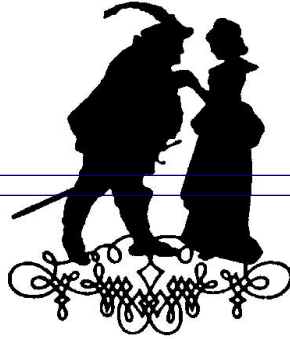


# Opera con Brio

Spring 2012  
Richard B. Beams



## A Baroque Banquet

### Göttingen International Handel Festspiele, 2012

In 2012, the renowned International Handel Festspiele, Göttingen, marked its first year under new Music Director, Laurence Cummings, who takes over the lead after the illustrious twenty-year tenure of another specialist in the Baroque, Nicholas McGegan. Signs are the Festival, fast approaching its hundredth anniversary in 2020, is in good hands as evidenced by the typically varied and enticing assortment of musical events offered this year. These included a fully staged, uncut opera by Handel (*Amadigi di Gaula*), two quite different oratorios (*Esther* and *Solomon*), a rarely performed early serenata (*Aci, Galatea e Polifemo*) and numerous concerts and recitals, ranging from Mr. Cummings' own display of virtuosity at the harpsichord to equally virtuosic displays for voice (a concert by coloratura soprano Simone Kermes) and recorder (virtuoso chamber music with the magnetic soloist Maurice Steger).

Per usual, part of the appeal of this always-enterprising springtime Festival is the enchanting, unpretentious Lower Saxony town of Göttingen itself. In part because many British and other foreigners had studied in Göttingen's famed University, the town remains virtually unblemished by the ravages of two world wars. How fitting it is then, that at the center of the mostly-medieval town

square stands an intimate art nouveau statue of a goose girl, which by tradition all doctoral students kiss after graduating from the university. As friends applaud the ritual, each graduate leaves behind a bouquet of flowers in exchange for the kiss.



Göttingen's Goose Girl

Who can resist Göttingen? Not I. Each year a return to this charming town and its special Festival is a highlight of my operatic travels. This year was no exception.

The Festival is always unified around a specific theme or motto – a tradition that also has every indication of continuing under the new director. The theme this year, “Love and Jealousy,” seemed generic enough to cover most of the opera repertory – from *Figaro* to *Carmen* to *Otello*, ad infinitum. But it is also apt for many of Handel's works, both operas and oratorios. Although I was unable to attend *Esther* (Handel's first English oratorio), with its archetypal seductive heroine and jealous Haman, I was able to attend two performances of *Amadigi di Gaula*. Certainly this operatic showpiece well represents the festival's central theme, as does his early Italian serenata *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo*, which I was also able to see. Cummings rightly labeled this work “one of the greatest stories for both love and jealousy of all time.”

## An Enchanting *Amidigi*

Handel's early London opera was the last of his three "magic" operas that had swept London by storm in the early eighteenth century: *Rinaldo* (1711), *Teseo* (1713), and *Amadigi* (1715). The tag "love and jealousy" fits all three, dominated as each is by the temperamental tantrums of a volatile sorceress (Armida, Medea, and Melissa respectively) who with the aid of supernatural powers manipulates stage actions (and emotions) in fits of jealousy and despair to gain the object of her desire. Today happily, revivals worldwide are celebrating the three-hundredth anniversaries of the respective premiers of these seminal works, often with radically different approaches. Among prominent revivals, Glyndebourne's new production of *Rinaldo* in the summer of 2011, transformed the opera into a schoolboy's fantasy, a rather misbegotten and reductive concept; a few months later in the spring of 2012, the Lyric Opera of Chicago mounted a much more successful production of *Rinaldo*, both whimsical and captivating. Göttingen presented an innovative *Teseo* at last year's Festival, labeling their concept "a period production with sidebars"; then this spring, Chicago Opera Theatre presented its Spartan modern production of *Teseo*. As for *Amadigi*, Central City Opera's production, set in the Renaissance, captivated audiences with its emotional intensity in the summer of 2011. (For more on these, see the list of related articles on page 5.) Finally, Göttingen's production of *Amadigi* this spring exhibited much strength in its striking visuals and emphasis on a historically informed approach. All of these revivals attest to the viability of Handel's "magic" operas in radically varied performance concepts and contexts.

By good fortune, attending these works in chronological sequence, I was able to experience *Amadigi* as the cap to these early operas, a work which esteemed late eighteenth century writer Charles Burney felt "contained more invention, variety and good composition, than in any one of the musical dramas of Handel which I have yet carefully and critically examined." In our own day, Dr. David Vickers, who gave the pre-opera lecture in Göttingen, called it the most compelling and carefully structured of the three. I agree; certainly, the twin coils of love and jealousy cast their spells effectively in a tighter web than in the earlier two works.

### Visual Virtuosity

Göttingen's fine historically informed production made this clear from the start. The curtain rises to reveal a series of receding blue arches soon to frame the action in various ways (with the rising and falling of another curtain). This opera includes just four characters: the sorceress Melissa, the two rivals in love, Amadigi and Dardano, and the object of their love, Oriana. The libretto specifies neither the place nor the period of the action; hence the prevailing blue color scheme (albeit rather un-baroque) helped set off the colorfully clad characters in a world of their own making, fraught with emotional entanglements.



Markéta Cukrová as Dardano; Mareike Braun as Amadigi  
Photo: Theodoro da Silva

The plot is relatively simple: The hero Amadigi (a Paladin of Charlemagne's court) as well as Dardano (Prince of Thrace) are both in love with the beautiful princess Oriana (daughter of the King of the Fortunate Islands). The sorceress Melissa, infatuated with Amadigi, manipulates the action by imprisoning Oriana. Only after various deceptions, visions, and trials are the two true lovers, Amadigi and Oriana, finally reunited - but not before Amadigi slays his companion-turned-rival, Dardano, and Melissa stabs herself, finding her supernatural powers impotent against the power of love.



Stefanie True as Oriana

Photo: Theodoro da Silva

This production, as a frame to these emotional entanglements, was a visual treat, thanks to the use of baroque gestures and choreography by Belgian specialist Sigrid T'Hooft, the scenery and costumes by Stephan Dietrich, and the vivid and sensitive lighting by Heinz Kasper. The costumes themselves made their own character-defining statements: Amadigi, who had been adopted as a child by a Scottish nobleman, wore a red tartan in tribute to his heritage. A gold helmet, adorned spectacularly with large red plumes, topped off his colorful attire, and his dancing attendants had matching tartan plaids as well. Dardano, his rival in love, was much more simply clad in silver with flared pantaloons, while Oriana wore light yellow with striking red trim on both her billowing gown and headdress, perhaps suggesting her link to Amadigi. For all the flamboyance of the two lovers, however, it was Melissa who rightly dominated this display of primary colors with bright blue and red in her gown and a fiery headdress. Indeed the "green-eyed monster" jealousy could effectively rear its ugly head amid this colorful palate. To complement her aggressive attire, her accompanying devils (dancers also, like the attendants to Amadigi) wore stunning costumes adorned with various accouterments of malevolence – flames, snakes, and the like.



Judith Gautier as Melissa

Photo: Theodoro da Silva

All this, along with the stylized baroque gestures from both dancers and singers, made for a visually arresting evening. Rhetorical gesture displayed every nuance of emotion, sometimes emphatic (enforcing an important word by gesture), sometimes imitative (reinforcing the particular “tinta” of a scene, be it harsh or pastoral), but always expressive (articulating a visual equivalent of a particular passion, be it grief, or fear, or love, or “la gelosia”). These stylized gestures typically involved the whole body, hands and fingers as well, for dancers and singers alike. A baroque specialist from Canada’s Opera Atelier (soon to perform Lully’s *Armide* at Glimmerglass Opera) once expressed the presumed goal of such gestures, “to ensure that audience members are not voyeurs, rather they are participants in the emotional journey of each player.”

To what extent did all this visual splendor and stylized movement contribute to enhancing the emotional involvement with Handel’s beautiful – and very emotional – music? To what extent did it draw the audience in? More so I think than did the previous year’s production in Göttingen of *Teseo* which combined a traditional baroque staging with the conceit of behind-the-scenes contemporary social networking, but less so than did the compact production of *Amadigi* at Central City Opera last summer which confined the stage action to the intimate interior of an Italian Renaissance “*studiolo*.” That is not to say one approach to *Amadigi* was better than the other – each was a package unto itself; again they illustrate the diversity of approaches possible for bringing to life Handel’s expressive, forever telling, music on stage.

In terms of casting, the opera itself is extraordinary in many ways, not the least because each of the four roles is scored for high voice. In Handel’s original production, the spurned sorceress was the sensational soprano Elisabetta Pilotti (who in the two previous “magic” operas had assumed the roles of both *Armida* and *Medea*). Complementing her was the sensational Neapolitan alto castrato Nicolo Grimaldi (Nicolini) in the title role, acclaimed for his brilliance as an

actor and as a singer (the Placido Domingo of his day perhaps). Another alto, in this case a female, Diana Vico, sang the role of the insanely jealous Dardano. The young soprano Anastasia Robinson as Oriana, the object of their affections, completed the formidable original cast.

### Emotional Restraint Amidst Visual Splendor

Curiously, all the roles in Göttingen were sung by women, while in Central City, *Amadigi* and *Dardano* were sung by two splendid countertenors, one of whom, Christopher Ainslie, had sung the title role of *Tamerlano* at Göttingen in 2010. A fine pair of mezzos took these roles in Göttingen, Mareike Braun as *Amadigi* and Markéta Cukrová as *Dardano*. However, for each, the stylized baroque gestures, which they handled so well, did not communicate the intensity of emotional expression as much as might have been possible. And at times the balance between voice and orchestra was problematic, as when the lovely but lighter-voiced Ms. Cukrová was overshadowed by the obligato oboe and bassoon in her agonized lament of Act II, “*Pena tiranna*” – notably a show-stopper that should continue to haunt us long after the opera is over. These and other such moments never rose to that height.

Nonetheless, the all-female cast created a very distinct tinta for the performance; indeed the delicateness and lightness of the singing overall, if somewhat restrained emotionally, well complemented the baroque artifice which took precedence in this production. In keeping with this approach, the impeccably sung *Melissa* of soprano Judith Gauthier projected with conviction throughout the evening this most human of Handel’s three early sorceresses. A highlight was “*Destero dall’empia Dite*,” with its thrilling trumpet obligato as she summons all the Furies to do battle against *Amadigi* and *Oriana*. She received here the biggest ovations of the night, and rightly so, for her clear and precise articulation.



Mareike Braun as Amadigi surrounded by Furies

Photo: Theodoro da Silva

As David Vickers had implied in his insightful pre-opera comments, what interested Handel especially in this compact piece were the emotions and sufferings of these characters – less so the flamboyant magical effects of the earlier magic opera *Rinaldo*, with its “two huge Dragons...dreadful Monsters spitting Fire and Smoke on every side...mermaids, waterfalls...thunder, lightening and amazing noises.” In the original *Amadigi*, by contrast, the “coup de theatre” was the Fountain of True Love, into which Amadigi gazed to see the imprisoned Oriana, famously a real fountain, spraying real water. Such a large number of stage engineers and plumbers oversaw the mechanics of the fountain that an oft-quoted newspaper announcement on the day of the premiere cautioned subscribers not to get too close to the stage. No such caution was necessary in Göttingen; a bit of glittering tinsel representing the fountain left the imprisoned Oriana merely to our imagination, while the expressive Ms. Braun, against the gentle flow of two recorders, kept the focus on Amadigi’s very human anguish.

Soprano Stephanie True was lovely as Oriana, although I prefer the role to be set off by a pair of countertenors as her rival lovers. At any rate, the highlight for her is a lament in the second act “S’estinto è l’idol mio” when she finds her beloved Amadigi seemingly dead. Again, baroque gestures, expressive as they were, seemed to distance her from the intense emotion of the moment, although at the da capo, as she finally caressed the inert Amadigi, the overwhelming grief of the moment finally came through. That said, however, the potential for intensifying emotion with baroque artifice was illustrated in the second of the two performances I attended when Ms. True, who had lost her voice, was sung by a substitute, Simone Schwark, from the orchestra pit. It is a credit to both that it all worked so well – but especially to the disheartened Ms. True whose baroque mannerisms made it all so fully involving, even though the voice came from elsewhere.

All in all, the Göttingen performance of *Amadigi* was a most satisfying experience, especially in its visual splendor. A special musical treat was being able for once to hear the score complete and uncut as the four principals, each a committed young artist, developed their individual stage characters via the stylized baroque vocabulary. I must admit to occasionally missing the emotional temperature inherent in Handel’s arias, for all the excellent playing of the Festspiel Orchester Göttingen led nicely by Andrew Parrott. Missing also it seemed was the brio and animated spirit, the attention to detail and to shaping phrases, always present when Nicholas McGegan was at the helm. Still, operas in Göttingen, in the intimate Deutsches Theatre, prepared with such care and insight, are always experiences to cherish, as was the case again this year.

## A Problematic *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo*

For me one of the most anticipated events at this year’s Festival was to be a “semi-staged” performance of Handel’s early Italian *Cantata a tre* of 1708, *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo*, written for Naples some ten years before the better-known English masque *Acis and Galatea*. This large scale “serenata” has nothing to do musically or textually with Handel’s late masque, although the story, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, is basically the same: the giant Cyclops Polyphemus, in a jealous rage, lusting after the gentle sea-nymph Galatea, crushes to death her pastoral lover, Aci. In the original myth from Sicily, Polyphemus is a personification of Mount Etna, while Aci is the little river that still runs from the mountain’s slope into the Mediterranean where Galatea, grieving at her loss, finds her final rest. Allegorically, of course, Aci and Galatea are finally joined for all time.

Alas, the realization of this poignant myth and delightful music – which I had never had the chance to hear on stage – was a major disappointment. Rather than any semblance of a “semi-staged” performance, a few trite theatrical gimmicks substituted for genuine theatrical effects. Early on, as Galatea stood at the music stand and sang of tears, “sforzato a piangere,” Aci awkwardly offered his handkerchief; later Galatea returned the favor, suddenly offering a rose, as Aci sang of the dangers of “la gelosia.” Things got worse when Polifemo made his ferocious entrance on stage, sending music stands crashing to the floor. Galatea’s entry into the sea became a stroll into the dimly lit auditorium while Polifemo’s killing of Aci, became a gun shot from the balcony. To be sure, hurling a rock wouldn’t work here. But please – no more guns.

The awkward staging itself didn’t help, often creating a disconnect between the orchestral forces – set well back on the stage – and the three performers in evening dress, often scattered in the auditorium. The dramatic effect of Handel’s great trio “Proverà lo sdegno mia,” in which the pleas of the lovers are juxtaposed against the blunt threats of Polifemo, was completely undermined by such staging. As Polifemo’s interjections were sung from the balcony, Galatea was half way to the stage in the auditorium and Aci was even further away on stage. The lugubrious tempo from Lawrence Cummings didn’t help much either, making the trio a smooth, mellifluous interchange of characters, rather than one of gruff interruption of the two lovers by the giant.

This disconnect between the vocalists and the orchestra prevailed much of the evening. To be sure, the last minute change of cast for Galatea was an unexpected handicap. The rich toned contralto Hilary Summers stepped in for Christine Rice, originally scheduled to sing the role. This fact perhaps contributed to some of the clumsy staging, especially since Ms. Summers understandably needed a music stand much of the time. She and the more petite Aci,



Gillian Ramm

Gillian Ramm, were an ill matched pair, however. The vocal highlight of the evening, when all stage antics were left aside, belonged to Ms. Ramm in her poignant second act simile aria, “Qui l’augel da pianta in pianta.” In this bucolic siciliano, molded eloquently by Maestro Cummings, her voice sustained beautifully against the plangent oboe. The shapely imitative phrasing between her and members of the orchestra captivated all; it was a moment that illustrated the kind of night this might have been, and the audience reacted accordingly. Bass Antonio Abete rounded out the cast as Polifemo, with ample range for this challenging role, although not always with precise intonation – perhaps a result too of the awkward staging.

In sum, this was far from the kind of festival-level performance one expects at Göttingen. The entire enterprise seemed under-rehearsed, and perhaps it was with the last minuet substitution and with Lawrence Cummings running back and forth between Göttingen and Garsington Opera in England for rehearsals of Vivaldi’s *L’Olimpiade* (which I would hear in a week’s time, and which was certainly not under-rehearsed). Indeed a viable semi-staged performance, of the sort Boston Baroque gives each year, can be captivating; yet it demands much thought, time and effort to realize successfully. Basically, however, I think the rather sophomoric stage direction of Daniele Cuerra was at fault. Given the logistics involved, perhaps a good concert version would have worked better (after all, Handel never intended it as a staged piece.) Then perhaps the full beauty of this seminal early work would have spilled forth like a gentle stream flowing to the sea to be savored for the delights it offers.



Simone Kermes

Photo: Moritz Schell

## Vocal and Instrumental Virtuosity

The Festival always includes various recitals and concerts, vocal and instrumental. Sometimes they prove to be highlights of the Festival. Such was the case in 2012, at least with the two guest artists who performed this year that I was able to hear - the exciting coloratura soprano Simone Kermes, in a concert of arias entitled appropriately "Ombra mai fu," and an afternoon concert entitled only "virtuoso chamber music," which turned out to be a recorder virtuoso, Maurice Steger, with backup of theorbo, harpsichord, and cello. My friend Charles Jernigan called it the highlight of our stay here, stating, "I have never heard the recorder played with anything like that virtuosity." Neither had I. Playing Corelli violin sonatas rearranged for recorder as well as sonatas by Handel and others, Mr. Steger demonstrated both the virtuosity and breath control one more commonly associates with great singers but which is just as essential for great wind players.

Indeed he was the instrumental equivalent of virtuoso soprano Simone Kermes who, when all is said and done, gets top honors for the most committed, thrilling, and energized event I experienced this year at Göttingen, or perhaps anywhere. Performing at the Stadhalle, on the same stage used for *Aci, Galatea, e Polifemo*, she mixed freely with La Folia Barockorchester conducted by Robin Peter Müller as she pranced and danced her way through assorted baroque showpieces. Her entrance itself was a showstopper as she stomped onto the stage in rock-star fashion and launched without a pause into Armida's "Furie terribile" from *Rinaldo*. The audience erupted as she finished, as they did often through the night. Her appearance, with shocking red hair, flouncy black skirt, gold lace-up strapless bodice and thick spangled high heels, matched her demeanor, one-upping any of the colorfully dressed characters in *Amidigi*.

It all may sound a bit much, except that she was so good, with secure coloratura technique, a secure "ping" to the high notes, eloquent pianissimos (in the top registers as well). And there was also the kind of involvement with the other musicians and obligato instruments such pieces invite. Especially expressive was a quiet pastoral aria from Pergolesi's *Adriano in Siria* ("Lieto così talvolta") in which the young oboist playing the eloquent, meandering oboe obligato (in imitation of a bird in pastoral setting) rightly became a true equal, performing right next to Ms. Kermes, interweaving with entrancing and mellifluous ease.

Other arias included many from Vivaldi, including Costanza's brilliant "Agitata da due venti" from Vivaldi's late opera *Griselda*, performed last summer in Santa Fe but with nowhere near the same brio. As she had in her opening aria, Ms. Kermes electrified the audience once again. As if this weren't enough, she dazzled the audience with three encores. Especially fiery was an aria by Carlo Broschi. Happily, the concert was being recorded for future radio broadcast - let's hope a recording will be available as well.

## Viva Göttingen

Indeed recordings of many previous opera performances from Göttingen are available. This year I would hope for a DVD of *Amadigi*, if not a recording, as a reminder that the best thing about Göttingen is - being there! Next year's season runs from May 10 to May 20, 2013. Delights are to be found not only in the opera house or in the concert hall, but also on the plaza, eating white asparagus in front of the goose girl, enjoying the ambience that comes from the warmth of the town itself, where a bicycle is more important than a car. And best of all is savoring with other Handelian the wonderful platter of baroque delicacies that the Göttingen Festival has served up now for almost one hundred years.

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A kiss for the Goose Girl

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