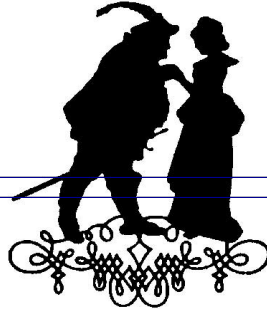


# Opera con Brio

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## *Arminio*: A Soundtrack for Sorrow, not Glory Handel Festspiele Göttingen 2018

The central theme for the 2018 International Handel Festspiele Göttingen was “Conflicts,” a fitting theme marking the one hundredth anniversary of the end of the First World War. But the Festival’s showcase opera, Handel’s relatively obscure late opera *Arminio*, focuses on a historical conflict centuries earlier, the German defeat of the Roman legions under Varus in the year 9 AD that put an end to Roman expansion into Gaul. This defeat, at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, has become a source of national pride in German history. It also became the source for one of the most popular librettos of the day, by Antonio Salvi, set first by Alessandro Scarlatti in 1703, and later by Steffani and Hasse, among numerous others.

Handel pretty much ignored what other composers had done with the opera; he and his London collaborator cut much recitative from the original libretto, keeping all the characters, but maintaining the mere outline of the original *opera seria* plot – a convoluted plot in the old militaristic, heroic vein of operas he had set earlier in his career. Herein lies the problem for a director of the work today. In the first revival of almost 200 years at the Halle Festival in 2014, British director Nigel Lowery sought to

illustrate the power of German music as a source of unity. A laudable idea, but he was only partially successful, in a production I called then “more muddle than majesty.” Last year, a less nationalistic production at the Karlsruhe Handel Festival, set in the time of the French Revolution, focused on the impact of the troubled times on an aristocratic family. It didn’t end happily.

Nor does the Göttingen production of this year. Renowned Swiss director Erich Sidler struggled to find a concept that would reflect the fact that the battle of liberation, and ensuing truncated *opera seria* plot, is only the background against which the characters come to terms with their actions, for better or worse. Happily, he and his production team succeeded admirably in a contemporary concept that was less clearly defined and at times even bewildering, but which in the end made sense, as disturbing as it was without the conventional *lieto fine* (happy ending). Each character struggles mightily with various internal battles – or conflicts, if you will. But in the end, they find that victory over themselves can be more difficult than victory over the enemy. The result is more sorrow than glory.

The complicated plot, ample fodder for conflicting emotions, revolves around the titular character Arminio, the German prince determined to defeat the Romans. Another prince, Segeste, would rather surrender, and he will go to all sorts of devious means to achieve his aims, including betrayal of his ally Arminio, who is also the husband of his daughter, Tuscelda. Meanwhile Varo, the invading Roman general, also loves Arminio's wife, Tuscelda. Further archetypal *opera seria* complications include the fact that Segeste has a son, Sigismondo, who is in love with Arminio's sister, Ramise. Amidst the ensuing emotional turmoil (to which the arias give varied expression) is the overwhelming concern: the kingdom of the Germans and its future.



Christopher Lowery, Arminio

Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

The talented cast of *Arminio*

Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

In Sidler's production all this translates into the search for resolution, order and permanence. Hence the opening tableau during the noble b-minor overture begins with the most ordered of all activities – a photo-op. Whether a museum photo, or an after-dinner souvenir, the characters all freeze before a young female photographer who snaps them together and in small groups. Each occasionally slowly shifts position as in a trance. The dress is modern: Arminio proudly posing in a white military uniform, Varo in khakis with red epaulettes, Tuscelda in a delicate mauve blouse and gray skirt. Later

in the opera, the imprisoned Arminio, given Roman armor, poses before a mirror inside one of the simple square boxes that serves as his prison for much of the time. The photographer arrives (and even an accompanying sketch-artist) to record the scene.

The search for resolution, order and permanence crumbles at the end. Yes, Arminio eventually escapes from prison, has his off-stage victory in the field, and is restored to his loving and long-suffering wife, Tuscelda. But rather than magnanimously sparing the life of Segeste, as per the libretto, he and his now gun-obsessed wife, line up Segeste and his Roman accomplice, Tullio, against the wall for execution. Tuscelda even toys with turning the gun on herself. Rather than a happy ending, the opera ends in ambivalence and turmoil because of the emotional toll the events of the opera have taken on the protagonists. Handel certainly sensed a final chorus in a major key would be somehow false – hence his closing g-minor chorus. Indeed the production highlights the “sorrows so late in subsiding” rather than “the virtue of all actions guiding” of that gloomy final chorus. Ambivalence, disorder and impermanence remain, in spite of the frequent poses for photographs.



Paul Hopwood, Varo; Christopher Lowrey, Arminio; Anna Devin, Tuscelda  
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Signposts along the way, fraught with wrenching emotional turmoil, were the many arias by the two stirring leads, American countertenor Christopher Lowrey as the would-be hero Arminio and Irish soprano Anna Devin as his unfortunate wife, Tuscelda. The close of Act II was critical; each of the leads delivered an aria of tear-inducing poignancy. First, Arminio, condemned to death and imprisoned within his grey cubical, entrusts Tuscelda to the enemy, Varo, who loves her. Mr. Lowrey sang his E flat major aria “Vado a morir,” bringing out its flowing melody with an exquisite legato and breathtaking sensitivity to phrasing, especially in the soft da capo repeat. Ms. Devin, with her clarion soprano then closed the act with Tuscelda’s appeal to Varo, “Rendimi il dolce sposo,” one of Handel’s most expressive major-key sicilianos. There was not a dry eye in the theatre, as her bright tone weaved its way amidst the restrained string parts. While she hovers, then collapses outside Arminio’s cell, a young artist comes to sketch him, resplendent in his shining breastplate and feathered helmet.



Anna Devin, Tuscelda; Christopher Lowrey, Arminio; sketch artist  
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Throughout the evening this companionable pair brought assured vocalism and dramatic presence to their respective roles. Mr. Lowrey’s impressive range did justice to a role originally cast for alto castrato, especially when wide register and virile chest tones were in order in the final heroic bluster of “Fatto scorta,” as he heads off to do battle. At least for the moment, he seems in command of his fate. Meanwhile, Ms. Devin’s exquisite vocal control and fine sense of baroque style were assets throughout in her mostly slow, minor-key arias, beginning with her first “Scaglian amore,” affirming her steadfast love with a da capo of fluid ornaments.



Sophie Junker, Sigismondo Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Happily, the strong supporting cast was just as good, beginning with the light and sparkling soprano of Sophie Junker, a former London Handel Competition winner, in the role of Sigismondo, the second castrato role of the opera. Her five arias center on Sigismondo’s divided loyalties between his love for Ramise (sister to Arminio) and loyalty to his father, Segeste. His magnificent aria “Posso morir, ma vivere” highlights his dilemma. The opening adagio phase gives way to a lively allegro characterized by virtuosic leaps that Ms. Junker captured with great élan, especially in the da capo, earning sustained applause to end Act I.

Complementing her nicely was contralto Helena Rasker as Ramise, contributing a lighter, major-key aria in each act with dramatic flare. Her rich low notes blended well with Sigismondo’s part in their single duet. Another highlight of the opera was Ramise’s poignant



Paul Hopwood, Varo Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

duet in Act II with her sister-in-law, Tuscelda, “Quando più minaccia il cielo,” in which, with help from a pair of recorders and the nuanced playing of violins, they expressed their new-found resolve amidst the chaos of their lives.

Others with less to sing made no less a viable contribution to the success of this production. The sonorous American bass Cody Quattlebaum made the most of the manipulative Segeste’s single aria, expressing with mighty bluster his treacherous intent to betray Arminio. The two Romans, the fine tenor Paul Hopwood as General Varo and countertenor Owen Willetts as the Tribune Tullio (originally a contralto), each get a pair of arias. Of these especially memorable was Varo’s valorous aria “Mira il ciel, vedrai d’Alcide,” in which he compares himself pompously to Hercules in preparation for battle. In this richly scored piece, the two obbligato horns, perched in a lower box to the side of the orchestra pit, seem more ironic than majestic as the would-be hero postures. Varo loses in the end.

And so does everyone else, contrary to the libretto’s happy resolution. But this is the strength of this production which, rather than impose an exotic “concept” on a dated plot, lets the concept, as it were, evolve from within – that is to say from within the characters, who were invited to look deep into themselves to tap the emotion Handel intended to express. The fine director Mr. Sidler, also director of the intimate Deutsches Theater Göttingen which housed this production, evidently approached the work like a fine conductor does his orchestra, inviting the cast to bring themselves to their

roles, not vice versa. Such was the case too with Festival Artistic Director Laurence Cummings and the talented players of the FestspielOrchester Göttingen; the expressive nuance and verve of the ensemble, so aptly complementing the fine cast on stage, was a product of letting the musicians do what they do best, with restrained but careful guidance.

Many found the closing of this production perplexing. But perhaps that was indeed the point of a concept that doesn’t pretend to be a concept. Set designer Dirk Becker provided a rather spare set with grey boxes, filled with little more than a few folding chairs and square tables. On the mostly barren main stage, two large chandeliers hang down initially, but later only one is lit while the other lies on the floor in the background. The lighting of Michael Lebensieg kept distraction to a minimum; eventually even the two chandeliers disappear. What was left was a handful of characters struggling for victory over themselves, which they find is more difficult than victory over the enemy. In this production, to achieve at least the illusion of order and of permanence, the camera or artist captures the moment. But in the end, the music reveals the grief of the protagonists, rather than any resolution of their internal conflicts.

Again, Handel seemed to know this. As Winton Dean comments, Handel’s minor-key final choruses “almost invariably reflect a situation where the *lieto fine* lands sympathy on the wrong side and the most attractive character is worsted or killed (as with Bajazet in *Tamerlano*).” He suggests that in the case of *Arminio*, perhaps Handel was thinking of the unfortunate Varo, who does nothing wrong but is killed for his pains, or the historical fact that Arminio was eventually murdered by his own people. More likely it was what Director Erich Sidler and his fine cast evidently discovered as they prepared the work. Looking deeply into themselves, they channeled the emotions Handel sought to express and let those inform the characters rather than relying on the plot or historical context. What emerged was a rather somber conclusion behind the heroic façade, a sound track for sorrow, not glory.