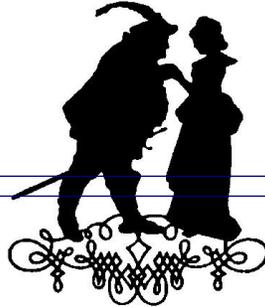


Opera con Brio

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Händel-Festspiele Halle 2017

Jephtha and Acis and Galatea Brought to the Stage

A primary focus of this year's Händel-Festspiele Halle was Biblical themes in Handel's works. The Festival thus included performances of sacred oratorios based on the Old Testament (including even the *Messiah*, which incorporates texts from both the Old and New Testaments). Among the five different oratorios offered honoring also the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation were *Esther*, which essentially marked the birth in 1732 of the English oratorio, and *Deborah*, written a year later for the King's Theatre in London, whose dramatic source material can be found in *Judges*. Alas, I was able to attend only the centerpiece of these anniversary offerings, Handel's final oratorio, *Jephtha*, at OperHalle. Based also on a story in *Judges*, this highly anticipated event was the only oratorio to be staged in Halle during the Festival.

Opera companies today increasingly choose to stage Handel's oratorios. An energetic, playful *Semele* just opened the 2017 Garsington Opera season; last year's *Saul*, staged by Peter Sellars, was a big hit at Glyndebourne as was his landmark *Theodora* in 2012. Arguably most powerful of all his staged oratorios was

the 2012/2014 *Hercules*, a co-production of the Canadian Opera Company and the Lyric Opera of Chicago, which focused compellingly on how the psychological scars of war affect not only returning warriors, but their loved ones and communities as well. Thus it was with high expectations that I ventured to Halle for Handel's equally powerful return-from-war story in which Jephtha, leader of the Israelites, challenges the Ammonites, promising God that if he returns victorious, he'll sacrifice the first creature ("what, or whoe'er") he meets upon return. The creature is his young daughter, Iphis, although (unlike in the biblical account) an angel intervenes to stop the sacrifice.

Expectations were high for what acclaimed director Tatjana Gürbaca might do with this monumental oratorio, especially since Handel's encroaching blindness while composing (another trick of fate) adds such poignancy to Jephtha's plight. Alas, Ms. Gürbaca is no Peter Sellars; her brand of German *Regietheater*, with a multitude of the usual modern elements, seemed cluttered and incoherent, lacking the defining focus that so typically unifies music, poetry, and drama in a Sellars production.



Ines Lex as Iphis; Robert Sellier as Jephtha; members of the Chorus and Extra Chorus of OperHalle
Photo: Tobias Kruse

At the outset, instead of Israelites, a motley array of colorless characters in drab contemporary dress (the chorus) gradually meanders onto the vacuous black stage with its endlessly revolving turntable, soon performing some kind of archaic, non-Christian ritual with small idols, rocks, and what not. Next they reject this ritual in order to follow a longhaired hippyish Jephtha. Throughout the first act he variously brandishes weapons or chains slung from his pants belt and even at one time a phallic fake nose as some in the crowd partake in the “spoils” of victory. Later, in the second act when the reality of Jephtha’s vow hits home, the throngs return to their original rituals, this time in various stages of undress. Poor Iphis, eventually “saved” not by an angel, but by some blood-soaked urchin who emerges from the crowd, ends up entombed in a circle of white rocks.



Tae-Young Hyun as the Angel Photo: Tobias Kruse

I give the director and production team credit, however, for some right-minded attempts to universalize *Jephtha* in bringing this powerful human drama to stage; Handel after all had done as much by insuring his new art form, the dramatic oratorio, was accessible to audiences, with its distinct advantage over remote *opera seria* in using Biblical stories familiar to the audience, sung in English, with the powerful structural support of a varied and powerful chorus as both participants and commentators. The central theme is not just that Jephtha must save Israel, but that Man must submit to Destiny. The production eased us into the powerful, oft-repeated opening phrase of the oratorio, “It must be so,” sung by Jephtha’s half-

brother, Zebul, by breaking down the frame between our world and that of the eccentric worshipers wandering on stage. Conductor Christoph Spering had bits of the overture played off stage (and before hand in the foyer); effective or not musically, the gambit served as a reasonable transition into the stage world, as Handel so strikingly does with his weighty 2-bar *largo e staccato* phrase in the key of the overture, a short preface to the fateful four-word opening phase. Framing the drama at evening’s end, the house lights gradually come up during the choral “Hallelujah, Amen,” a nice retreat from all that must be so.

Effective too was presenting the drama in two acts rather than three, breaking after the grave chorus (“In glory high...”) that caps the more relaxed and diffuse scenes that open the work, as well as Jephtha’s preceding air (“His mighty arm”). Thus, after the break, the drama can truly begin, as it does with the G Major Symphony preceding the chorus “Hail, glorious conqueror!” Iphis, dressed as a bride for her beloved Hamor (a soldier in love with Iphis) filters in from the wings and through the audience with her confetti-throwing attendants, singing and dancing to a lively gavotte rhythm as they greet the victorious Jephtha. He, horrified, stands alone on stage as



Svitlana Slyvia as Storgè; Robert Sellier as Jephtha
Photo: Tobias Kruse

Iphis scrambles through the orchestra pit to welcome her victorious father. If a bit contrived, all this certainly heightened the impact of their meeting at this critical moment. Handel himself soon draws the threads of the drama together in his fine quartet (one of the very best in opera), “O spare thy daughter,” as Zebul, Storgè (Jephtha’s wife), and Hamor plead with Jephtha. Both redouble their entreaties, even with different music, but all this was lost amidst the cluttered staging, with other figures weaving in and out among the principals, so that even Jephtha’s final, repeated, “I’ll hear no more, her doom is fixed” (shades of “it must be so”) gets lost in the shuffle.

One could argue perhaps that the omnipresence of the massive too-frequently-revolving turntable encapsulated the force of destiny; but it didn’t work, especially when, adding to the confusion, a huge circular mirror descended from above. Nor did the rotation help with the projection of the soloists, whose voices were often lost in the far reaches of the vast space. The smooth-voiced tenor Robert Sellier as Jephtha, for all his fine diction, did not project well, although his serene Air, “Waft her, angels,” had all the lovely

purity of tone necessary for this exquisite moment of calm. Ines Lex, a fine lyric soprano at OperHalle, also sang with good diction, although she was directed to play the role of Iphis in an all too cutesy little-girlie way. Still, she sang well throughout the evening, and her final e-minor Air, “Farewell, ye limpid springs,” sung huddled off stage against the auditorium wall, was breathtaking. Others in the cast included another OperHalle favorite, the robust bass Ki-Hyun Park as Zebul; mezzo Svitlana Sylvania as Storgè; and countertenor Leandro Marziotte, each a little short on diction but strong on warm tone. Singing front stage away from all the clutter, the young treble, Philipp Schrade (alternating in the role as the bloodied “Angel” with Tae-Young Hyun) received an especially warm response from the audience.

While the arias in *Jephtha* are rich and plentiful, they were on the whole less well served than the choruses, which are among the best Handel ever wrote. For the occasion OperHalle greatly expanded its regular chorus, to excellent musical effect, especially in such numbers as the monumental “How dark, O Lord, are thy decrees,” the core of the drama. Here Ms. Gürbaca carefully blocked its powerful four movements, sans rotating turntable, to bring all the poignant majesty of this complex structure to the fore.



Chorus and Extra Chorus of OperHalle

Photo: Tobias Kruse

Would that all the evening had been like this. As the esteemed baroque musicologist Jane Glover has written:

Above all it is Handel's power of characterization in music that gives *Jephtha* its supreme coherence. Jephtha himself becomes almost Shakespearian in depth, as the innocent, straightforward soldier against whom the fates turn, yet who steadfastly believes that "Whatever is, is right."

Isolated moments stood out indeed. The musical performances were solid, especially with the fine OperHalle orchestra when they were all together, led effectively by the eminent Christoph Spering. But all in all, the effort lacked coherence.

Puppets and People: *Acis and Galatea* Charms

Not so with the enchanting *Acis and Galatea* heard a day later at the intimate Goethe-Theater Bad Lauchstädt. What a treat it was to encounter a rare staging of Handel's very first dramatic work in English on the heels of his very last, *Jephtha*. Although the central theme is basically that of many of Handel's great oratorios including *Jephtha* – the conflict between human happiness and the harshness of fate – the two works could hardly differ more in terms of subject and scope. *Acis* is basically an intimate masque, relating the simple Ovid-based Sicilian myth of the water nymph Galatea and her love for the shepherd Acis, who is killed by the jealous giant Polyphemus. No record of the early 1718 chamber



Acis (Benedikt Kristiánsen) and Galatea (Sophie Junker) Looming above the puppet theater is the giant Polyphemus.

performance survives, yet the work provided the young Handel opportunities to display all his considerable talents for pastoral ambience, choral writing, characterization, and both tragedy and humor. All the while he never lets us forget, as Winton Dean reminds us, that "we are in an artificial world where standards of human drama do not apply," a very different convention from that of the great late oratorios like *Jephtha*.

How apt it was then that this bittersweet pastoral fable should be told with the captivating collaboration of the two Prague-based companies, Marionette Theater Company Buchty a Loutky and the early music ensemble Collegium Marianum, led by founder and director, flautist Jana Semerádová. An outstanding cast of young singers breathed life into the carved marionettes, so convincingly that by the evening's close, when the singer Galatea cradled the wooden Acis in her arms, the world of artifice and real life had become one – a perfect embodiment of the undying love between the two. "The bubbling fountain, lo! It flows," sings Galatea, while a blue ribbon streams out from the puppet theater; first Galatea and then the chorus echo the final couplet "Through the plains still joy to rove, Murm'ring still thy gentle love." It was all the perfect marriage of music, drama, and focus that was so lacking in *Jephtha*.



The Marionettes Acis and Galatea



The Cast and Conductor of *Acis and Galatea* take their bows

While production details are too numerous to mention here at length, the surprise of the show in general was the delightful interaction between live performers and carefully choreographed marionettes and props, including twittering birds, buzzing bees, sprouting foliage and flowers. Sometimes the singers stood within the marionette theater; other times they looked on from without. Galatea herself (the live one) was the charming young lyric soprano Sophie Junker (winner in 2012 of the London Handel Singing Competition). Two fine tenors, Benedikt Kristjánsson and Patrick Grahl, were properly engaging as Acis and his friend Damon respectively, especially in the second Act with their two Airs sung far removed from the marionette theater in the background, as if to emphasize their humanity (“Love sounds th’alarm,” and Damon’s cautionary reply, “Consider, fond shepherd”).

And of course there is Handel’s magnificent creation, the half humorous giant Polyphemus, sung with great élan by the fine baritone Tomáš Král appearing at first with a gruff Cyclops mask. Towards the end, about to bludgeon the helpless Acis, he appears as a monstrous oversized puppet looming above and embracing the entire marionette theater - a reminder again of the artificial but poignantly human world we have so imaginatively been invited to enter. It was one that was hard to leave.

Looking Ahead

From an operatic standpoint, the 2018 Händel-Festspiele Halle (May 25 to June 10) looks especially enticing. The annual OperHalle production will be Handel’s rarely performed 1737 opera *Berenice* – so rare in fact that with this production the Festival will at last complete a staging of every Handel opera. Just as rare will be another premiere, this time at the Goethe-Theater Bad Lauchstädt, Handel’s 1721 opera (or rather opera-pasticcio) *Muzio Scevola*, for which he wrote only the third act. (London competitors of the day wrote the first two.) Also at the Goethe-Theater will be a staging of Handel’s wonderful *Serenata Parnasso in festa* by the frequently visiting Lautten Compagny Berlin. (The *Serenata* was a stunning success at Halle in 2015.) Two other Handel opera-pasticcios will also appear, continuing Halle’s focus on this popular 18th century genre: one, *Ormisda*, in concert, in collaboration with The London Handel Festival; the other, *Oreste*, a fully staged production from the Theater an der Wien.

As if this weren’t enough, there will be concert performance of Handel’s colorful first London opera, *Rinaldo*, and the mighty oratorio *Samson*. As is customary, the OperHalle production of *Jephtha* gets another airing, and no Festival would be complete without the *Messiah*. Especially enticing of the many other offerings is a Festival concert with Joyce DiDonato.

But then there’s always Halle itself, Handel’s hometown along the river Saale. “Lo! It flows,” sometimes too much so with the disastrous floods of 2014 that caused the cancelation of the Festival that year. But that harsh fate is history, and once again the expansive parks and gardens on the river’s banks, with miles of bike and walking paths, bustle with happy humanity from near and far. And in town, the imposing monument to Georg Friedrich Händel looks out over the magnificent Market Square with its venerable Medieval churches, a reminder why so many of us make the annual trek to his home town, this vibrant corner of Germany where Handel’s spirit - and music - is very much alive.