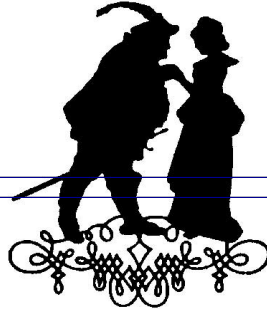


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## A Sensational *Semele* highlights

## Opera Philadelphia's 2019 Innovative Festival O



Amanda Forsythe as Semele

Photo: Dominic M. Mercier

In this, its third year, Opera Philadelphia's annual Festival O continued with its mission to exhibit the power and potential of opera in innovative repertoire. The three productions, all relative rarities, ranged from Baroque to contemporary, each compelling in its own way in defining the essence of the era from which it

emerged. From the Baroque came Handel's 1744 *Semele*, based on the Greek myth of a mortal who yearns for immortality. Labeled a "bawdy opera" in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the music drama was written "after the Manner of an oratorio" during the Lenten season in London. Opera Philadelphia's stunning production, enhanced by dance, reinforced all the emotional relevance of Handel's music. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, came Prokofiev's effervescent satire *The Love for Three Oranges*, which had its Chicago premiere in 1921. The whimsical production stressed the quest of a melancholy Prince in search of joy. Notably, at the time of its composition, Prokofiev was also on a quest for solace in America, given the turbulent times in Europe. And from the

Contemporary, almost a century later, came the tragic story of the Russian teenage lovers *Denis and Katya* by composer Philip Venobles and librettist Ted Huffman, a spare, disturbing look at how social media with its sensational allure impacts our lives and alters one's ability to distinguish between fact and fiction.

As successful as all three productions were, unquestionably the “hit” of the season was *Semele*, as measured by the enthusiastic response to the five sold-out performances at the Kimmel Center’s intimate, acoustically friendly Perelman Theatre. The co-production with Omaha Opera from 2016, directed here as well as in Omaha by James Darrah, fully incorporated elements of dance that the music so frequently invites. As Mr. Darrah states in the program notes, “*Semele*’s music is so full of life that it inherently calls for movement.” Indeed this production moves, stressing the work not as a static oratorio, but as a dramatic entity, really an opera in disguise. In Omaha, a single dancer had projected the deeper emotions of *Semele*’s distraught sister Ino; for Philadelphia, Darrah and choreographer Gustavo Ramirez Sansano added four more dancers, to help evoke emotional currents throughout the entire production. The result was a compelling integration of dance and drama that contributed to make this perhaps the most memorable of all the many performances of *Semele* I have ever attended, either staged or in concert.

That is to say, from the very outset, movement - whether for dancers, or chorus, or soloists - helped create a seamless flow that propelled the potentially static “secular oratorio” with its plethora of emotional da capo arias forward. Thus a viable human drama was created where vanity and ambition led inevitably to self-destruction. There was no need for the kind of “concept” opera that Chicago Opera Theater set in Hollywood with its lure of frivolous pleasures in 2002, nor for that conceived by the New York City Opera four years later with Marilyn Monroe and President Kennedy as the central pair. Nor was there a need to impose current Me-Too overtones. Instead, the straightforward production with a focus on dance as a primal dramatic device served both to universalize this timeless drama about human nature and to release its deeply emotional undercurrents.

A stunning example was that of *Semele*’s sister Ino, whose own plight is often lost amidst that of her sister *Semele*’s quest for immortality. Ino yearns for love - from the one she adores, Athamas, once betrothed to *Semele* who is now en route to eternal bliss (so she thinks) with Jupiter. Ino’s magnificent aria to Athamas, as he become aware he is the unwitting cause of her unhappiness, is often lost in the shuffle, sometimes even



Tim Mead as Athamas; Daniela Mack and Dancer Lindsey Matheis as Ino  
Photo: Dominic M. Mercier

cut or reduced as a piece that slows the action too much. But it deserves to be heard in full as a heartbreaking expression of one who truly yearns: “Turn, hopeless lover, turn thy eyes / And for a maid bemoan / In flowing tears and aching sighs / Thy woes too like her own.” Mezzo-soprano Daniela Mack sang the full aria poignantly enough, with glowing tone and convincing presence; but the shattering intensity and expressiveness from Principal Dancer Lindsey Matheis beautifully shadowing every nuance of the long, emotional aria, made this moment a highlight of the evening, indeed one central to the theme of unrequited love and an ensuing life of heartbreak.

This seminal scene is later reinforced at the pivotal point of the opera when Juno (Daniela Mack again) poses as Ino to manipulate *Semele* into admiring her beauty so much in a flattering mirror that she will then refuse to grant Jupiter her favors in bed until he appears not as mortal, “but like himself, the mighty thunderer, ...in heavenly attire.” The magnificent dancer Ms. Matheis returns to the stage as the dispirited shell of the forsaken Ino, and as Juno sings she also becomes puppet master, pulling every string that controls the contorted movement of the dancer. This iconic scene was as mesmerizing a moment on stage as I have ever encountered, wrought with powerful emotion and irony. Indeed, these two scenes with Ino’s inner soul personified in dance defined the breathtaking essence of this intoxicating production as a whole.

Choreographer Sansano also deserves much credit for integrating the four other dancers so well into both solo and choral tableaux that Darrah so effectively constructs - aided further by the scenic and lighting designs of Emily Anne MacDonald and Cameron Jaye Mock. Acrobatic leaps of the four were in stark contrast, for example, to the somnolence of Somnus, the God of sleep, so reluctant at first to aid Juno in her plan. The dancers eventual collapse in a heap on the snoozing God makes his reluctance perfectly clear, even adding a touch of humor to this otherwise static scene. Elsewhere, as the dancers integrate with the chorus, they fully engaged in the action – first in the dark, cluttered opening of the opera as cavorting members of the Cadmus clan. Later the dancers appear among the staid Arcadian denizens, set in contrasting brightness at the front of the stage, agents in Jupiter’s diversion of Semele.



Daniela Mack, Juno; Alex Rosen, Somnus  
Photo: Dominic M. Mercier

All of this would have been to no avail, however, had the musical forces been less compelling. Chorus Master Elizabeth Braden had shaped an impeccable chorus that sang, with zest and almost reckless abandon on the one hand, with an elegant glow and directness on the other – and always with exceptional diction. Impressive too was the Opera Philadelphia Orchestra, supplemented by a few baroque instruments such as theorbo and harpsichord. Under the direction of baroque and classical era specialist Gary Thor Wedow, its playing was idiomatic and vibrant, highlighted by crisp solos to supplement an ideal cast of singers, who as always carry the day in any Handel opera.



Amanda Forsythe as Semele Photo: Dominic M. Mercier

The six singers were indeed ideally cast, beginning with Boston-based soprano Amanda Forsythe, virtuosic as always in such showstoppers as “Endless pleasure, Endless Love,” and her famous mirror-aria, “Myself I shall adore” – sung amidst a myriad of glowing images of her projected on the curtain behind. But she must have had some dance lessons too, so well did she mix with the four dancers frequently encircling her – even with a balletic hoisting of her above them at one point. An apt complement to her was the fine tenor Alek Shrader as Jupiter, aloof and motionless in his authoritarian way, any motion being reserved for his adoring followers. Thus, appropriately, Mr. Shrader sang his famous showpiece “Where’er you walk” just as Handel wrote it: “Largo e pianissimo per tutto.” The stillness was a welcome contrast after all the stage activity; only some subtle computerized imagery on the curtain hinted at the Arcadian landscape that Jupiter, using his divine power, describes in the text supported by the exquisite strings.



Amanda Forsythe as Semele; Alek Shrader as Jupiter  
Photo: Dominic M. Mercier



Following Baroque tradition, Cadmus and Somnus as well as Juno and Ino were double cast - the former with the sonorous bass Alex Rosen, the latter with aforementioned mezzo Daniela Mack (real-life wife to Alek Shrader). Nor was there any falling off in the two secondary roles, Iris and Athamas. Indeed Curtis-trained soprano Sarah Shafer sang Juno's messenger with such notable beauty and acted with such élan, that she almost stole the show with her stylish white jumpsuit and dangerously high heels. As for Athamas, it was happily a bit of luxury casting to have superb counter-tenor Tim Mead - shining as last year's Oberon in Philadelphia's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* - sing this role. Indeed he did so with his usual clarion tone and phrasing - beginning with his showpiece aria "*Hymen haste, thy torch prepare,*" complete with effortless coloratura.

The production of *Semele* eschewed any kind of "eurotrash" antics, presenting a straightforward narrative of the Greek myth with enough contemporary overtones to heighten the inherent pathos and poignancy of the piece. This was the case as well with the other two productions of the Festival, each on an equally high level. Prokofiev's evergreen satire of Romanticism *The Love for Three Oranges*, sometime labeled "a triumph of silliness," was much more than that in the hands of Opera Philadelphia's esteemed Italian music director of twenty years, Corrado Rovaris and Italian director Alessandro Talevi. The music of the fast-moving comedy was crisp



Zachary James as The Cook

Photo: Kelly &amp; Massa

and buoyant throughout (even in the lower brass and winds), a reminder that, even though the music may seem second to the lively *comedia dell'arte* antics, it is endlessly inventive and vividly characterized in its own right, as is the chorus. And the production itself, originating at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino - often a stage within a stage - was endlessly captivating with everything from a ribbon-fixated cook (alias chicken) to, yes, three sumptuous princess-filled oranges, whose occupants are in dire need of water. Performed in Philadelphia's sumptuous 19<sup>th</sup> century jewel, The Academy of Music, the opera was a delight.



Jonathan Johnson as the Prince; Barry Banks as Truffaldino

Photo: Kelly &amp; Massa

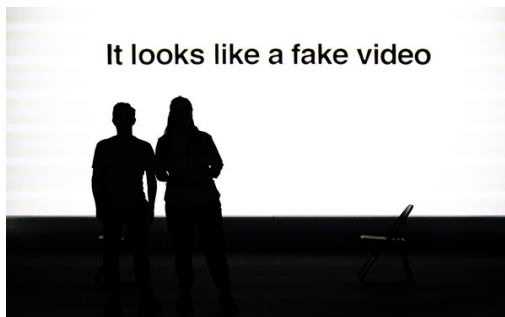


Theo Hoffman and Siena Licht Miller, narrators  
Photo: Dominic M. Mercier

At the other extreme, in the nearby intimate Suzanne Roberts Theater, came the stark tragedy of *Denis & Katya* – the true story of two Russian teenagers who need more than a glass of water to survive the ambiguous living hell they seem to have created, holed up in a cabin in an armed three-day confrontation with police. They do not survive. Whether they die by police fire or by committing suicide, we never know. Musical forces are merely one cellist at each corner of the bare stage, on which two expressive singers, baritone Theo Hoffman and mezzo Siena Licht Miller, intermingle accounts of six acquaintances familiar with the doomed couple. The crux of the unsettling piece is the impact of social media on fomenting both voyeurism and tragedy. Passages from Dennis and Katya live streaming via Periscope are quoted by the two narrators, while projected on the back wall are messaging chats from various sources. One left the haunting scene humming no tunes (there were none), glad to have escaped the claustrophobic space and disturbing

themes more or less unscathed; but one also left well acquainted with the power, potential, and variety of American opera today, another mission of the Festival.

Handel, after all, once wrote contemporary opera - so did Prokofiev, each in the above cases for English speaking audiences. Opera Philadelphia with the third year of its now annual Festival O, has cultivated audiences that know Philadelphia has become the place to go each fall for idiomatic, no-nonsense performances of the less-often encountered repertoire – operas that, whatever their period, are musically sound, inventively staged, with a contemporary feel that engages audiences fully in diverse and appropriate venues. As Director of Corrado Rovaris states in the Festival program: “We’re trying to say something new, fresh, without losing the connection with the repertoire of opera...to build a link between the past, the present, and the future.” I think they have succeeded.



Theo Hoffman and Siena Licht Miller, narrators  
Photo: Dominic M. Mercier