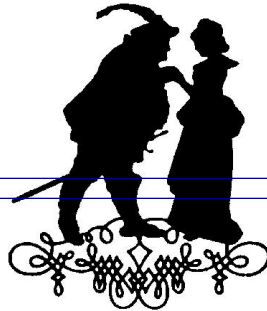


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Handel's *Oreste* in Bremen, May 2015

Evil Personified

Shortly after the final *Agrippina* at the Handel Festival in Göttingen, I was able to catch a performance of Handel's 1734 pasticcio *Oreste* at the Theater am Goetheplatz in Bremen, a fast two-hour train ride north. The unsettling and powerful production of this rarely performed work, the first of Handel's only three so-called "pasticcio operas," was more than worth the trip, especially given its relatively infrequent appearances on stage. 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. I had heard the work just once, shortly afterwards in 2003, at the Juilliard Opera Center in New York, which was presenting the long-delayed American premiere.

Although a pasticcio, this is no second-rate work; there is no falling off in quality of music. In this richly scored opera, Handel recycles compositions from works spanning some twenty-seven years, including in the overture even an adaption from the cantata *Cor fedele*, composed early on in Italy, as well as two operas from that period, *Rodrigo* and *Agrippina*. Handel also skimmed off some of the best numbers from *Radamisto*,

Floridante, *Ottone*, *Tamerlano*, *Riccardo Primo*, *Siroe*, *Lotario*, *Partenope*, *Sosarme*, *Terpsichore*, and *Arianna in Creta* (revived shortly before *Oreste*.) The miracle is not just the resulting homogeneity of this new opera, but how highly effective these numbers are in their new context, as, for example, in the closing minor key duet of Act II when Oreste and his wife Ermione bid a moving farewell, written for a similar context in *Floridante*.



Patrick Zielke as Toante, Ulrike Mayer as Oreste and Nerita Pokvytytė as Ermione
Photo: Jörg Landsberg

The familiar story of Oreste's 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, although with some considerable embroidery from other sources (including works by Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus). The "argument" as published in the 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 being 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 follow's this Drama shows.

Indeed it does. And Handel wastes no time opening with a startling arioso "pensieri, voi mi tormentate" modeled aptly on the great aria of the same name for the conscious-stricken Agrippina in the throws of her torments. The boyish mezzo Ulrike Mayer, effective all evening (in what was originally a showpiece role for the famous mezzo-soprano castrato Giovanni Carestini), instantly projected the urgency of the moment, although throughout the evening director Robert Lehniger has him more prone to periodic epileptic fits than anything else.



Ulrike Mayer as Oreste

Photo: Jörg Landsberg

But this entrance was really dwarfed by the elaborate revolving set and video projections of Mr. Lehniger. Tauris itself, he claims in his accompanying essay "Everybody's Worst Nightmare," was rather the run down remains of a southwestern diner, but to my eyes more like a casino. Whatever the case, it was a rambling, chaotic set which, with its varying rotations gave ample opportunity for the cruel ruler of this realm - slovenly dressed bass Patrick Zielke as Tuante - to dominate, pester, and torture. (The director's notes also refer to atrocities occurring world wide as evil constantly resurfaces.)



The tyrant Tuante's projected image (Patrick Zielke as Tuante)

Photo: Jörg Landsberg

At any rate, the stentorian bass was the presence that seemed to dominate the evening, not the titular character Oreste, who nevertheless has much more to sing. The videos constantly stressed the tyrant's dominance and control; indeed at times the projections even shrunk the entire set to show it all as an environment literally in the palm of his hands. At the opera's very end, even though we have witnessed him killed five or six times in the various personas he seems to embody, the tyrant reappears in a distorted full scrim video of his obnoxious face, with the amplified words stated ominously, "Il sono Oreste." Thus the resolution of evil, evidently, is not so simple, nor so permanent.



Christoph Heinrich as Filotete fetches for Patrick Zielke as Toante
Photo: Jörg Landsberg

Such many-layered ambivalence is not just the essence of this work (and myth) but was in fact, appropriately, the essence of this production. We see at one point, for example, Toante (as Agamemnon) sacrificing the child Iphigenia; at another, as himself, the sadistic ruler of Tauris, bullying his henchman Filotete into becoming an obedient dog; and at yet another point (as Aegisthus) caressing Clytemnestra, then stabbed through a wall by Oreste. No wonder the villain suffers so many repeated deaths at opera's end.

Moments of simultaneity of action also abound, especially with the juxtaposition of videos from past events with stage action, sometimes with great effect, sometimes with more confusion than clarity. In one such example, on stage Ermione vehemently rejects the advances of Toante, while a video to the side has her engaged with him in rather perverted sex. Or is the video showing Aegisthus and Clytemnestra? We never know. More effective, and less confusing, were the numerous videos looking back to the youth and emerging friendship of Oreste and Pilade, the pair running through cornfields, playing games, sharing poignant moments of intimacy. A critical element of the plot was thus nicely reinforced and clarified, as a kind of continuing leitmotif.

A disadvantage to the performance I attended was the illness of the scheduled Ermione, Nerita Pokvytytė. Fortunately, the fine young soprano Berit Solset, who learned Ermione's five arias in just three days, took over with all the genuine virtuosity the role demands, singing

from the side of the auditorium, while the role itself was mimed on stage. (Then in Act III an off-stage tenor took over the recitative.) But it all worked, perhaps helped by the convoluted production itself. The above-mentioned duet with Oreste ending Act II was especially effective, even in this awkward context.

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 written for Anna Strada, but the striking Marysol Schalit was most expressive throughout. Visually, her neatly crimped long hair was nicely duplicated in the child who doubled as the young Iphigenia. The fine tenor Hyojong Kim as Pilade rounded out the cast, and indeed the opera, with his final aria. The Bremer Philharmoniker under the direction of Olof Boman gave a most idiomatic and persuasive performance.



Marysol Schalit as Iphigenia Photo: Jörg Landsberg

Again, however, it was the ubiquitous tyrant who had the last say and kept the nightmare vision alive. To my mind, less is usually more, and although I might have preferred a less cluttered production, the unsettling overtones of a myth so riddled with guilt, confusion, mistaken identity, and both past and present uncertainty, came through effectively and made for a compelling evening of Music Theater. And let's not forget to thank Handel for collecting so much of his stunning music from the past to pull all of this together, music that releases us to live, hopefully, far beyond the nightmare world of this production.