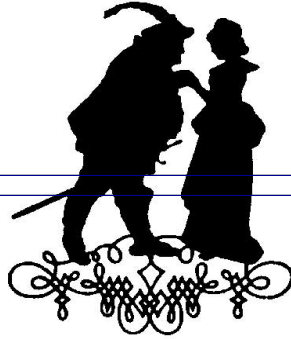


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## A Scintillating *Siroe* Göttingen Handel Festival 2013



Members of the cast on the striking set for *Siroe, Re di Persia* Photo: Theodoro da Silva

Handel's *Siroe, Re di Persia* of 1728 is a problematic work, at least at first appearance. A product of the waning years of his productive First Academy period, it was one of five operas tailored for the famous "Rival Queens," Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni. Handel used the verbose libretto of the young Pietro Metastasio, with its convoluted plot, ill suited it would seem to Handel's inclination to move the drama forward rather than to linger over many simile arias and the like, or to

focus on the sopranos' archetypal rivalry for the affections of the castrato superstar of the day, Senesino. As distinguished Handel Scholar Winton Dean comments, "we are faced with Handel at the height of his powers struggling with a recalcitrant libretto and an ungainly bunch of characters. They spend so much time deceiving each other or being deceived, or both, that none emerges in a strong positive light."

Yet the 2013 Göttingen Handel Festival turned this rarely performed, relatively obscure opera into a stunning success. Indeed it was a highpoint of my fifteen some years attending this Festival, and I would be willing to bet, a highlight as well of the Festival's seventy-year history. Often, as with last year's *Amadigi*, productions at Göttingen have reflected baroque authenticity to some degree; in other years, innovative updating has met with measured success, incorporating such *Regietheater* elements as relocations and even modifications of the story, mixed-period dress, excessive sexuality, and the like. But this year's production demonstrated that *Regietheater* need not be a dirty word – that when it all comes together, both musical and directorial forces, genuine music drama can emerge and bring to life with vivid theatricality a work that might otherwise seem to defy either coherence or viable staging.

Special credit for the spirited and at times unsettling production belongs first to German-Turkish director Immo Karaman and his production team. This includes his frequent collaborator, choreographer Fabian Posca, as well as set and costume designers Timo Dentler and Okarina Peter. Equal credit belongs to the Festival's new artistic director, Laurence Cummings, conducting his first opera in Göttingen. Indeed I had heard Maestro Cummings conduct at the last two London Handel Festivals where he is also artistic director: in March, 2012, *Riccardo Primo*, another of the “rival queen” operas; and in March, 2013, Handel's late comic opera *Imeneo*. As then, his spirited and expressive conducting, this time of the always-reliable FestspielOrchester Göttingen, dovetailed perfectly with the production team's realization of Handel's score. Handel, the composer *par excellence* for the human voice radiated also as a consummate musical dramatist, closer to the bone as it were than the convoluted libretto might suggest.

## A Serpentine Plot

Metastasio's libretto in just two years had already been set by five composers in Italy, beginning with Leonardo Vinci for the 1726 Venice carnival and later by Vivaldi and Hasse, the popular and prolific composer soon to be Bordoni's husband. The plot becomes serpentine, with all its disguises, eavesdropping, asides, and the like. Nicola Haym, Handel's frequent librettist, cut some half of Metastasio's rather lengthy recitatives, but left the arias untouched. (Göttingen included all of the

arias save one, “Se l'amor tuo mi rendi,” a short buoyant piece near the end as Siroe forgives his conniving brother Medarse.) With the recitatives so reduced, claims Winton Dean, “the plot with its political scheming, long-stored vengeance, amorous quadrilateral, repeated tergiversations and insufficiently motivated unraveling in the last chapter, reads like a cross between Scribe [a nineteenth century French grand opera librettist, with famously convoluted texts] and Agatha Christie. It coils like a boa constrictor round the characters and squeezes the life out of them.... Credibility flies out of the window.”

But the essence of the piece is rather straightforward: like King Lear, the Persian king Cosroe denies the throne to the rightful heir, his oldest son Siroe, loyal to the core. Instead he favors the younger son, the rather neurotic and conniving Medarse. Complications to the plot come from the two “rival” sopranos, Laodice and Emira. Both are enamored of Siroe – in spite of the facts that Laodice is (we are told) Cosroe's mistress and that Emira spends almost the entire opera in male disguise as “Idaspe,” the king's confidant, in order to carry out revenge on Cosroe for having murdered her father. The love between Siroe and Emira, with the divided loyalties of each, is the springboard for much of the dramatic conflict of the opera, as is Siroe's perpetual rejection of Laodice (and the consequent conniving by both her and the evil Medarse). Eventually, but not too logically, all plots are exposed, conflicts resolved, and loyalties reaffirmed.



Yosemeh Adieci as Siroe and Anna Dennis as Emira Photo: Theodor da Silva

The coils of a boa constrictor, as it were, became a revolving stage on which various half-destroyed rooms appear. The interiors are relatively unscathed, but the ragged edges of each suggest decay and/or demolition from some external force. The rooms are all on two levels, one of them with a staircase to the left on which much dramatic action takes place. The set reminded me of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's expansive but decaying Roman ruins in the current production of Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* at the Metropolitan Opera, which uses another eighteenth century Metastasio libretto of intrigue and moral decay (all to be corrected in the end.) But in contrast, the effect in Göttingen was claustrophobic. The revolving stage gave no exit to what in Mr. Karaman's hand became the disquieting abode for a truly dysfunctional family.

The set itself, as Karaman pointed out in the program notes, is modern "but not in the sense of something avant-garde. Rather in the sense of timeless, familiar. The audience must be able to identify with the figures." And so we did. Inside this pressure cooker, the life was not squeezed out of these characters; instead, they came vividly, if disturbingly, alive. As Mr. Karaman adds, he was interested not so much in the story of the individuals, but in the conflicts playing out between them: "Every action, every word of the individuals threatens the stability and inner peace of the family, again and again. This is due above all to the fact that they all speak to one another but clearly do not want to understand each other." Recognizable characters indeed!

## Dueling Sopranos

Mr. Karaman effectively contrasted the rivals, Laodice and Emira (originally Cuzzoni and Bordoni) in every way imaginable. The trapped and insecure Laodice, so effectively sung by the young Polish soprano Aleksandra Zamojska, was constantly trying to reinvent herself. She appeared on stage in no less than twelve different costumes (challenging the eight changes of costume for Cleopatra in the current Glyndebourne/Met production of *Giulio Cesare*.) Indeed these changes were more than justified since she was often reacting in major key simile arias to elements of the drama closing in on her, trying with increasing desperation to control her own destiny. (Fully one third of Metastasio's twenty four numbers are relatively obscure "simile arias"; this contributes to the isolation and dislocation of the characters, as well as to the lack of dramatic momentum.) Throughout the evening, the mellifluous ease of Ms. Zamojska's coloratura seemed emblematic of a caged bird hoping to free itself.



Aleksandra Zamojska as Laodice Photo: Theodoro da Silva

Only her beautifully expressive minor key siciliano lament, "Mi lagnero tacendo," with its gentle rocking motion and chromatically tinged melody, briefly catches her underlying misery. Fittingly, Göttingen concluded the first act with this magnificent number, saving the single intermission in the otherwise three-act opera for this moment. Although one couldn't realize it at the time, the moment juxtaposed effectively against a telling final stage direction in the production, in which Laodice, ever frustrated, has seemingly poisoned a wedding cake for Siroe and her rival, Emira. At the last minute she thinks better of it – but the shadow of the dysfunctional family lingered.

British soprano Anna Dennis, a dynamic opposite in every way, who spends all but the last scene disguised as a male, was equally effective as the conflicted Emira. Her disguise - an eloquent tuxedo throughout most of the opera - clearly suggested a confidence and singleness of purpose in contrast to insecurity and flightiness implied by Laodice's many costume



Anna Dennis as Emira Photo: Theodoro da Silva



The final scene

Photo: Theodoro da Silva

changes. Indeed, so convincing was Ms. Dennis in the tuxedo that it was a shock to see her in a flowing red gown in the final scene. Placing both Emira and Laodice at this point in similar showy red gowns was a nice touch, reminding the audience of the initial Cuzzoni/Bordoni rivalry. But Emira (Bordoni) has the last say, not only with the final da capo aria of the opera, the happy “La mia speranza” but also – an unusual touch for Handel – with a solo in the final *coro*, a delightful minuet based on an early cantata.

Still, Ms. Dennis shone most in the arias while in disguise, especially the poignant E Major aria “non vi piacquire” in which she contemplates the joys that might have been hers had she been born a simple peasant. (The smearing of lipstick during the da capo, however, perhaps to suggest her yearning to regain her femininity, was a bit much.) Yet she made this moment, meant to close Handel’s original Act II, a very special one indeed with her expressive, lyric cantabile wonderfully countering the exquisitely nuanced violin line. It was typical of the refined elegance she brought to the role overall, as well as of the fine playing of the orchestra. (English composer Philip Doddridge would soon use the tune from this aria for the hymn “Pressing on in the Christian Race.”)

## Coherent Musical Choices

At this point in the performance, the conclusion of Handel’s Act II, rather than breaking for intermission, Maestro Cummings inserted Handel’s Concerto Grosso op. 6 Nr. 12 in b minor (HWV 330) as an intermezzo. This was another nice touch, a poignant and much needed moment of repose, which

also made a nice bridge to the next scene. Much like the placement of Beethoven’s *Leonora Overture No. 3* before the final scene in *Fidelio*, the insertion effectively marked the shift in dramatic action. In this case Laodice, having finally confessed her guilt to Cosroe at having framed the innocent Siroe, and having asked his forgiveness, sings a *bravura* simile aria “Se il caro figlio” before a hazy mirror on the dimly lit stage.

Special praise must also go to Laurence Cummings and Immo Karaman for opting to include virtually all *da capo* repeats, using them on one hand for efficient scene changes (often with the set rotating) and on the other hand, for a further exploration of details from the opening section of the aria. There was no attempt to clip arias to save time, or to reinforce a misguided director’s concept. Nothing was cut either from the

music for the two secondary characters, the malevolent Medarse (countertenor Antonio Giovannini) and King Cosroe (bass Lisandro Abadie) – secondary figures only in that Handel allots each of them just three arias, one per act.



Antonio Giovannini as Medarse Photo: Theodoro da Silva

## Secondary Characters Riddled with Angst

Winton Dean rightly calls Medarse a “contemptible character, a self serving hypocrite.” Mr. Giovannini’s light, oily countertenor perfectly suited the role, projecting even in his major key arias a viciousness and narcissism not unlike that of Ptolemy in Handel’s *Giulio Cesare* of a few years earlier. Handel must have liked this ironic juxtaposition of buoyancy and sleaziness, and Karaman’s direction served Handel well. He first introduces us to Medarse as he sits in a crazed heap at the bottom of the stairs. Later we find him looking for drugs in his father’s desk or pursuing such nefarious deeds as setting his

brother aflame. A most effective exploitation of the *da capo* principle helped extend Medarse's gloating simile aria, "Chi è piu fedele" of Act I into a malicious scene of near rape of the distraught Laodice on the stairs. Horrified, she escapes to the tattered second level as the set rotates for her ensuing aria.

Likewise, the production reinforced the small but critical role of King Cosroe as a King Lear-like tragic figure. Handel had an excellent and trusted bass, Giuseppe Boschi, for this small but important role. Sonorous Argentinean bass Lisandro Abadie was clearly up to the task, from the stern bluster of his opening aria, "Se il mio paterno amore," sung as if from a hastily assembled podium on the stairs, to his pathetic collapse and near dementia later, as he crawls out of the chimney fireplace. He then sings his final, wonderfully expressive slow, minor key aria, "Gelido in ogni vena," (one of Handel's greatest for bass) in heart-wrenching fashion as he folds an imaginary infant into a blanket; only in the *da capo*, is the gesture revealed as mere hollow nostalgia for his long-lost paternal instincts.



Lisandro Abadie as King Cosroe Photo: Theodoro da Silva

## A Disheveled but Virile Siroe

As for the title character, just listening to the music or reading the libretto, Siroe would seem a much less "heroic" character than that of the typical roles Handel had set for Senesino. Still, he is an archetypal *opera seria* hero, split between love (for Emira) and duty (loyalty to his father). Winton Dean nonetheless labels him a "congenital underdog" and a mere "passive sufferer." Not so in this production. Admirably sung by muscular, blond-wigged German countertenor Yosemite Adjei, he exhibited all the virility and vigor one would expect from the son of a king so maltreated.



Yosemite Adjei as Siroe

Photo: Theodoro da Silva

As the opera progressed, his increasingly disheveled and bloodied appearance indeed mirrored the decaying environment around him. As Act II opened, he dragged behind him a radiator to which he was chained, after escaping his brutal imprisonment in the estate's basement. This was perhaps a bit extreme, but nonetheless proved an effective contrast to his more virile portrayal in Act I when, among other things, he pranced around in boxing shorts. By the time of his great *scena* late in the opera, the nadir of his emotional and physical torment, his repressed anger and fear surfaced with stunning impact in Mr. Adjei's alternately impassioned and subdued articulation of Handel's angular lines.

## Dance as an Effective Foil

Overall, the apt set and direction continually reinforced the dysfunction that made it so difficult for the angst-ridden characters to move on with any degree of normalcy, to get anything done, to even communicate with each other. But in many ways, the most effective touch in the production was the inclusion of the element of dance in the occasional ballet steps of the eloquent and poised Bettina Fritsche portraying a chambermaid, weaving her way through this toxic atmosphere. She became perhaps a symbol for what life might have held for these characters had they been able to get beyond their own wrenching conflicts. Or perhaps dance was an expression of her own fantasy world. At any rate, full credit must go to her, and to choreographer Fabian Posca, for so masterfully integrating into the production this extra-musical element that eloquently framed and balanced the unsettling stage action.



Bettina Fritsche, as the chambermaid, pauses on the stairs of the worn set  
Photo: Theodoro da Silva

This is no small point. Using dance in opera (when it is not called for) is risky business. Occasionally, but rarely, it can expressively complement the singing, as it did when Lucinda Childs, in last year's innovative production of Vivaldi's *Farnace* in Strasbourg, had a solo dancer double for each singer, reinforcing but not interfering with the musical elements. At the other extreme, a dance "concept" can completely trivialize the music drama itself, as with Göttingen's 2009 production of *Admeto* in which a Japanese Butoh dancer simply dominated far too much of the stage action. Mr. Posca, however, working with his frequent collaborator, Mr. Karaman, got it just right. Ms. Fritsche, occasionally breaking into animated ballet steps, provided just the right amount of detachment – holding the audience at a distance, as does Handel's music (this is not *Verisimo* after all) – but at the same time often reacting with compassion, frustration, or even humor to the chaotic and disjointed events she witnesses (as we do) on stage.

She enters midway through the overture, poised and controlled until she pauses, becoming distracted before a full-length mirror. Soon she lets loose, responding to Handel's lively *Gigue*, in animated ballet steps. The brief fantasy, to enjoy life beyond the restrictions of her position as chambermaid - to be part of, rather than servant to, the "family" of the decaying mansion - soon passes. Then the stage action begins. During the course of the opera, she sometimes simply glides unobtrusively across the stage, with measured steps, perhaps straightening a vase on the mantel, or transporting a discarded item, or just indicating with the simplest of gestures, her stifled

chagrin. At one telling moment, while Siroe, downstage on the dark lower stage, sings his final *scena* of despair ("Deggio morire, o stelle"), she, imitating Laodice at the upper left balcony, seeks to reinvent herself, as it were, with various changes of attire. It is a poignant juxtaposition.

By the opera's end, however, she seems to say, "No, it's not worth it. I really don't want to be part of them. I'll keep my distance." After the abortive cutting of the cake, the stage clears, and the final *coro* with Emira continues off stage, singing of love's delights. The chambermaid remains alone on stage, sitting, poised with a cup of tea. Meanwhile, stage left we see the shadowed, animated figures of those inside - this not-too-loving, dysfunctional family - still bickering. The relatively problematic *lieto fine* – an ill prepared shift of events given the eighteenth century convention of a happy ending – is turned on its head. In this production, so thoughtfully performed, directed, and yes choreographed, it all made sense. The chambermaid in effect gets a final "simile aria," without a word sung, in which she provides a prescription for dealing with characters like these and their endless, wrenching emotional fluctuations. Weep with Handel, but dance with him when you can. Maintain a sense of perspective and equilibrium.

Some may not have liked this riveting production, but one couldn't help being moved. It was an engrossing and cathartic performance I will not soon forget.



As the opera ends, the chambermaid sips tea while inside the family bickers on.  
Photo: Theodoro da Silva

## Coda

Two concerts at the beginning of this year's festival selectively showcased not only members of the FestspielOrchester Göttingen but also two of the especially attractive venues outside the city.

On Friday, June 9 (the evening preceding the premiere of *Siroe*), FestspielEnsemble Göttingen, an elite group working together since it was founded in 2006, performed chamber music in the historical setting of the Kloster Bursfelde, in the bucolic rolling hills a few kilometers west of Göttingen. Led by Phoebe Carrai, expressive center of the continuo group in the opera orchestra, it also included Elizabeth Blumenstock and Lisa Weiss, violins, Hanneke van Proosdij, harpsichord, and David Tayler, theorbo. What a delight it was to hear them play trio sonatas of Handel and his contemporaries with such suave and subtle elegance.

The other concert, the day following the premier of *Siroe*, was a recital in the equally attractive setting at Burg Adelebsen in Rittersaal, a little closer to town. As originally scheduled, sopranos Kirsten Blaise and Elizabeth Atherton were to have sung the roles of Emira and Laodice at the opera. Both had to cancel some weeks before the premier. Kirsten Blaise was originally scheduled to sing this much anticipated recital as well; instead, Anna Dennis and Aleksandra Zamojska, gamely stepped in, rather incredibly so since the premiere of *Siroe* had been just a half day earlier. Another delight of the opera had

been the discrete use of the theorbo as part of the continuo group (highlighted in a box to the right of the stage). Hence it was a special treat to hear the exquisite playing of David Tayler in such an intimate context, not only as accompanist, but also as soloist in works for lute by John Dowland and others of England and Scotland.

As for the vocal recital itself, English soprano Ms. Dennis was the major contributor, performing a set of English and Scottish songs with wonderfully expressive and idiomatic phrasing. Ms. Zamojska's contribution was primarily three solo Handel arias, famous ones indeed, *aria di bagagli* as it were. These included "Lascia ch'io pianga," from *Rinaldo* and "Verdi prati" from *Alcina*. She perhaps saved her most impressive fireworks for the opera, but the final number of the program, the only duet ("Pur ti miro" from *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*) provided the kind of mellifluous pairing of voices missing from the "rival queens" in the opera.

Both concerts were a pleasant reprieve from the emotional intensity of the absorbing opera. Out in the lovely countryside, with horses grazing nearby in lush pastures, one could not help recalling Emira's wish in the gorgeous Mozartian aria "non vi piacque": "wouldn't it have been nice to have no worries other than those of a simple shepherdess?" As it turns out, we who attended these two delightful events, had our respite from the emotion-laden opera, distanced and refreshed by more wonderful music, as always at the Göttingen Handel Festival.

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### 2014 Göttingen International Handel Festival

To be held in the context of the Hanoverian-British royal union

May 29 – June 9

*Joshua* (HWV 64) – Oratorio

*Faramondo* (HWV 39) – Opera

Coronation Anthems



Near Kloster Bursfelde