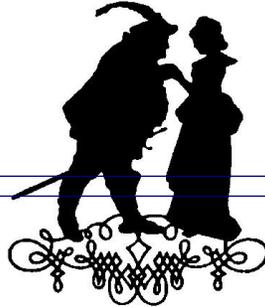


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## Göttingen International Handel Festival 2017

### A Rare Treat: *Brockes-Passion*

In the year 2020, the venerable Internationale Handel Festspiele Göttingen will reach its 100-year anniversary. En route to this admirable landmark, the Festival - the oldest of the three Handel festivals in Germany, and the one and only opera festival in Lower Saxony – continued in 2017 its tradition of presenting at least one staged Handel opera, in this case the rarely performed *Lotario*. But it didn't stop there, offering as well another rarity, a semi-staged *Lucio Cornelio Silla* and finally, icing on the cake, a concert performance of Haydn's last opera, *L'anima del filosofo ossia Orfeo ed Euridice* (more familiarly *Orfeo*). Alas I was unable to catch the *Silla*, which I understand was a great success; but the other two works found the Festival at its usual high standards.

Additionally, over the years, Handel's sacred works and oratorios have continued to provide an important complement to the secular operas, and this year's offerings were especially significant, meant as they were to help commemorate this "Reformation Year" of 2017 (the 500th year anniversary of Martin Luther's landmark

proclamations beginning the Reformation). The timely theme of this year's Festival was "Faith and Doubt," and two major sacred works were fittingly a core element of the Festival. The first was *Israel in Egypt*, one of Handel's two-dozen mostly Old Testament oratorios, all of which the Festival has offered at least twice over the years. The second, Handel's *Brockes-Passion*, his only sacred work employing a German text, was the Festival's first performance ever of this relatively neglected work. Although I was unable to attend *Israel in Egypt*, the stunning performance of *Brockes-Passion* on May 25 by Laurence Cummings and the FestspielOrchester Göttingen was worth the trip in itself.

#### *Brockes-Passion – An Opera in Disguise*

By any measure, this was a brilliant realization of a work to which Handel brought, as the program notes rightly remarked, "intense expression of emotion and richly varied instrumental colour." Handel was inspired by the 1712 text of the German poet and music lover Barthold Heinrich Brockes. His vivid and poetic text for



NDR Chor and FestspielOrchester Göttingen, Musical Director Laurence Cummings  
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

the Passion, based on Biblical excerpts and rewritten in rhyming verses, traces the course of events from the Last Supper to the Crucifixion and death of Jesus. Many composers set this popular text: first Reinhard Keiser in 1712, then Handel in 1715, and later (among others) both Georg Philipp Telemann and Johann Mattheson. What clearly appealed to Handel at this point in his young career - on the heels of his first three opera successes in London and five years before *Radamisto* and the string of fourteen operas of the First Academy Period - was the operatic nature of the text. Unlike Bach's two magnificent settings yet a decade or so away, concerned with the "misgivings" of the Passion, the primary emphasis for Brockes (and thus Handel) is the cathartic release of emotions in over forty, often brief, arias. Chorales are few (just four, simply shaped), yet the chorus' frequent interjections as the crowd - at times succinct, at times expansive - help enhance the dramatic thread, as does the omnipresent narration of the Evangelist. Over all, especially with the plethora of varied arias, the expansive piece had a wonderfully coherent and operatic feel. Credit for its power and appeal belongs not just to the work itself but to the outstanding musical forces, orchestral and vocal, that enthralled the packed audience of Stadthalle Göttingen.

German lyric tenor Sebastian Kohlhepp led the sextet of fine soloists with an invigorating portrayal of the Evangelist, who, without any arias, binds the work together with rhyming accounts of the gospel in surprisingly mellifluous secco recitative. Indeed most of the work's numerous arias came from two excellent sopranos who comment on events from outside the action. One, experienced Dutch Baroque specialist Johannette Zomer, as the Daughter of Zion, sang no less than seventeen numbers (arias, ariosi and duets) with consistent brilliance. She delivered some of the most florid and "operatic" arias with ease, as for example, the Bach-like passages of "Was Bärenatzen, Löwenklauen"



Johannette Zomer Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

(“The claws of bears and lions savage”) with its angular leaps or the extensive melismas of the virtuosic “Heil der Welt” (“Lord and Christ!”), one of the few da capo arias. Among the other numbers showing off her clarion vibrato-free tone were the lovely siciliano “Die Rosen krönen” (“A crown of thorns”) and – at evening’s end – the gentle, sorrowful “Wisch ab der Tränen” (“Oh dry thine eyes”), her purity of tone still intact while doubling a solitary oboe. Hers was a performance to savor indeed.

No less a performance came from the second soprano, the less well known but equally captivating Ana Maria Labin as the “Believer” (“Gläubige Seele”), who sings primarily in the second half of the work, often commenting on the emotional state of Jesus. Her warm tone and vocal nuance shone in pieces like “Was wunder, dass der Sonnen Pracht” (“What wonder sun and moon their light”) in which her firm, even projection and mellow tone blended so well with a pair of bassoons suggesting the darkness following the death of Jesus. (This flowing aria surely looks ahead to *Acis and Galatea* just a couple years away.) At times also taking on the smaller parts of Maria and Johannes, she was another consistently radiant force in the evening.



Rupert Charlesworth, Ana Maria Labin and David Erler  
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

As for the characters within the drama, three highly acclaimed male singers of varying vocal range each wonderfully captured their varied emotions: countertenor David Erler, with high tessitura and a convincing sense of drama, expressively caught the angst of Judas in his vibrant vengeance aria “Lasst diese Tat nicht ungerochen” (“Avenge my crime, with zeal unsparing”); English tenor Rupert Charlesworth as Peter brought a warm and passionate tone especially to a pair of brief remorseful arias following the three-part denial; and resonant bass Tobias Berndt portrayed a secure and poignant Jesus. Unlike in Bach’s Passions, Jesus gets his share of arias in the *Brookes-Passion*, including a moving adagio prayer in the garden of Gethsemane and even a small revenge aria, “For I will smite the shepherd yonder.” Each of the three also took on other small roles as well, such as other Believers, a challenging task they all met with aplomb.

Much credit should also be given to individual members of the NDR Choir, whose solo contributions made for the unusually strong singing of minor roles and exhibited as well why the ensemble, led by Bart Van Reyn, is regarded as one of Europe’s leading chamber choirs. Especially effective were bass Andreas Pruys as Captain, bass Fabian Kuhnen as Pilate, and baritone Dávid Csizmár as Caiaphas. Others included soprano Gesine Grube as the 1<sup>st</sup> Damsel, mezzo-soprano Gabriele-Betty Klein as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Damsel, and soprano Dorothee Risse-Fries as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Damsel.

Not to be overlooked either were the many fine solo contributions from the illustrious FestspielOrchester Göttingen, led with such exquisite subtlety and pacing by Maestro Cummings. Among these was the ethereal violin solo from Concertmaster Elizabeth Blumenstock in Ms. Labins’s glorious aria “Dem Himmel gleicht” (“In heaven God did set his surest token, it was the rainbow in the cloud”), which floated

as though weightless above the shimmering “rainbow” of muted strings. Another was the consistently nuanced expertise of principal cellist Phoebe Carrai, especially noteworthy in the anguished convolutions of Peter’s continuo aria “Nehmt mich mit” (“Let me follow Jesus sadly”). As for the oboes, the graceful and colorful solo playing of both Susanne Regel and Kristin Linde was a delight all night in their many obbligato and contrapuntal passages.

As the Festival’s program annotator Magda Marx-Weber writes in her informative program notes:

Taken together, the arias – with the variety of emotion they convey, their forms, and their instrumental accompaniments – demonstrate the full range of Handel’s ability to shape character through music.

The same could easily be said of Handel’s only Italian oratorio, “*La Resurrezione*,” written ten years earlier in Italy for a private performance. (Pope Innocent XII had for some time shut down Rome’s opera houses). This sacred drama was truly an opera in disguise, complete with elaborate staging. It seems Handel took special care in the *Brockes-Passion* as well to refine his skills as music dramatist - painting pictures with sound, expressing emotion, shaping character - skills so clearly

manifest in his many operas. What a treat to encounter them in Göttingen in this very special performance of the *Brockes-Passion*.

## Coda

Amidst the extraordinary output of Handel’s vocal works in Italian and English, this isolated German work certainly gets lost in the shuffle. So too does Brockes’ “Neun Deutschen Airen,” also set to music by Handel. In a bit of happy planning, the Festival scheduled this infrequently performed work for a late night recital at the nearby St. Paulus-Kirche immediately following the *Brockes-Passion*. Presented by the emerging young and talented ensemble Continuum from France, this song cycle too was a revelation and a delight. Swiss tenor Raphael Hohn replaced an indisposed soprano on short notice, but you wouldn’t have known it from the way this young, gentle and honeyed-voiced singer delivered Brockes’ mellifluous texts with expressive ease and lyricism. The young accompanying group as well - Santiago Medina, violin; Daniel Rosin, cello; and Elina Albach, harpsichord and organ - played with idiomatic and disciplined fervor. All this made for a fitting conclusion to an especially captivating evening with Brockes and Handel.



Barthold Heinrich Brockes



Georg Friedrich Händel