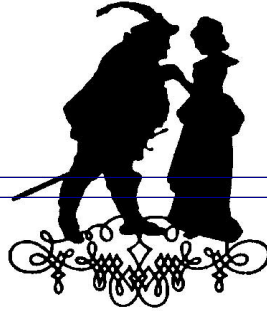


Opera con Brio

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Oreste: Power Corrupts

Handel Festival Halle 2018

Handel's 1734 pasticcio *Oreste*, the first of his three so-called "pasticcio operas," is a piece of relative rarity, in spite of a plethora of first-rate music. Indeed after the successful short run of three performances in 1734 at the newly-opened Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, it vanished from the stage for almost two-and-a-half centuries until it was performed again in 1988 in Bad Lauchstädt, near Handel's birthplace in Halle, as part of the 37th Handel Festival there. Now some thirty years later in 2018 it has returned to this illustrious Festival, compliments of the Bach Consort Wien and the Youth Ensemble of Theater en der Wien. Performed in the intimate Carl Maria-von-Weber Theater Bernburg, some 60 km or so up the River Saale, the scintillating performance and powerful production was worth the journey - a production that came through not as a random collection of some of Handel's great arias, but as a taut and powerful drama.

I had first encountered this masterful work in 2003, at the Juilliard Opera Center in NYC, in the long-delayed American premiere; in 2015 I encountered it a second time in Bremen, in a many-layered production, juxtaposing videos from past events with the present, that placed an emphasis on the deranged tyrant Toante as evil

personified. The following year I witnessed a blackly comic, blood-splattered production by Covent Garden's Young Artists Program at historic Wilton's Music Hall that went overboard with its contemporary take and much gratuitous violence. By any measure, however, this 2018 Halle revival was the most compelling, especially in light of the Festival's central theme, "Foreign Worlds." As such, the production zeroed in on the fear of the foreign that invites insular and protective - or in the extreme, power-hungry - behavior, providing a powerful reflection of today's world.

The music is masterful. Although a "pasticcio," this is no second-rate work. Handel recycles compositions from works spanning some twenty-seven years, including even music from an early 1707 cantata for Italy in the overture as well as music from two operas of that period, *Rodrigo* and *Agrippina*. He then skimmed off some of the best numbers from *Radamisto*, *Floridante*, *Ottone*, *Tamerlano*, *Riccardo Primo*, *Siroe*, *Lotario*, *Partenope*, *Sosarme*, *Terpsicore*, and *Arianna in Creta*. The miracle is not just the homogeneity of this new opera, but how highly effective these numbers are in their new context.

A strength of this exciting Theater en der Wien production was just how well this came through, right from the startling opening arioso “Pensieri, voi mi tormentate” for Oreste, modeled aptly on the great aria of the same name for the conscious-stricken Agrippina in the throws of her torments. Oreste’s predicament is, of course, familiar from antiquity. His struggle to free himself from the Furies and torments of conscience because of his crimes is drawn from Euripides’ play *Iphigenia in Tauris*, like Gluck’s famous opera of the same title (with some embroidery from other sources). The “argument” as published in Handel’s original libretto clarifies how Oreste had earlier avenged the death of his father Agamemnon by killing the murderer, Aegisthus, and his paramour, Clytemnestra, Oreste’s mother. It then continues:

Thence it happen’d that Orestes, troubled by the Remorse of his Crimes (having committed others) became mad, and at one time every Day was cruelly tormented by the Furies; and not been able to find any Remedy for his Madness, he had recourse to the Oracle, by which being answered that he should become free after he had been at Tauris expos’d for a Sacrifice to Diana; Thither he goes, follow’d by Pylades his most faithful Friend. What follows this Drama shows.

But what director Kay Link chooses to show, in this gripping production, is a world far removed from antiquity, one riddled with overtones of today’s far-too-common power struggles. As she comments in her introductory notes, it is impossible for a director of opera today to remove him/herself from the political context of our strange and troubled world. The characters we thus encounter are not rooted in mythology, but in today’s realities. First, a full-stage video of open sea accompanies the overture, a primary image that universalizes; then briefly interrupting the video of rolling waves, shadowy characters scramble in the darkness on the stage behind the scrim, scanning for intruders. As the overture

ends, from the sea (or rather from across the front of the audience), an intruder emerges – scruffy, bedraggled, wearing an orange life jacket. Thus Oreste appears as a wandering lost-soul and makes his way through a one-way iron gate to the stage. Finishing “Pensieri, voi mi tormentate” at center stage, he then collapses, yanking with him the black scrim that had concealed the bleak and forbidding unit set that will trap him (and us) for the duration.

Thus are we welcomed to what set designer Olga von Wahl and Ms. Link portray not as ancient Tauris, but as the dark, claustrophobic, enclave of a brutal dictator, far removed from democracies across the fresh air of the open seas. Based evidently on a WWII U-boat bunker in Bremen, the forbidding space is framed by metallic walls to the left and the long, dark outline of just such a U-boat to the right – the retreat of Toante. To the rear of the stage a bright light reveals Ifigenia, Oreste’s sister, in blood smeared gloves and apron, having just completed the human sacrifice required of her as a priestess of Diana. In the course of the opera, Toante, insecure and vulnerable, will become the embodiment of a dictator as much imprisoned within himself, as lonesome and fearful a person on the inside as he is brutal and imposing on the outside; Iphigenia meanwhile becomes the embodiment of those forces today carrying out mass murder in the name of religious beliefs. Familiar archetypes, alas.



Matteo Loi, Toante, on the imposing unit set

Photo: Herwig Prammer

Into this imposing environment come our two would-be liberators, Oreste's wife Ermione and close friend Pilade. In her program notes, Ms. Link points to the naivety of such do-good, democracy-based, heroics (citing James Bond 007 as an example). This is not too far fetched, as the startling entrance of Ermione makes clear. She emerges from the orchestra pit in a shiny red diving suit, complete with mask and flippers, singing her buoyant, virtuosic entrance aria from *Partenope* "Io sperai di veder il tuo volto," expressing her hope to soon find her spouse. It's a captivating moment, and a lighter one indeed, as during the course of the difficult piece she changes outfits, switching to her equally bright-colored feminine attire (with blonde wig and spiked red heels) for her ensuing rescue mission. Finished with this showy entrance, she beckons across the waves (that is across the orchestra pit) for the equally optimistic Pilade to join her in the quest. The adventure begins.

But the final denouement, in the hands of this production team, is far from what one might expect. The weakling tyrant is exposed for what he is and dies at the hands of Oreste, (a death of the sort Toante had always sought to arrange for his victims); Oreste, obsessed with his newly-acquired power, dons Toante's heavy militaristic overcoat and invites the reluctant Ermione, during the final aria of the opera, to join him in Toante's realm behind the heavy U-boat door; Pilade, thus abandoned by his friend, hovers over the body of Toante and contemplates suicide. Only the stunned Iphigenia, freed at last from years as enforced executioner, escapes. She steps away from Oreste, sensing his transformation, and then, stripping off her garb of priestess and executioner, crawls through the snarled barbed wire at stage right to the fresh air of the sea and freedom. The production eliminates the perfunctory final chorus of hope and calm, rightly so.

That all this is in fact realized so effectively on the stage owes much to the sensitive direction throughout but also to the fine and spirited young cast. Oreste was



Matteo Loi, Toante

Photo: Herwig Prammer

originally a showpiece role for the famous soprano castrato Giovanni Carestini. Handel gives him six arias, two accompanied recitatives, and one duet. From his opening to closing aria, countertenor Ray Chenez – experienced in baroque roles – was a commanding presence. Early in Act I with his exuberant aria "Agitato da fiere tempeste" (from *Ricardo Primo*), he displayed his ease in rapid-fire fioratura. Later he closed the first half of the opera with the poignant "Un'interrotto affetto" from *Ottone*. But most impressive, exhibiting his warm upper register was another number from *Ottone* toward the opening of the second part, the simile aria "Dopo l'orrore," as he anticipates his illusory freedom.

The aria is a good example of how effective stage direction reinforced the drama at hand. In the A section, a languishing bassoon cushions beautiful legato vocal sequences as he prepares to leave, crawling through the barbed wire, while from within the U-boat Toante's captive, a frantic Ermione, pleads for help pounding on the window. Oreste doesn't notice and proceeds through the barbed wire, but in the B section a memory of Pilade (a smiling figure highlighted on center stage) keeps him from fleeing, and the repeated A section, with its mellifluous sequences, brings Orestes back into the enclave. Soon after, Oreste has a long, passionate duet with Ermione as the two, both soon to be imprisoned, bid one another a moving farewell, (written for a similar

context in *Floridante*). In this case, the dramatic aptness was the simplicity of the staging with the two alone, face-to-face on the stark stage illuminated from above by a lone spotlight. It was a poignant highlight of the evening, much thanks also to director of lighting Franz Josef Tscheck for this and other sensitive lighting effects amidst the dark environs.

Handel seems to have esteemed the two principal sopranos equally, giving each five arias. The part of Iphigenia, originally sung by Cecilia Young, is not as virtuosic as that of Ermione, written for his long time favorite, Anna Strada. Soprano Viktorija Bakan was simply stunning in this demanding role, impressively since she replaced the scheduled soprano, Anna Gillingham, on relatively short notice for both performances. Right from her charismatic entrance aria, she took control of a role that demanded a wider array of emotional responses than any other character, on her path from naïve optimism at the outset to defiance and disillusionment by opera's end. Among the highlights along the way, shortly after her duet with Oreste, was the poignant aria "Piango dolente il sposo" (from *Riccardo Primo*), the "Vissi d'Arte" of the score. Finding herself in pretty much the same situation with Toante as does Tosca with Scarpia, Ms. Bakan brought all the requisite vocal nuance to trills and subtle phrasings, complementing the gentle punctuations from the violins that expressed her angst. It was another instance where isolating the character on the dark stage heightened the cathartic impact of the piece. Throughout the evening, hers was a performance to savor.

The central role of Ifigenia may be less demanding, but the Italian soprano Carolina Lippo brought a wonderful lightness of touch to it with her clarion voice, right from the gentle opening continuo aria "Bella calma" (from an early Italian cantata) as she first spots Oreste crumpled at the front of the stage. Her two simile arias give a hint of her inner struggle, but mostly the gentle piece like her final siciliano from *Siroe* "Mi lagnero, tacendo" ("I silent will bemoan my cruel fate"), as she prepares the execution of Oreste, masks the extent of her inner turmoil. Ms. Lippo's controlled elegance was a great asset here. So too was the effective staging



Carolina Lippo, Ifigenia Photo: Herwig Prammer

of this her final aria, as she methodically put on her execution garb –shining arm-length gloves, white smock, and a large red orb-like helmet. This served too as an ironic parallel to Ermione's flamboyant opening aria and change of garb: Ermione did so to save Oreste, while Ifigenia prepares to execute him; yet both wife and sister love him dearly.

Handel gives the tyrant Toante just two arias, originally written for his dependable bass Gustavus Waltz. Italian baritone Matteo Loi sang both pieces with impressive brio, especially the second "Tu di pietà spogli" ("You call up fury in my breast") addressed to Ermione tied in a chair. His pulsing rising phrases effectively suggested his brutal bravado. But unlike Puccini's Scarpia, he pointedly comes across in this production as a narcissistic wimp, fearful and lonely. It is a phony bravado indeed. His accomplice, Filotete, on the other hand, is a more benign character. Originally given three arias (as a trouser role for alto Maria Negri),



Florian Köfler, Filotete; Carolina Lippo, Ifigenia Photo: Herwig Prammer

Filotete sings only one of them in this production. But Bass Florian Köfler made the most of his only aria, opening the second half of the evening with a lovely *siciliano* from *Partenope* addressed to Ifigenia, the object of his affection throughout the opera. The playful scene was a welcome bit of comic relief, the only other moment of lightness in the opera (except for Ermione's emergence from the sea) as he presents various gifts to her while singing – flowers, chocolate, then even a cake. She in turn, at his exit, gives them to various members of the orchestra – a light, but also symbolic touch, a taste of the future as it were. After all, only Ifigenia will finally escape the horrors of Toante's enclave.

And who is really “saved” in this production? Oreste, momentarily, from execution, but power breeds corruption, and he succumbs to it. Ermione, rather sickened by it all, joins him nevertheless in the U-boat fortress. Not even Oreste's loyal friend Pilade is immune. Originally written for Handel's reliable tenor John Beard, this production gave this important role to the fine Columbian tenor Julian Hena Gonzalez whose carefully spaced three arias rather encapsulate the progression of the opera. His defiant first aria (from *Sosarme*), sung with impressive vigor, is brutally cut off before the final ritornello as he is led away. He sings the second aria uninterrupted, however, to Oreste, for whom he is willing to sacrifice his own life, “Caro amico a

morte io vo” (“Dear friend to Death I go.”) In this, a poignant *siciliano* (from *Tamerlano*), Mr. Gonzalez expressed with exquisite legato phrasing, especially in the restrained *da capo*, his pain at the possibility of never seeing his dear friend again. But by the time the pendulum shifts and he celebrates the saving of Oreste (and the defeat of Toante) in the virtuosic penultimate aria of the opera (from *Partenope*), the toll on him is apparent as well. His impressive upper register seemed to reflect the irony that as he sings, he also attends the dying Toante. He soon contemplates, first with a knife raised, later a gun, the taking of his own life as he sees how his friend, for whom he would have given all, has become the “new” Toante. Meanwhile, up front, stage right, Ifigenia crawls through the curled barbwire to freedom.

With all this discussion of effective insights Ms. Link brought to the opera with her probing concept, and the fine realization of it through the Youth Ensemble of Theater an der Wien, it should be emphasized that none of it would have worked so well without the vibrant orchestra of the Bach Consort Wien led with impressive brio by Ruben Dubrovsky (who even grabbed a lute himself on occasion.) The pulse and vigor of this fine ensemble wonderfully pushed the drama along, and the nuanced phrasing complemented the protagonists' emotional outbursts, from rapid-fire coloratura to languorous legato.

Thus the production as a whole came through not as a random collection of some of Handel's greatest arias, but as a focused drama of considerable contemporary impact. Fitting well into Festival's central theme, “Foreign Worlds,” the opera zeroed in especially on the fear of the foreign that invites insular and protective – or in the extreme, despotic behavior. “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” to quote Lord Acton's famous observation. Only Ifigenia extricates herself from all this. The hope is that we, in this complex, power-driven and often corrupt world, might do so as well.

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