

Aphrodite

Librettist: **Laura Lethlean**

Composer: **Nico Muhly**, in association with **Omega Ensemble**.

Produced by **Sydney Chamber Opera**, 2025

AVA *The Aphrodite Complex*, my latest to be published.
Took years of research and a lifetime of living.
The Aphrodite Complex, they're saying: "It's The Second Sex for the next
generation." We've come so far since de Beauvoir...
And yet-
And yet, well, you know.

"How brave", that's what they say, can you believe?
Me: divorced, mother of three, "obscure... academic..."
Right place, right time I suppose...

The Aphrodite Complex: now a three-part documentary!
What more could I want? What more can I expect?

I'm a thread in a garment, a leaf on a tree, there's nothing special that the fates
should see...
What is it to be human?
To be human is to want...

Athens! Three months ago, I felt his undertow.
He shook my hand and my heart followed.
At our meeting something happened
something deep and disobedient began to swim...

We were in Greece, to film my show.
Hector was the D.O.P (It was his job to look at me).
When Hector's hand reached for my own, it was warm and steady...
The gathering of thunder, the dropping of the pressure...

In our forced proximity days were woven into weeks, desire not erased by sleep.

Then there was Friday, he framed me in that shot just so,
standing on a cliff edge, the sun in my eyes, the beach down below.
He took me aside and asked: "That island in the distance, see how it looks well,
like a penis?"
I explained, and Hector listened...

When Chronos, God of Time, severed his father's phallus
and flung it into the ocean, it flew across the sky
and landed right behind me. Just over there.
Imagine that splash! Waves of blood and semen...
Mixing with the currents
From all this mess formed a Goddess.
From all this mess formed a Goddess.
From all this mess formed a Goddess.
Her name became the essence of fertility, beauty, love, seduction: four rivers
flowing into one.

There are many stories, but the famous one starts at a party...
All the Gods are there, including Eris.
As she arrives, she has a prize: a Gold Apple.

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She puts it at the centre of the room.
And soon, all the Gods desire it.
Alchemical temptation.
Zeus pulls focus. He announces:
The Golden Apple will be given to the most beautiful among us.

He regrets this instantly.

He selects a mortal: Paris, Prince of Troy.
He will judge the deities.
After some consideration, Paris makes his proclamation.
He awards the Golden Apple to...
You guessed it...

From that moment it's official: the greatest beauty, that the world will ever
see...
The one who stands above them all...
When a mortal man makes the call.

Athens International, end of the shoot.
The two of us are sitting there at the bar.
As if the Gods can hear my prayers, like a test, like a dare.
He clinks my empty glass, "We've got two hours to pass; would you like another?"
"Yes please" I breathe...

Hector,
what makes me smile most is that name. Kind, assertive, obsessed with the
shot, with the frame.
Hector
If I was braver, but it's insane.
Imagining Hector
following me to the bathroom.
Imagining Hector
knocking on the door.
Hector
pressing me against the hand dryer.
Hector!
I've stood on the side of erupting volcanoes. Interviewed war criminals. Birthed
three children.
Why can't I tell him?
Right then and there, I almost say it. Almost trade it: dignity for passion...
Instead, I tell him a story.

Once at a wedding,
I was barely twenty,
the bridesmaids were all posing,
having their photo taken.
We were watching. We were peeking. We were scanning their bodies, their
faces,
comparing and contrasting.

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It was decided,
the thinnest, with the hair that was the longest, and the skin that was the finest,
and the smile that was the widest
was the winner, was the prettiest.
The winner.
Ever since the Golden Apple, every day is some degree of pageantry. We rank
ourselves quietly.
And the prospect of winning,
the prospect of getting that Golden Apple,
is haunting...

"But you're not like that," Hector remarks.
Of course I am, am I immune?
"Well, you're like, fifty, aren't you?"

It's then I realise:
Obsessed with the shot, with the frame.
When he looks at me, what must he see?
What must he see? An older woman
standing in the rubble of a failed marriage,
still carrying the same baggage.

It was his job to look at me. How foolish could I be? This is just a fantasy.

Traveling through these tiled cities, I involuntarily absorb giant heads, giant
eyes.
Every surface a reflection.

I'm tipsy. I'm tired.
I've stood on the side of erupting volcanoes. Interviewed war criminals. Birthed
three children.
Why can't I...

She's what I should be, what I could be. Maybe they would see me... career of my
dreams...
Am I here?
When they look, what do they see?
Sagging cheeks, deepening lines.
I am pulled in, I'm pulling in.
I'm reaching...
for something to change me.
I'm willing. I'm open.

APHRODITE I am desire manifest.
Formidable, luxurious.
I bestow temptation, transcendental sensation.
I am aspiration, guaranteed satisfaction.
Do you not recognise me?
I was Ishtar, then Astrarte.

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Now Aphrodite.
In times of peace, of pilgrimage, they worshipped in my honour.

No hope of being crowned.
They found no pleasure in their play.
Games of stratospheric bliss with passions unrelenting coursed through mortal
bodies.
With pouted lips, motionless, I met your gaze no longer.

I became a marble statue.
A pin up girl. A figurine.
A goddess, reduced to stillness.
Now the pilgrimage is over.
It is I who comes to you. The question is...
What do you want?

AVA Three months ago, I felt his undertow...
 Gathering of thunder... I want them to see me...
 To see me as the one whose gaze electrifies,
 whose hair falls across her eyes, the only winner of the prize. I want to hold the
 Golden Apple.

APHRODITE We have work to do...
 To become irresistible you must be striking.
 Still, you must resist time.
 Be burned into a billion minds.
 I can make you glow like her.
 I can make you statuesque.
 External features, all that matters.
 A gaze that's ready to devour.
 A gaze that's ready to devour.

AVA A transformation of a woman, who once resembled me.

TOGETHER Suddenly...

AVA I am my thick hair.
 I am my hairless body.
 I am my thick hair.
 I am my curved brows.
 I am my hairless arse crack.
 I am my toned arms.
 I am my neatly folded labia.
 I am my full lips.
 I am my plump skin.
 I am white eyeballs.
 I am an even hairline.
 I am a pout, a pose.
 I'm a smile, a chin, a nose.

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I am a flat stomach.
I am pert tits, long legs, thigh gap.
I am irresistible.
I am my thick hair.
I am my hairless body.

APHRODITE Remember what I said: With desire comes trouble. If he sees you, he will not resist you,
but his desire might insist.
Your body is his gift.
The one who's irresistible.
Must also be responsible.
You must be accountable.
He will be insatiable.
He is not reliable.
The Golden Apple does not discriminate.
To him, you're irresistible.
But all who see you will desire you,
and only when they're satisfied will they stop chasing you.
Now you're irresistible.
It will be your fate to be eternally desirable,
in a world that is insatiable.

AVA Hector?
Are you there?
Hector? Are you close?
Can you hear me? Where is he?
Hector?
Did he disappear?
Hector?

Household name.
Resisting time.
Burned into a billion minds.
In the mirror, do you see her?
She is beauty, she is lovely.
She once resembled me.
Who is she?
A painted face, a practiced gait.
High heels, skipping meals.
Who is she?
She wears a frock...

Pointing cameras at beautiful strangers, in foreign lands.
Something to look at, to be arranged. Forever in bloom, a petal, a stem.

Look, look, look. Sniff, sniff, sniff. Touch, touch, touch.
Anything to say? Anything?

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To be human is to want, despite everything I've got...

The Aphrodite Complex, my latest to be published.
Took years of research, and a lifetime of...
And yet, what is it to be human?

Perfection promised connection. Did it not?
If I had one more wish, I'd want none of this.

APHRODITE One more wish, is that what you said? What is it that you want?

AVA Paris made his proclamation.
You are the ideal creation.
Yet, looking at your ivory, all I feel is pity.

APHRODITE Pity? Look how spoiled you've become.
Look, look, look, look.
I am four rivers flowing into one.
Who are you to pity me?

AVA Who am I? I'm no one.
"Obscure academic" "Mother of three" "A single woman"
Only human.
Host of a documentary.

I'm a thread in a garment, a leaf on a tree. Someone who was once happy...

APHRODITE Don't mistake me for a wilting flower. To be desired is to have power.
Mortals, always watching, never seeing. Only looking, never touching.
Golden Apples.
Pageant ranking,
winning smiles,
constant chasing.
I'm eternally desirable, in a world that is insatiable.
External features, all that matters.
Flawless body, clothes that flatter.
A gaze that's ready to devour.
Don't stop looking.

AVA If you have power, as you say:
Why was a mortal man allowed to rank you?

Close your eyes
Try not to die, but to feel.
There is life inside my hands.
I am the tingling.
There is life inside my chest.
I am the beating.
There is air inside my lungs.

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I am the breathing.
There is moisture on my tongue.
Can you feel it?

You stood in a line, each of you divine,
and he was watching.
He was peeking,
he was scanning your bodies up and down,
your immortal faces,
scanning your bodies up and down.
Comparing and contrasting.
There and then, it was decided.
This mortal man: he bestowed it. Did you want it?
Why did you take it? Why did you allow it?

The pageantry, the ranking...
Why do we allow it, still?
Close your eyes...