

## THE ENCHANTED ISLAND

With the world premiere of *The Enchanted Island*, the Met creates a new Baroque extravaganza featuring the best of Handel and Shakespeare—with a modern theatrical twist.

# Fantasy Island

By Tom Samiljan

What happens when director-writer-composer extraordinaire Jeremy Sams brings together two parts Shakespeare, liberal doses of Handel, Vivaldi, and Rameau, and is joined by Baroque specialist William Christie, the director-designer team of Phelim McDermott and Julian Crouch, and a fabulous cast of opera singers from David Daniels and Joyce DiDonato to Danielle de Niese, Luca Pisaroni, and Plácido Domingo? When this operatic confection premieres on New Year's Eve at the Met, *The Enchanted Island* will be one of the first modern-day takes on the pastiche, an 18th-century musical-theater genre made up of pieces from existing operas and oratorios, along with a new libretto. The score features a selection of hits and rarities by the aforementioned trio of Baroque composers (and a few others). The plot shipwrecks the lovers from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on Prospero's island from *The Tempest*. There's also a deus ex machina-style appearance by Domingo as Neptune and a full-fledged, masque-like ballet extravaganza.

*"The Enchanted Island* gives us a real opportunity to do the



**ENEMIES, A LOVE STORY**  
David Daniels and Joyce DiDonato play onetime lovers now at odds. Photograph by Nick Heavican, scenic design by Julian Crouch

Below: Plácido Domingo, Danielle de Niese, and Luca Pisaroni



Below: Kevin Pollard's sketches for the characters Ferdinand, played by Anthony Roth Costanzo, and Neptune, sung by Plácido Domingo



traditional things that happen in Baroque entertainment—spectacular costumes and amazing set pieces,” says director McDermott, joined by his frequent collaborator, designer Crouch. The pair has had remarkable success at the Met with productions of Philip Glass’s *Satyagraha* and the 125th Anniversary Gala. “It’s an extraordinary operatic entertainment that includes some of the best Baroque music.”

Baroque opera doesn’t come to the Met every month—but that’s not for a shortage of great Baroque singers. On the contrary, General Manager Peter Gelb wanted to create a showcase for the artists who excel in this genre today. So he turned to Christie, the American-expat-Baroque-conductor-in-Paris who is universally hailed as a leader in the field, and Sams, the acclaimed British theater artist. Sams has not only translated everything from Wagner’s *Ring* cycle (English National Opera) and Lehár’s *The Merry Widow* (Royal Opera House, Covent Garden) to Molière’s *The Miser* (Royal National Theater) and *The Threepenny Opera* (Donmar Warehouse), he’s also an accomplished musician and composer for film and theater. He’s perhaps best known for directing the West End productions of *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Noises Off*, which moved to Broadway.

“He’s got an extraordinary sort of theatrical genius, really,” Christie says of Sams, who created the libretto. It’s an apt characterization. In interviews, Sams deftly swings from authoritative discussions of obscure 18th-century Vivaldi arias to Alexander Pope to ABBA with complete ease. Despite his musical pedigree, Sams says he had to listen to a lot of Baroque vocal music—mostly Vivaldi, Handel, and even Bach—over two years as he decided what arias would fit into his new story. The first two composers made the cut, but why is Bach—author of so many cantatas, oratorios, and motets—nowhere to be found in *The Enchanted Island*?

“Bach isn’t a theater man—he went to the opera once in his life and decided he didn’t like it,” Sams explains. “Whereas

Handel went to his first opera and said, ‘This is what I want to do.’ Even his oratorios are theatrical.” Besides Handel and Vivaldi, the selection of music in *The Enchanted Island* includes pieces by Rameau and Leclair, everything from excerpts out of Handel’s well-known *Four Coronation Anthems* (“Zadok the Priest”) to a Vivaldi obscurity found ten years ago in a Dresden library. Yale University music scholar Ellen Rosand advised on the selections. “Vivaldi is a writer of fantastic violin concertos, but he’s also a brilliant operatic composer whose complete operas are only just now being performed,” says Sams. “So these are essentially new pieces, just recorded, just discovered.”

Gathering a gaggle of arias from the same century and working them into a two-act piece is challenging in itself, but then there’s the issue of language, since Leclair and Rameau wrote in French and Vivaldi and Handel wrote in Italian (though a few of the excerpts are from Handel’s works in English). “Handel was a German who moved to England and wrote operas in Italian,” jokes Sams. “It’s a very cosmopolitan medium, but Peter and I were keen to make sure this was easily understood, that story was everything.”

According to Sams, the new language is rhymed and inspired mostly by the 18th-century writers Dryden and Pope, but in a form that’s slightly more accessible to a 20th-century audience: “We have no ‘thee’ and ‘thou,’ and have opted instead for ‘you’ and ‘yours,’ but the grammar is 18th-century Baroque verse.” The plot pulls from Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, but its other influences allow for more variety in character and action. “Ariel becomes like Puck in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” Sams explains. “He’s trying to get the right lovers to fall in love and anoints the first person he sees to make sure he falls in love with [the *Tempest*’s] Miranda. That person turns out to be Demetrius from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, so the lovers cross-fertilize like that.” It isn’t the first time anyone has mixed up these plots—remember Woody Allen’s *A Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy*?—but it’s the first time these pieces, together, have been set to music.

To stir it up further, Sams has added an 18th-century-style masque in the

middle of Act II that includes not only a ballet, but also a glorious, showstopping appearance by Domingo as the Roman sea god Neptune. Domingo will rise out of an underground grotto, surrounded by mermaids and mermen, singing a lamentation about the foibles of the human race, set to two pieces by Handel and Rameau. Domingo had expressed interest, so, in a fashion true to 18th-century practice, a special part was written in, just for him. “I suddenly thought that Domingo, stripped to the waist with seaweed and a trident, would be a good look,” Sams says.

A legendary artist like Domingo may be the biggest name on the bill, but he’s hardly the only major divo or diva on the lineup. Everyone in the cast is at the top of their game. “It may come as a shock to modern opera-goers that we don’t have a monopoly on great opera stars—they’ve been around for hundreds of years,” says Christie. “The Baroque era was the golden age,

actually, of the great diva. So you can expect that all the people singing in this opera—Joyce DiDonato, Danielle de Niese, David Daniels, Luca Pisaroni, and Plácido Domingo—are going to be showing off their wares, so to speak, in this extravagant vocal way.”

Extravagance and exuberance are two of the defining characteristics of Baroque opera, and *The Enchanted Island* is certainly playing that up—not only in the showpiece arias for its star performers, but also in production and set design. McDermott and Crouch, the duo behind London’s Improbable

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theater company, who are known for mixing puppetry, projection, and improvisation in their shows, are an ideal match for a work that mixes the old with the new.

According to the pair, the production of the *The Enchanted Island* does exactly that, making liberal use of traditional period-style Baroque set design,



including not only layers of beautifully painted flat scenery—“lots of cut-out waves,” says Crouch—but also modern elements like video projection on scrims, which will be created by Leo Warner and Mark Grimmer of 59 Productions, the team behind *Satyagraha* and the 125th Anniversary Gala. The world of Prospero’s island is magical, so expect plenty of fantastical animations on those projections. There’s also an enchanted mini-menagerie. “We like

the idea of early exploration and those botanical drawings that scientists and explorers made back then,” says Crouch. “We’re playing a little bit with engravings of animals, making hybrid animals where I’ll take half of an elephant and join it to the head of an eel. Having a bit of fun, really.”

Other period touches with nods to today’s trends include a hint of retro-mechanical steampunk to depict magic. When Ariel goes to visit Neptune, she wears an old-fashioned diving helmet that would be perfectly at home on Captain Nemo’s submarine. “It’s going to delight me,” Crouch laughs. “And I think it’ll delight most of the audience.”

One thing that will certainly delight an audience is the length of the show. Sams made sure to offer an alternative to the usual four-hour Baroque opera. “I wanted to cut it very much to the pace of a Broadway show,” says Sams. “It’s quite important, I think, that people leave the theater wanting more rather than less.” ■

Tom Samiljan is the former classical music editor of Time Out New York and writes for Travel & Leisure, L’Uomo Vogue, and Hemispheres.

For information about special *Enchanted Island* events at the Shakespeare Society and WQXR, please visit [metopera.org/enchantedisland](http://metopera.org/enchantedisland).

LIVE IN HD:  
January 21, 2012

#### MetTalks

William Christie, Jeremy Sams, Phelim McDermott, Leo Warner, and Mark Grimmer will participate in a panel discussion about the new production on December 15, 2011.