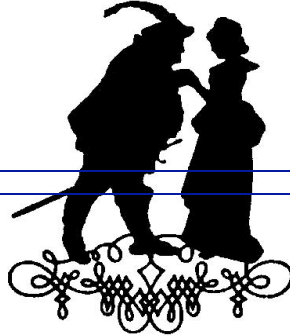


Opera con Brio

Summer 2010
Richard B. Beams



Glimmerglass At Its Best: Summer 2010

Glimmerglass in Transition

Francesca Zambello, Glimmerglass Opera's incoming General & Artistic Director, has announced the following plans. Beginning with the 2011 season, Glimmerglass Opera will become the Glimmerglass Festival. The company will continue with its tradition of four new fully-staged productions, pointedly to include along with three operas one piece of American musical theater - "performed as intended with full orchestra, large cast and no sound amplification."

Her emphasis on the later point is particularly welcome, given the propensity in today's world for amplification of musical theater, as well as for a reduced assortment of electronic instruments substituted for the original orchestration. And if the production of *Kiss Me, Kate* during the Company's 2008 "Shakespeare" season is any indicator, audiences at Glimmerglass are in for a real treat.

The Glimmerglass press release also asserts that these four productions will be supplemented by special performances, cabarets, concerts, lectures and symposiums throughout the season. Zambello continues: "our new name – The Glimmerglass Festival – reflects our new breadth of activities and spirit of adventure. My goal is to have a variety of offerings, so you can come to a concert or reading in the afternoon, have a picnic, go to the opera, and then stay afterward for a cabaret."

This too seems a natural and logical expansion of what the Glimmerglass experience is all about which already includes, for example a Festival Weekend, and an always-stimulating Seminar Weekend, as well as numerous lectures (including pre-opera talks), apprentice concerts, and the like. Presumably, the public at large will now fully perceive and appreciate the full (and now expanded) breadth and activities at Glimmerglass.

I must admit to a personal wish, however, that Glimmerglass would also continue the theme-based seasons initiated by retiring General and Artistic Director, Michael MacLeod, first in 2007 (with variations on the Orpheus myth by four diverse composers, Offenbach, Gluck,



Glimmerglass Opera's Alice Busch Opera Theater
(Photo: Peyton Lea)

Glass, and Haydn) and then in 2008 (with works rooted in Shakespeare by an equally varied set of four composers, Porter, Handel, Wagner, and Bellini). These exciting and stimulating seasons truly made Glimmerglass a uniquely rewarding opera season while they also exposed audiences to the broad spectrum of works written throughout the history of opera.

Admittedly, my attraction to such seasons reflects my typical foci in courses taught in *Opera con Brio*: "The Many Faces of Orfeo," "The Operas of Shakespeare," "The Many faces of Armida," "Classical Literature and Legend in Opera," and others (see <http://www.operaconbrio.com>). Of course there is always the danger of such theme-based seasons becoming forced or contrived for publicity purposes ("The Diva Season" is a popular one these days), but I know that Mr. Macleod still had some especially interesting additional theme-based seasons up his sleeve. One was to be titled

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Michael MacLeod
(Photo: Peyton Lea)

“Where is the Devil in You?” (Imagine a season including Dvorak’s *Devil and Kate*, Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress*, *Faust* (choose one!), the great American musical *Damn Yankees* and perhaps even a Handel rarity, *La Resurrezione*). The other, “A Bunch of Fairies,” would have included such diverse works as Purcell’s *Fairy Queen*, Wagner’s rarely performed early opera *Die Feen*, and Britten’s delightful masterpiece, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Maybe some day.

Meanwhile, what Glimmerglass Opera offered in the summer of 2010, Mr. MacLeod’s final season, was for the most part Glimmerglass at its best, a carefully

selected mix of the known and unknown, including a nod to popular appeal with a new production of *Tosca*, which I was unable to attend.

While there was no American musical theater per se, the talented members of Glimmerglass Opera’s Young American Artists Program (YAAP) were given a place to shine in Aaron Copland’s simple, poignant “American” story, *The Tender Land*. A second work was Mozart’s great masterpiece *The Marriage of Figaro*, regarded by Mr. MacLeod as arguably the greatest opera ever written. Who could blame him for such a choice in his final season – indeed in any season? How could you go wrong? Indeed nothing did in director Leon Major’s warm and human production, under the careful baton of Music Director David Angus. (Garsington Opera in England also chose this evergreen opera as part of its final season before relocating to another venue next year.)

This pair of works was balanced by a Baroque work needing just 5 virtuoso singers, one of Handel’s great and rarely performed operas, *Tolomeo*, in a production trumpeted as the American professional staged premier of this middle-period masterpiece. The young cast and orchestra met the challenge, although some intricate directorial intrusions altered the *tinta*, and occasionally undermined the flow, of this beautifully sculpted *drama per musica*, the final offering of Handel’s Royal Academy of Music in 1728.

Tolomeo as Romantic Comedy

To the credit of Glimmerglass Opera, this was indeed the first “professionally-staged” performance of *Tolomeo* in North America. (They have been the first with other Handel operas as well.) Mention should be made, however, of two other productions I also attended. One, the first staged performance in the USA in 1987 by The University of Maryland Opera Theater Department of Music, was a production conducted and directed by renowned Baroque specialist Nicholas McGegan leading the Smithsonian Concerto Grosso. In the second, some twelve years later in 1998, Maestro McGegan led a traditional Baroque staging of the opera at the Gottingen Handel Festival in Germany with the famed Hanover Band – strings and continuo, with occasional enrichment from flutes, horns and oboes. The idiomatic staging, without updating antics, reinforced the authentic Baroque idiom.

A strength in the Glimmerglass production most certainly included the musical performance itself. Scottish conductor Christian Curnyn (whom I had just heard last spring leading a vibrant performance of Cavalli’s *Giasone* at the Chicago Opera Theater) conducted an equally vibrant performance of *Tolomeo*, without the aid of an “authentic” baroque band. The young cast too was up to the task, especially the three who took the roles of perhaps the finest cast of singers ever

assembled in 18th century London, the famed castrato Senesino and the rival sopranos, Francesca Cussoni and Faustina Bordoni. Sweet toned countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo took Senesino’s part as Tolomeo, expressive soprano Joelle Harvey played the part of Cussoni as Tolomeo’s betrothed, Seleuce, and Julie Boulianne took Faustina’s role of Elisa, the rival scorned, with effortless and often fiery coloratura.

An occasional anti-Handelian tone, however, came with stage director Chas Rader-Shieber’s interpretation of this heroic “*drama per musica*” as broadly comic. Tolomeo sets the tone in the opening scene gazing into the sea (a fish bowl) contemplating suicide. Indeed in the program the director calls the work “a profound romantic comedy” which may be closer to the truth, but this is sometimes far from what we get on stage. More on this in a moment, but first a glance at the opera itself, which I would call a “pastoral drama” in the context of both 18th century plot and genre.



Anthony Roth Costanzo in the title role of *Tolomeo*.
(Photo: Claire McAdams)

The spark of the plot, before the opera begins, comes from Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, (whom we never see and, who is not the same one we all know). Unhappy at sharing the throne with her son Tolomeo, she separates him from his wife, Seleuce, driving them both from the kingdom. She then has made his younger brother, Alessandro, ruler in his place. But Alessandro, realizing his mother’s cruelty, has left Egypt also in search of his brother, to restore him to the throne.

The opera begins with Tolomeo and Seleuce now separated and searching for each other in Cyprus. Tolomeo, believing his wife has been lost at sea, is disguised as the shepherd Osmino; Seleuce, living in another bucolic village on Cyprus, is disguised as the shepherdess Delia, likewise searching for her spouse. Complicating the plot are the two royals of Cyprus – Princess Elisa and her brother, King Araspe – who are in love with Tolomeo/Osmino and Seleuce/Delia, respectively. The driving force in the opera in fact becomes Elisa, a princess scorned, who eventually becomes enraged and vengeful. However, all are eventually reconciled and the exiled lovers are happily reunited.

On one level, the opera is archetypal 18th century heroic drama in which, as in many others preceding it (*Siroe* and *Sosarme* for example), a rivalry between brothers for the throne is initiated by the favoritism of the reigning parent. (Another archetypal formula is similar: two monarchs themselves are in conflict, as in *Rinaldo*, *Tamerlano*, and *Giulio Cesare*.) On another level, however, the opera

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anticipates Handel's pastoral dramas to come in the 1830s (*Orlando* and *Arianna in Crete*) and even the later oratorios. At any rate, in neither of the idiomatic productions I saw prior to the Glimmerglass production was there even a hint of comedy. (See the *Opera con Brio* review of *Tolomeo* in the 1998 publication "Heroic Handel in Gottingen.")

Not to quibble over semantics, the point here is that Handel's *Tolomeo* is indeed somewhat of a transitional piece, bridging the gaps between the basically "heroic" operas of the Academy Period, the lighter "anti-heroic" operas like *Partenope* (one of Glimmerglass Opera's most successful productions ever from the 1998 season) and the "pastoral dramas" that dominate the 1730s. Indeed, Handel (like Mozart) became a master at mixing his genres to accommodate what he best felt suited a particular work.

However, in spite of the fact that the two lead characters spend the entire opera in disguise and go by assumed names, *Tolomeo* is not a farce and should not be played for cheap laughs. Too often, however, this is exactly what happens in this production. On the other hand, as a result of the director's intricate concept, the work also often succeeds as a "profound romantic comedy." Let me explain this apparent contradiction.

Fortuitously, in a recent *Opera News* review of this spring's successful revival at the New York City Opera of Glimmerglass's earlier production of *Partenope*, Judith Malafronte precisely articulates the crux of the matter:

With many directors attempting to make eighteenth-century opera relevant and hilarious to people with five-minute attention spans, it is cheering to experience a work in which stillness is encouraged and understanding unfolds at its own pace.

This *Tolomeo* had moments that did both. Too often, inviting cheap laughs for "people with five-minute attention spans," the antics of a trio of aged and decrepit servants distracted as they moved about intermittently in slow motion, not between arias, but during them. Presumably agents of the King of Cyprus (Araspe), they typically maneuvered props, often chairs, or other items comic in themselves (a fish bowl, an ornamental shrub, a four-poster bed).



L to R: Karin Mushegain as Alesandro, Julie Boulianne as Elisa, Servants in background. (Photo: Claire McAdams)

Moreover, the "malevolent" characters, Araspe, and especially his sister Elisa (with bright red wig and gaudy outfit) sometimes became mere caricatures, parodies of Handel's more human characters. Elisa, especially, often drew cheap laughs with her comedic ploys.

On the other hand, the approach also included moments where stillness was "encouraged and understanding unfolded" at its own pace. One example will suffice. At the center of the opera is one of Handel's most beautiful and inventive numbers. Seleuce, "alone, in a dark forest," laments her separation from Tolomeo and begins what seems to be a bucolic aria, "Dite, che fa, dov'e e l'idolo mio." ("Tell me, what is my beloved doing now.") As autumn leaves gently float to the ground, the crew of stooped servants enters with a couch, which they proceed to carry around the stage, shadowing Delia until she finally deigns to rest upon it. Their plodding silliness initially distracts from the poignancy of the moment and the ravishingly beautiful music (sung so affectingly by the expressive blond-wigged soprano, Julie Boulianne).

But, as the couch is finally repositioned to face the audience from the back of the stage (the servants have followed her again as she rose from her seat), Handel's inventive aria becomes a poignant "echo duet" with Tolomeo, wandering in the distance, unconsciously echoing her words. The leaves continue to drift from above, Seleuce more alone than ever. The stillness is palpable. She exits. Tolomeo enters, singing the opening phrases of her aria. The empty chair greets him. "Dite...where is my beloved." Soon the pair unites only to be interrupted by Araspe. Finally, on a stage, empty save a scattering of leaves, they sing an exquisite formal duet lamenting their plight. Only the sweeping up of the leaves by the somnambulant servants periodically punctuates their mellifluous phrases.



Joëlle Harvey as Seleuce laments her separation from Tolomeo. (Photo: Claire McAdams)

But it all works. Whereas "cheap laughs" were at times at the expense of any emotional involvement, such poignant human moments, often bittersweet, in fact redeem the production. A poignant romantic comedy indeed surfaces. And I must admit, for all my initial reservations, by the end of the opera, where the five characters disrobed – ridding themselves of "masks," disguises and pretensions – the director had succeeded admirably in bringing us such a work. It was a delightful, poignant, and yes, entertaining evening of theater.

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L to R: Rebecca Jo Loeb as Beth, Lindsay Russell as Laurie and Stephanie Foley Davis as Ma Moss in *The Tender Land*.
(Photo: Claire McAdams)

The Tender Land - Lovingly Brought to Life

Aaron Copeland once wrote of his only full-length opera that *The Tender Land* was “very plain, with a colloquial flavor, closer to musical theater than to grand opera.” Perhaps so, but it has a musical directness and affecting impact when given a sensitive and honest production. Such was the case in other productions in the US, notably at the Long Wharf Theater in 1987 and then again at the Bard SummerScape production just five years ago. Happily this summer’s production at Glimmerglass was equally committed and compelling; the Apprentice Artists, under the guidance of former Music Director Stewart Robinson gave the beautiful work a heartfelt performance to which the audience rightly responded with warmth and enthusiasm.

As Maestro Robertson points out, “there is an openness to Copeland’s music, the use of repeated motifs that recur and undulate, just like the terrain of Nebraska, or Iowa. There is a lot of air, almost an echo chamber around Copeland’s music.” The production nicely catches the feel of this music, turning the unit set (the basis for all four productions) into a virtue. The two slanted side panels, now images of a farmhouse or barn with peeling paint, frame the sparse set, with imaginary boundaries between interior and exterior, while a field of golden wheat beckons to the open spaces beyond in the rear. The simplest of touches – Ma Moss on the imagined porch in her green wicker chair in the final scene, for example – along with the vintage 1930s clothing – right down to Laurie’s prized flower-print graduation dress ordered from the Sears catalog – all help fill out the beguiling portrayals from the appealing cast.

Indeed, the talented apprentice artists gave as inspired a realization of this classically American opera, as did the apprentice artists in their captivating production of Britten’s American “operetta” *Paul Bunyan* in 1995. As the opera opens, the cast is silhouetted against the background light, as if in a black and white film. Copeland’s spare music begins; they turn to the audience, slowly coming to life with color and warmth and movement. The tableau, in reverse, defines the close of the act, as the apprentices fill the stage one by one letting the poignant finale, “The Promise of Living” build and take hold. Their concluding silhouette, gathered around the table in preparation for Laurie’s graduation party, frames the act as a final tableau. A stunning picture for sure. A lot of air, “almost an echo chamber” indeed, surrounds the silhouetted figures.

Standouts among the cast were the ardent young soprano Lindsay Russell who vividly captured Laurie’s sensual yearnings; the rich-voiced mezzo-soprano Stephanie Foley Davis embodying her worrisome and good-hearted mother; the clarion tenor Andrew Stenson as Martin (the young drifter who captures Laurie’s heart and imagination); and baritone Mark Diamond, convincing as Martin’s less stable side-kick. All in all, this was the kind of magical evening of Music Theater one anticipates Glimmerglass will continue to foster in the years ahead, especially with the level of talented young artists this Festival attracts and encourages.

A Festival Level *Marriage of Figaro*

I always approach a performance of Mozart’s miraculous opera with a tinge of both excitement and trepidation. Since it gets my vote also as the greatest opera ever written, expectations run high; it is also my favorite opera. However, such high expectations invariably invite disappointment. And interpretations can be far ranging - from the dark, sinister “Trump Tower” production of Peter Sellars some years ago, to the current sensuous, passion-filled production in Salzburg, to the light and intimate production at Garsington opera earlier this summer. But at the heart of the piece is the warmth and humanity of Mozart’s characters, realizing the myriad emotional nuances set off by various complications and intrigues. Happily, this Glimmerglass production, set in 1905, in a country estate outside of Seville, caught the heart of this always-rewarding work.

Indeed, this summer’s Glimmerglass production, with Music Director David Angus conducting and with Leon Major directing, was the jewel of the season, a truly festival occasion. No disappointment here.

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Aurhelia Varak as Cherubino, Mark Schnaible as The Count and Lyubov Petrova as Susanna.
(Photo: Karli Cadel)



Patrick Carfizzi in the title role of Glimmerglass Opera's 2010 production of *The Marriage of Figaro*. (Photo: Karli Cadel)

Everything flowed, as the brisk reading of the overture led directly into the first scene. At no time did the action play to cheap laughs (as some of the commedia dell arte moments can too easily invite – with the drunken antics of the gardener, for example, or hyperbolic slaps, or tumultuous sound effects at Cherubino's leap from the window). The action itself was briskly paced and true. Few applause points interrupted the flow; the comedy came from the music and situation, not from excessive directorial imposition.

Not that some telling and unusual touches from the director weren't there. A particularly effective and innovative touch was to have Basilio – always the voyeur and lover of gossip – frequently peaking through a door or from behind a doorway, an amused observer. But this never interfered; rather it helped focus our attention on, and indeed clarify, the often-complex alliances he was observing that resulted from the many facets of love the opera explores so well. Likewise the staging itself, the blocking of characters, always clarified. For example, at the height of the sextet of recognition, the newly reunited family of Figaro with Mama and Papa (Marcellina and Bartolo) are grouped on the left, Basilio (and lawyer) with the Count on the right. Susanna effectively is caught in between. Although the brilliant sonata-form sextet expresses every nuance, the staging and direction equally reveal the moment.

The real magic of *Figaro* is, of course, in the ensembles, for all the exquisite solo writing. It is sometimes said that when contemplating a production of this opera, one should first find a good Susanna and then build the rest of the cast around her. She, after all, is in every ensemble of the opera – from the opening series of duets with Figaro through to the very end of the opera. She initiates most of the action on stage as well. I have no idea if this is how Glimmerglass cast this opera, but well might they have. Russian soprano Lyubov Petrova was ideal in the role, perky and feisty, when need be, but capable of genuine sincerity, as in her final aria, the exquisite “Deh vieni” – really a declaration of love to the befuddled Figaro.

The other women were especially strong as well. The Cherubino of Aurlaelia Varak was captivating. Her opening impetuous aria, “Non so piu cosa son,” flew by like the wind, as it should; her (his) later “Voi che sapete” was touching and direct, as it should be. Soprano Caitlin Lynch exquisitely captured the primary object of Cherubino's affections, Countess Almaviva (whom costume designer Matthew Pachtman made particularly attractive and feminine in period dress.)

Most poignant was Lynch's bittersweet recollection of love lost in her second act aria, “Dove Sono,” with particularly expressive and unusual ornamentation in the repeats. Special mention should also be made of her wayward husband, Count Almaviva, so effectively portrayed by the sturdy bass-baritone of Mark Schnaible.

Looking Ahead

One can clearly assume – simply from the strength of the musical forces, the focused and sensitive directors who generally acknowledge “less is more,” and from the strength of the Young American Artists Program – that the future “Glimmerglass Festival” will not only thrive but also further enrich what we all have come to know as the unique Glimmerglass experience. To be sure I will miss the special vision of Michael MacLeod, but with experienced stage director Francesca Zambello at the helm, vibrant musical theatre should still be the core of this experience.

Speaking recently at Seminar Weekend, she asserted that she hoped to foster (happily) more “bel canto” opera and that an emphasis on baroque opera (so suited to the Glimmerglass stage) would continue. Neither of these are in evidence in the upcoming 2011 schedule, but the season looks promising nonetheless with four new productions: Cherubini's rarely performed *Medea*; two new operas from American artists, *A Blizzard in Marblehead Neck* by award-winning composer Jeanine Tesori (a world premiere) and *Later the Same Evening* by John Musto and Mark Campbell (an opera based on five Edward Hopper paintings); Irving Berlin's American Classic *Annie Get Your Gun* “with full orchestra, large cast [presumably many from YAAP] and no sound amplification”; and the ever-popular, always-powerful *Carmen*.

With all the expanded focus of the new Glimmerglass Festival, the creative synergy, which Zambello commented she first discovered at Glimmerglass some years ago, will most assuredly continue as well. What she discovered was, in her words, “a vibrant theater and a company renowned for innovative productions as well as a training ground for all disciplines set in stunningly beautiful surroundings.” A sure fire formula indeed.

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Francesca Zambello Photo: Claire McAdams