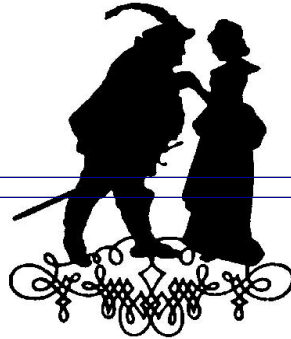


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Parnasso in Festa: a Feast for Ears and Eyes The 2018 Handel Festival Halle

As it was four years ago in 2014, a hit of the Handel-Festival Halle this year was Handel's delightful serenata *Il Parnasso in Festa*. But the two performances could hardly have differed more. The first was a scintillating concert performance by the acclaimed Cetra Orchestra in its annual visit with Director Andrea Marcon and prominent international soloists, who brought out all the virtuosic richness of this neglected work. The second was a fully staged, historically informed production at the intimate Goethe-Theatre Bad Lauchstadt from the equally renowned Lautten Compagny Berlin, in their annual visit. A spirited group of young soloists certainly reinforced the musical splendor of the work, yet the historically informed baroque performance, directed and choreographed by Belgian Baroque specialist Sigrid T'Hooft, made the evening a feast for ears and eyes alike.

Handel's enchanting work of 1733, much of it borrowed from the oratorio *Athalia* of 1732, is so Italianate that one would never know its source. The full title of this wedding serenata reflects the relatively undramatic nature of the piece: *Parnasso in Festa per gli*

sponsali di Teti e Peleo ("Parnassos in Celebration for the Nuptials of Thetis and Peleus.") The celebration was an allegory for the royal wedding of Princess Anne and William IV of Orange, the occasion for which Handel wrote the piece. The mythological figures of Thetis and Peleus are not personified in the serenata although a good part of the appeal of this production was the two baroque dancers who eventually assumed their personae.



Nicolle Klinkeberg, Martin Prescha, Baroque dancers, and members of the Lautten Compagny Berlin
Photo: Marcus Lieberenz



Riccardo Angelo Strano, Apollo, and members of the Lautten Compagny Berlin
Photo: Marcus Lieberenz

An assortment of other characters, singers all, was left to celebrate the union, led by Apollo and his son Orpheus. These also included three of the nine sacred muses - Clio (Muse of history), Calliope (the Muse of epic poetry, and mother of Orpheus), and Euterpe (the Muse of music) – as well as the huntress Clori and the god of war, Mars.

To be sure, although the singing from the young cast was first rate, the visual aspect was the captivating element of this production, which included not just the stylized Baroque gestures from the singers, but their sumptuous costumes by set and costume designer Niels Badenhop. Each made character-defining statements. For example, Apollo was resplendent in glittering gold; Orfeo, heroic in silver brocade; Clio, graceful in shimmering shades of light and darker blue, as she maneuvered the fullest and most decorative of Baroque hoop skirts. Elaborate headpieces complemented the richly colorful attire of each. The award for the most majestic must go to Mars, whose protruding black eagle headpiece capped his standout red attire. Each in turn had a signature token on head or in hand: Clio a rolled-up scroll, Euterpe a baroque recorder, Orpheus a harp, and so forth.

But most captivating were the baroque gestures and movements each employed. Happily, I had encountered Ms. T’Hooft’s work in two previous Handel productions, both at the Göttingen Handel Festival in the equally intimate Deutsche Theatre. The first was *Amadigi* in 2012, where a prevailing deep blue color scheme (juxtaposed with bright red) helped set off the baroque-costumed characters who inhabited a world of their own making. The brilliant ski-blue background in *Parnasso*, with radiating white light from a central orb, did the same thing for these celebrants on Mount Parnassus, defining the gods’ sumptuous world of ease and pleasure.

My second encounter with Ms. T’Hooft’s work was in 2016 with an equally effective production of Handel’s late “operetta” *Imeneo*, whose set for the three acts, as per the libretto, was A Pleasure Garden (“Deliziosa”). A single simple set worked also in Halle for Mount Parnassus – not with a plethora of “fountains, groves, streams, and grottos” as the libretto prescribes, but with isolated stand-up clouds behind which the varied protagonists sat, or stood. Set designer Niels Badenhop deserves much credit for all this innovative set, shifting the focus to the antics of the gods.



Elias Benito-Arranz, Mars, and members of the Lautten Compagny Berlin
Photo: Marcus Lieberenz

Again, however, the real glory of this visually arresting evening belonged to the baroque gestures and movements from both dancers and singers. These often coalesced into stunning tableaux amidst the clouds, complemented by stylistically informed dance interludes. Evidently Ms. T’Hooft worked carefully with each in the cast to help internalize the baroque gestures so as to display every nuance of emotion - sometimes emphatic (enforcing an important word by a gesture), sometimes imitative (reinforcing the nature of a scene, be it harsh or pastoral), but always expressive (articulating a visual equivalent of a particular passion, be it grief, or fear, or love, etc.). These stylized gestures typically involved the whole body, hands and fingers as well, for dancers and singers alike. A baroque specialist from Canada's Opera Atelier once expressed what I presume may have been Ms. T’Hooft’s goal, “to ensure that audience members are not voyeurs; rather they are participants in the emotional journey of each player.”



Nicolle Klinkeberg and Martin Prescha, Baroque dancers, and members of the Lautten Compagny Berlin
Photo: Marcus Lieberenz

All this emphasis on the captivating visual element of the production is not meant to diminish the fine musical contributions from both singers and orchestra. Handel’s vocal writing includes some of the most virtuosic arias he ever composed, and the cast generally



Riccardo Angelo Strano, Apollo; Margriet Buchberger, Orfeo
Photo: Marcus Lieberenz

met the demands of these pieces handily. Especially demanding is the role of Apollo, a part originally written for the famous mezzo soprano castrato Carestini. The young Italian countertenor Riccardo Angelo Strano was a standout. Although somewhat indisposed as announced before the performances on both May 27 and 28, he warmed up, especially in the second of these two performances. He was particularly expressive in both the lovely sequences in the upper register of pieces like the bucolic siciliano “Non tardate” praising the wedding pair, and with the melismas of his aria to Orfeo, “Turni pure,” persuading him to put aside his sorrow. Especially charismatic, he often matched his vocal virtuosity in difficult coloratura passages with engaging baroque gestures, sometimes with a telling wink or smile.

Complementing him, in slower more melancholic arias, was the expressive soprano Margriet Buchberger as Orfeo, with a liquid tone that captivated, especially in the upper register. Her somber accompanied recitative and aria “Ho perso il caro ben” (“I’ve lost my fair, my only

dear”) – a revision from *Athalia* - was a poignant highlight. Another fine soprano, Hanna Herfurtner, was the omnipresent Clio, graceful and commanding right from her impressive entrance before the curtain as she invites the audience into the serenata with her understated continuo aria “Verginelle” (“hear, ye virgins”). Indeed she was a delightful presence throughout the performance, often with pin-point precision in her coloratura, as in her light-hearted, buoyant blessing of the wedding couple late in the work, “Circondin lor’ vite.” Her voice also nicely complemented that of Mr. Strano’s rich mezzo range in their two duets.

Impressively, an array of talented singers emerged from the chorus (or from behind the clouds) to fill out their roles with their various arias. The rich-voiced alto Julia Böhme as Calliope (originally sung by Margherita Durastanti at the end of a long career with Handel), was especially effective in the dynamic contrasts of her tempestuous “furies” aria, (another transplant from *Athalia*); alto countertenor Georg A. Bochow as the huntress Clori, was noteworthy as the vibrant vocal catalyst for the buoyant hunting chorus closing the first part of this production; mezzo Aurélie Frank, was nicely bucolic as Euterpe, caressing her baroque recorder while singing her praises to the royal pair; and baritone Elias Benito-Arranz as Mars rose to bumptious eloquence in praise of Bacchus.



Georg A. Bochow, Clori; Elias Benito-Arranz, Mars; Hanna Herfurtner, Clio
Photo: Marcus Lieberenz



Hanna Herfurtner, Clio; Margriet Buchberger, Orfeo; Nicolle Klinkeberg and Martin Prescha, Baroque dancers
Photo: Marcus Lieberenz

Throughout the evening, the fine young cast collectively captured the varied character of the many fine choruses, not only in the exuberant hunting chorus just mentioned, but in numbers ranging from the lovely pastoral chorus “Non tardate Fauni ancora” to the spectacular finale. Complementing all the vocal splendor was the always-spirited playing of the Lautten Compagny Berlin’s fine, idiomatic early-music ensemble led by its energetic music director Wolfgang Katschner. As though following Apollo’s admonition early in the piece to “prepare today your most harmonious strains,” he and his spirited players did so indeed. Later Apollo also admonishes, “Let gentle calm succeed the stormy seas.” In the 2014 concert performance at Halle, this notion took on special meaning following the devastating floods and resulting cancellation of the 2013 Halle Handel Festival. “A Phoenix Arises,” I wrote then following that thrilling musical feast. In the staged performance of 2018, with the beauty of all we both heard and saw, the troubled waters of the world today also receded, at least for a time. A feast for ears and eyes indeed.

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