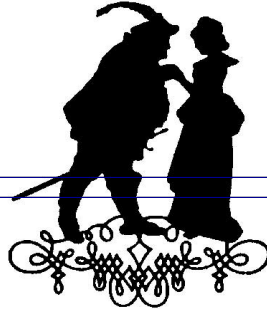


Opera con Brio

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Berenice Captivates and Distracts Handel Festival Halle 2018

The Handel Festival in Halle has long been renowned for presenting the critical editions of Handel operas. Until this year, all but one had been staged – *Berenice, Regina d’Egitto*, first performed in 1737 at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden. Now in 2018, almost 100 years after the modern renaissance of Handel’s operas began, this exotic but convoluted three-act drama about the historical queen of Egypt, Cleopatra, had its moment in Halle, thanks to the new production of Halle Opera and the Handel Festival Orchestra, led by its new musical director, Jörg Halubek.

The 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 soon Berenice, in order to thwart Demetrio’s plot with an Egyptian enemy to overthrow the Queen, tricks Selene into agreeing to a union with Prince Arsace. I

won’t go on, but all eventually works out for the best, sort of, when Berenice sacrifices love for duty. She and Alessandro wed, as do Demetrio and Selene.

As convoluted as the plot was, for much of the time the production itself bombarded the audience with a constant stream of video projections representing the omnipresent role of technology and media in our lives today. From the start these images, muted on a glittering sliver fringe curtain hanging in a semi circle from ceiling to floor, entice and yet warn; we’re about to enter a world of boundless, frivolous entertainment - also a world that will nauseate in its excess.



Ki-Hyun Park, MC Aristobolo

Photo: Anna Kolata

With the opening of the curtain, multiple moving images projected above the stage action caught the eye like intrusive pop-up ads on a website. On stage, the performers were glued to and dominated by their cell phones. This cluttered - yet captivating approach - was a great hit with the audience and epitomized the Festival's theme of this year, "Foreign Worlds." It's a world that has little to do with Egypt per say, or even the characters of the opera. Instead, it has a lot to do with people today and the strange world we live in, saturated with the relentless barrage of social media and other technology with which we all must cope. Deal with it, savor it, use it - but don't complain, the production seems to admonish. So what if the use of technology and devices obsesses us to distraction - or subverts our ability to engage meaningfully or even listen to music. It was a concept that worked, but also distracted from the fine musical performance at hand.

After the silver fringe curtain opens, Berenice commands one of the numerous cubicles on the turntable stage, seemingly a ubiquitous component of any Opera Halle production. Seasoned Halle soprano Romelia Lichtenstein, an expressive force throughout the evening, begins her vigorous opening aria from the cubicles, asserting her unwillingness to serve anyone but her choice. Above her, the perpetual stream of images flickers as she sings the da capo of the aria facing a camera on the right of the stage which projects her close up image onto large screen in the now-vacant cubical. A parody broadcast if ever there was one, presumably to her admiring public.

A similar pattern follows for each of the next two arias. First Fabio, the Roman ambassador, in his cubical, instructs Alessandro to be patient in love like the clever bee. During this famous aria, with its buzzing strings, cartoon bees flutter about on the big screen in the cubical, as English print appears also over the images, "Life is about sex," "Sex is power." For the da capo on the big screen, flamboyant but sturdy-voiced tenor Robert Sellier completes the over-kill with exaggerated facial sexual innuendo (ending with a big lipstick smeared smooch on the lens). Next the rather scruffy Alessandro has his turn; smitten with Berenice, he cajoles playfully for his turn at



Robert Sellier, Fabio

Photo: Anna Kolata

the camera in his long opening aria. Soprano countertenor Samuel Mariño was indeed dazzling in the role throughout the evening, as he was in this opening piece. But the stage has been set: video is king (or queen).

The pattern varies slightly with the introduction of the secondary lovers, Demetrio and Selene, the fine, full-voiced alto counter-tenor, Filippo Mineccia and the warm contralto Svitlana Slyvia. Their cubical is filled with a full sized scarlet bed - which gets much service in the production - and Demetrio makes much use of it in his passionate opening aria (an even more vivid illustration now of "Life is about sex.") But his (and her) omnipresent cell-phones and "selfies," with more than a touch of parody, continue to make manifest this "strange,

Svitlana Slyvia, Selene, Filippo Mineccia, Demetrio
Photo: Anna Kolata

foreign world” to which we all have become victims. Her ensuing aria, “Gelo, avvampo,” is in sharp contrast: an exclamation of horror as her beloved is led away and threatened with execution. It too is an impassioned piece, but the ubiquitous cell phone keeps the lovers connected.

And so it goes. The frequently revolving turntable between arias, and the commensurate frenetic scrambling of the characters against the grain from cubical to cubical, serve to remind us (as much over-kill as this is) of the frenetically paced, technology-saturated world in which we must cope (and copulate). Eventually even the self-obsessed Demetrio has had enough and pulls the plug, as it were, short-circuiting all electronic devices. What a relief! And soon Aristobolo, Berenice’s counselor, who acts in this production as MC, comes before the silver scrim posting a sign – “Out of order” - signifying intermission. Afterwards he, the fine bass Ki-Hyun Park, welcomes us back with a resonant aria about the chaotic world we live in, sans reason and logic. With a grin and a wink he departs – and we’re off again.



Ki-Hyun Park, MC Aristobolo, and Extras
Photo: Anna Kolata



Romelia Lichtenstein, Berenice

Photo: Anna Kolata

A highlight of the second part, if not the whole opera, is Berenice’s magnificent aria “Chi t’inende?” (“Who wants you now?”). With poignant obbligato oboe, the piece not only encapsulates the heartache behind her dilemma but the heart of what this production is all about. Ms. Lichtenstein begins the aria alone on stage with little or no external (video) distractions. But for the da capo, she moves to the side of the orchestra pit as the oboe’s elaborate obbligato with her resumes. It is a stunning moment, as she and the fine oboist dialogue together, with subtle scales and arpeggios.

But does this production let the music stand alone, without distraction? Of course not. The audience soon realizes, as the house lights come on, that the ubiquitous video camera now focuses on them; some wave and pose, as one is wont to do in front of the lens. Alas, there is no escape; victims are we all indeed. Handel scholar Winton Dean has commented, “This aria alone justifies revival of the opera.” A bit hyperbolic perhaps (there really is much other good music); but the production’s rendition of this aria alone in this performance certainly encapsulates the modern-day dilemma we all cope with and usually succumb to.

Yet the production does not judge; it entertains. The final love duet for Alessandro and Berenice is a buoyant, but pointedly frivolous piece. Sung with great brio by the pair, all the other characters surround the happy couple snapping selfies with each cadence. Then for the final

chorus, a more substantial and minor key minuet *triste*, all the characters (each with the assistance of a stage hand who suddenly appears) change back to the period costumes discarded at earlier points. Even Arsace (mezzo Svitlana Sylvia) reluctantly gives in. She had begun life as one of these stagehands, sweeping the floor before the silver scrim, but had been rather dragged into the drama by Berenice as a suitor for Selene. The turntable revs up again, and with great merriment the cast all play their prescribed roles, rushing helter-skelter against the current as it were.

Indeed, with the playful tone of this entertaining production, the concept worked – and entertained, as it was meant to do. It captivates but also disgusts, perhaps

intentionally so. It was a great hit and the audiences at the two performances I attended (the first and last of the run) applauded long and loudly. But for me, less is usually more; all the stage activity – the constant bombardment of hi-tech – was simply too intrusive to be able to enjoy the music, as good as it certainly was. Two years earlier I'd heard a stunning concert performance of the opera, with the visiting Baroque ensemble La Nuova Musica and a terrific international cast. The incongruities of the plot mattered little, and the Halle performance may have been on the same level. But I'm not sure; I was too distracted. Before Göttingen's concert performance, the audience had been admonished to keep all cell phones and other electronic devices off. I would have preferred the same in Halle too.



The talented cast of Opera Halle's *Berenice*

Photo: Anna Kolata