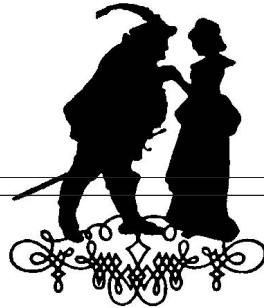


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Innsbruck Festival of Early Music, 2023

L'Olimpiade Sparks a Comprehensive Focus on Vivaldi

In late August, the Innsbruck Festival of Early Music, revered for historically informed performances from the Renaissance, Baroque and early Classical periods, concluded its 47th season with a reportedly stunning closing concert led by the outgoing Artistic Director, Alessandro De Marchi. Special emphasis in the varied season was on the great Baroque composer of instrumental and vocal

music, Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741). Highlights were three staged productions of his works – two operas, *L'Olimpiade* (reviewed below) and *La fida ninfa*, and his only surviving oratorio, *Juditha triumphans*. Additional performances included his taut gem, *Stabat mater* (reviewed separately), as well as the final sold-out concert on August 29 presenting other works of the “Red Priest” at the Haus der Musik. Indeed, the season, with its extensive Vivaldi focus, was a fitting one to mark the end of the 14-year directorship of the esteemed Italian maestro Alessandro De Marchi as Artistic Director of the Festival.



Alessandro De Marchi Photo: Kiran West

Barockoper:Jung (AKA the Cesti Competition)

This will certainly be a position hard to fill. In addition to his role as conductor for major operas and other music each year, he will be remembered not only for his directorship, but also for innovative programs he founded beginning in his first year, 2010. These include the international

Singing Competition for Baroque Opera “Pietro Antonio Cesti,” (AKA the Cesti Competition), which has become one of the most important singing competitions in the field, an exceptional training ground for young singers. Winners from each Barockoper:Jung competition then perform a semi-staged baroque opera the following year. I attended and reviewed the Cesti competition held on August 8, 2019, in the Grand Hall of the stunning new Haus der Musik, with its expansive view of Innsbruck’s picturesque alpine scenery behind the stage.

The competition was held there this year also, as were the four sold-out performances of *La fida ninfa*, featuring last year’s competition winners, which, alas, I was unable to attend. Reports are that every sold-out performance captivated the audience, which is no surprise given the high level of Barockoper:Jung performances of earlier years, even when given in the risky outdoor venue of the University of Innsbruck’s Theology Faculty. I recall braving the bitter cold for Cesti’s *Orontea* in 2014, and on a slightly less frigid evening for Handel’s *Ottone* in 2019. (I still have the 4-euro blankets I purchased on each occasion.) In 2019, the inclement weather forced the final performance into the new Haus der Musik.

A focus on Vivaldi

As for this year’s Festival, it is worth noting how important the emphasis on Vivaldi is at this particular time. Over recent decades, productions of Handel’s operas worldwide have shown the viability of the composer’s forty-some operas on the stage; indeed, they have proved to be as stage-worthy as they are incomparably beautiful and expressive musically, and various festivals in London, Göttingen, Halle, and Karlsruhe also have well-illustrated this fact.

Then in recent decades, came the turn of Antonio Vivaldi, Handel’s renowned contemporary, who claimed to have written over 90 operas. Roughly half seem to have survived in manuscripts of varied readability. Many now reside in the extraordinary collection preserved today at the Biblioteca Nazionale in Torino, visited by a group from *Opera con Brio* in the fall of 2008. Happily, the independent label Naïve has recorded this massive collection in a special “Vivaldi Edition,” designed “to reveal the full genius of Vivaldi, not only as a composer of instrumental music, for which he is well known, but as the creator of some of the 18th century’s most exhilarating vocal music.” (*L’Olimpiade* and *La fida ninfa* are volumes one and eleven respectively).

Noteworthy in recent decades for illustrating the stage-worthiness of Vivaldi’s operas was Garsington Opera’s presentation of three over a five-year period - early, middle and late- from 2008 to 2012: *L’incoronazione di Dario* (1717); *La verità in cimento* (*Truth Put to the Test*, 1720); and *L’Olimpiade* (1734), all written for Venice.

It was during this period that Mr. De Marchi took charge in Innsbruck. The mainstream opera he conducted in his first year, 2010, was one of the most memorable performances of Baroque opera I have ever attended, the *L’Olimpiade* by Pergolesi, written just three years after Vivaldi’s opera of the same name. (A terrific recording of this live performance is available on Deutsche Harmonia Mundi). But capping his first season, Maestro De Marchi also scheduled Vivaldi’s very first opera, a delightful, simply-staged *Ottone in Villa* (1713). This, in fact, was also Innsbruck’s very first staging ever of any opera by Vivaldi, although up until that year a dozen or so operas and oratorios by Handel had been sprinkled among its many baroque offerings.

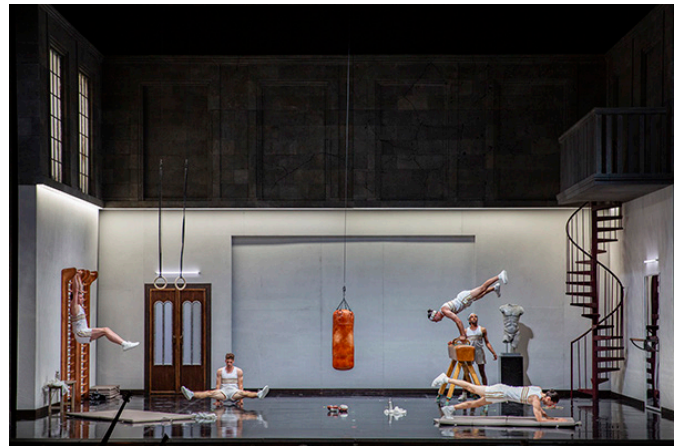
Thus, not only did Mr. De Marchi return to the fold with the Vivaldi version of *L'Olimpiade* in this, his final, season, but the Festival admirably made up for lost time with many more works by Vivaldi. And the credit belongs indeed to the revered Italian conductor and retiring Artistic Director whose affinity and love for Vivaldi came through from the very first notes of the overture.

A daring, updated *L'Olimpiade*

Vivaldi's relatively late 41st opera, with a text by the renowned librettist Pietro Metastasio, explores amorous episodes amidst Olympic athletes, also rather putting truth to the test, indeed not unlike *La verità in cimento* with its mistaken identities, disguises, usurped identities, and so forth. The popular libretto written in 1733, first for the baroque composer Antonio Caldara, would then be set to music by nearly fifty composers and used in part by scores of others during the rest of the century. Vivaldi's setting came the following year in Venice, Pergolesi's version shortly after that for Rome in 1735. The long much-praised text by Metastasio takes us carefully and with great detail through the convoluted plot, and he fully expected the audience to experience the work as much as a play as an opera. Thanks to Innsbruck for incorporating English (as well as German) surtitles for the entire text of the opera, which was performed virtually uncut in the Tiroler Landestheater.

And thanks to Maestro De Marchi for his vibrant conducting of the Innsbrucker Festwochenorchester, the four-hour evening flew by. Indeed, the renowned Artistic Director seems to be made for conducting Vivaldi. In a chance encounter with him some years ago, on a one-car train leaving the Bad Wildbad Rossini Festival, he commented to me that in baroque music, allegro

passages are rarely conducted fast enough, nor slow passages slow enough. True to his word, his excitement at the podium was visceral, and with the drive of the opening Allegro, he was as animated as the performers on stage - Olympic athletes working out in a gym in white shorts and tee shirts. Some were on parallel bars, while the thrust of others on punching bags seemed in sync with Conductor De Marchi's almost dance-like movements. The energy of the opera's opening bars radiated throughout the rest of the performance.



The set for *L'Olimpiade*

Photo: Birgit Gufler

Thus began an apt and imaginative production under Director Stefano Vizioli, who in 2019 also excited audiences, including me, with Cesti's opera *La Dori*. With costume designer Anna Maria Heinrich, the opera was set at Olympiad XI in Berlin once famously held by the Nazis. (By contrast, the Garsington production of *L'Olimpiade* was performed in an actual Olympic year, 2012). As explained in program notes, this year's Innsbruck production team was inspired by the friendship in 1936 between Afro-American long-jumper Jessie Owens (who won a gold medal) and his German counterpart Luz Long (winner of the silver medal); both then famously paraded arm in arm across the Olympic Stadium in front of Hitler.



Bruno de Sá as Aminta; Raffaele Pe as Megacle; Bejun Mehta as Licida
Photo: Birgit Gufler

A male soprano almost steals the show

In the original Venice production Vivaldi had three castrati to sing the three principal male roles, Megacle, Licida, and Aminta. In Innsbruck Mr. De Marchi gathered two of today's best countertenors, Raffaele Pe and Bejun Mehta, to take over the two male roles of the competing lovers, Megacle and Licida respectively. As for Aminta, Vivaldi had the superstar soprano castrato Nicolini, and he gave him some of the most virtuosic arias of the opera. Reports are that with his powerful and agile voice Nicolini was in large part responsible for the initial (and continuing) success of *L'Olimpiade*. In Innsbruck, Maestro De Marchi had the sensational male soprano Bruno de Sá as Aminta, who also rather stole the show with his compelling virtuosity and beautiful tone. This is not to take anything from the two fine countertenors, nor to suggest that the success of the production depended on him alone, but it was appropriate on many levels that Aminta become a central focus.

In the opera, the bonded pair was Athenian athlete Megacle and Licida, no athlete, but actually the unknowing Prince of Crete, who once (before the opera) had saved Megacle's life. The lynchpin of the opera is Licida's request to have Megacle compete as Licida for the "gold medal" at the upcoming Olympic games. Unbeknownst to Megacle, this "gold medal" is the hand of Aristeia, being offered by her father Clistene (King of Sikyon). The hitch is, naturally, that Aristeia and Megacle are mutually enamored. Licida, in turn, has turned his affections toward Aristeia (who is, unknown to him, actually his sister) having jilted his own former girlfriend, Argene, a noblewoman from Crete. But this being a libretto by Metastasio, there is an even more complicated background. Before the events of the opera, Licida's tutor, Aminta, had saved Licida from certain death by refusing to follow the orders of King Clistene to kill his own son following a prediction by a Delphic oracle that his son would kill his father - shades of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* except that in *L'Olimpiade* when all is resolved, the love and friendship of the young people overcome the prophesy of the oracle.

For one thing the opera itself stresses the tutor's critical role in fomenting the whole convoluted plot involving Licida's true identity as King Clistene's son. Thus, Mr. da Sá appropriately stood out with his unique voice type, male soprano (sometime labeled "sopranista") – sounding like woman but with a male's body, rather than a countertenor, sounding like a man with head tones or falsetto. As Mr. da Sá explained in his informative pre-opera interview (on August 8), Mr. Vizioli carefully directed this central role to show Aminta's changing states of mind. His three arias, one per act, reflected this from Aminta's initial nonchalance to eventual guilt, since he alone is aware of the truth of Licida's identity until near the opera's end.

And Mr. de Sá's breathtaking performance bore this out. His first aria, following in striking contrast to the two Allegro arias, one each for Megacle and Licida, is a sumptuous Largo, "Il fidarsi della spene" cautioning Licida about his hopes of winning Aristeia and the potential dangers of love. In a pointedly relaxed manner, Mr. de Sá's beautiful, exposed opening vocal line proceeded slowly through expansive legato phrasing and upward sequences to help express his hope and confidence that all would indeed turn out well. I have yet to hear a male soprano sing with such beautiful tone and unforced power – shades of Nicolini to be sure.

But his next aria was unequivocally the hit of the show, the fiendishly difficult "simile" aria "Siam navi all'onde argenti" – we are all ships at sea abandoned to the madness of love. Commenting on the difficulty of the aria, Bruno de Sá pointed out for one thing how Vivaldi in his writing for voice often wrote as he did for instruments, while Handel, on the other hand, wrote for the voice itself. This, Mr. de Sá explained, added an extra layer of difficulty to fulfilling Vivaldi's virtuosic demands. (Extra work for all in the cast indeed.)

My colleague and good friend Charles Jernigan, who attended the performance with me, aptly summarized in his own review the virtuosic fervor and technical skill with which Mr. de Sá attacked this difficult aria:

Here the staging put a spotlight on him as he sang – like a star in an old 30's vaudeville – through a textbook display of every kind of ornament and singer's trick. It was an astonishing feat, which ended when de Sá jumped and clicked his heels – and brought down the house with prolonged applause and endless shouts and bravos. It was worth the trip to Innsbruck to hear that remarkable moment.

Maestro De Marchi seemed captivated as well at the podium taking "Allegro mà poco" certainly at its word - a little faster and faster. But the larger point here is that, halfway through the opera, this central showpiece was more than just that; it became a bravado escape for Aminta, for the moment as acrobatic as any competing Olympic athlete, for whom "the truth will out" all too soon.

And that moment of truth was right around the corner. His aria in Act III, a moderate Andante "Son qual per mare ignoto," is another shipwreck "simile" aria, but now it is he, Aminta, who is the traveler in an unknown sea, "reduced to struggling with death as he swims." Agitated, Aminta now prances around the stage singing his choppy, chromatic aria with a different, unhinged demeanor. And Mr. de Sá was compelling in this unsettling scene a well.



Bruno de Sá as Aminta Photo: Birgit Gufle

A fine supporting cast

All this does not diminish the fine contributions of a remarkable cast. In Megacle's boastful opening aria, "Superbo di me stesso," countertenor Raffaele Pe exhibited all the power and agility necessary in an aria as difficult as any written for Aminta. Of equal technical virtuosity is Bejun Mehta's pulsating simile-aria for Licida soon to follow, "Quel destrier, che all'albergo è vicino." In it, he compares himself to a race horse who quickens as he nears the goal (winning Aristeia). Then, later in Act I Mehta's beautiful tone and expressiveness matched his demonstration of technical skill in the magnificent Larghetto, a lullaby sung to the resting Megacle, "Mentre dormi" – as pregnant a moment as Metastasio and Vivaldi could possibly conjure up. Licida does not yet realize that Megacle is competing for Aristeia as Licida, to win the women for Licida he (Megacle) loves. Director Vizioli thus places Megacle asleep on a massage table, while with prolonged wind and horn suspensions, Mehta's elegant legato and phrasing made this another highlight of the opera.



Benedetta Mazzucato as Argene Photo: Birgit Gufler

As for the two ladies, they certainly managed to hold their own against the three more virtuosic male roles. Right on the heels of Aminta's poignant opening Larghetto, Argene, Licida's jilted lover



Margherita Maria Sala as Aristeia; Bejun Mehta as Licida
Photo: Birgit Gufler

who had fled Crete, now appears disguised as a shepherdess in the hills near Olympus. Thus introduced was the contrasting Arcadian element in the score, as mezzo-soprano Benedetta Mazzucato gracefully, and with appealing warmth, sang a kind of rondo, "Oh care selve," with the chorus of nymphs providing the folk-like refrain. The more expansive role of Aristeia was equally well sung by contralto Margherita Maria Sala: she was also well matched in her duet of brief confused reconciliation with Megacle closing Act I, with its rapid-fire chromatic imitative sequences. The two low male voices, Baritone Christian Senn as King Clistene and bass Luigi De Donato as Alcandro, the King's servant, brought needed balance to the female and castrati roles.

Once all was resolved, with proper lovers united, Aristeia and Megacle, Argene and Licida (with his real identity revealed), an additional celebration ensued, after the curtain calls. As it turns out, August 8 was Maestro De Marchi's birthday, and all (including a joyous audience, and even a large marionette of De Marchi brought out on stage) joined in singing "Happy Birthday." A worthy Olympian celebration indeed.