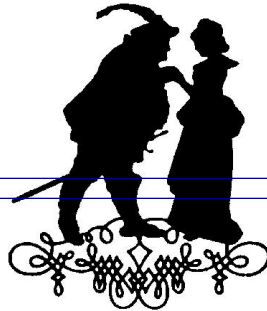


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## A Dynamic Duo: Vinci and Vivaldi

### *Catone in Utica*: Wiesbaden and Cooperstown 2015

On January 19, 1728, *Catone in Utica* by Leonardo Vinci premiered at the Teatro delle Dame in Rome, with a text written especially for the occasion by the foremost librettist of baroque opera seria, Pietro Metastasio. Almost a decade later in 1737 another equally acclaimed Italian composer, Antonio Vivaldi, now near the end of his illustrious career, premiered his version of Metastasio's text in the Teatro Filharmonica di Verona. In between, at least five prominent composers of the day had set the famous text to music, including Leonardo Leo, Johann Hasse, and even Handel (as a *pasticcio*). Recently the rare opportunity to compare the versions by Vinci and Vivaldi presented itself with two fine productions a short space apart – first the Vinci in the elegant Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden, Germany, on May 30 (repeated shortly afterwards at Versailles Opera Royal), and next the Vivaldi, some two months later at the Glimmerglass Music Festival in Cooperstown, New York (in a production soon to be repeated with the Washington-based Opera Lafayette.)



Vince Yi as Emilia, Juan Sancho as Catone, Ray Chenez, as Marzia, and Max Emanuel Cencic as Arbace Photo: Martina Pipprich

The experience of these two interpretations so close to each other was a revelation, especially since the respective performances so wonderfully illuminated the rather radically contrasting versions with such idiomatic flare. Wiesbaden used an all-male cast for Vinci's

*Catone*, replicating as much as possible the original performance in Rome in which, thanks to a decree in 1588 that banned women from the stage, the opera was performed with an all male cast. This included five castrati for the three heroic male roles as well as the two female roles, and a single tenor taking the title role of the elderly Catone. Vivaldi's casting was more traditional, as discussed below, and Glimmerglass followed suit.

Another rich subject for comparison is the libretto itself, which focuses on the forced exile of the rebellious Roman senator Cato the Younger (95-46 BC) to the city of Utica in North Africa. As Metastasio originally wrote it, the libretto ends with a dramatic recitative that focuses on the tragically noble suicide of Catone, stoically taking his own life rather than yielding to Caesar's demands. The idiomatic production of Vinci's opera in Wiesbaden closed with this extraordinary scene of hesitant recitative for the dying Catone. Although Metastasio had written a historically correct tragic ending for Vinci's opera, his audience was shocked, and he later changed it to the more traditional and expected *lieto fine*, happy ending. Vivaldi had used this ending (or one similar) "in order to render the drama shorter and more cheerful in this season of spring," as the printed libretto for the occasion states. This version had Catone, the proud "Father of the Senate," reconcile in unlikely fashion with Caesar. Glimmerglass, however, opted for a tragic ending, more in keeping with what Metastasio had originally intended.

## *Cato* in Glimmerglass

Thus two large problems confronted the Glimmerglass production team. One, Vivaldi had written no music for such a tragic ending. The other, the autograph score of Vivaldi's *Catone in Utica* (housed today at the Biblioteca Nazionale in Turin) contains only the second and third acts of the opera. The location of the first act remains a mystery. Various solutions have been attempted: for one, a reconstruction by Alessandro Ciccolini using other Vivaldi music; for another, a critical edition by the late Alan Curtis available on a recent recording by *Il*

*Complesso Barocco*. Glimmerglass used this critical edition, but with two especially innovative solutions to the missing first act and to the altered finale.

Concerning the lost first act, Glimmerglass merely eliminated it – feeling the basically expository elements could be communicated in a few simple gestures. Thus as each of the six characters stepped forward, and the orchestra played the fine *sinfonia* from Vivaldi's complete opera of 1734, *L'Olimpiade*, descriptions on a scrim introduced each of them and their respective predicaments. In addition to Cato (the historical figure upon whom Catone is based and whose name is used in the Glimmerglass version) and Caesar, these included the following: Marzia, Cato's daughter, secretly in love with Caesar; Arbace, Prince of Numidia, Cato's friend, in love with Marzia; Emilia, Pompey's widow, intent on revenge on Caesar for her husband's death; and Fulvio, Roman legate, Caesar's ally, in love with Emilia. After an introductory aria of rigorous conviction for Cato that opens the first act of Ciccolini's reconstruction, "Con si bel nome in fronte," the action of Vivaldi's original Act II ensues, with all the anticipated entanglements of love and politics. We'll perhaps never know what we've missed with Vivaldi's Act I, but knowing Vinci's complete first act, probably a lot. Still, the Glimmerglass approach worked well enough to draw us into Vivaldi's taut "dramma per musica."



Thomas Michael Allen as Cato, Eric Jurenas as Arbace and Megan Samarin as Marzia  
Photo: Karli Cadell

Resolving the drama, however, was especially problematic, given that the production team decided to dispense with Vivaldi's happy resolution and give the work an ending most in keeping with Metastasio's original tragic close. Perhaps they could have used Vinci's original setting of Metastasio's text, a startling sequence of mixed accompanied and secco recitative for the dying Cato capped with the distraught Caesar flinging the wreath to the ground with the last words, "take back, oh gods, your gift." Vivaldi after all had borrowed two of Vinci's best arias, one for Catone in Act II, another for his daughter in Act III. Instead, however, Glimmerglass chose to eliminate all text - no recitative or aria - and to insert an orchestral tableau using one of Ciccolini's "reconstructions" from the first act, with solo oboe instead of voice. On stage, in a scene of utmost taste and classical restraint in keeping with the production, Cato's suicide is represented by the hunched over martyr sitting with his back to the audience, symbolic red ribbons drooping from each wrist. Others react in stunned silence to the passing of the man who refuses to compromise. The original Vinci opera was labeled "Tragedia per musica." The Glimmerglass production aptly caught that tragic tinta with its unorthodox but effective solution.

Indeed this production from experienced set designer John Conklin was not only stunning right from the start, but also implied from the outset the last days of the Roman Empire, with its crumbling Roman columns and architectural elements. The framing device of a ruined Roman arch wonderfully set off various colorful tableaux, including the final scene, and the effective lighting by Robert Wierzel often highlighted a glowing red North African sun. Director Tazewell Thompson made the most of these eye-catching stage pictures - another was a giant moon - setting his characters off amidst them in such a way as to clarify the emotive essence of each scene. (Some have suggested that Conklin was inspired by the work of Maxfield Parrish, the early twentieth century American artist who painted pictures of women framed in arches and dressed in classical finery. The local Fennimore Art Museum was exhibiting his works, as it did also the famous production of *The Magic Flute* designed by Marc Chagall at the Metropolitan Opera. The



Sarah Mesko as Emilia

Photo: Karli Cadel

Glimmerglass Music Festival pointedly dovetails opera events with many other venues in the local community, an admirable policy.)

Thus, while the selective lighting and classical framework provided an uncluttered and apt atmosphere for each singer, none of this would have mattered had the singing itself not been so glorious - a delightful surprise since half the cast was taken from the Glimmerglass Young Artist program. Indeed, as it turns out, Glimmerglass was following a precedent established by Vivaldi himself, a noted discoverer of voices. As Vivaldi scholar Frederic Delamea points out in notes to the Alan Curtis recording, "Vivaldi had the gift of assembling a first-rate cast, a mixture of rising stars and tried and trusted regulars, on a shoestring budget. Thus the costly stars [of a Vinci/Metastasio opera] were automatically excluded from Vivaldi's skillfully brewed vocal potion."

Special credit then to Glimmerglass scouts for assembling the talented cast which included three apprentice artists: mezzo soprano Allegra De Vita in the trouser role of Fulvio, originally sung by a young Venetian specialist of such roles; counter tenor Eric Jurenas as Cato's loyal friend, Arbace, a role Vivaldi assigned to a recently discovered young soprano castrato; and another mezzo, Megan Samarin, in the important role of Cato's daughter, Marzia, a role that initially belonged to the composer's most famous protégé, Anna Giro. Interestingly, Vivaldi's indispensable protégé had sung





Megan Samarin as Marzia

Photo: Karli Cadel

the same role during a revival of Vinci's *Catone in Utica* in Florence during the 1729 Carnival. It should be no surprise then that Vivaldi used one of Vinci's arias for Marzia in the opening of his Act III, "Se parto, se resto," in which Ms. Samarin was especially expressive in the kind of *aria agitate* Vivaldi liked to write for Giro, with its hesitant, breathless phrasing.

Non-apprentice artists took the other three roles. A third mezzo, Sarah Mesko, portrayed Pompey's vengeful widow. She closed the first act showing she could master the carefully sculpted virtuosic arias spanning two-octaves that Vivaldi conjured up for another experienced and favorite artist known as La Gasparini. Mesko was certainly her equal, with secure top notes capping demanding coloratura runs, attacked with great force and stamina. Vivaldi assigned the title role of the opera to a local tenor, and in this Vivaldi certainly knew what he



Sarah Mesko as Emilia and Allegra De Vita as Fulvio

Photo: Karli Cadel

was doing, clearly following the precedent of Vinci, who likewise cast Catone as a tenor. Vivaldi even clips another *aria agitate* from Vinci's score, "Dovea svenarti allora," Catone's furious reaction to Marzia's admission of love for his enemy. Tenor Thomas Michael Allen assumed the role in *Glimmerglass*, and in this aria, the expressive peak of his part, he brought to it all the kind of vocal intensity the piece demands. Beyond that, with much thanks to the careful direction of Tazewell Thompson, his commanding presence on stage in a white toga, apt for the stoic, unbending Republican, was characterized mostly by poses of dignity and presence – the most startling, of course, the final tableau in which in this version he sings not a word.



John Holiday as Caesar

Photo: Karli Cadel

Yet the title role provides nothing even close to the kind of fireworks demanded of his soprano castrato, Caesar. The award for the great virtuosic singing of the evening thus belongs to the extraordinary young countertenor John Holiday, who took over this demanding role. I had been immensely impressed with Mr. Holiday singing the lead in Handel's *Radamisto* in 2013 at Juilliard School, from which he recently graduated. A protégé of the renowned countertenor David Daniels, with whom he shares the same vocal coach, Mr. Holiday literally stole the show. From his first moment on stage when he sings a lengthy aria expressing his love for Cato's daughter, "Se mai senti spirarti sul volto lieve," he stunned the crowd with his purity of tone and eloquent legato phrasing.

Later bravura pieces were no less thrilling and secure, especially his next aria, the fiery “Se in campo armato,” with vibrant coloratura, effortless trills, and meticulously articulated upward staccato runs – so much better than the sloppy glissandi such writing might invite. All this was a firm match for the brilliant counterpoint of the trumpets. And how much better it was to give this demanding role, originally written for soprano castrato, to a countertenor with this kind of range and athleticism rather than to a soprano, as good as she might be, but less likely to capture the power, bravado and range of color the role demands. This was “a star is born” kind of performance, just as it was for Mr. Daniels back in the now famous 1998 Glimmerglass performances of Handel’s *Partenope*.

All in all the evening was as brilliant a success as I have ever encountered at Glimmerglass. Much of the credit must also go to conductor Ryan Brown, Artistic Director (and founder) of the baroque ensemble that will present this *Cato in Utica* to audiences in both Washington and New York. The performance at Glimmerglass, with a modern baroque-sized orchestra augmented with a theorbo, sounded every bit as idiomatic as the early instrument baroque ensemble he is more accustomed to leading. His choice of performing edition was interesting and in context quite effective. However, having just attended the complete Vinci opera in Wiesbaden, with full first act, one could not help but wish that he and his creative team had opted for a solution that provided a fuller encounter with the material of this illuminating act. On the other hand, perhaps less was more.

## *Catone* in Wiesbaden

Alas, of course, Mr. Ryan did not have the Vinci advantage – that is, the advantage of a complete score enjoyed by conductor Riccardo Minasi leading the baroque ensemble Il Pomo d’Oro in Wiesbaden. This turned out to be one of the most thrilling encounters with baroque opera that I have ever experienced. Lest the reader think I am exaggerating, listen to their new Decca recording of the opera, which includes, with one

exception, the four countertenors and two tenors of the Wiesbaden performance. For a further introduction to Vinci, the extraordinary recording from 2012 of Vinci’s *Artaserse*, also with a text by Metastasio, and this time with five countertenors, is available on both CD and DVD. I viewed the DVD with friends in Germany; it held me spellbound for four hours, just as two days later *Catone in Utica* did on stage.

In contrast to the colorful set for Glimmerglass’ *Cato in Utica*, the Wiesbaden production team, including director Jakob Peters-Messer and Set and Costume Director Markus Meyer, created a set all in classically inspired black, white, and grey. Special projections and lighting enhanced the effects. In the stylized direction, some images suggested decay: a skeletal fish glides across the African skies at the end of Act II; a boney bird stalks Catone as he sings. Other arresting images occur as well. A dancer wearing a ship on his head moves slowly across the stage; a Parrot-headed man appears, adding vivid splashes of color to the scene; tents walk, and so on. Occasionally these additions, seemingly counter to the intentions of Metastasio and Vinci, kept one from focusing entirely on the singing. However, all somehow worked in this elegant and stylish production.

Most important, the power of this great Baroque tragic opera came through primarily in the inspired singing of four of the world’s most impressive countertenors: Franco Fagioli, Max Emanuel Cencic, Ray Chenez (replacing the indisposed Valer Sabadus, who



Juan Sancho as Catone in the striking black and white set  
Photo: Martina Pipprich

sings on the recording), and Vince Yi. John Holiday would have been at home in this company. As with the Vivaldi version, Catone was a tenor, the expressive Juan Sancho. Another fine tenor, Marin Mitterutzner, assumed the lesser role of Fulvio. Notably, Vinci, unlike the more frugal Vivaldi, had some of the most famous and pricy castrati of the day in his cast (five altogether). The two most important were the renown Giovanni Carestini as Caesar and Giacinto Fontana, given the nickname “Farfallino” or “little butterfly” for his stunning portrayal of female roles, who took on the role of Marzia.

No wonder that these two become the dominant roles of Vinci’s opera, and how aptly this music brings these characters to life, right from the important first act. With Caesar’s opening aria, “Nell’ardire che il seno t’accende,” Fagioli playfully brings the vengeful Emilia under his spell, with an air of insinuating duplicity, and a smooth tone of elegant restraint that belies his power. (Others on stage represent his persona, including the dancer with ship on his head; Pompey’s murder was on the Nile after all.) Soon Caesar’s attention turns to Marzia; Fagioli (à la Carestini) then becomes the epitome of a romantic lead with his rapturous declaration of love, “Chi un dolce amor condanna,” sung with exquisite lyricism, phrasing and tone. How fortunate that we have Vinci’s first act complete, especially since in the final act, his equally beautiful aria “Quell’amor che poco accende,” a reflective meditation on loss, is a subtle parody of the aria expressing his love in Act I, a splendid allusion indeed.

Not that Vinci denies Caesar the opportunity for vocal fireworks. Indeed these bravura pieces for the heroic Caesar emerge in Act II in pieces like “Se in campo armato” which, as with Vivaldi, give the singer ample opportunity to do battle with competing trumpets. In all things, this Caesar is an unstoppable force. Here and elsewhere, Fagioli’s control of all the requisite elements of baroque fioritura was simply breathtaking, and the writing for Caesar’s role alone illustrates not only the power and appeal of the music Vinci wrote for his protagonists – with a brilliance and simplicity that conceals its virtuosity – but how aptly, and quickly this music brings these characters to life.



Ray Chenez as Marzia and Franco Fagioli as Caesar  
Photo: Martina Pipprich

To be sure, I had rather expected Fagioli to steal the show, and so he did. On the basis of the recording, I had expected the same from Valer Sabadus as Marzia. (Alas, he did not sing, most likely because the next afternoon he was to give a recital in Essen, which happily I was able to attend. He stole that show!) But the happy surprise was that a countertenor relatively unknown to me, Ray Chenez, stepped so effectively into the role of Marzia. (The October issue of *Opera News* featured him as one of today’s “rising stars.”) The sensational “Farfallino” of Vinci’s day, so adept at interpreting female roles, premiered the role. Mr. Chenez was equally skilled.

In Vinci’s hands, Marzia becomes a more vibrant character than Vivaldi’s character seems, of course not knowing what his first act might have added, and keeping in mind too that his protégé Anna Giro later took over the role in both Vinci’s opera and in his. Full of verve and spunk, Vinci’s character takes on all the poignancy and élan of a true “prima donna.” In her first aria, early on in the opera, “Non ti minaccio sdegno,” she playfully toys with Arbace, impressive vocally with Giro-like abrupt, buoyant phrases. Both in pieces like this and the above mentioned *aria agitate* later usurped by Vivaldi, the fluid, velvety flow of Chenez’ attractive voice was perfect for this tormented heroine, at times cynical, at time flirtatious, at time vehement – but always engaging.



The other two countertenors were on the same level. Vince Yi was impressive as the “seconda donna,” Emilia. Knowing Vivaldi, one might automatically think “mezzo,” given the vehement nature of this betrayed widow. Not so with Vinci, and Yi’s extraordinary soaring soprano voice, with all the clarion ring of treble chimes, made for many thrilling moments. In his aria of Act I cautioning Marzia against Caesar, “Un certo no so che,” his marvelous top notes and powerful final cadenza sent chills through the audience.

And if this weren’t enough, the fourth countertenor of the night was the renowned Max Emanuel Cencic, another of the highly esteemed countertenors of today, taking on the role of Arbace. This role in fact had first been taken by yet another star castrato of the day, Giovanni Minelli. Since such castrati often needed to warm up, Vinci gave this warrior/lover a series of relatively calm arias, which Cencic performed with his usual poise. One example is his entrance aria in the first act, “Che legge spietata,” lamenting his plight of unreciprocated love. The great bravura moment that we, and he, have been waiting for finally comes later as the battle rages; the ease of Cencic’s vehement, explosive coloratura was remarkable, aided by the periodic masculine edge to his voice that so set him off from the artistry of Vince Yi.

Countertenors thus ruled the day. Indeed, the plethora of fine countertenors available to perform in today’s opera world, baroque or otherwise, continues as a great benefit and stimulus to the current renaissance of Vivaldi and Vinci. This dynamic duo is now moving to the forefront to join their well-established great contemporary, Handel, whose operas today filter regularly through the repertory of most opera houses. This is not, however, to take from the fine efforts of the two tenors. Martin Mitterutzner’s deep, powerful voice made for a most impressive Fulvio (with shades of Vivaldi’s mezzo tinta), and experienced tenor Juan Sancho, although not possessed of a large voice, came to life to great effect in his rage arias. And he was commanding in the shattering final scene.



Antonio Vivaldi



Leonardo Vinci

## A Case for more Vivaldi and Vinci

Notably, Glimmerglass alone, in the span of twenty-five years (from 1985 with the established masterpiece *Tamerlano* to 2010 with the relative rarity *Tolomeo*) has performed eight Handel operas. Many were great hits for the Company, like the 1998 *Partenope*, the 2001 *Agrippina*, and the 2003 *Orlando*. Yet *Cato in Utica* was a great hit too, although I know that some, judging Vivaldi only from the experience of this year’s truncated opera, perhaps regard him less favorably than Handel. This should not be the case, especially with the evidence supplied by the “Vivaldi Edition,” a project begun in 2000 primarily to record the massive collection of autograph manuscripts by Vivaldi preserved today in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Turin. This project spurred performances worldwide of his operas. For example, over six years, the renowned Garsington Opera in England presented three relatively unknown operas by Vivaldi, one each from his early, middle, and late works.

Glimmerglass, with its intimate theater, its commitment to baroque performance, its available resources, is clearly capable of such a project. And its exquisite performance of *Cato in Utica* has shown too what can be done without an expensive cast of superstars (although one or two help). As for Vinci? He’s a gold

mine of elegant, virtuosic operas. One need not pursue the all-male approach to realize his riveting works, whose simplicity, buoyancy, and verve in the so-called “gallant style” had such an impact on both Handel and Vivaldi. Even the world’s premiere Handel festivals acknowledge this with their periodic performances of a Vinci opera. (Note for example this year’s performance of Vinci’s *Semiramide* at Germany’s Halle Handel Festival.)

Indeed, I hope the European forces mentioned in this article, like the innovative Opera Wiesbaden, pursue their idiomatic and captivating Vinci endeavors, but even more, I hope Glimmerglass will continue to pursue not only Handel, but also his two masterful contemporaries, Antonio Vivaldi and Leonardo Vinci. The company has demonstrated, both this year and in years past, that it can perform in the baroque idiom with the best of them.



Glimmerglass Festival’s Alice Busch Opera Theater  
Photo: Claire McAdams