

The second performance of the Valletta International Baroque Festival was in complete contrast to the opening concert, and indeed to any other in the programme. The Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles in a co-production with the Manoel Theatre premièred a parody of Rameau's opera *Hippolyte et Aricie*, performed with marionettes together with live singers and musicians.

The venue for this extraordinary presentation was the magnificent Teatru Manoel, built in 1731 by the Grand Master Antónino Manoel de Vilhena. Originally, it was built to "keep the young knights of the order out of mischief" and to "provide the general public with 'honest entertainment'".

On the stage was a small puppet theatre with the musicians playing before it. This was built as a miniature replica of a theatre of the 18th century. The framework and sides were left open, so with the careful lighting it was possible to see the action of the scene-changes and the work of the puppeteers throughout the performance. The singers were situated in front of the puppets' stage, one on either side.



The performance commenced with a brief prologue where the singers, involved with a kind of rehearsal, are confronted by the marionettes, who ridicule their "ham" acting.

The music includes quotations Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie* and extracts from other operas, including some popular songs. The singers performed the operatic roles, whereas popular airs which were distributed amongst the actors/marionettes.

The theme of the parody centres on the step-mother Phèdre's desire for her step-son (Hippolyte) following the death of her husband. The seduction scene is a farce where the step-mother uses all her wiles to make Hippolyte interested in her, to the extent of leaping on to him and rushing around the stage, raising the hem of her dress.

Not having succeeded in her efforts – Hippolyte, being a coward and a fop, rejects overtures as he is in love with the princess Aricie – Phèdre literally flies around the stage in her anger banging her head against the walls and pillars.

A memorable scene is where Hippolyte goes into the country and contemplates his dilemma. The scene opens with an empty stage set as a pastoral scene with the musicians playing suitable music. A hen enters and clucks and pecks around the stage. Hippolyte enters, bemoaning his dilemma and after each sentence he is answered by the hen. The scene concludes by Hippolyte raising his voice making the hen fly up in surprise and which then drops an egg on to the stage to the amusement of the audience.

Many of the scenes had moments of hilarity, expressed both by the words and with exaggerated actions from the marionettes. Especially funny was a scene where the the singers, being drawn into the action, witness a sea monster threaten to devour Hippolyte, and panic and scream like children.

The husband has died and is sent to the underworld, where he is confronted with his former wife (Enone. Acting like a fishwife, she warns him that she will make his time in the underworld unbearable – and also, he is to be confronted with all his previous mistresses. Eventually he is returned to the world and is told by the nurse of the actions of his wife.

Love eventually wins out, and Hippolyte and Aricie are united.

The performance was in French using what was described in the programme as "authentic" pronunciation, with English subtitles displayed on a screen above the stage.

The performance was extremely well produced and performed. The singers, soprano Marie Kalinine and tenor Philippe-Nicolas Martin, were excellent. Ensemble Philodor, directed by Mira Glodeanu, provided the music. The fact that it was possible to see all of the action, including those of the puppeteers and scene setters added an extra dimension to the performance. Particular recognition must go to the puppeteers and the magnificent costumes of the marionettes.

An incredible, almost indescribable, evening; no words can adequately describe the effect that this marvellous presentation had on the packed audience.

The Grand Master's motto at the entrance reads: "*ad honestam populi oblectationem*" – he would not have been disappointed with this evening of sheer entertainment at its best.