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Two Kings, Two Baroque Works

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It was typically courageous of the Minnesota Opera, where early bel canto operas and new works always share the season with more standard repertoire, to offer "The Fortunes of King Croesus" (1711; revised 1730), a very obscure baroque work by an equally obscure composer, Reinhard Keiser. Keiser wrote more than 60 operas; "King Croesus" is a fascinating and appealing example of how German operas developed in Hamburg during the period, especially when compared with the more familiar French and Italian operas, and of course with the works of Keiser's more famous contemporary, Handel.

In a somewhat abridged edition by the director Tim Albery and conductor Harry Bicket, the rich score boasted a variety of aria types, some intriguing ensembles, and a colorful orchestral accompaniment.

A co-production with Opera North in the U.K., this "King Croesus" ably balanced the unusual love story with the theme of the dangers of complacency and pride. When Croesus, the King of Lydia, boasts of his riches, the philosopher Solon reminds him that fortunes can change very quickly. And they do: Croesus soon finds himself at war with the Persians, defeated and a captive, destined to be burned alive. Meanwhile, his son, the mute Atis, and a princess, Elmira, carry on a complicated courtship that involves disguise and proxy love-making. Three other characters suffer from unrequited love; two servants, a legacy of the opera's Italian roots, provide low comic relief. Fortunately, everything works out in the end.

Mr. Albery updated the opera (more or less) to the early 20th century, making the thematic points clearly and without excessive modern overlay. Croesus's self-indulgent court is dancing on the edge of the abyss of World War I, the king goes off to war in the garb of a World War I flying ace, and the battle scenes are represented by airplane models pushed across the raked platform of the set with long poles. **Set and costume designer Leslie Travers devised a color scheme of black and gold, lit in evocative pools by Thomas C. Hase; the look is spare, with jewel-colored costumes for the courtiers and a backdrop projection suggesting smoke and fire.** The captured Croesus huddles in a burned-out airplane fuselage, and the Persian soldiers beat him up. The lovers -- requited, confused and rejected -- circle each other in bemusement, and the mute Atis gestures his love with eloquence.

Mr. Bicket was the musical star of the show, giving the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, augmented by a few continuo players, the sound and verve of a period-instrument ensemble. Aria and recitative accompaniments were especially sensitive. Several of the singers also had a fine sense of the style: Tenor Paul Nilon captured the sudden fall and despair of Croesus; tenor Vale Rideout was touching as Atis (who finds his voice in Act II), especially in a brief, poignant aria accompanied only by harpsichord; and soprano Jamie-Rose Guarrine displayed sparkling clarity as Clerida, one of the unrequited lovers. Susanna Phillips (Elmira) had the most to sing, but her lush, attractive soprano missed the flexibility and pinpoint accuracy of pitch that makes this music work best; countertenor Alan Dornak was a little hooty as Halimacus, Atis's friend. Brian Leerhuber did fine with the villain Orsanès, and Dan Dressen was amusing as Elcius, the comic relief.