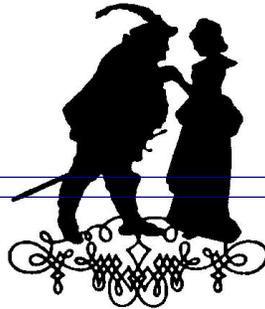


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## *Susanna and Berenice* Impress in Concert

### Göttingen International Handel Festival 2016

The 2016 International Handel Festspiele Göttingen, whose theme this year was “Connections,” opened with an impressive performance of Handel’s often-misunderstood 1749 oratorio *Susanna*. In his monumental study of Handel’s dramatic oratorios over fifty years ago, the eminent Handel scholar Winton Dean commented that for this work “a good deal of cutting is necessary in modern performance.” Not so, as amply demonstrated by the uncut concert performance from Laurence Cummings and the FestspielOrchester Göttingen on May 5. Along with five ideally suited soloists (two parts doubled), what came through – concert performance or not – was a viable music drama of power, beauty, and depth.

Put another way, as the late always insightful critic Andrew Porter wrote (in notes to the 1990 uncut Harmonia Mundi recording by Göttingen’s previous music director, Nicholas McGegan): “Heard complete, without haste, and unfolding in an ideal ‘theatre of the mind,’ *Susanna* may seem to be a subtler, stranger, and more coherent work than we are sometimes told to think.” Porter termed

*Susanna* a “voyage of the soul,” as I am sure Handel intended, anticipating such later works as *Theodora* and *Jeptha*. Thus the performance became one with which the audience could connect on many levels.

Many factors contributed to the overwhelming success of Göttingen’s performance. First off was the radiant mezzo-soprano Emily Fons, replacing the originally scheduled soprano, Lucy Crowe. Many in the audience must have remembered, as I did, Ms. Fons’



*Susanna*: Orchestra and Cast

Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva



Emily Fons as Ruby Thewes in *Cold Mountain*  
Photo: Ken Howard

dynamic performance in the lead role of Göttingen's *Faramondo* two years ago, in 2014. Additionally, I had had the good fortune to witness her in the world premiere of *Cold Mountain* last summer at New Mexico's Santa Fe Opera as the feisty Ruby Thewes, a role she especially enjoyed because, as she commented to me later, it was so much fun just to be herself on stage! Happily, she was also ideally suited for the multi-dimensional role of Handel's Susanna - innocent, steadfast, wrongly accused, and finally vindicated.

Thus she evolved impressively from the delicate shadings of such early pieces as "Would custom bid the melting air," with its trilling first violins, and the mildly portentous minor-key aria "Without the swain's assiduous care," which brought hearty applause from the audience. More passionate outbursts soon followed in

her indignant response to accusations from the second Elder. Her fiery da capo to the aria "In guiltless blood," following the Elder's intrusive recitative, radiated passion and indignation. Shifting gears in the third act, her triumphant, show stopping, bravura aria "Guilt trembling spoke my doom" had all the dramatic flair and secure technique of a singer like Joyce DiDonato, well known as an interpreter of such numbers. Indeed, throughout the night Emily Fons exhibited the emotional shading of another great Susanna, Loraine Hunt Lieberman, an artist Ms. Fons understandably particularly admires. In sum, Emily Fons was Susanna.

Handel supplies Joacim - her admirable, upstanding husband - with much fine material as well, and American counter-tenor Christopher Lowrey, familiar to me from his many roles in Boston, gave an equally effective portrayal of this steadfast character. Indeed he too had excelled in *Faramondo* two years earlier, although in a very different role, the cunning and contemptible Gernando. To hear him so effectively portray the upright and loyal Joacim was a refreshing change; indeed his opening and closing duets with Ms. Fons, sung with such expression and evenness of tone, were a delight. Another highlight was the virtuosic aria closing the second act, "On the rapid whirlwind's wing, see I fly to seek the fair," exhibiting Mr. Lowrey's impressive range and vocal flexibility. He deserved all the enthusiastic applause he received, and he demonstrated too that this piece is much more than a perfunctory close to the act following closely on the heels of Susanna's defiant aria mentioned above.



Emily Fons as Susanna Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva



Christopher Lowrey as Joacim Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Handel also carefully draws the two Elders, a dynamic duo of lascivious peeping Toms. Tenor Colin Balzer, the more sentimental of the two, and bass-baritone Raimund Nolte, more the blustering Polyphemus type, vividly brought this duplicitous pair to life. Mr. Balzer, familiar to Boston audiences for his incisive portrayal of Ulysses in last spring's Boston Early Music Festival, deserves special credit for taking over the role of the First elder on very short notice from the indisposed John Mark Ainsley. In his own words, ample rehearsal time enabled him to sing the role "not just right but well." And indeed this he did, his clarion tenor voice infusing his two arias not only with a properly soft tone (like Damon in *Acis and Galatea*), but also with a telling hint of irony. Complementing him was the bluff edginess of his companion, the Second elder, and Mr. Nolte brought a secure bass to his vivid portrayal, easily handling the many leaps, rushing scales, and wide range (from a top D to a low G) that so helped establish his rather brutish character. He doubled so well as Susanna's plaintive father, Chelsias, that one could hardly tell the two characters were the same singer.



Colin Balzer and Raimund Nolte as the two Elders  
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

But the surprising tour-de-force of the evening came from the young mezzo-soprano Ciara Hendrick who also did double duty, first as Susanna's attendant and second as the often under-appreciated role of the boy Daniel. The respective "minor" roles occur at critical junctures in the oratorio, and the effectiveness of these two scenes in a way encapsulates the careful structure of *Susanna*. In the first instance, the attendant's back-to-back airs – a simple, lightly scored strophic song followed



Chiara Hendrick as Daniel Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

immediately by a haunting stanzaic siciliano – are the lull before the storm, the overtly vicious accusations by the Elders. With artful simplicity and expressiveness, Ms. Hendrick kept the audience breathless in this critical moment of idyllic repose.

Even more effective was Ms. Hendrick's return late in the opera as Daniel, originally sung as "the Boy." The boyish Ms. Hendrick's, now simply clad in coat and tie, immediately shattered Winton Dean's infamous quip, "Daniel is as insipid as any other *deus ex machine*." Daniel's first aria, he adds, can certainly be cut. Not so. Ms. Hendrick turned this aria, "Tis not age a sullen face," into a flippant, ironic, and captivating response to the blow-hard second Elder. It was one of the surprising hits of the night. Better yet was her second aria, the more familiar "Chastity, thou cherub bright," a poignant cap to Susanna's "voyage of the soul." With mesmerizing legato sequences, a breathtakingly smooth return to the da capo, and exquisite pianissimo phrasing, this became in Ms. Hendrick's hands the cathartic highlight of the drama. The audience recognized this haunting moment with rapturous applause.

That is not to say the final celebratory sequence following this aria was in the least perfunctory, or that as Mr. Dean suggests, "Handel loses interest as soon as the drama is over." The sturdy bass of Mr. Nolte as Chelsias returns, as does the expert chorus, with trumpets, framing the aforementioned bravura aria from Susanna and her lovely duet with Joacim. What lingers after the thrilling

and idiomatic performance of the complete oratorio is the notion that Handel knew what he was about, that as Andrew Porter eloquently suggests, “*Susanna* is neither a comic opera *manqué* nor a sermon in song, but a musical drama in which music of many kinds is happily comprehended and balanced, while the whole is unified as a developing portrait of its heroine.”

## *Berenice, Regina d’Egitto*

*Susanna* was a gripping performance on every level. Fostering connections beyond Göttingen, Maestro Cummings took this memorable *Susanna* to Berlin and then with resounding success to the Polish cultural capital, Wroclaw. In Göttingen the festival continued with the visiting Baroque ensemble La Nuova Musica, under the impeccable direction of David Bates, also an esteemed director of Baroque music. Performing in Göttingen’s Stadthalle, the group offered yet another riveting concert performance: Handel’s rarely performed 1737 opera *Berenice, Regina d’Egitto*.

Unlike the straightforward, uncomplicated plot of *Susanna*, this opera’s plot involves all the complications of a typical dynastic *opera seria* in which various members of royalty compete for the throne, not to mention sundry amorous sub-plots. The starting point is the demand that the Egyptian queen Berenice must marry Prince Alessandro, to bind Egypt to Rome; but the proud queen (naturally) rejects the idea, intent on wedding Demetrio, an enemy of Rome. He in turn is enamored with Berenice’s younger sister, Selene, as she is with him. But then there’s the rival Arsace, to whom she is betrothed.... I won’t go on, but all eventually works out for the best, sort of, when Berenice sacrifices love for duty. (An interesting connection with *Imeneo*, the Festival’s staged offering, is that Rosmene, the tormented central figure, must grapple with a similar conflict. The outcome is the same – duty wins out.)

Happily, the potentially bewildering convolutions of *Berenice*’s plot mattered little in this vivid concert performance. For one thing, most of the score, indeed almost every aria, is basically Handel at his best; for another, the talented young cast vividly captured the



Mireille Asselin as Berenice Photo: Peter Heller

essence of every moment and every emotion. The plot thus emerged with some clarity. At center was the lovely Canadian soprano Mireille Asselin as Berenice, familiar to me for her Boston Early Music Festival roles last spring as Minerva in Monteverdi’s *Ulisse* and as Euridice in Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, and perhaps familiar to many others for jumping in at the last minute as Adele in the Met’s opening night of their new *Die Fledermaus* production last winter.

As Berenice, she commanded the stage from the start with the vigorous energy of her opening aria, “No, ché servire altrui,” (“no, to serve another is not in my nature.”) A highlight was her magnificent aria in Act III, “Chi t’intende?” (“What do you want?”). Here she wonderfully projected, with the help of a poignant obbligato oboe, the heartache behind her dilemma. With its sudden shift of tempos, the piece emerges as a mini-mad scene, as she contemplates which path (love or duty) will be her fate. A few moments later her character deepens further with a *c#* minor Largo that Handel cut before the first performance, but which this production included. In this poignant aria, “Avvertite, mie pupille,” she sings about the tears she must hide for her beloved Demetrio, now a presumed traitor. Sung with nuanced phrasing and exquisite pianissimo diminuendos, this short aria was a highlight of the evening – an apt crown to a commanding array of arias with which Ms. Asselin brought the often equivocal but ultimately passionate title character to life.

Two fine artists with two distinctly different roots took the two castrati parts, Demetrio and Alessandro, respectively: Polish countertenor Michal Czerniawski and Israel soprano Anat Edri. Happily they were also familiar to me from the 2014 Innsbruck Early Music Festival in which both joined David Bates and La Nuova Musica in an intimate, idiomatic performance of Cesti's *Oronthea*. It was thus a delight to find them again in these two demanding roles, especially Mr. Czerniawski in the bravura role of Demetrio. A highlight was his fiery a minor aria in Act II invoking the Furies ("Su, Megera, Tisifone, Aletto!"), sung with all the requisite depth of range and color.

Later, near the end of the act, in his defiant aria "Si, tra i ceppi," he displayed his charismatic pure-voiced singing. Happily David Bates chose to use the first version of this piece, a tragic setting in c minor with writing for the strings reminiscent of Bach (rather than a later, more popular, C Major gavotte). All this was to the advantage of Mr. Czerniawski's subtle way of shaping the text – but it also made me regret that one of the few cuts in the performance was his defiant f minor aria to Bernice, "Per si bella cagion," as he anticipates heading to his death. This was an awkward cut, following his heated exchange with Berenice, but justified perhaps since from here on he just rather fades from the scene.

Yet Alessandro, who eventually wins out, does not. Ms. Edri finishes the opera with a mellifluous duet with Berenice, and before then has ample opportunity to display her clarion soprano. Highlights were her joyful aria, "Quell'oggetto che è caro," in Act I and then in Act II, her double aria: an arioso in E major "Mio bel sol," followed, after a sudden reversal in fortune (when Alessandro learns he must wed Selene rather than Berenice), a full e minor "cabaletta." The scene was roundly applauded, rightly so. A nice touch in the carefully shaped arioso was Ms. Edri's rendition of the exquisite and difficult melismas on the word "adorar" that Handel wrote for the famous castrato Gioachino Conti in the first version of the opera, but which were never performed. She handled the leaps of a ninth and even an eleventh with impressive ease.

Berenice's sister Selene has much fine music as well. Soprano Giuseppina Bridelli had the distinct advantage of being the only Italian in the cast, and indeed she lived every word and gesture of the text. I had first heard her in *Il viaggio a Reims* with the Accademia Rossiniana in Pesaro at the annual Rossini Opera Festival. In her delightful aria concluding Act II, "Si poco è forte," she aptly caught all the Rossiniesque flavor of the lilting 9/8 Andante's first section, shifting gears with true Italianate vigor for the furious 4/4 Allegro middle section. In Act III Handel uses another cavatina-cabaletta design: the f minor Arioso "Tortorella, che rimira" ("The turtle dove who sees her mate ensnared"), followed by a duplicitous F Major "cabaletta" in which Selene manipulates Arsace to do her bidding (save Demetrio from chains). Alas this cabaletta too was eliminated from the performance, but Ms. Bridelli's soft rendering of the sparsely scored arioso, with its subtle trilling of the violins, was enough to compensate. Hers was a performance to savor.

Each of the other three characters had a pair of arias: countertenor Raffaele Pe as Selene's betrothed, Arsace; tenor Christopher Turner as the Roman ambassador, Fabio; and Timothy Dickinson as Bernice's counselor, Aristobolo. The light, high voice of Mr. Pe was nicely expressive in his second aria, "Amore contro amore," especially with an elaborate coda displaying his vocal flexibility; then too his voice was especially apt for a short duet in Act III with Alessandro, "Le dirai," picking up phrase for phrase where the soprano has left off. As for the tenor and bass, both outside the action relatively speaking, their arias balanced the principals' embroiled emotions. Mr. Turner's simile aria about bees was a delight, accompanied by exquisite triplet buzzing in the strings; Mr. Dickinson gave ample weight to both Handel's typically brisk minor-key arias for bass.

Perhaps the incongruities of plot have caused the opera to fall into obscurity, but the opera has much good music. Each of the seven principals has the kind of virtuosic vocal writing that thrills a modern audience as much as it did 18<sup>th</sup> century London audiences, and the simple yet effective scoring for strings, oboes, and continuo is unflinchingly engaging throughout. Handel

himself thought well of the score, borrowing frequently from it in later years. (Berenice's Act Two aria, "Sepre dolci" becomes Clomiri's aria "V'è un'infelice" in *Imeneo*, for example.) This performance more than made the case for bringing the little-known work to stage. Perhaps the Göttingen Handel Festival will do so soon. Meanwhile, thanks to them for making the connection - for providing the opportunity for David Bates, his excellent Baroque orchestra, and this stunning cast of talented singers, to communicate the opera's considerable musical, and indeed stage worthy, merits.

## Coda: Beyond Göttingen

As the Festival magazine notes, connections can take many different routes. One of them is to bring premiere ensembles such as La Nuova Musica to perform major works like *Berenice* in Göttingen. Later in the Festival the wonderful Wroclaw Baroque Orchestra gave a long-awaited performance of the *Messiah* (a performance I was unable to attend). Additionally, as mentioned above, the esteemed FestspielOrchester Göttingen (FOG) shared the splendid *Susanna* with audiences in Berlin and Poland.

In this spirit, the Festival has made an admirable effort to take both visiting and homegrown ensembles to venues in the surrounding region. In one such concert on May 9, the visiting young artists of the Milan ensemble L'Aura Rilucente performed an intriguing program of trio sonatas by Handel and Nicola Francesco Haym at the Ursuline Convent in the attractive neighboring town of Duderstadt. The program, entitled "Haymarket, 1713: Handel and Haym in London" was both a delight and a revelation. All Handel aficionados know Haym as the librettist for some of Handel's best operas, the first of them *Teseo* in 2013; but how wonderful it was to connect with him as cellist and composer as well. How wonderful it was as well to connect with this fine ensemble from Milan whose stated mission is to both revive and research musical repertoire of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In another concert on May 8, the versatile Göttinger Symphonie Orchester (GSO) performed a delightful chamber concert in neighboring Scheden, the hometown of renowned 18<sup>th</sup> century flute maker and composer

Johann Joachim Quantz (1697-1773). The concert, performed in the lovely St. Markkus-Kirche, was likewise both a revelation and a treat. First it provided the rare opportunity to make a connection with Quantz via one of his some 300 flute concertos, played with great élan by the symphony's solo flutist, Bettina Bormuth. Additionally, what a thrill it was to hear a familiar piece like Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* played with such vigor and dramatic flare as the extraordinary first violinist Natalie Kundirenko brought to it. The orchestra itself, led by the company's renowned Music Director, Christoph-Mathias Mueller, provided the range of color and rhythmic acuity the piece demands.

Next year, as part of its popular subscriptions series, Maestro Mueller and the fine orchestra again connect with the Festival, this time with a concert performance of Haydn's last opera, *Orfeo*. With electrifying soprano Simone Kermes in the lead, this will be a performance not to miss. Connections continue to abound.

.....



St. Markkus-Kirche in Scheden Photo: Victoria Viebahn