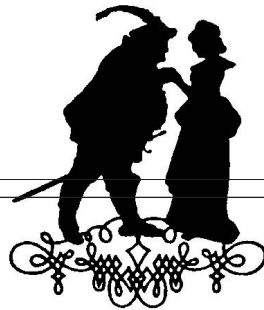


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Internationale Händel Festspiele Göttingen A Glorious *Hercules*

The 2023 Internationale Händel Festspiele Göttingen opened its Greek-themed season with two of Handel's greatest English "musical dramas": one sacred, the powerfully tragic *Hercules* of 1745 performed in concert on opening night at the refurbished 14th century St. Johannis Church; the other secular, the buoyantly playful *Semele* of 1744, staged at the intimate Deutsches Theatre. This dynamic duo, two peaks of Handel's dramatic output, made for an exquisite and apt pairing, especially considering the hiatus of such a forceful opening pair since Covid struck. As for *Hercules*, thanks to an outstanding cast and the stylish and idiomatic conducting of Festival Artistic Director George Petrou leading the FestspielOrchester Göttingen and the NDR Vokalensemble, this was perhaps the most vibrant and crisp of all performances of this monumental work that I have ever experienced.

Andreas Wolf, bass-baritone, as Hercules

The title role, although crucial, is not that long, but the stentorian young German bass-baritone Andreas Wolf was compelling as the beleaguered Hercules. Beginning with an energetic, even cheerful first air "the god of battle quits the bloody field," Hercules turns from war to love, buoyantly echoed in the spritely dance-like



Andreas Wolf as Hercules Photo: AlciroTheodoro da Silva

chorus “Crown with festal pomp...” In a similar vein, Mr. Wolf was masterful in his second air, “Alcides’ name in ancient story shall brightest shine,” especially with his careful articulation of the many short phrases amidst the gawky gait of the accompanying bassoons. Yet after these two light pieces, Mr. Wolf eventually brought out the sense of despair in the final imposing recitative and air of the dying Hercules, transposing a would-be jovial macho man into a truly tragic hero.

Vivica Genaux, mezzo-soprano, as Dejanira

In spite of the title *Hercules*, it is the two women in Trachis, Hercules’ wife Dejanira, mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux, and the captive Iole, soprano Anna Dennis, who have the lion’s share of vocal music – twelve arias and a duet between them, versus the mere three formal numbers for Hercules, whose death is caused eventually by Dejanira’s all-consuming but basically unwarranted jealousy of Iole.

Vivica Genaux, esteemed artist from Fairbanks, Alaska, was simply stunning as Dejanira, and there could hardly be a more fitting description of her illustrious quarter century career than that given in the notes from the Festival’s program book:



Vivica Genaux as Dejanira Photo: AlciroTheodoro da Silva

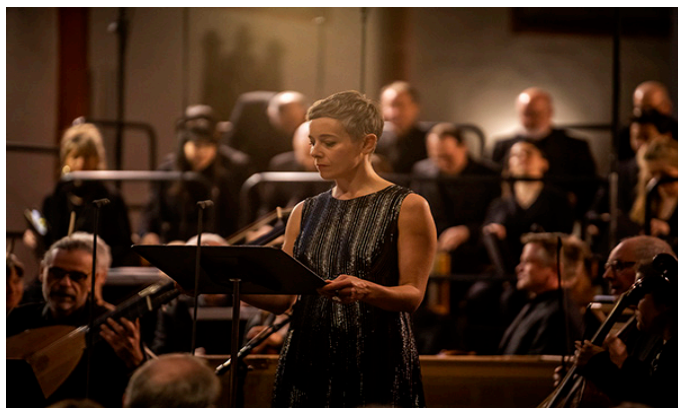
During her storied career, Vivica has amassed a repertory of more than sixty roles in opera and oratorio. Acclaimed for her vocal agility and the emotional depth of her performances, she is a celebrated interpreter of Baroque and bel canto works, especially parts composed for castrati.

Indeed, I have been fortunate to hear many of her performances, from comic Rossini at the Met, to a very early opera by Donizetti, *Alahor en Granada*, in Seville, to the title character of one of Handel’s most virtuosic roles, Ariodante, in Dallas, Texas.

But perhaps the role that best suits Ms. Genaux’s considerable skills, combining Baroque vocal virtuosity and dramatic flair, is that of Dejanira, Hercules’ loyal, but eventually estranged and jealous wife. The role is as complete and varied a portrait as Handel ever penned, and Ms. Genaux fully met all its demands. Notable was the ease of seemingly spontaneous inventiveness with which she embellished da capos, for example, in the aria early in Act I, “Begone, my fears, fly hence, away” when she welcomes the news that Hercules still lives.

By Act II, jealousy of the Greek maid Iola has turned her into a scold, and Ms. Genaux’ biting emphasis in her words to Iole in the aria “Resign thy club” illuminated Dejanira’s contempt, as did her sneer at Venus later in the aria via her oft-repeated chromatic phrase, “Venus and her whining boy.” By Act III, with her vision of the furies, Handel provides the singer with music about which the late great Handel scholar Winton Dean states: “The whole range of dramatic music contains no more terrifying picture of mental derangement.” Ms. Genaux brought all the resources of her experience and talents to the fore to make this the unequivocal highlight of the evening with visceral emotional intensity and

bel canto nuance. Her heavily accented climax to the scene, “no rest the guilty mind” was simply spine-tingling, the only moment of the evening to bring immediate and boisterous applause from a rapt audience.



Anna Dennis as Iole

Photo: AlciroTheodoro da Silva

Anna Dennis, soprano, as Iole

Anna Dennis in the role of Iole was equally persuasive as the captive Greek princess of Oechalia whose people Hercules had vanquished and whose father he had earlier killed in front of her. She was in every way a delightful antithesis to the Dejanira of Vivica Genaux. Even in their dress, whether planned on not, they were opposites: Ms. Dennis in a simple, sleeveless sheath, with boyish short hair; Ms. Genaux in a glittering black gown with full sleeves, matching black hair piled high. And Iole gains our sympathy from the outset with her aria eulogizing her dead father, a piece that Mr. Dean labels “one of the miracles of 18th century music.” The opening of the aria alone, as Ms. Dennis plumbs the depths of Iole’s emotion with an utterly unadorned chromatic vocal line was mesmerizing, followed by a comforting shift to the words “peaceful rest, dear parent shade,” in the middle section. Near the oratorio’s end, with her clarion soprano and secure coloratura, she

again came close to stealing the show, capping the double catastrophe of Hercules’s death and Dejanira’s madness with the exquisite aria “My breast with tender pity swells.” Supported by Maestro Petrou’s careful phrasing and arresting dramatic pauses from the orchestra, it all helped set up the cathartic close to the evening (a duet of reconciliation with Hyllus and the final chorus).

A supportive cast and chorus excel as well

Two other seasoned singers effectively rounded out the talented cast: mellifluous contralto Lena Sutor-Wernich as the herald Lichas, faithful servant to Dejanira, and lyric tenor Nick Pritchard as Hyllus, the loving son of Hercules and Dejanira. One could only wish Handel had written more for these secondary although important roles.

Right from the start, Ms. Sutor-Wernich displayed her wonderfully rich lower tone, opening the evening with a carefully articulated Schubertian segment of recitative accompagnato, “See with what sad dejection she looks,” followed immediately by an aria in which she handled the flexible phrasing with typical mastery. Later in the oratorio, her dark-toned palette again served well to probe the emotional intensity of her mournful lament for Hercules.



Lena Sutor-Wernich as Lichas

Photo: AlciroTheodoro da Silva

Likewise, early on Mr. Pritchard set the standard for excellent intonation in his recitative and aria expressing his determination to seek out his father, “Where congealed the northern streams / bound by icy fetters stand,/... By honour, love, and duty led,/ There with advent’rous steps I’ll tread.” Well into the aria, Mr. Pritchard returned resolutely to the four bars on the note G for repeats of the first two lines, while at the arias’s final line his tasteful vocal flourishes highlighted the “advent’rous steps” of his quest. He was supported throughout by the vivid word painting in the orchestra. Indeed, with his two later scenes with Iole, strategically placed to lower the tension, this experienced performer of Bach was a model of precision, clear tone, and refined expression.



Nick Pritchard as Hyllus Photo: AlciroTheodoro da Silva

With all the deserved superlatives for the cast and fine orchestra, perhaps the true “hero” of the evening was the chorus, the NDR Vokalensemble, under the direction of Chorus Master Klaas de Groot. Throughout, this polished ensemble displayed immaculate English diction and precision under the conducting by Maestro



The NDR Vokalensemble Photo: AlciroTheodoro da Silva

Petrou. At the close of Handel’s Act I, with added trumpets and timpani, the chorus “Crown with festal pomp the day,” celebrating Hercules’ victorious return, was simply thrilling. But the production didn’t break there; instead, the famous chorus “Jealousy!” closed the first half of the evening as the highpoint of the drama, casting its shadow for much that was to follow. Particularly effective was the extraordinary attention to dynamic contrast at the outset (from a barely whispered “Jealousy // Jealousy” to the explosive “infernal pest” immediately following,) just as Handel would have wanted it. Building through visceral contrapuntal excursions, the powerful choral and orchestral reading was emblematic of the vibrant and idiomatic performance throughout the evening.

All this was a great boon to the exceptional cast without which no opera or oratorio by Handel could succeed, on stage or in concert. After all, in Handel, the human shortcomings emerge through music of extraordinary expressive power and it is in the act of singing - beautifully, intensely, movingly – that the human drama comes vividly to life. And so it did on this exciting night.