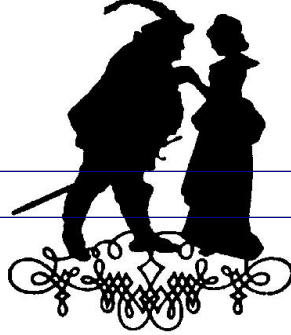


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



London Handel Festival, 2013 Handel's *Imeneo* Delights

Handel's penultimate opera, *Imeneo*, received a sparkling performance in March at the thirty-sixth London Handel Festival, a performance that confirmed both the theatrical viability and musical worth of this neglected Mozartian jewel. Like Mozart's *drama giocoso*, *Così fan Tutte*, Handel's "operetta" (as he called it) involves a romantic quadrangle revolving around the issue of marriage. Since Imeneo (aka Hymen) is the Greek god of marriage, opportunity abounds for mirth and frivolity to mesh with sentiment, bringing to the fore the touch of irony latent in the libretto. With Handel's music expressing the emotional depth so often beneath the comic surface, this lively production wonderfully caught the "tinta" of the work, as well as Handel's tongue-in-cheek attitude towards the libretto.

Indeed the libretto itself might well have served Gilbert and Sullivan. Before the opera begins, pirates have abducted two sisters,

Rosmene and Clomiri, sent overseas to participate in rites for the goddess Ceres. Not to worry. Imeneo (disguised as a woman to be nearer his beloved Rosmene) had accompanied them and soon defeats the pirates, rescues the sisters and returns them to their native Athens. By operetta convention, Rosmene is honor-bound to marry the man

who rescued her, assuming he so chooses – which he does. (The younger sister, Clomiri, is smitten by Imeneo, but to no avail.) Naturally, the complication is that Rosmene's heart belongs to another, her betrothed, Tirinto. The only other character in the opera, the girls' pompous father, Argenio, harangues Rosmene mercilessly about her duty. Eventually she gives in – although it is clear from Handel's music that his sympathies are not with this decision, given the moving string of arias for Tirinto, the paucity of material for Imeneo, and with a final ironic touch, the minor key of the "celebratory" chorus at the end.



The London Handel Festival's *Imeneo*
Photo: Chris Christodolou

In 2004, Glimmerglass Opera mounted a successful production that made the piece an amusing domestic drama about a dysfunctional family in nineteenth century New England. The set was a lavish second-story façade of a weathered clapboard house; most of the actions took place on a steeply raked, shingled porch roof in front, where characters (and the chorus) could make entrances and exits through windows. The not-inexpensive set was clearly designed to give depth and dimension, so that the audience could see what was taking place both inside and out.

The production in London, in the intimate four hundred seat Britten Theatre at the Royal College of Music, achieved a similar versatility, but much more simply and efficiently. The set itself – the remains of a Greek temple looking out over the Mediterranean – provides not only a striking frame, but also one more appropriate for the opera. Typically, the final ritornello of an aria would provide just enough time for choristers (doubling as stage hands) to slide the Greek pillars into a configurations suitable for the ensuing scene, whether meditative with a sunset over the open sea beyond, or convoluted and cluttered for the nuances of stage goings-on, eavesdropping, comic entrances and the like.

Against this classic frame, the production presented a contemporary social comedy in which, as Richard Fairman writing in *The Financial Times* put it, “a group of well-heeled young pleasure-seekers play out their romantic crushes and jealousies against a background of sun, sea and sand.” The libretto’s description for the scene of all three Acts is “A Pleasant Garden” (“Deliziosa”). We’re evidently in something closer to modern times at a hotel spa in which the well-groomed young occupants sing their way through massages, facials, and cocktail hour. The members of the chorus assume further duties as waiters and bemused attendants.

That it all worked so well is thanks to the tongue-in-cheek direction of Paul Curran who for the most part limited his tendency toward frivolity and even slapstick to appropriate moments such as when in a buoyant pantomime in Act II, Rosmene lathers her sister Clomiri with facial cream (à la the *Barber of Seville*) as she sings, teasing her

playfully about the coils of love, or when the soubrette Clomiri in Act I, with orgiastic abandon, lathers more than just the back of the sun-bathing Imeneo. Indeed there was even a touch of the scandalous in the coy couplings of attendants at the close of the first act. But all this was in great fun and far from intrusive, even if some business was occasionally over the top. Such moments let the young and talented members of each cast, who clearly enjoyed performing the opera, communicate with great élan the exuberance of the piece. Their youthful energy was infectious.

The soul of the work, of course, is Handel’s music, full of the brio and irony typical of his late operatic style, but also often as poignant as any he ever wrote, especially when it comes to Rosmene and Tirinto. As evidenced from the quality and depth of their arias, Handel’s sympathies are clearly with these would-be lovers, especially Tirinto, destined to lose out thanks to Rosmene’s eventual decision to follow the path of duty rather than love. His opening lament in Act I, “La mia bella perduta Rosmene,” with continuo only, parallels Rosmene’s opening prayer in Act II, “Deh! m’assistite, o Dei,” with cello only. Paul Curran follows Handel’s lead in such moments, emphasizing the reflective solitude of the parallel moments for each, minimizing any stage antics.



Katherine Crompton (Clomiri, second cast)
Photo: Chris Christodolou



Hannah Sandison (Rosmene, second cast)
Photo: Chris Christodolou

Two alternating casts of fine young singers from the Opera School at the Royal College of Music effectively brought to life the stylish characters. Most interesting was the contrast of performers in the role of Tirinto, originally composed for the celebrated Italian contralto Maria Monza, but rewritten to accommodate the soprano castrato Signor Andreoni because Monza had not yet arrived from Italy. Audiences at this year's London Festival performances had the nice opportunity to savor Tirinto's expansive role on one night by the pleasing Swedish mezzo-soprano Annie Fredriksson, on the other night by American counter-tenor, Tai Oney, who handled the alto range magnificently.

Each sang expressively throughout the entire performance, Ms. Fredriksson gradually winning sympathy for the wounded would-be lover Tirinto with her plaintive tone, right from the opening lament and beautiful da capo aria that soon extends the mood, "Se potessero I sospir." But in the second cast, it was Mr. Oney who stole the show with his magnificent Vivaldian bravura aria in Act II, "Sorge nell'alma mia," performed with great passion and vocal agility. Some in Boston may recall him from his professional opera debut here with Opera Boston as Athamas in Handel's *Semele* or in roles with the New England Conservatory of Music where he recently completed a



Annie Fredriksson (Tirinto, first cast)
Photo: Chris Christodolou



Tai Oney (Tirinto, second cast) and Bradley Travis (Argenio, second cast) Photo: Chris Christodolou

Graduate Diploma. The extraordinary richness and pliability of his voice came through not only in this bravura piece but in his other impassioned outburst in Act III, the expressive *largo* "Pieno il core," in which he spun out the vocal line with admirable beauty and breath control.

Each cast had a compelling Rosmene who is, after all, the central character in the plot. In the first cast, South African soprano Filipa Van Eck was beguiling right from her entrance aria "Ingrata mai non fui" addressed alternately to both lovers. Alluring in an attractive bathing suit, she sang with a clarion lyric soprano tone. Her witty, mock mad scene in Act III was a charming as well. In the second cast, soprano Hannah Sandison gave a more restrained but equally compelling performance, expressive and vibrant throughout. One missed the pliability necessary for such pieces as "In mezzo a voi dui" in Act III, her happiest aria, where the voice must imitate the rapid figuration of a rustling violin figure. No matter. In her rich vocal outpourings, she too captured the essence of this ambivalent character, torn between a choice of love or duty. Overall, it was a treat to have two equally valid interpretations of Rosmene, who should be, in fact, the title role.



Filipa Van Eck (Rosmene, first cast) in the mock mad scene of Act III
Photo: Chris Christodolou

But this honor belongs of course to Imeneo, perhaps with a touch of intended irony, since, although he is much involved in the recitative and trio, Handel gives him just two arias against six each for Tirinto and Rosmene. Curiously, Handel wrote the part for a low-lying tenor in the first and second acts, but assigned the part to a bass in the third act. The role would seem thus more appropriate for a baritone, as we had in the first cast with Morgan Pearse, than a tenor, as we had in the second cast with Luke D Williams. Indeed this seemed the case, as Mr. Pearse brought real bravado and vocal power to this macho role, captivatingly athletic too dancing through such songs as the vigorous bourrée that concludes Act I.

Another captivating performance was that of soprano Louise Alder as the younger sister Clomiri in the first cast, as winning a soubrette as one could imagine. The vocal agility and comic touch in her Act I aria “V’è uno infelice” (as she lathers Imeneo’s body) was full of sensual allure; her Act III wooing of Imeneo (“Se ricordar ten vuoi”) was a highlight, perhaps the most idiomatic baroque singing of the evening, natural and fluid, masterfully controlled. Katherine Crompton, the Clomiri of the second evening, held her own as well, persuasive though a bit more restrained in her ornamentation.



Louise Alder (Clomiri, first cast) Photo: Chris Christodolou

What a welcome opportunity it was indeed to encounter *Imeneo*, Handel’s little performed “serenata” on stage. Winton Dean admired “its individual flavor which almost entitles it to rank as a minor masterpiece.” Critic Andrew Porter comments of Dean’s description, “that ‘almost’ seems needlessly cautious.” Donald Burrows, whose edition of *Imeneo* was used in this production, commented in his informative pre-opera lecture, that this was one of his two favorite Handel operas. It’s easy to see why, especially when one experiences the work with such talented young singers who took such pleasure in bringing the piece to life. Special credit belongs also to Laurence Cummings, Musical Director of the London Handel Festival, who conducted the orchestra with aplomb from the harpsichord. His lively tempi propelled the brisk stage action and facilitated the comic timing, but his nuanced conducting also brought out the substantive emotions beneath the surface.

One final touch by Handel, caught wonderfully by director Paul Curran, encapsulates the beauty of this piece, Mozartian to the core, and the aptness of the production. In his final chorus, a homophonic minuet *triste* in the minor key, Handel gives us his comment on the personal sufferings of those who must choose duty over love. As the four characters gaze out to a sunset over the sea, with the pillars of the Greek temple now properly aligned, Curran too leaves us with an appropriate touch. Imeneo and Rosmene, and Tirinto and Clomiri, are indeed paired off. But behind their backs, à la the ambivalence inherent in the close of *Così fan Tutte*, the audience sees Imeneo and Clomiri, as well as Rosmene and Tirinto reach to one another and clasp hands. Final curtain? Maybe.

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