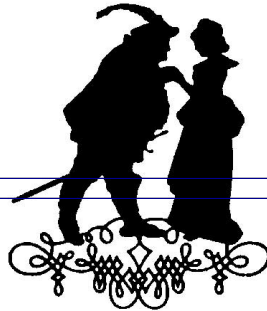


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Handel Festival Halle 2014

A Phoenix Rises

In late August 2012, the state of Vermont succumbed to the devastation wrought by a historic hurricane turned tropical cyclone. Major floodwaters and debris surged through rivers and communities; the infrastructure of towns and villages throughout the state was destroyed; bridges were swept away making travel impossible. One and a half years later, in the late spring of 2013, an unrelated event devastated much of central Germany. Heavy rain followed an exceptionally wet spring, causing floodwaters from the river Saale, a tributary of the Elbe, to devastate Halle an der Saale, the attractive town of Handel's birth. Some 30,000 inhabitants of the town were told to evacuate; the entire ten-day Handel Festival in Halle was cancelled.

My wife and I were witness to both events. In Vermont, the centers of our local village (Proctorsville) and nearby town (Ludlow) were torn apart; in Germany, en route to Halle by car, a friend emailed to tell us of the catastrophe in Halle. We drove to nearby Dresden instead; there riverside restaurants on the Elbe were underwater and sandbags surrounded the famed

Semperoper. The opera still performed Handel's *Orlando* that evening, but without changes in scenery, which could not be moved into the theatre.

Speculation was immediate and sharp as to why indeed the entire Festival in Halle had to be cancelled. Given my experience in Vermont, with rivers slicing through towns and then in Germany, having seen scores



A flooded street in Halle, spring 2013

Photo: Jan Woitas/EPA

of red cross and rescue vehicles heading to Halle on the autobahn, the decisions seemed to me, as disappointed as I was, both sound and justified. But the larger concern was in what form could any Handel Festival be held in Halle in the future, given the uncertainty of the weather and the potential for a repeat of such a catastrophic event. Would substantial financial donations be forthcoming, or support from politicians, musical and various other organizations, sponsors, and not least of all, the public? Could the Festival survive such a seemingly radical decision?

The answer was clear almost immediately. Within days of my return to Boston, I received, from what must be one of the world's most efficient and helpful press offices, the complete schedule for the Handel Festival Halle 2014, already in place. In Vermont, with fall foliage season immanent, response was just as swift; most bridges were rebuilt in time for the spectacular array of fall colors to be enjoyed by many; further down the road, the recovery led to extensive redevelopment of many village centers. All this is another story. Regarding Halle, the happy ending came not just with the quick reaffirmation of the 2014 season, but also with the recent completion of that season. With a wide array of performances, encompassing every genre from concerto to opera, but fortunately, without the less desirable flow of a little water music, this year's Festival was as invigorating, diverse, and artistically sound as one could possibly wish.

The ten-day festival, from June fifth to fifteenth, included more than one hundred performances in twenty-two different venues, from various churches including the Halle Cathedral where Handel was once organist, to various opera venues including not only the century-old Halle Opera but also the two-century-old Goethe-Theater in Bad Lauchstädt. An extraordinary six operas (or opera-related performances) were a central focus of the Festival, beginning with an opera rarity, *Arminio* in a new production by Oper Halle, and concluding with an even more rare performance of a late Handel *pasticcio*, *Giove in Argo*. An additional perspective on Handel's operatic

career also included four strikingly diverse works. One was *Almira*, the twenty-year old Handel's early German opera, the only work to receive a special performance by Oper Halle just after the cancelled season (ironically the focus at the same time of last year's Boston Early Music Festival). Another was a key work from Handel's first Academy period at mid-career, *Riccardo Primo*, in a keenly anticipated production in the Goethe-Theater Bad Lauchstädt by Lautten Compagny Berlin. Additionally, two stunning concert performance were musical highlights of the Festival: one, the always engaging early "magic" opera *Amadigi di Gaula*, the other, Handel's exquisite serenata *Il Parnasso in Festa* from 1734, which might as well be labeled an opera, given a thrilling performance by the specialized baroque musicians from La Cetra Barokorchester Basel.



Hagen Matzeit as Arminio; Melanie Hirsch as Tusnelda Photo: Mikesh Kaos

A Rare *Arminio* Opens the Festival

All this was a feast for eye and ear indeed. I was unable to attend *Almira*, but as last year, the opening opera performance in 2014 was also a new production by Oper Halle, *Arminio*, in this case a relatively obscure late Handel opera of 1737. Handel used a libretto by Antonio Salvi in the mold of the old military heroic type operas he had set prior to his excursion into the fabulous Ariosto-based magic operas (*Orlando* and *Alcina*) earlier in the decade. Loosely built around the historical

German defeat of the Roman legions under Varus in the year 9 C.E. that put an end to Roman expansion into Gaul, it became one of the most popular librettos of the age, set first by Alessandro Scarlatti in 1703, and later by Steffani and Hasse, among numerous others.

Handel pretty much ignored what other composers had done with the opera. With his London collaborator, he cut much recitative from Salvi's original libretto, keeping all the characters, but maintaining the mere outline of the originally convoluted *opera seria* plot. Herein lies the problem for a director of the work today, with which British director Nigel Lowery struggled imaginatively to cope, but with only moderate success. Rather than take a direct approach to get to the heart of the inherent drama, as Paul Curran had done in the equally convoluted *Faramondo* I had attended just the previous night at the Göttingen International Handel Festival, Mr. Nigel took a metaphorical approach, using the opera to reflect on the power of German unity and art rather than on the virtues of honor and duty for an operatic hero and the lengths to which such a hero must go to defend these virtues. What seemed to emerge, thus, was more muddle than majesty.

The complicated plot revolves around the titular character Arminio, a German prince determined to defeat the Romans. Another prince, Segeste, would rather surrender, and will go to all sorts of devious means, including betrayal of his ally Arminio, to achieve his aims. Meanwhile Varo, the invading Roman general, also loves



Julia Böhme as Ramise; Jeffrey Kim as Sigismondo; Hagen Matzeit as Arminio; Tomasz Raff as Segeste
Photo: Mikesh Kaos

Arminio's wife, Tusnelda, daughter of the devious prince Segeste. Further, archetypal *opera seria* complications include the fact that Segeste also has a son, Sigismondo, who, naturally, is in love with Arminio's sister, Ramise. Yet amidst the ensuing emotional turmoil, to which the arias give varied expression, is an overwhelming concern, as Donna Leon explains in her fine notes to the stunning Alan Curtis recording of the opera: "At risk in *Arminio* is a kingdom, the kingdom of the Germans, a theme that Handel, a German after all, might easily have turned into the worst sort of nationalistic trumpeting." Happily, the production does not fall into this trap, in spite of the fact that the defeat of Varus became a source of national pride in German history. But what it does do is trumpet the power of art – German art, indeed German opera to be precise – which is all to the good as well. The only problem is that doing this causes the drama to fall somewhat short of the kind of cohesive, theatrical production one yearns to have, even if Handel's telescoping of the plot made it difficult to achieve.

Arminio as Metaphor

It occurred to me during the performance that perhaps the metaphor was in part a response to the cancellation of the previous year's Halle Festival. Most of the time the stage set was the auditorium of a traditional Italian opera house, and across the three rows of loges were emblazoned the names of German composers of opera, among them Gluck, Telemann, Hasse, Weber, Mozart, Wagner and of course Handel. At the beginning of the opera, stagehands broke down a large model of the Brandenburg Gate in front of the curtain; toward the end of the opera, with Arminio's victory over Varo, it is rebuilt in the auditorium. German art, it would seem, had triumphed. With *Arminio*, like the Phoenix rising from destruction, the festival not only survived but also was back in full glory. So was the music of Handel.

Hence during the opera Tusnelda, with her breastplate and winged helmet, could have been right at home in *Die Walküre*. On the other hand, Arminio's sister, Ramise, dancing simple but charming steps in her



Melanie Hirsch as Tusnelda; Jeffrey Kim as Sigismondo;
Julia Böhme as Ramise Photo: Mikesh Kaos

froufrou ballerina costume, could have come straight from the Commedia dell'Arte tradition, a nod perhaps to its influence on opera. And then there was Sigismondo / Siegmund pulling the Valkyrie sword from the tree trunk, affirming his decision to protect Arminio and the Germans against his disloyal father and the Romans. Later, Arminio, like the Germanic hero Siegfried, forges anew the shattered sword pieces. Superimposed amidst the allegiance to German art was the inclusion of a silent observer (actor Bernd G. Albert) who, looking to Americans much like Alfred Hitchcock, seems to be some kind of government official about to close down the theatre (or by extension perhaps the Festival itself). He emerges first from our auditorium in a gray suit, later reappearing in the stage auditorium. A ubiquitous presence, he sometimes interacts with performers, even bringing the action to a halt on occasion.



Jeffrey Kim as Sigismondo; Bernd G. Albert as the observer
Photo: Mikesh Kaos

The political message is made even more explicit when we, the real-life audience return from intermission for the second half of the opera and encounter a presentation on a screen of a shopping mall, cinema complex and the like, clearly suggesting a more practical application for the excessive expenses incurred from such theatrical enterprises as opera. The struggle thus, in Lowery's concept, no longer becomes Germans against Romans, but a conflict between the value of German art and the commercialization of culture. All this was reinforced, perhaps a bit heavily, by quotes from Hans Sachs' final monologue in *Die Meistersinger*, written in large irregular letters at the back of the stage toward the opera's end, sermonizing how salvation comes through art, how the respect for tradition and discipline of great art liberates us and frees us from contentious rivalries.



Arminio, Hagen Matzeit, forges the sword anew
Photo: Mikesh Kaos

All that is fine, but the political message was not always integrated in a convincing way, coming across as somewhat contrived and, alas, even superficial. The laudable intent was at the expense of a cohesive musical drama. For better or worse, Lowery and his team were heartily booed at the premiere; yet those involved in the musical performance, received rapturous applause.

Rightly so. The Handel Festival orchestra, under the fine direction of violinist-turned-conductor Bernhard Forck, played with a brisk and nuanced elegance in support of a fine cast. My only regret was the addition of percussion, evidently to enhance timbre and rhythm.

Two capable countertenors, rather than the perhaps more usual female singers, took the two very different castrato roles, Arminio and Sigismondo. Hagen Matzeit, with an especially rich dark timbre, gave the title role the necessary vigor and heft, balancing this with some clear, lighter-toned coloratura. The lighter voiced Jeffrey Kim, with impeccable coloratura technique, took Sigismondo, far from a heroic figure, but with some breathtaking music to express his inner conflicts, especially that between loyalty to his father and love for Arminio's sister Ramise. His thrilling showpiece aria of Act II, "Quella fiamma" rightly brought down the house (the real one, that is!).

A standout among the women was the *prima donna* soprano Melanie Hirsch as Handel's archetypal suffering heroine. Most of her seven solos are thus in the minor mode, but her one major key aria closing Act II, the lovely siciliano "Rendimi il dolce sposo" ("Give me back my dearest") was especially expressive as Ms. Hirsch wonderfully intertwined her appeal to Varo to spare Arminio's life with the hushed strings. Minor roles were all effectively cast as well: Julia Boehm, whose pleasant mezzo combined with her girlish dance steps made for an enticing Ramise; lyric tenor Robert Sellier was solid in Varo's two arias; bass Ki-Hyun Park blustered appropriately as the Roman captain Tullio; another solid bass, Tomasz Raf, the villainous Segeste, was especially good in his dramatic recitative.

A Sizzling *Riccardo Primo*

Thus, while we were left to ponder the effectiveness of the production, or exactly what its political message may have been, one thing was clear: like the phoenix rising from the ashes, the Handel Festival in Halle was back in business, shaking off any lingering impact of the enforced hiatus. Next on the agenda – the following afternoon in fact – came the much-anticipated return of the enterprising Lautten Compagny Berlin, performing per usual at the intimate Goethe Theatre in the nearby spa town of Bad Lauchstädt (some fifteen kilometers outside Halle). Five years ago, in the Festival of

2009, I had been enthralled with the *Serse* that they brought to life in a captivating, fast-moving production that caught the very essence of Handel's buoyant satirical comedy. This year promised to be no less enticing with the relatively neglected *Riccardo Primo* of 1727, the eleventh of the thirteen *opera seria* Handel had written for the Royal Academy of Music, a vehicle for such luminaries as the sensational castrato Senesino and the infamous dueling sopranos, Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Borodoni.

This year's Festival may have escaped the wrath of water, but just as the run of three performances began, a burgeoning heat wave took over, causing the tiny auditorium of the eighteenth-century theater to become so overheated and stuffy that by the third performance a second intermission had been added to allow for a "World Cup" water break. No matter, the young company, which consists of talented artists from master courses in baroque opera organized by the University of Music Franz Liszt in Weimar, forged on with great brio. Led by their conductor/director Wolfgang Katschner, they gave a performance that both captivated and perplexed. That is, on a musical level the young singers were wonderfully persuasive and engaged in their diverse roles, not as superstars, but as contributing members of a cohesive ensemble; in terms of the production, the audience was once again left with more than a few unanswered questions regarding liberties taken in the director's somewhat mystifying concept. But this time the audience loved it.



The intimate Goethe Theatre in Bad Lauchstädt

Photo: Patricia Reese

The improbable original plot involves Riccardo I, alias Richard the Lion Hearted, (Senesino) and his fiancé, Costanza (Cuzzoni), who have never met and are separately shipwrecked on Cyprus. The villainous Isacio, the King of Cyprus, naturally falls in love with Costanza, and attempts with various schemes to win her. Initially he convinces his lively daughter, Pulcheria (Faustina), to abandon her own fiancé, Oronte, and to feign identity as Costanza in order to wed Riccardo. Pulcheria, however, doesn't go along with the ruse for long; indeed she and Costanza turn out not to be "rival sopranos" after all, but become friends. Riccardo eventually defeats the tyrannical Isacio in battle and magnanimously pardons him (of course), handing over Cyprus to Pulcheria and Oronte.

Riccardo Primo, Re d'Inghilterra was Handel's only *opera seria* based, however loosely, on the story of an English monarch. As such, it is a thinly disguised allegory of George II, having premiered in 1727, the year of his coronation. But don't be fooled. We get none of that here. The approach of young director Clara Kalus is to focus almost entirely on Costanza as an archetypal long-suffering "damsel in distress," the kind of role for which Cuzzoni was famous. This necessitated some unfortunate cuts in the role of Pulcheria (Faustina would have been furious) and, most unsettling of all, the elimination of the formal *lieto fine*, with its requisite forgiveness and reconciliation. Instead, Costanza escapes to daylight (and relief from the stifling auditorium) through a door at the back of the stage, leaving all those who had thrown her life into chaos in a heap back on stage - under a black tarp no less.

Now that the reader is duly perplexed as well, some explanation is in order, if indeed there is one. One good friend, an esteemed critic from Germany, Thomas Molke, viewed the whole thing as the hallucination or bad dream of the shipwrecked Costanza. When the curtain goes up we find Costanza, amidst chaotically stacked white bedroom furniture. During the course of



Cornelius Uhle as Berardo; Marielou Jacquard as Costanza; Georg Bochow as Oronte; Ludwig Obst as Isacio; Jennifer Gleinig as Pulcheria Photo: Oliver Fantitsch

the opera the furniture is gradually reassembled, with the large bed still missing a leg. The fact that all three acts take place in this gradually reassembled bedroom suite suggests Costanza's nightmare, says Mr. Molke. Strangest of all, by the end of the third act, all characters save Costanza have put on animal heads: the subservient Pulcheria, that of a mouse; the conniving Isacio, a baboon; Oronte and Riccardo respectively, a chimpanzee and a gorilla. Finally Costanza, the only one *sans* mask, pulls a large black tarp over the whole set, including the immobilized "animals" who meanwhile have sung awkwardly in their animal heads. While doing so, finally



Cornelius Uhle as Berardo watches as Costanza prepares to emerge Photo: Oliver Fantitsch

able to cheer up, she chirps her great bravura simile aria about the feathered creature she has now clearly become, “il volo così fido” (“A surer flight to his sweet nest no bird could have”). Except that she is now not flying to a nest with Riccardo, but fleeing the scene. Lucky her, given the mess she leaves behind.

I’m not so sure the director concocts this scenario as escape from a bad dream, although this could well be the case. Rather it seems perhaps the growing up of a young woman beset by all sorts of impediments, from the first moment that the bewildered creature crawls out from beneath the piled-up topsy-turvy furniture, only to soon encounter the menacing and controlling Isacio. She seems to discover her true love in Riccardo, but at the end, she skips out to the garden and sunlight, abandoning him along with the other unenlightened characters. “Curiouser and curiouser,” as Alice in Wonderland would say. Whatever the case, I didn’t think it all really worked, and I sorely missed the delightful production two years ago from the young performers at the London Handel Festival in which an austere set, with fragments of a Greek temple and a few naturalistic touches and video productions, brought the complete score to life, including even its perfunctory final arias and *lieto fine*. But again the audience loved it, greeting the performers and production with an enthusiastic ovation.

This was as much a credit to the fine ensemble of young performers as it was appreciation of the gusto and vigor with which the renowned Lautten Compagny Berlin engaged its audience. A standout in the talented young cast was certainly the Costanza of soprano Marielou Jacquard, who brilliantly warbled and trilled



Marielou Jacquard as Costanza Photo: Oliver Fantitsch



Zoe Kissa as Riccardo I Photo: Oliver Fantitsch

along with the sopranino recorder in her final avian simile aria. As Riccardo, mezzo soprano Zoe Kissa couldn’t quite replicate the higher pitched demand of the original castrato role, but was a delight in moments like that of her mellifluous duet, “T’amo si,” at her long delayed first meeting with Costanza. The eloquent intimacy of their assertion of eternal faithfulness seemed at odds with the director’s concept of having Costanza leave Riccardo behind beneath a black tarp at opera’s end. The Pulcheria of the rich-voiced mezzo Jennifer Gleinig was another delight, especially in moments like her simile aria of a proud eagle, “L’aguila altera,” late in the opera. But this great showpiece for Faustina is about an eagle, not a mouse! And I can’t help but wish that the production had kept her as Costanza’s equal in terms of allotted music, since Handel took great care to do so. This, however, seems not to have fit the director’s concept involving exaggerated emphasis on Costanza and her journey to freedom and mental health.

Other young soloists joined in with Katschner’s often-brisk tempos to keep the music making at a consistently high level. The fine bass Ludwig Obst was a most convincing Isacio (before he turned baboon), countertenor Georg Bochow, a fitting Oronte (before he too joined the primates). Although the orchestra unfortunately included augmented winds and added percussion, the fine conducting and the general propulsion of the strings made for a vibrant if not always lyrical performance. Rather than a showpiece for superstars as originally intended, the piece became a pulsing music drama, filled with tension and anxiety from which one character, at least, would happily escape.

Two Stunning Concert Operas

For all the fine performers in the above works, many of them promising young artists setting out on careers, the more established stars appeared in two stunning concerts, one Handel's early "magic" opera of 1715, *Amadigi di Gaula*, and the other his rarely performed serenata of 1734, *Parnasso in festa*, really an opera in disguise composed for the wedding of Princess Anne and William IV of Orange. Each work includes substantial virtuosic demands from the relatively small casts. As esteemed writer Charles Burney maintained near the end of the eighteenth century, "*Amadigi* 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." The same could be said of *Parnasso in festa*, a score he probably never had a chance to peruse.

Each work was presented in the acoustically friendly Georg-Friedrich-Händel Halle, a concert venue that happily invites the audience to savor every clarion orchestral detail as well as every nuance of vocal execution. This was especially nice given the orchestral forces at hand, as well as the sensational cast for each. For *Amadigi* the Kammerorchester Basel, under the capable direction of Ottavio Dantone, showed again why its brilliant performances of baroque operas are so revered. Likewise for *Parnasso in festa* with the esteemed baroque ensemble La Cetra Baroque Orchestra and its choir, led by artistic director, Andrea Marcon. Its link with the *Schola Cantorum Basiliensis*, which trains the Swiss early-music elite helps explain why the group provided such an idiomatic, historically informed performance, as well as the surprise hit of the Festival.

Amadigi di Gaula - The Magic is in the Music

The cast of each was simply spectacular. First up, on the evening of June 7, came *Amadigi*, whose cast certainly did justice to Handel's original, which included two alto and two soprano roles. Famed Neapolitan alto



The Kammerorchester Basel and the soloists take bows after *Amadigi*
Photo: Patricia Reese

castrato Nicolo Grimaldi ("Nicolini") took the title role, while the other, that of the insanely jealous Dardano was taken by a young female contralto, Diana Vico. In Halle, two exceptional alto countertenors were especially impressive as the competing lovers, each skillfully portraying the different traits of his character. Experienced American countertenor Lawrence Zazzo was brilliant in the title role, singing with a clear tone and mellifluous heft, wonderfully expressive, for example, with the two recorders that stylishly graced his long cavatina in Act II as he addresses the Fountain of True Love (a famous stage detail in its day). The less well known Italian countertenor Filippo Mineccia was equally impressive as Dardano, whose agonized lament, "Penna tiranna" in Act II was the show-stopping event of the evening. Mineccia's rich and sometimes earthy tone was a perfect match for this famous sarabande. Coupled with the expressive orchestra of strings in five parts and the careful pianissimos of the single oboe taking over the mournful suspensions first presented by the bassoon in the ritornello, the aria was mesmerizing. Somehow, given all the times I have heard this famous piece in various contexts (Handel after all revised it on several occasions), this seemed the most wrenchingly dramatic and poignant, thanks also to Maestro Dantone's careful control of detail and *rubato* in the orchestra.

Of Handel's two sopranos, the most famous by far was the acclaimed Elisabetta Pilotti, who already had portrayed the spurned sorceresses in *Rinaldo* and *Teseo* (Armida and Medea respectively). Now with *Amadigi* she took on the third, Melissa, with equal success, and Halle was fortunate to have experienced Canadian superstar Karina Gauvin to take on the demanding role. Melissa is a much more subtle creation than either Armida or Medea because she is so much more human, a fact that Ms. Gauvin clearly brought out in her first aria "Ah! Spieato! E no ti muove," showing her not as sorceress but as a woman in love. A highlight was her later bravura aria of rage, "Destero dall'empia Dite," full of vigor and determination following repeated humiliating rejections from Amadigi. But it was no mere vocal display, since the thrilling trumpet and oboe obbligato so wonderfully melded with the requisite coloratura, quite an accomplishment when the balance of competing elements is so tricky.

Finally, experienced baroque specialist, Italian soprano Roberta Invernizzi completed this attractive quartet as Oriana, the object of affection for the pair of jealous countertenors. A lovely balance to the cast, she seemed especially well suited to the role, with a hint of the *bel canto* style of Bellini as she spun out Italian texts in expansive and melodic lines. A highlight was certainly her lament in the second act, "S'estinto è l'idol mio" when she believes Amadigi dead (rather than asleep). All in all, with this stunning cast, effectively complemented by the capable and sensitive musical direction of Ottavio Dantone, the performance brought out what Handel cared about most, the expressive articulation of his characters' deepest feeling, not the magic effects – which in this concert performance we didn't have anyway!

Il Parnasso in Festa – A Performance fit for Royalty

Such a performance would seem hard to match. But for me the surprise hit of the Festival came two days later with the serenata *Il Parnasso in Festa*, in part perhaps because of my lack of familiarity with this neglected work, much of it borrowed from the oratorio *Athalia* of the previous year, 1733. *Parnasso* is so Italianate,



La Cetra Baroque Orchestra and the soloists for *Parnasso in Festa*
Photo: Mahala Tillinghast Beams

however, that one would never know it. The full title of this wedding serenata reflects the undramatic nature of the piece: *Parnasso in Festa per gli sponsali di Teti e Peleo* (*Parnassos in Celebration for the Nuptials of Thetis and Peleus*). The celebrations on Mount Parnassus of the mythological figures of Thetis and Peleus, who are not personified in the serenata, are of course an allegory for those of the royal wedding of Princess Anne and William IV of Orange, the occasion for which the piece was written. It is left to an assortment of other characters to celebrate the union: Apollo and his son Orpheus, the muses Clio, Calliope and Euterpe, and even the huntress Cloride and the god of war, Mars.

And they do so with some of the most virtuosic arias Handel ever composed, especially those for Apollo, a part originally written for the famous mezzo soprano castrato Carestini. Australian countertenor David Hansen was fully up to the demanding task, indeed extraordinary in the role. He exhibited with impeccable technique all the flashy brilliance of the difficult coloratura, his lower tones providing an expressive masculine *tinta* that wonderfully filled out the role. Complementing him, generally with slower more melancholic arias, was the stunning male soprano Paolo Lopez as Orfeo, whose liquid tone, so bright and clear, was captivating, especially in his ethereal upper register. The second most important role in the serenata was that of Clio, taken by the appropriately contrasting soprano Martina Janková,

delightfully lyrical and expressive. Impressively, the various talented singers emerging from the chorus took most other roles: Silke Gäng (Calliope and Cloride), Jenny Högström (Euterpe) and Ismael Arróniz (Marte). All together, with the virtuosic playing of the inspired Cetra orchestra under Maestro Marcon, so finely balanced with the stunning chorus and soloists, this concert performance of an infrequently performed serenata became, from a strictly musical point of view, one of the high points of the festival.

Three Visiting Ensembles Delight

“Duello Amoroso: Händel versus Steffani”

There is not room to expand at length on the extraordinary richness and diversity of the Handel Festival in Halle. A sampling of these performances must suffice. An especially enticing concert was called “Duello Amoroso” (“Loving Duel”), offered on a warm Sunday morning (June 8) in the elegant Aula of Martin-Luther-University, attended by Handel in 1702. A particular focus of the festival (as it was also of the Göttingen International Handel Festival) was the three hundredth anniversary of the coronation of George I of England in 1714 who had employed Handel as his Kapellmeister before moving to London from Hanover. In this capacity Handel was under the tutelage of the renowned Italian



La Venexiana and Soloists after “Duello Amoroso” in the elegant Aula
Photo: Mahala Tillinghast Beams

composer Agostino Steffani (1654-1728), whose acquaintance he had made in his three-year apprenticeship in Italy.

“Duello Amoroso” was an appealing program of duets and arias from cantatas by Steffani and Handel, which the renowned early music ensemble La Venexiana offered with two singers experienced in the baroque repertory, soprano Roberta Mameli and countertenor Raffaele Pè. One could savor in pieces like the poignant imitative chromatic soprano lament, “Occhi, perché piangete?” the influence of Steffani on Handel. In the two Steffani duets, the pair of crystalline voices blended and intertwined with ease. One could also clearly hear the influence on Bach. Cello, theorbo, and harp, provided elegant and nuanced support, with director Claudio Cavina at the cembalo. It was a delightful occasion.

Festive Coronation Anthems for George II

Elsewhere during the week, two grand concerts, from two visiting orchestras, in two separate church venues offered two captivating but divergent works. On June 9, the FestspielOrchester Göttingen performed the popular *Coronation Anthems*, written for George II, in the Marktkirche zu Halle, the sixteenth-century church in which Handel was baptized and where he first learned to play the organ. Handel wrote these four lively and festive anthems following his official appointment as “Composer of Musick for his Majesty’s Chapel Royal” in 1723. The FestspielOrchester Göttingen had just performed them the previous week in Göttingen, and it was a special treat to have its Artistic Director Laurence Cummings bring them to Halle, especially in such an historic venue. Various symphonic pieces provided interludes to the anthems. Special note should be made of J. C. Bach’s *Sinfonia concertante A-Dur für Violine and Violoncello mit Orchester*, in which violinist Elizabeth Blumenstock and Boston-based cellist Phoebe Carrai performed their respective concertante parts with such finesse and impassioned brio. For all that, however, the hit of the evening was the well known first Anthem, *Zadok, the Priest*, played last with great élan. It made a rousing finale, and also encore, to the festive evening.

A Rarity - *Solomon* by William Boyce

The next day brought a special Gala concert with the famous London-based Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OEA) performing in the seven-hundred-year-old Halle Cathedral in which Handel had been organist about the time he was also a student at the University (1702-1703). The acclaimed period-instrument orchestra, under the able direction of harpsichordist Steven Devine, offered a crisp performance of the rarely performed *Solomon* of William Boyce, appointed “Master of the King’s Musick” in 1757 by King George II. Among other things, I had especially looked forward to hearing the highly acclaimed young soprano Lucy Crowe in the piece; alas she was unable to perform. However, with much credit to the esteemed Choir of the Enlightenment, two of its sopranos, Katie Tretheway and Amy Moore, each took over half of the performance with great success. James Gilchrist, not surprisingly, was the clear voiced, technically secure tenor. The only caveat in the vast space of the cathedral was the lively resonance, which caused a blurring of sound, rather than fostering the distinctness one desired.

Giove in Argo takes flight

As if all of the above were not enough, on each of its last three days, the Festival presented another rarity, Handel’s 1739 *pasticcio Giove in Argo*, once again in the intimate Goethe Theater at Bad Lauchstädt. Perhaps in part because the brief heat wave had broken, the production was especially enjoyable, particularly given the energetic and expert musical performance by the Orchester & Vokalensemble l’arte del mondo under the attentive musical direction of Werner Ehrhardt. But the imaginative production helped too. Rather than place this pastoral piece in the countryside, as the disguised shepherds and shepherdesses would suggest, the action moves to an airport, and is enlivened with various action-film antics. It all may sound a bit contrived – but after all, the work itself, put together by Handel in the waning days of his opera career and using numbers from his earlier works, is a concoction no less contrived, quite in keeping with the baroque opera aesthetic.



Natalia Rubis as Calisto ; Krystian Adam as Zeus; Roberta Mameli as Iside
Photo: Tilmann Graner

With no intention of examining in detail the tangled plot, the story, derived from the more frivolous side of Greek mythology, involves two of the many amorous adventures of Zeus (Giove), his pursuit of both Calisto and of Iside (Isis). Calisto is under the wing of Diana who naturally insists on her chastity; Iside is promised to Erasto (alias Osiris). Given the airport concept, one can easily extrapolate: Zeus becomes a dashing pilot, always on the make; Diana appears as a tightly uniformed flight attendant, initiating the new recruit, blond bombshell Calisto, into her ranks; Iside pops up as a back-packing young woman on the fly. There is naturally a complicating back-story to it all, providing the requisite *opera seria* vengeance component. The tyrant Licaone has killed Iside’s father, Inachus, before the opera. This event is acted out during the overture, leaving the poor victim sprawled on the airport floor for most of the opera. No arias for him!



Natalia Rubis as Calisto; Barbara Emilia Schedel as Diana Photo: Tilmann Graner

Enough of the plot. What really engages the audience in the fast moving sequences is, of course, Handel's extraordinary music. And I mean extraordinary. With his beloved Italian opera losing popularity in London at this point, Handel skimmed some of his best music off the top from such works as *Teseo*, *Alcina*, *Arminio*, *Ezio*, *Faramondo*, and even the recently performed *Parnasso in festa*. The piece thus seems to be packed with one bravura aria after another. Who in Halle would mind revisiting arias from *Arminio* or *Parnasso in festa*? And what a delight for example, to hear again the stunning "Combattuta da piu venti" from *Faramondo* (recently performed in Göttingen) or to encounter the well known "Tornami a vagheggiar" from *Alcina*, both offered with valiant effort and great élan by soprano Natallia Rubis (substituting for the indisposed Arantza Ezenarro) as Calisto. Overall, the young and talented cast was more than up to the task: the fine tenor Krystian Adam, a suave, smooth-toned Giove; two sturdy basses, Thilo Dahlmann as Erasto and Johan Rydh as Licaone; and two other fine sopranos, the dynamic Emilia Schedel as the exacting Diana, and Roberta Mameli as Iside. Ms. Mameli was particularly dramatic in her extensive mad scene and later, especially expressive with fluid coloratura in her showpiece aria, "Questa d'un fido amore," as she confronts Zeus.

Written when he was beginning to concentrate more on English oratorios, the *pasticcio* also includes some eight choruses, some repeated, as when the action resumes after the intermission. A great strength of the production was indeed singers of the Vokalensemble l'arte del mondo, positioned at the side of the orchestra, but clearly visible to the audience. Like a true Greek chorus, their animated reactions to events on stage contributed to the immediacy of the production, and to the audience's involvement with this action. Although Handel classified the piece as an "opera," it is unclear whether the two performances at the King's Theater in 1739 were staged, semi-staged, or sung as an oratorio. Scholar Winton Dean once even

pondered whether the work was even worth doing, "except as a curiosity." Our thanks to Halle, then, for showing in this enterprising and successful production that indeed this *pasticcio* – be it a serenata (like *Parnasso in festa*) a pastorale (like *Acis and Galatea* from which it also borrows) or an oratorio – is not only worth doing, but deserves to be counted in the ranks of the forty-some operas in Handel's operatic repertory.



Roberta Mameli as Iside Photo: Tilmann Graner



The Market Square in Halle

Photo: Thomas Ziegler

A Phoenix Rises

Indeed, in 2014, the Handel Festival Halle was flooded with great music and great performances, of which the samples described above are representative. As Professor Dr. Norbert Lammert, President of the German Bundestag and Patron of the Handel Festival 2014 comments, “After the catastrophic flooding of the Saale last year which literally sank the festival, Halle once again figures among Germany’s major festival cities, to the great pleasure of Baroque music lovers.” Happily, a recent funding agreement from the State of Saxony-

Anhalt has also guaranteed the future of the Handel festival for the next three years up to 2017. It appears this year’s opening opera, *Arminio*, with its support-the-arts-and-opera concept, was prophetic after all. As the renowned American director of Handel operas, Stephen Wadsworth, has commented, “Handel’s operas are like beautiful places to sit and consider the ways of the world. Time spent with Handel is time reclaimed from our hectic, over-filled twentieth-century lives.” Our thanks to Halle an der Saale for providing this chance.

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Halle’s Statue of Handel

Photo: Horst Fechner