

opera nd presents

the **Real**

Coronation

OF POPPEA claudio monteverdi

matt hawkins, stage director

dror baitel, music director

o'neill hall of music

labar performance hall

april 27, 28, 29, & 30, 2023



UNIVERSITY OF
NOTRE DAME

MUSIC

OPERA ND PRESENTS:

THE *REAL* CORONATION OF POPPEA

Music: Claudio Monteverdi
Libretto: Giovanni Francesco
English Translation: Alan Curtis

Stage Director: Matt Hawkins
Music Director: Dror Baitel
Video/Projection Design: Ryan Belock

Cast

Poppea: Erin Taylor
Nero: Maxwell Trochlil
Otho: Scottie Rogers
Octavia: Loren Masánqué
Seneca: Jeffrey Dean
Drusilla: Blessing Agu
Love, Ensemble: Brigid O’Driscoll
Lucan, Ensemble: Samuel Ary
Virtue, Ensemble: Joy Yelenosky
Fortune, Ensemble: Georgia Sigler
Arnalta, Ensemble: Camila Holden
Nurse, Ensemble: Raphael Fernandez
Security, Ensemble: Christopher Staszak

Production Team

Production Manager: Debra Gasper
Assistant Production Manager: Paige Dooley
Creative Producer: Kiera Duffy
Technology & Production Coordinator: Daniel Stein
Marketing & PR Coordinator: Noelle Elliott
Lighting Designer: Derrick Null
Stage Manager: Ethan Babler
Costume Designer: Claire Prins
Props Designer: Leah Jordan
Associate Media Producer: Liz Maroshick
Media Production Assistants: Kayla Stone,
Christine Hilario
Camera Operator: Neil Crum
Musical Coaches: Stephen Lancaster, Mona Coalter

Orchestra

Harpsichord: Dror Baitel
Violin I: Sara Hill
Violin II: Maya Kvaratskhelia
Viola da Gamba: Phillip W. Serna
Organ: Ellis Anderson
Theorbo: Christopher Wilke

Opera ND thanks:

Berthold Hoeckner
Peter Jeffery
Matt Haines
Kevin Wangler
Emily Matz
Janet Rudasics
Christine Trail

Alex Blachly
Mary Anne Ballard
Christopher Schenkel
Sean Martin
Kola Owolabi
Daniel Stowe
Norman Vesprini

DeBartolo Performing Arts Center
Notre Dame College of Arts and Letters
Department of Film, Television, and
Theatre
Shakespeare Notre Dame
Mark Doerries
Suze Villano
Jo Ann Norris

About the Production & Synopsis

Monteverdi's 1640(ish) opera *The Coronation of Poppea* (*L'incoronazione di Poppea*) was originally set in ancient Rome, in the year 65 A.D., featuring many historical figures from that period. With an eye-crossingly digitized social media landscape, littered with attention seeking influencers, morally dubious politicians and their sycophants, and unscrupulous "reality" TV producers, Opera ND's contemporized production might seem like a far cry from the opera Monteverdi had envisioned. But great theatre — Shakespeare, Ibsen, DaPonte — transcends space and time to reveal, if not universal, persistent truths about the human experience.

The opera opens with a **PRELUDE** during which the goddesses Fortune and Virtue argue over who has more power over humankind. They are interrupted by Love, who claims ultimate power over all gods and mortals, declaring: "Mighty Cupid is triumphant forever." And to prove it once and for all, she challenges them to a "contest."

As **ACT ONE** begins we meet Otho, who is returning from a long journey. When he finally arrives home, he finds some of Nero's soldiers hanging around — and he knows what that means. Nero is inside, romancing Poppea. As the lovers emerge, Poppea makes Nero promise to get rid of his wife, Octavia, and crown Poppea as empress. Meanwhile, Octavia knows exactly what Nero is up to. When Nero confirms his intentions to dump his wife and stay with Poppea, the dubiously moral, but always strategic, Seneca objects. Nero angrily dismisses him, and Poppea convinces Nero that it would be best if Seneca were out of the picture for good.

Otho overhears all this, and appeals to Poppea to give their relationship another chance. She tells him it's hopeless. What would she want with him, when she can be with the emperor instead? When she leaves, Otho considers murdering her. He also decides that maybe he'd be better off with a woman who really loves him — Drusilla, for example. When he goes to her, she's suspicious, but eventually welcomes him. Still, Otho can't shake his love for Poppea.

At Poppea's urging, Nero has ordered Seneca's death, and Seneca has decided to carry out that order himself. One of his servants brings him a knife, and Seneca asks a few friends to witness his suicide.

With Nero's discovery of Seneca's death, **ACT TWO** opens with an ecstatic (and maybe drunken?) duet with his friend, Lucan, praising Poppea's sensuous beauty.

Despite Nero's betrayal, Octavia still hasn't given up on saving their marriage. And if that's going to happen, she concludes, Poppea will have to be killed. But Octavia won't be doing that herself. Instead, she orders Otho to commit the crime. He turns to the faithful Drusilla for help, and she lends him her clothes for a disguise.

Poppea, not realizing the danger she's in, prays to Love (Cupid) to ensure her marriage to Nero — which turns out to be a good move. That night, Otho quietly enters Poppea's room with his dagger in hand, but Love intervenes and prevents the murder. Poppea wakes up just as the disguised Otho is running away. She mistakes him for Drusilla and, naturally, tells everyone that Drusilla has just tried to kill her.

Drusilla has been arrested, and she decides to accept her fate. She wasn't the one with the dagger in hand, but as one who was an essential part of the plan, she admits her guilt. But she also goes one step further. In spite of everything, she's still in love with Otho. So, when she's brought before Nero for judgment, she says it really was her that Poppea saw that night — and that Otho had nothing to do with it. Nero promptly orders her execution.

That's too much for Otho, who isn't completely without a moral compass. He steps forward and confesses, but he decides not to go down alone, and also reveals Octavia's role as instigator of the plot. That gives Nero just the opening he needs — a perfect excuse to get rid of Octavia. He orders up a boat and has her shipped off into exile.

Nero then decides to spare Otho from a death sentence. Instead, he exiles him, as well. But at least Otho won't have to slink off alone — Nero says Otho can take Drusilla with him.

With all the sentences passed, Nero and Poppea arrange to be married, and Octavia sings a famous and beautiful farewell to her home — "Goodbye, Rome." Finally, Nero and Poppea confirm their love, and Poppea is crowned Empress. After the coronation, the opera ends with its best-known music — a quietly passionate duet for the newlyweds.

Get to Know The Coronation of Poppea

The Coronation of Poppea is the last of the three operas by Monteverdi that have come down to us. The first, L'Orfeo (1607), was written less than a decade after the beginnings of opera and is generally acknowledged as the first masterpiece in the new genre. Then, after a gap of more than 30 years, during which Monteverdi wrote many operas that are now sadly lost, we have two great works from near the end of his life: The Return of Ulysses (1640) and Poppea (1642).

When he wrote his first operas, Monteverdi was employed at the ducal court in Mantua, where he had the full resources of the court at his disposal. He had extensive rehearsal time, beautiful productions, and large instrumental ensembles, and he was even able to publish a printed score of L'Orfeo. In 1613, he moved to Venice to take up the post of maestro di cappella at St. Mark's Basilica, the most prestigious musical post in Italy after that of the Vatican. There he not only provided church music for St. Mark's but continued to write operas, at first for wealthy patrons and then for the newly opened public opera houses. Writing for the new public institutions, where producers had to be careful about budgets, meant that ensembles were considerably smaller than in his earlier court productions. It also meant that operas now needed to appeal to the tastes of a broader public. Instead of the nymphs and shepherds of early pastoral dramas, his later opera, The Return of Ulysses, culminates in the famous bloody scene from The Odyssey, in which Ulysses slays the suitors. The Coronation of Poppea, also a story with villains, betrayals and death, is based on historical characters.

The libretto (offered here in English translation by Alan Curtis) is by the Venetian lawyer and poet Giovanni Francesco Busenello, who also wrote libretti for Cavalli. For his story, he adapted accounts by Tacitus and other ancient writers about the infamous Roman emperor Nero divorcing his wife and marrying his mistress Poppea. It is a libretto with three-dimensional characters, lifelike dialogue and a powerfully developed story.

Remarkable juxtapositions of tragedy and comedy, innocence and decadence shift sharply from one scene to the next. Throughout the opera, Busenello has created complex characters who are neither all good nor all bad. The empress Octavia, after gaining our sympathy as Nero's rejected wife, ultimately resorts to blackmail to have Poppea murdered. The philosopher Seneca, Nero's mentor and moral compass, sometimes appears intellectually rigid and unsympathetic. Seneca's stoic death is followed by a wild drunken scene, in which Nero and the poet Lucan sing extravagantly about the beauty of Poppea. As for Poppea herself, she appears to be both manipulating Nero and perhaps genuinely in love with him. And, in what may be the most fascinating and morally ambiguous ending in all of opera, the work concludes with a beautiful love duet for Nero and Poppea, who have been the villains of the story.

Much has been written in recent years about the fact that certain parts of the score -- among them some of Otho's music, a few instrumental pieces, and even the final duet -- appear to incorporate music by other composers. It is impossible to know for certain whether these were insertions that found their way into the work after Monteverdi's death or whether the aging composer may have worked on his final opera together with younger composers in a kind of workshop setting. Either way, what we have is a beautifully integrated work that makes for a powerful drama.

- *Martin Pearlman, Boston Baroque*