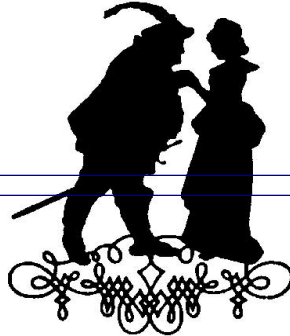


Opera con Brio

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Richard B. Beams



Handelian Magic in Chicago

Lyric Opera of Chicago: *Rinaldo* / Chicago Opera Theater: *Teseo*



Eliza van den Heever as the enchantress Armida in *Rinaldo*
Photo: Dan Rest

Until recently, Boston, a city rich with musical resources, was fortunate to have two major opera companies: the smaller but more adventuresome Opera Boston and the larger more mainstream Boston Lyric Opera. Alas, the former, after a promising beginning in the fall of 2011 with a charming *Béatrice et Bénédict*, collapsed in a morass of petty squabbles before the company could bring Michael Tippett's much-anticipated *The Midsummer Marriage* to stage this winter. At the same time, Boston Lyric Opera maintained their recent surge both with quality productions of traditional works (*Macbeth* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*) and such innovative productions as Peter Maxwell Davis' *The Lighthouse*.

Chicago, on the other hand, maintains its two major opera companies: the renowned Lyric Opera of Chicago and the less well-known but engaging and adventurous Chicago Opera Theater. Both are faring well indeed, as evidenced this spring when I had the rare opportunity of attending Handel's first two London successes in quick succession: *Rinaldo* (1711) in March at the Lyric and *Teseo* (1713) at Chicago Opera Theater in April. Each production proved the respective companies as fully capable of realizing a baroque opera in the less hospitable venue of a larger theater. At the Lyric, *Rinaldo* was juxtaposed against the traditional pageantry of *Aida*; COT balanced *Teseo*, its final offering of the season, with less traditional fare - its captivating production of *Moscow, Cheryomushki*, a brilliant operatic spoof by Dmitri Shostakovich.

Over the years, Boston in fact has led the way, at least in the US, in the revival of operas by Handel, many thanks also to Emmanuel Music and Boston Baroque. Craig Smith and Emmanuel Music brought the US premiere of numerous uncut Handel Operas; Boston Baroque recently has



Renée Tatum as Medea in *Teseo*
Photo: Liz Lauren

made semi-staged performances of operas by Handel a primary focus. And the Boston Early Music Festival has also fostered this Handel Revival, pioneering in 1985 with an authentic period staging of the rarely performed *Teseo*.

Yet given the relatively static baroque aesthetic, typically problematic for both directors and audiences, one is never quite sure what to expect in the theater these days. Göttingen Handel Festival presented a double-edged *Teseo* in May of 2011 (see <http://operaconbrio.com/teseo.pdf>). The premise was, to quote the director, “a period production with sidebars” in which the audience experienced the conventional opera while at the same time being able to see and read into the experiences of the performers as they were playing the characters. A month later Glyndebourne Festival Opera celebrated the 300-year anniversary of *Rinaldo* with a rather misbegotten concept, transforming the opera into a schoolboy’s fantasy. Later in the summer, Central City Opera took a more successful approach with its focused production of the third of Handel’s early magic operas, *Amadigi di Gaula*, confining the stage action to the intimate interior of an Italian Renaissance “*studiolo*.”

A Quirky and Captivating *Rinaldo*

The recent Chicago productions encapsulated yet two more contrasting approaches, each highly effective. First, *Rinaldo*. Just as the initial London production of 1711 was meant to wow its audiences with spectacle to complement its virtuosic singing, so did director Francisco Negrin with his whimsical effects – most notably the descent from above of the enchantress Armida’s huge black harpsichord. In the great aria of defiance “Vo’ far guerra” with its lengthy harpsichord cadenza which closes Act II, Armida clearly articulates the power of music to enchant (as Handel did at the opera’s premiere and in successive performances when he would display his remarkable gifts as harpsichordist with a spontaneous cadenza). Other apt touches stressed the quest of the momentarily waylaid and tempted Rinaldo – especially the curved wall of Jerusalem with the word spelled in stacked block letters at the rear of the stage.



Luca Pisaroni as Argente on the Jerusalem “wall” Photo: Dan Rest

The universally strong cast greatly contributed to the production’s success. Two of them, counter-tenor David Daniels and bass-baritone Luca Pisaroni, fresh from their recent success in the Met’s *Enchanted Island* (see http://www.operaconbrio.com/Enchanted_Island_2012.pdf), were once again diametrically opposed to each other. In his first ever tackling of the title role, the always idiomatic Mr. Daniels seemed



David Daniels as Rinaldo confronts the magic of Armida
Photo: Dan Rest

effortless in his demanding arias, especially so in his brilliant call to battle, “Or la trombe,” with trumpet obbligato late in the opera. Opposite him, the rich-voiced bass-baritone Luca Pisaroni was equally impressive as the impulsive and villainous pagan chieftain Argante. This coming summer Mr. Pisaroni assumes the exciting title role in the new production of Rossini’s *Maometto II* at Santa Fe Opera, a role he is especially well suited for, as it was for Sam Ramey in the initial modern day revival at Pesaro in 1985. Indeed Argante’s terrifying and virtuosic entrance aria from *Rinaldo*, accompanied by trumpets and drums, was the vehicle for Mr. Ramey’s stunning debut at the Met; so too it was for Mr. Pisaroni’s debut in Chicago, with no less effect.

Other standouts were the ever-reliable baroque specialist, contralto Sonia Prina in the trouser role of Goffredo and the young German soprano Julia Kleiter as the innocent captive Almirena, especially poignant in her moving sarabande “Lascia ch’io pianga,” as she pleads from within the giant harpsichord-turned-prison. Finally, most impressive of all was the powerful and tempestuous soprano Elza van den Heever as the sorceress Armida who (rightly so) stole every scene she was in, from her riveting entrance from below the stage in fiery red leather, to her great *aria de vendetta* closing Act II, harpsichord cadenza and all. Experienced Baroque specialist Harry Bicket held all together from the pit with his usual refinement and sensitivity to texture.

A Spartan and Contemporary *Teseo*

Chicago Opera Theater, by contrast, took an alternate approach to these early Handel operas of magic, sorcery, and spectacle – exposing the characters alone on stage to express the myriad emotions they experience. Director James Darrah did this via a Spartan modern production, which, with the elimination of all elements of the supernatural and the spectacular, highlighted the interaction of characters and eloquence of expression. With mostly contemporary dress, and props limited to a chair here and there, tiny chandeliers at various heights, and dream-like fabrics, the magic of this production came from the humanity of the characters, expressed in the exquisite emotion-laden arias and ensembles of Handel’s score. These in turn were brought beautifully to light with Chicago’s period instrument ensemble, Baroque Band, led by Boston based Michael Beattie, who for many years took a similar approach with Handel specialist Craig Smith in performances by Emmanuel Music.

A large frame at stage left kept extraneous events of the plot (in this case the war embodying the struggle of King Egeo to retain his throne) away from the attention of the audience. On the darkened stage itself,



Medea (Renée Tatum) manipulates Egeio (Gerald Thompson)
Photo: Liz Lauren

the psychological and emotional struggle of the protagonists assumes primary importance, with Handel's poignant and expressive music working its magic all the while. Indeed in a Baroque opera such as this, the text gives the story coherence and context, but it is the music that creates credible and consistent characters. This production thus became thoroughly modern in its compassionate depiction of the fears, the agonies, and the hopes of each character thrown into the smoldering crucible of the stage.

Medea, at the center of the action, may be the archetypal enchantress (like Armida), but in this production she was nothing short of a dark and foreboding Lady Macbeth – from her somber entrance in black leather robe, to her blood soaked incantations, to her persistent manipulations of Egeio to harm her rival Agilea. Often an eerily dim chandelier hovered above. (I kept thinking of Verdi's great Act II aria for Lady Macbeth, "La luce langue...The light thickens, the beacon that eternally does course the far-flung heavens is spent!") Mezzo-soprano Renee Tatum was just as effective here in *Teseo* as she was in the joint production of Gluck's *Armide* by the Juilliard School and the Met this winter when she stole the show as La Haine (Hate). Vocally secure, she commanded the stage from her somber, mellifluous entrance aria with plangent oboe ("Dolce riposeo") to her spellbinding



Medea (Renée Tatum), victim of her own machinations
Photo: Liz Lauren

incantation scene. Indeed no dragon-drawn flying chariot swept her away in a fury at the end as the libretto prescribes; instead, she lingered on stage, a spent force like Lady Macbeth, victim of her own machinations.

Much to the credit of Chicago Opera Theater, this production of *Teseo* capped a trilogy of Medea operas from the Baroque era that began with a stunning production in 2010 of Cavalli's 1649 opera *Giasone* and continued with last year's production of Charpentier's 1693 opera *Médée*. In Handel's *Teseo*, which follows just twenty years later, the burning of Corinth and Medea's infamous murdering of her two children are far behind. But not really; in this production, the ghostly appearance of the two children at the height of Medea's anguish (although not called for in the libretto), like the spectral appearance of Banquo in *Macbeth*, highlighted not only the chronology of events in the trilogy, but at the same time heightened the human anguish of Medea.



Medea (Renée Tatum) with the specters of her two murdered children
Photo: Liz Lauren

Significantly, however, in spite of Ms. Tatum's virtuosic, even frightening, portrayal of Medea, she does not dwarf the other characters. They are all on equal footing, as it were, immersed each in their tangled emotional webs, which unfold with the emotional and musical weight their torments warrant. *Teseo*, the target of Medea's affection, originally a soprano castrato, became an effective trouser role for soprano Cecelia Hall. Another soprano, Manuela Bisceglie, was especially fine in articulating the varying aspects of her love for *Teseo* early on, as she was also later in "Amarti io so Vorrei," her lament while under Medea's malevolent spell. The long duet of the two sopranos was both a relief and a delight with its exquisite blending of tone and effective staging of eloquent sheer white drapery against the ubiquitous darkness.

The loyal companions of *Teseo* and Agilea – Arcane (countertenor David Trudgen) and Clizia (soprano Deanna Brewick), whose lover's tiffs are eventually resolved, round out the cast as the secondary pair of lovers. But in this production, they are anything but secondary – especially the extraordinary David Trudgen. The *Chicago Tribune* recently hailed him as "the next generation's answer to David Daniels." Ready proof was to hear Mr. Trudgen so soon after encountering David Daniels in the Lyric Opera of Chicago's *Rinaldo*.



Cecelia Hall (Teseo) duets with Manuela Bisceglie (Agilea)
Photo: Liz Lauren

His recent performances at both Wexford Opera and Central City Opera further attest to his impressive talent (see <http://www.operaconbrio.com/Reviews.html>) His rich, earthy tone provided special poignancy to his often-plaintive numbers, like that of his “Ah! Cruda gelosia,” aptly counterpointed by solo cello.

Trilogies Abound

In Handel’s vast output of thirty-nine operas, some five are “magic operas” in which a protagonist with supernatural powers plays a major role. Again, his first three operas for London fit this category: *Rinaldo* (1711), *Teseo* (1713), and *Amadigi* (1715). Each featured the same celebrated singer, Elisabetta Plotti, as the central enchantress, who in large part contributed to the success of each. It was certainly a happy coincidence that one could hear two of these early successes in such quick succession in Chicago. Fortuitously, the third in this trio of magic operas, *Amadigi*, will be the central focus of the Göttingen Handel Festival in Germany this spring. The time seems ripe for

tercentenary revivals of all three works, which happily today succeed not simply on the merits of a single performer but because of such integrated and thoughtful productions as heard in Chicago.

Indeed, these days trilogies seem to abound, whether by chance or not. This spring Garsington Opera helps to celebrate the Olympics in England with Vivaldi’s late *L’Olimpiade*, thereupon completing their cycle of three of his operas over the last few years. (See <http://www.operaconbrio.com/vivaldisummer2011.pdf>) Certainly *Teseo* was a captivating conclusion to COT’s “Medea” cycle as well as an engaging evening of contemporary musical theater. Likewise *Rinaldo*, which initiated the entertaining trilogy of Handel’s magic operas three hundred years ago, capped the Lyric Opera’s season with a masterful portrayal of human agony and ecstasy within a whimsical and playful framework. As always, the expressive resonance of Handel’s music lingers when given the chance, as it did at both of Chicago’s enterprising houses. If only Boston were still so fortunate.

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