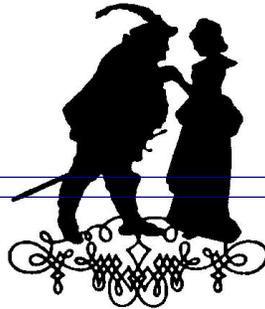


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



The 2017 London Handel Festival Young Artists Shine in a Feisty *Faramondo*

Once again, for six weeks in March and April, the London Handel Festival treated Handel's adopted city with an enticing array of performances and activities, for the most part works by Handel, both familiar and forgotten. The theme this year was Handel, the European, in his adopted city of London, celebrated with various concerts, talks, walks and film screenings. For almost twenty years now, since 1999, the Festival has been under the visionary artistic leadership of Musical Director Laurence Cummings. This year's opera, *Faramondo* - per usual a collaboration with The Royal College of Music International Opera School - was certainly on the high level I have come to expect at the Festival, whose mission in part is to foster promising young talent.

So it was somewhat of a surprise to learn from the new Festival Director, Samir Savant, that this would be the final year of the formal collaboration between The Royal College of Music and the London Handel Festival. On the surface, the split may seem perplexing, especially given Mr. Savant's welcoming comment in the 2017 Festival program book: "We continue with our major

aim of promoting young talent and exploring lesser known repertoire of Handel and his contemporaries." But looking beyond the surface, as Mr. Savant explained to me, it makes good sense, thus giving the Festival more flexibility in terms of scheduling, venue and choice of repertory. Performances may still be heavily dependent on the fine talent from The Royal College of Music (happily so); but, where appropriate, casts can be supplemented with other gifted young Handelians of today, as well as with established international singers.

A Roster of Talented Competitors

Representative of this talent is the Festival's annual Handel Singing Competition, celebrating its fifteenth year. I was able to attend the semi-finals of this year's competition on March 22 in Handel's own church, St. George's, Hanover Square. Each of the twelve semi-finalists (following the First Round, held in February) presented two arias, one with recitative and one in English as required. The impressive and diverse group (from no less than nine different countries!) illustrates why this competition has grown to international



Music Director Lawrence Cummings with the LHF competition winners: Jungkwon Jang, Marcjanna Myrlak, H el oise Mas, Arianna Vendittelli, and Max Riebl Photo: Chris Christodoulou

significance, as has the RCM International Opera School. Indeed the five winners represented five different countries: countertenor Jungkwon Jang from South Korea, mezzo-soprano Marcjanna Myrlak from Poland, mezzo-soprano H el oise Mas from France, soprano Arianna Vendittelli from Italy, and countertenor Max Riebl from Australia. Many previous finalists (some indeed from RCM) have gone on to important international careers, for example, Iestyn Davies, Ruby Hughes, and Rupert Charlesworth. This year's winner (at the finals on April 4) was the engaging Ms. Myrlak, whose eloquently phrased "As with rosy steps the morn" from *Theodora* won me over in the semi-finals. Ms. Vendittelli took the second prize and Mr. Jang received the audience prize. Finalist prizes went to Mr. Jang, Ms. Mas and Mr. Riebl.

The point here is to stress the continued commitment of the Festival to foster promising young singers of Handel, with or without a formal collaboration with RCM, which has launched the careers of many celebrated singers including Joan Sutherland, Thomas Allen, Gerald Finley, Sarah Connolly, and Lucy Crowe – to name but a handful. Singers from the Handel Competition pop up in performances world wide, and, whether RCM graduates or not, are also viable resources for Festival Opera productions.

A further indication of the Festival's continued support for young talent was the captivating concert on March 23 at St. George's by "Ceruleo," a chamber ensemble from the esteemed Guildhall School of Music & Drama, another source of promising talent. The chamber ensemble of two clarion-voiced sopranos (Emily Owen and Jenni Harper), along with harpsichord and viola da gamba, captivated the audience with three delightful songs by 17th century Venetian Barbara Strozzi, rich in eloquent word painting. Also included were diverse chamber works by Handel, including one of his many delightful early pastoral cantatas, "Occhi miei che faceste?" and also a late duet, "No, di voi non vo fidarmi" ("No, I will not put my trust in you"), in which the two sopranos with artful imitative exchanges, caught the playfulness of this delightful piece.

As Samuel Butler once wrote en route to Venice: "the out of the way bits of Handel are like the little side bits in such a town as Verona." So too at the London Handel Festival. Events of this uniquely varied and extensive six-week Festival range from its renowned vocal competition, to intimate chamber works and recitals, to major works by Handel and his contemporaries, both rare and familiar. Of the rare, for example, which I was unable to attend this year, were Handel's *pasticcio* opera *Ormisda*, performed by the visiting ensemble Opera Settecento, and Handel's late oratorio *Joseph and his Brethren*, with Laurence Cummings and the London Handel Orchestra, which closed the Festival. Alas, for a visitor from abroad spending only a week in London, attending the plethora of riches at the Festival is not an option.

A Rarity Revived - *Faramondo*

An important centerpiece to the Festival is always the four performances of a staged opera, and for many years during my March visit I have admired Maestro Cummings' ability to meld the young singers of the Royal College of Music's International Opera School with the nuanced expertise of his London Handel Orchestra. Such was the case again this year with *Faramondo*. Indeed both of the talented young casts

(seen on March 23 and 25), aided by William Relton's taut and aptly bleak production, helped turn this convoluted, underrated opera into an evening of vivid opera theater. So too did Paul Curran at the 2014 Göttingen Handel-Festspiele, with a production also conducted by Maestro Cummings, Artistic Director there as well since 2012. Both productions left one wondering why the undeservedly little known *Faramondo* of 1737 remained dormant so long. As discussed in my review of that Göttingen performance, (www.operaconbrio.com: "Göttingen International Handel Festival 2014; A Season Fit for a King"), a number of the eight young artists had gained experience at the London Handel Festival. (For an extensive look at the far-fetched archetypal baroque plot of vengeance, shifting allegiances, and conflicting love interests in this *opera seria*, I invite the reader to peruse this lengthy review.)

Both directors wisely eschewed any sense of the pseudo-historical plot involving the conflict of fifth-century Franks, Cimbrians and Swabians. *Faramondo*, King of the Franks, before the opera, had killed Sveno, supposed son of Gustavo, King of the rival Cimbrians, thus setting up the principal plot for revenge. The contemptible Gernando, King of the Swabians, with ever-shifting allegiances and malevolent plottings, completes the trio of kings. Each director simplified all this, updating the power struggle of the three to a contemporary casino setting; that in Göttingen an elegant "Caesar's Palace" type establishment, that in London a starker and seedier nightclub. Enhancing the unsettling set in London, Relton depicted the struggle as that between rival gangs of the 1960s: *Faramondo* becomes the leader of a gang of three leather-jacketed thugs; Gustavo a slick, black suited casino owner with his three similarly clad clones; and Gernando, the head of a rival group of scruffy, pot-sniffing skin-heads.

Another bold stroke from Relton was to have *Faramondo* murder Gustavo's presumed son Sveno during Handel's E Major overture; thus eliminated was the stately minuet at the center of the overture, and also a brief chorus soon to follow (now perhaps superfluous) in which Gustavo and colleagues swear revenge on *Faramondo*. (Göttingen by contrast began with a more

elaborate tableau around the gambling table during the complete overture, thus introducing in pantomime a number of key characters soon to be delineated musically. The brief chorus was then included.) I mention this to emphasize how by contrast the essence of the London production was swiftly moving vignettes isolated amidst swiftly shifting locales, often dark and dingy, even amidst the occasional glare of disco lights and such. Thus isolated, the angst-ridden characters typically indulged in an excess of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs.

Through it all, what impressed most were the two fine casts the Festival assembled from the ranks of The Royal College of Music and how effectively each projected his or her role to the audience. Handel wrote *Faramondo* 1737 for Gaetano Majorano (also known as Caffarelli) considered one of the great singers of the age. Two fine mezzos, Ida Ränzlöv and Kamilla Dunstan, both looked the part of this young leather-jacketed rocker, handling the demanding trouser role with almost as much convincing presence as had Emily Fons in Göttingen. Ränzlöv indeed stole the show in her performance right from her first aria, "Rival ti sono" without an opening ritornello, and with the exacting coloratura that followed. But Dunstan was her equal in vocal energy and vividness of tone as she too exhibited considerable élan interpreting this role.



Ida Ränzlöv as Faramondo

Photo: Chris Christodoulou

Another vivid characterization was that of Rosimonda, daughter of Gustavo and sister of the man Faramondo presumably murdered at the outset. Sworn to avenge this murder, she spends most of the opera deeply conflicted once she (rather illogically) falls in love with Faramondo. A famous mezzo of the day, Maria Marchesini (“La Lucchesina”), was Handel’s first Rosimonda. Göttingen was fortunate to have a young Ukrainian-born mezzo Anna Starushkevych, a graduate of the Guildhall School who in 2015 won both first prize and Audience Prize in the Handel Singing Competition. Her dramatic flare made for a dynamic and engaging prima donna, thus acquiring the nickname “Bond-girl” in Göttingen’s production.



Beth Moxon as Rosimonda and Ida Ränzlöv as Faramondo
Photo: Chris Christodoulou

In London, mezzo-sopranos Beth Moxon and Ashlyn Tymms each caught much of this quality. Especially effective was Ms. Tymms’s entrance aria curtly dismissing Faramondo, “Vanne, che più ti miro,” which explodes without preliminary ritornello; her dramatic pauses effectively expressed Rosimonda’s tangled emotions. In her Act II aria “Sì, l’intendesti, sì” (“Yes, you heard me, you”), she attacked the insidious Gernando with equal vehemence, forcefully emphasizing her oft repeated phrase, “barbaro traditor!” As for Beth Moxon, she too captured the conflicted nature of the role, especially in her sappy but glamorous nightclub act.

One other important role is that of Clotilde, Faramondo’s sister (in love, naturally, with his enemy’s son.) The demanding role was the first of many Handel wrote for the young French soprano Elisabeth Duparc (“La Francesina”), soon to become his first Semele. Irish coloratura soprano Anna Devin, a former finalist in the Handel Singing Competition and winner of the Audience



Amy Manford as Clotilde

Photo: Chris Christodoulou

Prize, leapt to stardom with her vibrant Clotilde in Göttingen; happily London had a pair of young sopranos in this role, Harriet Eyley and Amy Manford, who seem destined to follow suit. Each had the kind of sparkle and charm that such a role demands, with consummate technique and vocal fluency to match.

One entertaining highlight, handled with élan by each artist, was the brilliant simile aria in Act II, “Combattuta da due venti” (“I am buffeted by two winds”) in which Clotilde imbibes an excess of bubbly between phrases, hanging on to friends in Gustavo’s bar at one point, eventually scampering off stage about to vomit. Another musical highlight, late in Act III with matters resolved, was the even more brilliant “Un ‘aura placida” (A sense of calm”) whose sequence of running triplets captures her new found joy. Alas, however, a rotating disco ball with annoying strobe lights competed with Clotilde’s pinpoint coloratura. This flaw in direction turned what should have been the showpiece aria of the night into a dizzying muddle.



Harriet Eyley as Clotilde (center) Photo: Chris Christodoulou

Among the remaining cast, two baritones stood out as particularly strong, Kieran Rayner as Gustavo and Timothy Edlin as Gustavo's duplicitous general, Teobaldo, responsible for the *Trovatore*-like switching of sons that sets the vengeful plot off. (As it turns out, Childerico, not Svenno, is the true son of Gustavo; this minor but critical character pops up here and there during the course of the opera without an aria.) Noteworthy also in the cast of well-coached singing actors, were two fine countertenors, Timothy Morgan and Tom Scott-Cowell, with their salacious portrayal of the glue-sniffing and rather pathetic Gerlando.

One perplexing bit of stage business, however, gave the opera a sudden and seemingly inappropriate anti-heroic twist at the end. With Gustavo and Faramondo finally reconciled, all aspiring couples happily united, and the villains Gerlando and Teobaldo exposed, Faramondo's final aria and the ensuing chorus celebrate the realignment of goodness and virtue. But on stage Faramondo knifes to death one of Gustavo's cohorts, and the villainy continues with a series of stabbings. Only Clotilde, again "buffeted by two winds," as it were, runs off the stage sickened by the excess of violence. Who can blame her this time! Some in the audience even laughed - too bad after such a compelling production that had given RCM's talented young singers the chance to so well inhabit the emotions of Handel's wonderfully delineated characters.

At the Crossroads: Looking to the Future

One assumes that with the formal separation of The London Handel Festival and The Royal College of Music, not only will many of the College's promising artists still take part in the operatic offering each year, but that the Festival itself, through song competitions and the like, will continue its commitment to nurturing gifted young vocal talent. Hopefully too the lovely intimate performance setting of the Benjamin Britten Theatre will remain a principal venue. Whatever the case, at this crossroad the potential for new and varied collaborations abound for the Festival's capable new Director, Samir Savant, not only with more opportunities to include additional talent as part of these productions, but with the



Kieran-Rayner as Gustavo and Harriet Eyley as Clotilde
Photo: Chris Christodoulou

opportunity to have more flexibility in scheduling as well. Perhaps the dovetailing of *Faramondo* with ENO's award-winning *Partenope* this March was merely fortuitous. But more such attractive programming would be nice indeed, especially for we out-of-towners.

The confluence of resources and artistic personnel should also be a bonanza for Artistic Director Laurence Cummings, whose reach is international, from New York, to London to Göttingen and beyond. Handel, the European, too had numerous crossroads in his long life, for example, the demise of the First Academy in 1728 out of which eventually emerged The Second Academy with entirely new casting, and his first truly anti-heroic jewel, *Partenope*. Another crossroad was his break with the King's Theatre in 1734 and shift to the new Covent Garden playhouse; this initiated a further high point in his career, the magnificent *Ariodante*, with Giovanni Carestini in the title role, an artist he had long wanted to engage. Handel's stroke in 1737, the *annus horribilus*, represented another sort of challenge, which led to *Faramondo* and a final trilogy of comic operas.

Crossroads, planned or otherwise, were indeed catalysts for the ever-enterprising George Frederick Handel, who, as Carnegie Hall annotator Janet E. Bedell has recently written, "possessed an extraordinary ability to reinvent himself and his art whenever circumstances demanded it." I trust this will be the case too for the expansive and always innovative London Handel Festival that so admirably honors his name and works.