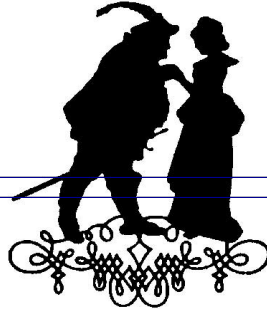


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## Riccardo Broschi's *Merope* Mesmerizes

### The Innsbruck Festival of Early Music, 2019

The Innsbruck Festival of Early Music has long played a pioneering role in the revival of Baroque music with at least one staged baroque opera or oratorio each summer. This year the Festival outdid itself with the revival of the long-neglected opera *Merope* of 1732 by Riccardo Broschi (1698-1756), always in the shadow of his younger brother Carlo Maria Michelangelo Broschi, better known as Farinelli, the most famous castrato of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. To be sure, Riccardo himself, composer of six operas, knew well the extraordinary vocal skills of his brother, for whom he wrote this work. But as the Festival's artistic director and conductor Alessandro De Marchi illustrated in the carefully researched and idiomatic production, Riccardo Broschi was no neophyte, but a well-known and respected composer. As Maestro De Marchi wrote in the program notes, Riccardo "was a master of Neapolitan opera who composed beautiful operas and wrote impeccable arias for all voice types and parts." The stunning cast he assembled and the persuasive baroque performance proved his point.

His assertion was also supported by not just the musicians, cast and orchestra, but also by the staging and direction of esteemed baroque choreographer Sigrid T'Hooft, a specialist in Historically Informed Performance Practice. As she stated in an interview before the performances, the acting will not involve the typical antics of traditional opera (singers lying on the floor, embracing fervently, leaping on beds, etc.). Instead, "just like in Farinelli's time singers will mainly come to the front of the stage to sing their arias, and will thereby constantly use rhetorical hand-gestures, shift the weight of the bodies and display a wide range of facial expressions." A further aid to the HIP approach was the recreation of the lighting directions - from above, the sides and the footlights - endowing each singer with a kind of soft and even mysterious three-dimensional halo.

And what a group of singers they were – no less than three countertenors, plus two mezzos, one soprano, and one tenor. The clearly written text by Apostolo Zeno



David Hansen as Epitide (originally Farinelli's role)  
Photo: Rupert Larl

provides a complex plot, typical of the period. It involves the ambitious Polifonte (the tenor) who before the opera usurped the throne of Messene (an ancient kingdom in the southwest of the Peloponnese peninsula) by having the king, Merope's husband, murdered, as well as all their children. One survived the attack, however, Epitide (Farinelli's role), and grew up in the distant country of Aetolia. The opera itself begins ten years after the murder and basically hinges around the ambivalent circumstances of mother and son - Queen Merope not knowing her son is alive but hoping for his return, he incognito in Messene for various reasons. In the hierarchical structure of baroque opera, therefore, it should be no surprise that each, the prima donna and primo uomo, has the equal and dominant share of musical numbers – two in the first act, three in the second act, and one major piece in the third.

Stepping into the shoes of Farinelli was the fine Australian countertenor David Hansen who brought all his considerable experience to the daunting task of a role that demanded such Farinelli traits as a three octave vocal

range, virtuosic agility, large dynamic scope, and powerful, sustained breath control. Hansen did not disappoint, right from his opening heroic aria, "Incerto è il vostro core," with his breathtaking leaps. (Such a heroic aria was a necessity for Farinelli, made possible by his vow to kill the huge boar wrecking havoc in the country). Then the final aria of Act I, "Chi non sente al mio dolore" exhibited an impressive array of wide leaps again, but this time mixed with sustained legato phrasing and nuance of tone that articulated his personal sorrow and pain. The carefully crafted cadenza was stunning. Another showstopper came late in the second act, with the vigorous tirade toward Polifonte, "Si, traditor tu sei," with its calculated coloratura. As further exploration of the artistry of Farinelli, the Festival offered between two performances of *Merope*, a gala concert, "Farinelli und andere Helden" ("Farinelli and other Heroes"), by another illustrious countertenor Valer Sabadus, further evidence of Farinelli's versatility, power, and beauty - traits shared by both the fine countertenors.

But the opera itself proved far more than a mere Farinelli showpiece. Accomplished Italian mezzo Anna Bonitatibus was no less engaging in the title role of Merope, both vocally and in her striking stage presence, in billowing crimson gown. Indeed much of the first act a look-a-like dancer as servant shadowed and mimicked her baroque poses, thus amplifying her natural dramatic instincts. Vocally, her command of two elaborate accompanied recitatives and varied arias was impressive. Her first accompanied recitative and agitated aria, "Barbaro traditor," directed at Polifonte, was drenched with emotion; so too was her final accompanied recitative, "Sei dolor," and following aria in Act III, "Accesso il mio core sol ode il furore," the final aria of the opera. Much of the writing for her reminded me of Vivaldi's writing for his protégé Anna Giro – often periodic, breathless, emotionally driven. Ms. Bonitatibus brought to the role all the emotional intensity and detailed nuance that Vivaldi would have liked – as I'm sure did Riccardo Broschi.



Vivica Genaux, Trasimede; Anna Bonitatibus, Merope;  
Dancer-Shadow, Corpo Baroco Photo: Rupert Larl

The other mezzo of the cast was renowned American singer, Vivica Genaux in the trouser role Trasimede, town councilor and would-be lover to Merope. The role had been written for the castrato Francesco Bilancioni, for whom Broschi also wrote much demanding music. Genaux in fact opens the opera with a short cavatina that sets up Farinelli's demanding first aria. She then follows his aria immediately with a kind of delayed cabaletta, "Dal possessor di quell core," which demands extraordinary vocal display; her vivid and rapid-fire coloratura immediately captivated the audience. In each of her other three arias, one per act, she directly addresses Merope; in Act II, "Se il labbro tace" was especially poignant, with pleading upward chromatic lines that eloquently displayed the secure legato phrasing of Ms. Genaux.

For sheer beauty, it was perhaps the voice of the opera's only soprano, Arianna Vendittelli that proved especially enchanting, with soft, radiant tone appropriate for the gentle Princess from Aetolia in love with Epitide. Dressed in flowing white (in stark contrast to Merope's blood-red gown), she too was shadowed by a dancer early in the opera, who at one point eloquently mirrored the obbligato wind writing. Her expressive aria "Vieni, o di questo cor," sung before the curtain without her

shadowing double, was subtle and expressive by itself in its purity of tone and ease of articulation, especially in the upper register. Following immediately, her exquisite love duet with Epitide was another highlight of the evening, with its intricate and delicate weaving of two clarion voices.

Another Italian, Filippo Mineccia, a charismatic countertenor who excels at the villainous roles found in Baroque Opera Seria, did just that with the role of Polifonte's pawn, the assassin Anassandro (a role sung by a contralto in the 1732 premiere). In his Act II continuo aria, "Son traditore," he remains unrepentant with well-articulated accents over the dotted rhythm. But with the opening aria of Act III he switches gears effectively to support the demise of the tyrant

Polifonte, again with a determined presence. One other countertenor, the versatile German artist Hagen Matzeit, effectively took on the small role of Licisco, the Ambassador from Aetolia. His single aria, sung following Epitide's revelation of identity, is essentially an "aria di sorbetto." Mr. Matzeit sang with secure agility as in the cantatas of Bach, works with which he has had considerable experience.



Filippo Mineccia, Anassandro  
Photo: Rupert Larl



Alas, all was not perfect. Jeffrey Francis, the tenor scheduled to sing Polifonte, was indisposed and unable to sing the role in any of the performances. The emergency solution was to have Carlo Allemano, a fine tenor familiar to Innsbruck audiences, sing the part from the orchestra pit; meanwhile the versatile Italian actor Daniele Berardi pantomimed the baroque gestures on stage, doing the best he could on short notice, which was fairly good indeed, except for his understandable inability to mouth the words. But Mr. Allemano, whom I had the good fortune to see clearly in the pit, did so admirably in an animated and persuasive reading of Polifonte's vigorous two arias.

(A third aria, "Penso, e non ho mercede," the penultimate aria of Act I, had to be cut.) The emergency procedure seems to have been one factor in the decision of the Festival not to make a DVD of this performance, nor for that matter even a CD.

This is unfortunate, since both the music and production were so authentically compelling. Broschi created some extraordinary music, apt for each character, situation and emotion; and the approach of director Sigrid T'Hooft was to let this music work. Quoting her again: "Broschi highlighted each affect in a typical baroque way. I allow the music to do this to the fullest, and the singer to complete this with his art. I stand back and allow the work to speak for itself. I do not have a concept; I stay close to the original libretto." Aid to her carefully researched baroque gesturing also came from her team, lighting designer Tommy Geving (including footlights across the front of the stage, hanging chandeliers above, and even candle light in the auditorium). Additionally, costume and set designer Stephan Dietrich adorned each character in authentic, often extravagant, baroque outfits, and easily movable flats of classical buildings provided ample space and depth. (A striking image to begin the opera was David



Dancers of the Corpo Barocco in the dance following Act II

Photo: Rupert Larl

Hansen as Epitide in flamboyant baroque garb, in a classic "Farinelli" pose mirrored by a classical statue next to him.)

This authenticity embodied one further element – dance. At the opera's 1732 premiere in Turin, the Teatro Regio had a large, well-known dance troupe, which performed a ballet after each act. Director De Marchi asked T'Hooft not only to direct this revival but also to recreate this dance tradition, in the service of complete authenticity. This she did admirably, with music of contemporaries of Broschi: Jean-Marie Leclair (1698-1756) following the first and third acts, music of Carlo Alessio Rasetti (1700-1746) following the second act. It all made for a long evening (five and a half hours, with two short intermissions), but few cared. Leclair's elaborate chaconne following Act I was a delight, so much so that following the final performance of the opera, the dance troupe, "Corpo Barocco," performed it as a spontaneous encore. T'Hooft used Rasetti's colorful music to accompany a prolonged "commedia dell'arte" scene involving the boar that had been terrorizing Messene. The sheer fun in the boar's various antics made up for its excessive length. The third dance gave opportunity for the cast itself to join in, following at last their own jubilant reconciliations.

All in all, Maestro De Marchi's faith in the opera, as well as his and Ms. T'Hooft's faith in the value of complete baroque authenticity, paid off. All forces involved, including not just a stunning cast but the expert Innsbruck Festival Orchestra, provided ample evidence that Farinelli's older brother, Riccardo Broschi, really

deserved equal billing. He was a talented composer capable of catching with elegance and great élan the myriad emotions of characters within the baroque aesthetic. For me the opera was a revelation. One can only hope that more of his music will be so lovingly and admirably revived.



Members of the cast of *Merope* Photo: Rupert Larl