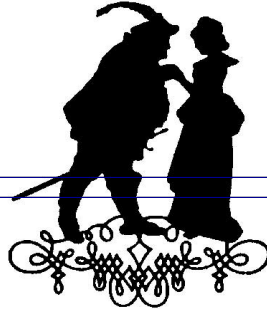


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



The 42nd Innsbruck Festival of Early Music An Enticing Perspective on the Baroque

Since its founding in 1976, the Innsbruck Festival of Early Music has played a pioneering role in the continued revival of Baroque music. Its centerpiece has usually been at least one historically informed opera or oratorio from the Renaissance, Baroque and early classical periods. This year, director Alessandro De Marchi, who took over the helm from René Jacobs in 2010, stretched the boundaries a bit making the centerpiece an opera by Saverio Mercadante (1795-1870), *Didone abbandonata* of 1823. He justified its inclusion as a work which reflects both the end of the Neapolitan School, a period of particular interest to him, and the extended baroque period itself – a bit of a stretch perhaps, but valid in relation to the long arc of vocal style.

Other works of the Festival represented the full range of the traditional baroque boundaries, from Francesco Cavalli's early Venetian opera of 1640 *Gli armori d'Apollone e Dafne* (*The Loves of Apollo and Daphne*), to Alessandro Scarlatti's Roman oratorio of 1700 *Davidis pugna et victoria* (*David's Struggle and Victory*), to Johann Adolf Hasse's Neapolitan serenata of 1726 *La Semele o sia La richiesta fatale* (*Semele or The Fatal Request*) Alas, I was unable to attend this semi

staged finale of the Festival, a recently discovered chamber piece – or rather miniature opera – written for the Mecca of opera in the South, Naples, just 17 years before Handel's better-known oratorio *Semele* of 1743. Hasse's serenata, by all accounts a great success at the Festival, certainly made a fitting Neapolitan cap to the 42nd Festival season – a season which wonderfully continued its pioneering role in the revival of historically informed works, whatever the dates.

Didone abbandonata

Clutter and Mayhem Mar a Fine Musical Performance

Of considerable interest was hearing De Marchi use his fine period orchestra "Accademia Montis Regalis" to play a work more naturally associated with the "Dawn of Romantic Opera" - the title used by Will Crutchfield in his pioneering "TeatroNuovo" Festival in Purchase, NY, earlier in the summer of 2018, which also used period instruments for Rossini's 1813 *Tancredi*. Ten years later, in 1823 (the same year as *Didone*) Rossini would close his Italian career with what might well be called the last "baroque" opera seria, *Semiramide*. The baroque connection for *Didone* is even stronger, since the roots of



Didone, Viktorija Miskunaite; Enea, Katrin Wundsam ; Chorus Members
Photo: Rupert Larl

the revised libretto began about a hundred years earlier (in 1724) with the most famous of baroque librettists, Metastasio. Many composers used and modified the libretto over the years before Andrea Leone Tottola, one of Rossini's major Neapolitan collaborators, re-cast the work in Rossini's *serioso* fashion: two long, balanced acts, each with seven numbers: arias (grand and small), duets (grand and small), extended ensembles (including a grand first act finale), and, naturally, a *rondo finale* for the abandoned prima donna, Didone.

For those familiar with Virgil's *Aeneid*, it would be no surprise that Dido, abandoned by Aeneas, dies in the flames of a collapsing Carthage. But the libretto adds numerous complications. Enea (Italian spelling of Aeneas) will indeed set sail to found Rome, but a rival, Jarba, King of the Moors, will dominate much of the opera; he pursues Didone, at first disguised as his messenger Araspe, and eventually in a fit of rejection, sets fire to Carthage. Others in the cast are Didone's sister Selene, frustrated in her infatuation with Enea, and Didone's loyal companion Osmida, whose well-intentioned interventions further complicate the plot.

True to typical early 19th century casting, sans castrati, Enea is a mezzo-soprano. The boyish Katrin Wundsam, making her Innsbruck Early Music Festival debut, was especially effective in her buoyant and precise

coloratura. Carlo Vincenzo Allemano, a regular at Innsbruck, made an appropriately repellant Jarba as a rather dark-voiced tenor. In disguise or not, he dominated much of the action – too much so at the cataclysmic conclusion. Another debut role was that of the attractive soprano Viktorija Miskunaite as Didone, who commanded the stage with a compelling presence both in solo and ensemble numbers.

My only wish is that director Jurgen Flimm, the infamous King of Eurotrash, had better served the opera. For the most part, the production, though ugly and unappealing, was not offensive. The ubiquitous cluttered turntable revealed at times such trite amenities as a red cement mixer, a small refrigerator, and ample beers for the workers, who were (all too obviously) intent on building Carthage, etc. But more intrusive were the endless streams of smoke that poured onto the stage much of the time - to remind us, I presume, that all would not end well. Indeed it doesn't, and it is here that the production collapsed into absurdity: Jarba, once rejected by Didone, sets Carthage aflame, prancing around the stage frenetically, not without raping and stabbing everyone in sight (including Didone's sister Selene). All this eclipses Didone and her *rondo finale*. In the end she and Jarba stab each other. Boos drowned out applause on the first night. I left wishing for the semi-staged



Jarba, Carlo Vincenzo Allemano Photo: Rupert Larl

simplicity of TeatroNuovo's austere *serioso finale* in *Tancredi*, or for the kind of no-nonsense staging more typical of this Festival.

Still, the cluttered production and ill-conceived ending should not diminish the overall success of this interesting revival and the stylish and spirited forces of De Marchi and his orchestra that brought it to light. With excellent soloists who enlivened the 18th century plot, and a fine male chorus that often provided effective counterpoint to the soloists, this was a worthy revival of Rossini-style music clothed in a baroque aesthetic. Each moment, if encumbered by the ugly construction-site set by Magdalena Gut, captivated, even those focused on secondary characters: the light tenor Diego Godoy, as Araspe, made an effective foil to the darker voiced Jarba; the mezzo Emilie Renard as the flirtatious Selene, was an effective foil to her sister. Indeed throughout the evening, the opera with its set formal numbers, large and small, was riveting - no matter that the end collapsed into absurdity.

Gli amori d'Apollone e di Dafne Breathing life into a bucolic Greek myth

At the other extreme was Cavalli's early baroque chamber opera, which received rapturous applause on its opening night in the open-air Theological Faculty Courtyard. Rightly so, as the final scene brought a beguiling metamorphosis of Dafne into a Laurel tree via the imaginative stroke of having each character, one after another, bring a small laurel branch and place it at the front of the stage as though in a vase, while a light projected and enlarged its shadow on the wall of the courtyard behind it. As the huge laurel tree enveloped the courtyard, the voice of Dafne faded to silence - and we, the audience, were enveloped in the beauty of the closing moments of this well-known bucolic Greek myth.

It is not surprising that the story of Apollo and Daphne should have been the subject of the very first opera as court entertainment (*Dafne*, circa 1597, by



The opening scene from *Dafne*, set in a hospital Photo: Rupert Larl

Jacopo Peri) nor that Cavalli (1602-1676), with Monteverdi as mentor, should further exploit the myth as a popular entertainment for Venice some half a century later. He and his accomplished librettist, Giovanni Busenello, with much embellishment, added characters, subplots, intrigues and the like. The actual story of Apollo and Dafne, delayed for almost an hour, finally comes as a dream. But the strength of this Innsbruck production – sung by the talented group of young emerging artists from “Barockoper Jung” – was its simplicity. On a mostly bare stage the complicated Venetian libretto comes to life through the beauty of the music enhanced by a range of appropriate and non-intrusive shadow projections.

Director Alessandra Premoli clearly took her cue from the opening Prologue that invokes the world of sleep and dreams in order to decipher meaning for those awake – or rather to come to terms with, or indeed act on, the element of desire that is central to all. After a Peter Sellars-like opening scene in a hospital, the characters eventually morph into players in the opera: the patient in the bed, Daphne, for example; the Nurse, Cupid; the stumbling janitor, the old woman Cirilla, who has the strange dream. Without expanding on complications of the plot and its many characters, suffice it to say that it all worked wonderfully in this world of shadows. Seven of the ten young singers – save Dafne, Apollo, and Amore – were asked to assume as many as three different roles,



Dafne, Sara-Maria Saalmann Photo: Rupert Larl

wearing 17th century dress in their later guises. Dafne, the lovely soprano Sara-Maria Saalmann, wearing a simple white tunic, was a thoroughly enrapturing embodiment of this central role. The expressive countertenor Rodrigo Sosa dal Pozzo, sporting a white shirt and a black leather jacket, was a manly Sun God; and the Venetian lyric soprano Giulia Bolcatoas as Amore made for a delightful Cupid, with white outfit and black wings.

But best of all, really carrying the night, was the chamber orchestra of the Accademia La Chimera, under the direction of Massimiliano Toni, tucked into the corner of the courtyard. With just strings and basso continuo, befitting the limited needs of Venice's new,



Apollo, Rodrigo Sosa dal Pozzo Photo: Rupert Larl

public opera houses, the ensemble brought just the right expressive and dramatic tone to Cavalli's melodious arias and ariosos, even mirroring at times the subtle humor often emerging in the enchanting work. And again, the finale was stunning, every bit as mesmerizing as that of my favorite of all performances of Daphne, Santa Fe Opera's 1981 production of Strauss's more familiar version. In the finale there, a gentle southwestern zephyr wafted through the diaphanous gown and veil of the transformed Daphne sung by the young Roberta Alexander. Each performance was the stuff of dreams.

The world of dreams in *Dafne*

Photo: Rupert Larl

David and Goliath

Vivid theatricality sans staging

Another highlight of the Festival was a single, scintillating performance of Scarlatti's oratorio *David and Goliath*, called officially a "drama sacrum," *Davidis pugna et victoria (David's Struggle and Victory)*. Having recorded the work for Hyperion a decade ago, Alessandro De Marchi led his acclaimed chamber ensemble, the Academia Montis Regalis, in the apt setting of St. Jakob's Cathedral in the center of the old town, bringing the dramatic story to life with vigor and aplomb. This was no small feat given the quite resonant

acoustics of the church, however appropriate and beautiful; yet overall, the brilliant work – with five fine soloists and an eight-part chorus complementing the strings and continuo - drew one into the vivid theatricality of the story.

The surprise for me was the dramatic viability of this Latin oratorio, written for Lent after the Pope had forbidden staged performances. Of equal surprise was how fully developed Scarlatti's characters were – no less so than as in Handel's more familiar oratorio *Saul*, written some forty years later. Indeed having just attended Glyndebourne's staging of that monumental oratorio in the previous month, I was also struck by the radical difference in the way each expands on the brief biblical account. Handel's work begins where Scarlatti's work ends, with the death of Goliath and the consequent celebration of the Israelites. Saul, the principal focus, becomes a tragic hero as his envy of the upstart David and ensuing rage lead to madness.

The focus of Scarlatti's oratorio is, as the title suggests, David's (and the Israelites') struggle and eventual victory. But an underlying theme is the uncertainty of fate, a theme that recurs throughout the piece. An occasional narrator, the fine American tenor Jeffrey Francis, serves as a guide through the drama, even relating the death of Goliath at the climax of Part II. He



Saul, Lawrence Zazzo Photo: Melis Sahin

also opens the work with a reflective strophic continuo aria, "Fata regum et sereno," on this central theme, which Saul himself immediately picks up with his fearful melismatic arioso, "Heu, perti" ("Alas, I die"). Renowned countertenor Lawrence Zazzo wonderfully caught the essence of Saul's despair (at the prospect of facing Goliath) through the ease of his nuanced suspensions and expressive descending melodic line. His ensuing da capo aria, with its more aggressive line, further caught his fear of fate's uncertainty. By the end of Part I, Saul's fears assuaged, Mr. Zazzo's subtle phrasing helped make the quiet siciliano expressing relief, "Mea fate, suberbi, videte," a poignant highlight. (Saul exits the drama here, but happily Mr. Zazzo returns in the closing moments of the oratorio as an Israelite with an aria of dazzling virtuosity celebrating the victory.)

Typically the four main characters (along with the omnipresent chorus) carry most of the dramatic weight, as does Saul in this opening sequence. Italian bass Luigi De Donato makes his striking entrance as the bellicose Goliath only at the start of Part II, with lengthy passages of coloratura that express the giant's bravura. I had first encountered this fine bass some years ago at the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro in the brilliant *Il Viaggio a Reims*; Mr. De Donato brought all his Rossinian skills to the fore as he calls the Philistines to arms accompanied by a full



Narrator, Jeffrey Francis



Goliath, Luigi De Donato Photo: Melis Sahin

string complement. A grand crescendo heralds the climax of the battle as Mr. De Donato's stentorian phrases carried clearly over the tumultuous eight-part chorus of the Philistines – a stunningly Handelian tableau.

Indeed the fine Coro Maghini, experienced in the Baroque idiom, deserves much credit, not just for their interactive moments with the soloists, but also for the execution of their many fine tableaux. In the especially fine double chorus, the quiet, homophonic laments of the Philistines alternate dramatically with the vibrant, contrapuntal rejoicings of the Israelites. Indeed throughout the evening their diverse and vigorous contribution helped reveal Scarlatti's oratorio as every bit the equal of Handel's *Saul*.

Jonathan, Saul's son, is also an added character from the Biblical account, just as in Handel's *Saul*. The delightful lyric soprano Giulia Semenzato, at her entrance following Saul's initial despondent aria, injected a spirit of hope with her lively, triple-time strophic aria encouraging him to banish his fear of encountering



Johnathan, Giulia Semenzato Photo: Melis Sahin

Goliath. Just as lively was their ensuing duet, to fight or not to fight. Again as in Handel, Jonathan's primary role is to function as friend and adversary to David, and Scarlatti portrays the closeness of their relationship with a magnificent string of duets to close Part I. Helping to cement this bond, David too is a lovely lyric soprano, Arianna Vendittelli. Their exquisite duetting at the close of Part I, with seemingly effortless imitation and interweaving of melodic lines, projected their hope, as did their strophic simile "aria a due," an antidote to the earlier reflections on fate.



David, Arianna Vendittelli Photo: Melis Sahin

But the focus on fate's uncertainty will return although not until David, appropriately, leads us to victory in Part II. Ms. Vendittelli was wonderfully up to the task, first displaying David's youth and agility with rapid-fire thrusts to the top of her range in a series of exchanges with Goliath to counter his bluster. Next, after the battle, she reflects on the now carefree world sans Goliath with a prayer of utter simplicity, beautiful legato phrasing and poignant leaps. Finally, in a fully scored aria to close the oratorio, she cautions about the uncertainty of fate. The great surprise was the sudden ending without a chorus (in contrast to Handel's usual practice). Following this, Maestro De Marchi turned to the silent audience as if to say, "that's all folks." The following burst of applause was spontaneous and vigorous. Indeed the performance had captured all the dramatic and visceral intensity of Scarlatti's ever inventive, if infrequently performed, gem. Handel, we now know, was a consummate man of the theatre, with or without staging; so was Scarlatti.



Alessandro De Marchi, Academia Montis Regalis, Soloists and the Coro Maghini in Scarlatti's *David and Goliath*
Photo: Claudia Putzhuber

Looking Ahead

At a press conference, Maestro De Marchi announced next year's exciting season, which focuses on rarities all from the Baroque period. Most rare will be the main stage opera, *Merope* by Riccardo Broschi, which premiered in Torino in 1732. (Interestingly, Broschi's brother, Carlo, was the famous castrato known as Farinelli.) The Innsbruck production, led by De Marchi, will include no less than four countertenors.

Next, the Festival will present a rare treat by Handel, *Ottone*, from 1723, the most successful opera from his Royal Academy of Music. (Coincidentally, in a revival of 1734, *Ottone* was the only opera by Handel in which Farinelli appeared.) Handel's star-studded first cast included the celebrated castrato Senesino and soprano Francesca Cuzzoni in their London debuts. The Innsbruck cast, performing in the intimate Theological Faculty Courtyard, will come from the ranks of the "Barockoper Jung," winners from the annual Cesti Competition. They will have quite a challenge with music that demands dazzling virtuosity.

Closing the Festival, the third performance, will be a rarity from 1657 by Innsbruck's famous Court Composer, Pietro Antonio Cesti (1623-1669), *La Dori*, a tumultuous tragicomedy presented in honor of the 350th anniversary of his death. The last opera by Cesti I attended in Innsbruck was a stunning *Orontea* in 2016; more Cesti, in this case an opera that was one of the most successful operas of the 17th century, should be a great treat indeed.

Finally, the best surprise of all came with a tour of Innsbruck's new Haus der Musik, a stunning black cube of a building adjacent to the classic columned Landestheater. Miraculously, the building was completed in five years from the architect's concept, and constructed in just three years. It includes a large, fully equipped stage facility, plus three concert halls of varying sizes, some with magnificent views of the nearby Tyrolean Alps. With the latest equipment and extensive space for administrative offices and a library on the top floor, the impressive facility will presumably be an exceptional venue for the always enthralling Innsbruck Festwochen der Alten Musik.