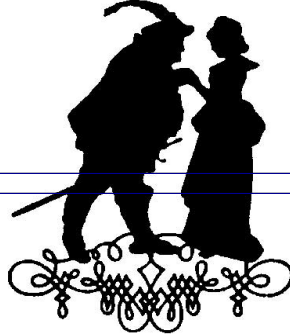


# Opera con Brio

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## Wizardry and Sorcery at the Met *The Enchanted Island*

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Dragon's blood, mermaids, gods, storms, grand scenes of magic and transformation... Wagner's *Ring*? No.

The Metropolitan Opera has done the beleaguered world of opera an immense service by bringing its *barocco pasticcio*, *The Enchanted Island*, not only to its stage at the center of the bucolic isle we know as Manhattan, but also to the world stage through the HD broadcasts. While opera houses at home and abroad struggle to survive, and while too many do so by catering to banal and often infuriating directorial conceits, it was refreshing that the Met team could conjure up a production so true to the baroque aesthetic and so captivating on every level. The sorceress Armida could not have done any better. Indeed *The Enchanted Island* was the surprise hit of the season.

Rightly so. Credit first goes to General Manager Peter Gelb for the daring suggestion of creating a baroque *pasticcio*, a genre which today, especially on the Met stage, would seem hard to justify. Yet in the eighteenth century, a *pasticcio* was a perfectly valid art form. Vivaldi, for example, often put together works for which he had not written all the music. These he regarded as original works, in that they were not merely a collection of numbers thrown together haphazardly, but numbers carefully chosen and constructed in the service of the libretto. His *Bajazet*, quoted briefly in the Met production, is a good example - a *pasticcio* in which all the music for Bajazet and those loyal to him was written by Vivaldi himself, while all arias sung by Tamerlano and the others representing oppression were written by rival Neapolitan composers of the day.

This is not to suggest that Jeremy Sams, who devised and wrote the Met's baroque fantasy, made similar symbolic use of the forty-some numbers borrowed from the great baroque masters (primarily Vivaldi



The realm of Neptune (Placido Domingo) in the *Enchanted Island*  
Photo: Ken Howard

and Handel). But the choice and placement of the borrowed numbers, in the service of a hybrid plot combining the narrative threads of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, evidenced a process and vision that was much more than "throw in the pot and stir." Mr. Gelb had said to him at the outset, "Imagine taking the hidden gems from a century of music, and turning them into one opera." This he did indeed. But beyond the many accolades both press and public have given regarding performances (with leading baroque specialists) and production, credit should go to the

enlightened vision of the creators (Jeremy Sams and those working with him) in fashioning a work that not only entertained but, in the end, was so profound and moving— and at the same time, so true to the baroque aesthetic.

Mr. Sams has commented in the Met program notes on how revelatory it was to encounter Handel's early Italian cantatas. Indeed! (Samuel Butler once commented, "The out-of-the-way bits of Handel are like the little side bits in such a town as Verona.") The opera also gives a nice tour of such youthful masterpieces as *The Triumph of Time and Truth* (a virtuosic aria by "Beauty" provides for the vibrant entrance aria of Ariel) and *La Resurrezione* (providing a bumptious piece, originally sung by Lucifer, for Caliban's entrance aria). Also from *La Resurrezione*, a reflective siciliana, originally sung by St. John, provides for Demetrius' entrance shortly afterwards.

But it is interesting to note also how much use Mr. Sams made of Handel's early operas from London, composed shortly after his brief and prolific Italian sojourn from 1707-1709. His first opera for London, *Rinaldo* in 1711, was such a hit that he pointedly soon fashioned two operas according to the formula that had proven so successful, with its emphasis on magic and spectacular scenery and machines, *Teseo* (1713) and *Amadigi* (1715). These three "magic"



Joyce DiDonato as Sycorax

Photo: Ken Howard

operas indeed provide in part the fitting archetype for *The Enchanted Island*. For one thing, the plot of each centers on a sorceress (Armida, Medea, and Melissa respectively) and involves ample doses of sorcery. The element of the spectacular was also important. In the case of *Amadigi*, a real fountain spurting real water as the "Fountain of True Love" was all the rage. (Patrons were cautioned not to get too near the stage.)

All this we have in abundance in *The Enchanted Island*: a determined sorceress, Sycorax, who once ruled her island, but whose power, land, and heart

Prospero has stolen; ample sorcery from each as well as from their respective agents, Sycorax's son, Caliban, and Ariel, captive spirit serving Prospero; many elements of the spectacular both above water and below, all with a truly baroque tinta. Fittingly, some five important musical numbers come from either *Teseo* or *Amadigi*. The arresting, powerful entrance aria for Joyce DiDonato as Sycorax belongs, for example, to Medea (*Teseo*) when she is determined to revenge herself upon her rival and her lover before she dies ("Moriro ma vendicata.") Sycorax is just as determined from the outset; like Medea, she dominates the opera from her first appearance. (Notably, some of Handel's greatest works feature a malevolent sorceress.)

Closing the first act is David Daniels as Prospero, the object of her plot for revenge. His aria, a mournful sarabande originally from *Amadigi* for a thwarted lover, Dardano, is one of the most moving Handel ever penned with its poignant suspensions from bassoon and oboe. It is a perfect, meditative choice to close out the Act, which more easily might have closed moments before with the grandiose spectacle of Neptune (Placido Domingo), gloriously enshrined in seashells and surrounded by mermaids. Also from these early Handel operas come two entrance arias: one for the shipwrecked Helena, originally the entrance aria for Medea, in a rare reflective mode, lamenting her lost peace of mind from past sins; the other in Act II for Ferdinand, adrift at sea but soon to land on the island, originally an exquisite, dreamy aria of disillusionment for *Amadigi*, "Sussurrate, onde vezzone" sung before the Fountain of True Love. Masterfully, emotions are crystallized in these self-contained musical numbers from the past, each fitting the new plot perfectly.

One should note a further parallel to Handel's early magic operas from London – the stunning casting available for each. Handel had Elisabetta Pilotti, a renowned portrayer of sorceresses, as well as the famed Neapolitan castrato, Nicolini, in the title roles. Each had the kind of box office appeal of the outstanding cast at hand for *The Enchanted Island*, including David Daniels (Prospero), Joyce DiDonato (Sycorax), Danielle de Niese (Ariel), Luca Pisaroni (Caliban) and of course Placido Domingo (Neptune).

Handel's renowned contemporary, Antonio Vivaldi, also took center stage in this *pasticcio*. Now receiving long overdue recognition on the opera stages of the world (see "The Case for Vivaldi" [http://www.operaconbrio.com/ocb\\_newsletter\\_5.09.pdf](http://www.operaconbrio.com/ocb_newsletter_5.09.pdf)), Vivaldi took his rightful place on this one – indeed the first time ever a note of Vivaldi has been heard on the stage of the Met. According to Sams,



David Daniels as Prospero

Photo: Ken Howard



Ariel (Danielle de Niese) celebrates her freedom  
Photo: Ken Howard

Vivaldi was a primary choice for all members of the cast, understandably so. Most of them got their wish; nine of Vivaldi's arias made the cut (and Sams further comments that he could easily have included twenty more!)

Notably, Prospero addressed Ariel in the opening number using a portion of a ravishing cantata by Vivaldi; Ariel in turn closed out the opera, celebrating her freedom, with a virtuoso showpiece from Vivaldi's late, Boccaccio-inspired opera, *Griselda*, a work also celebrating patience rewarded (see "Vivaldi Takes Center Stage" <http://www.operaconbrio.com/vivaldisummer2011.pdf>). Two striking moments occur for Caliban, one in each act. The first excerpts Vivaldi's "favorite" opera *Farnace*, with its familiar *dissonant* ritornello from "Winter" in the *Four Seasons*, as Caliban utters amidst the amazement of first love, "Mother my blood is freezing." Complementing this in the second act, at the other extreme, is the taut, powerful arioso originally sung by the dying Bajazet in Vivaldi's *pasticcio* of the same name. In this incarnation, Caliban, suffering a broken heart, is inconsolable following his mother's attempt to



Layla Claire as Helena and Luca Pisaroni as Caliban  
Photo: Ken Howard

comfort him. Another effective juxtaposition of arias by Vivaldi comes in the second Act, as Ariel puts the four troubled lovers from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to sleep with the sleep-aria from a rarely heard work, *Tito Manlio* (one of Vivaldi's best operas at mid-career). Sams deemed it, "a ravishing sleep aria...that demanded to be featured." Fittingly, the lovers wake in the next moment with a delightful quintet of recognition from Vivaldi's very next opera, *La Verita in cimento (The Truth at Risk)*, a sparkling work, recently, a hit at Garsington Opera (see "Vivaldi Takes Center Stage" <http://www.operaconbrio.com/vivaldisummer2011.pdf>).



The reunited lovers: Paul Appleby as Demetrius, Layla Claire as Helena, Elliot Madore as Lysander and Elizabeth DeShong as Hermia  
Photo: Ken Howard

Whether such a balanced use of source material was fortuitous or not, what was striking indeed upon repeated hearings (I had four) was how well the self-contained vocal numbers served the new text and plot in ways not only appropriate but emotionally true. And, beyond all expectations, such manipulation rarely seemed forced – any more so than would be expected within the context of a vividly realized baroque aesthetic. More important was the moving, even profound, level this assembling of diverse musical material eventually attained, as William Christie himself commented during an HD interview.

A glance at the structure of Act II aptly illustrates. Its three pillars, as it were, involve the maltreated Sycorax: first she gathers her strength; midway she seeks forgiveness from Caliban for the pain and sorrow she has brought to her son; and finally she grants forgiveness to Prospero for all the pain he has caused her, in a moving concluding sequence. This *Figaro*-inspired finale was as poignant indeed as that which Mozart conjured up.

Both Vivaldi and Handel play a key role in this structure. The opening "pillar" juxtaposes two powerful pieces. In the first, a distraught Helena expresses her torment in a delayed entrance aria, originally Dejanira's vision of the furies from Handel's mighty oratorio *Hercules* – a blockbuster piece that Handel scholar Winton Dean calls "a mad scene without parallel in the music of the age." The shipwrecked Helena indeed is on the edge, so to speak. In the second, balancing Helena's portrayal of derangement, Sycorax revels in the renewal of her strength with a bravura aria from Vivaldi's recently rediscovered opera for Prague, *Argippo*.



As Joyce DiDonato commented in the HD interview, she relished performing this role, as Sycorax regains her strength as a woman, en route to the elevated moral plane achieved at the opera's end. In Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, the Countess anticipates the elevated tone of the finale with her wistful and moving aria, "Dovo Sono." Sycorax likewise reveals growing nobility of character in the incomparably poignant moment in which she seeks to comfort Caliban and, feeling helpless in the face of the pain she has caused, seeks his forgiveness. This Handelian moment (a number attributed possibly to another eighteenth century composer) comes from the central movement of the cantata *Il pianto di Maria* – a moving picture of Mary overwhelmed by sorrow, lamenting with her last ounce of strength. With its sumptuous and seemingly unending linked suspensions and discords, this aria becomes the musical heart of the opera.



Sycorax (Joyce DiDonato) attempts to comfort Caliban (Luca Pisaroni) Photo: Ken Howard

The sorceress' plea for forgiveness magnificently sets up the Figaro-like finale, in which Sycorax herself will be the one to grant forgiveness. Famously, Mozart performs miracles with Beaumarchais's final reconciliation, which is perfunctory to say the least in the libretto for *The Marriage of Figaro*. The tables suddenly turned, the Count merely says "Forgive me"; the Countess replies, "I am more gentle and answer you, Yes." The chorus then comments, "We all are delighted to have it end thus." Sams and company match the eloquence of Mozart's elevated music. Prospero's "Forgive me, please forgive me" is a poignant plea from Handel's *Partenope* (the only aria which David Daniels acknowledged he had previously sung). The granting of forgiveness, with chorus, is magnificently transferred from Handel's *L'allegro, ed il Moderato*, a stunning sequence for soprano and chorus stressing the ideal of temperate living. In the *Enchanted Island*, Neptune (Domingo) initiates the sequence which is then capped eloquently with Sycorax's simple "I forgive you," Ms. DiDonato's soprano soaring above the chorus. The moment in Mozart is perhaps incomparable, but this comes pretty close. It is only left for Ariel to celebrate her freedom with some virtuosic Vivaldi.



Sycorax (Joyce DiDonato) forgives Prospero (David Daniels) as Neptune (Placido Domingo) observes. Photo: Ken Howard

But not quite. As in *The Tempest*, Prospero steps forward and releases us from this baroque fantasy world: "Our revels now are ended / These our actors were all spirits and have melted into air, into thin air / and like the basic fabric of this vision / the cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself - shall dissolve / and like this insubstantial pageant faded / leave not a rack behind." In a final glorious burst, the "Hallelujah" from *Judas Maccabaeus*, the chorus brings to a joyous close our "insubstantial" vision.

But the experience for the audience has been anything but insubstantial. Some purists have complained – at the unidiomatic use of English, at fabrication of an "insubstantial" *pasticcio*, at the production's baroque machinery. Too bad for them. In this, only the Met's fourth foray into baroque opera (following after three operas by Handel, *Rinaldo* in 1984, *Julius Caesar* in 1988, and more recently, *Rodelinda* in 2004), we had a sparkling jewel which caught the spirit and beauty of the baroque, not just in its elaborate production, with ample spectacle, stage machinery and magic, but also in its balanced and thoughtful use of selected musical numbers.

Both Handel and Vivaldi frequently recycled their works – and Handel indeed from numbers originally in Italian to those in English (as in his late oratorios). When they had good material, they knew to use it again. Besides, when had most in the audience at the Met had the chance to hear the exquisite music we heard on stage? Sams acknowledged that the use of little-known material, digging into the gold mine of available material, would give a sense of freshness and immediacy to the work. And what a journey of discovery it was.

A recent exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston on Degas' nudes illuminated how the artist had often revisited works created thirty years earlier in later paintings. Why? He let the old subjects "speak in a new way, in an entirely new context." So too did the Metropolitan Opera and all the artists connected with this imaginative, updated, baroque *pasticcio*. Musical gems written almost three hundred years earlier could speak...or rather sing...in an entirely new way, in an entirely new context. Viva la *barocco pasticcio*.

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