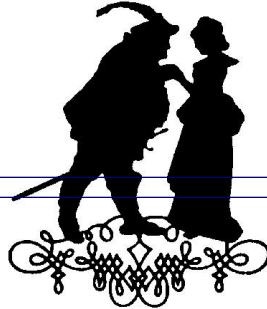


Opera con Brio

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A Scintillating *Saul* Returns to Glyndebourne

Glyndebourne International Festival 2018



Members of the Chorus in *Saul*

Photo: Bill Cooper

Three years after its successful opening run at Glyndebourne in 2015, the mesmerizing production of Handel's mighty oratorio *Saul* returned in all its surreal splendor. Once again Barrie Kosky's captivating abstract production elicited its visceral impact on the audience, thanks to an innovative approach that caught the very essence of what Handel's music is all about: 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; and the separation of a nation from its ideals.

Given the state of the world today, one might have thought a realistic realization of these central themes would have been the logical approach. But Mr. Kosky explains otherwise in his program notes, with a nod to the landmark Peter Sellars production of *Saul* in the past that did just that:

My designer, Katrin Lea Tag, and I decided early on that we weren't interested in doing a realistic take on the piece, which has been done very well with a lot of Handel operas, but which has become the accepted way of dealing with these operas and is now sort of overdone. Everything Peter Sellars was doing so brilliantly 30 years ago has now become as clichéd as a Zeffirelli "Aida" [complete realism].

Coincidentally, two of Mr. Sellars' landmark productions here in Boston, *Giulio Cesare* (1987) and *Saul* (1981), are the very same works of this year's Glyndebourne season, which presents for the first time ever in one season two Handel works on stage. Illustrative of Mr. Kosky's point, Mr. Sellars' production of *Giulio Cesare* with the Opera Company of Boston some thirty years ago was a prophetic updating to one of the crisis points in the world, the Middle East. His earlier *Saul* with the Cantata Singers and Ensemble updated the setting to the present (then 1981) and focused on political corruption through a device recently in the news, a concealed tape recorder. In that version, the Witch of Endor put her feet upon her desk in the final act and summoned the prophet Samuel from her Rolodex. At times the Sellars approach, while always imaginative and often powerful, could lead to clutter, as when during the final chorus in *Saul*, flickering video images of presidents and nuclear warheads seemed intrusive.

This is the kind of thing Mr. Kosky assiduously avoids, as he continues to explain: "I was very interested in finding a much more surreal, distracted, dreamlike world for the piece. I'm not interested in realism at all. I'm interested in poetry, and in association. I'm interested in the theatricality of theater."

Nothing could be more theatrical than Mr. Kosky's striking opening to *Saul* - the *Epinicion* or Song of Triumph - celebrating the victory over Goliath and the Philistines. Just visually, it is a scene of such captivating splendor that even the usually staid Glyndebourne audience burst into applause. From the start, we are all hooked by the spectacle of the chorus in their colorful quasi-baroque costumes, feasting at a sumptuous banquet table, which extends the full width of the stage, while singing Handel's glorious C Major opening. Between the freeze-like shifts of poses, we are breathless. States Mr. Kosky, "I don't need complicated architecture on the stage. I don't like scenic clutter. I like the clutter



A freeze-frame from the opening scene Photo: Bill Cooper

of bodies." The only addition, at the front of the steeply raked stage covered with a dark substance like soil, was Goliath's giant severed head, soon caressed by David, to the shock of all. That is enough. The only hint of clutter came with the change in tone at the opening of the second part, when the dark stage becomes brightly lit by scores of candles. Suddenly a baroque-wigged organist (James McVinnie) playing Handel's mini-concerto on an organ magically rises amidst them. The sense of fun persists, even as the drama darkens.



Clockwise from front centre: David (Iestyn Davies), Merab (Karina Gauvin), Michal (Anna Devin) and Jonathan (Allan Clayton) Photo: Bill Cooper



Witch of Endor (John Graham-Hall) and Saul (Markus Brück)
Photo: Bill Cooper

The use of space is the key to the production; its sparseness, sometimes filled with just one character, other times many, invites the music to work. In the most striking moment of isolation, the penultimate scene of the opera, the otherworldly Witch of Endor emerges from the dark earth as the eerie bassoon and oboe chords buttress a repeated triple figure in the violins, a portent of the Saul's fate that the ghost of Samuel will soon pronounce. Having risen mysteriously to the stage, the Witch of Endor (John Graham-Hall) embraces Saul (Markus Brück) and then with his aged, sagging breasts suckles the bare-chested, semi-demented king. Saul then transforms into the solemn spirit of the prophet Samuel, pronouncing his own fate: "God has forsaken thee." After this pronouncement, the Witch slowly leads the beaten Saul back up the steeply raked stage, evoking images of Shakespeare's mad Lear and blind Gloucester.

Of course the heart of *Saul* is the poignant tragedy of his progression from pride of power and position through envy (of the upstart David) to madness and finally self-destruction. All this Mr. Brück, making his Glyndebourne debut, portrayed with impressive conviction and intensity, right from early on in the first act with expressions of his internal angst, "What do I hear...Am I then sunk so low," juxtaposed against the

jubilant, woman's chorus and vibrant carillon music praising David. (This is as startling a response as that of Othello to the innocent Desdemona, as Winton Dean points out.) Saul often interrupts quiet moments with desperate spoken assertions such as "I am not mad" and "I am the king," an especially effective insertion at the close of the first part when he is isolated in a spotlight on the dark stage. The phrase lingers over the Festival's traditional hour-and-a-half-long dining break, especially disquieting for us Americans in the audience, given our current unsettled political scene.

The heart of *Saul* is also the potent struggles of his dysfunctional family to cope with a father stymied by his temper and fate. His two daughters are especially vivid portraits: the older Merab, who haughtily rejects the offer to wed the "low-born" David; and the sprightly Michal, who eventually weds him and indeed saves him from the wrath of her father. As Merab, Karina Gauvin was properly imperious at the outset; then later in the second part, as she mellows amidst the horror of her father's behavior, her gleaming soprano was especially expressive in her



David (Iestyn Davies); Saul (Markus Brück); Merab (Karina Gauvin)
David (Iestyn Davies);



David (Iestyn Davies) and Michal (Anna Devin)
Photo: Bill Cooper

poignant air “Author of peace.” As Michal, Anna Devin often provided a breath of fresh air, as in her opening air welcoming David, with her bright soprano and adept musicality, both in voice and dance. (Her ease with the role certainly reflected the fact she had performed it in the 2015 tour of this production.) Later in the work her clarion voice was a wonderful complement to David (countertenor Iestyn Davies) in their two duets – one exuding happiness for the pair, the other a terrific theatre piece, amidst the candles, as she cautions him to escape her father’s wrath.

Completing Saul’s household is his third child, Jonathan, caught in a vice between affection for David and loyalty to his father (and to his father’s determination to have David killed.) The fine tenor Alan Clayton was both a tenderly expressive and ardent Jonathan, as in his *largo* “No, cruel father,



Jonathan (Alan Clayton); David (Iestyn Davies)
Photo: Bill Cooper

no!” and the following *allegro* expressing his determination to defend his friend David. Still, as well performed as were Saul’s three conflicted children, it was Iestyn Davies, reprising his role from the first production, whose sensational rendition of the outsider David really stood out – as well it should; David after all is the fulcrum of all those around him. With a beguiling mixture of innocence and vulnerability, his simple, exquisitely sung air of resolute faith, “Oh Lord, whose mercies numberless,” with a coda for harp solo, was surely meant to counter Saul’s mounting mental disorder. But its effect was just the opposite, causing Saul to erupt.

David, with the chorus, finally rounds out the work with the magnificent penultimate number of the score, “Oh fatal day! How low the mighty lie!” This monumental *Elegy*, the poignant climax of the evening, was heightened further by the simplicity and power of Mr. Kosky’s use of space. The bodies of Jonathan and Saul lay spread out on the sprawling black surface, as ever so slowly – poignantly in sync with the tonal harmony of chorus and soloists – the two are ritualistically covered with the soft black soil. And this of course was just one of the many stunning moments for the wonderful Glyndebourne Chorus. Indeed even minor characters are vividly drawn by Handel, each of them portrayed with great *élan* by tenor Stuart Jackson – Abner, High Priest, Doeg, Amalekite. But the most



Amalekite/Abner/High Priest/Doeg (Stuart Jackson); Dancers
Photo: Bill Cooper



High Priest/Amalekite/Abner/Doeg (Stuart Jackson); Chorus
Photo: Bill Cooper

important character, next to the King himself, is the chorus. This, along with the color and variety of its events, goes a long way toward helping to make *Saul* such a stage-worthy oratorio.

And this production emphasizes that the oratorio is as much the chorus' story as Saul's. Indeed they take part in just about everything, usually supported by six fine dancers, from the colorful opening celebrations of David's victory, to the betrothal of David and Michal and Saul's Feast, to the great c-minor Dead March and Elegy, finishing with the final, powerful C Major look into the future. They also go a long way toward shaping the mood of this production. The vibrant color of the opening scenes soon drains away. By the time of the Dead March, the chorus is not only as drably attired as Saul, but they too lay spread out on the dark turf, rising one by one with their respective vocal entries in the Dead March, "Mourn Israel, Morn, thy beauty lost." By the time of the powerful closing triumphant C Major chorus looking to the uncertain future that David will now lead, the ragged lot, staring blankly

from the foot lights into the audience, is anything but triumphant. Darkly, contrary to the hopeful text, it seems to beg another Shakespearean caution, à la Richard III: can a once great nation survive when its leader becomes unhinged?

We Americans in the audience shudder again. But there was no need for fleeting images of presidents and nuclear war heads in this compelling, abstract production, complemented by the glowing instrumental colors radiating from the wonderful Orchestra of the Age of the Enlightenment led by Handel expert Laurence Cummings. Well familiar with the score, he'll lead the orchestra in *Saul* again in next year's Gottingen Handel Festival, sans staging. Nor was there a need for Mr. Sellars' admonition to his audience nearly four decades ago: "Welcome to what, it must be admitted from the outset, will be a long evening, a sort of experiment – the first uncut performances of *Saul* since Handel's lifetime, plus staging. The whole operation will run about three and a half hours." And so it did in Glyndebourne. But thanks to the lively and engaging production, a stunning cast and chorus, and the fine orchestra, it went not a minute too long. The energized audience roared its approval.



Members of the Chorus in *Saul*

Photo: Bill Cooper