

EROS AND PSYCHE

Opera in Three Acts

Music by Conrad Cummings

Libretto by the composer freely adapted from Apuleius

SYNOPSIS

The action is set in mythological times. A king has three daughters, the youngest of whom, Psyche, is the most beautiful woman in the world. People come from every kingdom to admire her beauty, and soon begin to worship her as the goddess Venus herself.

ACT I SCENE 1: THE PALACE OF PSYCHE'S PARENTS

Psyche's mother encourages her to receive yet another group of admirers and indulges in a few moments of motherly pride. The admirers arrive; each is awe-struck by Psyche's beauty. As they kneel before her in worship, Venus is revealed looking down from Olympus, furious that a mere mortal is receiving the worship that rightly should be her own. She calls on her son, the Love God Eros, to use his famous bow and arrow to make Psyche fall in love with the vilest brute – an apt humiliation for Psyche and her worshipers.

SCENE 2: A GARDEN WITHIN THE PALACE

Psyche sits alone. She may be the most beautiful woman in the world, but she is also the most lonely. Venus enters the garden, unseen, and calls Eros to her side. He prepares to loose his golden arrow, but is struck by Psyche's beauty: for the first time the God of Love feels love himself. Venus, oblivious of this development, departs. Eros swears he will make Psyche his bride, and runs to seek help.

SCENE 3: APOLLO'S HOUSE ON OLYMPUS

Eros' race brings him to Apollo, who notices he has begun to show the signs of approaching manhood. When he blurts out his dilemma, Apollo realizes that even among the gods, children eventually grow up. A plan is formulated: Psyche's family travels to Apollo's Oracle at Delphi today – her unhappiness is causing growing alarm. A judiciously pre-arranged oracle could pave the way for Eros' godly abduction. . .

SCENE 4: THE ORACLE AT DELPHI

Psyche, her family, and the court arrive before the Oracle. Psyche's father begs the Oracle to reveal the causes of his daughter's unhappiness. Roused from her trance, the Oracle howls and shrieks with growing intensity while the Priest interprets her meaning (according to Apollo's instructions): Psyche has inspired the wrath of Venus, she will never find love from a mortal, she must be placed on the highest craggy rock, a monstrous serpent – fearful even to Zeus – will take her as his bride! Psyche's family and court bid her a sad farewell, and she is left to scale the rock alone, alternately terrified and resolute. Reaching the highest point, with open arms, Psyche bids Fate work its will upon her.

ACT II SCENE 1: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ROCK

Instead of a dreadful monster, it is Zephyr – the amiable spirit of the West Wind – who invites Psyche to his nameless master's realm. Brought to the valley below in his gentle arms, Psyche discovers an enchanted palace where she is waited upon by invisible servants and serenaded by unseen musicians. As darkness falls, a tender lover slips into bed beside her, and they become man and wife. When Psyche asks his name he replies that she must never know. He will come to her every night after sundown and leave before sunrise; she must never seek to see him. In the first light of dawn he slips away.

SCENE 2: THE SAME

Psyche's two sisters come to look for her on the rock. Both are victims of hasty marriages to decrepit and miserly husbands. The sisters gain sight of Psyche, and all three call to Zephyr, the only one who can bring them down from the rock. Zephyr knows too well the evil that will come from this visit: 'Families are wonderful, mine includes all the animals, plants, and natural forces, but your sisters will only bring you grief.' Psyche insists, and Zephyr must obey. She invites her sisters to bathe themselves and retires to prepare a feast.

SCENE 3: THE SAME

When they feel themselves being undressed and bathed by invisible hands, the sisters know they are in a god's palace – a god who must be Psyche's lover. This is more than they can bear. When questioned, Psyche admits she has never seen her lover. Isabel, the older, tells Psyche that her lover is the serpent in disguise, and unless she takes action he will eat her alive this very night. She must take a dagger and a lamp; when he sleeps beside her, by the light of the lamp, she must plunge the dagger in his neck and run from the palace. Psyche refuses; the sisters depart with renewed threats. Left alone, doubt, then panic overtake her. Seizing lamp and dagger she runs into the palace.

SCENE 4: THE SAME

Psyche slips from the bed and shines the lamp on her sleeping lover. Overcome by his beauty, she spills a drop of oil from the lamp onto his shoulder. Eros, awakening, sees all and flees. The palace vanishes, Psyche is alone in a vast desert. Eros appears to her, announcing his true identity – he is lost to her forever. Venus has seen all and, unseen by the lovers, gloats over her successful thwarting of the affair. Zephyr too has been watching and, invisible to the other three, challenges Venus' authority: 'Love will find its way assisted by Nature.' Eros, followed by Venus, leaves for Olympus; emboldened by Zephyr's touch, Psyche sets out through the world to win Eros back.

ACT III SCENE 1: BEFORE VENUS' HOUSE ON OLYMPUS

Psyche's travels have been in vain; no one dares to cross Venus by helping her. In desperation she has climbed Olympus to appeal to Venus in person. Venus responds to Psyche's entreaties with a ruse: in the guise of teaching her how to be beautiful she will crush her beauty under endless toil. Psyche has no choice but to accept, and the first task is laid before her: in a single night she must separate a huge pile of flour and rice into separate piles. In despair, Psyche realizes she will never complete the task, but a passing Ant hears her lament and rallies his fellows to separate the piles. As dawn approaches, the task is completed and the Ants depart.

SCENE 2: THE SAME

Venus is mortified by Psyche's success and sets her a second task: to gather golden wool from the sheep that graze on the other side of the river – sheep who devour mortals on sight. The task is clearly impossible, and Psyche prepares to throw herself into the water. But a Reed growing on the river's bank tells her how she can safely gather the golden wool. Venus sets a third task: Psyche must journey to the Underworld, gain entrance to Persephone's palace, and bring back from her a box of beauty. Psyche needs no further indication of the futility of her efforts – Venus clearly wishes her dead. She climbs the highest Tower of Venus' house, but the Tower itself refuses to let her jump and explains the steps necessary for a return trip from Hades: She must take two pennies for Charon, the boatman on the River Styx, and a piece of cake for Cerberus, the dread three-headed dog who guards Persephone's palace. Psyche follows the instructions.

SCENE 3: THE SAME

Eros is being held captive in Venus' house. Zephyr appears with news that Psyche is thriving thanks to Zephyr's relatives. They spring the bars, and with Zephyr's assistance Eros sets out to regain his love. Psyche returns to the upper world, box of beauty in hand. She cannot resist opening the box, but it is empty – except for the sleep of death which overtakes her. Eros comes to the rescue, wipes the sleep from her eyes, and bids her return quickly to Venus' house. If all goes as he hopes, they will be wed this very night.

SCENE 4: THE THEATER OF THE GODS ON OLYMPUS

Eros presents an ultimatum to Zeus: ‘Make Psyche a goddess and let me marry her. If you do not, I will stop shooting my arrows: there will be no lovers, no reproduction, all life on earth will cease forever.’ Realizing he has no choice but to comply, Zeus agrees and calls an assembly of all the gods and goddesses. Venus is last to arrive, and is thunderstruck when she learns the reason for the gathering. Oblivious of all onlookers, she valiantly attempts to reconstruct her pride, finally convincing herself that the marriage was her own idea after all. Psyche is welcomed to the family of the gods, and with Venus presiding the marriage is performed. All unite in a chorus of celebration, and our protagonists assert: the continuance of life on earth can be assured.