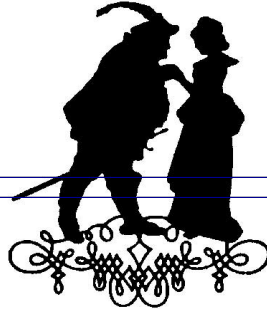


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## The Innsbruck Festival of Early Music, 2019 An Exceptional Training Ground for Young Singers

The annual opera production of the Innsbruck Festival of Early music, Riccardo Broschi's *Merope*, reviewed separately, showed once again how the 43-year-old Festival continues to exhibit a pioneering role in the revival of Baroque music. Ample evidence too was the scintillating performance of Handel's 1707 oratorio, *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (*The Triumph of Time and Truth*), given under the title "Handel's Triumph" at nearby St. Jacob Cathedral a few days later. This rare treat from Handel's apprentice years in Italy highlighted the 22-year-old Handel's secure vocal and instrumental writing, already virtuosic. As conductor and Festival music director Alessandro De Marchi enthused beforehand, four talented singers would "bring the profound musical language of the oratorio to life, setting feelings, thoughts and actions to music." That they did, to the delight of a sold-out audience.

But the evidence for Innsbruck's pioneering reputation goes well beyond its annual principal attractions of opera and oratorio, notably with the

festival's *International Singing Competition for Baroque Opera* Pietro Antonio Cesti, a valuable stepping-stone for young singers specializing in performance of Baroque opera initiated by De Marchi in 2010 when he took over as festival Artistic Director. The Festival's "Barockoper: Jung" ("Baroque Opera: Young") provides more performance opportunities with a production each year in the intimate inner courtyard of the University of Innsbruck's Theology Faculty. The production this year was another rarity, Handel's later opera *Ottone* (1723), which I was able to attend a week after the competition. (Later, at a performance celebrating Pietro Antonio Cesti that I was unable to attend, the Festival offered Cesti's 1657 tragicomedy *La Dori*, one of the most successful of his sixteen operas, to honor the 350<sup>th</sup> year death of this renowned musician at the Hapsburg court.)

The finals of this year's Cesti competition were held on August 8, 2019, in the Grand Hall of the stunning new Haus der Musik, with its expansive panoramic view of Innsbruck's picturesque alpine scenery behind the stage.

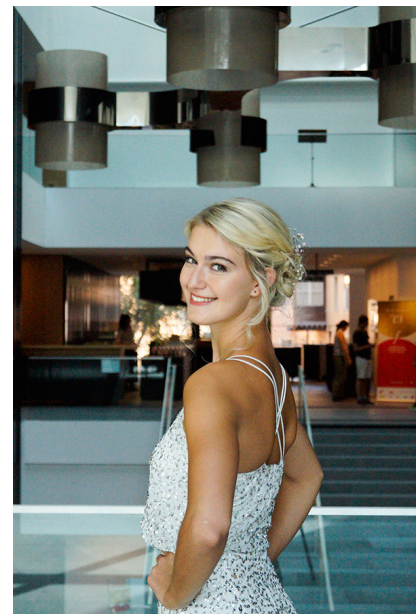


Dioklea Hoxha, 2<sup>nd</sup> prize; Grace Durham, 1<sup>st</sup> prize; Theodora Raftis, 3<sup>rd</sup> prize  
Photo: ©Diefotografen

The setting itself was hard to match, as indeed were the ten finalists, all roughly the age of Handel in his apprentice years in Italy, pared down from some 200 applicants of which about 100 had initially performed in the competition. Of the remaining, from nine different countries, seven were women, four of whom won prizes: first prize (4000 EUR), second (3000 EUR), third (2000 EUR), and “audience favorite” (1000 EUR). A distinguished panel of eight (including De Marchi) had the daunting task of selecting winners, a task I would not have relished given the talented group before them. Requirements for performance were that each sing two arias, one on each half of the program by a baroque composer of choice, the other from Alessandro Melani’s 1669 opera *L’empio punito*. Notably this opera was the first on the subject of Don Juan, and will be next year’s *Barockoper: Jung* production, in which a selection of finalists will have a chance to perform.

While it would be fair to say there was no runaway winner, certainly mezzo Grace Durham from the United Kingdom deserved first place with her virtuosic display of fioritura in a Hasse aria from *Cleofide* (which she repeated effortlessly as an encore once awards were announced). Second place belonged to a charismatic 22-year-old soprano from Kosovo, Dioklea Hoxha, singing

Asteria’s aria “Se non mi vuol amar” from Handel’s *Tamerlano*; third was an engaging soprano from Cyprus, Theodora Raftis, singing with animated brio “Torrente cresciuto” from Handel’s *Siroe*. Coincidentally, the audience favorite, Austrian soprano Miriam Kutrowatz sang the same aria, revealing a clarion tone and effortless coloratura. The youngest competitor, she also won a prize for the most promising young singer – as well as the Sonderpreise guaranteeing her a place in next year’s Jung presentation of *L’empio punito*.



Miriam Kutrowatz, “Audience Favorite” and Sonderpreise  
Photo: © Celina Friedrichs

As for this year, the production of Handel’s rarely performed drama per musica of 1723, *Ottone*, was an apt choice given the chamber scoring and small cast. But it was also a daring choice given the virtuosic demands of the piece written for a cast of superstars early on at the Royal Academy of Music: the renowned castrato Senesino, soprano Francesca Cuzzoni (in her debut with the Academy), long-time favorite mezzo Margherita

Durastanti, among others. The young cast in Innsbruck gave it their best shot, which was pretty good indeed, aided by a delightful warm summer evening in a courtyard setting. The weather was no small bonus; five years earlier in 2014 I braved bitter cold for Cesti's *Oronthea* (one of the most frequently performed operas of the 17<sup>th</sup> century) in this traditional venue for *Barockoper: Jung*; on other occasions, rain has sent performances inside – as indeed happened later this year when inclement weather forced a performance of *Ottone* inside to the Haus der Music. I'm not sure how well that worked, but director Anna-Magdalena Fitzzi's imaginative use of the courtyard's enclosed space and surrounding buildings certainly was a great asset for this year's *Ottone* - benefiting singers and helping to reduce this convoluted baroque *opera seria* plot to digestible dimensions.

Thus, jettisoned was the historical context of 10<sup>th</sup>-century Rome. Rather the space became a contemporary hotel (probably in Rome) with the chamber orchestra over in one corner of the "lobby." During the overture, each of the six characters arrives one by one with a suitcase, each in white, but clearly defined by nuances of outfit – thus universalizing the situation and keeping, for the moment, their considerable inner conflicts under wraps. The pretext for the action - riddled with disguises, misunderstandings and manipulations - may be briefly summarized: the ambitious Gismonda (mezzo, originally Durastanti), widow of the deceased self-proclaimed King of Italy, is doing all she can to insure that her weak-willed son Adelberto (countertenor) assumes the throne of Italy. Meanwhile Ottone (mezzo, originally Senesino) seeking to assert German rule, is en route to Rome, planning to marry Princess Teofane (soprano, originally Cuzzoni), soon to arrive from the East. Although they have never met, she has already fallen in love with his portrait. Mama Gismonda, however, wants her son to wed Teofane and thus has him pose as Ottone. Adelberto (countertenor) indeed secretly loves Teofane, but is engaged to Ottone's cousin Matilda (mezzo); meanwhile the pirate Emireno (baritone), but really brother to Teofane, has delayed Ottone's arrival in Rome. Complications ensue.

One need not know all this, since the dynamics of the relationships between characters become so clear in this telescoped production. The concept was not unlike that of Cecilia Bartoli's *Alcina*, which I had attended in Salzburg during the week, where conflicting characters are also trapped in a kind of "no exit" hotel environment. Both productions could thus focus with clarity on the psychological depth of each character in their respective emotional upheavals. While *Alcina* was complete, *Ottone* was rather effectively cut back to narrow the focus. Director Fitzzi shifts the emphasis slightly to the outsider Teofane – really the pivotal character – who eventually ends up happily wed to Ottone. (After all, the prima donna Cuzzoni and primo uomo Senesino ultimately had to unite.) Performed in two parts, with some elimination and adjustment of arias, characters often peer in and out of various courtyard windows and entrances, facilitating the effective use of da capos to keep action moving. The simple scenery by Bettina Munzer (a chair, a picture, a couch, a table), using the backdrop of the courtyard itself innovatively helped also to isolate these characters and their emotional turmoil. In the end, all gather around the table, but only the lead couple are content; the other four appear miserable, in spite of Handel's joyful final chorus, which all sing.



Alberto Miguélez Rouco, Adelberto; Valentina Stadler (behind), Gismonda; Mariamielle Lamagat, Teofane  
Photo: ©Rupert Larl



Taking the lead, young Austrian soprano Mariamielle Lamagat, 3<sup>rd</sup>-prize winner in the 2018 Cesti Competition, was an engaging Teofane, as throughout the opera she seeks to cope as an interested outsider with events around her. With the false Ottone's portrait hanging nearby, she sang her famous chamber-like first-act aria "False immagini, e m'ingannasti" ("False picture, you deceived me") with apt restraint. (Cuzzoni at first refused to sing this aria as being too austere.) Later, with the production opening Part II with Teofane's great nocturnal scena "O grati ornori" ("Oh pleasing gloom"), she effectively displayed the angst at her discovery of Adelberto's deception, with rich tone against the dark colors of the orchestra.



Mariamielle Lamagat, Teofane  
Photo: ©Rupert Larl

How happy she becomes then at the end of the opera to lead the way, à la the Countess in *Figaro*, to a final reconciliation, which at least Ottone (the real one) accepts with a buoyant duet for the two. As for Ottone, the experienced mezzo Marie Seidler (a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music in London and prize winner on numerous occasion), she sang the sparkling duet with all the variety of color and vigor she had displayed earlier in the act with "Dove sei" ("Where are you"), a wonderful outburst of lyrical melody. In the course of the evening,



Ottone, Marie Seidler  
Photo: ©Rupert Larl

she effectively brought the relatively passive role of Ottone to life. As for the despicable fake Ottone, Adelberto, the fine young countertenor Alberto Miguélez Rouco gave an effective and even sympathetic interpretation, especially in his two minor-key arias in the first Part; but when he becomes a prisoner later in the opera, others rather overshadow him.

Two of those who move to the fore are naturally his mother, Gismonda, and his fiancée, Matilda, two mezzos who eventually conspire to save him. As Gismonda, the young German mezzo Valentina Stadler brought her considerable experience to capture the inner workings of this unscrupulous and ambitious woman; so too she gave impassioned voice to the ravishing aria she sings toward the end of the first part, "Vieni, of figlio, e me consola" venting her heartfelt sorrow for her imprisoned son. As for Matilda, forever on an emotional roller-coaster ride, the dark voiced Bolivian mezzo Angelica Monje Torrez, a finalist in the 2018 Cesti vocal competition, seemed a perfect fit for this character, first sung by a contralto. The duet of the two scheming woman sung in Part II, a nocturnal romantic fantasy celebrating Adelberto's escape from prison, was a delight as the bright voice of one crisscrossed with intricate counterpoint the dark voice of the other.



Emireno, Yannick Debus  
Photo: ©Rupert Larl

The royal pirate Emireno (“royal” because he is, after all, brother to princess Teofane), is a relatively superfluous role, but bass-baritone Yannick Debus made a great hit defying Ottone with his early Polyphemus-like simile aria “Del minacciar del Vento “about a sturdy ancient oak that remains firmly rooted against the winds.

As the only singer in the cast who had performed the previous week as a finalist in this year’s Cesti competition, one wondered if he had only brought all the brio and stage presence he did in the opera to that competition, whether he might have come away with some prize money as well. Indeed his stage performance was so compelling I wish he had been allowed to sing all three of his buoyant arias in the score; a little more levity might well have been welcome in a production so serious minded.

At any rate, the group of young artists effectively revealed the varied emotions of each character, even though the situations of some remained unresolved at the opera’s end. The opera also gave these talented singers a chance to excel in some very challenging roles from Handel, the experienced artist. An energizing element was the lively, idiomatic performance from the Accademia La Chimera tucked in the corner, led by Fabrizio Ventura, with whom characters interacted from time to time. Happily, the production itself is a co-production with the Handel Festivals in both Göttingen and Halle in the spring of 2020. I trust all will work as well in both places, whatever the venue, especially if they have the kind of talented young casts that the Innsbruck Festival of Early Music so effectively nurtures through both vocal competition and performance.