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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

### Cavalli's La Calisto: Desire, and Cosmic Transformation

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Cavalli's La Calisto is one of the great paradoxes of early Venetian opera: a work at once intimate and cosmic, comic and disturbing, tenderly lyrical and morally merciless. First performed in Venice in 1651, with a libretto by Giovanni Faustini, it transforms the ancient myth of Callisto into an extraordinarily fluid theatre of unstable identities, sexual pursuit, divine hypocrisy, and unexpected metamorphosis.

At the Theater an der Wien, artistic director Stefan Herheim joins forces with lutenist and conductor Christina Pluhar and her ensemble L'Arpeggiata for a new production that promises to release the opera's full mixture of comic fairy-tale fantasy and unsettling emotional truth. The story begins in a world already broken. Earth has been ravaged by fire and drought, and Jupiter descends to restore water to the planet. Yet, in an opening that reveals the opera's distinctive moral irony, the supreme god is immediately distracted by desire. Seeing the nymph Callisto, a devoted follower of the chaste Diana, he decides not to protect or persuade but to deceive.

By assuming Diana's form, Jupiter gains access to Callisto's trust and seduces her. The action then expands into a richly tangled web: Callisto encounters the real Diana and is rejected; Diana herself has fallen in love with the beautiful young Endymion; the god Pan, jealous of this attachment, pursues his own claims; and Juno, Jupiter's formidable wife, ultimately directs her fury not at her unfaithful husband but at his innocent victim.

This is material ideally suited to Herheim. The director has repeatedly shown a rare ability to treat opera as an art of simultaneous narratives: historical, psychological, visual, musical, and theatrical. His productions frequently ask audiences to see the machinery of representation as part of the drama itself. In La Calisto, such an approach can be especially fertile, because the opera is already fascinated by performance. Jupiter becomes Diana; chastity masks desire; love is confused with impersonation; gods play roles and mortals suffer the consequences. The boundaries between reality, illusion, ritual, and theatrical make-believe are not peripheral themes but the opera's essential subject.

Herheim describes the production as comic fairy-tale theatre, and this is an apt point of entry, provided "fairy tale" is understood in its older and darker sense. Cavalli's opera has monsters, gods, transformations, erotic pursuit, jealousy, a bear, and ultimately a constellation. But its fantasy is never innocent. Its comic scenes are sharpened by the knowledge that Callisto's situation is fundamentally unequal: she is young,

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faithful to Diana, and confronted by Jupiter's power in a form designed to bypass consent. A successful contemporary staging must preserve the score's exuberance without neutralising this troubling centre.

Herheim's theatrical intelligence is likely to make the contrast between surface playfulness and underlying violence unusually visible. The question raised by the final transformation is particularly compelling. Juno turns Callisto into a bear, but Jupiter then elevates her to the heavens as Ursa Major. Is this a punishment followed by consolation, a celestial memorial, or a form of conquest? The Theater an der Wien's programme asks whether Callisto's new constellation represents a rupture with divine order or an act of self-assertion.

That ambiguity gives the opera an astonishingly modern force. Callisto is made into an image, an animal, and a star by powers stronger than herself; yet the final radiance may also suggest that the myth cannot fully contain her. Her transformation becomes an unresolved challenge to the social, sexual, and divine order that has tried to define her. Musically, Cavalli's achievement lies in his profound understanding of theatrical time. The operatic world of 1651 is far from the later standardisation of aria and recitative. Speech, song, lament, comic dialogue, dance rhythm, and instrumental colour move into one another with remarkable freedom.

Cavalli's music listens closely to the emotional shocks of language: a suddenly interrupted phrase, a repeated word, a hesitant cadence, or a shift from lyrical expansion to dry comic observation. His orchestra is modest in scale, but its expressive potential is immense. The continuo does not merely support the singers; it creates the pulse, texture, and emotional temperature of the drama.

Christina Pluhar is therefore an inspired choice as musical director. As a lutenist and founder of L'Arpeggiata, she has made seventeenth-century music feel spontaneous, physically alive, and rhythmically alert. Her approach is distinguished by the sense that historical performance practice should not reduce music to academic correctness but should restore its capacity for surprise. In La Calisto, that means an unusually vivid relationship between voice and continuo. The plucked instruments, harpsichord, harp, strings, winds, and percussion can respond almost conversationally to the singers, shifting in an instant from sensual warmth to comic bite, from pastoral delicacy to dramatic unease.

This flexibility is crucial because La Calisto contains multiple theatrical worlds. There is the grandeur of Jupiter and Juno, the chaste community of Diana's nymphs, the pastoral yearning of Endymion, the earthy humour surrounding Pan and the satyrs, and the vulnerable interiority of Callisto herself. Pluhar's musical direction can illuminate the way Cavalli lets these worlds collide without ever losing the opera's forward momentum. The comedy has to dance; the erotic scenes need dangerous softness; the laments must emerge naturally from speech; and the final apotheosis needs to retain both its wonder and its ambiguity.

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The Theater an der Wien is also an ideal house for such a work. Its intimate scale makes the emotional directness of Cavalli's writing immediately communicative, while its commitment to historically informed performance allows an opera like *La Calisto* to appear not as a specialist rarity but as fully alive theatre. The production, a co-production with the Staatsoper Unter den Linden Berlin, is presented in Italian with German and English surtitles, and runs from 16 to 28 September 2026.

This *La Calisto* promises to be one of the most intriguing operatic events of Vienna's autumn season. Herheim's imaginative directorial world and Pluhar's instinctive command of seventeenth-century style offer the ideal conditions for Cavalli's masterpiece: an opera where divine comedy becomes human tragedy, where gender is performance, where desire becomes a form of power, and where a wronged nymph finally becomes a star.

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