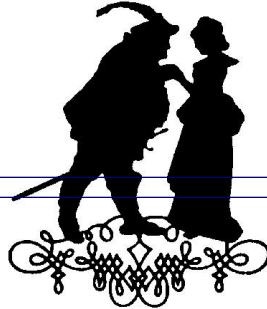


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## Opera Lafayette: *Cerere Placata* A Jommelli Jewel Revived

On its annual fall visit to New York, the enterprising early music specialists from Washington, Opera Lafayette, brought with them a true rarity: *Cerere Placata* (*Ceres Placated*) by the famed, but infrequently performed, 18<sup>th</sup> century composer Niccolò Jommelli. This delightful 1772 Neapolitan *festa teatrale* was in fact a modern premiere, in a new edition conducted by Charles Brink, the company's second guest musical director. The sprightly and idiomatic performance confirmed why the prolific Jommelli was regarded at the time of his death in 1774, two year after the premiere of this work, as one of the greatest composers of his time.

No wonder that Charles III, King of Spain, would commission this renowned composer for the writing of a festive piece to help celebrate the birth and baptism of his granddaughter Princess Maria Theresa of Naples and Sicily (the future Empress of Austria); no wonder either that the well-known myth of the abduction of Persephone would be modified a bit so that it is not Hades (God of the underworld) who abducts the daughter of Cerere



Opera Lafayette's 2<sup>nd</sup> Guest Music Director Charles Brink and the cast of *Cerere Placata* take their bows

(Goddess of the Harvest and Queen of Sicily), but Titano, King of Spain, who elopes with her, thus arousing Cerere's considerable ire. Finally Giove, serving as the obligatory 18<sup>th</sup> century *deus ex machina*, delivers a *licenza*, a monologue resolving the drama and tying it to the happy occasion at hand.

The original performance in Naples evidently had a first rate cast; likewise with Opera Lafayette and their handful of stellar international singers. In the titular role of Cerere, Soprano Jennifer Casey-Cabot caught all the angst and fury of a mother wronged who will stop at nothing to achieve revenge. Her virtuosic aria in Part II clearly was a model for Mozart's Queen of the Night, and Ms. Casey-Cabot, with sharp and clarion tone, attacked it with all the fortissimo top notes the aria demands.

Another extraordinary performance came from German mezzo-soprano Stephanie Houtzeel as Titano, originally a role for castrato. Her experience in trouser roles certainly must have contributed to her convincing male charisma, while vocally she was the very essence of style and grace with her warm tone and command of expressive nuance in her demanding, and often poignant, arias. She reminded me of Mozart's Sesto in *La Clemenza di Tito*, especially in her impassioned aria to her beloved Proserpina opening Act II, "Bella mia fiamma, addio" ("Light of my life, farewell"). That Mozart knew this opera, and this role, is clear from the fact that some 15 years later he used this same text for his own concert aria, K.528. As for Proserpina, the light and fiery soprano Laetitia Grimaldi was a delightful complement, at times with beautiful limpid phrasing, at others with precise, blazing vocal acrobatics. The two duets of these besieged lovers, in Parts I and II, were highlights of the evening, aided at times by the ever-inventive wind obbligati from Jommelli.

One could not help thinking of Mozart in these characters, with perhaps a touch of Zerlina in Proserpina, and more that a touch of Emperor Tito in the light, warm tenor of Thomas Michael Allen as Cerere's consoling Counselor, Alfeo. Another fine soprano, sounding at times like a Mozartian mezzo, was Arianna Zukerman as the High Priest, whose voice also mixed well with the splendid chorus. Finally, tenor Patrick Kilbride, holding a microphone, happily hammed up the role of Giove at the end, reminding us of the joyous occasion at hand. Even the performance venue itself, the acoustically friendly Times Center Theater on 41<sup>st</sup> street, enhanced the festive atmosphere, sporting an all-encompassing glass wall behind the orchestra that revealed subtle images from the world beyond.

All the reference to Mozart should not negate, however, the achievement of Jommelli himself, a true revolutionary between the baroque and the classical, a giant in his time, composer of more than sixty operas characterized by increasingly expressive orchestral subtlety. On the occasion of his death in 1774, one critic wrote: "If richness of thought, glittering fantasy, inexhaustible melody, heavenly harmony, deep understanding of all the instruments, and particularly the full magical strength of the human voice.... constitute a musical genius, then in him Europe has lost its greatest composer." Thanks to Opera Lafayette, with its vibrant orchestral ensemble led by Charles Brink, for bringing this work to light in a stunning concert performance. Let's hope a Jommelli renaissance is in the making, as well it should be.



Nicollò Jommelli, 1714-1774