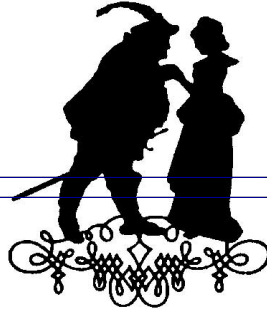


Opera con Brio

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The Complete *Lotario*: a Winning Endeavor

The Göttingen International Handel Festival 2017

In the year 2020, the venerable Internationale Händel Festspiele Göttingen will reach its 100-year anniversary. En route to this admirable landmark, the Festival - the oldest of the three Handel festivals in Germany, and the one and only opera festival in Lower Saxony – continued in 2017 its tradition of presenting at least one staged Handel opera, in this case the rarely performed *Lotario*. But it didn't stop there, offering at the outset of this year's three-week Festival another rarity, a semi-staged *Lucio Cornelio Silla* by the early music specialist group from Cologne, Ensemble 1700. Then, the icing on the cake at the Festival's close was a concert performance of Haydn's last opera, *L'anima del filosofo ossia Orfeo ed Euridice* (more familiarly, *Orfeo*), presented by the esteemed local company, Göttinger Symphonie Orchester. Alas I was unable to catch the *Silla*, which I understand was a great success, and the *Orfeo* certainly was as well, in a compelling performance under its capable conductor and director, Christoph-Mathias Mueller.

Lotario as Handel Shaped It

But once again the Festival's centerpiece, its first ever staging of *Lotario*, was the hit of the season with Artistic Director Laurence Cummings leading the FestspielOrchester Göttingen (FOG) and a cast of fine singers. Typically, one of the great pleasures in attending a performance in the Deutsches Theater Göttingen is not only the intimate venue itself, but also the opportunity to experience a Handel opera uncut, especially one so rare as *Lotario*.

My only previous encounter with the work on stage was a fine production at the Manhattan School of Music in 1999 led by Will Crutchfield with minor cuts. Then in 2004, two compelling recordings helped rescue the opera from oblivion: one, with Paul Goodwin and the Basel Baroque Chamber Orchestra on the Oehms label, eleven excerpts from that year's performance at the Halle Handel Festival of its new critical edition; the other, with

Alan Curtis and Il Complesso Barocco on Deutsche Harmonia Mundi, was billed as “the first complete recording.” Alas this turned out not to be so. An introductory note by Mr. Curtis explained the commercial necessity of reducing the recording to two rather than three CDs. Even with a lively performance and stunning cast, the dramatic integrity was compromised by giving only the A sections of certain arias, among other discrete cuts.

How nice then to have in Göttingen a Festival context in which the complete work, in three acts as intended, without cuts (save in this case one small snippet of a chorus), can give a full sense of the opera as Handel envisioned it, thus maintaining the inherent dramatic tension of the work. I found this particularly helpful for *Lotario*, which Handel wrote in 1729 to inaugurate his “Second Academy” opera company, a venture that was especially critical to him. He was using an Italian libretto by Antonio Salvi, which he had discovered at a performance in Venice. But Handel, with his customary astute editing, and the help of another librettist, Giacomo Rossi, made it even better by sharpening critical dramatic issues. The Göttingen production, complete and with fine direction, let the audience savor the depth and consistency of Handel’s theatrical power.

An Effective Adaptation for the Stage

Salvi’s original story is less convoluted than most Baroque operas. Indeed it is rooted in fact: the dynastic struggle in 10th century Milan when a German king (Lotario in the opera) seeks to take the Italian crown, currently in dispute, and win over the widowed Queen of Italy, Adelaide. Much of the opera concerns not only their emerging love, but also the manipulations by the conniving couple Berengario (duke of Spoleto who murdered Adelaide’s husband) and his evil wife, Matilde (who makes Lady Macbeth look like a girl scout) to usurp



Jorge Navarro Colorado, Berengario; Jud Perry, Idelberto
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

the throne. Throughout the opera they manipulate their pliable son Idelberto, infatuated with Adelaide, to foster their nefarious plan. As the notes from the Göttingen program clarify,

Handel palpably sustains the conflict between good and evil figures almost to the end of the opera, not least in the alternation of the numbers. Salvi masterfully lays out the conflict of ever-shifting strategies via formal parallels from one scene to another; meanwhile the inner drama within the Berengario family becomes increasingly acute.

Handel’s masterful adaptation made the work even more concise and understandable, as the Göttingen production showed with its engaging approach. Rifail Ajdarasic’s cluttered and claustrophobic unit set seemed odd at first – a kind of artist’s studio with buckets here and there and large paintings of colorful scenes, often violent, scattered about, leaning or hanging on the walls and scaffoldings. But this is Italy, after all, with its heritage of magnificent art, and the drama of the opera itself is played out amidst constant warfare and ever-shifting strategies. Amidst all the turmoil, who will reign? For how long? An opening tableau during the overture might well be subject for a narrative painting: the former king (Adelaide’s husband) sits enthroned on a low

platform amidst the paintings. Then Berengario and Matilde persuade their clueless son Idelberto to hand the king (Adelaide's husband) a goblet containing poison. He expires on the spot. At the opera's close, Idelberto – loser in the game of love – again extends a goblet toward the new king, Lotario. Curtain. The set seemed to provide the perfect frame for this ambivalent close; in the Director's take on the character, perhaps Idelberto is not so innocent after all, corrupted by his malevolent, ambitious parents.

The opening tableau, paralleled in the close of the opera, also paved the way for the crucial first scene that reveals the inner drama of the Berengario family. The usurper king's guilt-ridden Cavatina, "Grave è'l Fasto di regnar" ("Heavy the fate of those who rule"), leads to an aria for his wife and son respectively, she wheedling the insecure young man to press his love on Adelaide.



Jud Perry, Idelberto; Ursula Hesse von den Steinen, Matilde
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Next the low platform slides back without the throne, but instead a catafalque containing the body of the dead king. (The etymology of "catafalque" is the Italian *catafaico* or "scaffolding"; intended or not, this all made for a rather homogeneous grouping on stage.) What Venezuelan director Carlos Wagner certainly did intend, however, was the parallelism of the opening tableau with the dramatic entrance of the now-widowed Adelaide who in a poignant arioso apostrophizes the throne of her dead husband, "Soglio, degli Avi miei Retaggio illustre" ("Great throne, the heritage of my forefathers").

Six Vivid Characters Emerge

Handel would have applauded the way Adelaide, in a black gown, first appears on stage, set off as she is as the only soprano in a cast of six (which includes three altos, a tenor, and a bass). She is, as Maestro Cummings comments in his introductory notes, the strongest character, "a courageous, smart and proud queen, not willing to give in to any pressure but instead prepared to fight with all the means she can muster." The renowned Anna Strada, in her first appearance on the London stage, was a great success as Handel's first Adelaide. So too in Göttingen was Swiss soprano Marie Lys, a graduate of London's Royal College of Music International Opera School and recent First Prize winner at the Göttingen Historical Music Series competition along with her Abchordis Ensemble.

Right from her forceful opening monologue she impressed with firm, penetrating voice and impeccable technique. Bound as a prisoner in her final aria of the act, she exhibited defiance and determination while the infamous Berengario couple stretched her arms apart with rope. This Vinci-like showpiece with brilliant coloratura demonstrated the dramatic veracity of this archetypal Baroque simile aria about triumph over shipwreck in a stormy sea. Equally effective was the intense emotional expression Ms. Lys brought to her prison scene in the second act with the b flat minor prayer "Menti eterne," as alone and despondent she painstakingly lit candles on the low platform that once held the funeral bier.



Marie Lys, Adelaide Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Among the many fine Director's touches was to have her nemesis, Berengario, defeated in battle between Acts I and II, bound at the start of the second act just as she was at the end of the first. In Handel's adaptation, Berengario is a figure on whom he threw additional weight right from his opening gloom-laden soliloquy. A fine, robust Spanish tenor Jorge Navarro Colorado, a graduate of the London's neighboring Guildhall School of Music, assumed the role with secure presence. His initial Cavatina and following "cabaletta" (reduced alas to just the "A" section in the Curtis recording) was executed with genuine vigor, but he was especially expressive in his third act aria, "Vi sento si vi sento" ("Piercing remorse and rending fear"). Now a fallen tyrant who has to be repeatedly propped up by his unflappable wife, his vehement phrasing effectively brought to the fore all the inner turmoil he had begun to express at the opera's opening.



Jorge Navarro Colorado, Berengario
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

As for Matilda, his partner in crime, German mezzo-soprano Ursula Hesse von den Steinen used all her considerable experience in both the German and Italian repertoire to shape the character that Winton Dean rightly labels "a veritable dragon without a redeeming feature." Her impressive dramatic instincts made her effective in frequent recitatives; in her final *accompagnato* invoking the Furies, she captured the abrupt changes in mood and tempo with great élan. Of her five arias, her dramatic piece of the second act was the most impressive. With



Marie Lys, Adelaide; Ursula Hesse von den Steinen, Matilde
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

biting sarcasm she first addresses her son, prodding him per usual to make advances to Adelaide, who she then proceeds to denounce. The periodic thrust of the opening phrases were particularly incisive ("Arma lo sguardo D'un dolce dardo" ("Arm your eyes with the soft dart"), while the B section (addressed to Adelaide) brought forth both lustrous high notes and some especially expressive low notes in the concluding incisive phrase "Della Schernita mia ferità" ("Or guard you from the gloomy grave.")

Meanwhile, in this production her browbeaten son Idelberto became more than a mere passive figure but one riddled with angst and insecurity. Once again Handel helped shape the character by making him more prominent than in the original Salvi text, giving him three relatively slow heartfelt arias. American countertenor Jud Perry, who began his career as a tenor in 2005, switching effectively to countertenor in 2013, took the alto role that Handel originally had given to a female contralto. Dressed in a flowing white night shirt with his oddly lopsided hair cut, he too spends time wrapped in rope, at the end of Act II. Freed in the third act, he sang an especially touching appeal to his mother as he seeks her acceptance for having released the innocent Adelaide from chains. His nuanced first phrase, "D'e Delitto," was especially poignant, ahead of the lightly scored orchestral entry. This exquisite aria is another instance where it was



Jud Perry, Idelberto; Ursula Hesse von den Steinen, Matilde
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

nice to have the full *da capo*, with its subtle return to the opening plea, a piece for which the Curtis recording only provides the A section. Moments like this are not to be rushed, especially from a character whose moral compass, at least as Handel intended, seems to be intact.

Another American singer, baritone Todd Boyce, a graduate of Oberlin Conservatory whose career took off after two years in the Glimmerglass Festival Young Artists Program, sang the secondary role of the bass Clodomiro (which really is more of a baritone role). The original librettist had given him only long convoluted speeches in recitative; Handel cut back on the recitative and gave him three highly inventive arias, which allow the messenger to express his appeals to reason musically rather than verbally. The Göttingen production turned



Todd Boyce, Clodomiro; Ursula Hesse von den Steinen, Matilde
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

this character (originally Berengario's General who switches allegiance in the course of the opera) into a priest, a good move since two of his numbers are simile arias – one with advice to Adelaide in the first act, another with advice to Lotario in the final act. While Mr. Boyce's resonant tone was impressive in these pieces, his advice in Act II directly to Adelaide with the aria "Non t'inganni la speranza" ("To constancy you trust in vain") was especially forceful with his muscular virility so well suited to the rhythmic vitality of this piece. Throughout, he was a pillar of strength.



Sophie Rennert, Lotario; Marie Lys, Adelaide
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

As for the titular character himself, Lotario became almost a knight-in-shining-armor, literally, in a splendid shiny silver jacket, arriving from outside Italy's tumultuous dynastic struggles – as much to woo Adelaide as to restore justice. Handel's original Lotario was the experienced alto castrato Antonio Bernacchi, evidently with a vast compass and warm tone; this production's Lotario was the fine Austrian mezzo-soprano Sophie Rennert, a prizewinner recently in vocal competitions in both Salzburg and Innsbruck. Her warm tone blended wonderfully in the final duet with Adelaide, surely one of Handel's most beautiful duets ever.

The role is rather typical of a dynastic hero of the day, with six arias in Major keys, sometimes of war, mostly of love, all of which Ms. Rennert executed with

clear projection and adequate range – although her voice was not especially large - thus revealing the kind of subtle artistry that makes her such a fine performer in the Baroque idiom. Most impressive was her haunting simile area closing Act II, “Non disper Peregrino” (“The traveller betrays no fears”), sung while the now-imprisoned Idelberto has his turn tied to ropes at the omnipresent scaffolding. In an inventive use of the *da capo*, Idelberto mimed Ms. Rennert’s words as she sang them prostrate on the ground before him – a stunning and apt directorial touch, and a mesmerizing display of vocal, and non-vocal, artistry.

The Ensemble Excels

Full credit for this compelling production of *Lotario* belongs to all involved, not just the internationally renowned director Carlos Wagner and a cast of notable international singers, but also to Artistic Director Laurence Cummings and the FestspielOrchester Göttingen. This orchestra, now an instrument of

idiomatic precision and refined tone in his capable hands, unites specialists in historical performance practice from around the world. This is no small point given the many brilliant arias with long ritornellos of carefully worked polyphony as well as the florid writing for voices and instruments alike; Maestro Cummings led the fine ensemble with drive, but happily let the music breathe when necessary.

All this played to the basic ensemble nature of the work itself, for which Handel had pulled out all stops in launching his new company. Göttingen’s production excelled, not because of individual vocal and instrumental superstars and their intermittent highlights, but because of a highly capable ensemble attuned to the depth and consistency of Handel’s theatrical genius. A work that might have suffered from the cutting back of full *da capos* and the resulting emergence of cardboard characters thus came through instead as one rich in musical invention and character development, with a distinct color all its own.



Director Laurence Cummings and the FestspielOrchester Göttingen
Photo: Frank Stefan Kimmel