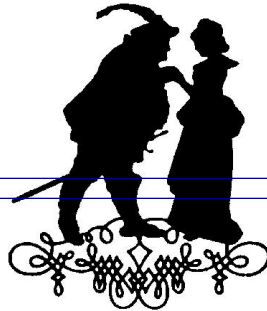


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## *Acis and Galatea*

### A Happy Union of Music and Dance

The Handel and Haydn Society with the Mark Morris Dance Group in The Boston Celebrity Series

Boston's esteemed Handel and Haydn Society, founded in 1815, proudly proclaims itself as America's oldest continuously performing arts organization. As they prepare for next year's bicentennial celebration, their period instrument orchestra and chorus concluded this season with two stunning Handel performances.

The first, in early May, was a concert performance at Symphony Hall of Handel's mighty oratorio *Samson*, a work that H+H indeed premiered in the United States in 1845. Artistic Director Harry Christophers led this revival with idiomatic fervor in a performance that was as complete and compelling as that brought to us by Craig Smith some twenty years ago with Emmanuel Music. Tenor Joshua Ellicott, singing with vigor and elegance, headed the splendid international cast, which included soprano Joelle Harvey, expressive and poignant as wife Dalila. The chorus excelled both as hedonistic Philistines and virtuous Israelites, and the period orchestra demonstrated just how well such an ensemble could project in a large venue like Symphony Hall.



Mark Morris Dance Group in *Acis and Galatea*  
Photo: Johan Henckens

The second performance was Handel's delightful masque *Acis and Galatea*, not in concert form as is often the case, but in a much anticipated collaboration with The Mark Morris Dance Group. H+H indeed had celebrated its one hundred and seventy-fifth Jubilee season in 1990

with a concert performance of this ever-popular work at Symphony Hall under the direction of its Artistic Director at the time, Christopher Hogwood. Yet another renowned specialist of the baroque aesthetic, Nicholas McGegan, led this year's performance. Both used the later version orchestrated by Mozart.

Handel's *Acis and Galatea* has appeared in many guises and transformations since its premiere in 1718, first in a private performance for the Duke of Chandos as a tiny masque for a handful of singers (doubling as chorus and soloists) and an equally sparse band of instrumentalists (oboes and recorders, never together, a pair of violins and a cello along with continuo). Some fifteen years later Handel, along with other revisions, enlarged the little one-act jewel to two acts with an expanded chorus and orchestral ensemble, adding the chorus "Happy we" to close the first act. It then became one of his most popular compositions, acquiring in the process such diverse labels as "a little opera," "serenata," "pastoral," "English pastoral opera," "bucolic poem," and even "oratorio." Call it what you will, H+H again presented this version in 1999 as part of a Handel Festival Weekend (including panel discussions, films, and demonstrations) also under the direction of Christopher Hogwood.

Soon after Handel's death, various places on the continent of Europe began independently to perform this music; the first documented performance outside of London of *Acis and Galatea* was in Florence in 1772. By the end of the century, Mozart had gotten his hands on this bittersweet pastoral fable of the ill-fated love between the handsome shepherd Acis and the lovely nymph Galatea, thanks to a commission from the musical patron Baron van Sweiten who hoped to sponsor private performances of several Handel works (including the *Messiah*, *Alexander's Feast*, and the *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*). Like most of Handel's enthusiastic admirers in the last part of the eighteenth century (and like Mendelssohn in the nineteenth century), Mozart saw his task not as the restoration of the original performing practices, but as the wholesale adaptation of the "old works" to the aesthetic tastes of his own time.

Mozart therefore further enlivened the score in classical-era terms with a larger body of winds (adding two flutes, two clarinets, an additional bassoon, and two horns) and with touches of subtle counterpoint and inner voices. Using this version, in a performance presented by the Celebrity Series of Boston, celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary season, The Mark Morris Dance Group mounted its fully staged opera production of *Acis and Galatea* in Boston's Schubert Theatre for four performances, May 15-18, 2014. With the collaboration of esteemed baroque specialist Nicholas McGegan leading the H+H period instrument orchestra and chorus, this made for an evening hard to categorize. Morris himself called it a "through-danced opera." Let's just say it all added up to an irresistible blend of dance, opera, and theatre – a charming take indeed for our own time.

One should stress at the outset the aptness of the use of the Mozart edition with its fuller, mellower sonority, including occasional chromatic harmonies and countermelodies. All this plays to the strength of Mark Morris' choreography with its propensity for elaboration: dancers in the foreground mirrored in canon by others in the background; dancers arranged in appealing formations around the stage, threading here and there; dancers dipping, falling, skipping, leaping and even strutting to complement the phrasing and pulse of the music. A Mark Morris trademark, the visual representation of poetic language, seemed a perfect fit in the fuller score. "See, how thy flocks in yonder valley stray." Sheep – well, dancers – trot in a flock across the



Sherezade Panthaki as Galatea (seated) with the Mark Morris Dancers  
Photo: Robert Torres



The Mark Morris Dancers in *Acis and Galatea* Photo: Ken Friedman

stage. The muted green and brown chiffon dresses of the women and corresponding skirts of the bare-chested men complemented the flow of the choreography and music. Always harmony, symmetry and grace prevailed. This is no small point. Mozart deserves great credit for shunning the then-common practice of wholesale mutilation of other composers' works; he, like Mark Morris, took great pains – with great gains – to preserve the integrity of Handel's magnificent and near perfect score.

It should be noted that for the original Mozart performance, Baron von Swieten himself provided an anachronistic German translation, thus adding a heavy German *tinta* that would have been out of sync with this light and fanciful production, as well as less palatable to audiences today. English, happily, is almost always the choice today, even when using the Mozart version, and the quartet of soloists projected John Gay's original pastoral English text with fervor and expressive nuance, if not always with perfect clarity. Faint, nearly unreadable surtitles did not help much, but who would have wanted to look away from the visual delights on the stage anyway? The four capable protagonists included the slightly sharp-edged but clarion soprano Sherezade Panthaki as Galatea; the forceful tenor Thomas Cooley as Acis; the eloquent light tenor Zach Finkelstein as Acis' mild-mannered friend, Damon; and resonant bass Douglas Williams as the blustery, villainous Polyphemus.

The excellent chorus, singing from the pit, clearly benefited from Maestro McGegan's nuanced and buoyant

conducting, as did the orchestra itself. As he had for some twenty years heading the famed Gottingen Handel Festival in Germany, Maestro McGegan fostered expressive shading and subtlety from the singers, indeed inspiring orchestra and dancers as well to give their best. Although *Acis and Galatea* is an English work, it flowed with a special Italian grace. Indeed roughly two thirds of the score is cast in a gently rolling triple meter, typically pastoral. Yet right from the rapid-paced overture with its delightful winds, McGegan moved the music along with appropriately upbeat tempos. A special treat was having the subtle *Musette* from Handel's *Concerto Grosso, Op. 6* preface the second act, as Mozart had done, precipitating the shift in tone from the bucolic first act to the more melancholic second.

What a joy too that all music, on and off the stage, was unamplified, in stark contrast to the intrusive amplification of Boston Ballet's recent US premiere of "Cacti," which I had attended the previous night. I hope Boston Ballet's respected Director, Mikko Nissinen, had a chance to stroll down the street from the Opera House to the Schubert Theater to see (and hear) what it is that he claims in the program to present (and sometimes does): "beautiful dance with beautiful music." This does not include amplification of Haydn and Schubert chamber works to deafening levels. Mark Morris knows better. (The question of "beautiful dance" in "Cacti," by highly touted choreographer Alexander Ekman, I'll leave to experts in the field.)

Be that as it may, what is perfectly clear is the musicality of Mark Morris and how well he weds dance and music. So much so, in fact, that some questioned the advisability of including the four vocal protagonists on stage, interacting as they did frequently with the dancers. In his landmark production of *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, which just received a twenty-first anniversary performance in New York, also with McGegan conducting, the four soloists never appeared on stage, but sang, fully visible, from the pit. *L'Allegro* is also bucolic to the core and the Mark Morris production, with colorful sets also by Adrienne Lobel, flowed through some thirty-two dance pieces, all linked

to the poetic landscape of Milton’s pastoral poems about “the very happy man” and the “pensive, thoughtful man.”

Handel’s *Acis and Galatea*, however, is a jewel of another sort. The Sicilian lovers have indeed been the protagonists of numerous operas – Charpentier in 1660 and Lully in 1685, for example. Sparse as the plot may be, however, the four protagonists belong on stage, and they should interact with the pastoral community of which they are a part. As Morris says, “Everyone is occupying the same world.” Again, he rightly labels the work a “through-danced opera” in which the solo singers appear on stage amidst the dancers.



Acis, Galatea and Polyphemus mingle with dancers  
Photo: Susana Millman

The physical action suggested in many phrases, and in Handel’s setting of these phrases, thus becomes an invitation for Mr. Morris both to dramatize the phrase and to transfer the immediacy of the image to the viewer. “See what ample strides he takes,” intones the chorus in staccato bursts, and dancers imitate the strides of the giant, lifting one another into exaggerated arcs. Polyphemus himself enters with these enormous strides, hoisted by dancers. Soon, in a wonderfully humorous moment, he grabs one of the bounding dancers in mid-air. (This is not *Samson* after all.) Such touches abound. “The mountain nods, the forest shakes.” How could one leave such phrases unattended? Morris does not. By the end of the work, “the bubbling fountain, lo! It flows”; likewise do the dancers, enveloping the radiant, transfigured Acis, who “now a god appears,” Galatea, now free to “dry thy tears.”



Douglas Williams as Polyphemus grabs a dancer mid-leap  
Photo: Robert Torres

Morris thus wonderfully catches the *tinta* of John Gay’s colorful interpretation of the myth, with its pastoral imagery and touches of humor, but also with its plaintive, half-tragic yet magically elevating end. As the dramatic tone shifts near the end, Galatea stands transfixed over the lifeless Acis, surrounded by a ring of dancers with arms stretching out. The abstract forest backdrop disappears, replaced by a solid blood red glow from the back. The stark change of light is stunning. The stage then clears, except for Galatea. “Must I my Acis still bemoan,” Ms. Panthaki gently intones in a moment that is pure opera in its poignant isolation, while McGegan’s orchestra colors her melody with harmonies Handel could scarcely have imagined. Nor would Handel have imagined what happened next, as the “bubbling fountain flows” and the returning dancers recapture the radiant, bucolic mood that had opened this “through-danced opera.” But I think he would have approved.



Soprano Sherezade Panthaki mourns amidst dancers  
Photo: Robert Torres