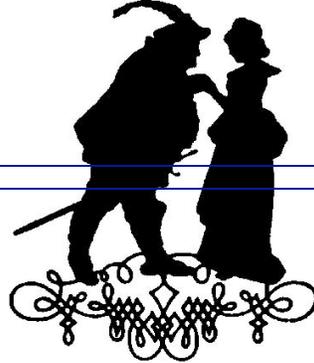


Opera con Brio

Fall 2009
Richard B. Beams



Halle Festival Honors Handel

George Frideric Handel was born in Halle an der Saale, a historic and attractive city in central Germany, on February 23, 1685. After a long and stunning career of truly international stature, he died in London on April 14, 1759; he was buried in Westminster Abbey on April 20. Both Halle and London rightly claim allegiance to Handel – Halle, home for his first 18 years, source of his first and only musical education; London, home for most of his composing career, birthplace to most of his over 40 Italian operas and over 30 oratorios (among the 600 some works that have survived).



Halle's Handel Statue
(Photo: Horst Fechner)

No wonder that in 1859 London would honor the centenary of Handel's death with the famous Handel Festival at Crystal Palace, presenting the Dettingen Te Deum (with 2,765 singers and 460 orchestral players performing before an audience of some 80,000). Halle, by contrast, marked the occasion with the unveiling of a bronze statue of Handel by the Berlin sculptor Hermann Heidel in the central Marktplatz, in a ceremony that included Franz Liszt.

This statue has become a fitting and permanent symbol of Halle's devotion to Handel. Equally fitting, if more ephemeral, was Halle's Handel Festival in June this year, honoring the 250th anniversary of Handel's death with an apt theme, "Handel – The European." The festival included works from all periods of his life and all genres, from chamber music and Italian cantatas, to oratorios and no less than four of his Italian operas,

including two stunning festival premiers, *Floridante* and *Serse*.

Accompanying this ten-day musical feast was a new permanent exhibition at the Handel House, completely refurbished for this anniversary year. The expansive house, where Handel was born and spent his youth, was set up as a small museum in 1948 and renovated on the occasion of Handel's 300th birthday in 1985, becoming not only a memorial to Handel, but a research institution and venue for musical performance as well. As the exhibition expanded, the focus became a chronological survey of Handel's life and career. The shift in the new exhibition was to a thematic approach. Dr. Philip Adlung, Director of the Handel House Foundation until July of 2009, explains the shift in an introduction to the new exhibit, titled also "Handel – The European":

The new permanent exhibition on the 250th anniversary of George Frideric Handel's death endeavors to show what Handel means to people today, beyond his work as a composer. It is the first time he is being interpreted as a European phenomenon – a notable event, because Handel was indeed an early European and the first musician to think in a European format. Handel mastered the musical genres of his age and was able to combine them in a way that was unique.

The expansive exhibit covers two floors. The second floor surveys Handel's period in Halle from 1685-1703 ("Handel, the Man from Halle"). The lower floor chronicles his European career from 1703 to 1759 ("Composer of European Stature").



Handel House
(Photo: Horst Fechner)

Among the themes are “Handel’s London,” Handel as “Opera Composer and Entrepreneur,” as “Master of the English Oratorio” and as “Citizen of the World.” The innovative exhibits, too numerous to expand on here, also include a miniature theatre in which an animated Handel talks about eight of his more than forty opera productions and in which portraits of Handel at various points in his life, sequenced in a digital simulation, detail him as a “much portrayed artist.” An added bonus of the exhibit is an extraordinary collection of historic musical instruments, more than 700 individual items, complementing an equally expansive manuscript collection, basic source materials for research into Handel’s work and output, both locally and internationally.

Viewing one of the many interactive exhibits that documents the range of Handel Societies throughout the world, I was interested to find the oldest of such societies belongs to my alma mater, Dartmouth College. The Handel Society of Dartmouth was founded in 1807 and represents America’s oldest town-grown choral society. Next on the list was Boston’s own esteemed Handel and Haydn Society, which was established in 1815.

Opera Highlights: Two New Productions

Floridante and *Serse*

But the true glory of this year’s festival was the music, especially the Handel Festival premiere of two operas, *Floridante* and *Serse*, works representative of Handel’s early and late opera career in London. *Floridante* (HWV 14), the third of his 14 operas for the Royal Academy of Music, was written in 1721 and anticipated the great heroic operas soon to follow in the middle of the decade (*Giulio Cesare*, *Tamerlano*, *Rodelinda*); *Serse* (HWV 40), third from the end of his long opera career, was written in 1738, the last of Handel’s operas for the King’s Theatre in London. With a masterful lightness of touch that blends the comic and the tragic, it is the Handel opera perhaps furthest removed from the “opera seria” mold of the Academy period. The new production of *Floridante* was a joint venture by Halle Opera and the Handel Festival; *Serse* represented a joint production by the Handel Festival Halle, the Goethe Theatre Bad Lauchstädt, Festwochen Hannover Herrenhausen and the Bayreuth Baroque Festival. Both were truly festive occasions.

A Captivating *Serse* from Berlin

With performances in the intimate Goethe Theatre in nearby Bad Lauchstädt (some 15 kilometers outside Halle), the innovative Lautten Compagny from Berlin brought *Serse* to life in a captivating, fast-moving production that caught the very essence of Handel’s buoyant satirical comedy. Indeed the style of the libretto – shorter arias, half of them with no *da capo*, many with no opening ritornello – fosters the light and conversational tone that rarely brought the action to a halt. And the sparse production itself, directed by Andre Buecker, with a continuous, but unobtrusive, video projected on a circular screen above the stage, propelled the action along, often with an appropriate ironic juxtaposition of images.



Serse (Photo: Jens Schlueter)

Handel’s *Serse* is set in ancient Persia, in 480 B.C. The famous king, Serse, son of Darius, is intent on building a bridge connecting Asia Minor to Europe and marching across it to conquer Athens. But little in the libretto is specific to Persia (or to Serse’s accomplishments), so that the piece is ripe for updating. The famous production of Stephen Wadsworth (owned by Los Angeles Opera, seen also at the Santa Fe Opera, NYC Opera, and the Boston Lyric Opera) thus moved the action to an imagined 1730’s England, effectively heightening the quintessential age-of-enlightenment story of a king seeking to govern his own passion, not ancient Persia.

This production, moving the action forward to the 20th century, depicted a similar struggle for mastery of self - to my mind, even more effectively. An acknowledged influence on the direction was Johann Nestroy, the famous 19th century “Austrian Shakespeare” whose burlesque comedies at the Viennese Volkstheater focused on romantic and magical fantasies, using comedy for parody and criticism. Such was the essence of Buecker’s production that, with its juxtaposition of often ironic, but sometimes sensuous, videos reminded us of the ambivalence tugging at Serse. Which side of him should prevail - the hard-line politician (who can compel the fulfillment of his wishes, be they to build an absurd bridge or to conquer Romilda, his brother’s lover), or the magnanimous “dandy” (forever running a comb through his matted hair) whose calculations might eventually help him to become more human and to finally win back his own estranged fiancé, Amastre? To some extent, Serse is a ridiculous figure but, like the Count in *Figaro*, his privileged position makes him dangerous as well – even to himself, as this production highlights. As Handel scholar Winton Dean states:

It is no exaggeration to rank Handel’s gift for musical characterization beside Mozart’s. In *Serse* he moves with absolute certainty between the sinister and the farcical, the flippant and the tragic. We forget we are in ancient Persia, or in the eighteenth century, and recognize that these things belong to human nature. The opera could almost be called Handel’s *Marriage of Figaro*.

All the production’s pacing, mod updating, and juxtaposed video images would have been to no avail, however, if the musical values were not in place. Happily, under the deft conducting of company founder Wolfgang Katschner, his

Baroque period ensemble achieved a brilliant and idiomatic performance, compensating for the relatively dry acoustics of the small theater space itself. The young cast was up to the task as well. Especially effective were mezzo-soprano Susanne Kreuzsch as Serse, soprano Paula Turcas as Romilda, and soprano Heidi Maria Taubert, as her sister, Atlanta, a brilliantly drawn flirt. All the cast too could have been acrobats, so deftly did they navigate with leaps and bounds the nine square cushions that dotted the stage.



Susanne Kreuzsch as Serse and Paula Turcas as Romilda
(Photo: Jens Schlueter)

In a fortuitous coincidence, Vienna's most famous bridge is the Reichsbrücke ("Empire Bridge") crossing the Danube – the only one of Vienna's bridges over the Danube not to suffer serious damage during the Second World War. (Videos in the opera occasionally juxtaposed WWII war images, including the destruction of bridges.) In August of 1976, however, the bridge collapsed, and the consortium that won the competition to rebuild the famous bridge was named *Project Johann Nestroy*. This production of *Serse*, with its lively burlesque tints and insertion of the fantastic, could happily have been named project Johann Nestroy also. It was a captivating success.

A Festive *Floridante*

I thought of this coincidence taking the short bus ride back from Bad Lauchstädt, across the River Saale, to an evening performance of *Floridante* – and what turned out to be a truly festive event to mark this anniversary year. Indeed *Floridante* was a splendid choice as centerpiece for the Halle Handel Festival – only the second performance ever in Halle of this unduly ignored opera, and also the first performance of Handel's original conception of the opera, using the recently published Halle Handel Edition. Winton Dean calls *Floridante*, which Handel revised four times, an important "transitional" work, "more tentative and experimental, lacking a unity of style." Yet the Halle production clearly turned all this to advantage, showing not only that *Floridante* anticipates the great heroic operas coming up, but is truly a first-rate opera itself, a work quite worthy of Handel – the European.

The young singers, the production team, led by director Vincent Boussard and the conductor, Christopher Moulds, did justice to the occasion. Indeed, they let the power of Handel's human drama come forward in what I would consider a most effective approach to the realization of Handel's baroque aesthetic on stage for a contemporary audience.

Let me illustrate through a comparison to the production of Handel's late Academy opera, (1727) *Admeto*, the centerpiece of this year's Handel Festival in Gottingen just one week earlier. The theme for Gottingen's homage to Handel in this anniversary year was "Fascination and Inspiration – Haydn and Mendelssohn Engage with Handel." Indeed this Festival, under the artistic direction of Nicholas McGegan, aptly celebrated the anniversary year of Haydn and Mendelssohn as well with stirring performances of such rarities as Haydn's English madrigal *The Storm* and Mendelssohn's arrangement of the *Dettinger Te Deum*.

But the production of *Admeto*, in the intimate Deutschen Theater, which in the past has served Handel operas well with typically idiomatic productions, was an unsteady and misguided affair. For this first-ever performance of the opera in Gottingen, the direction was entrusted to German filmmaker Doris Dorrie, who, working with Japanese Butoh dancer Tadashi Endo, relocates Handel's poignant story (with its roots in the Greek drama *Alceste* by Euripides) to medieval Japan. The transposition of the formal language of baroque opera to the equally formal language of Japanese kabuki theatre might have worked had the stage not been so cluttered with dance and visual elements, indeed sometimes stunning, but at other times obtrusive and seemingly in opposition to the music.

Alceste, for example, who had earlier sacrificed her life for her dying husband, Admeto, emerges from Hades accompanied by her bedraggled, long-haired shadow, the butoh dancer Tadashi Endo, who dominates far too much of the action – indeed right up to the end of the opera where he appears in front of a partly lowered scrim that alas conceals the singers of the final chorus.



The ill Admeto, Tim Mead, plagued by the shadow of death
(Photo: Theodoro Da Silva)

Antigona, Alceste's rival for the hand of Admeto, played as a flighty shepherdess, has her own shadow – a ubiquitous sheep, equally overdone and distracting. The demigod Ercole (Hercules) - who descends to Hades to rescue Alceste - has some unexpected comic moments as a sumo wrestler, while Admeto himself rambles about in samurai gear.

But what is lost in this production - beneath the huge sculptural wigs, amidst the mimed alter egos and the visual tableaux - is the immediacy of the powerful love triangle between Admeto and the two rivals, Alceste and Antigona. (The opera itself was a vehicle for the famous rivalries in Handel's day between his two prima donnas: Francesca Cuzzoni, a heroic, monumental Alceste, and Faustina Bordoni, a more frivolous Antigona, with her trills and coloratura.) Incomprehensively the production even cut Antigona's showy closing aria in Act I. Problematic too was the stop/start nature of the production necessitated by the use of cloth scrims between scenes, as well as some vocal performances that were good, but hardly on a festival level. (An overload of three countertenors did not help.) In sum, the visual clutter, with its imposition of Jungian conceits, obscured Handel's powerful human drama.

By contrast, the *Floridante* of the neighboring festival in Halle was a remarkable event, reaffirming Handel as music dramatist. The experienced director of the opera, Vincent Boussard, well understood that when dealing with the relative complexities of a typically convoluted Handelian plot, "less is more," to use the cliché. Indeed the plot, taken over from an older Venetian libretto, is more convoluted than most. A Persian general (Oronte) having usurped the throne, stirs up a hornets' nest seeking to wed his adopted daughter (Elmira), formerly promised to his own general (Floridante, Prince of Thrace); meanwhile this primary plot intertwines with that of the secondary couple, his legitimate daughter (Rossane), betrothed to a former enemy (Timante, Prince of Tyre), believed to have been lost in battle.

The strength of Boussard's production is its simplicity and starkness, inviting us into something credible on stage. During the overture the "happy family" (Oronte and two daughters) sit formally at dinner on a stark stage reflected by mirrors in the rear. The manipulative father/tyrant, stoic in his tuxedo, serves

wine, trying to engage the solemn girls. Each then comes to life in an instant in the opening moments. First, Elmira rushes to the front of the stage to deliver a short cavatina in a burst of hope at the prospect of Floridante's return, "Dimmi, O spene" ("Tell me, oh hope"), the bare texture - unison violins in octaves - highlighting her resolve. Then the more juvenile Rossane leaps atop the table in an excited recitative, yearning for the return of Prince Timante as she reports on Floridante's victorious approach. Elmira then repeats the cavatina with new words, "Godi, oh spene!" ("Rejoice, oh hope") reflecting the fulfillment of her hopes. The focus is from the start on character and emotion, sans Jungian conceit, superfluous shadow figures and the like. There is scarcely a nod either to formal titles or positions. Elmira, the opera's most fully rounded personality and most successful character, comes instantly alive, as does her more volatile sister, Rossane.



Floridante (Photo: Gert Kiermeyer)

And so it goes. The table and mirror get heavy use, often to striking effect. At one moment, perched on the table dangling her legs at one point, the teenager-like Rossane irritates her father ("Keep still," he seems to be thinking). In another moment, as *Floridante* and Elmira begin the closing duet to Act I, the father sprawls on the table between them. Elmira's acrobatic leap to the table top signals the shift to the B section of the duet. Victoriously the pair of lovers delivers the da capo atop the table. Particularly striking moments also come in the recitative, as when in Act II Oronte (paralleling the opening image of Act I) confronts his daughter Elmira (unknowingly an adopted daughter) with a proposal of marriage. Elmira leaps from the table, crumbling in shock: "What surprise? Sir, alas! Horror? The daughter spouse to the father? Do you hear neither heaven nor earth? I fly the horrid accents." Eventually, her hand on the table confronting Oronte, she bursts out, "Barbaro! Barbaro!" - her fury and contempt for Oronte as expressive and direct as the energetic scales on the strings that begin the forceful aria proper.

This was all vivid opera theater, indeed worthy of Handel's original inscription to the opera, *dramma per musica in tri atti*. Treated with equal care were the contrasting lovers, Timante



Sonya Yoncheva as Rossane and Elin Rombo, as Timante in *Floridante*
(Photo: Gert Kiermeyer)

and Rossane, whose delightful music “sprinkles” the score somewhat as Fenton and Nanetta’s does in Verdi’s *Falstaff*. (For this second couple, Handel wrote pointedly brief and tuneful, dance-like arias and duets, responding to the changing tastes springing from the rival composer in residence at the Royal Academy of Music, Giovanni Bononcini.) And how masterfully this production integrated the emerging love of this couple into the whole concept – from the moment at the beginning of Act II, for example, when Rossane leaps out from behind the mirror and startles the preening Timante (setting up his aria), to their delightful Bononcini-like duet “Fuor di periglio” (“Out of danger”) much later in which they compare themselves to a pair of doves escaped from the hunter’s snare. In this number, with Elmira observing from the side, Rossane begins a solo; then as the piece expands with Handel’s glorious texture (recorders and bassoons played antiphonally), Timante joins in. A monumental fire curtain containing a door descends, but the action continues without interruption into the next scene as Rossane, awaiting *Floridante*, inserts a shoe in the heavy door. No scrim or disruptive pause ever impedes the flow of the drama; no extraneous visuals distract. The Spartan restraint let Handel’s characters truly live.

None of this would matter, of course, were the musical forces not so strong, augmented effectively by the flow and simplicity of the production. Baroque specialist Christopyher Moulds led an inspired, idiomatic performance by the Handel Festspiel Orchestra of Halle on original instruments. The young cast was festival-level throughout: Mezzo soprano Mariselle Martinez, a striking *Floridante*; Bass Raimund Nolte, a firm and malevolent Oronte; Contralto Virpi Raisanen, a stunning Elmira (the role originally written for Handel’s favorite soprano, Margherita Durastanti, but later transferred to the contralto Anastasia Robinson when Durastanti became ill); two sopranos, Sonya Yoncheva and Elin Rombo, as the delightful Rossane and Timante respectively. The absence of countertenors worked to advantage as well.

In sum, the festival itself, encompassing some 80 events over a 10-day period, including two other operas (revivals of *Ariodante* and *Alcina*), oratorios (among them *Israel in Egypt*, *Theodora*, and *Belshazzar*), a delightful performance of the Masque *Acis and Galatea*, and numerous concerts and recitals in some 30 different venues, was worthy of the Festival theme, “Handel the European.” And the stunning production of the Festival’s centerpiece, *Floridante*, was worthy of both Handel’s birthplace, Halle an der Saale, and this year’s commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the death of the composer that Beethoven in 1823 rightly called “the greatest composer who ever lived.”

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Handel Festival Halle 2010

June 3 – 13

Centerpiece: *Orlando*

Based on Ariosto’s famous Renaissance epic *Orlando Furioso*, this masterpiece is perhaps the richest of all of Handel’s operas.

For information on the Handel Festival Halle and the exhibits at the Handel House, visit:

<http://www.haendelfestspiele.halle.de/en/>