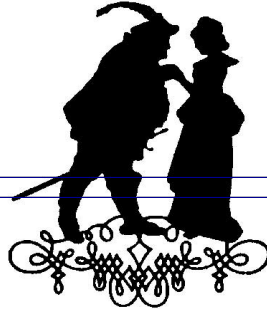


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Opera Lafayette's Beguiling *Radamisto*

A Happy Pairing of Music and Dance in Handel's Rarely Performed 1st Version

In early February the enterprising Washington-based company Opera Lafayette brought its captivating production of Handel's *Radamisto* to New York in the rarely heard original version for a single performance in the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College. This fine production of his first true *opera seria* convincingly demonstrated that Handel's operas are dramatically as coherent and relevant as they are musically compelling.

Such was not always thought to be the case, as conductor Will Crutchfield had pointed out in his introductory comments to his revival of *Radamisto* in New York City at nearby Mannes College of Music back in 1992. The critical assessment of Handel's operas, following the almost 200-year hiatus of his operas appearing on stage, had been that these works were either insignificant showpieces for vocal canaries or so awkwardly and primitively constructed that they were not worth bringing to stage. Maestro Crutchfield's semi-staged production, with a student orchestra and student singers, then went on to demonstrate the dramatic viability of this supposedly outdated *opera seria*.

Led by the sure hand of its Artistic Director, Ryan Brown, Opera Lafayette's recent production took this premise yet a step further with its renowned historically informed baroque orchestra and seasoned professional singers, complemented by six talented members of the Seán Curran Dance Company. With a simple set consisting of three long red benches and three large movable transparent screens, the action included the dance element at the end of each act called for in the original *Radamisto* of 1720. Mr. Curran also imaginatively used his dancers to facilitate the numerous scene changes called for in the complicated libretto, helping to create a seamless flow. The result was a compelling music drama that minimized the stilted stop-go conventions that previously invited stereotypes about baroque *opera seria*.

Radamisto, premiering on 27 April 1720, was Handel's first opera for the newly formed Royal Academy of Music - for which during the next decade he would write some of his most esteemed *opera seria*. It was a great success, incorporating dance, but not the

acclaimed Italian singers he had hoped to use, including the castrato Senesino who had yet to arrive from Italy. Thus, for a revival on 28 December of 1720, he rewrote the opera with significant changes of detail, both in casting and musical numbers, adding some ten new arias, eliminating much, including the dance element, from the earlier version. Considered superior in dramatic and musical strength, the later version is preferred today. Indeed performances I have attended certainly attest to the enduring strength and beauty of the revised version.

Opera Lafayette, originally named *Les Violons de Lafayette*, presented rarities of the French Baroque for almost twenty-five years. It is thus to Ryan Brown's credit that he chose to perform the first version of *Radamisto* – indeed the only opera by Handel that Opera Lafayette has ever performed. His faith in the score and in the more taut drama of the first version paid off, as he and his production team captured in contemporary terms the essence of this compelling work. Briefly, the story revolves around the predator King Tiridate of Armenia who is determined to conquer Thrace and with it Zenobia, faithful wife of Radamisto and heir to the Thracian throne. Despite this betrayal, Tiridate's own wife Polissena remains faithful to him. Eventually she and others, including two allies, convince Tiridate of his evil ways - and he relents: "Oh, what virtue have I offended!" And all is well.

But not quite. Mr. Brown eliminates this line (and a few others related to Tiridate's turnaround), so that with the traditional final chorus of reconciliation, any reform on his part is clearly in doubt. The production prepares this alteration to the first edition nicely late in the opera by inserting Polissena's dramatic aria "Barbaro! Partiro" from the second version. In this explosive aria, she expresses her fury to her tyrant husband at his continuing bad behavior and threatens punishment. Yet in the staging of the final scene, the "barbarous" Tiridate, now thwarted by his allies and opponents, resists joining in the celebration even as Polissena firmly, and perhaps hopefully, takes his arm. We wonder, will this tyrant be contained? What might he do next? The ambiguity of the altered ending succeeds admirably.



Members of the Seán Curran Dance Company
Photo: Louis Forget

Dancers and dance as integral components

The streamlined production as a whole, without other added arias from the later version, created a world unto itself that clearly helped avoid the kind of "willful suspension of disbelief" baroque opera invites. With their sinuous intertwining black lines, the three large transparent screens rolled into place by Mr. Curran's dancers eclipsed potential applause points to keep the drama moving, and their various configurations, aided by the subtle and varied lighting of Rob Siler, gave a kind of theatrical punctuation to the myriad scenes: from royal tent or royal gardens, to Tiridate's camp, to the city wall, to "the river Araxes and a subterranean cave." One of the many effective dramatic touches was Zenobia's attempted suicide in Act II by flinging herself into the river; this was enacted (or rather choreographed) by three dancers elevating her prone body high above their heads, and next placing her at the far end of the three red benches, now in a long row in front of the screens. They then covered her with a shroud, where she remained until the scene of her rescue later to follow. The implausible became plausible – and the drama flowed seamlessly.

As for the dances concluding each act, they too flowed smoothly from the preceding material. The shape of each act was basically to move from darkness to light – a pained arioso for Polissena at the outset of Act I led to



Hagar Sharvit, Zenobia; Caitlin Hulcup, Radamisto; Members of the Seán Curran Dance Company
Photo: Louis Forget

an aria of hope at the act's conclusion, with its lilting rhythm and buoyant syncopations, "Dopo torbide procelle" ("After turbulent storms a fine day seems more beautiful"). A similar pattern for Act II begins with a sober cavatina for Zenobia with the act ending in an ebullient duet for her and her husband Radamisto. The dances grew organically from the events of each act from the marching and posturing of soldiers at the end of Act I, to the celebrations of the common folk when the lovers are reunited at the end of Act II; indeed the reunited couple participate in and then enjoy watching this glorious Passacaille.

Since for many years the company offered dance-based French Opera, an appeal to presenting the first version of *Radamisto* was the natural way dancers could be integrated into the complete opera, as Ryan Brown stressed in his introductory notes to the program. His distinguished stage director and choreographer Seán Curran also pointed out in the introductory talk that all this involved using "old language in a new way, with contemporary accents." As an esteemed dancer and choreographer, and Chair of the department of dance at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, he should know. All this was very removed from the approach of the acclaimed production of the first version directed by Sigrid T'Hooft at the Karlsruhe Handel Festival in Germany in 2009,

conceived in period style and now regarded as one of the most significant examples of historically informed performance in baroque opera.

The goal with Opera Lafayette, by contrast, was not complete Baroque authenticity, but the creation of a timeless world, combining a 21st century sense of drama with 18th century conventions. As well as the versatile scenery, the costumes by Amanda Shafran accented with both old and contemporary elements - headscarves, sunglasses, fezzes, a business suit - helped to create this world. Informed by contemporary technique and sensibility, but influenced by the importance of

gestures and patterns in baroque choreography, the dance contributed greatly to the magic of this production.

A stellar cast in a taut drama

Mr. Brown also stated in his introductory notes that an appeal of the work "was the quality of the drama and the sense of dramatic tension we feel from the very beginning of the piece." Indeed this opening, the Cavatina "Sommi dei," a prayer to the gods by the degraded queen Polissena to redress her wrongs, instantly sets the tragic mood and highlights the central theme of



Dominique Labelle, Polissena
Photo: Louis Forget

marital conflict that dominates the opera. One of Opera Lafayette's regulars for years, soprano Dominique Labelle, emerged slowly onto the dimly lit stage, imbuing the role with dignity and authenticity with the rich tone and dramatic weight of her voice. At the same time she impressively lit the initial spark of tension. Twice in the opera she makes a similar, halting entrance to save her wayward husband. Finally, near the opera's end, she explodes with "Barbaro, partiro," chastising her ungrateful spouse. The vigor with which Ms. Labelle attacked this demanding piece, with all its rushing scales and syncopations, made this a highlight of the evening.



Hagar Sharvit, Zenobia; Caitlin Hulcup as Radamisto
Photo: Louis Forget

While the effectiveness of Dominique Labelle was no surprise to me, thanks to performances I have heard in Boston and Göttingen, the universally first-rate cast was indeed a delight. Two experienced international soloists making their U.S. debuts were striking discoveries: Australian mezzo-soprano Caitlin Hulcup as Radamisto and Israeli mezzo-soprano Hagar Sharvit as Zenobia. Handel first wrote Radamisto as a trouser role for a favorite soprano (with mezzo range), Margherita Durastanti. With regal bearing Ms. Hulcup projected one of the more impressive male personas I've ever

encountered in a trouser role. She was also a refreshing change from the many alto countertenors, whom I had heard over the years assuming the role, as rewritten for the alto castrato Senesino. Her vocalism was assured throughout, from the clarion tone and soft legato phrasing in the rhapsodic lament "Ombra cara" to often elaborate fioratura in her arias as well as frequent high-flying cadenzas.

As for Zenobia, Ms. Sharvit had the depth of range for a role originally written for a contralto. Her lyric mezzo voice mixed eloquently with the strings in "Son contenta di moire," her poignant acceptance of death in Act I. In another vein, she exhibited stunning vocal intensity in her aria late in Act II, "Empio perverso cor," addressed alternately with vehemence to the treacherous tyrant, Tiridate, and with soft-breathed devotion to her disguised husband. The joyous duet of reconciliation that soon follows to close the act (and leads to the ensuing graceful dance) was also a happy union of two voices that blended well.

Regarding the tyrant, Tiridate, originally written for a tenor, it seemed strange at first to encounter the fine tenor Robin Yujoong Kim, since the role – transferred to a bass in the later version – was so familiar to me from the charismatic bass Luca Pisaroni who almost stole the show in both Santa Fe and at Carnegie Hall with the English Concert. But Mr. Kim, with his clear but



Robin Yujoong Kim, Tiridate
Photo: Louis Forget

slightly thin tenor brought a dignified determination and confidence to the role. His bravura aria in Act III, “Alzo al volo,” accompanied brilliantly by two natural horns, as he believes he will be victorious, was another highlight of the evening. He projected this bravado piece with great vigor and clarity, helping to give credence to the fact that, in this production at least, he will most likely not mend his ways.

The opera does have one bass, King Farasmane, father of Polissena and Radamisto. Alex Rosen, an American bass experienced in the baroque repertory, sang his only aria (in Act I) with such warmth that one could only wish Handel had written more for him. Rounding out the cast, two delightful sopranos, Nola Richardson and Véronique Filloux, both Opera Lafayette Young Artists, took on the roles of Tiridate’s two generals, his brother Fraarte and the young Prince Tigrane. To further complicate things, Fraarte is in love with Zenobia (a love interest eliminated in the later version) and Tigrane is also in love with Polissena. Each wore spiffy military outfits and sang their delightful



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Véronique Filloux, Tigrane; Alex Rosen, King Farasmane; Nola Richardson, Fraarte; Members of the Seán Curran Dance Company
Photo: Louis Forget

arias with a youthful élan that happily complemented the dancing soldiers with their sunglasses. Among the numerous contemporary touches, Fraarte wore a skirt; thus the “he” was really a “she” – a young woman enamored of another woman.



The full cast of Opera Lafayette’s *Radamisto*
Photo: Louis Forget

Coda

As I happily discovered in the lobby of the theater at intermission, Opera Lafayette provided another contemporary bonus in the form of a charming book published by the company – an illustrated retelling of Handel’s *Radamisto* by experienced translator and librettist Kelley Rourke and the fine artist Amy Severson. With enchanting and colorful illustrations, this short book tells the story of the opera simply, mirroring the seamless flow of the colorful opera production itself. Included at the end of the book was a series of “questions for reflection and discussion” that pointed to issues of contemporary relevance.

A number of these questions focused on the varying aspects of Tiridate’s seemingly unquenchable obsession with greed and power. “I want what I want, and I will have what I want” is a refrain in Kelley Rourke’s succinct text. The questions also focused on how the deeply troubled, yet faithful, Polissena coped. Amy Severson’s particularly poignant illustration captures the depth of Polissena’s anguish as she wonders, “Where will all this greed and anger lead us?”



Polissena by artist Amy Severson from the book *Radamisto* by Kelley Rourke and Ms. Severson



The cover from the book *Radamisto* by Amy Severson and Kelley Rourke

Neither the opera with its ambiguous ending nor the book with its probing questions and illustrations answers Polissena’s question, but both were a wonderful reflection of the company’s mission statement as quoted in the book:

The mission of Opera Lafayette, an American period instrument company, is to bring to modern audience fresh interpretations of 17th- and 18th-century rediscovered gems and historical masterpieces, illuminating the contemporary relevance of the works together with their original appeal.

So thanks to Opera Lafayette for its beguiling production of *Radamisto* and for reaffirming the beauty and relevance Handel’s operas bring to our hectic and imperfect world.