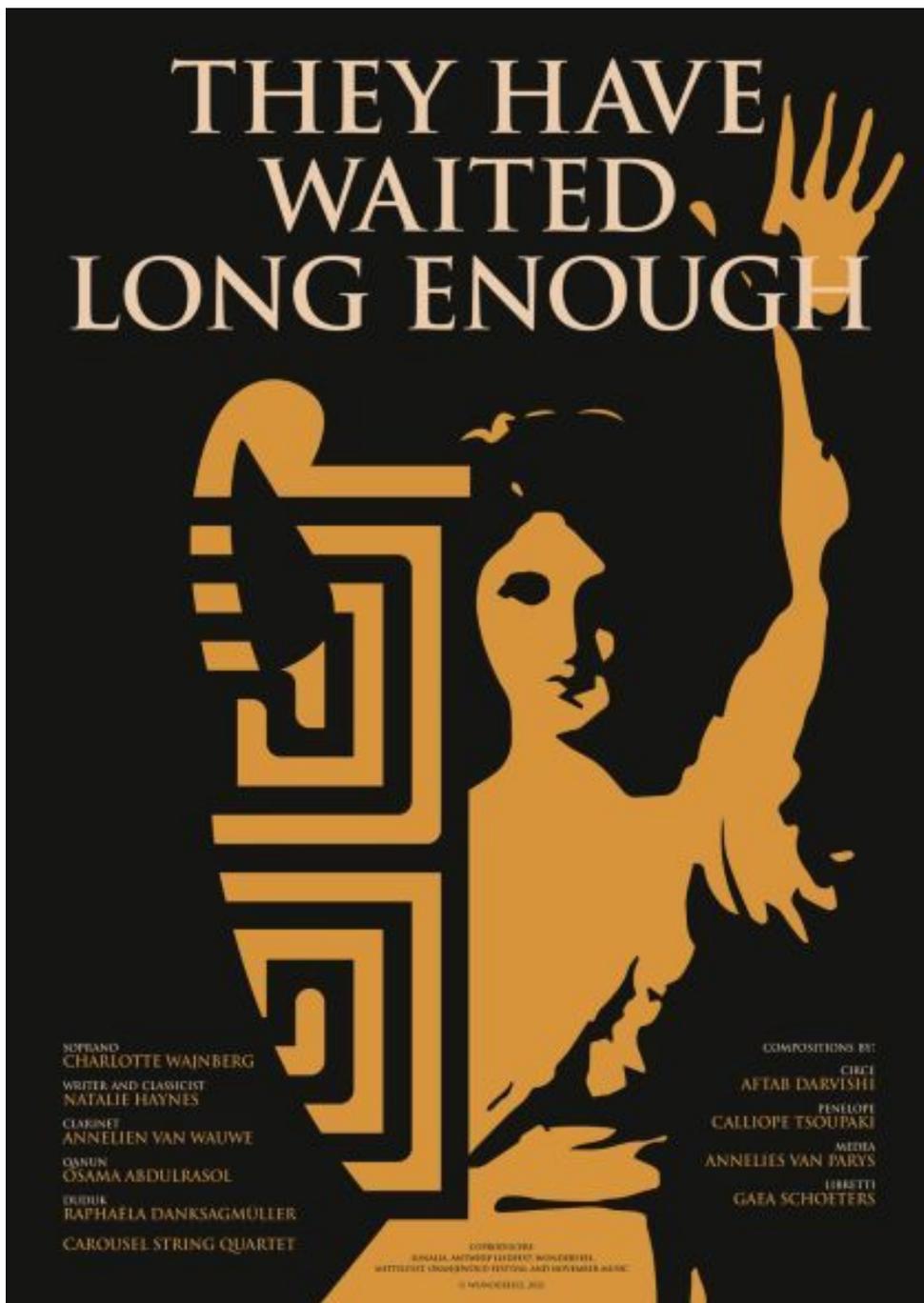


PERS MEDEA / door Thea Derks

Medea, Circe & Penelope get a voice of their own

Posted on [July 3, 2021](#) by [Thea Derks](#)

Euripides immortalized Medea in his eponymous play, Homer recounted Circe and Penelope in his Odyssey. Throughout the centuries, their labelling of the threesome became ever more solidified. We regard Medea as a hysterical child murderer, Circe as a malicious witch and Penelope as a passive, eternally waiting wife. But do we do them justice, Tamar Brüggeman, organizer of the [Wonderfeel](#) summer festival, wondered. From 17-18 July the outdoor festival presents a different take in the production They Have Waited Long Enough.



SOPRANO
CHARLOTTE WAINBERG
WRITER AND CLASSICIST
NATALIE HAYNES
CLARINET
ANNELIEN VAN WAUWE
QANUN
OSAMA ABDULRASOL
DRUM
RAPHAELA DANKSAGMÜLLER
CAROUSEL STRING QUARTET

COMPOSITIONS BY:
CIRCE
AFTAB DARVISHI
PENELOPE
CALLIOPE TSOUPAKI
MEDIA
ANNELIES VAN PARYS
LIBRETTI
GAEA SCHOETERS

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At Brüggeman's request, librettist Gaea Schoeters and author Natalie Haynes examined other possible interpretations of the classical heroines. They arrived at a change of perspective 'simply by taking their stories seriously'. This alternative view took on musical form in three brand new compositions by as many female composers: Annelies van Parys (Medea), Aftab Darvishi (Circe) and Calliope Tsoupaki (Penelope). Each one set a text by Schoeters for the soprano Charlotte Wajnberg, the Carousel String Quartet and three soloists: Annelien Van Wauwe, clarinet; Rhaphaëla Danksagmüller, duduk, and Osama Abdulrasol, qanun.

Thus, after two millennia, the mythological ladies finally get their a voice of their won. The three musical portraits premiered online on May 21 at the Festival of Flanders, in a coproduction with the aforementioned festival Wonderfeel, Lunalia, Antwerp Liedfest, Oranjewoudfestival, Mittelfest and November Music.

THE ANGUISH OF MEDEA

Annelies van Parys zooms in on Medea and begins and ends her piece with a lullaby, played by the clarinet. In contrast to the monster that many see in Medea, she feels empathy for her tragic fate. The sorceress from Colchis left her homeland to follow her lover to his native land. In this foreign environment, she was immediately swapped for another. Not out of bloodlust but out of pure love, she then kills their children : she wants to save them from the humiliation she herself suffered as an outsider.

In Schoeters' libretto Medea lulls her children into a deadly sleep. Her tenderness and agony are beautifully expressed by the sweet cantilenas of the clarinet and the soprano's swaying vocal lines, infused with abrasive multiphonics and grinding strings. Sliding tones, rustling sounds and resigned recitatives alternating with sudden, passionate outbursts from the singer, make Medea's doubts and despair palpable.

THE LONELINESS OF CIRCE

The Iranian-Dutch Aftab Darvishi painted Circe's portrait. We regard her as an evil witch who turned men into pigs, but Darvishi recognizes a fellow sufferer in her. Like the demigoddess exiled to an island, she knows the feeling of loneliness and displacement when a person must build a new life in unfamiliar territory. For the solo instrument, Darvishi chose the Armenian duduk, a double-reed instrument with a sweet melancholic sound that can also sound shrill and unpleasant.

The muffled tones of the duduk almost imperceptibly blend with the voice of the soprano, who mainly communicates her sad message on one single tone. In stark contrast to her apparent resignation are the rich, romantic harmonies of the strings, that sketch a carefree, Arcadian universe. The string players do make attempts at rapprochement, though, but the moment they lovingly try to absorb the 'foreign' instrument, the duduk wriggles free from their embrace with harsh, unpleasant shrieks.



Screenshot online premiere

THE POWER OF PENELOPE

The Greek-Dutch Calliope Tsoupaki portrays Penelope. For many years, Odysseus' wife kept a pack of would-be lovers at bay by unravelling her fabrics at night. Because of its resemblance to a loom, Tsoupaki chose a qanun, an Arabian zither with a trapezoidal soundboard strung with three-stranded strings, played with a plectrum. With its heavenly tinkling treble and deep buzzing basses, the instrument beautifully symbolizes the layered character and mental prowess of Penelope.

Tsoupaki gives the rich sound of the qanun a prominent role. Sparkling ascending and descending motifs and modal scales are embedded in sonorous harmonies and fierce tremoli in the strings, coupled with sweltering melismas from the soprano. Abundant drones and bent tones evoke an oriental atmosphere. Arpeggio's and minimalist repetitions effectively call to mind the never-ending journey of Odysseus and the patient but sovereign waiting of Penelope.

DIGNIFIED OWN VOICE

Wajnberg's agile, full voice, careful diction and empathic performance flawlessly bring the characters' changing emotions to the fore, aided by immaculate performances of the three soloists and the ever alert Carousel String Quartet. Its four players combine symphonic allure with individual perfection. Natalie Haynes introduces each composition with an impassioned

spoken narrative, but in her enthusiasm sometimes overestimates the listener's craving for detail.

The production offers Medea, Circe and Penelope a worthy voice of their own. This was about time, for indeed: *They Have Waited Long Enough!*

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