Opera con Brio

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Steffani's Seminal *Orlando generoso* Enchants

The Boston Early Music Festival 2019

Ludovico Ariosto's epic poem *Orlando furioso* of 1516, the most popular and well-known literary work of its day, became the source for myriad operas even centuries later. Best known today are two operas of the same name, one by Vivaldi (Venice, 1727, following an earlier version in 1714) and the other by Handel (London 1733). Now the Boston Early Music Festival, led by the visionary Directors Paul O'Dette and Stephen Stubbs, has unearthed a rarity to match this illustrious pair, Agostino Steffani's *Orlando generoso,* (Hanover, 1691) revealing this neglected piece as a masterful work on any level - a seminal link between earlier baroque composers such as Monteverdi and Caccini and those soon to follow such as Handel and Vivaldi. The opera was a revelation, and the stunning performance further evidenced that BEMF with its idiomatic baroque productions continues to be the premier early music festival in the world.

Teresa Wakim, Melissa Photo: Kathy Wittman

The music alone was a revelation. Steffani was well schooled in the musical language of the seventeenth century, and as such was a known master of chamber duets, two voices and continuo, of the sort found typically in cantatas of the day. (Handel owned a volume

of these duets and learned much from them.) Steffani's opera is full of them, often tiny pieces in which a "cavata," a repeated melodic expansion of recitative, morphs subtly into a short duet (or alternatively, into an arioso, a da capo aria, or even a short ensemble), thus creating an almost through-composed composition. The expanded continuo section of the BEMF (two theorbos, baroque guitar, baroque harp, harpsichord and viola da gamba), along with its full early-music ensemble, further helped reinforce Steffani as the master of "invertible counterpoint" – a kind of recycling of given material in varied permutations. Indeed Steffani's Germanic method of instrumentation, with its rich and varied contrapuntal textures, had a significant influence on other Baroque masters - not just Handel, but also Telemann and Bach. As for the BEMF audience, this all contributed to an engaging evening through the power of Steffani's complex and inventive music.

Christopher Lowrey, Ruggiero; Emőke Baráth, Bradamante
Photo: Kathy Wittman

The production too was captivating. The Festival theme had the apt moniker "Dreams & Madness." Mr. Stubbs comments in Festival notes that Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* was:

> *…a rip-roaring tale of romance, intrigue, exoticism, and magic, as popular with Baroque audiences as Game of Thrones is today…In his most acclaimed opera Steffani, gave musical wings to this beloved tale and crafted one of opera's earliest portraits of madness with a dreamscape of enchanted castles and far-off lands.*

Indeed the authentically baroque production by set designer Gilbert Blin gave the "rip-roaring tale" all the "dreamscape" it called for: colorful costumes (by Anna Watkins), realistic painted flats that changed sets instantly with the flip of a sorceress's wand, magical stage effects, including a recalcitrant Hippogriff (half horse, half eagle) that initially failed to descend on opening night.

For those not up on their Ariosto (or the tale from the epic that librettist Ortensio Mauro rather faithfully depicts), the plot builds around the heroic warrior Orlando and includes two sets of lovers, the Chinese princess Angelica, enamored of the lowly shepherd Medoro, and the Moslem warrior Ruggiero, happily fated to wed the Christian warrioress Bradamante. For his part, Orlando has fallen madly in love with the beautiful

Jesse Blumberg, Atlante, riding the Hippogriff;
Emőke Baráth, Bradamante Photo: Kathy Wittman

Aaron Sheehan, Orlando; Amanda Forsythe, Angelica
Photo: Kathy Wittman

Angelica. Complications ensue, to say the least, as his "madness" from unrequited love infiltrates the "dreamscape." Soon assorted misunderstandings, jealousies, and mistaken identities consume all the characters. Meanwhile, two other-worldly figures at odds with each other manipulate much of the plot: the sorcerer Atlante vowing to keep apart Ruggiero and Bradamante, and the sorceress Melissa who seeks to secure their bond, they being the eventual founders of the house of Estes, powerful rulers in Northern Italy – and Ariosto's patrons.

For an audience today, a helpful comparison is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; indeed Ariosto had its influence on Shakespeare, with its mixture of fairy-tale dream world and ill-fated lovers in perpetual turmoil. The librettist has even added a *commedia* Puck-like character, Brunello, in service to Atlante who, moves much of the action along. In this production at the close of Act II, Brunello, like Puck, mimics the off-stage voices of the four lovers, now in a maze of confusion in Atlante's enchanted Palace. In Shakespeare's play at the end of Act III, all is resolved and forgiven in the Duke's Palace; just so with the opera, written to enhance the chivalric values of nobility for the first audience in Hanover. Thus Atlante, with a flick of his wand, releases all from the "dreamscape" made by his "Magical arts" and we return to the real world of the Royal Salon of the Chinese king, Angelica's father, Galafro (added also by the librettist). At the end Angelica sings the central theme of Ariosto to the now recovered Orlando *generoso*, that to conquer oneself was all that was needed. The theme of spiritual awakening of course is central to *A Midsummer nights' Dream* as well as to many an Italian baroque opera, including Handel's first opera *Rodrigo* to follow in Florence ten years later, subtitled *Vincer se stesso è la maggior vittoria* ("Self-conquest is the greatest victory").

Steffani's score also contains extensive dance music reflecting the influence of French opera of the time, notably Lully's music. Such *divertissements* were sprinkled throughout the work, with authentic baroque dance wonderfully choreographed by Marie-Nathalie Lacoursière, often accompanying the dance-like vocal tunes or expanding to Lully-esque entr'acte chaconnes,

Zachary Wilder, Brunello Photo: Kathy Wittman

The Ballet of the Spirits Photo: Kathy Wittman

as with "the Ballet of the Sprits of the Enchanted Palace" closing Act II, or the celebratory close of the opera. The dances also helped to cement the sometimes capricious, even ironic tinta of the opera, prevalent also in Ariosto's sensuous *demi-comėdie* epic itself. Combined with the often-sumptuous spectacle of the production, the entire visual element was as much a pleasure as the music.

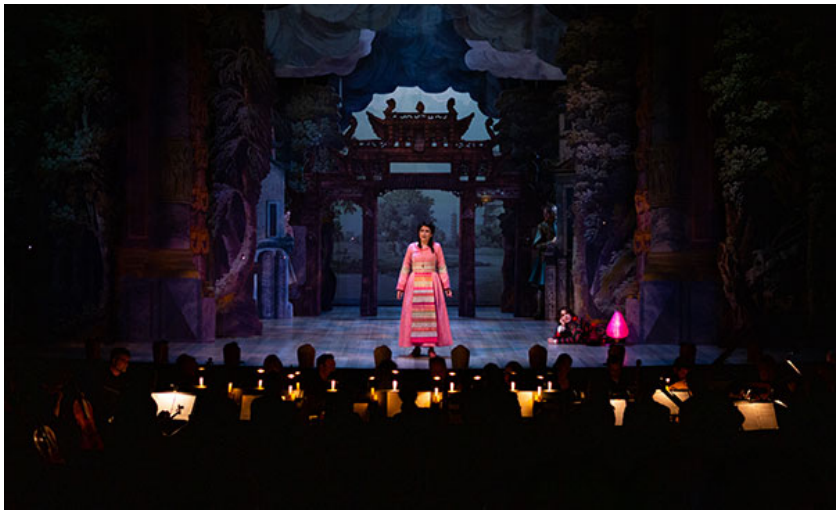
All this would have been to no avail without the universally excellent cast, bringing to life the often-melancholic inner psychologies of each of the frustrated characters. A pair of stunning countertenors, Christopher Lowrey as Ruggiero and Kacper Szelażek as Medoro, made for effective thwarted lovers, while Flavio Ferri-Benedetti, with wide range and occasionally blousy intonation, made for an appropriately oddball King Galafro. Grammy-winning tenor Aaron Sheehan, an impressive baroque specialist, was a convincing Orlando with both his rapid-fire vocal runs and idiomatic monologues, especially in the final cathartic prison scene with the poignant arioso *Miserie fortunate*. Equally impressive was the sorcerer Atlante, the sonorous baritone Jesse Blumberg, and his energized sidekick Brunello, tenor Zachary Wilder. The bright vocal contribution from early music soprano Teresa Wakim, descending briefly from the heavens as the Sorceress Melissa, made one wish for more music than allotted to her (which she would provide later in the week in a scintillating BEMF concert of music by Rameau.)

The two lead women of this mostly male cast had plenty to sing, however - Hungarian soprano Emőke Baráth as Bradamante and familiar Boston soprano Amanda Forsythe as Angelica. Each was exceptional in both vocal artistry and in projecting the personas of their respective characters. Ms. Baráth dominated much of the first act, as one riddled with the emotional stress of both saving and possibly losing her beloved Ruggiero. With all the flamboyant presence and vocal power needed for Ariosto's female warrior, she at one point duly chastises her recalcitrant lover with stunning rising coloratura sequences without sacrificing purity of tone. Throughout, she was a formidable and charismatic presence.

Those who live in Boston are familiar with Amanda Forsythe as a perpetual standout. She did not disappoint in one of the more captivating of the many roles in which I have had the good fortune to experience her. There is good reason for the predominance of males in the cast; most are enamored of her at one point or another, not only her beloved Medoro, or the besotted Orlando, but even her confused father, Galafro. In whatever capacity – with

Kacper Szelążek, Medoro Photo: Kathy Wittman

genuine love, feigned love, or disguised love – Ms. Forsythe projected the appropriate tone for the occasion, both in temperament and glorious voice, be it genuine, ironic, or even overtly comic.



Amanda Forsythe, Angelica Photo: Kathy Wittman

While many of her moments stand out, perhaps none more so than her long and poignant lament early in Act II – a moment that encapsulates both the artistry of Ms. Forsythe and Steffani. His opera, from the simplest of songs and duets to the often complex da capo structures, basically involves meditations on various woes. The inspired scene is a double da capo aria as first Angelica, and then Ruggiero, laments the absence of their lovers (as meanwhile the hidden Orlando witnesses their bonding over respective sorrows). With breathtaking beauty Ms. Forsythe sings her aria, *Se t'ecclissi ò bella face* ("If you are gone, O light of my life"), accompanied by the sumptuous continuo group. The harp gives pinpoints of light at the octave, while a silvery violin from concertmaster Robert Mealy adds further counterpoint. Pinpoints of light also sprinkle through the darkened stage. Thinking the gorgeous moment is finished, the audience applauds.

But, per usual, Steffani is full of surprises. In a brief moment of recitative, Ruggiero states that he too suffers and laments – and proceeds to do so in the exact same da capo aria, with similar sentiment but different text *Vive stelle à me splendete* ("Bright stars, so resplendent, Do not make me suffer more"). But the orchestration has changed – solo oboe takes over from solo violin, and *principal* cellist Phoebe Carrai further enriches the texture from the far side of the otherwise silent orchestra. Still, the most engaging moment is yet to come; the ethereal voice of Ms. Forsythe, with ever-perfect control and beauty, enters from back stage amidst the twinkling lights, to join Mr. Lowrey's da capo as a duet, gloriously rounding off the shared moment with poignant ambivalence. The extraordinary scene, not just as another variation on Steffani's imaginative duet writing, must rank as one of the greatest in baroque opera. (And not even Handel, until later in his career with *Xerses,* would dare to repeat complete da capo arias side by side, in that case for comic effect.)

The opera itself comes across as one of the most imaginative, and until now, unappreciated baroque operas ever. Many thanks belong to the production team from BEMF, who so lovingly assembled this delightful, idiomatic production, with no extraneous nonsense from a concept-obsessed director to update the work. We had merely the enchanting world of illusion and fantasy that was a delight to behold and to hear from beginning to end, even breathtaking at times. Steffani and his librettist, Mauro, knew what they were about. Mauro contributed a libretto faithful to the essence of Ariosto while Steffani's through-composed music, way ahead of its time, facilitated the seamless flow of its many entertaining episodes. The production did the same. As baroque opera should, it dazzled from beginning to end – at which point the audience finally had their chance to cheer again and again, as they did.