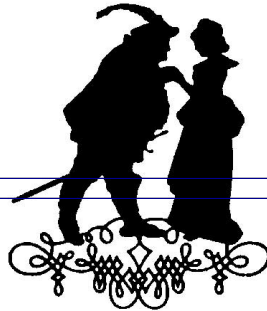


Opera con Brio

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Handel's *Silla* Triumphs

Händel-Festspiele Halle, June 2015

If ever there were an opera in Handel's pantheon of forty-one operas worthy of having its flawed reputation as an inferior and inconsequential work corrected, *Lucio Cornelio Silla* of 1713 is certainly the one. If ever there were an opera company appropriate to dispel its false reputation, Oper Halle, the resident company in the town of Handel's birth, is certainly the one. Oper Halle accomplished just that feat with the opening performance of the 2015 Händel-Festspiele Halle on June 5.

Oper Halle had presented a concert performance in 1993 (the same year Paris offered the first staged production in modern times), and the London Handel Festival had soon followed with a concert performance in 2000 (and the first recording of the opera). However, Oper Halle's recent compelling production under director Stephen Lawless and the strong and idiomatic musical forces under the direction of Enrico Onofri proved decisively that this opera by Handel is not only surprisingly viable on stage, but also rich with music of sheer delight and at times even great emotional depth.



Filippo Mineccia (Silla), Romelia Lichtenstein (Metella) Photo: Anna Kolata

A Problematic Early Work

In his fine notes to the London Handel Festival recording, scholar Anthony Hicks outlines the many ways in which *Silla* is indeed unusual among Handel's operas. These include the absence of information about its composition and performance, the fragmented Handel autograph and manuscript full scores, and the evident

lack of a complete performance during the period it was written (1713-14, between *Teseo* and *Amadigi*.) The libretto, he points out, written by Giacomo Rossi, the author of Handel's earlier smash hit *Rinaldo* and his later pastoral opera *Il pastor fido*, is another puzzle. He elaborates on the somewhat disjointed construction and occasionally ludicrous story:

Until the final scene Silla is consistently presented as a repulsive leader, taking absolute command over Rome at the start of the action, alienating his supporters, indulging in a massacre of his enemies, and finally resigning his position for no obvious reason. Meanwhile, heedless of his faithful wife, Metella, he makes several indecent advances to two Roman noble women, one (Flavia) the wife of a friend, the other (Celia) the daughter of one of his officers, though on every occasion he is rebuffed and has to make an undignified retreat.

To be sure, this insidious ruler is a villain par excellence, and his sudden about face indeed strains credulity.

Eminent Handel scholar Winton Dean agrees, but goes further. In his famous two-volume study of Handel's operas, he offers the following scathing observation on this neglected work:

Handel emerges from the enterprise with scarcely more credit than Rossi. Either the score is very incomplete, or he took little trouble, or both. Many episodes that peremptorily demand music...receive none; the individual arias bear the stamp of his personal artistry, but they are seldom fully developed and there is little attempt to express character or dramatic conflict.... Too many arias are both dramatically and musically unsuitable; it is no surprise to discover that at least six were adapted or lifted from cantatas; ...none of the characters is fully realized, and some are not even consistent.

Enough said. In short, I found little evidence of the veracity of Mr. Dean's comments given the compelling Oper Halle production, one of the most successful of all I have witnessed from this company over the years. The opening night audience clearly felt so too; cheers, not boos (sometime the norm these days in German productions) rewarded all involved.

A Taut and Compelling Production

In Mr. Dean's defense, I doubt he ever had the good fortune to experience this work staged. It might have helped had he been in the audience to witness this taut two-hour performance, which presented the opera's three short acts without intermission or pause. The tension built throughout the evening as a revolving stage shifted to various scenes involving Silla's machinations or the effects thereof. The first surprise, following the overture, is to view a full-sized black and white newsreel film highlighting the victorious Silla and his entourage amidst a wartime background en route to a villa or hotel, where we next find them in the opening scene. The audience is thus effectively transported to another world, a war room of sorts, a hotel lobby perhaps, stark, grey, but elegant with high ceilings. It turns out that Silla's mute servant Scabro ("rough") is just completing a showing of the film to this group, at Silla's command to be sure. The film clips, the projector, and ambience all date the setting as somewhat before mid-twentieth century.



Filippo Mineccia (Silla), Romelia Lichtenstein (Metella), Jeffrey Kim (Lepido), Ulrich Burdack (Scabro)
Photo: Anna Kolata

The universally strong cast was a major factor in the success of this production. Fittingly, the dynamic countertenor Filippo Mineccia as Silla gets the first aria (one Handel would later reuse in *Radamisto*). Is the easy-going grace of this aria, "Alza il volo la mia fama," ("My fame soars aloft"), an inappropriate opening vehicle for such a despicable leader, as Mr. Dean suggests?

Perhaps, but Mr. Mineccia aptly invests such moments with insidious charm throughout the evening in his persistent attempts at conquests in the parallel war of amorous pursuits. Moments of sinister cruelty will come later, not only in his final aria (“La vendetta è un cibo”), for example, but also often in the sadistic stage actions Mr. Lawless frequently provides for him.

Perhaps the standout performance of the evening came from Romelia Lichtenstein as Silla’s faithful but unhappy wife, riddled with concerns not only for his extra marital pursuits but also for the harm he brings to his country in the perpetual pursuit of war. Her experience singing with Opera Halle manifest itself throughout the evening with her expressive execution of some of Handel’s most poignant arias, beginning with the very next in the opera (still in the war room), “Fuggon l’aure,” lamenting Silla’s destructive exploits. So what if this continuo aria has roots in Handel’s prolific Italian cantata period? (A full forty of the forty-five arias in his earlier opera *Agrippina* are similarly recycled!) A highlight of the evening, late in the opera, was Ms. Lichtenstein’s rendition of the moving aria (soon to be reused in *Amadigi*) “Io non ti chiedo più,” with its hesitant dotted rhythm. Here, back in the darkened “war room,” Mr. Lawless provides the perfect complement to this apostrophe to her wayward husband with filmed images of soldiers on the move, some wounded or dead, reflecting the pointless waste of endless war. It is this kind of juxtaposition that defines the evening.

While still in the opening scene (before the first rotation of the turntable), Handel provides the opening arias of the secondary couple, Lepidus (countertenor Jeffrey Kim), and his wife, Flavia (soprano Ines Lex). Both displayed an effortless flexibility in their respective, often virtuosic, coloratura arias. The stage directions for their entrance arias call for thunderbolts and the like (representing Silla’s destructive actions); in this production, flickering lights and a shaking chandelier accompanied by the projection of zooming war planes stood in for the thunderbolts. Lepidus it seems is Silla’s personal physician as well, typically administering



Filippo Mineccia (Silla), Romelia Lichtenstein (Metella), Antigone Papoulkas (Claudio), Ines Lex (Flavia), Jeffrey Kim (Lepido), Eva Baumüller (Celia)
Photo: Anna Kolata

medication, or drugs, to him and to others, including his anxious wife, Flavia. For her part, Ines Lex, in the nuanced delivery of Flavia’s arias, remained beautifully expressive throughout the evening, with arias that ranged from her spare rhythmically intricate aria in the opening scene to her slow triple time aria (probably also with Italian roots), “Stelle rubella” (“Hostile stars”), in the final act as she laments her husband’s supposed death at the hand of Silla.

The first rotation of the stage shifts the focus from the ongoing fears of Lepido and Flavia to what will become, on occasion, a delightful thread of the opera, the burgeoning relationship between a third couple, Claudio (antagonist to Silla) and Celia (at first, a supporter of Silla). The scene shifts to a split stage. In one room Claudio, a trouser role sung by the smooth-voiced mezzo Antigone Papoulkas, fiddles on a piano with what it turns out will be the ritornello of his continuo aria, “Senti, bell’idol mio,” a love song to Celia. She overhears in the adjacent room, joins him, and before Claudio has done with the song, she accompanies at the keyboard as well. The wonderful vignette indeed furthers their relationship, as throughout the night he breaks down her resistance. In a second love song, later in the opera, the lively “mi brilla nel seno” with delightful recorders doubling, Claudio has Celia dancing with him by the time the piece is finished.



Ulrich Burdack (Scabro), Antigone Papoulkas (Claudio), Romelia Lichtenstein (Metella), Filippo Mineccia (Silla), Jeffrey Kim (Lepido), Eva Baumüller (Celia) Photo: Anna Kolata

A Tragicomic Tone Prevails

Two additional moments demand attention. One, shortly after Claudio's brilliant trumpet aria (and billiard scene) takes place in Silla's bedroom, which appears with another rotation of the set. The stage directions in the libretto read: "The God (originally the goddess Hecate) appears on a chariot drawn by two dragons and surrounded by the Furies with flaming torches in their hands, wheeling round Sulla; the sky is darkened." The powers-that-be thus urge Silla on to more mayhem and destruction. Such will not do for Mr. Lawless, of course. As Silla prepares for bed, the "doctor" Lepido gives him a shot of

some sort after which he quickly falls asleep. The mute servant Scabro, suddenly no longer mute, picks up the comatose Silla in his arms, turns to the audience and in the stentorian bass voice of Ulrich Burdack bursts forth with the opening phrase of his only aria, the brief "Guerra, stragi e furor!" No need for translation (or surtitles). But just for good measure, filmed images of "war, slaughter and furry" fill the back stage screens, as if Silla needed more prodding. He wakes, singing *a capella* the God's opening line "Guerra, stragi e furor!" What else?

A surprise in the opera is the fact that Claudio in fact has five arias, more than any other character. One, the longest and most brilliant of them, "Con tromba guerriera," with trumpet obbligato, ends Handel's first act with a typically rousing climax. In this production it serves as the entertaining focal point of the next rotation of the turntable to a billiard room in which Claudio and Silla engage in a lively game of pool. The suave Claudio, in light suit and low-brimmed hat, holds his own, but Silla (of course) cheats extravagantly, moving the balls around at will.

For her part, Celia gets just two arias, the second a slow sarabande, "Sei gia morto," in which, believing Silla has killed Claudio, she laments her fate, and his. Clarion voiced soprano Eva Baumüller was most expressive in this moment, as Mr. Lawless also stresses again the sadistic, repulsive side of Silla who watches at the side as she, chained to a radiator, tries to stretch her hand out to grasp Claudio's hat on the floor, which he keeps kicking just out of reach. Such is the tragicomic tinta of a production that juxtaposes, often with an ironic edge, the comic and the poignant, in this case the game of billiards with the sadistic gaming of a narcissistic tyrant.



Filippo Mineccia (Silla), Ulrich Burdack (Scabro) Photo: Anna Kolata

The motif of this entertaining and apt scene continues in the final sequence of the opera. Winton Dean is indeed correct in asserting, “the perfunctoriness of the closing scenes has no parallel in Handel’s work.” Silla embarks on a ship, the directions tell us, making for the open seas (seeking escape to Sicily). Metella sees the ship wrecked by a violent storm after which Silla saves himself by swimming to a rock; then she rows to the rock and brings him back to shore. The reformed Silla and others celebrate in a square in Rome, the Capitol in the distance. Deus ex machina.

None of this would do for Mr. Lawless, of course, whose imaginative transformation saves the day. While Celia laments her fate in the poignant sarabande mentioned above, Silla not only teases her sadistically by pushing Claudio’s hat just out of reach, but also carefully assembles a paper boat, with child-like glee. The next rotation of the set reveals a large tub, and while he sings a duet of reconciliation with Metella, he playfully tries to sail the toy vessel, which quickly sinks. The mute servant enters, whose sentiments like most of the cast save Metella, have turned against the juvenile tyrant; he grabs Silla and pushes his head into the tub. The others help, and then begin to leave, suitcases in hand, as Silla collapses on the floor. Silence. But Silla rises (*mirabile dictu!*), revived, and supposedly enlightened. All return, and the set rotates one final time to the opening “war room,” now an outdoor venue, green with shrubs. A joyous chorus celebrates as Silla climbs on a pile of rocks in their midst.

All will live happily ever after, in true eighteenth-century fashion. Or so one would assume. There is a tendency in *Agrippina* productions these days to have either surtitles, or pantomimed stage actions, defy the thrust of the “happy ending,” which in that case finally places the narcissistic Nero on the throne. (In the post-

opera history of this sordid crowd, everyone is killed one way or another.) Similarly at the end in this production, Silla, reverting to character, points his finger to shoot all on stage one by one, and each collapses. The historical Sulla, as related in Plutarch’s account of his life, was indeed encouraged in a dream to slaughter all his enemies. This pantomime was thus an apt final touch from Mr. Lawless, although perhaps he took it all one step too far in the final moment when the full screen from the opera’s opening sequence descends once again to show in dead silence (no pun intended) a bomb falling to the ground followed by the signature mushroom cloud. End of opera. End of the world. Three cheers for Silla.

A Resounding Success

A bit contrived perhaps, but in the end Mr. Lawless has shown that even the most incomprehensible and incomplete of baroque librettos can be made to work. He succeeded by turning a flawed piece into an absurdist comedy. And it works wonderfully. Thanks also go as always to Handel’s music, fundamentally true to character, whatever the situation. The composer, always a dramatist, knew what he was about even in this inconsistent and neglected work, which was perhaps a rushed job. With help from the imaginative mixture of sometimes poignant, sometimes tongue-in-cheek direction of Mr. Lawless, Handel’s characters indeed came alive, proving the music more revealing than may appear from a superficial reading of the score. Given the idiomatic musical performance on historical instruments from the Händelfestspielorchester Halle, the expert young cast who sang as though they believed in the character that each portrayed, and a director who dared to be inventive with his insightful touches of dramatic and often entertaining ironic flare, this production turned out to be a stunning highlight of the Festival as well as a belated victory for *Lucio Cornelio Silla*.