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[Handel in Bhutan](#)

By [Alessandra Quattrocchi](#), September 3, 2013



Bhutanese masks – © Aaron Carpené

In October 2013, Handel's opera; "Acis and Galatea" will be performed in the Bhutanese capital Thimphu - an ambitious and utopian project that will see combined the genius of Handel with traditional Bhutanese dance and music. The conductor Aaron Carpené assures us; "It promises to be an exciting and mysterious adventure into the world of Baroque opera".

Do you know about Bhutan? If you do, the chances are you have only heard about it in the last couple of years. That's when the tiny kingdom, tucked away between Nepal and India, first became fashionable in travel magazines. Although to be fair, economists have been talking about Bhutan since the year 1972, when King Jigme Singye Wangchuck first created the concept of Gross National Happiness, rather than gross domestic product, as an indicator of social progress and quality of life. The fourth Wangchuck king was also the one who opened up the country to the age of modernization and started applying a Western style education system, taking a long view into the future and setting the course on which he wanted to steer his country. He abdicated in 2006, at 51, leaving the kingdom to his young son Jigme Khesar Namgyel. They both look like Bollywood actors (the brooding eyes, the handsome features), which does help in promoting the picture of an attractive country.

In October, another step will be taken when for the first time a Western opera will be staged in Bhutan. George Friedrich Handel's *Acis and Galatea* (1735) will be performed in the capital Thimphu thanks to the unremitting efforts of Baroque conductor [Aaron Carpené](#) and stage director [Stefano Vizioli](#) and Executive Director Preston T. Scott. It will all take place on October 12 – a pivotal date in Western history, recorded as the ‘discovery’ of America by Christopher Columbus, sailor and adventurer from Genoa. But for Bhutan, October 12 is a momentous date because it is the eve of King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and Queen Jetsun Pema's wedding anniversary.



Stefano Vizioli – stage director and Aaron Carpené – conductor with Bhutanese friend – © Aaron Carpené

But the reference to Columbus is not superfluous, because this is a story that encompasses the whole world, from the mountains of the Himalayan kingdom to the hills of El Paso in Texas and on to Rome, where Vizioli and Australian-born Carpené are based. They are both deeply involved in “[Opera Bhutan](#)”, a futuristic, utopian project worthy of the myth from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* about the beautiful nymph loved by young Acis and the brutish Polyphemus. “It promises to be an exciting, mysterious adventure into the world of Baroque opera”, assures Carpené. But with a twist; enriching it “with the unknown alchemy of Bhutanese music and dance, and opera singers from the four corners of the globe, and a grand collaboration with the University of Texas at El Paso. In fact we chose *Acis and Galatea* because it is a *masque*, it has a chorus and only a few singers and players, and also because the libretto is in English, Bhutan's second language. But also because it touches chords which resonate with Bhutanese culture”. When the Cyclops kills Acis the shepherd in a fit of jealousy, Acis's dead body is transformed into the sweet waters of the Acis river that flow down the sides of Mount Etna in Sicily.



Dancers rehearsing the death of Acis – © Aaron Carpené

“My first question was: how can I dramatically combine these two languages? How can I avoid this sense of apparent schizophrenia, in order to create some semblance of coherence?” recalls Vizioli. “But the most fascinating thing happened when we told the story to the Bhutanese dancers. They immediately absorbed the central themes in *Acis*: love, both the idyllic adolescent love between *Acis* and *Galatea* and the more raunchy wooing between *Galatea* and *Polyphemus*; and then nature, transfiguration, re-birth. These are universal themes, unlike the stories in *La Traviata* or *La Bohème*. On the other hand, young people in Bhutan listen to *Madonna* and *Lady Gaga*, while we have no idea about their music: in a sense it is easier for them to absorb our culture than the other way round”.



Khandu – one of the dancers from the Royal Academy of Performing Arts – © Aaron Carpené

A fantastic spirit envelops the project also thanks to the involvement of UTEP, the University of Texas at El Paso. The university feels a strong link to Bhutan because of the *National Geographic* – that mainstay of American travelling culture. In 1914, the *National Geographic* ran an 88-page photo essay on Bhutan and its architecture. The photos of British engineer John Claude White were among the first ever published of the ancient kingdom. The colourful buildings, the “dzongs” and their quaintly curved roofs fascinated Kathleen Worrell, wife of the school’s first dean, who persuaded her husband to build the University’s first campus – on the foothills of the Franklin Mountains – in full Bhutanese style. Which is why the Texan university is financing part of the *Opera Bhutan* project, sending its young chorus and orchestra to the far East – which will play next to the Bhutanese musicians and five experienced Baroque players selected by Carpené. In 2014, for the first centenary of the University, El Paso plans to restage *Acis and Galatea* in its Bhutanized version on campus.



The beauty of Bhutanese architecture – The Rinpung Dzong at Paro –
© Aaron Carpené

However – notwithstanding the architecture that so enchanted the imagination of Kathleen Worrell – Bhutan is no fairytale Kingdom. Rather it is a country coming to terms with modern times and trying to do it at its own pace – if possible without losing its soul. The kingdom’s revenue derives primarily from selling hydroelectric power to India, but tourism is an important field of expansion, with several Western companies trying to develop their presence in the country. Bhutan would like to build structures in a spirit of sustainable tourism –or to put it more bluntly, the Nepalese model just beyond the border is exactly what the Bhutanese would like **not** to copy. “Tourism and tourists will not destroy Bhutan’s environment as long as the Bhutanese learn to appreciate, respect and preserve their country” says Kunzang Choden, the first Bhutanese writer to publish a novel in English. “Changes are impacting on the society as a whole, but Western influences are not the only devil.



Actors wearing traditional Bhutanese masks – © Aaron Carpené

Youth unemployment is a new reality”. In fact Bhutan now has a young generation of people educated according to the Western system– thanks to the arrival of Western teachers – but there are not nearly enough jobs to employ them locally, whereas just a few decades ago they would have worked on the farms. “We now have a Royal University of Bhutan with ten colleges located across the country. Most students who qualify study in these colleges because they are free. Students who do not qualify, attend colleges outside the country, mostly in India. Those students who can afford it or who manage to obtain government sponsorship tend to go to the US” says Kunzang Choden. Born into a family of feudal landlords, educated in India and the US, married to a Swiss, she now lives in the capital Thimphu, one of the three urban centres in Bhutan.



Stefano Vizioli mid rehearsal – © Aaron Carpené

Internet and TV sets are now a common feature of town life in Bhutan, while radios and mobile telephones are common in nearly every part of the country. But the changes go deeper than technology, they touch the very essence of the social structure of Bhutan, for better and for worse. Bhutan used to be a matriarchal society; farms and lands were inherited by sons or daughters according to the parents' wishes. "In the past there was no conception of marriage as a sacred institution; couples could live together, form and dissolve, and it was not uncommon for women to have children from different fathers. Now we have a Marriage Act that requires couples to register their marriage and which covers both divorce and child support" observes Choden. "Bhutanese law recognizes three forms of co-habitation; monogamy; polygamy and polyandry. Monogamy is the most common". In fact, the fifth King was born from the fourth king's third wife. But in the context of the south Asian region, Choden says, Bhutanese women appear to be much better off in terms of social status. "We are free of many of the prejudices and discrimination that women of the region face. We have no dowry system, no arranged marriages, no preference for male children and therefore no occurrence of female foeticides. Men and women have equal rights, at least on paper."



Traditional Bhutanese instruments – The 'lim' (flute);

the 'yanchen' (dulcimer at the front) and the 'dramyen' (lute) – © Aaron Carpené

But what can Bhutanese people get out of Handel and how is it possible to create a fusion between the Baroque tradition and Bhutanese music? To answer this challenge, the nymph Galatea will undertake a totally new adventure in Bhutan. To marry West and East, Vizioli's vision has imagined a young girl in early XX century costumes, travelling to the kingdom for the first time and meeting another culture with the colourful costumes of the Bhutanese dance tradition. Galatea's encounter with Acis the shepherd is the first love of her youth, Polyphemus incarnates the violence of convention and social repression. Through her trip and her exploration of a different reality, beyond borders and conventions, Galatea will become a woman in control of her life.

Vizioli and Carpené had to go through weeks of rehearsals in different stages over the last year, with several trips from Rome to Texas to Bhutan. Part of the challenge was a problem that Vizioli had to solve which lay in the very different spatial relationship between stage and audience in the Western and Bhutanese traditions. "Here there are no stages, theatre seats or proscenium to guarantee a division" notes Carpené. "The public sits, stands or hunches in the courtyard of the dzong, occupying three quarters of the rectangular performance area. They sit on mats and munch on betel nuts, the children are free to run around as they please, often directly towards the actors, and the actors themselves have an almost physical relationship with the audience which by necessity becomes an integral part of the spectacle". It is reminiscent of an Elizabethan theatre. And then there are the disturbing masks of the Atsara, much loved by the Bhutanese public who consider them the emanation of the divine because of their madness and absolute freedom of expression.



The spectacle of colour and costume by the local Bhutanese in Trongsa – © Aaron Carpené

"What both excited and disturbed me" says Vizioli "is that there are many similarities to my own cultural background: the Atsara wears a grotesque red mask with a distorted canine smile, an enormous nose and black oblong eyes with facial warts. They remind me of the primitive harlequins of the Italian Commedia dell'Arte and evoke the smells of a Venetian campiello (small square) in the midst of a square in Thimphu. The Atsara mingle with the spectators, taunting them, miming and pronouncing obscenities ranging from coprophilia to pornography, desecrating religion, the monks and the establishment. They are mad, so they can say and do whatever they please. They have enormous phalli attached to their headwear..." Again, another undercurrent that strikes a chord with our own traditions: the Romans used to have phalli drawn on their houses as a symbol of fertility. And in Bhutan the phallus can be found everywhere, painted on the walls of houses, hanging above the entrance or as an elegant piece of furniture in a living room. "What I wanted" says Vizioli "is for both the Western and the Bhutanese side to share common feelings, aspects of human nature and solidarity in a higher concept of brotherhood through art. Accepting and respecting differences is the basis of democracy and of fighting against ignorance".

The second challenge is Carpené's artistic problem: to combine Handel's music and the Bhutanese dances, finding common ground and preserving the independence of both traditions; opera and singing, leaving enough room to include instruments that are unknown to the Western world, for different costumes and another type of body language. Carpené has conducted *Acis and Galatea* in several surroundings, including a production in Macao two years ago. But this is a totally new experience. "We had to insert the Bhutanese dances where they were most logical" he says, "for instance with the entry of Polyphemus, who is a disturbing presence, because these hypnotic traditional dances have a symbolic link to the underworld. The Bhutanese dances celebrate nature, happiness, grief; they deal with deep emotions. The musical transition might be shocking in another context but in the Bhutanese frame it will be magic". The inner courtyard of the Royal Textile Academy in Thimphu will have two different orchestras and the performance in the early afternoon will use natural light and will have a feeling of the tsechu, the religious festivals. Bhutan is a country of mountains, spectacularly transparent air and clean-cut colours. The King and Queen will be there to be enticed and swept away by the music and this wonderful clash of cultures.

Acis has but four singers (four outstanding Baroque performers in this case: *Galatea* will be Francesca Lombardi Mazzulli from Italy, *Acis* the Canadian Thomas Macleay, Jacques-Greg Belobo from Cameroon will be Polyphemus and Brian Downen from the US will be *Acis*' friend Damon). But the whole enterprise involves dozens of technicians and performers. Fitzcarraldo comes to mind – the visionary Klaus Kinski of Werner Herzog's film who staked everything to build an opera house in the forests of Peru. But *Opera Bhutan* is about dialogue, not invasion; about understanding, not conquest. Young *Galatea* should emerge from the Thimphu courtyard as an emblem of peace.

For more information about the project please refer to the [Opera Bhutan site](#)

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