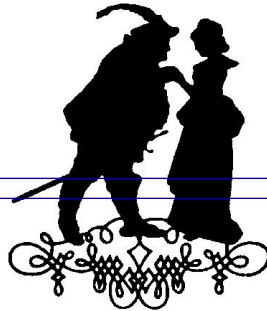


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## Sosarme Highlights a Season of Rarities Handel Festival Halle 2016

Once again the esteemed Handel Festival in Halle displayed its vigor and diversity with fifty or so performances ranging from chamber concerts to fully staged operas. Opening the season was the annual contribution from Oper Halle, Handel's rarely performed *Sosarme, Re di Media* of 1732 (following up on last year's *Lucio Cornelio Silla*, offered again this year). At the close of the Festival, came the annual contribution from a visiting company at the Goethe-Theater in Bad Lauchstädt, the even more rarely-performed *Publio Cornelio Scipione* of 1726, a Parnassus Arts Production, which the previous year had presented Handel's *Alessandro* to great acclaim.

The Festival's current focus seems also to be on Handel's various *pasticcios*, operas that he put together borrowing from both himself and other composers. Last year at the Goethe Theatre, the visiting Lautten Compagney Berlin offered *Giove in Argo*; this year they returned with *Didone Abbandonato*, a scintillating performance of Handel's 1837 *pasticcio* that included music by numerous composers, mostly Leonardo Vinci, as well as a few popular arias by Giacomelli, Vivaldi and



A concert in Market Square, in front of Halle's famous statue of Handel, marks the opening of the Festival Photo: Thomas Ziegler

Hasse. Additionally, the esteemed early music group from Pisa, Auser Musici, offered another Handel *pasticcio* in concert based on Leonardo Leo's *Catone in Utica*, which Handel spiced up with arias by other composers of the day, including also Vinci and Vivaldi. All told, this was a thrilling operatic season in Halle. Clearly, a primary focus these days is rarities of all sorts, happily so.

## Sosarme - from Anarchy to Unity

For years *Sosarme* was a forgotten piece. After a successful premier in 1732 during Handel's Second Academy period, and a brief revival two years later, the work fell into oblivion until its rediscovery in the mid-twentieth century. A scattering of staged productions has appeared since then; this new production at the Handel Festival was the first ever by Halle Opera. Part of the reason for neglect may have been inconsistencies in the genesis of the libretto, which began life as *Fernando, Re di Castiglia* (set in Coimbra, Portugal). While composing it, Handel transferred it to the mythical and timeless Lydia, and the full title to the somewhat truncated libretto now became *Sosarme, Re di Media*. Sacrificed was a certain dramatic integrity, but the music is first rate Handel.

In the Halle Opera production, it was thus an insightful move for director Philipp Harnoncourt and set designer Katja Rotrekl to confront the problematic libretto head on, ignoring the historical context of feuding fourteenth-century royal families. Shifting the time, locale and action to that of a contemporary dysfunctional family, the production does not focus on a militaristic struggle for succession to the throne between a father, Haliates, King of Lydia, and his two sons, Argone and Melo. Instead it becomes a study in contemporary societal alienation, even anarchy, which runs almost unchecked through the familial disintegration we witness on stage. An opening video zooms in on a single, suburban German house. On stage, this house will undergo gradual destruction in the course of the opera. With the help of a rotating stage, a barb-wired barrier separates the territory claimed by the anarchist older son (Argone) from the territory of his father. Things get worse; eventually the house collapses completely – as do family relations. But order is restored in the end; with the help of a video projection, the house is rebuilt as the final chorus celebrates the reunification of the family and the community.

All this may seem a bit contrived, but what emerged was a production which reflected how well the director listened to the music – how well he understood the work, with all its incongruities, and gave free rein to music that so skillfully articulates drama, character and motivation. Winton Dean has commented that the result of Handel's shifting the original locale was "a lopsided libretto, a rare instance, at least in part, of Handel sacrificing consistency and dramatic relevance to expediency, catering for the singers at the expense of the drama." Perhaps so, given that the first cast included such luminaries as his superstar castrato Senesino as *Sosarme*, the always-dependable soprano Anna Strada as *Elmira*, *Sosarme's* betrothed, and the deep bass Antonio Montagnana as *Altomaro*, the treacherous instigator of rebellion. Yet those critics like Edward Dent who early on labeled *Sosarme* "another unsatisfactory opera" were certainly, as Dean suggests, blinded to the quality of the music. The production team in Halle was not.

Aided by conductor Bernhard Forck, using the newly published Halle critical edition, each singer emerged with clarity amidst devastating conflicts. The distraught *Elmira*, for example, expressively sung by soprano Ines Lex, closes what the libretto indicates is Handel's first act, disheveled and precariously perched



Ines Lex as Elmira

Photo: Falk Wenzel



Ki-Hyun Park, Altomaro; Julia Böhme, Melo; and Robert Sellier, Haliates  
Photo: Falk Wenzel

atop her half-destroyed house. But following her moving adagio prayer, “Dite pace” (“proclaim peace”), there is no curtain. Instead the drama continues – with an interlude of strobe lights, interpolated trumpets, sounds of battle, and the like – until the dust clears and she sings the even more poignant cavatina, “Padre, germano, e sposo,” wondering who among them soon will cause her the most grief, Haliates, Argone (the elder son and her brother), or her finance, Sosarme. Next her distraught mother, Erenice enters, asking what she saw from the “tower.” Elmira responds that a haze of dust obscured her vision. How effectively the two acts dovetailed; how effectively too, music and drama merged.

All this was typical of the production. A standout of the evening was Altomaro, the manipulator of the plot for rebellion, sung by the sturdy bass and long-time member of Halle Opera Ki-Hyun Park. Winton Dean calls Altomaro “a double-dyed villain, an unscrupulous bully, liar and potential murder.” Yet his three major-key arias are full of bounce and bravado, especially his entrance aria (“Fra l’ombre”) that Handel adapted from an aria for Polifemo in his 1708 Naples serenata *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo*. Mr. Park’s magnificent rendition of this difficult piece brought rapturous applause. Better yet was his second aria, “Sento il cor che lieto gode” in which

he gloats at his apparently successful scheming, his feet dangling over the orchestra pit at the realigned close of Act I (actually mid-Act II of the original libretto). This turned out to be an interesting parallel to the close of this production’s second and final act when, his schemes exposed, Altomaro takes his own life. But not for long - the production brings him back to life moments later to let him (not Sosarme as the libretto indicates) articulate the brief recitative that precedes the closing chorus of celebration:

*Let strife be forever banished from this place.  
Let it be a haven where peace and love may dwell!*

He too then participates in the delightful final pastoral chorus as, with the help of the closing video sequence, order is restored in the bucolic home in the suburbs. There is hope after all amidst all this civil strife.

Indeed each character emerged from the progressively devastating scenes with clarity. The poignant duet of longing and suffering, “Per le porte del tormento,” for Sosarme (the eloquent countertenor Benno Schachtner) and Elmira which now opens Act II was especially effective. Handel later transferred this exquisite duet to his 1740 “operetta” *Imeneo* as its penultimate number. In this production of *Sosarme* it



Benno Schachtner (Sosarme), Ines Lex (Elmira) Photo: Falk Wenzel



becomes the lynchpin to the opera as Elmira attends to the wounded Sosarme, gently stripping a large blotch of red blood from his white smock – a telling symbol midway through the work for the healing and reconciliation to come. In their second duet, “Tu caro sei,” the penultimate number of the score, the lovers express their relief that their trials are over in an equally beautiful but light-hearted piece. Vocally, the pair wonderfully captured the lyricism of the first duet and the lighthearted lilt of the second.

To Halle Opera’s credit, Handel’s original casting received careful consideration in the casting for this production. The result was a fine selection of singers who acquitted themselves admirably. During the Second Academy period, Handel had the service of a first-rate tenor, Giovanni Battista Pinacci, for Haliate, who has three fine arias. In the first of these, “La turba adulatorice” experienced tenor Robert Sellier amply attacked the angular leaps of this large-scaled vengeance aria. Complementing him, contralto Henriette Götde was equally effective in the demanding role of his wife, Erenice. Her expressive, Bach-like lament in Act II, “Cuor di madre,” facing the prospect of a duel between husband and son, was another highlight of the evening.

Countertenor Michael Taylor effectively energized the role of that older son, Argone, the second castrato of the original cast, although except for some arioso and a short duet in which his mother berates him, he has little of substance to sing. But the illegitimate son, Melo, the



Robert Sellier as Haliate, Henriette Götde as Erenice, Julia Böhme as Melo, with supernumeraries of Oper Halle Photo: Falk Wenzel

only trouser role of the original cast, was sung magnificently by German contralto Julia Böhme. Clinging to a ladder against the half-destroyed house, and tormented mercilessly by Altomaro, she gave a stunning rendition of “So ch’il Ciel,” another poignant piece reminiscent of Bach. What a shame that one of the few cuts was her Act III aria late in the opera, the much simpler, if perhaps superfluous, “Sincero affetto.”



Benno Schachtner (Sosarme), Olaf Weiß, Petra Hiltawsky-Klein (Händelfestspielorchester Halle) Photo: Falk Wenzel

To the credit of Halle Opera, this production was effective theatre on every level although the company sometimes offers a mixed bag of stage gimmicks and unidiomatic musical intrusions – added drums and other percussion, for example. And it was also cathartic, even moving by the end. The occasional artifice of obligato musical instruments played on stage - for example, a solo violin, an organ, a pair of horns – invited further audience involvement with the expressive power of the music, while such extra-musical intrusions as a gang of anarchists with black masks and drums kept the unsettling civil drama at the fore. What emerged was an evening spent not with distant, dynastic intrigue and the family quarrels of a fourteenth-century king, but with the kind of revolutionary upheaval all too frequent in today’s unsettled world, perhaps more troubled than any before. A glimmer of hope and unity emerged in the end. If only it were true that music always had such power to heal.

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