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“The Stag Hunt” (2020), based on “La Chasse” by Clément Janequin, performed by I Fagiolini, directed by John La Bouchardière.

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RUNNING just under 9 minutes, *The Stag Hunt* is the latest in a series of short films from internationally renowned solo voice ensemble I Fagiolini. The film is a modern visitation of the programmatic French chanson *La Chasse* (1537) by Clément Janequin (c.1485-1558), one of the most popular sixteenth-century composers of the genre.

Based in the UK and under the direction of founder Robert Hollingworth, I Fagiolini specialises in early and contemporary music and is particularly known for its innovative productions. John La Bouchardière, who directed this latest project, has worked with I Fagiolini on other filmed performances, notably the *Ode à la Gastronomie*, featuring 20th century choral works, and the humorously titled *The Full Monteverdi*, based on Monteverdi’s fourth book of madrigals. The dynamic collaborations between Hollingworth, La Bouchardière and a group of fine singer-actors has once again produced an imaginative interpretation of a vocal ensemble piece.

In an interview about the making of *La Chasse*, La Bouchardière remarks on the challenges of teasing out the narrative from a polyphonic composition whose use of overlapping vocal lines inevitably disturbs the sequence of events (IMDB, 2020). Despite La Bouchardière’s lament, the story of a proud king who wants to track down and kill a great stag “before his game is up” is cleverly told thanks to sophisticated filmic techniques (including the judicious use of close-up), excellent subtitles (which bely the obscurity of the original text), clear diction and true intonation on the part of the singers, and the creative framework in which La Bouchardière sets the scene. To avoid spoilers, I won’t say any more about one visual aspect of this framework which re-imagines a stag-hunt in a contemporary and relatable manner.

Structurally, the original work is divided into two parts, the sections delineated by changes in voicing rather than by any major development in the story line. In both parts, the voices deliver fragments of dialogue that could conceivably be heard on a stag-hunt, the lines passing back and forth between the hunters (in the original text a dozen hunters are named in the first section and a further 15 in the second). In Part I, four voices, with the bass voice representing the King, direct each other as they set off on the hunt. As the piece proceeds the audience continues to overhear snatches of conversation, including more instructions, an analysis of the stag’s droppings and superstitious talk of bad luck. In the second part, as the chase reaches its climax and the stag is hunted down, three additional voices join in, adding to the musical and vocal complexity of the work with effective mimicry of barking dogs (“gnof, gnof”), horses hooves (“plif, plof”), and hunting horns (“tronc, tronc”).

The original piece is scored for two sopranos, two countertenors, two tenors and a bass. I Fagiolini have modified this voicing, presumably to accommodate their core members and to allow for the allocation of unnamed but titled characters, a feature not in the original text. The seven I Fagiolini singers appearing in the film are given the roles of the King (bass Charles Gibbs), the Queen (soprano Anna Crookes), the Princess (mezzo-soprano Claire Wilkinson), the Duke (tenor Nicholas Hurndall Smith), the Countess (soprano Rebecca Lea), the Earl (baritone Greg Skidmore) and Perot, who is mentioned by name in the score and is here given the title of Huntmaster, played by I Fagiolini director and baritone Robert Hollingworth. The assignment of roles enables the formation of three aristocratic couples plus the huntmaster. These characters represent an aristocracy with a tradition

of blood-sports, a critique of which is implied in this production.

The subtitle, “Noble Born Killers”, with its punning reference to the 1994 Tarantino/Stone film, gives the first clue as to the position taken by the director and his team on wild animal welfare. The unusual and contemporary setting referred to earlier, together with the final image we are left with, combine to depict a desolate future resulting from the actions of a privileged humanity’s actions upon the natural world.

This interesting and refreshing reimagining of a work from nearly 500 years ago upholds the high production values and excellent musical and vocal standards that we have come to expect from I Fagiolini and their creative team. Though short, the film makes for an enjoyable and thought-provoking viewing experience that benefits from multiple re-watchings.

I Fagiolini’s *La Chasse* can be purchased at www.ifagiolini.com/thestaghuntfilm for £2.99, £1 of which goes to the Born Free Foundation, a charity devoted to wild animal welfare and to compassionate conservation.

REFERENCES

IMDB (2020). “Director John La Bouchardiere on transforming Janquin’s ‘La Chasse’”. https://www.imdb.com/video/vi1157677337?ref_=vp_rv_0

BIOGRAPHY

Lyric mezzo-soprano **Linda Barcan** trained at the Conservatorium of Newcastle, the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA). Following professional engagements in France and intense study in Germany, Linda returned to Australia to perform for many years with Opera Australia in Sydney and Melbourne. Linda’s affinity for 20th and 21st century opera led to appearances in *Christina’s World* (Sydney Chamber Opera), *Abelard and Heloise* (Opera Hunter), *Pecan Summer* (Short Black Opera) and *The Emperor of Atlantis* (Lost & Found Opera). A specialist in art song - specifically in French *mélodie* and German *lieder* - Linda has been coached by Graham Johnson and David Harper amongst others, and has performed in recital for companies, festivals and art song societies in Australia, France, Germany and Asia, frequently appearing in French cultural and diplomatic circles. Linda is currently Lecturer in Music

(Voice) at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, where she is also completing her PhD.