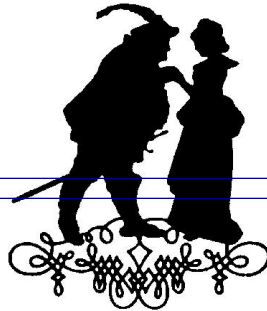


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## Going for Baroque in Toronto

Lully's *Persée* with Opera Atelier; Handel's *Hercules* with the Canadian Opera Company

Cruising above the clouds on a smooth Porter Air flight back from Toronto to Boston on a late April Sunday night, I was struck by the generally sullen crowd aboard the plane, in spite of the fact that the enterprising airline offered free wine during the short hour and a half trip. I soon learned the reason: many were disgruntled Red Sox fans who had just watched their team go for broke in attempting to prevent yet another loss to the ascending Toronto Blue Jays. On the other hand, my wife and I, although tired, were as happy as could be, savoring not just the wine but also happy memories of a delightful weekend in Toronto, attending performances at its two internationally renowned opera companies, Opera Atelier and the Canadian Opera Company (COC). We had gone

for Baroque – opera that is - and were clearly the winners. The pair of Baroque operas we attended could not have been more compelling or better served in performance.



Olivier Laquerre, King Céphée; Mireille Asselin, Andromède;  
Christopher Enns, Persée; Artists of Atelier Ballet Photo: Bruce Zinger

From Opera Atelier came Lully's ravishing five-act *tragédie lyrique* of 1682, *Persée*, first presented at the Palais-royal in Paris as a court entertainment in praise of Louis XIV (the Sun King), then revived almost one hundred years later in 1770 at Versailles as part of the celebrations for the marriage of the future King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette. More than two centuries later, in the year

2000, Opera Atelier revived the rarely performed work on a limited scale, then expanded on that production in 2004 with additional scenery, and finally this year

presented *Persée* again, this time with an ornate framework of seventh-century tapestry that enclosed the stage. The idiomatic production soon travels to Versailles (sans Red Sox fans) for performances in the newly restored Royal Theatre. We in Toronto might as well have been there already, so effective and enchanting was this reconstructed French Baroque masterpiece.

In complete contrast just up the street, from COC came an updated production of Handel's mighty oratorio of 1744, *Hercules*, labeled by him a "musical drama." As such, Handel never meant it to be staged; but his dramatic oratorios, now regarded as among the great musical dramas of the English language, invite staging. Renowned director Peter Sellars has famously been at the forefront, staging revivals of many operas and oratorios by Handel too numerous to mention here. Certainly his concept for *Hercules* is one of his most profound, a startling modern take on the Greek myth which gives voice to the untold horrors of war and the unspoken complications faced by veterans returning home. First aired at the Chicago Lyric Opera two years ago, the COC remounted the Seller's production with the original cast in such a powerful and thought-provoking rendering that one can only hope that it too will find future performances, at home or abroad.



Alice Coote as Dejanira; Eric Owens as Hercules  
Photo: Michael Cooper

Back to back, therefore, Toronto offered two works that were pinnacles of both the Middle and Late Baroque respectively, each indeed an archetype of its age. The first of the two composers, Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-87) became the founding father of French opera. Ironically he was Italian by birth (born in Florence), yet demonstrated via his encounter with the court of Louis XIV how the French language could be as well suited to opera as the Italian language, although in a very different way. He devised a new form that included dance as a primary component and which gave more rigorous attention to texts fashioned by his favorite librettist, Philippe Quinault. As private court entertainments, the *tragédie lyriques* were homage to one man, Louis XIV, who indeed had chosen the subject of *Persée*. (Lully in turn referred to the hero as "the image of Your Majesty.") The goal of Opera Atelier was to recapture the essence of this historic and lovely seventeenth-century genre in all its scenic and aural manifestations. The company had done the same not long ago with Lully's *Armide*, a tale of medieval chivalry (also chosen by the king), recently presented at Glimmerglass Opera in the US.

The second composer, George Frideric Handel (1685-1758), born two years after Lully died, was not the founding father of Italian opera, yet he was one of its strongest advocates, composing some forty or so masterly *opera seria* in his long career. Nor was he Italian by birth, born in Halle, Germany. Moreover, he lived almost his entire adult life in London where he mostly wrote not for the court but for the public. When public tastes moved away from Italian *opera seria*, this German composer who loved Italian opera and lived in England turned to works in English. He too invented a new form, a "musical drama" in the guise of un-staged oratorios. One of the greatest of these, *Hercules*, failed at the outset. The esteemed Handel scholar Winton Dean, whose recent death the world of music deeply mourns, commented that perhaps Handel's London audience, "still fairly unsophisticated and conventional in its musical tastes, was simply not prepared to accept an English opera without the bonus of star singers and the usual trimmings of handsome sets and costumes." Today, the staging of a

Handel oratorio is not a prerequisite for an audience to experience fully the power and scope of these monumental “musical dramas,” but the sort of thing Sellars does with *Hercules* brings to the public an awareness of how relevant such updating of an ancient Greek tragedy can be.

Ancient Greek myths are some of the favorite sources for Baroque operas, and it turns out that the pair of titular heroes, Perseus and Hercules, were both sons of Jupiter, each by a mortal woman: the beautiful Danae, in the case of the former, impregnated with a shower of gold; Alcmena, in the case of the latter. Each heroic child becomes among other things a slayer of monsters and has been immortalized as such - Perseus by Cellini’s famous bronze statue in Florence (Lully’s hometown) clutching the snake-haired head of Medusa, the Gorgon; Hercules, the “strongest man in the world,” by the many ancient statues depicting the nude hero with a lion skin draped over his shoulders. The slaying of Medusa by Perseus becomes the central episode of Lully’s opera (the entire third act of the five-act score). Eventually in the final act, Persée uses the head and the curse of its deadly gaze to turn his enemy to stone. Similarly, the slaying of the centaur Nessesus by Hercules to save his wife Dejanira, one of his twelve labors, becomes central to the opera’s plot, although the feat takes place well before the opera begins. But the centaur’s blood-poisoned tunic, mistaken by Dejanira for a love potion to help rekindle the love of Hercules, will also become an instrument of deadly revenge.

### *Persée, A Tragédie en Musique* fit for Versailles

Parallels stop there, for in Lully, the slaying of Méduse is an entirely comic central episode, especially hilarious with three male gorgons (Méduse and his two sidekicks) prancing around the stage like drag queens. It opens the second half of Opera Atelier’s two-act production, which continues with an equally entertaining episode of Persée slaying a colorful sea monster threatening his beloved Andromède, the king’s daughter whose kingdom Méduse had previously threatened. Other entertaining episodes follow, and this fact alone in a way defines the difference in the works, as well as the difference in approaching them on stage. In this elaborate



Mireille Asselin (Andromède) and the Sea Monster.  
Photo by Bruce Zinger

and authentically baroque production, the concept of director Marshall Pynkoski and choreographer Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg (Co-directors of Opera Atelier) pointedly reflects the fact that Lully’s work is a diffuse, episodic court entertainment. As set designer Gerard Gauci states in the program book:

*[The work] was unrivalled for its taste and opulence. It is an opera based on mythology that demands the complete spectrum of baroque stagecraft including ingenious machinery, ornately painted trompe-l’oeil scenery, pasteboard monsters and a cast of supernatural characters dressed in glittering costumes.*



Lawrence Wiliford (Mercure), Curtis Sullivan, Olivier Laquerre (Méduse) and Aaron Ferguson Photo: Bruce Zinger



Meghan Lindsay (Venus); Artists of Atelier Ballet Photo by Bruce Zinger

And this, happily, is exactly what the rapt twenty-first century audience got, a baroque entertainment with all the trappings: painted backdrops representing, among other things, a Renaissance court, a grotto for Méduse and her two comic cohorts, rocks and huge waves for Andromède and a sea monster worthy of Julie Taymor's *Lion King* and *Magic Flute*, a sunburst and clouds for the final *deus ex machina* at the end, including among the deities a bare-breasted Venus. Movements were lively but stylized, and the elegantly costumed protagonists frequently paused in graceful baroque poses, giving ample opportunity to savor the colorful seventeenth-century attire, basically court dress with exotic decorations. Mostly to accommodate Louis XIV, who loved to dance, each of the five acts ended with a stylized baroque divertissement. At times a dancer even doubled for Persée, with especially great success in a vigorously choreographed sword fight just preceding the denouement with Méduse's head.



Artists of Atelier Ballet Photo: Bruce Zinger

The pacing was leisurely. One had plenty of time to savor not just the skillfully executed period dance, but also the fine playing of the renowned Tafemusik Baroque Orchestra under the meticulous and nuanced direction of David Fallis. One could savor too the ample, supple accompanied recitatives, or *vers libres*, a trademark of these seventeenth-century scores, filled with blossoming ariosos (couplets that become briefly aria-like) and occasional more extended aria or rondo forms. Thus all the characters seemed to work out their problems, which mostly involved the vicissitudes of love, in conversations with each other and their confidants.



Christopher Enns, Persée; Mireille Asselin, Andromède Photo: Bruce Zinger

Heading the wonderful cast were the lovely soprano Mireille Asselin (who also performed in the production of Lully's *Armide* that traveled to Glimmerglass Opera) as Persée's beloved Andromède, and the firm tenor Christopher Enns as an eloquent

Persée, making his company debut. Other standouts were bass-baritone Olivier Laquerre who took on the roles of both Méduse (with great flare) and King Cephée, and a pair of plotting antagonists, each victims of unrequited love, baritone Vasil Garvanliev as Phinee and soprano Peggy Kriha Dye as Mérope. Another fine soprano, Carla Huhtanen as Queen Cassiope, the mother of Andromède, deserves mention; she after all is the one who sets the whole convoluted plot going for her insolence in comparing her own beauty to that of the goddess Juno, who retaliates by sending Méduse to punish the Queen. The morale is don't mess with Juno; she's already angry enough with Jupiter. Happily, however, with Opera Atelier's production of *Persée*, we all end up with a captivating and delightful Baroque concoction of extraordinary richness and variety, spiced with magic and the *merveilleux*.

## A Contemporary *Hercules*

By contrast, Handel's *Hercules* is a monumental masterpiece of an entirely different sort, intended to edify and entertain certainly, but not to enchant. As directed by Peter Sellars, it becomes a powerful political statement, typical of him, and frankly one of his most compelling. In his introduction to the production as first conceived for the Chicago Lyric Opera, he pointedly states that his intention was to bring Handel's oratorio closer to Sophocles's original play, *The Women of Trachis*, by focusing on the hidden costs in war. That production was part of collaboration between the Chicago Lyric Opera, The University of Chicago, and organizations such as the McCormick Foundation and A Safe Haven Foundation supporting veterans. His moving pre-opera lecture before that performance emphasized further the involvement with Veterans themselves in the formulation of various aspects of the production. To understand Sellars' concept, it is worth quoting the reflections on the play by distinguished professor John T. Cacioppo of the University of Chicago, as Sellars does in the program notes for the original Chicago production. Professor Cacioppo outlines three hidden costs of war:

*Soldiers may wish to return to their families and friends the same person as before they departed, but fundamental aspects of who they were can be among the casualties of war... Among these costs are suicide, alcohol and substance abuse, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), divorce, mental-health issues, domestic abuse, sexual assault (and more)... If victorious soldiers are non-obvious victims of war, then the family and friends who are left behind during wartime are the invisible victims. As such, they represent the second hidden cost of war...The third hidden cost derives from the fact that, because we are fundamentally connected to one another in myriad, invisible ways, the revenge of a vanquished warrior can extend beyond the grave. The centaur Nessus was able to slay Hercules from the grave through the hands of Dejanira, who sought only to be his sole lover. Dejanira's own suicide reflects an effect of her connection to Hercules that extended beyond his life.*



Alice Coote as Dejanira; David Daniels as Lichas; Eric Owens as Hercules  
Photo: Michael Cooper

In Sellars' production, tightened and revived in Toronto with the original cast intact, *Hercules*, a hulking and gruff Eric Owens in military fatigues, is an American soldier returning from an apparently ill-advised war abroad (choose one: Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan). His PTSD is evidenced clearly by his detached coldness to his tormented wife Dejanira, Alice Coote. The simple unit set by George Tsy-pin of broken Greek columns reminded me of Agrigento on the southern coast of Sicily with its broken Greek columns and boulder-strewn landscape. I was fortunate many years ago, before it was a gated park, to sleep the night by a pillar under the Mediterranean starlit sky. I thought of this during the performance because the effective lighting by James F. Ingalls caused the dark cloth backdrop riddled with holes of various shapes to appear sometimes as the night sky, brilliant with stars, but alternately, and more often with shades of red predominating, as drops of blood, or as shrapnel, or as numerous other accoutrements of war. Against this backdrop the chorus commentated movingly on the events of the story, often employing synchronized stylized gestures typical of Sellars, offering songs of praise at the outset but later such famous outbursts as "tyrants now no more shall dread." With costumes by Dunya Ramicova, they represented a vibrant mix, some in military fatigues, some women clad in colorful floor length dresses and some men in Greek tunics.



Alice Coote, Dejanira; Richard Croft, Hyllus; COC Chorus Photo: Michael Cooper

For all the power of the production, however, what remained most persuasive was the performance itself, led with special sensitivity by the stylish conducting of distinguished Baroque specialist, Harry Bicket. As he does with the Met Opera orchestra and the Santa Fe Opera Orchestra, among others, Maestro Bicket engenders especially idiomatic performances, vibrant and crisp, from an orchestra more accustomed to playing the traditional nineteenth and twentieth-century operas. At the same time, Handel's carefully positioned rests and fermatas became poignant dramatic pauses in Bicket's hands. All this was a great boon to the exceptional cast without which no opera or oratorio by Handel could succeed on stage. After all, in Handel, the human foibles emerge through music of extraordinary expressive power, and it is in the act of singing – beautifully, intensely, movingly – that the human drama comes to life.

The title role, although crucial, is not that long. Owens, with his commanding physique, brought a husky and at times grainy voice to his portrayal of the tormented hero, who in his death scene had the seemingly impossible task of singing flat out, almost upside down, forcing more of a growl than tune. But it was a compelling end. Two other

seasoned singers contributed effectively to the cast. One, the always-dependable counter tenor David Daniels as the herald Lichas, faithful servant to Dejanira, was expressive from the start. He opened the evening with a carefully articulated Schubertian segment of *recitativo accompagnato*, “See with what sad dejection she looks,” followed by an aria in which he handled the flexible phrasing with typical mastery. The other, lyric tenor Richard Croft as Hyllus, the loving son of Hercules and Dejanira, set the standard for excellent intonation early on in his recitative and aria expressing his determination to seek out his father. One wished to hear more from both,

and I was sorry indeed that the production chose to eliminate Hyllus' final duet with Iole. But more on that in a moment.

In spite of the title *Hercules*, it is two women in Trachis, Dejanira and the captive Iole, who have the lion's share of vocal music - twelve arias and a duet between them, versus the mere three formal numbers for Hercules. The superb mezzo Alice Coote was an engaging Dejanira, especially in her final fury-ridden mad scene after she has inadvertently caused her husband's death. Her heavily accented climax to the scene, “no rest the guilty mind”

was spine tingling. Indeed, singing with affecting intensity and tireless stamina throughout the lengthy evening, she almost matched the fiery brio of the young Joyce DeDonato a few years ago (in 2006) under the baton of William Christie and the inimitable Les Arts Florissants. As satisfying as that austere modern-dress production by Luc Bondy was, it did not carry the punch that Sellars' production did, and Ms. Coote was a major force in its overall success.



Eric Owens, Hercules Photo: Michael Cooper

Funeral Scene from *Hercules*

Photo: Michael Cooper

Perhaps the most persuasive performance of the evening was soprano Lucy Crowe as Iole, the captive princess of Oechalia whose people Hercules had vanquished, and whose father he had earlier killed in front of her eyes. Certainly Dejanira, convinced among other things that her husband and Iole have been lovers, dominates the evening. Yet Iole most gains our sympathy from the outset, when she is led in wearing an orange prisoner jump suit, her head covered in a black hood - shades of American atrocities against prisoners at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Her opening aria, in which she recalls her beloved father's death, is extraordinarily poignant. Dean labels it "one of the miracles of eighteenth-century music." Crowe begins the aria with hood still on, as she plunges the depth of emotion with an utterly unadorned vocal line; she was absolutely mesmerizing. And what a relief it was to have her cap the evening after the double catastrophe with the final aria of



David Daniels as Lichas; Richard Croft as Hyllus; Lucy Crowe as Iole; Soldier

Photo: Michael Cooper

the opera, the exquisite E Major largo, "My breast with tender pity swells." Her clarion soprano and secure coloratura illuminated the exquisite pianissimo phrasing and carefully perfected cadenzas. Supported by Maestro Bicket's careful phrasing and arresting dramatic pauses from the nuanced orchestra, this was the performance of the night - an appropriate, even cathartic, close.

Given the quality of singers available, it again seems a shame the production cut her chaste duet with Hyllus, the penultimate number in the score. But given the intent of the production, Sellars was right to do so, and also to jettison the perfunctory entrance of a priest of Jupiter to tell the audience that Hercules has now been elevated to the court of his father. All this would have been superfluous. Handel, great humanist that he was, would agree; he had really lost interest in such pseudo *deus ex machina* finales, absolutely obligatory for the *opera seria* (as well as for seventeenth-century *tragédie lyrique*). Unlike *Persée*, which survives through an enchanting amalgamation of all elements of the stage, *Hercules*, truly one of the peaks of Handel's dramatic achievement, survives through the expressive power of moments like those for Hercules, Dejanira, and Iole, which articulate a humanist's vision of the secrets of the human heart. As Sellars comments of singing Handel, "each performer creates something that is quite personal - you witness somebody searching their own heart and finding their own confession, moment of discovery, and moment of recognition." And so they did. The production thus stunningly centered on Handel's key concern in the work, "the collapse of the individual beneath a weight of personal folly and obsession," to borrow words of Jonathan Keats.

Whether to recapture the pleasure of a seventeenth-century private entertainment or to immerse oneself in an eighteenth-century drama made powerfully modern, the flight to Toronto was more than worth it. At this writing, the Sox still have a "herculean" task to surge upward from the cellar. Good luck to them. Better to go for Baroque in Toronto.