Thais Program Notes

Since the beginning, mankind has lived with doubts and desires. With Massenet's opera we once again confront the continual battle between the everyday and the spiritual with essential questions like “Who are we really? What do we want? What do we run away from?” Has Thaïs really found her faith? We don’t know, but she has undeniably found peace. Her fear of growing old, her anguish as she confronts mortality in the aria “Dis-moi que je suis belle et que je serai belle éternellement” (Tell me I am lovely, tell me I'll be fair until the end of time) disappears when Athanaël offers her an eternal life - a life where pretense is no longer necessary, where she is no longer condemned in the eyes of the world. In the eye of God, she discovers serenity. But the eye of God can also push man's fragile mind towards fanaticism and madness; the longing to please God can transform him from a god of love into a god of vengeance. The exaltation offered by most religions can easily be transformed into the need to punish differences. In his constant search for answers and reassurance, doubting man finds refuge and concealment in religious dogma. Louis Gallet's libretto, based on the novel by Anatole France, questions the foundation and value of our spirituality. The monk Palémon warns Athanaël not to walk in the paths of the ungodly - or so eternal wisdom would tell us, “Ne nous mêlons jamais, mon fils, aux gens du siècle.” (Of what is he afraid?) Athanaël has studied philosophy with Nicias, who here represents the world of humanism; he decides to quit that world and put himself at the service of his faith. But in quitting the world is he not also renouncing to himself. Is isolation not just a form of flight? Athanaël must confront his nature as a man; religion will not help, for it is not God but his own dishonesty that will destroy him. Massenet takes us to Egypt in the 4th Century A.D., and to a confrontation between two worlds - the carnal one of Thaïs, which combines the Pagan cultures of both Egypt and Greece, where pleasure is the order of the day - and the world of Athanaël, Christian monk who wishes to convert Thaïs the sinner and save her from the pit of hell. We witness a prime moment of transition, full of conflict and doubts: The Egyptian Empire no longer exists, Greek civilization is on foreign ground, and we see the beginning of the Byzantine Empire.

The way the outside world looks at Thaïs, the way Athanaël looks at both Thaïs and God, the way Thaïs looks at herself and the way God looks at her, seems to us be best represented by an eye - an eye that sees and judges all. On the floor an oval platform represents different strata of civilizations, in the style of the Greek bas-reliefs and Egyptian hieroglyphics. The sacred eye of Osiris symbolizes eternal life, it is a counterpoint to the inner eye which allows Thaïs to lift her spirit and yield to peace. It seemed important to us first of all to present the symbolism of the work in a minimalist style without betraying the spirit of the piece. The costumes represent the spirit of the characters, whether they are the monks and nuns who are physically and spiritually grounded in their environment, or the actors and philosophers who represent the energy of a life “without any tomorrow”. It was also extremely important to us to maintain the orientalist themes which so enchanted the original audiences at the Paris Opera without in any way betraying the work itself.

BARBE & DOUCET
Setting: Byzantine Egypt (late fourth century, A.D.)

Act One
The cenobite monk Athanaël returns to his religious brethren after travelling to Alexandria. He explains to his fellow monks and to Palémon, the leader of the congregation, how shocked he was to find the city immersed in salaciousness and sin. Athanaël blames this spiritual disorder on the courtesan Thaïs.

Athanaël recalls meeting Thaïs, a priestess in the cult of Venus, years before taking his vows.

The community retires to rest. Athanaël has a dream in which he sees Thaïs naked. He decides that he must return to Alexandria to try to redeem the courtesan. In spite of Palémon’s warnings not to meddle in other people’s lives, the monk sets off through the desert to the city of sin.

In Alexandria, Athanaël visits Nicias, a friend from his youth who is infatuated with Thaïs and has squandered a fortune on her. The monk explains the mission that has brought him to the city once again. Nicias laughs, believing Athanaël will never succeed. Nonetheless, Nicias agrees to introduce him to Thaïs, who will be coming to his house for dinner that very evening. When she appears, the monk disapprovingly stares at her. Thaïs is somewhat disconcerted when she hears his sermon, but she invites him to visit her at her house.

INTERMISSION

Act Two
In her bedroom, Thaïs looks at herself in the mirror, wondering what life will be like when her beauty fades. Athanaël arrives and tries to persuade her to follow his doctrine, which will bless her with eternal life and free her from sin and death. At first his words horrify Thaïs, but little by little she is overcome by an internal peace and she begins to feel happy. From outside the voice of Nicias is heard, calling to her. Athanaël says that he will wait outside for her at dawn. Throughout the night Thaïs meditates about the spirituality of her soul. (Orchestra Interlude “Meditation”)

The next morning, Thaïs is ready to follow the path of holiness. Athanaël will lead her to a convent, but she must first destroy all of her worldly possessions by fire. When Athanaël tells the crowd in the plaza that Thaïs has consecrated herself to God and that she will be leaving with him, they jeer and are about to stone her and the monk. Nicias throws some gold coins on the ground to distract the crowd as Thaïs and Athanaël flee to safety.

INTERMISSION

Act Three
Thaïs and Athanaël travel through the desert to a monastery run by Mother Albine. She is exhausted and barely has the strength to walk. The monk explains that this suffering is the penitence she must endure to rid herself of her sins. But when he sees that Thaïs’ feet are bleeding, he feels sorry for her and goes in search of water. He kisses her feet and comforts her. She thanks him for his kindness and for saving her soul. Once in the monastery the nuns welcome Thaïs. She bids the monk farewell and kisses his hands with love and admiration. Athanaël, knowing he will not see her again is profoundly distraught.
Athanaël once again returns to his brethren. Twenty days have passed and he is unable to stop thinking about Thaïs; he now realizes that he desires her with physical passion. He then has a dream in which he sees Thaïs dying in the monastery courtyard. When he awakens, he decides that he must see her again.

Albine welcomes Athanaël, who finds the weakened Thaïs surrounded by the devout nuns. Athanaël tells her of his feelings of physical love and desire. In a state of mystical ecstasy, she is oblivious to the monk’s words and passes away peacefully, leaving Athanaël in despair.
Thaïs
Jules Massenet

OPERA IN 3 ACTS
Libretto by Louis Gallet based on the novel by Anatole France
First performance at Teatro Lyrico Internazionale in Milan on March 16, 1894
Last performed by Florida Grand Opera in 1976
Performed in French
Miami: May 3, 4, 6, and 10, 2014
Fort Lauderdale: May 15 and 17, 2014

The Cast (in order of appearance)
Palémon
Athanaël
Servant
Crobyle
Myrtale
Nicias
Thaïs
Albine

Adam Lau*
Kristopher Irmiter
Carlton Ford*
Riley Svatos*
Caitlin McKechney*
Martin Nusspaumer*
Eglise Gutiérrez (May 3, 6, 15, 17)
Angela Mortellaro (D) (May 4, 10)
Raehann Bryce-Davis*

Cenobites, Historians, Comedians, Philosophers, Friends of Nicias, Townspeople, White Daughters

Conductor
Stage Director
Set Designer
Costume Designer
Lighting Designer
Wig and Makeup Designer
Chorus Master
Assistant Conductor
Assistant Director
Musical Preparation
Production Stage Manager
Projected English Titles
Projected Spanish Titles

Ramon Tebar
Renaud Doucet
Andre Barbe
Andre Barbe
Guy Simard
Chris Diamantides
Michael Sakir
Zoe Zeniodi
Kathleen Stakenas
Sergio Puig
Liam Roche
Karl Hesser
Dreambay Enterprises

There will be two intermissions