

January 6, 2022 - Reinhard Keiser's *Croesus*

The expression "as rich as Croesus" comes from the legendary wealth of the king who reigned from 560 to 546 BC over Lydia in western Asia Minor. On this week's Thursday Night Opera House I'll present Reinhard Keiser's *Croesus* (*Der hochmütige, gestürzte und wieder erhabene Croesus* [*The Proud, Overthrown and Again-Exalted Croesus*]), which was first performed at Hamburg's Theater am Gänsemarkt sometime in 1711. Later, the composer extensively revised the opera for a new version, which premiered at the same theatre on December 6, 1730. The story is loosely based on two incidents from Herodotus's *Histories*.

King Croesus of Lydia (tenor **Roman Trekel**) is rich and hedonistic, and is insulted when the philosopher Solon (baritone **Kwangchul Youn**) tells him that riches do not necessarily bring happiness. His son Atis (counter-tenor **Werner Gura**) was born a deaf mute, and relies on Halimacus (counter-tenor **Graham Pushee**) to interpret his sign language. Nevertheless, Elmira (soprano **Dorothea Röschmann**), who--with her mother, the former Queen of Media--has been rescued by Croesus after their country was conquered by Cyrus (bass **Johannes Mannov**), is in love with Atis and he with her.

Cyrus, keen to expand his empire further, declares war on Croesus, so the latter, with Atis, Halimacus, Elcius (tenor **Kurt Azesberger**) and the army depart from Sardis to take on the invader. Croesus leaves Eliates (tenor **Markus Schäfer**) in charge, to the annoyance of Orsanès (baritone **Klaus Häger**). Orsanès desires Elmira, who spurns him; he himself is desired by Clerida (soprano **Salomé Haller**), but he spurns her, and Clerida is desired by Eliates, to whom she is indifferent.

Croesus loses the ensuing battle and is captured by the Persians, who are about to put him to death when Atis, who is nearby, suddenly finds that he has the power of speech and shouts at his father's captors. They spare Croesus's life, but take him to Cyrus, who imprisons and taunts him and threatens him with being burned to death. Meanwhile, Atis and Halimacus hatch a plot: Atis will pretend to be a captured Persian Captain (baritone **Jörg Gottschick**), who closely resembles the Prince but, unlike him, can speak. Elcius, a cynical servant, escapes capture, deserts the army and becomes a travelling salesman.

Halimacus returns to Sardis with Atis, who wears a Persian uniform and is now called "Ermin," with the news that Croesus has been captured. Everyone marvels at "Ermin's" resemblance to Atis, but they accept that, because he can speak, he cannot be the Prince. Eliates sets about finding a ransom for Croesus.

Orsanès, seeing a way to further his own ambitions, suggests that "Ermin" should pretend to be Atis, and can then declare himself – via Halimacus – unfit to rule because of his speechlessness, and cede the throne to Orsanès. "Ermin" agrees to this, but points out that the real Atis should be returning that night, which could cause a problem. Orsanès has a solution: "Ermin" must first kill Atis and dispose of the body. "Ermin" agrees to do this, and next day appears as the dumb Prince.

Everyone accepts that Atis and Ermin are different people, but Elmira is upset when "Ermin" gives her a letter in Atis's handwriting saying that he wants her to take "Ermin" as a lover. When "Ermin" then reveals who he really is, she does not believe him, while Orsanès discovers that "Ermin" isn't as stupid as he had thought. Meanwhile, Elcius reappears at the court with his wares and is recognized by Elmira's attendant Trigesta (soprano **Brigitte Eisenfeld**), who is happy to see him again.

Eliates has raised a ransom, but Cyrus is not interested and prepares to execute Croesus. The Lydian court visit Cyrus to try to save their king, and Atis offers himself as an alternative victim, but Cyrus is implacable. Solon is on hand, however, and he points out that, as Croesus's pride went before a fall, so may Cyrus's. Cyrus relents, a chastened Croesus is restored to his throne, Elmira and Atis embrace, Orsanès is discomfited, Clerida turns to Eliates, and everyone else rejoices.

René Jacobs conducts the Berlin Academy for Ancient Music, the RIAS Chamber Choir, and members of the Hanover Boys' Choir in this 2000 Harmonia Mundi recording, CD number 901714-16.

From Act I, baritone **Hermann Prey** sings Croesus's "Prangt die allerschönste Blume":
<https://youtu.be/DEH2bFyVY2A>.