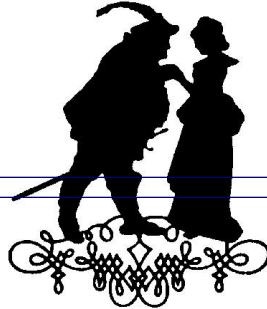


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## *Muzio Scevola: A Triptych Complete* Handel Festival Halle 2018

One of the most anticipated events of the 2018 Handel Festival in Halle was the first ever fully staged performance of the 1721 Opera-Pasticcio *Muzio Scevola*. It was indeed a fitting close to a Festival that had begun with the rarely performed *Berenice* of 1737, the last of Handel's operas to be staged in Halle. So one could argue that only with *Muzio* had the Festival truly completed the staging of all Handel's operas, since the work is sometimes listed as one of his 42 operas even though only Act III is his. Semantics aside, the occasion at the historic Goethe-Theater Bad Lauchstädt was a great success, with stunning baroque sets and costumes that helped bind together this unusual and historic three-act work, a product of not one, but three composers.

Back in 1721 the newly formed Royal Academy of Music conceived the composition as a kind of publicity stunt between its musical director, Handel, and a celebrated Italian composer newly arrived in town, Giovanni Bononcini – thus initiating a 20-year rivalry between the two. As a kind of prelude, necessitated by Paolo Rolli's three-act libretto, which focused on three



Alexis Vassiliev, Muzio; Michaela Šrůmová, Orazio; Markéta Cukrová, Clelia; and Roman Hoza, Porsenna Photo: © Stiftung Händel-Haus

“valorous actions” of early Roman times, the Academy commissioned another man to compose the first act. This was Filippo Amadei, an Italian friend of Handel, not really a composer, but a cellist in the Covent Garden orchestra. To no one's surprise, then and now, Handel's Act III – with which he evidently took a great deal of trouble – was by far the best. But to the credit of this



Alexis Vassiliev, Muzio; Members of the Hartig Ensemble  
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revival, the production gave equal billing and care to each act, allotting roughly 45 minutes to each composer. Alas this meant cutting roughly half of Handel's music, a major drawback; but balancing this was a viable assessment of the work as a whole, the laudable intended goal of this revival.

Rolli designed the opera so that each act could stand alone if necessary, a kind of baroque trilogy. But, as the taut production shows, this fictional love story set amidst the early Tuscan-Roman rivalry, although absurdly convoluted and awkwardly constructed, is actually well unified around the nucleus of each act, these three "valorous actions." In the first, a young Roman officer Orazio, resisting Tarquinio's efforts to regain the throne of Rome, sets a bridge on fire and leaps into the Tiber River; in the second, Muzio, another young Roman warrior, determined to match Orazio's bravery, thrusts his own left hand into Rome's sacred flame to prove his valor; in the third, the fiery "amazon" Roman maiden Clelia, makes a defiant escape via another heroic plunge into the Tiber.

As renowned Handel author Winton Dean comments, looking at the whole libretto "this absurd gallimaufry might have been designed as a parody of all that is windy and inconsequent in the convention of heroic *opera seria*." Perhaps, but this production team -

including conductor Marek Štryncl (who unearthed the work), director Laurent Charoy and choreographer Helena Kazárová - did not treat it that way. The direction was authentic and elegant early baroque; the dance element spare but effective. Many unifying elements of stagecraft and direction conspired to construct the whole. It was rather like having the three panels of a lost Triptych finally reunited; the whole came through not as parody, but as a viable reconstruction of the artistry of a lost era.

Each composer had been allotted an overture for his act, and Ms. Kazárová, experienced choreographer of Baroque revivals, took full advantage of this with tableaux during the music. The first act begins with two dancers holding giant puppets on long poles, the rivals Tarquinio and Porsenna, King of Tuscany, initially allied. In mid-Act II, Muzio will mistakenly stab one of the puppet figures, Porsenna, thus precipitating his valiant act with the sacred flame to defy the king. During the second act overture, Clelia's brightly clad troop of four amazon warriors stomp and cavort with their spears. The dancers, members of Ms. Kazárová's Hartig Ensemble, appear frequently in the production, in one guise or another, to fine dramatic effect.

As to the music, no one will claim that either Amadei or Bononcini stands up well to Handel. I found Dean's assessment to be relatively accurate, if a little harsh: "Amadei's act is correct but colorless, full of vain repetitions and aimless progressions; the music has no life of its own and gives none to the characters." As for Bononcini, his style is a bit more like Handel's but without the extended melodic line and nuance of detail. Writes Charles Burney, "Bononcini's airs are easy and natural, but no vigour of genius is discoverable in the subject, design, or texture of the parts." But even on a second hearing, the music of both was pleasant enough, much thanks not only to the baroque elements but also to the capable cast and vibrant orchestra under the direction of conductor Marek Štryncl. After all, not every Triptych is perfect.

As for Handel's Act III, his autograph score includes two duets and eleven arias, often of significant length. Alas, reducing each act to 45 minutes, this production eliminated almost half of them, along with much verbose recitative, as well as the da capo on the final duet and at least one of the arias. (This basically cut the act to half its original length.) I wish it were otherwise, of course, but the compensation, again, was that this historical curiosity was at least finally brought together as a whole on stage. (Completely uncut, it would have run about five hours with intermissions, about twice the length usually allotted for a Bad Lauchstädt production.)



Alexis Vassiliev, Muzio; Markéta Cukrová, Clelia; Members of the Hartig Ensemble  
Photo: © Stiftung Händel-Haus

Fully aware comparisons would be made, Handel took great care composing for a cast that was really the best of the day. Muzio was the first part Handel wrote for Senesino, the famed castrato who would then take the lead in his ensuing Academy operas. A revered Russian countertenor from Paris, Alexis Vassiliev, took on the role for this revival. His rich mezzo timbre and intense voice, with a wide range of colors and dynamics, was just right for capturing the arias each composer wrote for Senesino. Alas on June 8<sup>th</sup>, in the first of the two performances I attended, he had rather an off night, often

off pitch, and with a rather ugly color. But he must have had a good night's sleep, for the next day he was wonderful through all three acts with expressive control of his melismas, impressive *messa di voce* (both Senesino trademarks), and precise fioratura. The sequences in his opening aria to Clelia in Handel's Act III, "Pupille sdegnose!" ("Disdainful eyes!"), were moving indeed, making me regret all the more the time saving device of cutting his two later arias.



Markéta Cukrová, Clelia; Members of the Hartig Ensemble  
Photo: © Stiftung Händel-Haus

The remaining cast was all female, save for the sturdy baritone Roman Hoza as the kindly Porsenna, who sang with plenty of Polyphemous-like bluster in his only aria in Handel's Act. Strangely, the tyrant Tarquinio, recently ousted from the Roman throne, has no aria in any act, only recitative handled nicely by Soprano Marta Fadjljevičová in a trouser role. Indeed the mostly Czech cast of Musica Florea was well experienced in the field of historically informed performance, and it showed. Markéta Cukrová, the fiery Clelia, (originally a role for Handel's stalwart mezzo Margherita Durastanti) handled the role with aplomb, right from her impressive entrance with troops and trumpets in Act I, to the spirited aria "Dimmi crudele Amore" that Handel provides for her.



Michaela Šrůmová, Orazio

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The pair of secondary lovers, Orazio and Irene (Posenna's daughter) was an appealing complement to the lead pair. In her trouser role as Orazio, soprano Michaela Šrůmová impressed from the start (a lively aria with oboes in Act I) with a clear and appealing timbre and fine technique. Her only aria by Handel, the lovely siciliano "Come, se ti vedro" was a poignant highlight of the last act. As Irene, mezzo Sylva Čmugrová, with her warm and expressive voice, was a poised presence throughout, opening the evening with a lovely siciliano. Perhaps because she had an ample amount to sing in the first two acts (including a lovely duet with Orazio by Bononcini), the production clipped her only two arias in Act III. This was unfortunate, especially since Handel's Larghetto, the saraband "Ah, dolce nome" is such a jewel.

The Act did include, however, the only aria by Irene's companion, Fidalma, sung to her as an admonition, "Non ti fidar," "Do not be so trusting." The buoyant, mixed-meter piece, sung with brio by soprano Lucia Knoteková, was a refreshing contrast to the posturing of the two heroes. Compensation perhaps for the loss of Irene's aria was the lively duet Irene has with Orazio that soon follows. In this penultimate number of the score, each voice had its quatrain before they blended melliflously together,

followed by the vocal melody in the orchestra, as Handel intended, rather than a da capo. The final number (sans chorus) soon follows, a weightier canonic duet between the primary pair, with a full da capo – supposedly. Alas this was cut.

Still, the juxtaposition of these two duets was a nice feature, and hearing them soon after the two duets by Bononcini was instructive. Handel wins. As Winton Dean sums up: "Handel's music for Act III is of such outstanding quality that it is a pity it should be condemned to silence." (Even more a pity that so much of it was cut.) "It is a magnificent torso, but still a torso. A performance of the whole opera, though instructive, could never be more than a historical curiosity; there is too little doubt who would be the winner."

True enough. Handel triumphs. But the point of this revival, the first ever (and Dean never had the privilege of experiencing such a revival) was not to pick a winner – as perhaps it might have been in 1721. The performance as whole was instructive, yes, but it proved to be much more than an historical curiosity. Thanks to the unified production, the balance of baroque aesthetic and idiomatic performance, it proved a thoroughly delightful – and viable – evening. A triptych complete.

Sylva Čmugrová, Irene; Tarquinio, Marta Fadljevičová; Porsenna, Roman Hoza  
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