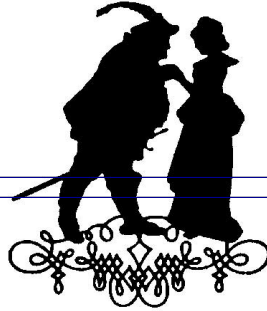


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## An Apt and Captivating Pair: *Rodrigo* and *Saul*

### The 2019 International Händel Festival Göttingen

The opening weekend of the 2019 International Händel Festival Göttingen presented two compelling performances of works at the opposite end of the spectrum of Handel's dramatic output: his first Italian opera, *Rodrigo*, written at age 22 for Florence in 1707, and perhaps the mightiest of his oratorios, *Saul*, written for London some three decades later. The rare airing of *Rodrigo* – indeed the first ever by the Festival, thus completing its offering of every Handel opera – gave ample evidence that Handel was at his very best, as some have asserted, in this seminal Italian period; the visceral airing of the more familiar *Saul* belies this assertion. Either way, the two performances side by side, one staged, the other in concert, helped to reaffirm that Handel was the greatest musical dramatist of his day, if not of all time.

As divergent as the two genres are – a convoluted soloist-bound *opera seria* and a mighty chorus-filled dramatic oratorio – the central concerns of the respective

works, typical of Handel, were similar: the complexity of human relationships and divided loyalties; the corruption wrought by power; the mental decline of a ruler and its effect on his people. With *Rodrigo* we face the grim final days of the last Visigothic king of Spain, Rodrigo, whose dissolute nature led to his demise and the more than 300-year Muslim occupation of the Iberian Peninsula. With *Saul* we follow the more familiar Old Testament progression of King Saul from pride of power and position through envy (of the upstart David) to madness and finally, self-destruction – a prelude to David's ascension as the new Israelite king. The complex, busy, and ambiguous production of *Rodrigo* by Dorota Karolczak was a major factor in the dramatic impact of this early opera, while *Saul* needed no such assistance. Either way, the fine performances by Maestro Laurence Cummings, the FestspielOrchester Göttingen and the exceptionally well-cast vocal artists of each production reinforced the mastery of Handel as musical dramatist, in all genres, at both ends of his lengthy career.

### Rodrigo: Raunchy and Riveting

The opening stage picture is a show-stopper in itself – a cluttered unit set in a state of complete disrepair suggesting certainly the pyrrhic victory of Rodrigo’s recent military campaign but also - in this production especially – a dissipated court already well on the way to permanent decline. The clutter on the glossy floor includes tarnished furnishings covered with fake fur, half empty bottles of booze on tables amidst scattered rubbish, shelves of stuffed animals – all in a vast dilapidated room (torn wall paper, cavernous holes in walls) capped by a glitzy chandelier. An alcove to the rear gives a sense of expanded space; in it, at the overture’s start, a figure at the harpsichord mimes playing the music.

My first thought was that he was the personification of Handel, in the process of composition or performance, as was occasionally the case in his operas. As it turns out it was Fernando, Rodrigo’s military leader, confidant and servant, entertaining his lascivious employer. But I still like the Handel association, if merely metaphorical, since Fernando, the fine young countertenor Leandro Marziotte, the only one not to survive in the opera, is more a detached observer than participant in the emotional turmoil of the protagonists; early on, in a lively continuo aria, he gives advice to Esilena, Rodrigo’s faithful wife, while riding a stationary bike that powers the lights!



Anna Dennis, Florinda; Erica Eloff, Rodrigo  
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Whether the personification of Handel or not, he returns in less lively fashion to the harpsichord at the opera’s end, during the final chorus that celebrates, in the spirit of Handel, the triumph of love over revenge. (The source libretto that became the basis for Francesco Silvani’s *Rodrigo* was titled *Il duello d’amore e di vendetta*, “The conflict of love and revenge.”)

A strength of Silvani’s libretto is the impressive directness at the start of Act I setting up the central confrontation between Rodrigo and his discarded mistress Florinda whose desire for revenge soon prompts her to join with the rebel prince Evanco to avenge his father, murdered by Rodrigo’s forces. Admirably, director Walter Sutcliffe, even beats Silvani to the draw with the help of an extended orchestral dance suite that Handel tacked on to the short overture. The ensuing pantomime during this overture and suite vividly delineates the three central characters and the source of dramatic tension amidst the wretched decadence without a word sung. First, the blond-wigged Florinda and Rodrigo dance briefly; but during the suite it becomes clear that Rodrigo is bored with the sensual, flippant mistress, paying more attention to his large dog, a handsome Rhodesian Ridgeback. Ironically this is a breed known to be everything Rodrigo is not – affectionate, dignified, and even-tempered. (The dog’s demise in the opera will become a turning point,



Russell Harcourt, Evanco; Fflur Wyn, Esilena  
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

indeed bringing a level of self-awareness to Rodrigo as to the consequences of his dissolute and destructive behavior.) Next the haughty, vengeful Florinda parades around with a pram containing her lovechild fathered by Rodrigo, while the warm, nurturing Esilena, Rodrigo's childless and long-suffering wife, pushes a cart of potted plants around the cluttered room. Such blatant but effective juxtapositions were typical of the production.

Thus Florinda's fiery opening recitative in response to his rejection of her and the child was no surprise - "Ah mostro, ah furia....., empio Rodrigo," ("Ah monster, ah fury....wicked Rodrigo!") - nor was her vigorous opening vengeance aria, "Pugneran con non le stelle," sung with impressive ornamentation by soprano Anna Dennis as she rips off her golden wig to expose long brown locks. This expressive English artist was perfectly cast as Florinda, exuding both allure and passion here and elsewhere throughout the opera. Closing out the first act (as performed in Göttingen) Ms. Dennis brought all her vocal and dramatic instincts to the extraordinary bitter aria without continuo "Fredde ceneri d'amor" ("Cold ashes of love") in which, while now clipping off her long brown tresses, she rids herself of whatever shreds remained of love for Rodrigo. Finally, with gun pointed at the precarious chandelier, the curtain falls. When it rises for the production's next act, devastation and chaos prevail; the toppled chandelier rests shattered amidst smoke and the crumbling remnants of the palace.



Erica Eloff, Rodrigo Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva



Fflur Wyn, Esilena Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

No less well cast was Welsh soprano Fflur Wyn as Esilena, whose warm, round tone and demure persona made for an apt contrast to Florinda, reinforcing her stature as the selfless, loving moral center of the opera. One glory of the score is her expansive final aria to Handel's first act, "Per dar pregio all'amor mio" in which, to avoid war, she cedes her husband, but not her constancy, to her rival. Donning a garbage bag as she sings, it is clear how she feels about herself at this point. Yet Ms. Wyn was simply exquisite in this mesmerizing moment with her effortless, elaborate coloratura and long sustained high E flat (on the word "costanza"), all juxtaposed against the sumptuous violin obbligato of Elizabeth Blumenstock. Typical of how this production worked, the selective lighting of lighting designer Susanne Reinhardt effectively isolated this stunning moment. During the ethereal closing violin ritornello, it then focused on the conspirators (Florinda, Evanco, and Giuliano) stealthily inching forward from the back of the set, thus transitioning effectively to Handel's Act II, begun without break in this production.

In this opera of constantly shifting allegiances, the conspirators, of course, had not always been conspirators. During the first Act, Giuliano, Rodrigo's military commander, had defeated the enemy, unceremoniously dumping the captured, bloodied Evanco from a ubiquitous pushcart to the garbage-strewn floor. However, upon learning from his sister Florinda about



Navarro Colorado, Giuliano

Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

her shame and degradation as Rodrigo's mistress, he dramatically switches allegiance. Furiously punching through the wall behind which the captured Evanco lies, he joins his sister and Evanco in the quest for vengeance.

These two especially well cast singers – tenor Jorge Navarro Colorado as Giuliano and countertenor Russell Harcourt as Evanco, rise to the occasion both vocally and physically to handle the vocal acrobatics each must execute, but also the demands of the choreography amidst the stage clutter. The London based Spanish tenor, Mr. Colorado confessed to me that he feels especially comfortable in this florid baroque repertory, and it certainly showed. In his heroic, virtuosic arias – from his militaristic entrance aria to those later vowing revenge on Rodrigo - his clarion tone rang out even in the most elaborate fioritura. An equally impressive Handelian, the English countertenor Mr. Harcourt also exhibited a seemingly effortless fluidity, especially in the higher ranges. His energized battle aria “Su, all armi” was a tour de force, while throughout the work he projected a raw persona intent on defeating Rodrigo.

Perhaps the most impressive interpretation in this extraordinary cast was that of South African soprano Erica Eloff in the titular role of Rodrigo. Indeed her statuesque bearing helped contribute to her impressive male persona, but as a former winner of the London Handel Singing Competition and frequent collaborator

with Laurence Cummings, it was her secure vocalism and bright, clear idiomatic phrasing that accomplished so well the formidable task of interpreting this cruel masculine persona. As she admitted in a public interview with the Festival Managing Director Tobias Wolff, it took her a while to warm up to this despicable character. But after weeks of reading carefully through the lengthy libretto, a line of recitative late in the first act finally turned her around. After declaring his hard-to-believe constancy and love for Esilena, Rodrigo asserts: “Amai Florinda con quell’amor che solo ama se stesso.” “I loved Florinda with that kind of love which only loves itself.” There was hope for this guy after all she felt, as also implied in the title of the opera as first produced in

Florence in 1707: *Vincer se stesso è la maggior vittoria* (“Self-conquest is the greatest victory.”) Silvani’s libretto indeed humanizes the vicious historic Rodrigo; Ms. Eloff followed suit with her empathetic interpretation as she admirably dug into the role.



Erica Eloff, Rodrigo

Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

And the production team did the same with the theme of the piece itself – although this was not evident at first amidst all the initial mayhem and clutter. But the narrative retained its fierce grip with repeated encounters (I was able to attend three times), and production details became especially illuminating each time. Order does emerge from chaos. A poignant moment comes in the last act when Rodrigo, still dressed in military

fatigues, first spots his beloved dog sprawled dead on the cluttered floor, a victim of earlier violence from the vengeful Evanco. The moment of awful realization brings a pained grimace from Ms. Eloff, as she methodically and ashamedly removes the military garb. Indeed all the characters, with Esilena the lynchpin for forgiveness, finally attain a measure of self-conquest. The once vengeful Florinda abandons her quest for revenge at the prospect of causing the death of Rodrigo, her son's father, and the vicious Evanco in another poignant directorial touch, sings his lightly scored penultimate aria cradled in the lap of the ever-nurturing Esilena.



The protagonists of *Rodrigo*, reconciled in Act III  
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva



Russell Harcourt, Evanco; Fflur Wyn, Esilena;  
Navarro Colorado, Giuliano Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Even the once-warring Giuliano who had killed Fernando early on, hugs the dog he too had loved, finally dragging its body through the clutter as once he had dragged the body of Fernando (another typically ironic juxtaposition). Some in the audience reacted with disgust and irritation as a limb from the dog was then roasted on the portable grill, but this brought home the devastation (including starvation) wrought by the senseless vendettas. If a bit unsettling, compensation came in the developing familial harmony on stage.

By any measure, *Rodrigo*, Handel's first venture in the genre of Italian *opera seria*, of which he would become the master, has much great music, often evolved from Handel's fluid cantata writing of the period. Handel

himself thought a great deal of the music and recycled numerous numbers from *Rodrigo* beginning with *Agrippina*, all the way through his career. The score is vibrant and subtle, including no less than 10 continuo arias (many very brief with extensive final string ritornellos) along with an inordinate quantity of recitative, typical of the day. No wonder Maestro Cummings, following the sublime performance, first singled out the formidable continuo pair of Phoebe Carrai on violoncello and David Tayler on theorbo, before acknowledging as well the stellar contributions from both Susan Regel on oboe and Elizabeth Blumenstock on violin. Finally, the FestspielOrchester itself received all the rapturous applause it deserved for its robust and nuanced playing.

During the joyous final chorus, soon to be recycled in his first London opera *Rinaldo*, Handel rightly includes a florid solo part for Esilena, the moral core of the opera. The deceased Fernando, the distant observer, perhaps the spirit of Handel, came forward from his perch at the harpsichord to join them, as a light-hearted distant observer. Amidst the principals, the jubilant Erica Eloff, seems fully reconciled to her wayward persona, Rodrigo, as they all sing how love had disarmed revenge; to master oneself is the greatest victory. Although moralizing is kept to a minimum in the production, in the buoyant lighted hearted piece they seem to say, "look, we can do it, so can you."



Maestro Laurence Cummings, Soloists, the NDR Chor, and the FestspielOrchester in *Saul*  
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

### **A *Saul* that Dazzled**

On the second night of the Festival, Maestro Cummings took the FestspielOrchester and an equally acclaimed group of soloists out to St. Blasius-Kirche in the delightful regional town of Hannoversch Münden for what turned out to be a splendid performance of Handel's monumental oratorio *Saul*. There was no need for the kind of theatrical staging we'd had for *Rodrigo*, nor indeed for the mesmerizing theatricality of the Barrie Kosky's Glyndebourne production two years back, which Maestro Cummings had also led. Instead the visceral impact came entirely from a masterful concert performance that captivated the audience right from the splendor of the opening *Epinicion* (Song of Triumph, celebrating the victory over Goliath and the Philistines) to the riveting final sequence initiated by the somber Dead March. For me, and I'm sure for many in the audience as well, it was one of the most magnificent performances ever of *Saul*, staged or in concert.

Much credit belongs to the exquisite NDR Chor, now a seasoned exponent of Handel's oratorios in Göttingen, and to Maestro Cummings whose experience

with the work (in Innsbruck and Glyndebourne) certainly helps account for the way in which so much apt instrumental color radiated through the evening. (The sumptuous trombones and trumpets of both the opening sequence and Dead March were breathtaking.) Complementing all this, it would be hard to top the extraordinary group of soloists, beginning with the sole carryover from the Glyndebourne production, German baritone Markus Brück in the title role. He needed none of the histrionics of a staged production to convey the intensity of his tragic descent to self-destruction, from early on with the simmering internal angst of "What do I hear...Am I then sunk so low," juxtaposed against the jubilant woman's chorus and vibrant carillon music praising David. Among the many instrumentalists to be singled out were the versatile Hanneke van Proosdij on both Harpsichord and Carillon, as well as again Phoebe Carrai on lead cello; a special nod goes also to oboist Xenia Löffler filling in at the last moment from the visiting Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, whose performance the next morning would be a highlight of the Festival as well.

Although the heart of the oratorio is *Saul*'s poignant tragedy, his two daughters are vivid portraits, especially as performed by two real-life sisters, Sophie Bevan, the haughty older sister Merab who rejects the offer to wed the “low-born” David, and Mary Bevan, the sprightly younger sister Michal, who eventually weds him and indeed saves him from the wrath of her father. The former was properly imperious at the outset with her florid soprano, then properly melodious and expressive later on in her poignant air “Author of peace”; the latter in turn provided a breath of fresh air with her bright soprano and adept musicality as she welcomed David early on. Later, her vibrant voice was a wonderful complement to David, countertenor Eric Jurenas, in their two duets.

For his part, Mr. Jurenas stood out with his sensational rendition of the outsider David, as well he should; he after all is the fulcrum of all those around him. His extraordinary range and penetrating tone, especially in the upper register, helped in presenting his beguiling mixture of innocence and vulnerability – from his simple air of resolute faith, “Oh Lord, whose mercies numberless,” (with exquisitely spun coda for harp by Margret Kröll), to the magnificent penultimate number of the score, with chorus, “Oh fatal day!” Complementing David was the bright tenor Benjamin Hulett as Jonathan, Saul's third child, caught in a vice between affection for David and loyalty to his father. With especially clear articulation of text, he was both tenderly expressive and ardent in his larghetto “No, cruel father, no!” and the following allegro expressing his determination to defend his friend David.

Handel vividly draws even minor characters in this great work as well. Another tenor, Raphael Höhn, doubled as both the High Priest and the Witch of Endor; his light voice, with reedy falsetto, was colorfully apt as the latter. Talented members of the NDR chorus portrayed each of the other minor characters with great élan: two tenors, Keunhyung Lee as Abner and Joachim Duske as the Amalekite, and two basses, Christoph Liebold as Doeg and Fabian Kuhnen as Samuel's Ghost. But still, the most important character, next to the King himself, is the chorus, which dazzled with its rhythmic precision, dynamic range, spot-on intonation and glorious sonorities. The choral numbers go a long way toward helping to make *Saul* such a stage-worthy oratorio. But with a concert performance this compelling, who needs the stage?

#### **Looking ahead: Göttingen's Anniversary Year**

Next year, 2020, the Göttingen International Festival celebrates its centenary with an ambitious program offering all 42 Handel operas in a broad spectrum of different formats: staged, in concert mode, as jazz arrangements, puppet theatre, film or reading. Missing will be its annual oratorio performance; but compensation will be this extraordinary and varied program, capped by a fully staged production in the Deutsches Theater of *Rodelinde*, the opera with which the illustrious Festival gave birth to what now known worldwide as the “Göttingen Handel Renaissance.”