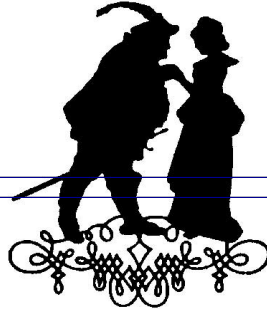


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## A Tale of Two Worlds

### Handel's *Ariodante* at the Lyric Opera of Chicago

In March of 2019 the Lyric Opera of Chicago continued its admirable history of presenting storied Handel operas, updated for contemporary audiences, by bringing to town Richard Jones' well-traveled production of *Ariodante* first produced in Aix-en-Provence in 2014 and later viewed in both Amsterdam and Toronto. The company thus knew well what it was in for – a controversial but powerful updating far removed from Ariosto's medieval romance in the epic poem *Orlando Furioso* of a chivalric knight (Ariodante) and slandered Scottish princess (Ginevra). We land instead on a barren Scottish island in the 1970's populated by a scruffy bunch of working-class locals duped into following a stern Calvinist creed. During the opera's overture, a pantomime showed a priest holding the sweater-clad populace spellbound around the table as he lectured, presumably on sex and sin. The tableaux effectively set the tone of this production and its theme of women as victims in a male-dominated Christian community.



Josh Lovell, Odoardo; Iestyn Davies, Polinesso; Kyle Ketelsen, King of Scotland  
Photo: Cory Weaver

The world of this anti-baroque production was thus far removed from Handel's setting of Ariosto's myth. But it turned out to be both viable and compelling, as evidenced by the standing ovation concluding the performance I attended on March 11. That said, the

The unit set for *Ariodante*

Photo: Cory Weaver

Ariodante (Otello) of the infidelity of his virtuous bride, Ginevra (Desdemona). Shakespeare's play ends tragically; Handel's baroque opera ends with a happy reconciliation of the couple. But not Jones' production – and the stark, realistic unit set prepares for the unsettling drama to follow. Merely a compact, austere Scottish house, it includes three rooms: on the left, a gray anti-chamber; at center a large meeting room with a long table and windows at the back, above which, ominously, a display of knives decorates the wall; to the right, Ginevra's bed

production was not without its flaws, sometimes sophomoric and crass in details and direction, but often redeemed by a stunning cast across the board. Much the unsettling excess involves the hypocritical Polinesso-cum-priest who masterminds the scandal - his stern black cassock concealing his tattoos and biker jeans, and nefarious character. In Ariosto, Polinesso's motives are ambiguous and complex; in Handel he is a model of pure ambition, although not a particularly well-developed character. In this production he becomes a personification of evil - as vulgar, sleazy and lustful a misogynist as one could conjure up. The problem was that revival director Benjamin Davis imbued Polinesso with such an overdose of invention as a sexual predator that he became a nauseating caricature rather than a believable character.

On the other hand, the taut, dramatic production itself worked well to capture the essence of this unusual and powerful Handel opera which, as the esteemed late Handel critic Andrew Porter once pointed out, "is not a heroic opera, or a magical opera, but a direct drama – the nearest thing to a Shakespeare plot that Handel ever set." The insidious Polinesso (Iago), with the help of the gullible Dalinda (Emilia), convinces the unsuspecting

chamber, whose sole widow gets much use by the sleazy Polinesso. No walls separate the rooms, only three spare poles on wheels holding doorknobs that the characters can open and close.

All this forms a timeless yet claustrophobic environment from which Ginevra at opera's end, as feminist heroine, will pack her bags and escape. In doing so, she repudiates the patriarchal system that had accused and tormented her on the flimsiest of pretexts – that she, the most loving and sincere of all, had betrayed her beloved Ariodante. One of the strengths of the production was how the set countered the stop-go effect of the eighteenth-century convention of recitative, then aria, followed by the singer's immediate exit. Instead the symbolic doors minimized the "exits," fostering simultaneity of action and enhancing the sense of a through-composed opera in this Ibsen-like psychological exploration of character.

For example, Dalinda, the naive younger sister of Ginevra, blindly infatuated with Polinesso and thus easily manipulated by him to betray her sister, often remains riddled with angst while "off stage" in one of the rooms.

Fittingly, at opera's end she thus stands forlornly outside the set to the left observing Ginevra's departure (hitching to catch a ride off the island). Not all simultaneity of action works, however. At the outset of Act II, a pantomime in Ginevra's bedroom undermined Handel's magnificent depiction of moonlight in the opening Sinfonia, negating the atmospheric shift to the night of deceit too come when the disguised Dalinda, at Polinesso's heavy-handed prodding, gives a sleeping potion to Ginevra before assuming her place. Yet worse, as Lurcanio next tries to comfort his distraught brother in the central room, encouraging him not to despair in the exuberant aria "Tu vivi," stop-action tableaux of completely unnecessary and violent pornographic pantomimes of rape and sex in Ginevra's bedroom filled each brisk ritornello of the aria. Polinesso's violent flinging around of Dalinda was so distracting that one could hardly enjoy the aria itself, sung with such ardor by tenor Eric Ferring.

Such were the sort of distractions that interfered with what otherwise was an effective concept. That it worked at all – and it did – was due to the secure musical forces – the orchestra led with idiomatic fervor by Handel specialist Harry Bicket, and a cast both willing to execute the oddities of direction and vocally up to the demands of Handel's rich score. The fine young tenor Eric Ferring, a graduate of Boston Conservatory, was so compelling as



Eric Ferring, Lurcanio; Alice Coote, Ariodante Photo: Cory Weaver



Dalinda, Heidi Stober Photo: Cory Weaver

the forthright Lurcanio that it was hard to imagine how his impassioned overtures to Dalinda could be rejected in favor of the despicable Polinesso. Especially compelling too was his impassioned aria "Il tuo sangue" calling for punishment of Ginevra at her presumed infidelity. For many, like me, he was the great discovery of the evening.

As for Dalinda, the vibrant soprano Heidi Stober imbued her thankless role with vigor, both vocally and dramatically. Indeed revival director Benjamin Davis has her debase herself a great deal – she becomes as much a masochist as Polinesso is misogynist. Still, her inner torments and lack of confidence are made clear in her "off stage" guilt-ridden behavior, making her a much more interesting character than the simple naïve young woman usually encountered in the limited but important musical material she receives. Ms. Stober delivered her animated aria in Act III, "Neghittosi or voi che fate," calling for punishment of the ingrate Polinesso, with all the passion and fury one would expect in someone so betrayed and misled.

Polinesso is perhaps short changed by Handel musically, but renowned British countertenor Iestyn Davies, so impressive in his recent *Messiah* with the Handel and Haydn Society in Boston, also brought his





Iestyn Davies, Polinesso

Photo: Cory Weaver

innate theatrically to both his vocal and dramatic duties. Fittingly, his early aria “Coperta la frode,” in which he decides to turn Dalinda’s love to advantage, is cut; there’s nothing indecisive about him in this production. But what this skilled countertenor did sing, articulating complex fioratura and smooth legato with such ease, made him as much a serpentine presence vocally as he was dramatically. Meanwhile, the island king, poignantly sung by celebrated American bass-baritone Kyle Ketelsen, brought an element of stability to the community, even as he is torn between devotion to it and his presumably wayward daughter Ginevra.

As for the lead roles, much of the evening’s powerful impact was due to the two renowned artists, English mezzo-soprano Alice Coote as Ariodante and American soprano Brenda Rae as Ginevra. In the demanding trouser role of Ariodante, Ms. Coote’s compelling performance included seven varied arias. Two of Handel’s most famous arias are the diametrically opposed “Scherza infida,” the ultimate expression of despondency and betrayal, and “Dopo notte,” the burst of sheer joy at the passing of the gloomy black night. Ms. Coote took the first at a daringly slow tempo, squeezing out with sustained legato phrasing every ounce of pain in the exquisitely quiet and restrained da capo, as Maestro Bicket brought the muted upper strings to a mere

whisper. The second, an explosion of joy with her buoyant coloratura, was thrilling. Such was the range of expertise that this experienced Handelian brought to her demanding role.

From the very outset, displaying the only element of genuine femininity in the opera, Ms. Rae’s bright-toned singing of Ginevra was a treat, beginning with her opening triplet-filled arioso and trailing aria with ample vocal fireworks defying Polinesso. Indeed her joyful exuberance brought a spot of freshness to the first act, especially in “Volate, amori,” sung dancing on the long table, and her two nicely blended duets with Ariodante suggested a life of love and faithfulness together. Yet the dire machinations of the conniving Polinesso win out by the close of act II, bringing out perhaps the best of Ms. Rae’s singing when in near madness her warm tones against bare strings were a poignant conclusion to the act.



Brenda Rae, Ginevra

Photo: Cory Weaver

But not quite – a dance sequence follows. Writing *Ariodante* for Covent Garden in 1735, Handel was fortunate to have a ballet troupe available, and he dutifully supplied Baroque dance sequences to conclude each of the three acts. Happily this production included this music, and the production made interesting use of these suites. As revival director Benjamin Davis explains in his program notes, the “Dances” are staged as puppet



Brenda Rae, Ginevra

Photo: Cory Weaver

sequences, “performed by the island community as expressions of their hopes and fears in response to unfolding events.” Enacted on the same long dining table in the main room at which Polinesso had first lectured the populace and on which Ginevra had later danced, the puppets first chronicle the impending happy marriage of Ginevra and Ariodante, complete with the anticipated arrivals of many babies. In a light hearted way they seem to honor and support the happy couple.

But following the second act, after Ginevra’s mad scene, where the libretto calls for a dance juxtaposing “Benign and Malevolent” dreams, the puppets represent Ginevra as a prostitute, even as a seductive pole-dancer, in a slinky red skirt. Now, with all the hypocrisy of their Calvinist priest, they humiliate and mock her.

At the close of the third act, with all supposedly resolved happily à la Baroque convention, a da capo repeat brings back the opening tableaux. But that happy ending is false in the misogynist world of this production. No wonder Ginevra, like Nora abandoning her “doll’s house,” then packs her bags and departs.

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