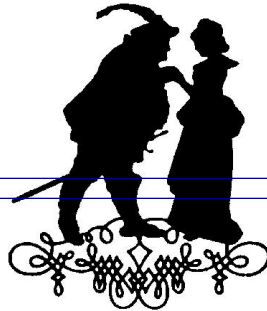


# Opera con Brio

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## Handel's *Richard the Lionheart* Shipwrecked in St. Louis, June 2015

In June of its fortieth anniversary season, the venerable and always engaging Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (OTSL) presented the American premiere of *Richard the Lionheart*, an English language adaptation of Handel's 1727 *opera seria*, *Riccardo Primo, Re D'Inghilterra*. The production was a stunning success on every level, causing one to wonder why it had taken almost three hundred years to bring the opera to the American stage. For me, happily, the wait had not been so long; just a year ago in June, 2014, the Handel Festival in Halle, Germany (Handel's hometown), presented the rarely performed work as a rather buoyant satirical comedy (which one critic called "hallucinations of a shipwreck"). Two years before that, in March of 2012, the London Handel Festival had offered this work in a more austere, classical production as its annual showpiece for the young and talented vocal students from the Opera School at the Royal College of Music. Each of these performances, in the original Italian, had its considerable merits.



Tim Mead as Richard the Lionheart

Photo: Ken Howard

But the OTSL performance was best of all, epitomizing the kind of riveting musical theatre for which the company is so well known. The production boasted a compelling set, which captured the shipwreck-motif of the convoluted story. The talented young cast, using a colorful new English-language performing edition by director Lee Blakeley and Damian Thantrey, excelled in

vivid character portrayal. With firm pacing and control, experienced Handelian conductor Grant Llewellyn, so familiar to Boston audiences, elicited a most idiomatic performance from members of the St. Louis Symphony that never overwhelmed the singers. At the end of both performances I attended (the final two of the run), the audience roared its approval, stunned, perhaps, that an evening of Baroque opera could so captivate and enthrall.

The opera itself comes at the peak of Handel's ten-year sojourn with the Royal Academy of Music, a period that included among his thirteen works for stage the better-known operas like *Julius Caesar* and *Rodelinda*. A major draw was two Italian superstars, the sensational castrato Senesino and the brilliant coloratura soprano Francesca Cuzzoni. In the final years of the Academy (1726-8), to spice things up, Handel had added a second Italian prima donna, the flamboyant Faustina Bordoni. He wrote no less than five operas for this pair, the two greatest sopranos of the age, whose rivalry became legendary. *Riccardo Primo* was the third of these. Musical invention, as one would expect, is at a consistently high level. Not so coherence of plot, however, since Handel's primary concern was showcasing these two infamous "dueling sopranos" equally. But St. Louis adjusted for this, primarily through the insightful direction of Mr. Blakeley who telescoped the work to focus on the drama at hand rather than the antics of superstars.

The improbable plot would seem not to invite such success. Riccardo I, alias Richard the Lionheart, (originally Senesino), and his fiancé, Costanza (originally Cuzzoni), who have never met, separately shipwreck on Cyprus. The villainous Isacio, King of Cyprus, naturally falls in love with Costanza, and with various deceptions schemes to win her. Initially he convinces his lively daughter, Pulcheria (originally Bordoni), to abandon her own fiancé, Oronte, and to feign identity as Costanza in order to wed Riccardo. Pulcheria, however, doesn't go along with the ruse for long, eventually befriend Costanza. Riccardo eventually defeats the nefarious Isacio in battle, but in true baroque *opera seria* fashion soon pardons him. Riccardo weds Costanza and hands over Cyprus to Pulcheria and Oronte. All ends well – at least in the original.

Not in St. Louis. In this production, Costanza, long suffering through most of the evening, seems never to quite recover from the distress of her shipwreck and other events that follow. A striking set by Set and Costume Designer Jean-Marc Puissant depicts various aspects of a wrecked ship, a motif in itself. The various dark, wooden constructions on stage give distorted perspectives on a wrecked ship that remain omnipresent throughout the evening as a metaphor for turmoil, distress, and conflict – both in love and war. This element of perpetual disturbance - of wrecked lives - becomes the thrust of this face-paced production with its quick scene changes.

As much attention focuses on the dominant male characters who perpetuate this conflict, as on the two sopranos who suffer its consequence, often reacting with copious outpourings of emotion cum trills. Indeed, the dramatic approach is consistent with Handel's second production, rewritten to celebrate the ascension of King George II of England (like Handel, German-born), the score generally used as it was in St. Louis. As Stage Director Lee Blakeley notes in the program book, he set the production in the eighteenth century around the time of composition rather than in the twelfth century of King Richard and the historical period of the Third Crusade. Mr. Puissant's elegant eighteenth-century costumes, like the stunning blue velvet attire of the hero and heroine, helped define the period as well as the characters.



Susannah Biller as Costanza Photo: Ken Howard

Italian audiences in Handel's day took little interest in an opera's dramatic progression; their interest in baroque opera was the star singers, of which Handel had an ample supply. What St. Louis did so admirably was to shape and sustain a viable, engaging dramatic progression, while at the same time give its talented cast a chance to shine in some of Handel's most virtuosic and expressive arias. This was not easily done since the dynamic duo of competing prima donnas, Cuzzoni and Bordoni, necessarily had their allotted share of showpiece arias (eight or nine each) – many relatively superfluous “simile” arias that rather stopped the action. The *primo uomo*, Senesino, also had his allotted nine arias, as much for his gratification as for George II. These arias were mostly intended to propel heroic action as well as to elucidate heroic stature. The production team's solution was thus to cut three arias each for the two sopranos (all's fair..., of course) and to leave all of Richard's music intact except for a short aria of anticipation (“o vendicarmi”) in the second act. The performance thus telescoped into a comfortable, fast-paced, dramatically intense three hours, a length more appropriate for a contemporary audience, if not fit for a King.

Normally I would object, savoring as I do performances of complete Handel operas. But in this case I congratulate the production team for their achievement in turning a dramatically not-all-together-satisfactory opera into such viable music theatre. Handel's magnificent music helped, of course, as did the exemplary musical forces that brought it to life, beginning with experienced British countertenor Tim Mead in the lead. With a bright, ringing voice, and vigorous athleticism to match, he really stole the show, projecting with great élan Richard's prowess as warrior king. His full red beard and striking masculine presence helped as well. Especially exciting were two bravura arias, one closing the first act, “Racked by storm clouds and tornadoes raging” (“Agitato da fiere tempeste”), the other in Act III, a whirlpool of roiling virtuosity, “Forged by horrors of the tempest” (“All'orror delle procelle”), sung improbably as he scaled the shattered wall of the



Tim Mead as Richard the Lion Heart Photo: Ken Howard

shipwreck with impressive athleticism. Each brought down the house. Although like Senesino his manner and deportment seemed more suited to the part of hero than of lover, he was also beautifully tender and expressive in other places, especially in the exquisite duet with Costanza that ends Act II.



Susannah Biller as Costanza; Tim Mead as Richard Photo: Ken Howard



Tai Oney as Oronte Photo: Ken Howard

Such is the versatility of Tim Mead that on the Deutsche Harmonia Mundi recording of *Riccardo Primo* he sings the role of the other countertenor, Oronte, Pulcheria's fiancé. St. Louis was fortunate to have another marvelous young countertenor, Tai Oney, in this important role. His rich alto timbre and stunning coloratura technique made him another hit of the show. Indeed Boston audiences are familiar with Mr. Oney, and it was a treat to encounter him once again, having heard him in Boston at the New England Conservatory of Music and in his professional opera debut with Boston Baroque as Athamas in *Semele*. I heard him again as a standout member of the Royal College of Music International Opera School at the London Handel Festival, first as Teseo in *Arianna in Creta* (in 2011) and next as Tirinto in *Imeneo* (in 2013). Of the latter show, I wrote at the time "he stole the show with a majestic Vivaldian bravura aria, performed with great passion and vocal agility." I could have said the same for his thrilling Act III vengeance aria, "My soul will strive for vengeance" ("Per mia vendetta"), sung with panache while performing a feisty sword dance. In his other two arias, one in each act (with not a note cut), he displayed equal assurance, spinning out lines of great beauty in his simile aria to Pulcheria in Act I, exhibiting admirable

breath control and presence in his hunting aria of Act II, complete with idiomatic horns. His was a performance to match Mr. Mead's, although Handel did not give the secondary castrato as much space to shine.

Handel gave even less chance to Riccardo's antagonist, Isacio, King of Cyprus and Costanza's captor - all vice and no virtue. But bass-baritone Brandon Cedel presented his two magnificent, blood-curdling arias with such vigor that one wished Handel had written more in this opera for the original gruff bass, Giuseppe Boschi. Like him, Mr. Cedel was all controlled vehemence and bluster, especially as he refused to surrender in Act III, navigating with ease and impassioned vigor the difficult octave leaps and angry scales of the fiery aria "Let the earth fall and crumble," ("Nel mondo e nell'abisso"). Another showstopper. Even the fine bass Adam Lau as Costanza's servant Berardo sang his single aria with formidable force, having initiated the stage action with an animated rescue of the distraught, bedraggled Costanza.

Susannah Biller as Costanza and Brandon Cedel as Isacio  
Photo: Ken Howard

Which brings me to the two women. It has often been pointed out that although Handel worked with the two famous prima donnas Cuzzoni and Bordoni for many years, he was not ever entirely satisfied with them. The necessity of spinning out so many showpiece arias to suit the particular needs of a sensitive artist, but not necessarily to serve character portrayal or dramatic development, might have been problematic indeed. At



Susannah Biller as Costanza and Devon Guthrie as Pulcheria Photo: Ken Howard

times, it seems that Handel approaches their music also with an edge of parody. (This aspect was highlighted in the captivating production of *Alessandro* at Halle this year, the first of the five operas Handel wrote for this duo.) Be that as it may, the judicious cuts of three arias for each – some of them Handel at his best – indeed served not only to curtail the length of the performance, but to shift the focus away from their rivalry toward what really becomes the thrust of the work and production, the shipwrecked emotions of lovers and warriors alike. With these cuts, the warrior-like pursuits of Richard, Isacio, and Oronte acquire weight, furthering the dramatic pace of the piece considerably.

Where does this leave the two women? In the case of Costanza, she seems a passive victim for much of the time, forever lamenting – with many elegiac utterances in slow tempi and in the minor mode. Pulcheria, for the most part, becomes the more animated of the two, with arias generally at faster tempi and in major keys. Handel, I think, would have been well satisfied with the two engaging young sopranos who so effectively took over these roles in St. Louis – Susannah Biller as Costanza and Devon Guthrie as Pulcheria. Costanza’s demanding role encompasses a full two-octave range, requiring agility and full high notes. These Ms. Biller handled with

exquisite ease, exhibiting also much expressive, nuanced phrasing in the lower register that was “unaffected, simple, and sympathetic” (to borrow a phrase often applied to Cuzzoni by Baroque critics). Pulcheria’s role, on the other hand, given the varied dilemmas she finds herself in, demands a complicated mix of varied emotional responses; Ms. Guthrie likewise had effortless control of her coloratura, but also a robust, rich lower tone when necessary for her more animated role. As Bordoni’s execution was reputed to be, Ms. Guthrie’s was articulate and brilliant.

The cuts made in each role are especially telling. In the short Act I, the only cut was the penultimate aria of the act, Costanza’s “Lascia la pace all’alma” as she

rejects the suit of Isacio (an aria that gave Handel much trouble). Thus early on the production downplays the aspect of rivalry between the two sopranos (Pulcheria had the aria immediately preceding it) and clears the way for Richard’s heroic bravura aria that closes the act. In Act II it is Pulcheria’s turn to lose the penultimate aria, the magnificent and justifiably famous “eagle” simile aria, “L’aquila altera conosce figli” (“Proud eagle mothers know to release their fledglings”). Curiously the text remains in the OTSL libretto, suggesting the cut was a last minute one. Sorry as I was to lose this brilliant piece, even with its obscure metaphor, it was probably best eliminated, as it unnecessarily breaks up the sequence leading from Costanza’s arioso to the long, beautiful final duet for Costanza and Richard. Earlier in the act both Costanza and Pulcheria lose a simile aria that would have framed Isacio’s formidable and menacing entrance aria, alluded to above. Again, the aura of competition between sopranos is de-emphasized, while at the same time the action develops rapidly, reinforcing the dramatic thrust of the piece.

In the final act, both Costanza and Pulcheria lose an aria each, and I must admit to missing one of my favorite arias, Costanza’s glorious “Bacia per me,” (“Cover his head with kisses”). Again its inclusion in the OTSL

libretto suggests some ambivalence about the cut. Winton Dean calls it rightly “one of Handel’s great tragic arias,” so perhaps the reason for its omission, other than its relative length, is that it took away from the production’s approach to her final “swallow” simile aria, the exquisite “Il volo così fido” (“The swallow could not ever find a sweeter flight to follow / as she returns to her nest. No!”). As the text indicates, this at last is the chance for Costanza to cheer up - and for Cuzzoni to warble and trill with unison violins and soprano recorder. In this production Ms. Biller did warble and trill effectively, but in a distracted, otherworldly manner, mimicking a Lucia in her mad scene, reaching out for the vagrant bird. This seemed the one point in the production that direction went somewhat astray denying her the chance to at last express her joy. On the other hand, the preceding recitative was perhaps its justification: “I have still not recovered / First I was shipwrecked, then kidnapped. / Escape and victory don’t seem real.” Hallucinations of a human wreck.

Soon afterwards during the final chorus of celebration, another odd touch ensued; a row of caged,

grey corpses slowly descended, dangling from the rear ceiling. A symbolic burial at sea? (One such wrapped figure had been carried across the stage in the opening act.) A portent of more chaos to come with pursuits of war and the like, suggesting all was not as well as it seemed? (Handel too would sometimes write a musically unsettling final chorus in a minor key, in deviance of the compulsory “lieto finale” prescribed by opera convention of the day).

Whatever the case, *Richard the Lionheart* was both captivating and engaging all night. The St. Louis audience would often not wait for the ritornellos to finish before applauding. Although on one hand, this was annoying, on the other hand, it was perhaps a measure of the evening’s success. Who could blame them since the music at every turn was so compelling, and since stage actions moved along so effectively without a break? Indeed, it was often hard not to burst into applause at the first opportunity, and for many in the audience it was perhaps also the discovery of how viable, indeed thrilling, Baroque opera could be. After three centuries, shipwrecked in St. Louis. What could be better?

