

## Handel in America: A Personal Account

### Part III: America's Love Affair with Handel

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Having spent some time in Parts I and II of this series with the explosion of Handel opera performances first in Boston and then in New York, I will expand now to a personalised account of the public's emerging love affair with Handel across America – but not without one final glance back at these two cities by way of a brief recapitulation. Back in Boston, the mid-1990s also included a landmark production of *Xerxes* by Boston Lyric Opera with a stunning cast featuring David Daniels and Lorraine Hunt. Once again Craig Smith (of Emmanuel Music, a focus of Part I) took charge of the orchestra, working now with another American director: Steven Wadsworth, who was responsible for many engaging productions of Handel in America (including the Met's *Rodelinda* discussed at the conclusion of Part II).

This *Xerxes* production, originally designed for and created by the Santa Fe Opera, soon became a great hit at New York City Opera in 1997; indeed, it was revived so many times that, like *Giulio Cesare* some three decades earlier, it became a New York City Opera calling card. Following the trend of updating, the production moved the action from 5th century BC to an English villa in Handel's time; the language was English rather than Italian. Bits and pieces were cut and moved around. Even amidst the trend for authentic early music and uncut performances that I have emphasised were an important part of the discovery of Handel opera in America, the *Xerxes* production, like a number of others, reminded the audience that Handel too could work as popular entertainment.

Representative of the growing affection for Handel's operas in the USA, with varying degrees of idiomatic flavour, were performances of two magnificent, but quite different, works: *Partenope* and *Radamisto*. Glimmerglass Opera in Cooperstown, New York, in a co-production with New York City Opera, presented the American premiere of *Partenope* in 1998. This modern 'hip' production, in an intimate 950-seat theatre, was wildly successful, with Lisa Saffer captivating in the lead. The brilliant performance, conducted by Harry Bicket, was also the breakthrough moment for David Daniels, although he had already performed in Glimmerglass's 1995 *Tamerlano* and the above-mentioned *Xerxes* of 1996.

Glimmerglass also deserves credit for the first professionally staged production of *Tolomeo* in America in 2010, the same year that the production of *Partenope* returned to the New York City Opera with Cyndia Sieden in the title role, and the same year that Boston Baroque presented a further semi-staged period-instrument performance of *Partenope* with Amanda Forsythe, now rightly considered a Handelian superstar (she currently tours the USA, accompanied by the vibrant Cleveland-based chamber ensemble Apollo's Fire, with a recital titled 'The Power of Love', featuring arias from Handel operas). Finally, in the fall of 2014, San Francisco Opera scored a great success presenting the award-winning ENO production of this buoyant work, virtually unheard of in America less than two decades ago. And David Daniels was still at it!

The trail of *Radamisto* through the stages of America is even more extensive. Famous, among other things, as the opera that spearheaded the Handel Renaissance at Göttingen almost a century ago, the uncut concert performance – led by Will Crutchfield with period instruments at the annual Connecticut Early Music Festival in 1993 – certainly paved the way for the ensuing American odyssey of this seminal Royal Academy work. St Louis Opera Theater presented a beguiling English-language production of *Radamisto* in 2000 (and followed recently with the American premiere of *Riccardo Primo* discussed below). Next, Santa Fe Opera, in a co-

production with ENO, stepped up in 2008, with a strong cast headed again by David Daniels and conducted by Harry Bicket, now Chief Conductor of Santa Fe Opera. Juilliard Opera Theater finally brought a staged performance of *Radamisto* to New York with its period-instrument orchestra in 2013, the same year that the ubiquitous Harry Bicket once again brought his English Concert to Carnegie Hall for a concert performance of *Radamisto*. The following year, in 2014, his concert performance of *Alcina* with Joyce DiDonato and the same forces at Carnegie Hall (and elsewhere worldwide) was likewise a highlight of the season.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to four recent performances that demonstrate the vitality and extent of Handel's presence in America. Featuring mostly young American artists, these four productions are among the most compelling that I have encountered of Handel on stage in America in recent years (reviews of all four may be found on my website, [www.operaconbrio.com](http://www.operaconbrio.com)). The first, in the winter of 2011, was a psychologically penetrating production by Peter Sellars of the operatic oratorio *Hercules* in the large venue of the Chicago Lyric Opera. Presenting Hercules in this updated production as a victim of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), the powerful production explored the effects of combat on the lives of warriors and their families, a topic all too relevant in America today. Once again Harry Bicket led the orchestra; Eric Owen was the muscular Hercules; two wonderful British mezzos, Alice Coote and Lucy Crowe, took the roles of Dejanira and Iola respectively. Peter Sellars, so instrumental in the formative period of Handel operas in America, is happily still a strong creative force.

Next was *Amadigi*, performed in the historic mining town of Central City, high in the mountains of Colorado, in the summer of 2011. In the tiny theatre of Central City Opera (capacity 550), four outstanding Handeliens brought this wonderful magic opera to life in a backdated production in which all the action took place within the confines of a splendid Renaissance *studiolo*. In this moving production, the sorceress Melissa, Kathleen Kim – fresh from her recent success singing the title role of *Agrippina* that spring for Boston Lyric Opera – became an especially sympathetic character as she suffered from her unrequited love for Amadigi (Christopher Ainslie). Another outstanding American countertenor, David Trudgen (also in the Boston *Agrippina*), was the poignant competing lover, Dardano; soprano Katherine Manley rounded out the cast as Oriana.

Third on the list was a stark and dramatic production of *Teseo* the following season in 2012 at Chicago Opera Theater, a production again with a Boston connection since Emmanuel Music's principal continuo player, Michael Beattie, led the inspired and idiomatic performance of Chicago's period-instrument Baroque Band. With mostly contemporary dress and props, the magic of this production came from the humanity of the characters, expressed in the exquisite emotion-laden arias and ensembles of Handel's magnificent score. The young American mezzo Renee Tatum, fresh from a three-year stint in the Met's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program, mesmerised the audience with a dynamic interpretation of Medea: not as an archetypal enchantress, but as nothing short of a dark and foreboding Lady Macbeth who at the opera's close does not escape in a fury with dragon-drawn flying chariot (as the libretto prescribes), but lingers on stage, a spent force, victim of her own machinations. Teseo, the target of her affection, originally a soprano castrato, became an effective trouser role for soprano Cecelia Hall. Hailed by *The Chicago Tribune* as 'the next generation's answer to David Daniels', the extraordinary countertenor David Trudgen sang the role of Teseo's companion, Arcane.

Finally, in June 2015, the always-engaging Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (OTSL) presented the American premiere of *Richard the Lionheart*, an English-language adaptation of Handel's 1727 *Riccardo Primo, Re D'Inghilterra*. The production, capturing the shipwreck motif of the convoluted story, was a great success on every level, epitomising the kind of riveting musical theatre for which the company is so well-known. In the lead was the experienced British countertenor Tim Mead: with a ringing voice and vigorous athleticism to match, he stole the

show. Yet St Louis was fortunate to also have another marvellous countertenor, the young Boston-trained Tai Oney, as impressive here as when I have had the good fortune to hear him at the New England Conservatory and at the annual London Handel Festival.

My few comments, of course, just scratch the surface of America's growing love affair with Handel. What I have shared in this short series is based not only on having had the good fortune to attend, over the last half-century, all the performances of Handel operas and oratorios mentioned here, but also to have taught all the Handel operas and oratorios numerous times in courses as part of my adult-education programme, *Opera con Brio*. Indeed, the explosion of Handel performances across America includes many others I have attended and often led tours to, performances in houses large and small, at conservatories, and at numerous festivals.

I make no pretence of having being complete in my survey, but have suggested what may be representative of the Handel renaissance in America, with Boston, most familiar to me, serving as kind of a microcosm, as well as an impetus, for the growing spread. My intent has not been to advocate any particular approach to performing works once considered so irrevocably hamstrung by impossibly un-theatrical Baroque conventions. As it turns out, almost any approach works with Handel's richly human 'nothing much happens' style of theatre, be it performances semi-staged or fully staged, authentically Baroque or inventively updated, cut or uncut, in concert form or dance-integrated. My aim has been simply to illuminate some of the paths and influences that have brought the humanity and vitality of Handel's operas to increased public awareness and appreciation here in America. Handel is, after all, a composer for all time, all people and all countries.