

Hadrian Librettist's Notes and Synopsis

Hadrian creates the story of the last day of the Roman Emperor who ruled from 117-138 CE. Hadrian seems best known for the building of the wall in Britannia that bears his name, and for his conflict with Judea against the rise of monotheism. But he is mostly unknown for what might be his greatest legacy, his having lived openly as a homosexual and his deep, unshakable love for another man, Antinous.

Homoerotic relationships were acceptable within the Roman nobility at the time but only when the aim was carnal instruction between an adult male and a youth who was a slave and subservient to his master. Antinous was both a free man and too old for this relationship to be sanctioned, and most concerningly for Hadrian's entourage, Antinous was treated by Hadrian as an equal partner in their love.

Hadrian met Antinous while on a tour of the Empire and they spent the next six years together continuing that tour. Near the end of their travels, facing the happy promise of a life together at Tibur, Hadrian's magnificent villa outside Rome, Antinous died under suspicious circumstances by drowning in the Nile.

In our opera, we offer explanation for Antinous' death, and for Hadrian's politics. We enter Hadrian's heart and hold up his relationship with Antinous as one the great love stories upon which an era began its end.

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ACT I

The last night of Hadrian's life. In Tibur, outside Rome.

Hadrian is gravely ill and grieving the death of his lover Antinous. After a year of preparations, Antinous' body is to be entombed. Hadrian's entourage feels Hadrian will die tonight, from either sickness or sadness.

Hadrian is visited by two deities only he can see: Emperor Trajan and his wife Plotina. Trajan, like a father to him, is here to comfort Hadrian. Plotina, having secured Hadrian the throne, is on a mission. Hadrian only wants to know the truth of what happened to Antinous.

Convinced he is mad with grief, Hadrian orders his physician Hermogenes to kill him. Turbo, his long-time friend and head of his military, tries to reason with Hadrian. Hermogenes' loyalty to his Emperor brings him to kill himself.

Plotina and Trajan return. Plotina begins her campaign.

Turbo addresses affairs of state: enemies of the status quo rise in power. This is of no concern to Hadrian; he's busy memorializing Antinous. Knowing that time is short, Plotina strikes a deal: two nights with Antinous and the truth if Hadrian signs a document that would destroy those who would destroy them. Hadrian agrees.

ACT II

Seven years earlier, in Greece.

Plotina leads Hadrian through the night he met Antinous: the feast of Robigalia, celebrated tonight to honour Hadrian's tour of the Empire. Guests sing Hadrian's praises. We meet Hadrian's wife Sabina. Her sadness reveals itself: her husband has no heart for her.

Present is Antinous, who was magnificent in the hunt today, killing a boar that was charging the Emperor. Preparations begin for a ceremonial sacrifice. Hadrian insists Turbo bring forward the hero of the hunt; Turbo is reluctant, concerned about the Emperor's tastes.

Hadrian longs to take Antinous in his arms, but knows the night must play out just as it did. We see their attraction is deep and true.

For Hadrian's amusement, a Sibyl has been procured. She predicts that Antinous will "sacrifice" and become a "saviour." Hadrian turns his attention back to the celebration.

A sacrifice is brought to the altar, small groups form. Hadrian and Antinous have found their destiny. Turbo and Sabina have found a common enemy in Antinous. The entourage considers political implications. The people gossip.

Plotina reveals herself to us: she had been the Sibyl.

INTERMISSION

ACT III

Egypt. A barge on the Nile.

In a world between worlds, Hadrian and Antinous' love expresses itself as all consuming.

It is six years since the night Hadrian and Antinous met. Over time Antinous has shown himself to be a wise and gentle man. Hadrian recognizes this night as the night Antinous died.

Unable to escape his real-world illness, and facing the worst night of his life, Hadrian begs Plotina to change the rules. She refuses.

The entourage, sick of life on the road, amuse themselves with drinking games. When Antinous appears we see that he has captured their hearts. Antinous has a peaceable approach to the Jews and Nazarenes. Turbo sees this as supporting the power of monotheism. He worries that Hadrian is too influenced by Antinous.

Sabina is tormented by her husband's love for Antinous. She and Turbo speak of a plan: a deception is to be undertaken by a Sybil. Sabina is unsure, Turbo is determined.

The bedchamber. Antinous cares for Hadrian. A Sybil comes to help with Hadrian's illness. She declares that Hadrian's recovery requires a sacrifice.

Hadrian briefly steps into the world between. He sees that the Sibyl is Sabina. Back in the fever dream of the past Antinous cares for Hadrian tenderly. Sabina witnesses Hadrian's love for Antinous. Her husband has a heart. She is moved.

On deck we see that Antinous trusts the Sibyl's words. He is about to sacrifice himself. Sabina rushes in to end the game. Turbo shows himself and has Sabina taken away. Alone with Antinous, Turbo admits the deception then kills Antinous, delivering his body to the Nile.

ACT IV

Tibur, outside Rome. Hadrian's last moments.

Back in the real world. Hadrian, now more broken than he was, makes a show of signing the document, thus ending Judea. Plotina is elated, monotheism will die. She will live eternal.

Turbo is delighted, Hadrian is himself again, the Empire will thrive. Hadrian explains this document will see the Empire fall. Then he tells Turbo what he knows: Turbo killed Antinous. Turbo admits it with no remorse. Hadrian moves to stab Turbo in the heart, but stops, he asks "Why?"

Turbo explains he was protecting the legacy of his friend and Emperor. Hadrian disdains all material concerns naming his own legacy in his final words, "He loved." In this moment Turbo sees the truth. Hadrian dies.

All deities present lead Hadrian into death. Hadrian and Antinous are reunited. The gods ponder their future as a dark chorus of unrest gathers. A time has ended. A time has begun.

~ Daniel MacIvor, librettist