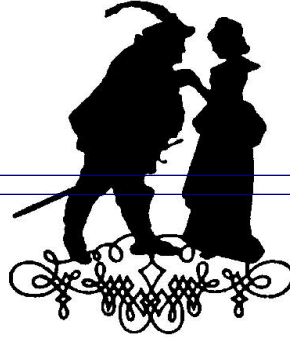


Opera con Brio

Summer 2011
Richard B. Beams



Handel's *Amadigi di Gaula* Central City Opera Strikes Gold, July 2011

Of Handel's vast output of thirty-nine operas, some five are "magic operas" – that is operas in which at least some of the action takes place in an enchanted realm and in which a protagonist with supernatural powers plays a major role. Handel's first three operas for London fit this category: *Rinaldo* (1711), *Teseo* (1713), and *Amadigi di Gaula* (1715). Each was a stunning success, in large part due to soprano Elisabetta Pilotti who portrayed the spurned sorceress in each opera, Armida, Medea, and Melissa respectively.

But the success of these operas was due to more than magic spells cast by the temperamental tantrums of a volatile protagonist, or even the numerous elements of the "spectacular" – elaborate transformation scenes, entrées of infernal spirits, and the like. It was due as much to Handel's inventive musical ideas that depicted so well the vividness and authenticity of characters' emotions, be they sorceress or not. As esteemed writer Charles Burney maintained near the end of the eighteenth century, "*Amadigi* contained more invention, variety and good composition, than in any one of the musical dramas of Handel which I have yet carefully and critically examined." The same could be said of all three works.

By good fortune, I was able to indulge in a comparison of these three seminal London works during the summer of 2011 by attending major new productions of each: *Rinaldo*, at Glyndebourne Festival Opera, celebrating the 300th anniversary of its premiere in London; *Teseo*, at the Göttingen International Handel Festival, marking the final performance by departing artistic director Nicolas McGegan (read my review at <http://www.operaconbrio.com/teseo.pdf>); and *Amadigi*, at The Central City Opera Festival, in a production that proved the crown jewel of the summer.

In a good production one can understand why the spectacular opera *Rinaldo*, where characterization is not always subtle, was Handel's most popular opera in his day. (Such was the case, for example, in the



Christopher Ainslie as Amadigi and Katherine Manley as Oriana
Photo: Mark Kiryluk

engaging productions with Marilyn Horne in the mid '80s at both La Fenice and the Metropolitan Opera, or even at Central City itself in 2009). Alas Glyndebourne's new production undermined any adherence to chivalric romance or magical transformation, by setting the opera in a school, complete with blazers, blackboards, bikes and bullying. (For more details, refer to the review by Jonathan Keates in *Opera*, September 2011). Göttingen fared much better although one can argue whether the frame of contemporary social networking combined with behind-the-scenes views of the performers and their goings on enhanced or undermined the traditional Baroque staging. (See <http://www.operaconbrio.com/teseo.pdf>).

This summer at least, each of these two renowned festivals could have taken a cue from Central City Opera. Its effective, direct approach, coupled with impeccable musical resources in an intimate setting, made this production (viewed on July 13 and 17) a highlight of the summer. In fact, in my some forty years of attending Handel's operas, including numerous productions of this opera, this was by far the best-realized performance of *Amadigi* I have ever experienced.

The credit goes to all involved. First up must be production director Allesandro Talevi, whose program note set the stage, as it were:

For me, the most important thing about *Amadigi* was to create real, human characters on stage. For the sorceress Melissa and her enchanted realm, I drew inspiration from the powerful, cultured women of the Italian high Renaissance, figures like Isabella d'Este and Lucrezia Borgia, who had the means to create private fantasies and follies within the high walls of their palaces. The setting for *Amadigi di Gaula* is like a giant Renaissance curiosity cabinet, full of surprises and illusions which Melissa has created to seduce her admirers and confound and torment her rivals.

A Renaissance *Studiolo*

An invitation to *Regieopera* opera – the radical, contemporized concept opera that seems opera's nemesis these days? Not so. Instead of updating the opera to somehow contemporize the chivalric story of the knight-errant, *Amadigi*, Mr. Talevi backdates the story to the Italian Renaissance. We can imagine ourselves, perhaps, in fourteenth century Ferrara, in the grand *Palazzo Schifanoia* (carefree palace) where esteemed members of the famed Estes family came to relax. The innovative set itself, by set and costume designer Madeleine Boyd, exudes the feeling not of the spacious *Salone dei Mesi*, (Room of the Months) with its splendid frescoes but of an enclosed book and cabinet-laden Renaissance *studiolo*, of the sort that so opened the windows of imagination and artifice to its enlightened patrons. (Visit the magnificently restored *studiolo* from Gubbio, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to recreate the feeling or the only *studiolo* still in place in the *Palazzo Ducale* of Urbino). Other Renaissance artifacts prevail, but to appreciate them fully, first a look at the opera itself.

The story is based on a Spanish legend and epic poem written by various poets. (Other operas on the same subject include such diverse approaches as Lully's *Amadis* (1684) and Massenet's *Amadis* (1895). The libretto specifies neither the place nor the period of the action. The hero *Amadigi* (a Paladin of Charlemagne's court) as well as *Dardano* (Prince of Thrace) are both in love with the beautiful princess *Oriana* (daughter of the King of Fortune Islands). The sorceress *Melissa*, infatuated with *Amadigi*, has imprisoned *Oriana* in a tower and both *Amadigi* and *Dardano* in her garden (in this case her *studiolo*.) After various deceptions, visions, and trials, the two lovers, *Amadigi* and *Oriana*, are finally united. Before then, *Amadigi* will slay *Dardano*, his companion turned rival, and *Melissa*, will stab herself finding her supernatural powers impotent against the power of love.

The director's Renaissance locale sets the tone immediately. *Amadigi* and *Dardano* enter, exploring the nooks and crannies of the "*studiolo*" – trapped, fascinated, anxious. Object laden shelves and walls mysteriously slide and shift. In an oval window on the dark back wall, a vision of the imprisoned *Oriana* appears – a startling likeness of one of the most famous of Renaissance paintings, Botticelli's "Birth of Venus." The beautiful image will spark the disintegration of the



David Trudgen as Dardano and Christopher Ainslie as Amadigi
Photo: Mark Kiryluk.

relationship between *Dardano* and *Amadigi* – a progression that Handel's music traces so well through the opera. Toward the end of the opera, in complete contrast, a large full portrait appears – Raphael's stern rendering of Pope Julius II. This soon morphs into the magician *Orgando*, who appears briefly to release *Amadigi* and *Oriana* from *Melissa*'s spell. In the course of the opera, between these antithetical framing portraits, other Renaissance references make their appearance; most striking are the mechanical inventions à la Leonardo da Vinci, which serve as *Melissa*'s instruments of torture.

Captivating Casts, Past and Present

None of this would have achieved the dramatic impact it did without the expert musical preparation of British maestro Matthew Halls or without the four young artists who so well suited their roles. The opera itself is extraordinary in many ways, not the least because each of these four roles is scored for high voice. In Handel's original production, complementing *Elisabetta Pilotti*'s *Melissa*, was the Neapolitan alto castrato *Nicolo Grimaldi* (*Nicolini*) in the title role, acclaimed for his brilliance as an actor and as a singer (the *Placido Domingo* of his day perhaps). The other alto role, that of the insanely jealous *Dardano*, was taken by a woman, *Diana Vico*. The young soprano *Anastasia Robinson* as *Oriana*, the object of their affections, completed the formidable original cast. With such a stunning cast, what interested Handel especially were the emotions and sufferings of these characters, not the descriptive effects of his later "magic" operas.

It was in this human depiction that the contemporary quartet of young artists excelled. What they achieved in this intimate space, aided by the sensitive direction of Mr. Talevi, and the capable music direction of Matthew Halls, was simply miraculous. Every note and every gesture counted.



Alessandro Talevi (Director) and Matthew Halls (Conductor)
Photo: Blind Crow



Kathleen Kim as Melissa

Photo: Mark Kiryluk.

Front and center was soprano Kathleen Kim, returning to play the tormented sorceress Melissa (following her successful debut with Central City Opera as Armida in *Rinaldo* two years earlier). Although she has a good deal in common with Armida and with Handel's later Alcina, to whom she is often compared, Melissa's love is never returned by the object of her love. Indeed, she is not even able to enchant Amadigi into loving her. As Handel scholar Winton Dean points out, she is thus a more subtle creation than either Armida or Alcina because she is so much more human. As he summarizes, "her impulsive alternations of hatred and love, tenderness and violence, expressed in arias of great imaginative penetration, make up an imposing portrait of a woman scorned."

Kathleen Kim as Melissa and Christopher Ainslie as Amadigi
Photo by Mark Kiryluk

Kathleen Kim mastered all of this. In her first aria, "Ah! spieato! e no ti muove," Handel immediately defines her humanity, not her villainy or sorcery. She is a woman in love. With the assured presence of an experienced Handelian (Ms. Kim recently sang *Poppea* in the Boston Lyric Opera production of *Agrippina*) and looking every bit an image of Isabella d'Este, she sang with heart-stopping ease in this languishing largo. Her voice floated above the accompaniment with its trailing oboe obbligato; hers was a tender, heartfelt, very human plea. A later bravura aria of rage, "Desterò dall'empia Dite," following repeated humiliating rejections from Amadigi, was full of vigor and determination. It was no mere vocal display. The thrilling trumpet

and oboe obbligato never drowned out the voice but became a fluid, menacing echo. (The orchestral forces deserve much of the credit as well.) Rather than merely stressing an idiomatic exchange of instruments and voice, Ms. Kim's requisite coloratura had all the transient majesty the aria deserved, evoking her acclaimed interpretation of Zerbinetta (*Ariadne*) last season at the Metropolitan Opera.

The intensity of her performance near the opera's end called to mind her portrayal of Madame Mao in *Nixon in China*, also in the 2010-2011 season at the Metropolitan Opera. As Melissa commits suicide, her last arioso was especially poignant with feeble broken phrases over a detached sarabande rhythm. In a final, telling, and immensely human touch, typical of this production, the director has Amadigi, Oriana and the chorus move to the back of the stage in the final celebratory moments. Then a solitary former votary of Melissa, now repentant, comes forward to her body at the front of the stage and weeps for her as the curtain falls.

David Trudgen as Dardano and Christopher Ainslie as Amadigi
Photo: Mark Kiryluk.

All this may suggest that Ms. Kim's compelling portrayal of Melissa stole the show. Not so. Two exceptional counter tenors were equally effective as the competing lovers, Amadigi and Dardano. It helped too that each might certainly be regarded now as a seasoned Handelian. Christopher Ainslie (Amadigi) had effectively sung the title role in *Tamerlano* at Göttingen Festival Opera in 2010. (See my review at <http://www.operaconbrio.com/Reviews.html>.) David Trudgen (Dardano) was Nerone in Boston Lyric Opera's production of *Agrippina* in the spring of 2011; earlier in the year, at The Wexford Opera Festival in the fall of 2010, he not only effectively performed Mike Teavee in *The Golden Ticket* but also displayed his considerable musical skills in two separate concerts. (See my review at <http://www.operaconbrio.com/Reviews.html>.)

The difference in these two fine artists encapsulated the difference in the two characters they portrayed. Ainslie was brilliant in the title role, singing with a clear tone and mellifluous heft. Looking every bit the hero as well, his two fine duets with Oriana and Melissa respectively brought a splendid melding of tones. He was wonderfully expressive also, for example, with the two recorders that graced his long cavatina in Act II as he addressed the Fountain of True Love. This scene was famous originally for its spectacular effects. The "coup de theatre" then was the use of a real fountain spraying real water. Indeed, the scene employed such a large number of stage engineers and plumbers, among other things, that the following newspaper announcement appeared on the day of the premiere:

“whereas there is a great many Scenes and Machines to be mov’d in this Opera, which cannot be done if persons should stand upon the Stage (where they could not be without Danger), it is therefore hop’d no Body, even the Subscribers, will take ill that they must be deny’d Entrance on the Stage.” No such danger in Central City, however. An image of the imprisoned Oriana merely appears where earlier the Boticelli-like image had first appeared. And it was the emotional veracity of Mr. Ainslie, sweetly rendering the lilt of the Italian text, that carried the moment.

Dardano too has his show-stopping moments, the best of which is his agonized lament, “Pena tiranna,” in Act Two, with its extraordinary orchestration. David Trudgen’s rich and sometimes earthy tone was a perfect match for this melodic sarabande, supported by strings in five parts with a single oboe and bassoon operating independently. Mr. Trudgen brought out wonderfully the moment of extraordinary poignancy when his voice enters over the oboe, which now has taken over the mournful suspensions first presented by the bassoon in the ritornello. As with all the finely colored vocal numbers in this score, much credit must go again to the crisp and balanced support from the conducting of Maestro Hall.



David Trudgen, Dardano, surrounded by Nymphs Photo by Mark Kiryluk

Finally, the touchingly attractive singing of soprano Katherine Manley as Oriana provided a lovely balance to this pair of countertenors. As luck would have it, a group from *Opera con Brio* heard Ms. Manley as Helena in a delightful performance of Britten’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at Garsington Opera in the summer of 2010. Equally experienced in works of Handel, she was impressively idiomatic in her opening love songs. At the same time, there was a hint of the *bel canto* style of Bellini as she spun out the Italian text in expansive and expressive melodic lines. Indeed I found her especially well suited for the role, both here and in some assertive and feisty Helena-like confrontations later on.

But the highlight was her lament in the second act, “S’estinto e l’idol mio,” when she finds her beloved Amadigi seemingly dead, soon after the scene in which he has gazed into the Fountain of True Love. This was also perhaps the most beautifully staged moment of the opera,



Katherine Manley, Oriana; Christopher Ainslie, Amadigi Photo: Kira Horvath

with its confusion of sleep and death reminiscent of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. During the exquisite, harmonically rich central section of the aria, she curls up with him, intricately entwining herself with his body, finally lifting his arm over her to luxuriate in his embrace in the *da capo* return. The audience to a person was spellbound during this touching scene.

A North American First

Central City opera billed this stunning *Amadigi di Gaula*, as the first fully staged production in North America. At first glance, this may seem a bit of a stretch. From my own experience I know of three other performances of the work. Opera Manhattan rightly claimed the New York Stage Premiere in 1994, although with chamber orchestration. The Opera Theatre Company, Ireland, on the heels of its acclaimed sold-out performances in London and Dublin, then brought a taut, minimally staged touring production to New York’s Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1997. (The production, bursting with life, pushed simplicity to the extreme: a central box served various functions; a classical door opened to Melissa’s realm; a single window represented the tower; and The Magic Fountain was choreographed.) More recently in 2009, Boston Baroque offered a semi-staged – but fully realized – production in Jordan Hall.

All this is not to quibble, however. Central City Opera indeed has provided the first fully staged and fully orchestrated performance of the opera in North America. More important, I think it can claim bragging rights to the most completely satisfying performance of Handel’s *Amadigi di Gaula* in North America, if not in modern times. It would be hard to imagine a better rendition anywhere since its modern day revival after over two centuries of neglect. If you were not in Central City this summer, don’t fret. In March 2012, Mr. Halls will be taking Central City Opera’s production of *Amadigi di Gaula* to Wigmore Hall in London. It would certainly be worth the trip.

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