

# Music review: Les Talens Lyriques, Versailles Opéra Royale

## Antoine Dauvergne was no neglected genius, but this production is a pleasant divertissement.

By [Alexandra Coghlan](#) Published 21 November 2011 16:38 *Hercule Mourant* (Antoine Dauvergne)

**Versailles Opéra Royal, Les Talens Lyriques, dir. Christophe Rousset**

The particular splendour of Versailles is all about scale. It's a point made forcefully when you turn a corner into the Avenue de Paris and the splendid municipal buildings and *hôtels particuliers* all shrink, suddenly dwarfed by the elegantly sprawling bulk of the Palace of Versailles itself. In the musical history of Versailles and the French baroque, [Antoine Dauvergne](#) is more Petit Trianon than palace - a curiosity, a charming postscript to Lully, Charpentier and of course his own teacher Rameau. His opera *Hercule Mourant*, performed last weekend for the first time since its 18th century premiere, reveals Dauvergne as no neglected genius, but a distinctive voice nonetheless, and one that inevitably speaks with greater resonance in the baroque beauty of the Opéra Royal, Versailles.

The highlight of one of many music festivals that punctuate the Versailles calendar, this concert performance of *Hercule Mourant* by Christophe Rousset and the musicians of [Les Talens Lyriques](#) was the culmination of ten years of research and reconstruction by the musicologists of the Centre de Musique Baroque Versailles. Charged with promoting the forgotten works of this period, they curate an annual programme that fleshes out the silhouetted musical landscape of the baroque, exposing transitional or neglected figures such as Mondonville, Sacchini and Dauvergne.

Fresh from the critical success of their most recent baroque rehabilitation project (Lully's *Bellérophon*), Rousset and the Les Talens Lyriques appeared here in full force - doubled wind and brass responsible for characterising each of the opera's self-contained acts. Rousset's own continuo accompaniments were daringly spare, celebrating the simplicity in Dauvergne's writing that, rather unusually, eschews excess in favour of dramatic clarity. This play of muted textures was at its best in a brief dialogue between ingénue Iole (sweetly, if not always consistently sung by Julie Fuchs) and Dejanire (Veronique Gens) - the queen all percussive harpsichord chords, the young princess a haze of sustained flutes and strings.

A habitual collaborator of Rousset's, Gens led the cast as Hercules's embittered wife. Having extracted all possible emotion from generic vocal showpiece "La honte, La douleur", she was at last able to bring her dramatic subtlety to bear in the extended Act IV arioso, leaving us in calculated doubt as to the sincerity of her devotion to her husband. While both Andrew Foster-Williams's Hercules (who grew vocally into the challenge of the final act) and Emiliano Gonzalez-Toro's Hilus were stylish and assured, it was the supporting roles that offered the surprises.

**Jennifer Borghi's Juno was a venomous delight, a worthy foil to Gens** during her brief stage time, and Edwin Crossley-Mercer as Philoctete (whose first entrance is heralded by the fussiest, most deliciously pompous little cello solo) risked upstaging Foster-Williams with the meat of his tone. While with Rameau or Handel you can generally be certain where your big tunes are coming from, the bonus of the evening was a lightly virtuosic aria from

the otherwise unimportant Grand-Pretre de Jupiter (Romain Champion) which satisfied any cravings for more conventional arias among the through-composed fluidity of the score.

The question Dauvergne's contemporaries and fellow composers asked of *Hercule Mourant* is still the opera's central issue: how can our hero Hercules sing his own death, and do so without debasing myth or betraying the drama? Dauvergne's answer is found most strikingly in the textural effects of the opera's final two acts. Employing muted bassoons (an innovation not heard again until the 19th century) together with horns and strings, Dauvergne sets up a unique sonority for the Act V opening, colouring Hercules' death-pangs and those at his wife's betrayal with shades quite different from either the flute-driven Act II or the marshal trumpets of Act III. Even when we reach the opera's quasi-symphonic orchestral postlude, a lively Chaconne that dispels the gloom with its dance rhythms, the bassoons remain prominent within the texture, a baleful reminder of struggles past.

*Hercule Mourant* is no more the equal of *Belléophon* than Dauvergne himself is a real rival to Lully. Yet there is interest to be found here in the harmonic extremity and textural sensitivity of this work. Prioritising dramatic directness over self-reflexive technical flourishes, Dauvergne's music risks (and yes, occasionally succumbs to) banality, but also anticipates the Romantic model for opera that was born with Gluck. A charming curiosity, if not perhaps worth a full-scale staging, when *Hercule Mourant* comes gift-wrapped in the gilded interior of the Opéra Royal it still makes for a pleasant evening's *divertissement*.