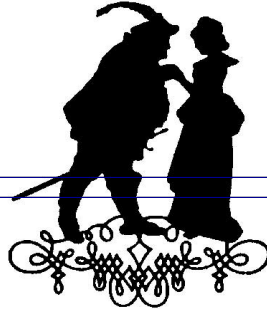


# Opera con Brio

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## *Tolomeo* and *Serse*: from Pastoral Simplicity to Showbiz 2020 Internationale Händel-Festspiele Karlsruhe

Each year, the renowned Internationale Händel-Festspiele Karlsruhe performs two operas in the Badisches Staatstheater, one a new production and the second a repeat from the previous year. In 2020, the forty-third year of the Festival, the new production was Handel's early heroic opera, *Tolomeo, re d'Egitto* while the return of last year's production, was a work of an entirely different nature, Handel's late comic opera *Serse*. For all the difference in the two works - the first featuring the forlorn Egyptian prince Tolomeo, the rightful heir to the Egyptian throne, and the second revolving around the fundamentally ridiculous Persian king, *Serse* - both operas involve miss-matched romantic relationships, each with key characters often in disguise. But there the similarities end, as the two antithetical Karlsruhe productions so aptly illustrate, the one austere and restrained and the other flamboyant and colorful.



Jakub Józef Orliński (*Tolomeo*); Louise Kemény (*Seleuce*)  
Photo: Felix Grünschloß

### [Tolomeo, Re d'Egitto: a production of elegant restraint](#)

On the surface, this 1728 work, the cap to Handel's nine *opera seria* for the Royal Academy, is an archetypal heroic opera of the day. It pits the royals of ancient Egypt (Prince Tolomeo, his betrothed Princess Seleuce, and his younger brother Prince Alessandro) against the cruder counterparts of Cyprus (King Araspe and his sister Princess Elisa).

The opera is without much plot aside from its tangled love interests and resulting complications. Briefly, Tolomeo loves Seleuce, but believes she has drowned in a storm; King Araspe also loves Seleuce; Elisa, Araspe's sister, loves Tolomeo; Alessandro, Tolomeo's brother, loves Elisa; and Seleuce loves Tolomeo. If all this were not confusing enough, Tolomeo and Seleuce spend the entire opera in disguise under assumed peasant names, Tolomeo as "Osmin" and Seleuce as "Delia." Yet the rigor of the opera's action and music (some thirty or so da capo arias and duets sans obbligatos) in many ways represents the essence of Handel as a music dramatist. The austere production by Benjamin Lazar caught this magnificently amidst the elegant simplicity of the unit set by Adeline Caron, King Araspe's country villa by the sea.



Louise Kemény (Seleuce); Jakub Józef Orliński (Tolomeo)  
Photo: Felix Grünschloß

Indeed the power of this work is its simplicity. Not only does the action unfold amidst basically undifferentiated settings like "a wood" or "a country scene," but also the taut libretto calls for none of the elaborate special effects and exotic settings pervasive in Baroque Opera. Handel simply gives us five characters woven together in an interlocking web of shifting emotional complexity, rather like a "cats cradle" where pulling one strand distorts the emphasis, while other strands still connect. Thus in this production each character usually remains on stage rather than exiting following his or her aria, as baroque convention would normally require. With a kind of slow motion "time warp," a character while not singing often moves slowly around the stage, as if in a trance, or remains absolutely immobile, pensively looking out at the sea perhaps, or cowering behind one of the few stage props, a shrub, flowers, or a chair. To complain of no plot misses the point; Handel simply follows the emotional upheavals of his five characters, and the production admirably stresses the poignant internal drama of these intertwined, shifting emotions. To be sure Tolomeo is generally miserable throughout the opera – but so, for the most part, are all the others.

The opera itself inclines towards classical drama, with its notable unities of time, action, and place. The production admirably emphasizes this fact. All action takes place amidst changing aspects of Araspe's attractive villa and surroundings on Cyprus; a few bushes and a vase of yellow flowers simply define the pastoral setting. It also visually stresses the unity of time – all action within the short span of two days. As Act I begins a despairing Tolomeo is about to throw himself into the sea, initially represented by a white sheet blanketing the stage, soon to be removed as he instead rescues his drowning brother, Alessandro, crawling out from under the sheet. Soon Yann Chapotel's breathtaking panoramic videos of the encroaching sea take us from the calm morning sunrise to a despairing duet for Seleuce and Tolomeo at nightfall closing Act II. A new stormy day opens Act III,



Jakub Józef Orliński (Tolomeo) Photo: Felix Grünschloß

and projections of the sea soon crescendo with turbulent waves pounding the villa's glass walls during Tolomeo's explosive, despairing final *scena*. Finally, as in an aquarium, an underwater view restores calm, presaging the joyful reunion of Tolomeo and Seleuce.

The cast assembled by Karlsruhe was superb, probably on the level of Handel's star-studded first cast, headed by the famous alto castrato Senesino. Handel allotted some ten numbers to him - six arias, two accompagnatos, and two duets, most in minor keys. Right from the start, in the opening accompagnato lamenting his miserable fate, the young Polish countertenor Jakub Józef Orliński displayed the kind of innate musicality and wide range that would serve him well in this arduous role. His arias ranged from the sorrowful to the more sorrowful - from an early gentle "siciliano" to his final expansive death scene (which, happily, he survives since instead of poison, he was given a sleeping potion).

I had first encountered Mr. Orliński at the Juilliard School a couple years back, and his warmth of tone over a wide range, without a hint of shrillness, had impressed me then as now. Especially poignant was the aria ending the first act addressing the vision of his lost wife, with a beautiful melismatic technique that aptly matched the equally moving staging in which his memory of Seleuce as a living, tactile presence shadowed him. This was the kind of direction that was typical of the production, again a "time-warp," wherein another character's continued presence, though unseen by the singer, reinforced the essence of the aria.

As for Seleuce, the estranged Egyptian noblewoman who has come to Cyprus in disguise, drably clad as the peasant "Delia" to seek out her fugitive husband, the young Scottish soprano Louise Kemény easily essayed the role Handel wrote for his famous prima donna Francesca Cuzzoni. Seleuce, like Tolomeo, is long-suffering, and Ms. Kemény sang her often-reflective arias, many with allusions to nature as in her opening number, "Mi volgo," with lyrical warmth and angelic top notes. Loving, but somewhat passive, she embodied the essence of her role, and her voice blended wonderfully with Orliński's in their two glorious duets.

Handel's competing soprano was Faustina Bordoni who played the feisty Princess Elisa (sister of Araspe), the character who is really the driving force in the opera. She also loves "Osmin"/Tolomeo, but when scorned, turns both furious and vindictive. With a forceful sequence of arias ranging from the seductive to the vengeful, experienced French mezzo Eléonore Pancrazi handled the wide range of the role with consistent richness of timbre, providing an effective contrast to her less extrovert rival Seleuce. Still, many of her arias also invoke elements of nature like waves, breezes, flowers, and birds - further helping to define the basically pastoral nature of the opera, which the production so well catches.

Prince Alessandro, Tolomeo's younger brother, suffers bad luck throughout the opera - nearly drowning in Act I, failing to recognize his own brother as his rescuer, then falling in love at first sight with the vengeful Elisa, who soon uses him as a pawn in her plot to kill Tolomeo. But the young, sweet-voiced Chinese counter tenor Meili Li, well trained in both the Guildhall School of Music and The Royal Academy of Music, gave ample expression to this thankless role. The fine bass/baritone from London, Morgan Pearse, rounded out the cast nicely, handling the perilous leaps of Araspe's two rage arias with ease.

The Festival was fortunate to have Italian conductor Federico Maria Sardelli binding the work together. As a baroque specialist, and chief conductor of the *Academia Barocca di S. Cecilia* in Rome, his animated and impassioned conducting, with much fine attention to



detail, was a great aid to the singers in a production designed to let the singers sing. Stage gimmicks and other intrusions never distracted. No superficial spectacle overshadows the beauty and humanity of the singers' narratives, allowing us to follow the emotional vicissitudes of the five characters, so tightly intertwined. In the end, like the ever-shifting sea, they all survive. No need for a *deus ex machina* here – myriad emotions wind their way inexorably to a final resolution, and even the ever-miserable Tolomeo and Seleuce at last get a joyful duet to close the opera.



David Hansen (Serse)

Photo: Felix Grünschoß

### [A Flamboyant \*Serse\* Overwhelms and Entertains](#)

The approach to Handel's late comic opera *Serse* was just the opposite; Max Emanuel Cencic's lively, flamboyant production of 2019 was certainly crowd-pleasing but dwarfed the singers, who became mere caricatures. While the approach in *Tolomeo* was to minimize historical context and to expand on the nuanced, emotional journey of the richly human characters, the approach in *Serse* was to create an entirely new historical context, that of a 1970's opulent but seedy Las Vegas nightclub. It was not subtle. The curtain rises during the overture, and a glowing sign reads *The Serse Show*, while beneath it a glittering keyboard arch frames a stage on which showgirls clad in silky blue body suits bump and grind their tacky opening number. Nightclub booths with patrons dot either side, and if one manages to glance further to the right, the reward will be brief glimpses of various gratuitous, vulgar sex acts between a man and a woman in a dressing room. These two turn out to be "King" Serse and his mistress Amastris. Such was the level of visual distraction that would dominate the night.

Thus warmed up, the showbiz "King," alias Liberace (or Elvis) proceeds to do his thing with the famous opening number of the score, "Ombra mai fu." After swaggering onto the stage in full performance garb – a flowing, white sequined cloak with ostrich-feather collar

– he sits at the grand piano, complete with a candelabra displayed prominently on its shiny surface. Miming at the keyboard, Serse, the fine Australian countertenor David Hanson, swooned his way through the number, with exaggerated legato and vibrato – and at the slowest tempo I've heard. The distortion of Handel was painful in itself; the tempo is in fact a flowing "Larghetto." As for the arioso itself – Serse singing to his favorite tree praising a balanced life in tune with nature, far removed from the complications of human relationships – the piece is certainly half-ironical in Handel as well. But the parody is of a very different nature.

At this point I was ready to leave the theatre, but stayed, and in the end was glad I did. With the tone set, the thrust of the production becomes eminently entertaining and in its own way even edifying. Indeed the production team, headed with Cencic as director, Rifail Ajdarpasic as set designer, and Sarah Rolke as costume designer, all contributed to a clear parody, something Handel indeed intended and would probably have liked, even though it minimizes the element of tragedy in a work that in fact is well balanced with elements of comedy, farce, and tragedy. Here, the glitter of a tacky Vegas predominates, a superficial world saturated with money and fame, but also with a seedy underworld: a diner "The Frustrated Lovers," a sleazy



David Hansen (*Serse*) with Extras of the Staatstheater Karlsruhe Photo: Felix Grünschloß

gay bar, “Tom of Persia” (about as close as we get to the original setting in Persia of the libretto), cocktail-soaked swimming pool parties, a disco rock band, prostitutes, pimps, and drug dealers - and in the end, even the facade of a gleaming white wedding chapel for those so inclined.

Two things saved the evening. One, the conviction and integrity of the vulgar concept which was – like it or not – consistently colorful, well done, and simply entertaining in all its chaotic vigor. Second, the exceptional musical forces were generally so strong that they prevented the stage antics from smothering Handel’s wide-ranging, surefooted score, as they were in danger of doing at the opera’s outset. Conductor George Petrou, one of the world’s leading Baroque specialists – soon to take over as Artistic Director of the historical Göttingen Handel Festival – drew stunningly idiomatic playing from the Deutsche Händel-Solisten. His often-brisk tempos (opening sequence excepted) reinforced his keen interest in the lively stage action. Indeed the musical distortion of “Ombra mai fu” did not persist, and countertenor David Hansen brought his considerable experience to the task of this demanding role that included much embellishment and virtuosic agility. Perhaps his experience stepping into the shoes of

Farinelli in last summer’s *Merope* at the Innsbruck Early Music Festival helped, his role there demanding an exceptional three-octave vocal range.

Hansen had assumed the role of last year’s *Serse*, Franco Fagioli, while the remainder of the talented cast had stayed intact. Mr. Cencic himself again took on the role of *Serse*’s down-in-the-dumps and drug-possessed brother, Arsamene, singing with his usual creamy tone and strength. The love-starved sisters, Romilda and Atalanta, were a colorfully contrasting pair indeed. The versatile American soprano Lauren Snouffer as Romilda showed why she is so widely respected as a singing actress, dynamic in her various Barbie-doll outfits - from tight yellow mini skirt and heels to glistening green jump suit while grabbing the mike in a disco bar. Her gorgeous singing alone, with clear tone and bright high notes, certainly explained *Serse*’s attraction to her, right from her famous off-stage vocal entrance. British Soprano Katherine Manley, wearing glasses and a drab skirt with her slip consistently showing, gave an equally riveting performance as the love-deprived Atalanta, looking more like a frumpy bag lady than the unrelenting flirt she is underneath. Her light, silken tone penetrated through her dower persona, coming to the fore especially at the end of



Lauren Snouffer (Romilda); Extras of the Staatstheater Karlsruhe  
Photo: Falk von Trautenberg

Act I when she sings one of Handel’s most exuberant light arias. As she expands on how her feminine charms (somewhat hidden) will help her get what she wants, she leads the others on the stage in a vigorous conga line.

Between the two of them, this dynamic sister-duo carried much of the show. But others in the cast were on an equal level, especially the important – and thankless – role of Amastris, *Serse*’s discarded mistress. She cavorts with him in the opening dressing-room scene, but then spends the rest of the opera in disguise, sometimes as a male, but usually as a lowly cleaning lady. American contralto Ariana Lucas, who had made her major-house debut in Karlsruhe in 2016 as Erda, seemed to make good use of that earthy role, exploiting her smooth, wide range to good effect. In the end, she gets her man, “King” *Serse*, leading him off stage in handcuffs with the police. It was about time! The two others in the cast, both bass roles with much less time on stage, were persuasive: Yang Xu as the lively Elviro, in drag, selling “flowers” (a code word for drugs), and Pavel Kudinov as Ariodate, *Serse*’s “general” and father of the two sisters.

### A Final Note

In sum, Karlsruhe this year offered two works whose contrasting natures perhaps justified the antithetical approaches of the respective productions. The one, *Tolomeo*, a more serious work with relatively narrow plot had a despondent “King” at its center; but the production also gave ample space for all its characters to expand on the woes of their often-fraught relationships, with the ever-changing sea an apt metaphor. Unencumbered by stage shenanigans, the singers had space to sing the string of exceptional da capo arias (and occasional duets) that Handel wrote. Their music was the thing. The other, *Serse*, a masterpiece of operatic comedy, glows with the vitality of varied characters and a complicated, if ridiculous, plot with a preposterous “King” at its center. Singers are swallowed up in an absurd but contemporary concept with less room for them to sing Handel’s myriad musical forms freely. Given the constraints, they managed well indeed. But the show-biz production is the thing. Handel survived too, thankfully.



Bust of Handel atop the festival poster outside the Theater  
Photo: Richard Beams