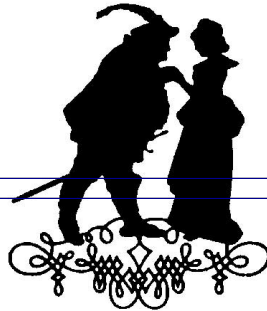


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## A Triumphant Trilogy

### Göttingen International Handel Festival 2016

The 2016 Internationale Händel Festspiele Göttingen, whose theme this year was “Connections,” opened on May 5 with a triumphant uncut performance of Handel’s often-misunderstood 1749 oratorio *Susanna* by Laurence Cummings and the FestspielOrchester Göttingen. Along with five ideally suited soloists (two parts doubled), what came through was a viable wide-ranging music drama of power and beauty. Two nights later the visiting Baroque ensemble La Nuova Musica, under the impeccable direction of David Bates, took over Göttingen’s Stadthalle with another riveting concert performance, Handel’s rarely performed 1737 opera *Berenice, Regina d’Egitto*. If this weren’t enough, on the intervening Saturday night Maestro Cummings and company presented the Festival’s first-ever staged performance of Handel’s “operetta” *Imeneo*, a historically informed production directed and choreographed by Belgian Baroque specialist Sigrid T’Hooft. It was a feast for eyes and ears alike.

Many factors contributed to the overwhelming success of *Susanna*, first the radiant mezzo-soprano Emily Fons, replacing the originally scheduled Lucy Crowe. American counter-tenor Christopher Lowrey

gave an equally effective portrayal of her steadfast husband, Joacim, while tenor Colin Balzer and bass-baritone Raimund Nolte brought much life to the two lascivious Elders. Mr. Balzer deserves special credit for taking the role on very short notice from the indisposed John Mark Ainsley. But the surprising tour-de-force of the evening came from the young mezzo-soprano Ciara Hendrick who did double duty, first as *Susanna*’s attendant, with a pair of strophic arias, and second as the boy Daniel, in which role she turned the often-cut aria, “Tis not age a sullen face,” into a flippant, ironic, and



Ciara Hendrick as Daniel Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva



*Susanna*: Orchestra, Chorus and Soloists Emily Fons, Colin Balzer and Raimund Nolte  
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

captivating response to the blow-hard second Elder. Better yet was her more familiar “Chastity” aria that soon followed and became the poignant and cathartic highlight to the drama.

*Susanna* was a thrilling performance on every level and Maestro Cummings took this memorable concert to Berlin and Wroclaw. At Göttingen the Festival continued with a concert of *Berenice* by the visiting La Nuova Musica. The potentially bewildering convolutions of *Berenice*’s typical *opera seria* plot mattered little since almost every aria is Handel at his best, and the talented cast vividly captured the essence of every moment and



Mireille Asselin, *Berenice*  
Photo: Peter Heller

every emotion. At center was the lovely Canadian soprano Mireille Asselin as *Berenice*, torn between marrying for love or duty. She commanded the stage from the start with the vigor of her opening aria, “No, che servire altrui.” Two fine artists with distinctly different roots took the two castrati parts, the rivals Demetrio (love) and Alessandro (duty): Polish countertenor Michael Czerniawski, with some accomplished bravura singing, and Israel soprano Anat Edri, with a clear and forthright tone, just right for the lighter role.

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*Berenice*’s sister, *Selene*, has much fine music as well. Soprano Giuseppina Bridelli had the advantage of being the only Italian in the cast, and she communicated every word and gesture of the text. Each of the other three characters had a pair of arias: countertenor Raffaele Pe as *Selene*’s betrothed, *Arsace*; tenor Christopher Turner as the Roman ambassador, *Fabio*; and Timothy Dickinson as *Berenice*’s counselor, *Aristobolo*. The tenor and bass are both outside the action relatively speaking, and their arias were a nice respite from the principals’ roiling emotions. Mr. Turner’s simile aria about bees was a delight, accompanied by exquisite triplet buzzing in the strings; Mr. Dickinson gave ample

weight to both of Handel’s typically brisk minor-key arias for bass.

The Festival’s centerpiece this year was a Baroque-inspired staging of Handel’s charming late-career “operetta” *Imeneo* in the intimate Deutsches Theater. The libretto’s description for the setting for all three acts is “A Pleasant Garden” (“*Deliziosa*”). This is exactly what we got from stage and costume designer Stephan Dietrich - an elegant Baroque garden overlooking the Mediterranean, with movable flats expanding or closing the space with Greek pillars and/or vegetation. We viewed all this through a large picture frame around the proscenium, with Baroque-styled candles flickering along the front edge of the stage.



The “Pleasant Garden” of *Imeneo* Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Baroque gestures from dancers and singers often coalesced into stunning tableaux, and stylistically informed full dance interludes complemented the performance – at times with the chorus of Athenians, who play no part in the action, singing in the wings. The dance was always bound up with plot and character, either allegorically or directly. Maestro Cummings also added music to accommodate Ms. T’Hooft’s Baroque dance company, Corpo Barocco (music drawn from the *Water Music*, *Concerto Grosso op.6 Nr. 7*, and two harpsichord suites orchestrated by Mr. Cummings.) Still, the visual aspect was the captivating element of this production, which included stylized Baroque gestures of the elegantly clad singers.



William Berger, Imeneo, and dancers

Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

The two leads, soprano Anna Dennis as Rosmene and counter-tenor James Laing as her would be lover Tirinto, each have six arias. Soprano Dennis, in another love-duty conflict, commanded all the resources for singing a role which is the lynch pin of the opera. The sweet-toned countertenor James Laing was most effective in the more subtle moments of his six emotionally charged arias. His pure tone and nuanced singing inflected and communicated the text although he seemed to have neither the passion, range, nor agility for the great

Vivaldian bravura aria of Act II, “Sorge nell’alma.” Baritone William Berger, a Baroque specialist, was a secure Imeneo, and bass-baritone Matthew Brook was equally secure with his two heavy-handed arias as the father of the two girls, Rosmene and the charming soubrette Clomiri, delightfully sung by soprano Stefanie True.

But what most made the evening one of the best and most cohesive productions that Göttingen has ever mounted was the apt and beautiful integration of dance and music. The exquisite flow of movement was always illuminating, adding visual beauty to Handel’s especially attractive and apposite music. The close of the piece turned out to be truly cathartic, a beautifully choreographed final duet that Handel borrowed from *Sosarme* and later added to the score, a painful “love duet” of parting and sorrow. Maybe Handel was just teasing us with the label “operetta” after all. Winton Dean writes that the work’s individual flavor “almost entitles it to rank as a minor masterpiece.” Of Dean’s description Andrew Porter writes, “that ‘almost’ seems needlessly cautious.” Göttingen proved him right.

James Laing as Tirinto and Anna Dennis as Rosmene  
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva