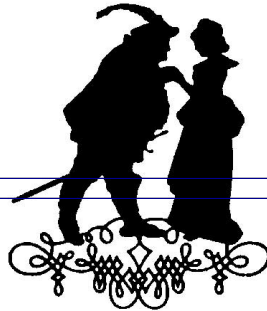


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## *Agrippina* and Other Heroines

### Göttingen International Handel Festival, May 2015

For its 2015 season, the renowned Göttingen International Handel Festival headlined as its theme “Heldinnen!?” (“Heroines!?”) with the important, and emphatic, exclamation point and question mark. Why? Welcoming notes from the Directors of the Festival make it clear that much ambivalence can be attached to the label “heroine,” by definition, a women of strength, but not necessarily of spotless virtue. As the festival notes point out, “not all of them are heroines, but many are sensitive, heroic or noble.” Hence, on one hand, we had the titular character assuming the lead in the Festival’s opera, *Agrippina*, the infamous Roman known as “Agrippinelle” (15-59AD) who ruthlessly manipulated the way for her son, Nero, to assume power. On the other hand, two additional heroines, of a somewhat different ilk, were also a focus of the festival: first, in the early oratorio, the prophetess *Deborah*, and second, in Handel’s magnificent penultimate oratorio, the Christian martyr *Theodora*.

The success of this exceptionally fine Festival season came also from a stunning array of real-life “heroines,” contemporary female artists who in turn



Ulrike Schneider, *Agrippina*

Photo: Theodoro da Silva

presented concert performances embodying some of the myriad of female figures who appear in Handel’s operas, oratorios, and cantatas. In sum, those I attended included two stunning orchestral concerts as well as the following three intimate chamber concerts. At Kloster Bursfelde, in the lovely countryside outside Göttingen, clarion young soprano Suzana Ograjenšek, with the British ensemble Odissea, presented an enticing program titled “Handel & Scarlatti, Roman Cantatas,” a program that included

Handel's powerful cantata *Agrippina condotta a morire*. At the Aula der Universität, Czech mezzo-soprano Markéta Cukrová (who triumphed as Dardano in *Amadigi* at Göttingen in 2012) presented a compelling recital, which also featured transverse flute player Jana Semerádová. The recital included another early Handel cantata, the pastoral *Mi palpita il cor*, but also the most riveting interpretation of Ariodante's haunting "Scherza infida" that I have ever heard. In a late night concert, again at the Aula, the young soprano Marie Jaermann, joined the FestspielEnsemble Göttingen for a diverse program highlighted by an especially expressive aria of one of the most famous of Handel's "heroines," Alcina, the poignant "Ah, mio cor."

The two orchestral concerts were Festival high points as well, both taking place in Stadthalle Göttingen, the town's large, attractive concert hall. The first was a Gala Concert titled "Heroes and Heroines" with renowned English mezzo soprano Sarah Connolly singing with eloquent sensitivity some of Handel's greatest arias for heroes and heroines alike. Festival director Laurence Cummings led the refined FestspielOrchester Göttingen in this enthralling evening of well-known operatic delights. The second orchestral *concert*, no less engaging, shifted to operatic rarities in an enterprising program with the equally admired Swedish mezzo-soprano Ann Hallenberg, accompanied by the outstanding original-instrument Baroque ensemble Il pomo d'oro. With them she presented a carefully researched and indeed captivating homage to the three Roman ladies bearing the name Agrippina, not just the "heroine" of Handel's opera, but also Agrippina the older, her mother, and Agrippina Vipsania, her mother's stepsister. Composers attracted to these ladies, well represented in the recital, included Handel's important contemporary (and rival) Nicola Porpora, Giovanni Sammartini, and Carl Graun (Frederick the Great's house-composer). The latter provided the showpiece aria, "Mi paventi il figlio indegno" from his 1751 opera *Britannicus*, in which Ms. Hallenberg performed the most virtuosic display of late Baroque pyrotechnics one is ever likely to hear.

## *Agrippina* – A Gripping Evening of Opera

But all this is a subject for another time, and I return now to the best known of the operas about this nefarious Roman family, Handel's magnificent *Agrippina* which in 1709 was the climax of Handel's three-year Italian sojourn and a smashing success with the Venetian audience. Little did they know, however, in a work they applauded for all its novelty and brio, that Handel had recycled some forty of the forty-five arias from his earlier works, mostly cantatas. No matter. The musical invention from the young Handel, then in his early twenties, is simply unbelievable, fired by the excellent libretto by the theater's impresario, Vincenzo Grimani, one of the very few libretti written especially for him. The result is Handel's first dramatic masterpiece, and what a treat it was in Göttingen not only to hear the work uncut - all four and one-half hours of it (with two short intermissions) - but also to have the production and cast so constantly engaging. This was the Göttingen Handel Festival at its best; no wonder the audience responded with all the rapt attention and enthusiasm that surely matched that of the original Venetian audience.

Handel scholar Winton Dean has rightly dubbed the anti-heroic *Agrippina* "The Baroque Figaro" for its embracing of a comic vision without abandoning passion and even tragedy. Sometimes, as with the recent Boston Baroque semi-staged production just one month earlier, the exaggerated antics emphasized the comic at the expense of the tragic, drawing perhaps too often peals of



Festival Director Laurence Cummings

laughter from the audience. But in Göttingen's production, led by experienced director of Baroque opera Laurence Dale, the comedy casts long shadows. At the fore stands the "heroine" of Handel's opera. Biographer Adolf Stahr describes her:

*There is no one quite like Agrippina in the total history of Roman emperors. She combined both her mother's and her grandmother's intellectual and physical assets. She surpassed both by far in all the predominant attributes which assured the success of her ambition and lust for power: cunning, pretense, restless energy and the remorseless use of any means necessary to reach her goals.*

The various intrigues in imperial Rome, both political and amorous, are often uncomfortably at the center of the action, thanks also to the simplicity of Tom Schenk's sets, basically two shifting vertical boxes with mirrored sides on either end of the stage. A single large bed sometimes evokes the tone of a bedroom farce, but not to the extent of negating the generally darker intrigue.

The stark simplicity of the set serves another function: it effectively sets off not only Agrippina, but all the other hyperventilating characters in their amorous plotting and intrigues, as do the showy, colorful costumes designed by Robby Duiveman, inspired, it would seem, by a kind of modernizing of the baroque with allusions to



Owen Willetts, Narciso, and Ross Ramgobin, Pallante, peer out of one of the vertical boxes. Reflected in its mirrored side is Ronaldo Steiner, Lesbo  
Photo: Theodoro da Silva



Ulrike Schneider, Agrippina; Jake Arditti, Nerone  
Photo: Theodoro da Silva

more recent figures from the entertainment world, both in films and on stage. Agrippina, with her black dress and stand-up violet collar, could well be Disney's wicked fairy in *Sleeping Beauty* or the evil stepmother in *Snow White*; her nemesis, Poppea, evoked a sleek, sinuous star of a 40's film, say Veronica Lake. Of the men, the flighty teenager Nerone stood out in the flamboyant, bright red attire of a devil, while one of Agrippina's sleazy attendants, Narciso, was the embodiment of Liberace with his pompadour and excess of sparkles and silver. The seedy, Sad Sack Claudius, conjured up a cross between Charles Laughton and Peter Lorre.



João Fernandes, Claudio Photo: Theodoro da Silva

All this may sound more like caricature than character, and indeed on one level it was. However, with help from the persuasive direction of the experienced Mr. Dale, the engaging cast managed to elicit the strong sense of character that the barbed libretto so often demands. In the title role, originally written for one of Handel's

favorite singers, Margherita Durastanti, with whom he would have his longest association, mezzo soprano Ulrike Schneider was vocally riveting, dramatically confident with ample sturdy coloratura in reserve, right from her commanding entrance aria “L’alma mia,” full of frightening confidence and vigor. A force to behold! Poppea, on the other hand, has been famously labeled by Mr. Dean as “the first of Handel’s sex-kittens.” However, in this production the svelte Ida Falk Winland played her more as a not-too-dumb-blond than wily coquette, and her gleaming lightness of tone wonderfully caught an appropriate edge of elegant restraint, well encapsulated in her Act I closing aria “Se giunge un dispetto” as rotating mirrors reflect the audience in full view as well. At other times the mirrors caught multiple images of the manipulative Agrippina.



Ida Falk Winland, Poppea; Christopher Ainslie, Ottone  
Photo: Theodoro da Silva

was Christopher Ainslie as Ottone – genuinely a good guy, often singing shirtless some of the opera’s most poignant arias, capped by the especially moving central episode of act two, “Ottone, Ottone, qual portentoso” with striking back-lighting isolating the abandoned singer. In a role originally sung by a contralto (as also performed in the recent Boston Baroque production), he nonetheless brought admirable warmth and richness of tone to this demanding role. Clearly he spends much time in a fitness studio as well.

The third countertenor, Owen Willetts (who local audiences will remember fondly as Arsace in Boston Baroque’s recent *Partenope*), aptly caught all the flare of the flamboyant Narciso (originally a role for alto castrato). Complementing him as the other half of the dynamic duo that fawns on Agrippina was the fine young British baritone Ross Ramgobin (Arasse in Göttingen’s 2013 *Siroe*). What a pair! Special mention, finally, should go to bass João Fernandes in the thankless role of Claudio, the pathetic Emperor whom the librettist created as a thinly disguised caricature of Pope Clement XI. (His ban on opera in Rome, among other things, somewhat diminished his popularity!) In Mr. Fernandes’ capable hands, given all his experience in Baroque opera, the decrepit, battle-worn figure gained much sympathy from the audience, even if the parody aria “Io di Roma il Giove sono” (“I am the Jupiter of Rome”), sung



Ida Falk Winland, Poppea; Ulrike Schneider, Agrippina Photo: Theodoro da Silva

The cast included three fine countertenors. The young Jake Arditti was a sensation as the volatile Nerone, originally a soprano castrato. With a career that began as a treble singing with the ENO and Glyndebourne, he has had many recent successes including the title role in *Riccardo Primo*, which I heard him sing at the 2012 London Handel Festival (also under the direction of Maestro Laurence Cummings). With clarion high tones, and the spunky agility of both voice and stage manner, he was the perfect embodiment of Agrippina’s degenerate, sadistic son, already in this production a burgeoning monster. Equally effective, but antithetical in every way,



Ross Ramgobin, Pallante; Christopher Ainslie, Ottone; Owen Willetts, Narciso  
Photo: Theodoro da Silva

while groping around on the large bed, had little to do with the Pope. With dramatic skill and understated comic instincts, he somehow brought real tonal depth and warmth to this unappealing character.

Best illustrative of the somber tinta achieved in this production, amidst the bits of biting, sardonic humor, was the final sequence in Act II, beginning with one of Handel's most imaginative strokes, Agrippina's one moment of reflection, the powerful G minor "Pensieri, voi mi tormentate" ("thoughts, you torment me"), an astonishing picture of mixed deceit, anxiety, guilt, and determination (in the G Major middle section, to bring her son Nero to the throne). Nero has just tugged Poppea off the dark stage, when the bare octaves and pregnant silence in the ensuing ritornello prepare the three power vertical orchestral slabs that preface the aria. Then, from behind the grey scrim on the empty stage, Agrippina's "pensieri," floats over the forlorn oboe obbligato. It is a stunning moment, and shift of gears from the previous scene. Scrim up, Ms. Schneider completes the aria, with da capo.

But Handel is not done. Happily, this complete production included (which many do not) Handel's most imaginative stroke: a condensed third return of the "pensieri" opening (still with its plaintive solo oboe), as a taut "coda." It follows a recitative in which Agrippina acknowledges the strength and courage of her

antagonists, Ottone and Poppea, reinforcing the need for continued deceit. In Göttingen, she confesses these concerns to her pawns Pallante and Narciso, on a solitary wooden chair (e.g. The throne). Then comes the "coda," a final hammer blow to the scene. (In Boston, by contrast, the comic antics return quickly in the abbreviated scene, played on a bed with no full da capo, intervening recitative or "coda." Instead, Narciso pops up suddenly from under the covers.) Handel evidently created this magnificent scene with varying performing options in mind; how effective it was for the production team to incorporate the fullest option available, thus creating this mini-mad scene.

Doing so kept the dark shadow of this production lingering for some time, indeed until Agrippina's final gloating ray of hope closing the act, her buoyant (and famous) simile aria "Ogni vento." And what a ray of hope it is, given that in the interim we had two arias from the nefarious duo Pallante and Narciso, still darkly staged, and then a scene with Claudio limping back on stage, whose final aria, reflected with a grim intensity in the mirrored walls, continues the somber tinta. Only with the playful "Ogni vento" does the scene lighten, although even here, during the middle section as Agrippina gloats over Nero's eminent ascension to the throne, her sadistic and murderous son drags the limp body of a woman he has just strangled across the back of the stage. The comedy cast its long shadows.

Finally, credit for the great success of Göttingen Festival performances must be attributed to the constantly engaging and renowned FestspielOrchester Göttingen, under the firm direction of Artistic Director Laurence Cummings. Indeed the idiomatic brio and clarity of its performances, of opera as well as oratorios and various concerts, remain the core of the Göttingen Handel Festival's fame and success. Coupled with such a diverse and captivating array of vocal artists - heroines (and heroes) all - the Festival remains, as it has been since its outset in 1920, the place to visit. Next year's production of Handel's penultimate opera *Imeneo*, with full Baroque staging, is not to be missed.