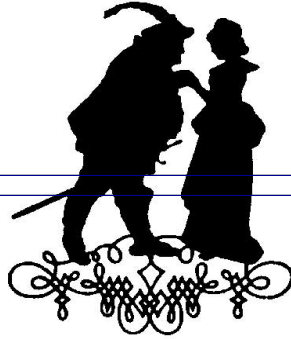


# Opera con Brio

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## A Rich and Rewarding *Riccardo Primo* London Handel Festival March 2012

Some years ago, waiting at Logan airport for a flight to London, I asked Craig Smith, the visionary founder and leader of Boston's Emmanuel Music, which of Handel's operas he would yet most like to perform. The great Handel aficionado, who had led the US premier of numerous uncut operas by Handel over the years, answered without hesitation: *Riccardo Primo*. Alas he was never able to realize this wish. But last month I had the good fortune to make another trip to London to hear for myself the reason for such enthusiasm. I was not disappointed – in either the work itself, a relative rarity to be sure, but musically top-drawer Handel, or in the imaginatively conceived and brilliantly executed production at the London Handel Festival, led by another renowned Handel champion, Laurence Cummings.

The quality of the music was no surprise since the 1927 work caps a peak period of operatic writing for Handel at the Royal Academy of Music. It was the eleventh of the thirteen *opera seria* composed during this period, which included such

masterpieces as *Julius Caesar* and *Rodelinda* (last year's London Handel Festival offering). Like many of the Academy operas, it was written for such luminaries as the sensational castrato Senesino and the infamous dueling sopranos, Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni. Musical invention, if not coherence of plot, is often at an extraordinarily high level, as one would expect.



Edward Grint as Isacio and Katherine Crompton as Costanza  
Photo: Chris Christodoulou

One happy surprise was the performance venue itself - the elegant four hundred-seat Britten Theater, whose accommodating acoustics and intimacy make it a perfect setting for the two casts, composed of advanced vocal students from the Opera School at the Royal College of Music. The theatre itself is of course named after Benjamin Britten, himself a former student at RCM; it fosters the kind idiomatic performance realized with this young and talented group, and the kind of vivid theatrical production that its technical facilities accommodate. It was the kind of performance the late Craig Smith would have loved. So did I.

The improbable plot would seem not to invite such success. Riccardo I, alias Richard the Lion Hearted (originally sung by Senesino), and his fiancé, Costanza (originally Cuzzoni), who have never met, separately shipwreck on Cyprus. The villainous Isacio, the King of Cyprus, naturally falls in love with Costanza, and with various deceptions schemes to win her. Initially he convinces his lively daughter, Pulcheria (originally Faustina), to abandon her own fiancé, Oronte, and to feign identity as Costanza in order to wed Riccardo. Pulcheria, however, doesn't go along with the ruse for long; indeed she and Costanza turn out not to be "rival sopranos" after all, but become friends. Riccardo eventually defeats the tyrannical Isacio in battle and magnanimously pardons him, handing over Cyprus to Pulcheria and Oronte.



Jake Arditti as Riccardo Primo  
Photo: Chris Christodoulou

Like Metastasio's libretto for *La Clemenza di Tito* written a few years later (and used throughout the century by more than fifty composers, including Mozart) the drama comes second to a didactic display of magnanimity. *Riccardo Primo, Rè d'Inghilterra* was Handel's only *opera seria* based, however loosely, on the story of an English monarch. As such it is indeed a thinly disguised allegory of George II, having premiered in 1727, the year of his coronation. Hence the certain aptness in a set that was not historic (the 12<sup>th</sup> century of Richard I) but which gave more of a nod to the Georgian period itself. Interestingly, in a string of ground breaking productions at the end of last century, French director Jean-Pierre Ponnelle resurrected another similarly allegorical opera, Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito*, for contemporary audiences with a series of productions that also foreshortened the historical distance between the audience of 1791 and the period of the opera (17 A.D.) with more than a nod to the eighteenth century aesthetic of Mozart's day.

As Ponnelle's did, this production, under the inventive direction of Adam Wiltshire, showed that a seemingly dated and static *opera seria* could have a viable theatrical impact for a contemporary audience. What made this production particularly effective was the almost whimsical combination of Georgian costumes and various naturalistic touches, both realistic and at times allegorical. Ponnelle had given depth and scope to his production with frayed images of imperial Rome; the London set for *Riccardo* achieved a similar effect very simply with a huge staircase, like the entrance to a Greek temple,



Eleanor Dennis as Costanza

Photo: Chris Christodoulou

which dominated the stage. On it a varying assortment of realistic props appeared from time to time – cushions, lanterns, flags, crosses, a jasmine tree. Stunning naturalistic video projections on the front scrim periodically prepared or punctuated the simple set and its artifacts.

The opening sequence provides a telling example. Handel's turbulent overture, beginning with an emphatic fugue, becomes an orchestral tone poem depicting a storm. A spectacular large-screen video of crashing ocean waves accompanies Handel's innovative opening, fading to the set only when the shipwrecked Costanza tumbles on to the now visible stairs, highlighted with just a few props (trunks, remnants of a shipwreck, and the like). Later in the opera, complementing the orchestral depiction of battle, the full-screen image of a lion surges forward on the screen. If a little hyperbolic, such effects (and others such as starry skies, for example) were thrilling, naturalistic interludes juxtaposed amidst more stylized elements of the baroque aesthetic, as with Costanza's simile aria about a nightingale shortly after the the battle, or as in Pulcheria's expression of hope while reflecting on a jasmine tree in her earlier simile aria.

The lively pacing of the opera was one of its great strengths. Fortuitously or not, this lively pacing was matched by the brisk tempos from conductor Laurence Cummings, one of the most sought after of conductors of baroque opera. (He not only heads this Festival but has just taken over as Musical Director of the renowned Göttingen International Handel Festival in Germany. In June he leads the new production of Vivaldi's *L'Olimpiade* at Garsington Opera.) This vigorous approach to the score, justifiably idiomatic, seemed to have had its impact on directorial decisions. Events of the opera, for example, seem to overwhelm poor Costanza again and again. The brisk tempo of her prolonged love duet with Riccardo, whom she has just met for the first time, seemed to suggest uncertainty; the director then has her faint at the end of the opera amidst all the final "happy" resolutions. Odd as this seemed, this fainting spell apparently reflected her anxiety amidst the avalanche of events that had overwhelmed her by the end.

As in any Handel opera, the music's the thing, and the most delightful aspect of finally experiencing this work on stage was the endless string of musical treats, arias of captivating variety and color brought to life by two capable young casts. Clearly, as with Boston University Opera Theatre productions, these were not "first" and "second" casts;

rather, the varying vocal and theatrical strengths of each performer nicely balanced each other, especially in the talented trio of lead roles for Riccardo, Costanza and Pulcheria. Thus each evening's performance had its own particular tone and dramatic dynamic.

In the cast for the opening night, the clear standout was soprano Emilie Renard, the previous year's winner of the Audience Prize in Handel Singing Competition, as Isacio's energetic daughter, Pulcheria. As first rival then confidant to Costanza, she sang at all times with stylish fluency and idiomatic fervor. Wonderfully coquettish at the start, she captivated the audience at every turn. In the first act alone, she moved with ease from playful minx in the early "Vado per obedirti," with graceful coloratura, to her dramatic interruption of Costanza later on ("Bella, teco non ho"), assuring her of support. Her remarkable beauty of tone and technical ease made me regret that one of the few cuts was her grand simile aria of a soaring eagle late in the second act, "L'aquila altera," initially a virtuoso showpiece for Faustina to end the act. (Dramatically the cut made sense, however, since in Handel's revision the aria interrupts the first meeting of the lovers and their duet, ill serving the natural sequence. Indeed the cut also seemed calculated to maintain the brisk pacing of the production.)

In contrast to her dynamic performance were the more restrained portrayals of Riccardo and Costanza by countertenor Rupert Enticknap and soprano Eleanor Dennis respectively. However, their interpretations seemed appropriate to the characters of the more one-dimensional King and his relatively passive betrothed. As each warmed up to their roles, in clear-toned, bright voices, their technical assurance came through. Their elegant duet at the end of Act II, although somewhat hurried to my ears, was a delight. And the rush here and the relatively passive portrayal of Costanza throughout made all the more believable her otherwise inexplicable fainting spell at the wedding finale.

On the second night, the balance differed slightly according to the relative strengths of the cast. Countertenor Jake Arditti as Riccardo brought more authority to the role, perhaps because of the fluidity and



Emilie Renard as Pulcheria  
Photo: Chris Christodoulou



James Hall as Oronte; Hannah Sandison as Pulcheria  
Photo: Chris Christodoulou

ease of his fioritura. With its vocal acrobatics, his brilliant simile "aria di tempesta" closing Act I, "agitato da fiere tempesta" ("that after every storm finally appears a bright star"), a showpiece for Senesino, brought down the house, as intended. As Costanza, the mellifluous soprano Katherine Crompton brought a bit more pathos to the role with an equally dexterous voice, evidenced especially in her great tragic aria of Act III, "Bacia per me," full of expressive warmth. Rightly, it too brought down the house.

Hannah Sandison as Pulcheria gave a fine but more subdued performance; her touching simile aria, "Quel gelsomino," was a special delight as jasmine pedals gently drifted to the floor around her. But the shift of focus on the second night was certainly more to the plight of the lovers. Complementing the lead performers on both nights was the solid bass Edward Grint with his two demanding "furioso" arias for the tyrant Isacio. Indeed he excelled in the kind of bluster that the original stentorian bass, Giuseppe Boschi, must have brought to the role. In a trouser role, Fiona Mackenzie sang the secondary castrato part of Oronte cleanly and expressively on the first night; countertenor James Hall handled the role capably on the second night.

Either way, it all worked as a glorious evening of Handel opera, captivating at every moment in its simplicity and directness, in its careful attention to detail and expressive singing. Credit goes to the director, James Robert Carson, who, with his innovative concept, knew that less was more, and to the conductor, Laurence Cummings, who lovingly brought forth this rarely performed, delightful score, leading the fine London Handel Festival orchestra, with its idiomatic strings and wonderfully nuanced recorders, horns and the like. But mostly, I think, credit goes to a committed cast of young artists who clearly know and love Handel and communicate this affection. It was more than worth the journey. I think Craig Smith would have agreed.

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