Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams

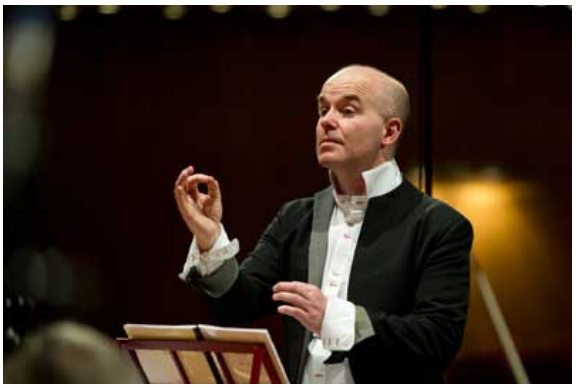
Göttingen International Handel Festival 2014

A Season Fit for a King

Herrschaftszeiten! - Händel Royal

Thus was the title in 2014 of the International Handel Festival in Göttingen celebrating the three-hundredth year anniversary of the ascension of George I to the throne in England in 1714, the advent of a period lasting more than a century in which Hanover and Great Britain would share their monarch. Much was made of this occasion at the Festival, rightly so, since the musical side of this union is best epitomized by George Frideric Handel, newly arrived himself on the scene in London. The music of the Festival was fitting indeed, led off by reportedly splendid performances of the triumphant oratorio *Joshua* in London and Göttingen, neither of which, alas, I was able to attend. But happily on three occasions, I was able to attend the Festival's centerpiece, Handel's neglected opera *Faramondo*, a pseudo-historical romance about three kings who struggle for dominance in fifth-century Europe. By any measure, and against all expectations, this was one of the great productions I have enjoyed at this esteemed Festival in the last twenty years, fit for a king indeed!

Ironically, much credit for the success of this festival in central Germany must go to another British connection, that between the Festival itself and one of Britain's most revered exponents of historical performance, conductor and renowned harpsichordist Laurence Cummings, Artistic Director of the London Handel Festival since 1999. Now, since 2012 Artistic Director of the Göttingen International Handel Festival as



Maestro Lawrence Cummings Photo: Anton Säckl

The FestspielOrchestra Göttingen with Artistic Director Laurence Cummings
Photo: Anton Säckl

well, he has engendered the kind of performances and programming that best exemplifies his vision and talent. His own chamber ensemble, The London Handel Players, presented an enticing evening of chamber works by Telemann, Couperin and Handel, and select groups from the FestspielOrchestra Göttingen (via a newly formed *FOG in Focus* series) offered five diverse programs exhibiting the respective talents of its virtuoso players. And complementing *Joshua* was a vibrant performance of the *Coronation Anthems*, composed for George II, a performance that made its way to the Handel Festival in Halle as well.

Faramondo - Crown Jewel of the Festival

But the real crown jewel of the Festival was Handel's underrated opera of 1737, *Faramondo*, a performance in which one felt the extraordinary FestspielOrchestra Göttingen and its esteemed conductor communicated on a level of music making often sought, but rarely achieved. For many years, at the London Handel Festival, I have admired Maestro Cummings' ability to weld the young singers of the Royal College of Music International Opera School with the nuanced expertise of his London Handel Orchestra, most recently last March with a vibrant performance of *Ariana in Creta*. Now he seems to have done the same in Göttingen, following the twenty-year reign of his distinguished predecessor Nicholas McGegan. With *Faramondo*, the transition seemed complete, the orchestra truly simpatico with their leader's approach and the eight young artists on stage, a number of them with experience at the London Handel Festival, equally at ease with each other and with all musical forces involved.

The Myth of Actaeon Sets the Tone

The cohesive power of *Faramondo* in Göttingen's updated take is perhaps best communicated by inviting the reader to enter the world of that production, just as the unsuspecting audience members did when they took their seats in the intimate Deutsches Theater. At the outset, they encounter the striking full-sized painting on the front scrim of hounds attacking a stag, an amalgamation of various familiar Baroque paintings. One need not know that this is certainly the hunter Actaeon, transformed to a stag by the vengeful Artemis for admiring her beauty, then ravished by his own hounds who turned upon him and tore him to pieces – as such, a fitting visual "simile aria" for what the opera is all about. For the moment, however, it simply sets the tone of vicious attacks, sudden reversals, fierce struggles for survival, and powerful conflicts that permeate the plot. The scrim returns on many occasions, a pervading motif, highlighted differently with each appearance.

Curtain Up

In jarring contrast, complementing the bright three-section overture in E Major, one of Handel's finest, is the crimson interior of a gambling room in an elegant "Caesar's Palace" type casino. Men in black tuxedos and women in exquisite black gowns circulate around the huge rectangular gaming table. The action commences immediately with a flurry of rather reckless, competitive bets on the evolving poker hand. During the opening dotted Larghetto, an aggressive figure, standing out in a white tuxedo, bets recklessly and wins the large pot on the table. The dealer, subservient and restrained, has

clearly manipulated the betting to insure the proper victor. Another character stands out as well, a small, punkie blond man with large dark glasses, a young sidekick of some kind to the leader of the pack, as it were.

The tension following the final bet was marked by a sudden quiet passage of gently shifting chords for strings alone. Another character now stands out, the one defeated in the final round of betting, who then distances himself from the gaggle around the table. A lively freely formed fugue pushes the overture towards its invigorating climax. With it, another round of cards commences, and this young man, ignominiously defeated in the first round of betting, begins almost nonchalantly to enter the second round. As the fugue crescendos, his fortune soars as well. He wins, to the chagrin of the first winner in white tuxedo, to the horror of the dealer, and to the amazement of all others present.

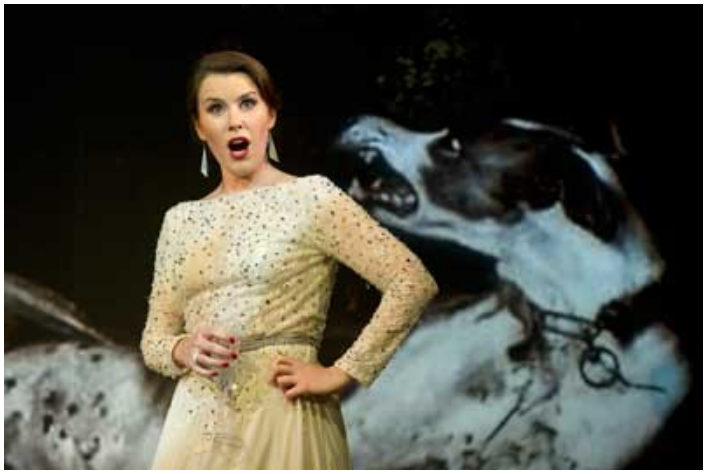
Thus, even before a note is sung, set and costume designer Gary McCann and Stage director Paul Curran have prepared us for the convoluted entanglements and sudden reversals of one of Handel's more obscure and problematic *opera seria*. This is a work that seems on the surface incomprehensible and even unstageable with its absurdly complicated plot, its many unexplained entrances and exits, and ill-explained fluctuations. Normally I am not a fan of stage antics interfering with a prelude or overture, especially one so so capably played by the FestspielOrchester Göttingen. But in this case, right from the start, all came together effectively to launch this captivating production.

Masterful Delineation of Characters

Without trying to explain the convoluted plot of archetypal shifting allegiances, conflicting love interests and the like, it is perhaps best in illustrating the success of this production, far removed from the conflict of fifth-century Franks, Cimbrians and Swabians, to show the skill with which the production team introduces each character and defines his or her motivations. This vivid depiction of character indeed was a special strength of the production, since the libretto Handel used in 1737 eliminated the first six expository scenes of the original 1699 libretto and drastically reduced the lengthy recitatives. As a result, as Handel scholar Winton Dean notes, the plot becomes a "whirlpool of inconsequence. Deprived of the dialogue that elucidates their motives, the characters behave like ventriloquists' dummies, jerked into action by some unseen force. Little but violent action is left, much of it off-stage, and so beyond the audience's grasp."

To start, our suspicions regarding the white-tuxedoed winner at the table and the second unexpected winner are correct; the conflict between them will be intense, sudden reversals frequent. They turn out to be father and son, Gustavo (originally King of the Cimbri) and Adolfo. Gustavo is not to be crossed. His unforgiving code of honor is vengeance at any cost. In the opening moments, as the stage darkens to blood red, he exhorts a group of family and supporters in a brief chorus around the table to swear vengeance on his arch enemy, Faramondo (originally King of the Franks), who had killed another son, Sveno, in battle. Adolfo reluctantly joins in. Then Teobaldo (dealer of the cards) drags in Faramondo's beautiful sister, Clotilda, beloved by Adolfo, who is prepared for sacrifice on the table. (The image of ravenous hounds on the scrim immediately flashed through my mind.) The father/son confrontation that began at the gaming table continues as once again the son preempts his father, persuading him to spare Clotilda. The knife drops, the father now suddenly smitten by the beautiful Clotilda. Sudden reversal indeed. Time for an aria - three in fact.

The production team has thus effectively eased the audience into a convoluted plot with crisp character-defining strokes. Handel's favorite bass, Antonio Montagne, originally played Gustavo. He has just two arias, one in each of the first two acts. Norwegian bass Njal Sparbo, active and popular in his own country, imbued both his arias with a rich bass register, effecting a menacing tone appropriate for this unforgiving tyrant. The first aria, "Viva, si…" ("Yes, let her live"), perfectly capped the opening events on stage; the effective blustering in his second act aria, "Sol la brama…" ("Thirst of revenge"), effectively expanded his vengeful persona before the distraught Clotilda.



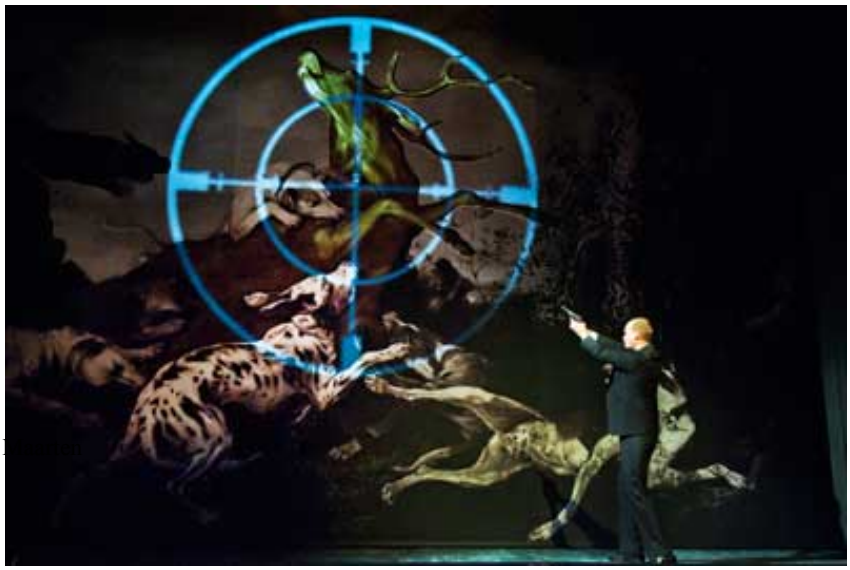
Anna Devin as Clotilda Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Adolfo and Clotilda, Tormented Lovers

Gustavo's exit in the first act sets the stage for the two lovers, Adolfo and Clotilda. After her ordeal, she staggers forward in a bedraggled, semi-conscious state, supported by the sympathetic Adolfo. Clotilda, sung by the vibrant Irish soprano Anna Devin, was one of the delights of the evening. I should really say "coloratura" soprano, since she handled her five mostly triple-time arias with such ease and clarion beauty. In her entrance aria, she pleads with Adolfo to forgive her brother, Faramondo (his father's enemy), with an exposed featherweight vocal line eloquently nuanced. Other highlights were her brilliant showpiece simile aria in Act II, "Combattuta da due venti" ("I am buffeted by two winds"), and her last aria in Act III, the brilliant "Un 'aura placida" ("A sense of calm") whose endless running triplets flowed like sparkling rivulets with seemingly effortless technique. The role was the first of many Handel would write for the young French soprano Elisabeth Duparc ("La Francesina"), soon to become his first Semele. Coincidentally, this was also Anna Devin's first Handel role on stage. Let's hope there will be many more. *Semele* would be a good bet!

Her exit left Adolfo alone on stage for the first of his five arias, "Chi ben ama," ("He who truly loves"). Handel wrote the role of this perpetually harassed lover for a woman *en travesty*, soprano Margherita Chimenti. For Göttingen's production, Dutch countertenor Maarten Engeltjes gave an eloquent, mellow glow to all he sang, with a tone perfectly suited to the role. The gentle chromaticism of this opening aria showed off the subtle phrasing of this seasoned performer of Bach; later in Act III, his honeyed tone was an ideal match for the exchange of short-breathed phrases with the Clotilda of Anna Devin.

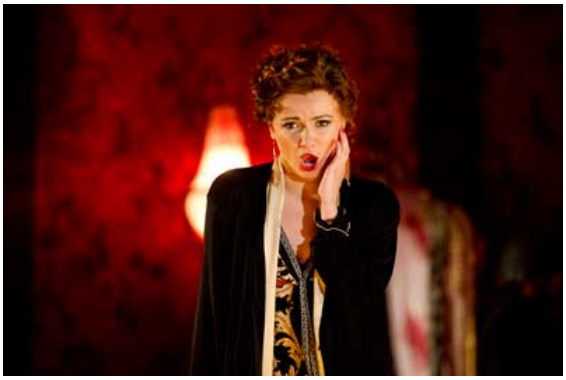
Before he completes his first aria, a meditation on how for the sake of love he will not hunt down his father's enemy (her brother, Faramondo), the scrim of combative hounds and stag descends, leaving Adolfo in front to complete his aria. This device, which of course facilitates a scene change, also allows for enhanced communication between a performer and the audience. At each instance, special lighting pinpoints an element of the painting - the eyes of the hounds, for example at one point, or the starry background at another – bringing the emotion of the moment into clear focus. In this case, the white circle of a gun sight targets the stag's neck, tormenting the conflicted hunter Adolfo, torn between his love for Clotilda and his father's wish for vengeance on her brother, Faramondo.



Maarten Engeltjes as Adolfo Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

A Descent into Niebelheim

At about this point in the performance, with three expository arias complete, the audience has begun to assemble the first pieces of this jigsaw puzzle of a plot. However, the dramatic scrim reminds the audience that more is to come of a rather unsettled and violent sort. Such will be the case, and Director Paul Curran articulates well in the Festival Magazine exactly what we should expect with the shifts in scene: "The action is set around a "Caesars Palace" – type casino, the main rooms and the "backstage" of the casino, the "underground" – the dark places, the places where only the servants go, the places where it's much more dirty and less pretty."



Anna Starushkevych as Rosimonda
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

A descent into Niebelheim follows, as it were, and indeed, as the scrim rises, we're halfway there. At stage left, set designer Gary McCann provides the plush, crimson bedchamber of Gustavo's daughter, Rosimonda; at stage right, a gray boiler-room-type cellar. (In the next scene, the shift to the dreary, ominous gray set will be complete.) For the moment, the dramatic clash of opulence and grime sets the stage for the first encounter between the diametrically opposed lovers-to-be, Rosimonda and Faramondo, her father's archenemy. That these two should fall in love at first sight is a given; at the center of this convoluted work indeed is the uneasy progression we follow in their journey from one extreme to the other, dire enemies to do-or-die lovers.

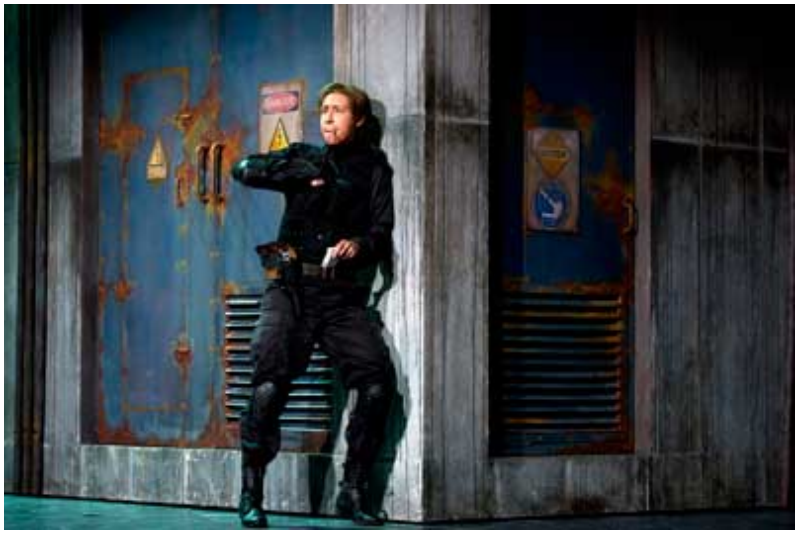
"The Bond Girl," Rosimonda

Hardly has the violent scrim risen when Faramondo and his gun-toting men come crashing victoriously through the gray doors. But the first aria belongs to Rosimonda, who, like her brother Adolfo, and like many an operatic heroine from Handel to Verdi, will be long-suffering in her ambivalence over shifting loyalties between duty and love. Mezzo-soprano Maria Marchesini ("La Lucchesina") was Handel's first Rosimonda; Göttingen was fortunate to have a young Ukrainian-born mezzo, Anna Starushkevych, whose dramatic flare and experience with Handel made for a dynamic and engaging prima donna. Some in Göttingen nicknamed her "the Bond girl" from her flamboyant shifts in attire, beginning with a flimsy baby doll nightgown at the start, as she bounced vigorously on a large bed before donning a long black silk robe; other glamorous outfits followed, like an elegant black sequined evening gown, and finally, a glimmering gold "Bond girl" mini-shift in Act III.

Her six arias mostly focus on vengeance and rage, engaging in their vehemence if occasionally rough in tone. In her entrance aria, she curtly dismisses Faramondo ("Vanne, che piu ti miro…" ("Be gone, for the longer I look upon you, the greater my grief becomes"). Typically, her aria explodes without preliminary ritornello, and in the dramatic pauses throughout the piece she effectively catches the depth of Rosimonda's tangled emotions, indeed as she did throughout the evening. In a surprising but effective gesture, the ubiquitous scrim descends leaving the distraught Rosimonda in front of it to complete her *da capo*. The lighting now highlights the white eyes of the hounds, which seem to glare at her - and at us.

Emily Fons as Faramondo Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

The *Primo Uomo*, Faramondo



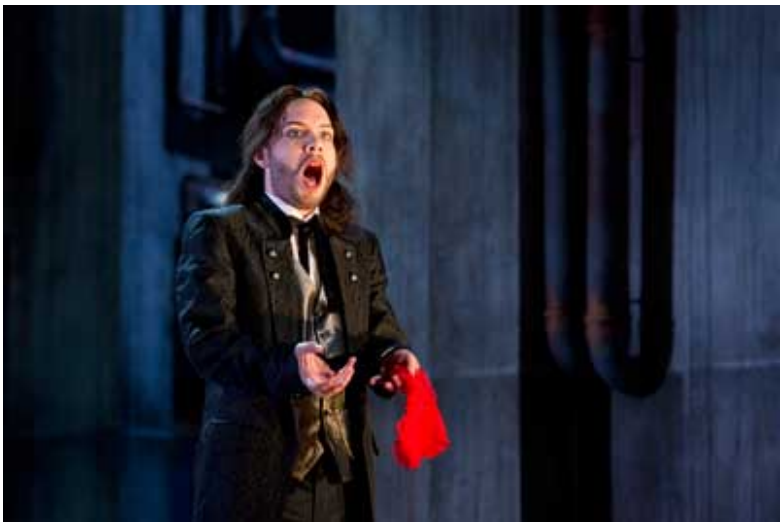
Emily Fons as Faramondo Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

It would appear it's time for the *primo uomo* to have his entrance aria. But are we done with meeting all the opera's protagonists? Of course not. Can the plot thicken any more? Of course. So in front of the scrim, Gernando (King of the Svevi in the original libretto and initially an ally to Faramondo) engages with Faramondo in a lively recitative revealing they are indeed rivals in their affections for Rosimonda. So much for friendship! Faramondo immediately acknowledges as much in his long delayed entrance aria, "Rival ti sono" ("I am your rival"), begun with the scrim still down. This was an especially effective tactic. First, it set off the titular character wonderfully. In the previous scene, he had simply flung himself headlong into turmoil and chaotic action. Besides, while none of Handel's first cast was the real star of the show, the main attraction was the castrato Gaetano Majorano, known as Caffarelli, considered one of the great singers of the age (ranked by some above Farinelli). Handel naturally wrote a string of arias for him, six in all, designed to let Caffarelli shine as he dazzled the audience with eloquent fioratura and cadenzas.

Casting such a castrato role today is always tricky business. Of the two available commercial records, one assigns the role to the stunning countertenor Max Emanuel Cencic, the other to the eloquent Boston-based mezzo D'Anna Fortunato. Göttingen took the latter route, a happy choice since they had available the dynamic and versatile mezzo Emily Fons. I had the good fortune to hear her two years ago in another triumphant trouser role, that of Megacle in Vivaldi's *L'Olimpiade* at Garsington Opera (also under the direction of Laurence Cummings). And what a thrilling performance her Faramondo was as well, right from the first "Rival ti sono" without opening ritornello, and the exacting coloratura that follows. A highlight was her great Act III aria, "Voglio che sia l'indegno" ("I want the villain to fall"), with her extraordinary control of the demanding and determined coloratura, balanced with her dramatic pauses as Faramondo recalls it is the father of his beloved that he seeks to kill. Not the least of Ms. Fons' strengths was her ability to move like a man on stage; this, coupled with her carefully designed military garb, made for one of the most effective "trouser roles" I have ever seen on stage. For Ms. Fons, her performance as Faramondo must have been as much a personal triumph as was her Megacle for Garsington Opera.

A Malevolent Misfit, Gernando

Once again, the production makes a most effective shift of scene. Faramondo has barely completed the "A" section of his aria, when the scrim rises. Nibelheim has arrived, or rather the ugly gray, lifeless basement of the luxurious casino. Continuing the quotation from director Paul Curran: "So there are contrasts, because in this story one faction is up while another is down. And then in the next scene the fortunes have reversed; the one is up, the other is down." In this new place, "more dirty and less pretty," we finally get to know the less pretty, or rather the sleaziest of all the characters, Gernando, of whom we had a brief glimpse moments earlier in his conversation with Faramondo. As Winton Dean states, "Gernando's behavior is contemptible – introduced as Faramondo's friend and colleague [before the scrim], he performs an instant about-turn [in the basement] on learning of his interest in Rosimonda and plans to kill him," encouraged by the fact that Gustavo has promised his daughter to whomever would rid him of his enemy.



Christopher Lowrey as Gernando Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Handel composed Gernando, like Adolfo, for a woman *en travesty* – the distinguished contralto Antonia Merighi; Göttingen cast the role of this malevolent misfit also for a countertenor, in this case the US born Christopher Lowrey, well seasoned too in Bach and Handel, with experience as well in the London Handel Festival as Bertarido in *Rodelinda.* The contrast in these two fine countertenors in Göttingen could not have been more striking and apt. Gernando stands out from the start as a lascivious dandy, sporting a scraggly beard, long hair and a luxurious oversized black fur coat. Throughout he is portrayed as both cunning and salacious, a fact emphasized by the fact that he concludes each of his four arias sniffing a brightly colored pair of Rosimonda's panties that he has somehow stashed away in his oversized coat. A tacky gesture, perhaps, but it worked – mostly because he inhabited the role so well, both in temperament and voice, projecting with wide range and exquisite low register, the vehemence and passion latent beneath the surface (hidden, one might say, beneath the coat) of this oily character.

Right from his first aria, he caught the flashy brilliance of Handel's writing for him, particularly effective as he juxtaposed in sudden higher and lower registers the oft repeated, almost ostinato-like, opening phrase of his first aria, "Voglio che mora, si" ("Yes, he shall die"). Mr. Dean claims, incorrectly I think, that Gernando never comes into focus dramatically or musically. Not so in this production. Gernando in the hands of Mr. Lowrey was a captivating presence on stage, especially as he noticeably grew in the role over the course of the three performances I was able to attend, responding with increasingly animation to the jerky rhythms Handel often provides for this quirky character (as in his second aria, sung to Rosimonda, "Non ingannarmi, no" ("Do not deceive me, no"). Perhaps audiences like to root for the underdog, but his dynamic portrayal of this licentious looser certainly contributed to making him an audience favorite, rightly so. At the end of the opera, all couples happily pair off; Gernando's consolation is one more hidden undergarment. A happy man!

The Plot Thickens, Teobaldo and Childerico

Perhaps the reader has now lost the thread of this narrative. I'm not making this up, you know. But one is easily able to maintain focus, thanks to the carefully sculpted portrayals. More confrontations ensue; sudden reversals follow rumors of Faramondo's death (not a real possibility for the *primo uomo*). Another exit aria for Faramondo and the beginning of one for Rosimonda follow. During the *da capo* of Rosimonda's aria, which expresses her continued uncertainty, the scrim descends for the final time in Act I. This time it is the stark whiteness of the savage hounds that the always telling lighting of Kevin Treacy highlights, appropriately so at this point.

Anna Starushkevych as Rosimonda Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Edward Grint as Teobaldo Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Soon we are back on another split stage, grimmer and sparer this time. Clotilda (Faramondo's sister you recall) is the "house guest" as it were of her brother's vindictive foe, Gustavo. She exits, sans aria, and finally Handel gives an aria to the last of the seven principal characters, Teobaldo, who in the original libretto is Gustavo's "capitano." In this production we remember him (don't we?) as the obsequious card dealer from the opening scene. The duplicitous baritone gets just one aria, vowing to fight on for Gustavo and hunt down the "wicked traitor," Faramondo, just as he had attempted to manipulate the cards to insure a victory for Gustavo in the opening scene. British baritone Edward Grint was so effective in this single aria, articulating with firm tone and expressive vigor the vehemence of the opening rising arpeggio, that one wished Handel had provided more for this impressive baritone, whom I remembered fondly from his more expanded performance in *Riccardo Primo* at the London Handel Festival just two years ago.

In fact, Teobaldo is critical to the plot, for the true "wicked traitor," ironically, is in fact he himself. Long before the opera began, he had surreptitiously performed a *Trovatore*-like switch, exchanging his own son for Gustavo's son Sveno, hoping that his offspring would inherit the throne. Faramondo had killed this pseudo son in battle, hence providing the motivation for Gustavo's revenge. And what of Sveno? Indeed he lives, and lo and behold, we discover that this young man, Childerico in the opera, the final piece in the puzzle, was the jaunty blond kid in dark glasses at the opening card game. I'm really not making this up, you know. Although Childerico gets no aria, he pops up now and then in various capacities – Rosimonda's protector, Teobaldo's sidekick, Gustavo's aide, and so on. In a crucial bit of recitative between him and Teobaldo in Act II, usually cut, but pointedly included in this production, Teobaldo goes so far as to clarify part of this mystery for the young man. It is worth singling out this delightful trouser role, as the recitative was articulately and masterfully sung by the young "spunky" soprano Iryna Dziashko in her professional stage debut.

Indeed, one wishes this pair – Teobaldo who set the plot in motion and Childerico who puts an end to it by revealing the earlier switch - were given more to sing, given the cast in Göttingen. (In the original libretto of 1719, Childerico indeed had two arias.) Be that is it may, they were an effective contribution to the success of this outstanding ensemble of eight talented young singers, each who stood out in his or her own way to effectively capture the essence of Handel's carefully articulated characters. Just as none of Handel's singers was the real star of the show, with the exception perhaps of his new lead castrato, so too in this production even the slightest of roles was an integral part of the production's success. Not only did each, vocally and temperamentally, own his or her role, but each was also a compelling presence on stage, able to wonderfully express nuances of a character's personality not just with persuasive acting and interaction, but with all the subtle changes in color and phrasing that the expression of a character's personality demands. On top of all this, the aura of collaboration radiated throughout the performance with indeed both cast and orchestra.

A Collaborative Success

A *drama per musica* like this, Handel's last *opera seria*, demands what this production most provided – a chance for each character to open up with the audience and express that inner emotional reality that the plot, however quickly moving and seemingly convoluted, has brought them to. Last March, at the London Handel

Festival, its artistic director Laurence Cummings led an equally compelling performance of another Handel *opera seria*, *Arianna in Creta*, written shortly before *Faramondo.* The production was austere and simple, with isolated Greek columns and such. The director of that production, the well-known actress and TV personality Selina Cadell, commented in her pre-opera talk that her approach to the opera was governed by the fact that the primary goal is to let the music work, to have singers in their arias communicate emphatically with the audience. And so Paul Curran did as well, who as it turns out also had the invaluable experience of working with Laurence Cummings the year before with *Imeneo* at the London Handel Festival. Although in *Faramondo* the stage actions included occasional clutter and frequent violent action, the product of a taut libretto with minimal recitative, when it came time for the character to sing, little interfered. Bits of stage action helped – the unraveling of a colorful panty, for example, or a glass of water in the face perhaps – but communication from the performer was direct, engaging, and always true.

Faramondo was certainly the crown jewel of the Göttingen Handel Festival 2014 season, "Händel Royal." Thanks to this exceptional production and musical performance, it also came across not as second-rate Handel, as one sometimes reads, but as vintage Handel. In Handel's operatic output, it falls between the mighty Ariosto operas of the mid-1730s, (*Alcina, Orlando,* and *Ariodante*) with all their magic and romance, and the comic works soon to follow, beginning with *Serse* that Handel began work on immediately, followed by *Imeneo.* Paul Curran's insights into this late comic work in London, the only other Handel opera he has directed, certainly contributed to his success with *Faramondo.*

Faramondo thus came through not as a valley between two hills, but as a transitional work. Paul Curran wonderfully caught the ironic *tinta*, even with a light touch of the comic, by not having the Franks (Faramondo), Cimbrians (Gustavo) and Swabians (Gernando) vie for dominance in central Europe. Rather the topsy-turvy struggles filter through the elegant rooms and the gray bowels of a casino, making plausible the expression of the myriad inner emotions that bubble to the surface. As the Aristotelian unities of time, place and action take over, as ideally they should in such a *drama per musica*, the audience is drawn in to experience Handel's extraordinary music. The communication becomes direct and even cathartic. The power of the improbable art of opera comes through triumphantly.

One can only hope that the kind of vision and skillful collaboration that shaped this production and indeed the entire festival season, with Artistic Director Laurence Cummings in the lead, will prevail at Göttingen for some years to come. Signs are that it will. Next year's opera is *Agrippina*, as colorful and invigorating a work as Handel ever wrote, often called the "Baroque Figaro." Don't miss it!

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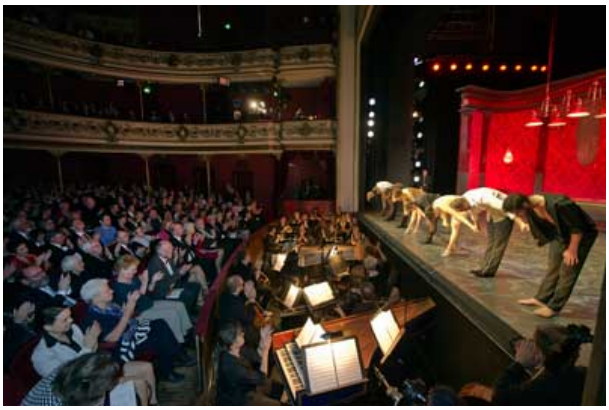

The cast of *Faramondo* receives well-deserved applause
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva