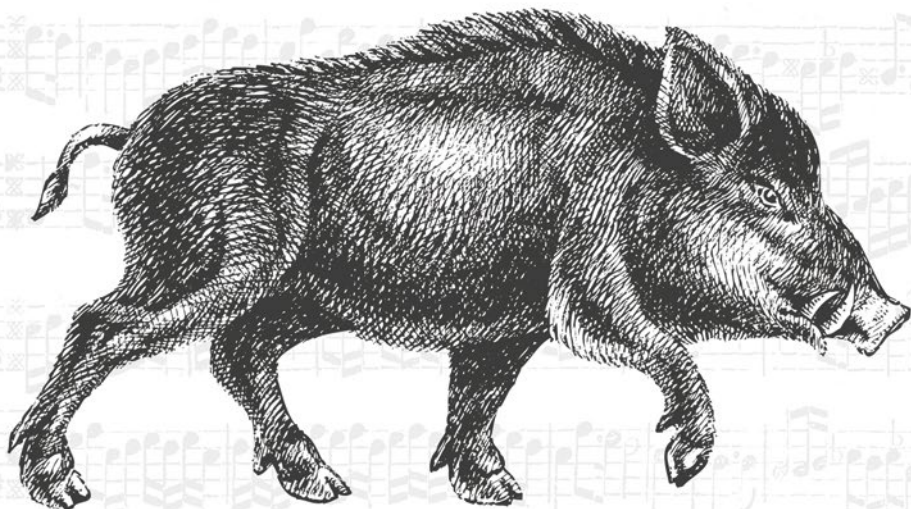


Venus and Adonis

An opera by John Blow
(1649-1708)



SIX SOLO VOICES
ENSEMBLE OF PERIOD INSTRUMENTS



THE CAPE CONSORT @ THE FUGARD STUDIO
5, 12 and 19 OCTOBER 2014 @ 18:00

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CAST (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Cupid
Lente Louw

Shepherdess
Tessa Roos

Chorus of Shepherds and Shepherdesses
Tessa Roos, Lente Louw, Nick de Jager, Willem Bester

Shepherd
Willem Bester

Shepherd
Nick de Jager

Adonis
Charles Ainslie

Venus
Antoinette Blyth

Chorus of Huntsmen
Nick de Jager, Willem Bester, Charles Ainslie

Huntsman
Nick de Jager

Little cupids
Adiba Cook, Annie Grieve, Nathan Scott, Michael Wilson-Trollip

Chorus of Graces and Cupids
Lente Louw, Tessa Roos, Adiba Cook, Annie Grieve, Nathan Scott, Michael Wilson-Trollip

INSTRUMENTALISTS

Baroque violin
Annie Shaw, Petra Hofmeyr

Baroque viola
Sarah Evans

Viola da gamba
Rebekka Sandmeier

Recorder
Darryn Prinsloo, Joshua Frank

Harpichord, Musical direction
Erik Dippenaar

Surtitle operator
Lauren Davis

Surtitle design
Lente Louw

Poster design
De Waal Immelman

Performance edition
Clifford Bartlett (1984)

Special thanks to **Selway Robson, Karin Maritz, Emile de Roubaix and Erik Dippenaar for the loan of period instruments.**



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Venus and Adonis (c. 1693) is the only dramatic work by John Blow (ca. 1648/49 – 1708). It was mounted privately at the court of Charles II and the identity of the librettist is unknown. The part of Venus was sung by Mary (Moll) Davies, the king's former mistress, while their illegitimate daughter, Lady Mary Tudor (who was about ten years old at the time), sang the part of Cupid. One of the earliest manuscript scores describe **Venus and Adonis** as 'A Masque for the entertainment of the King', but in spite of the term 'masque' **Venus and Adonis** can be classified as the earliest surviving English opera, seeing that it is sung through-out (no spoken dialogue). The only remaining copy of a libretto printed in the mid-1680's tells us that a revival of **Venus and Adonis** took place on the 17th of April 1684 at Josias Priest's Boarding School at Chelsea – the same institution where a performance of **Dido and Aeneas** by Henry Purcell (1659 – 1695) was put on a few years later.

There are indeed many similarities between **Venus and Adonis** and **Dido and Aeneas**: both are in three acts, both are about the same length, both include scenes of comic relief, in both a very active and multifaceted chorus is used and both end with the death of one of the lovers.

The most significant difference is that Blow avoids the use of arias and other set pieces – **Venus and Adonis** is through-composed.

It is possible that **Venus and Adonis** might have served as a model for **Dido and Aeneas**. Blow and the slightly younger Purcell had a very happy collegial relationship: in 1679 Blow created a vacancy for the 20-year old Purcell by resigning as organist of Westminster Abbey and in 1682 Purcell joined Blow as one of the three organists at the Chapel Royal. After Purcell's death Blow wrote the very moving **Mark how the Hark and Linnet sing - An Ode on the Death of Mr Henry Purcell** for two countertenors, two recorders and continuo.

Although there are no clear records of productions of **Venus and Adonis** after the Chelsea Boarding School revival, several contemporaneous manuscript scores indicate that the opera might have had later revivals.

For this performance we use an edition of the first performance (without later revisions by Blow himself) by Clifford Bartlett (1984). In our choice of instrumentation we attempt to reflect the performance practise of the early 1690's: no 16-foot instrument, the use of the viol instead of cello and recorders doubling string parts. The French style of ornamentation and rhythmic alteration is used, as would have been the practice at the English court at the time.

SYNOPSIS

Prologue – The grove – After a French overture, Cupid addresses the shepherds and shepherdesses (actually Venus's courtiers) in his traditional posture ('Behold my arrows and my bow'). They are inclined to make love; he at first deplores their general faithlessness ('At Court I find constant and true/Only an aged lord or two'), then invites them to seek the sweetest pleasures of the grove.

Act 1 – A room in Venus's palace – Venus and Adonis are discovered embracing on a couch; an obbligato recorder is added to the sensuous recitative; Venus toys with Adonis'

sexual frustration ('Adonis, thy delightful youth') and is about to let him have his way when hunting music is heard ('Hark, hark the rural music sounds'). Adonis vows not to join the chase, but Venus (in a departure from the myth) urges him to leave ('Absence kindles new desire'), and Blow underscores the line 'I would not have my lover tire' with witty, descending chromatic lines. Adonis responds indignantly to her teasing, but the huntsmen burst in to describe a mighty boar that is wreaking havoc. Unable to resist the challenge, he leaves for the hunt.

Act 2 – A room in Venus's palace – Cupid is taking instruction in the art of love from Venus, his mother, who sings the arietta 'Fit well your arrows when you strike'. Cupid in turn teaches the Little Cupids, a children's chorus, to spell the word 'mercenary', a few letters at a time. Cupid responds with the only proper aria of the opera, 'Choose for the formal fool'. When he humorously advises his mother to treat Adonis badly to assure his constancy, Blow writes out Venus's terrifying laugh note-for-note. The rest of this act is occupied by an incidental scene for the Graces who sing the chorus 'Mortals below, Cupids above' and offer a series of dances, culminating in a long chaconne.

Act 3 – The same room – The curtain opens to show Venus standing 'in a melancholy posture. A mourning Cupid goes across the stage and shakes an arrow at her. The recitative which opened Act 1 is transformed into a portentous wail ('Adonis, uncall'd for sighs'). Adonis, gored by the wild boar, is led in mortally wounded. After a passionate exchange, he sings his final ironic lines, 'Let me on your soft bosom lie/There I did wish to live, and there I beg to die'. Struggling to regain her composure, Venus begins a funeral march ('With solemn pomp') and is joined by her courtiers. The final piece in the opera is the G minor chorus, 'Mourn for thy servant', whose elegiac counterpoint does not suffer from comparison with the similar final chorus of *Dido and Aeneas*.

(Curtis Price – New Grove)

The Cape Consort is a Cape Town based ensemble dedicated to stylish and historically informed performances of Early Music. Part of a wider initiative to introduce Historically Informed Performance Practice (HIPP) to South African concert stages, the Consort collaborates with international practitioners and musicologists, and also strives to connect local musicians to the debate and research in the field of HIPP. The ensemble aims to establish a regular presence in the South African concert circuit, exploring and presenting early vocal repertoire (which rarely features in local concerts) in vivid performances of works by composers such as Monteverdi, Strozzi, D'India, Caresana, Biber, Schütz, Buxtehude, Purcell, the Bach family, and many other less familiar names. In line with current trends in early music circles, the Consort translates and re-contextualises ancient musical expressions into vibrant and credibly contemporary articulations.

Conceived as a flexible group, the Consort adapts its forces to the requirements of the repertoire. The regular singers are Lente Louw and Antoinette Blyth (sopranos), Nick de Jager, Lance Phillip, and Willem Bester (tenors), and Charles Ainslie (bass-baritone). Erik Dippenaar (harpsichord/organ) and Hans Huyssen (Baroque cello) form the core basso continuo group. Period instruments such as viols, violins, viols, lute, theorbo, and percussion join forces as the repertoire requires.

In 2011, the Cape Consort performed Monteverdi's six-part *Vespers* in a series of concerts, as well as an all Purcell programme in collaboration with the Cape Town Consort of Viols. Concerts with visiting artists, such as the renowned Dutch Baroque violinist Antoinette Lohmann and the soprano Mandie de Villiers-Schutte were also presented. The Cape Consort has appeared at the Klein Karoo Klassique in Oudtshoorn, the Odeion Musik Fest in Bloemfontein, GIPCA's Infecting the City Festival in Cape Town, Oude Libertas in Stellenbosch, the Cape Town Concert Series at the Baxter Theatre and Cultivaria in Paarl. Its performance at the Stellenbosch Woordfees in 2012 was awarded with the Woordtrofee for 'best

classical music production', a KykNet Fiësta nomination and a return invitation to the Endler concert series in 2013.

In February 2012, the group launched the first part of its Monteverdi Project at the Fugard Theatre in Cape Town. The gripping renditions of Monteverdi madrigals (supported by synchronised and animated projections of text translations) ran for a series of sold-out performance and resulted in an invitation to establish a regular presence at the Fugard. This is documented in the ensemble's first CD: **Claudio Monteverdi Selected Madrigals** which received a SAMA nomination. The Monteverdi Project is ongoing and has expanded into the exploration of other 17th century repertoire - John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* is the fourth part of this series.

Upcoming appearances include a second collaboration with Camerata Tinta Barocca in a performance of the original Dublin version of Handel's *Messiah* (10 December 2014, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church)

www.mucavi.com/CapeConsort

