



FIRST NIGHT | OPERA

La Calisto review — a punky take on a baroque masterpiece

Longborough, Gloucestershire

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Property

Mathilde Lopez's staging of Francesco Cavalli's masterpiece is one exciting result
MATTHEW WILLIAMS-ELLISShare    Save 

★★★★☆

It's heartening if slightly puzzling that the unsubsidised "country house" summer opera festivals are doing rather more than the state-supported full-time opera companies to train and showcase young British opera singers. Consider Longborough Festival Opera. Its chief claim to fame (apart from a theatre converted from a chicken barn) is its ambitious Wagner productions. It embarked on a new *Ring* this summer. However, under the bold new direction of Polly Graham, it too has ramped up its work with young performers. This provocative, punky staging of Francesco Cavalli's masterpiece *La Calisto* is one exciting result.

The original, embracing rape and overt lesbianism, must have been startling enough to 17th-century audiences. In essence the nymph Calisto is seduced by the god Giove disguised as his own daughter, Diana. In Mathilde Lopez's modern-day staging — rough theatre in every sense — the action, set in what seems to be a rubbish-strewn council estate, gets darker and darker.

What starts as a light-hearted romp, with fag-dangling female cleaners replacing the goddesses in the opening prologue, and Giove and his sidekick Mercurio portrayed as shiny-suited spivs, turns increasingly violent. One goddess gets beaten up by thuggish satyrs, then dragged away presumably to be sexually assaulted. And Calisto's fate — transformed into the constellation Ursa Major in the original story — is portrayed as eternal, joyless subjugation as a battered trophy wife.

As things turned nasty, I was not surprised to hear a few involuntary gasps of "oh no!" from some of Longborough's very genteel Cotswolds punters, but they were possibly as much a tribute to the forthright, in-your-face acting skills of the young performers as a comment on the nature of the production. The singing quality is more varied — Cavalli's fast-paced recitatives, constantly merging into florid arioso, make big demands on technique and intonation — but there are spirited performances from Chiara Vinci (Calisto), Sophie Goldrick (playing the "real" Diana and her lascivious impostor) and Felix Kemp as the preening Giove.

In the pit Lesley Anne Sammons's excellent Barefoot Band matched what was happening on stage with hollowed-out accompaniments that were more 1920s Berlin than 17th-century Venice. Pizzicato-bass jazz riffs, soulful accordion decorations, scrunchy harmonies, lots of percussion and some full-blown grunge effects: it shouldn't have worked with Cavalli's elegant baroque melodies, but it did.

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