

Handel in America: A Personal Account

Part II: From Boston to New York

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At the conclusion of Part I of this narrative, I commented how Peter Sellars with his respective productions in Boston of both *Orlando* and *Giulo Cesare* in the 1980s had presented ‘the fullest versions’ of these masterpieces ever heard in America. Moreover, long before the advent of surtitles, his productions supplied ‘books’ which included the complete text of the original Italian libretto and its English translation as read by Handel’s audience at the premiere of these works. Clearly the goal was an attempt at authenticity and a clarification of the conventions of opera in Handel’s day for audiences basically unfamiliar with them at this point, or indeed with Handel operas at all.

Yet by the end of the century, the esteemed critic Andrew Porter would begin an article in the *New York Times* as follows: ‘George Frideric Handel is something of a newcomer to the 20th-century opera repertory, but he is firmly ensconced there now. Scarcely a season goes by in any big city without a Handel production.’ How did this change come about so quickly, not only in America but throughout the world in the decades of the postwar Handel revival? Andrew Porter, succinct as always, provides an answer: ‘The composer and his work are strong. His operas have been cut and shuffled – and still they survive.’

Peter Sellars, in his more hyperbolic but typically enlightened fashion, also noted: ‘Handel’s operas are frequently brought before the public these days as mutilated corpses, with as much as forty percent of the music removed. Inadequate translations cheapen the emotions and are incapable of maintaining their integrity over permutations and repetitions of Baroque musical structure.’ His comments conjure up recollection of the 1966 *Giulio Cesare* at New York City Opera (NYCO), one of the company’s greatest triumphs and a breakthrough event for a young soprano named Beverly Sills. I cherish even today the many glorious performances I was able to attend in subsequent seasons, indeed my own first experience with a Handel opera on stage, as it was for many in the American audience. Yet this seminal moment in Handel opera in America, designed to showcase its superstar heroine, fitted the category of ‘mutilated corpse’. As conductor Julius Rudel commented at the time, the score presented such an ‘embarrassment of riches [that] we just had to cut some of the arias’. This in turn meant a substantial rearrangement of numbers: for example, moving Cleopatra’s Act III lament over the supposed death of Caesar, the magnificent ‘Piangerò la sorte mia’, to her first entrance in Act I. How could this glorious piece, placed in the archetypal position for the prima donna of nineteenth-century operas, not hook the audience immediately, as it was clearly intended to do? The opera’s final love duet, the exquisite ‘caro / bella’, came early in the second act!

As for casting, before the days when countertenors or female singers were the norm for replacing the super-star castrati of yesteryear, transposing the role of Caesar (composed for the castrato Senesino) down an octave seemed to make perfect sense, however un-Handelian this was. At least having the great bass Norman Treigle assume the role was a small compensation. The point here is not to criticise what was a seminal moment in the performance of Handel operas in America, but to illustrate the kind of adjustment felt to be needed not just for time’s sake (with all the cuts), but to accommodate American audiences as yet unschooled in the conventions of the Baroque aesthetic.

To follow the thread of the emergence of more fully idiomatic Handel performances in America is beyond the scope of these brief comments, but again the 1987 Boston *Giulio Cesare* is nicely

illustrative, since by then Peter Sellars and conductor Craig Smith were performing the opera with every da capo aria in place and intact – not usual practice at the time. Boston-based Emmanuel Music artists took lead roles, among them counter-tenor Jeffrey Gall as Giulio Cesare, Susan Larson as Cleopatra, and the young Lorraine Hunt as Sesto.

Updating of productions was becoming increasingly frequent, and this compelling production focused prophetically on one of the crisis-points in the world, the Middle East. Coincidentally, the young Lorraine Hunt's breakthrough as an internationally acclaimed singer came when this production had premiered at the Pepsico Summerfare Festival in Purchase, New York, in the Handel tri-centennial year of 1985. As Sesto, the avenging son of Pompey, she was a terrorist armed with an Uzi in this predictably controversial production. Noteworthy as well, this festival with its three provocative contrasting productions was also a major force in bringing the idiom of a Handel opera before American audiences in authentic fashion. It included not only the controversially updated *Giulio Cesare*, but also an idiomatic Baroque staging of *Teseo*, and a compelling *Tamerlano* which split the difference between the radically contemporary and the authentically Baroque. This trio thus encapsulated the full range of viable approaches to Handel opera on stage.

Around the same time, during this important Handel tri-centennial year, a series of concert performances (and festivals) invited audiences to focus solely on the music itself, further giving audiences a chance to savour the complete opera unencumbered. New York was in the lead in this regard with Carnegie Hall's Handel Opera Festival of 1984-85: first in November came *Orlando* (which critic Will Crutchfield called 'the first uncut professional performance of any Handel Opera in New York'); next in January, the magnificent *Ariodante* led by Raymond Leppard, with Tatiana Troyanos and June Anderson in the leads, a work that would, like *Orlando*, soon make the rounds to many American cities; and finally in April, the rich and varied *Alessandro*, also performed, as Andrew Porter wrote in the programme notes, 'uncut and unshuffled, founded on the belief that Handel, master dramatist, meant what he wrote, built his sequences with care, and knew the difference between an aria-finale and a mid-act climax.'

In the spirit of such authenticity, the glorious centrepiece of this year-long Carnegie Hall Festival was the performance of *Semele* on Handel's 300th birthday, 23 February 1985 – not in the abbreviated version one often gets, but in the complete 'First 1744 Covent Garden Version'. Opening his review of that evening, *New York Times* critic Donal Henahan wrote: 'It is difficult to imagine, in this Handel year, any event doing more honor to the composer than the spectacular performance of *Semele* that took place on Saturday evening at Carnegie Hall. For admirers of Handel's many-leveled art, and the craft of singing, it was a night to mark down.'

A landmark night it was indeed: certainly one of most memorable of all Handel performances I have ever attended. The cast included the young Kathleen Battle in the lead, Marilyn Horne and Rockwell Blake (in their peak 'Rossini' years), Sam Ramey (fresh from his Met debut the year before), Sylvia McNair, and conductor John Nelson. Surprisingly, the first professional staging of *Semele* in America had taken place just five years earlier (in 1980) in Washington's Kennedy Center, produced by John Copley, who then took the production to Covent Garden in 1982 – its first performance in the theatre where it had premiered in 1744, 238 years earlier. (I was able catch up with this famous Copley/Covent Garden production when I travelled to Venice for performances at *La Fenice* in 1992.) The following decade, in 1994, Boston Baroque's founder and director Martin Pearlman led the Washington Opera in a staged performance of *Semele*, again at the Kennedy Center.

Nearby, New York's Metropolitan Opera, loaded with superstars, had finally performed its first Handel opera ever, *Rinaldo*, in the fall of 1984. The colourful production, borrowed intact from

Canada's National Arts Center, with the inimitable Marilyn Horne in the title role, also included the above-mentioned Met debut of bass Samuel Ramey; the thrilling vocal acrobatics were matched by the incredibly nimble acrobatics of tumbling warriors from Newark's 'Flip City' in the final battle scene! Handel productions indeed seemed now to be taking root at the Met, albeit with the help of London productions: in 1986, the company presented the oratorio *Samson* as an opera in Elijah Moshinsky's stark Covent Garden semi-Baroque staging to showcase tenor Jon Vickers; then just two years later in 1988, the year after Boston Opera Company's landmark *Giulio Cesare*, the Met presented the same work as its third Handel production (borrowed from the English National Opera), showcasing two eminent artists in the lead roles – Tatiana Troyanos as Cesare and Kathleen Battle as Cleopatra.

No surprise then, that in 2004 the next Handel opera to find its way to the Met stage, *Rodelinda*, should showcase the most famous prima donna of the day, Renee Fleming, in the lead, both then and in the revival of 2011. But the opera's success belonged as much to the homegrown Steven Wadsworth production, placing the opera roughly in Handel's own eighteenth century with a lovely Mediterranean setting. Baroque specialist Harry Bicket elicited a stylish and idiomatic performance from the Met orchestra, as he also did two years later, in 2013, when the Met brought David McVicar's captivating 2005 Glyndebourne production of *Giulio Cesare* to its stage. Countertenor David Daniels and coloratura soprano Natalie Dessay headed the stunning cast that also included French countertenor Christophe Dumaux as the calculating Ptolemy, and the wonderful mezzos Patricia Bardon and Alice Coote as Cornelia and Sextus respectively. At the end of the four and a half hour evening, well after midnight, the opening-night audience rose to their feet with an exuberant ovation.

No longer, after nearly a half-century of Handel opera in America, were adjustments necessary to accommodate American tastes or lack of familiarity with Baroque conventions. Acceptance of Baroque opera had come far since showcase soprano Beverly Sills had created a sensation in bringing a Handel opera before a large, soon-to-be adoring public. Who would have thought that across the plaza, in such a huge house (over 3,800 seats), ill-suited for a Baroque opera, the Met would soon be performing its fourth Handel production and with such success? Yet performances at New York's Lincoln Center are hardly a fair measure for the explosion of Handel operas across America in this period. Looking ahead, my final segment will examine what I now may aptly label America's emerging love affair with Handel – no longer a newcomer on the American opera scene.