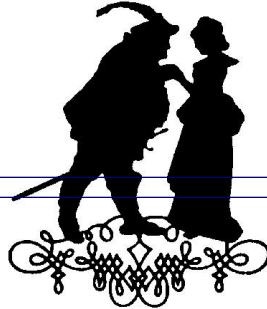


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Berenice Returns to Covent Garden

The London Handel Festival 2019



Claire Booth, *Berenice*

Photo: Clive Barda

The London Handel Festival has long had a reputation for presenting carefully prepared productions in the intimate setting of the Benjamin Britten Theater at the Royal Academy of Music. This year, the Festival's production of Handel's rarely performed 1737 opera *Berenice, Regina d'Egitto* was in the stunningly restored Linbury Theatre at the Royal Opera House, Covent

Garden. A fitting and much anticipated occasion, it also marked the first return of the work to the place of its premiere at Covent Garden Theatre, the forerunner to the Royal Opera House. The London Handel Festival's bold new collaboration with Covent Garden marks an important step forward for this esteemed festival, and, given the brilliant success of the production, it certainly bodes well for future performances.

Berenice, a convoluted three-act drama about the historical queen of Egypt, had appeared only infrequently on stage during the renaissance of Handel's operas in the last century. Three years ago in 2016, a riveting concert performance at the Göttingen Handel Festival by the visiting Baroque ensemble La Nuova Musica first revealed to me the power and sweep of this work; two years later a staged production at the Handel Festival in Halle bombarded the audience with such a constant stream of video projections, meant to suggest the role of technology and media in the modern world, that one was left wondering what the opera itself was all about.

Thus it was with great anticipation that I ventured to London in late March in the hope of encountering a staged performance that would do justice to what I already knew was a work of considerable beauty and dramatic integrity despite its somewhat jumbled plot. I was not to be disappointed. Laurence Cummings, Musical Director of the London Handel Festival for two decades now, and one of the leading advocates of authentic baroque performance today, conducted an impeccable and idiomatic performance, while director Adele Thomas – aided by the new, carefully shaped English libretto of Selma Dimitrijevic – provided the complex plot with all the clarity, wit and dramatic thrust that it deserved.



James Laing, Demetrio; Patrick Terry, Arsace

Photo: Clive Barda

The opera 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 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 plans 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. Poor Arsace is left in the lurch.

This brief summary gives no hint of the wry, at times playful tone of the piece, so typical of Handel's late operas. This the production caught magnificently, many thanks to the imaginative touches from designer Hannah Clark, which included flamboyant baroque wigs and costumes on a simple set featuring a large semi-circular green-cushioned bench, over and around which the action took place. A large bouquet of flowers was the only prop at mid-point of the bench; to the right, a small continuo group, similarly clad in baroque refinements, at times

mixed with the action as well. Immediately upon entering the steeply-tiered hall from the top of the auditorium, the audience spots a tableau of the motionless cast on stage, sipping tea; this made a startling impact, anticipating the at times tongue-in-cheek antics of the characters amidst the complicated interplay of desire and power politics soon to emerge. Soon these puppet-like characters sprang to life, setting the tone as they swap partners while dancing during the overture's haunting minuet.

From the outset of the opera, soprano Claire Booth as the proud Queen Berenice commanded the stage, fittingly so since the theme of this year's London Handel Festival was "Handel's Divas." Anna Maria Strada del Po, who first performed the role of Berenice, was one of Handel's favorite singers. Ms. Booth, a worthy successor, began the work with all the vigorous energy of a diva in her opening aria stating she will wed none other but her choice. Her poignant aria in Act III with an obbligato oboe, capturing the heartache behind her dilemma, further brought this equivocal but ultimately passionate character to life. Berenice's sister, Selene, has much fine music as well, and mezzo-soprano Rachael Lloyd, with rich tone and secure acting, held her own as an engaging foil. Noteworthy was a lilting aria

addressing Arsace, with much Rossinesque flavor, before rebuking him with Italianate vigor. Overall, with equally impressive moments later in the opera, hers was a performance to savor as well.

Two compelling young artists, a countertenor and a soprano trouser role, illustrated the viable alternatives in modern performance to casting what originally were two castrato roles. British countertenor James Laing took the bravura role of Demetrio and American soprano Jacquelyn Stucker became the impassioned Alessandro. Mr. Laing, who studied at the RCM, showed the impressive range and flexibility of his light countertenor voice with his fiery aria invoking the Furies in Act II. Ms. Stucker, for her part, a Jette Parke Young Artist and graduate of both Bard College and New England Conservatory, was an impressive force throughout the evening, especially in her glowing double aria in Act II (when Alessandro thinks he must wed Selene rather than Berenice.) As *The Boston Globe* commented recently, she is “a singing actress to be reckoned with.” Indeed so.

The other Jette Parker Young Artist in the cast was American countertenor Patrick Terry, both energized and entertaining as Arsace (originally a contralto). His spirited aria about the vicissitudes of love, with lively violin accompaniment, was an acrobatic, show-stopping piece, as he leapt, even summersaulted, on and over the green bench. Still, he managed to keep his impressive display of vocal flexibility intact. The flamboyant routine may have seemed a bit excessive, but it further highlighted the prevailing wry and at times comedic tone lurking beneath the surface of the production.



Rachael Lloyd, Selene
Photo: Clive Barda

Two other minor characters provided some stability to the turmoil of the plot, since they are both outside the action relatively speaking: tenor Alessandro Fisher as the Roman ambassador, Fabio, and Bass William Berger as Berenice’s counselor, Aristobolo. Fabio thinks all Egyptians are nuts, and his famous simile aria about bees that he sings to his bewildered charge Alessandro was a delight, as the two sit around the great flower bouquet center stage. The exquisite triplet buzzing in the strings helped. As for Aristobolo, Mr. Berger gave ample weight to his aria denouncing politics as a blight on reason and happiness,

an assertion not lost on the British audience. All in all, the two colorful characters, so vividly portrayed, were a nice balance to the principals’ embroiled emotions.

Perhaps the incongruities of plot have caused the opera to fall into relative obscurity, but the opera has much good music and each of the seven principals has the kind of virtuosic vocal writing that thrills a modern



James Laing, Demetrio; Patrick Terry, Arsace; William Berger, Aristobolo
Photo: Clive Barda

audience as much as it did the eighteenth-century audiences in the Covent Garden Theatre. And in the intimate Linbury Theater, it was also the vivid theatricality of the production that so engaged the audience. Perhaps the English language libretto helped somewhat, but not always, even with the excellent acoustics of the theater, since enunciation with voices in the higher register is sometimes problematic. Even so, the production's powerful and riveting dramatic thrust kept the audience completely involved throughout.

So too did the musical forces of the piece, thanks to the refined conducting of Laurence Cummings and the innate musicality of the exquisite London Handel Orchestra that rendered *Berenice* - with its simple yet effective scoring for strings, oboes, and continuo - so vibrantly alive. Praise to all for reaffirming the opera's considerable musical and indeed stage-worthy merits. Let's hope this is the first of many such collaborations for the London Handel Festival and The Royal Opera Covent Garden in its unique and inviting Linbury Theatre.

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Jacquelyn Stucker, Alessandro; Claire Booth, Berenice
Photo: Clive Barda