

2006

The Greatest Opera Never Written: Bengt Lidner's Medea (1784)

Bertil Van Boer

Western Washington University, bertil.vanboer@wwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/music_facpubs

Part of the [Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Van Boer, Bertil, "The Greatest Opera Never Written: Bengt Lidner's Medea (1784)" (2006). *Music Faculty and Staff Publications*. 3.
https://cedar.wwu.edu/music_facpubs/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Music at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Music Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

Bertil van Boer

The Greatest Opera Never Written: Bengt Lidner's *Medea* (1784)

When the Gustavian opera was inaugurated on 18 January 1773 with a performance of Johan Wellander and Francesco Antonio Baldassare Uttini's *Thetis och Pelée*, the anticipation of the new cultural establishment was palpable among the audiences in the Swedish capital. In less than a year, the new king, Gustav III, had turned the entire leadership of the kingdom topsy-turvy through his bloodless coup d'état, and in the consolidation of his rulership, he had embarked upon a bold, even politically risky venture, the creation of a state-sponsored public opera that was to reflect a new cultural nationalism, with which he hoped to imbue the citizenry with an understanding of the special role he hoped they would play in the years to come. Proclaiming himself as "the first citizen among a nation of free citizens," Gustav sought to recreate the primary position Sweden had played in European politics during the so-called *Stormaktstid* of the previous century, while at the same time give the public a form of entertainment that would both please the aesthetics of the time and educate them on their destiny as a nation, with himself as their popular ruler. This overtly patriotic thrust demanded a special event that would at once be both "Swedish" and spectacular on a scale to rival the main capitals of Europe; Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and London. This was a Swedish national stage, at the center of which was to be the

new Royal Opera.¹

The event was a bold stroke that would be so audacious that it would either make or break this new theatre, a work so advanced and spectacular that the future of the Swedish language as a cultural focal point would either stand or fall with a single performance. As Ehrensvärd so succinctly states: “[The way] was to begin with that which other nations ended: to create a grand opera.”²

The reasoning behind this decision was logical and concise; Ehrensvärd summarized it in the following manner:

An opera that contains a pleasant and attractive music, a well-conceived ballet, decorative costumes, pretty and well-painted decorations, is so captivating that the eye, ear, and other senses are pleased all at once. Through this one eventually becomes used to the language, whose harshness is softened by a captivating music; one eventually finds words and expressions more gentle, one should find them more serviceable, and eventually one comes to like his own language. An opera can be given many times in a row; one always seems to find something new to see and hear.³

¹ The general literature on the Gustavian opera is, of course, rather substantial. Some of the main sources are *Gustavian Opera: Swedish Opera, Dance and Theatre 1771-1809*, ed. Inger Mattsson (Stockholm: Kungliga Musikaliska Akademien, 1991); Nils Personne, *Svenska Teatern* (Stockholm: Wahlström och Widstrand, 1918); *Fribetstid och Gustaviansk Tid 1720-1810, Musiken i Sverige II*, ed. Leif Jonsson and Anna Ivarsdotter-Johnson (Stockholm: Fischer, 1993); and Marie-Christine Skuncke and Anna Ivarsdotter, *Svenska operas födelse* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 1998). See also the literature contained therein.

² Ehrensvärd, Gustaf Johan. *Dagboksanteckningar förda vid Gustaf III:s hof*. 2 Vols. Ed. by E. V. Montan (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner, 1877), p. 216; see also Oscar Levertin, *Teater och Drama* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1918), pp. 9-10; Personne, *Svenska Teatern*, pp. 89-90; Beth Hennings, *Gustav III: en biografi* (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner, 1957), p. 181.

³ Ehrensvärd, *Dagboksanteckningar*, p. 216.

One cannot fault this (and Gustav's) logic, and the premiere of *Thetis* proved the point perfectly. For awhile, the King could bask in the glow of this success, but as the year wore on, it was clear that, as heady a start as *Thetis* had been, some sort of sequel was needed both to point the new Royal Spectacles towards the future and to follow through with the precedent established by this inaugural work. A variety of projects were embarked upon, and over the next several months a trend could be discerned. Operas on Classical subjects, while not particularly "Swedish," did conform to the cultural preferences of the time and linked Swedish opera to reform opera on the continent, first by using derivative librettos from mostly French sources, second by importing and "improving" several seminal foreign works by recognized masters in the field (Christoph Willibald von Gluck and Niccolò Piccinni), and finally, by adapting the works of the most famous foreign composers with sometimes clever updates provided by local musical talent. The second trend was found in works based upon Swedish history for which no specific operatic precedents existed, and therefore there was a need for originality, both in text and music, in order that these be distinguished from continental models. The second work, an enlargement of George Fredrick Handel's popular serenata *Acis & Galatea*, premiered in May of 1773, followed a few months later by a rendition of Gluck's seminal *Orfeo ed Euridice*.⁴ Both of these conform to the first model, albeit with significant differences: the former includes a massive alteration of the plot and considerable new music by Hinrich Philip Johnsen, while the latter is "updated" to include a more modern orchestration and leading singers. Kathleen Hansell has pointed out that the Stockholm version for tenor

³ Ehrensverd, *Dagboksanteckningar*, p. 216.

⁴ For information on these works, see Alan Swanson and Bertil van Boer, "A Swedish Reinterpretation of Handel's *Acis and Galatea*." *Scandinavian Studies* 65 (1993): pp. 29-49 and Kathleen Kuzmick Hansell, "Gluck's *Orpheus och Euridice* in Stockholm," in *Gustavian Opera*, 253-280. See Note 1.

instead of alto castrato predated Gluck's own voice shift by several months.⁵ In January of 1774, the first Swedish work appeared, Gustav Fredrick Gyllenborg's *Birger Jarl*, to great public approbation like its predecessors. As no model existed for this new type of Swedish work, a format had to be created. This became the *drama med sång*, a unique blend of mostly spoken drama with extensive musical insertions; in the case of *Birger Jarl*, the latter included both a large number of ballet movements (including national dances such as the "Vingåker Dans" and the dance of the Lappish Seers) and arias by both Uttini and Johnsen, as well as an entire one-act insertion "Classical" opera, *Æglé*, by Johnsen.

The intellectually vibrant first days of the Gustavian opera thus established a direction, and in the anticipation that its initial success would continue to grow along the lines the King intended, there was a flurry of activity, particularly among those closely attached to Gustav's court. According to court gossip and diarist, Johan Fischerström, most of those with literary ambitions were hard at work on libretti in the hopes that their work would be accepted by the opera, and in turn their own fame and visibility would thus increase.⁶ This activity was encouraged by the King, who in order not to take on the appearance of favoritism, delegated the adjudication to organizations that he had created; the Royal Academy of Music and the Vitterhetsakademi. There potential new works were vetted and critiqued, and although the King certainly had the final say, their decisions were often key to the development of the future of Swedish opera.

The main concern with the trends as they evolved was that the subject matter was often either too imitative or too commonplace

⁵ See Hansell, "Gluck's *Orpheus*," pp. 261-262.

⁶ See Johan Fischerström, *En gustaviansk dagbok* (Stockholm: Bröderna Lagerström, 1951), p. 110. In his entry for 6 November, the chatty Fischerström notes that "det är nu le gout du temps at[t] skrifva Operar, så inbillar sig hvar och en at[t] kunna melera sig."

to achieve acceptance. During the course of the next decade, numerous attempts, such as Simmingsköld's *Zephyr et Flore*, were written off as too mundane, while those that did achieve production—Grétry/Johnsen's *Cephal och Procris*, Walter's *Adonis*, and Uttini's *Aline*—could hardly be considered extraordinary. The search for Swedish originality, irrespective of which trend librettists and composers sought to employ, was often subject to political whim and strong critical reaction, though the concept at least served as the starting point for any adjudication of a new work (and, of course, Gustav himself as the final arbiter). In 1774, for instance, Fischerström noted that Carl Michael Bellman's original attempt entitled *Fiskarena* was returned for “revisions,” since it was considered too prolix with a plethora of detailed stage directions.⁷ In 1779 a newcomer to Sweden, composer Joseph Martin Kraus, teamed with his colleague and fellow Göttingen University student Carl Stridsberg to submit the three-act opera *Azire*, the plot of which involved dark Scandinavian forests and crags, evil trolls, and mystical spirits. Kraus reported in a letter to his parents in 1779 that the work was set aside due to internal politics, but many years later his student, Per Frigel, noted that the real reason was that the work was dark and foreboding, the characters wild and untamed, the emotions raw, all of which probably disturbed the sensibilities of the Academy's adjudicators unused to such unbridled passion in the music, in particular the director of the Royal Opera, Friherr Adolf Frederik von Barnekow.⁸ Although this work was not approved for production, it nonetheless had a considerable impact on the for-

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Irmgard Leux-Henschen, *Joseph Martin Kraus in seinen Briefen* (Stockholm: Reimers, 1978), pp. 29-31 and Richard Engländer, *Joseph Martin Kraus und die gustavianische Oper* (Uppsala: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1943), pp. 99-103. Frigel's comments were contained in a summary of Kraus's music published as the proceedings for a special celebration of the composer in 1798, the *Åminnelse-tal öfver Kraus*.

tunes of its composer, who was eventually to obtain a second commission and, after its successful trial performance, both employment and stature within the Gustavian cultural establishment.⁹

The rejection of *Azire*, however, may have been the last gasp of the more conservative element within the adjudicating bodies, for within two years a plethora of new works in the same emotional vein appeared on the heels of a new passionate literary style heralded by such poets as Thomas Thorild. In 1782 Frigel himself collaborated with notary Carl Pihlgren on a powerful emotional drama entitled *Zoroastre*, the same year as the visiting *Kapellmästare* Johann Gottlieb Naumann premiered the inaugural work for the new Royal Opera house, *Cora och Alonzo*, which was not only set in Peru of the Spanish conquest, it featured a new sense of emotionalism unfettered by conventional Classical operatic conventions, yet fully faithful to the new French (and Swedish in context) style of Gluck and Piccinni. Shortly after this work's successful premiere in the Fall of 1782, one of Sweden's most original, if extremely eclectic new poets, Bengt Lidner, began work on an opera in a similar style, yet tied heavily to the prevailing predilection for Classically-inspired dramas. This was *Medea*, published in anticipation of the adjudicatory process and intended to result in a full-fledged opera production in 1784.

Of all of the literary figures, professional and amateur, active in Stockholm during the Gustavian period, Lidner was probably one of the strangest.¹⁰

⁹ This was the opera *Proserpin*, with text by Johan Henrik Kellgren, whose court performance at Ulriksdal in 1781 led to Kraus being appointed *Vicekapellmästare*, as well as a commission for the opera *Aeneas i Cartago*. See Alan Swanson, "Kellgren's Libretto to Proserpin," *Gustav III and the Swedish Stage*, ed. Bertil van Boer (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1993), pp. 191-217.

¹⁰ Relatively few studies of Lidner's life and works have been published. The first collection of his works appeared as the *Samlade Arbeten* in 1788, followed by the *Nyare Arbeten* (Stockholm: J. Lindh, 1793), with an expanded collected



Bengt Lidner (1757-1793)

Born in Göteborg on 16 March 1757 to a middle class family, Bengt Lidner lost his father and his only brother at the age of four. His mother remarried a cousin, Samuel Aurell, an accountant with the Swedish East India Company. She died when Lidner was only fourteen, which meant over the next several years that he grew up

edition entitled *Lidners Samlade Arbeten* in 1812 (Stockholm: Carl Delén). During the nineteenth century, Karl Warburg published *Lidner: Ett bidrag till Sveriges litteraturhistoria* (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt, 1889) but the only modern biography of note is the small tome by Lennart Josephson in the *Svenska författare* series entitled simply *Bengt Lidner* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1947; rev. 1966). The last is, of course, well-written, if meant for a more general audience. A good current biography is still much needed; a basic bibliography can be found at the end of this essay.

under the protection of both a step mother and father. This unsettled life experience left him with an almost fantastical view of religion and a very Freudian relationship with his late mother. His own education, however, proceeded at a rather normal pace; as a student at the Göteborg Gymnasium, Lidner showed himself to be good though not exceptional.¹¹ In 1770 he matriculated at Lund University, published his earliest poetry, and participated in the academic life rather more fully than was normal or prudent. Here he became known as an eccentric profligate. An anecdote from this time narrated by Lennart Josephson portrays Lidner using money earned from a funeral ode to buy new clothes, oddly all in white. This brilliant and dashing figure lasted only a short number of hours before he was found dead drunk in the gutter half-naked and covered in mud.¹² In 1776 he became a seaman on the *Finland*, but jumped ship in Capetown on the way to China, making his way back to Göteborg by conning a returning Swedish merchantman into taking him on as a non-paying passenger. There he was befriended by Patrick Ahlströmer, one of Gustav's courtiers, who sent him to the University of Greifswald, where a thesis on the benefits of the American revolution soon embroiled him in controversy.¹³

¹¹ The oft-quoted "reason" for Lidner's literary gifts—that one day at the age of ten he received a sudden blow to the head, finding it afterwards easy to learn things—seems to be a self-inflicted fantasy. As Josephson notes (*Lidner*, p. 11), this story has no corroboration and its origins only in Lidner's own statements of self-aggrandizement. This is also the view of Herman Lindqvist, who noted drily that, "such a sound must have resonated throughout the classroom." See Herman Lindqvist, *Historien om Sverige* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1997), pp. 234-235.

¹² Josephson, *Lidner*, pp. 12-13.

¹³ This work was *De jure revolutionis americanorum*. Although well-written and well-argued, the conservative faculty did not accept it. His apologia to Ahlströmer—that he did it out of "fear for His Majesty [e.g. Gustav III]"—was not deemed reliable, but his patron did not abandon him.

After a few years in Rostock in Swedish Pommerania, during which he wrote four dramas, he returned to Stockholm at the age of twenty-two. In 1781 he was awarded a travel grant by the King after plaguing him with laudatory poetry, and journeyed to Paris, where he became the secretary to the ambassador, Gustaf Philip Creutz. Creutz, a celebrated poet in his own right whose pastoral epic *Atis och Camilla* had been a perennial favorite in Sweden, took Lidner under his wing, began a collaboration on an opera text entitled *Rustan och Mirza*. He was rewarded by his protégé destroying and stealing his own books and personal effects for ready cash. In 1782 after only a few months, Creutz wrote to Gustav III about his dissatisfaction with the dissolute behavior and in short order the poet was sent home in disgrace.¹⁴

Lidner's literary efforts in Paris went contrary to his Bohemian lifestyle, for he began to write large-scale works for the stage, such as the drama *Eric XIV*. Upon his return to Stockholm, he entered a period of almost frenetic activity, producing in the next several years his best works, *Året 1783*, *Grefvinnan Spastarnas död*, and the libretto for the opera *Medea*. Although in disfavor with the King for his alleged sins committed in Paris under the protection of the Swedish ambassador and his mentor, he continued to ply the court, including the King himself, with laudatory poetry in the hopes that the favor would be restored and his real work recognized.¹⁵ In so

¹⁴ See Josephson, *Lidner*, pp. 28-29 and Lindqvist, *Historien*, pp. 236-237.

¹⁵ Much of Gustav's reaction can be blamed on Creutz, who refused to release *Rustan och Mirza* for publication, claiming that Lidner had plagiarized much of the text for *Medea*. Even more scurrilous rumors were begun by the erstwhile ambassador that Lidner was used only as a copyist, that he had continually lied about his involvement in *Rustan*, and that his crimes were far greater than could be revealed. Josephson (*Lidner*, pp. 28-29) discusses this as an apologist for both sides. While one can dismiss out of hand Creutz's accusations regarding Lidner's opera, it is clear that the latter did nothing to refute the charges beyond a continual series of pleading and awkward laudatory poems to the King. These pitiful efforts were rebuffed.

doing, he created one of the most significant opera texts in Gustavian Opera.

In 1784 he published—or was allowed to publish—the libretto for a Classical story that embodied raw and violent emotion. This was *Medea*, based upon the Greek myth and reworked into what the author considered a form suitable for the newly-emerging emotionally-charged texts of the Swedish main stage. The opera was conceived as a grand work in three acts with the following plot:

Act I: Medea, Princess of Colchis, stands at the harbor in Corinth viewing the preparations for the wedding of the daughter of Creon, Creusa, to her estranged husband Jason. Her confident Rhodope tries to comfort her by placing the blame for her situation on Jason, but Medea is torn between her feelings and the sorrow of being forced into exile by Creon and Acast, the King of Thessaly. Jason and Creusa enter to the glad cries of the townsfolk and warriors. As their praises are being sung, a sudden storm approaches driving them all towards the city. Medea sees this as an ill omen portending vengeance. Jason arrives and she attempts to persuade him not to abandon her and her two sons. He rejects her impassioned plea, telling her to vanish into exile quietly. The scene changes to a room in the palace, where shepherds sing of Jason's new love.

Act II: Medea meets Rhodope in a moonlit courtyard in Creon's palace. Her confident tells her that to remain in Corinth only increases her woe, since Jason is not worthy of her love. As Medea falls asleep on a grass sward, Jason appears and falls asleep beside her. The scene changes to a park in Colchis with a dragon guarding a large globe; in a series of pantomime scenes the entire episode of the *Argo* and the theft of the golden fleece is re-enacted. The dream ends with Medea sailing away from her homeland on Jason's ship. The following scene shifts to Jason's dream in which Medea points a dagger at the chests of his chil-

dren while calling upon Jupiter. Both awaken and Medea attempts once more to throw herself at Jason. He rejects her again, causing her to curse him for his faithlessness. Calling upon the eternal powers, she invokes the Furies amid earthquake and lightning. They appear and carry her off to the underworld, where Hecate gives her a poisoned robe of purple as a gift for Creusa in revenge for the insult. In Juno's temple Rhodope presents Medea's sons to the goddess. Medea appears seeming on the verge of death after her brief sojourn in Hades. She gives Rhodope the robe as a gift for Jason's new wife and then struggles between her love for her children and the desire to eradicate Jason's blood from the earth. She tells her sons to flee, but they disobey.

Act III: Acast dismisses Jason's fear about impending doom by telling him his future as his heir. The soldiers greet a herald who has brought news of the wedding by offering him wine. As they celebrate the soldiers of Thessaly attack and overwhelm the Corinthian guards after learning that Medea's gift has killed Creusa. Medea and her sons flee the wrath of Acast by hiding in the temple of Juno. After sending Rhodope away, she grabs both her sons and runs out of the temple. Jason appears armed for revenge when he sees Medea in a chariot drawn by dragons, her two sons at her side. She remonstrates against him for his faithlessness, and in the heat of the moment stabs her sons, tossing their corpses into Jason's arms. The priests of Juno enter and cover the bodies of the two children. Medea appears in the air above the city; cursing it, it bursts into flames as the population mourn their tragedy.

The story is powerful and poignant, allowing not only for the requisite interaction between the characters, but also for large amounts of dramatic ballet and choruses, all of which combine to make this text a monumental work of epic proportions. In his in-

roduction to the printed text, which he purposefully entitles a “*Svensket Original* [Swedish Original],” Lidner takes great pains to show that his work is a direct descendant of the plethora of Classical (and sometimes modern) plays on the subject by Euripides, Ovid, Seneca, and Corneille, while at the same time proclaiming proudly: “I have not borrowed a single bit of any of these.”¹⁶ Boasting that he was beholden to no “mortal,” the author stated his sole purpose in writing the work: “The single piece of advice that is pertinent is to evoke tears, which means infinitely more than all of the rules of Aristotle.”¹⁷ One might be tempted to dismiss this as rash hyperbole, but there is no doubt that the author was primarily interested in the emotional interactions of the main characters, even as he set the stage for the well-known story by swiftly changing scenes, dream sequences, and special effects.

The principal figures are, of course, Jason and Medea. The former is characterized as a rather thoughtless, arrogant prig who abandons his wife and children in order to further his political alliances through a second marriage. He has only a single human moment when Medea appeals to his love of his children in order to affect a reconciliation: “Men Jason? Kärlek! Jason gråter?...Vid dina knän jag Dig besvär: Gif mig! Gif mig dit hjerta åter! Ur barmen af Caucas det ju ej huggit är [But Jason? Love! Jason crying? At your knees I beg you: give me! Give me your heart again! If from the bosom of Caucas it has not been chopped out].” His answer is a halting indecision as his heart wars with his ambition (“Medea! Mi-

¹⁶ Lidner, *Medea*, [pp. 2-3]. Other authors mentioned are Quintus Ennius, Lucius Accius, and Hilaire-Bernard de Requeleyne, Baron de Longepierre (1769-1721), as well as works by Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter (a one-act melodrama set to music by Georg Benda in 1775) and Gaetan Vestris (1729-1808), by which Lidner presumably refers to Vestris’s well-known setting of Jean-Georges Noverre’s *Médée et Jason* (1763) in Stuttgart in 1770/1775. Translations into English by the present author.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, [p. 3].

na barn! Din eld mig brinner [Medea!, My children! Your fires burn me!]), but in the end he twists this into a cold-hearted answer to her entreaties: “Ack! Kärlek har ju tidens vana:/Han flygtar nog; ej vänder om [Ah, love is like time/It moves onward, it does not turn back].” Medea, on the other hand, is a creature driven to depend entirely upon her emotions, a sort of female Werther, which present a continual duality in her psyche. When her friend Rhodope admonishes her to forget Jason and his treachery, she staunchly defends him, even though she has been terribly wronged. Even as he continually rejects her, sometimes brutally, she returns time and time again to persuade and excuse him, a Classical character in the modern mode of abused spouse. Her unfolding tragedy makes her personality all the stronger; the more adversity she faces, the more forceful she becomes until the entreaties lie on the fine line between love and hate where tears can represent sorrow or anger. In the sixth scene of the second act, Medea realizes suddenly that her attempts to regain Jason’s love are futile, that he is more interested in political power than familial obligation. In an aria she invokes the powers of darkness, eliciting supernatural help as her motives turn to revenge:

Fasans natt mit öga höljer,
Hämnden ryter i mit bröst;
Månen vid dess hesa röst
Uti måln sif hufvud döljer.
Mig en svartsjuk kärlek följer.
Med en het och grumlig våg
Styx den sista ömhet släcker,
Hvilken dold i hjertat låg.
Hemska natt, som mig betäcker
Med din fasa på mig fall!

[Night of horror shrouds my eyes,
Vengeance rages in my breast;

The moon at its hoarse voice
Hides its head in clouds.
A jealous love follows me.
With a hot and turgid wave
The Styx has quenched the last tenderness,
Which lay hidden in my heart.
Terrible night that covers me
Fall upon me with all your horror!]

The emotions are taut and palpable, the hate seethes from each line of the verse in an incantation of blackest rage. Although she has no qualms about her decision to murder Creusa by means of the poisoned robe, her children are another matter. After admonishing them to leave her, their cries melt her heart, and she resolves at the end of the second act to be their protector against what she perceives as Jason's potential revenge:

Jag gråt! Din mor du gråta bör
Att hon är mor, är alt hvad hon sig sansa hinner.
Mit lif lik morgondag i Aethnas gap försvinner.
Men hasten, låt oss fly! Hår skyddas vi ej mer;
Fly svanen lik, som sig åt vida rymden ger,
Då hon ej någon vass för sina ungar finner.

[I weep! Your mother, you should weep
That she is a mother, has done all that can calm her down.
My life disappears like dawn into the mouth of Etna.
But hurry, let us flee! We are not protected here any more;
Fly like the swan, who gives herself to the wide spaces
When she does not find reeds for her brood.]

But here too her mixed emotions of protection and the desire to eliminate Jason's blood in revenge are resolved once he intervenes in the penultimate scene where she is carrying them off in her chariot, having saved them from being dedicated (read: sacrificed) to Juno. At his insistent cry "J mina Barn [You, my children]!" Medea makes the final disconnect with her former life, stabbing them and

throwing their bodies into his arms. With such a powerful personality, it is no wonder that the *seconda donna* in the tragedy, Creusa, appears only briefly and has no dialogue at all. The rest of the characters, with the exception of Rhodope, are equally insubstantial; although given dialogue, Jason's two sons are not even named, for example. Even Medea's confidant is two-dimensional, appearing only to offer derogatory commentary or placating advice which the heroine simply ignores.

One of the most remarkable features of this text is that some substantial portions have been left for the pantomime ballet. In second act, for instance, the entire dream sequence is meant to be a dramatic ballet, in which in the third scene the entire story of the winning of the golden fleece is portrayed. This is a bonus for a composer, who would be expected to write extensive dramatic music in a style to complement Lidner's rather graphic scene instructions. This occurs also in the third act, where a pitched battle between the Corinthians and Thessalonians occurs on stage, and throughout the entire opera, Lidner provides extensive and detailed stage directions that, in the words of Josephson, "would not have offered any difficulties to the opera directors of the time."¹⁸ Indeed, these would have allowed both performer and composer to have executed a well-planned work that would have had an integration rarely found in eighteenth century operas, where more generic texts and greater directorial freedom was the norm.

It is clear that this work is a fine text. The mix of poetry and prose dialogue, the plot development, and the scenic display are all calculated to draw the audience into the story. From a literary standpoint, only a few inexplicable shifts in the scene mar the smooth progress of the drama. One of these is the use of the *deus*

¹⁸ See Josephson, *Lidner*, p. 48. He states: "Medea skulle inte ha erbjudit några svårigheter för tidens operaregissörer. Det är inte ett läsdrama utan skrivit för att uppföras och det bör bedömas därefter."

ex machina in the second act where Medea is given the poisoned robe by Hecate. This is a departure from the original story where the vengeful Medea uses her sorcerous powers to thwart Jason's marriage; by making the demons of the underworld indirectly responsible for the murder of Creusa, Lidner seeks to excuse Medea's motivation, in reality making her a double victim of both Jason's rejection and a tool of darkness. Another comes in the third act where, in the middle of the nuptial celebrations, the Thessalonian soldiers abruptly attack their Corinthian hosts, overwhelming the city and subjugating the people. Lidner, so focused on the interpersonal tragedy of Medea, provides no dramatic preparation for this catastrophic event; there is no intimation of this event apart from a brief, vague threat uttered by Acast at the beginning of the act. These inconsistencies are, however, not so problematic as to mar the well-written and musically-adept text.

Medea was destined not to be set to music, despite the advantages it had as a literary-musical text. Although Lidner himself was an amateur composer, the complex libretto was clearly beyond his meager talents, and because it was perhaps never submitted either to the Vitterhetsakademi or the Royal Academy of Music, opportunities for advancement were not forthcoming. Then too, he dedicated the published libretto to the Crown Prince of Denmark, in addition to making a snide comment at the end of the preface directed to those in charge of adjudicating texts, which was not only politically awkward, but also cannot have insured much support for his effort.¹⁹ But given the quality of the text, the question still remains why *Medea* was not set to music. It clearly fulfilled all of the criteria of a Classical Gustavian opera text: the drama is intense and

¹⁹ He states (Ibid, [p. 3]): "By the schoolmasters it will be eternally judged; those who weigh words, when they have the occasion, can but weep." This basically calls the members of the Royal Academy insensitive clods who are unable to discriminate between good texts and bad, an impolitic statement at best for a supplicant for approval.

flows logically; there is ample opportunity for extra-musical display such as ballet and stage effects, all woven into the story in a seamless manner; the characters are delineated with acute human clarity so that the foibles and inevitable tragedy of the Greek tale are made manifest; and the language flows naturally with vivid imagery, subtle turns of phrase, and an almost musical sense of poetic diction. In other words, from virtually every aspect, the libretto is most ideal as the foundation for the hand of the composer, regardless of the superficial political importunities of its author. Moreover, the telling of the story is highly original; one can take the author's word in the preface that he did not "borrow a single bit" from these predecessors.²⁰ The reasons for leaving this "half-finished" include several possibilities. The contretemps between Creutz and Lidner, in which the former accused him of excerpting wholesale portions of *Rustan och Mirza* into *Medea*, may perhaps have had some validity, though it is hard to see where such may have occurred, given the linguistic disparity between the two authors. The disgrace with which he was sent home to Stockholm in 1783 and Gustav's subsequent distancing from the mercurial poet would also have had clear repercussions for the opera's success during the initial adjudication process, but need not have affected the final judgment. This alleged permanent fall into disfavor derailing the opera is contradicted by the publication of the libretto, which in turn meant that a certain official sanction must have been received from the Vitterhetsakademi, for there was no effort made to censure or withdraw it from public consumption.²¹ It is also possible that Lidner's rather

²⁰ See Lidner, *Medea*, [p. 3].

²¹ The usual final approval or disapproval came only after the entire work was set and read through by the Royal Academy of Music, although the Vitterhetsakademi generally approved the texts as the first step in the adjudication process. Such was apparently the case with both Frigel's *Zoroastre*, Johnsen's *Ismène och Ismenias* and Kraus's *Azjre*. The first was apparently completed but for reasons unknown never mounted, the second completed, approved and

Bohemian lifestyle and eccentricities contradicted the ideal of the writer that the King wished to demonstrate in his operas. Here the contrast between Gyllenborg, Adlerbeth, Leopold, and Kellgren would have been marked; all were staunch and upright members of Gustavian society, a status that Lidner never attained. This, in and of itself, however, ought not to have presented an impenetrable impediment for setting such a text, for Gustav was keenly aware of literary virtues, often to the point of allowing even efforts by less polished and more plebeian authors to be staged, whatever his views on the person himself.²² Finally, Lindqvist suggests that it may have been that the violence of the work—the Thessalonian slaughter of Corinthians on stage to avenge the murder of Jason's new bride Creusa, the murder of Medea's two sons in a callous and violent manner, tossing their corpses into Jason's arms—might have been too graphic for Stockholm audiences. This is as may be, but in 1784 plans were underway for an equally tragic and graphic ending to Kellgren and Kraus's *Aeneas i Cartago*, including a bloody battle and Dido's immolation. Moreover, Haeffner's *Electra* written some three years later is equally graphic and tragic in the concluding scene, where Orestes murders Aegisthes and Clytemnestra. The notion that every opera needed to end with a *deus ex machina* or *lieto fine* in Gustavian Stockholm is hardly consistent, and *Medea* must be seen as only one of several operas in which violence and tragedy conclude the work. The real reason may have been much simpler: there was no composer resident in Stockholm who would have been able to undertake its setting in a manner that would have been consistent with the power and imagery of the text.

scheduled but never performed due to the composer's demise, and the last set aside for political reasons—Barnekow and Kraus were not on friendly terms—though it did get the composer another commission, the opera *Proserpin*, in 1782, something that might well have occurred with Lidner.

²² Here, the obvious candidates are Carl Michael Bellman and Carl Israel Hallman.

In 1784, *Hovkapellmästare* Uttini was for all intents and purposes retired, and his older Italianate style would have in any case been unsuitable. Visiting *Kapellmeister* Naumann from Dresden had just completed *Gustaf Wasa*, an official nationalist opera, but had other duties for the Saxon court that precluded any such speculative settings or, for that matter, even a return to Stockholm. Other local composers, Carl Stenborg, Per Frigel and Johann Christian Friedrich Haeffner among them, had no official position as opera composers for the main stage; the first was writing simple comic works for his own theatre, the second was seen as an amateur whose first opera *Zoroastre* had not made it to production, and the last was only newly-arrived in Stockholm without any local experience in setting texts. Indeed, the only in-house person who might have been able to match his compositional style with the powerful text was the *Vice-kapellmästare* Kraus, who was away on a grand tour and in any case already deeply involved with Kellgren in revising *Aeneas*. The only other composer who might have been capable was Abbé Vogler, but negotiations for his employment did not begin until the following year; moreover, the success of these would have been conditional on setting a text of a higher status than the untried Lidner libretto.²³ With no suitable or capable composer at

²³ Negotiations for Vogler's employment commenced in 1785 while the composer was on tour in Amsterdam; a final agreement was not reached until the next year and included freedom to perform in public for his own benefit, as well as commissions for a prologue to Gluck's *Armide*, the nationalist opera *Gustaf Adolph och Ebba Brabe*, and incidental music to *Athalie*. Vogler's rather eccentric lifestyle would have been a perfect match for Lidner, and indeed the two hit it off almost immediately. Their first collaboration was a cantata, *Helig är Herren*, performed at the Catarina Kyrka on 20 July 1786. The text to this work was published in the *Samlade Arbeten*, p. 266. See Georg-Helmut Fischer, "Abbé Georg Joseph Vogler: A 'Baroque' Musical Genius," *Gustav III and the Swedish Stage*, ed. Bertil van Boer (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1993), pp. 85-87. As a note, Lidner thought Vogler one of the best composers of the age, noting "with Vogler's music, the angels gather to

hand, the text languished and was then forgotten, having been simply a case of poor circumstances rather than anything specifically to do with Lidner's status or the work's acceptability.

For the author, the failure of *Medea* to make the sought-after inroads into the ranks of performed Gustavian opera librettists, for whatever reason, appeared to be a rather bitter blow. He then turned to another form that intrigued him, the epic oratorio, hoping to have better success. His first effort, begun in 1785, was an ambitious work, *Yttersta Domen*, in which he completed three years later about the same time as he left Sweden for Åbo to resume a student life. He noted in the preface to this epic his disappointment:

It has flattered me—why should I not say it—eternally flattered me to see two of my works translated in the language of the proud British. The French and one German poet has shown me the same honor in the year 1783. *Medea* ought to have been performed in London, and it would certainly have enjoyed an equal honor in my fatherland if, among other great errors, the titlepage had not also betrayed things most damnable in naming me as the author.²⁴

While one might question the fantasy of an English “performance” of the opera, especially since no one set the work to music, it is clear that Lidner never accepted that the timing was poor. To him, the lack of fulfillment of its purpose and his subsequent in-

hover.” See Josephson, *Lidner*, p. 46.

²⁴ See *Samlade Arbeten*, p. 171. “De har smickrat mig, hvarföre skulle jag ej säga det? oändeligen har det smickrat mig, att på den stolta Brittens språk se tvenne af mina Arbeten öfversätta. Fransmannen och Germaniens Skald hafva vista Äret MDCCLXXXIII samme heder. *Medea* torde i London vara uppförd; och hade hon säkert i mit Fädernesland njutit en lika ära, om ej, bland andra stora fel, hon äfven på Titel-bladet röjt det grusliga, att äga mig till författare.”

ability to become one of the chosen Gustavian librettists were indications of a social and artistic chauvinism that he would be unable to overcome.

That is, of course, not been the judgment of history; authors such as Josephson, Lindqvist, and others have commented upon the extraordinary quality of *Medea* as a musical text, as noted earlier. All it lacked was a composer who could do it justice, and it was destined to remain a libretto whose possibilities as an opera of power and originality remained unfulfilled. It did, however, set the stage for the insertion of raw emotion and graphic imagery into the Gustavian opera; later works, such as Kellgren's later revision of *Aeneas i Cartago* and Haeffner's *Electra* all owe their powerful dramatic foundation to *Medea*, which must be seen as the first of the dramatically intense texts of Swedish opera. While one today might lament that no one during Gustav's day was prescient enough to push this project forward, it is clear that its status as one of the greatest Gustavian operas never set has been well-deserved.

References

- Arvidson, Stellan (ed.): *Svenske Sturm und Drang: Thomas Thorild, Bengt Lidner*. Stockholm: FIB:s Lyrikklub, 1957.
- Cornell, Jan: *Gustaviansk lyrik*. Stockholm: Bonniers, 1952.
- Elovson, Harald: *Bengt Lidners Greifswalder dissertation "De iure revolutionis Americanorum."* Jena: Frommansche Buchhandlung [Biedermann], 1928.
- Engdahl, Horace: *Den romantiska texten*. Stockholm: Bonniers, 1986.
- Feuk, Mattias: *Lidner's poetiska språk*. Lund: H. Ohlssons boktryckeri, 1912.
- Josephson, Lennart: *Bengt Lidner*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1947, [revised and expanded] 1966.
- Lidner, Bengt: *Lidners nyare arbeten*. Stockholm: Johan Pehr Lindh, 1793.
- Lindqvist, Herman: *Historien om Sverige*. Stockholm: Norstedts, 1997.
- : *Samlade Arbeten af Lidner: Andra uplagan, mycket tillöket och förbättrad*. Stockholm: Holmberg, 1796-1800. Second edition of *Samlade Arbeten* published in 1788.
- : *Samlade Arbeten*. Stockholm: Carl Delén, 1812-1814.
- : *Samlade Arbeten*. Stockholm: Bonniers, 1859; reprinted as the *Samlade skrifter af Bengt Lidner*, Stockholm: Bonniers, 1878; reprint, 1932 ed. by Harald Elovson; partially reprinted as *Valda Skrifter*, 1913.
- Warburg, Karl: *Lidner: Ett bidrag till Sveriges litteraturhistoria*. Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt, 1889. With Supplement *Lidners "Medea": ett tillägg till min lidnermonografi*. Göteborg: Wettergren och Kerber, 1898.