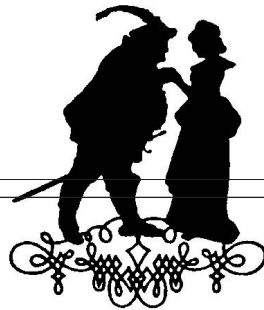


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## Internationale Händel Festspiele Göttingen A Buoyant *Semele* Delights

For the first time in the history of the Göttingen International Handel Festival, the annual staged performance at the intimate Deutsches Theater was an oratorio, Handel's 1744 *Semele*, based on the Greek myth of a mortal who yearns for immortality. Labeled a "bawdy opera" in the 18th century, the music drama, one of Handel's greatest, was written "after the manner of an oratorio." But the music is so full of life that it inherently calls not just for inventive staging, but also for lots of action. Indeed, the highly entertaining production from Director and Conductor George Petrous gave us plenty of both, stressing the work not as a static oratorio, but as a dramatic entity, really an opera in disguise (as early audiences recognized as well) – with a bawdy, if sometimes overly campy approach.

But with the help of Stage and Costume Designer Paris Mexis and Lighting Designer Stella Kaltsou, the production also stressed the emotional currents that run throughout the entire piece, universalizing this timeless drama about human nature.

At the outset, as *Semele* recovers from a bad dream or from a disturbing premonition, white-clad attendants help her to don a wedding dress, in preparation for her unwanted arranged marriage to Athamas. They also remove a baby-sized bundle from the bed, a scene re-enacted toward the close of the opera, following the birth of Bacchus from *Semele*'s ashes, as per the Greek myth. Thus, the opening scene, full of action, creates a frame for the production and seamlessly propels the potentially static "secular oratorio" with its



Marie Lys as Semele; and Jeremy Ovenden as Jupiter  
Photo: AlciroTheodoro da Silva

plethora of emotional da capo arias forward. The opening sequence would be one of many dressing scenes to come, sometimes involving disguises. Perhaps all this was also a nod to Greek mythology, the theme of this year's Festival titled "Hellas!" with its recurring transformations and ultimately tragic overtones.

### **A comic mood prevails**

Yet right from the start the production sets its often-playful tone as Semele bemoans her fate in song while distractedly plucking and flinging white chrysanthemums (symbols of love and joy) from a wedding bouquet into the audience and orchestra pit! By the end of the act, Jupiter, the fine tenor Jeremy Ovenden, disguised as a janitor, has abducted Semele, as a stunning video of a soaring eagle creates a backdrop in keeping with the Greek myth.

Buoyantly, the animated soprano Marie Lys then sings "Endless pleasure, endless love" from high in a gilded cage, now gleefully flinging golden confetti to the adoring, festive crowd below.

Indeed, in this straightforward production, maintaining a careful balance between nods to Greek mythology and playful excursions into contemporary dress and modes, there was no need for the kind of "concept" opera prevalent in recent years, such as that of Chicago Opera Theater in 2002 set in Hollywood with its lure of frivolous pleasures, nor for that conceived by the New York City Opera four years later with Marilyn Monroe and President Kennedy as the central pair. Nor was there a need to impose current MeToo overtones exposing the all-too-common drama of a man who keeps an attractive and irresistible mistress of inferior social station in luxury for himself. Simply, the telling of the story in which vanity and ambition lead inevitably to self-destruction was the thing, alternately comic and poignant, updated to entertain, but generally true in spirit to its Greek origins and most always fluid in its perpetual motion.

At the beginning of the second act, a seedy, action-packed scene stands in comic relief to much of the first act. Jupiter (now a tramp) hovers over a garbage bin outside a disco-bar as a crowd waits for the bouncers to let them in (which they do eventually). Then Iris, messenger of the Olympian gods



Jeremy Ovenden as Jupiter; Marilena Striftombola as Iris  
Photo: AlciroTheodoro da Silva

(soprano Marilena Striftombola), enters, now a flight attendant with travel bag in tow. Juno, Jupiter's jealous wife (Vivica Genaux), follows disguised in a black trench coat over a black dress wearing sunglasses, hauling an over-sized bright orange suitcase. The crux of the scene is built around Ms. Genaux's vehement rendition of her playfully instructive aria, "Iris hence away" as the two prepare to set off to get aid from the god Somnus to help undo Semele.



Marilena Striftombola as Iris; Vivica Genaux as Juno  
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

But the liveliness of the scene, although highly entertaining and well done, is also its nemesis. Cluttered stage action in this production sometimes tends to overshadow musical values – here, the endless antics over moving the large suitcase to a cart, Jupiter in his tramp disguise offering to help and (with more than a touch of irony) offering a cigarette to the unsuspecting Juno who, of course, refuses the offer from such a lowly creature. Indeed, there is much fun, wit, and irony in its details. But for my taste, musical values tend to get a little lost in the shuffle. On the other side of the coin, however, with the Music Director and Stage Director being one and the same (Artistic Director George Petrou), theatricality and musicality were generally sympatico. And the audience loved it.



Riccardo Novaro as Somnus Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Such was the case in the opening scene of the next act, equally comic, as Juno and Iris labor tirelessly to awaken Somnus, God of sleep, sonorous baritone Riccardo Novaro (as effective in his sleepy comedy as he was earlier as the more noble Cadmus). Here the

somnolent god is the leader of a group of Hindu Hare Krishna worshipers, all in bright orange robes. The comic timing of orchestral pauses following Juno's sometimes forte, sometimes pianissimo calls of "Somnus, awake" (with occasional toy cymbals, horn, and a small light) were perfect, adding a touch of humor to this otherwise static scene. Then when Somnus finally responds with Polyphemus-like glee to the promise of further delights (the nymph Pasithea), we enter the realm of an Offenbach operetta with the lively gyrations of Somnus and fellow worshipers. Finally, a nice touch, consistent with the whole scene, was to have Juno then don the fat suit and flaming red wig for her disguise as Ino to flatter and eventually undo Semele. Now, finally, Ino's awful garb made sense: the unattractive baggy dress of an overweight, large bottomed "ugly duckling" with bright orange hair, large rimmed glasses, and a noticeable limp - as also did the usual double casting of Juno and Ino.

### Respite from the comic

However, not all the production was fast moving, bawdy and/or loaded with hilarious detail. For example, the plight of Ino is often lost amidst that of her sister Semele's quest for immortality. From the start she is given the most outlandishly unattractive persona possible, in stark contrast, of course, to the beautiful and desirable Semele. But Ino also yearns for love – from the one she adores, Athamas, once betrothed to Semele, who is soon enroute to eternal bliss (so she thinks) with Jupiter. Ino's magnificent aria midway through Act I to Athamas, as he become aware he is the unwitting cause of her unhappiness, is often lost in the shuffle, sometimes even cut or reduced (omitting the da capo) as a piece that slows the action too much. But this chamber-scored gem deserves to be heard in full as a heartbreaking expression of one who truly suffers: "Turn, hopeless lover, turn thy eyes / and for a maid bemoan / in flowing tears and aching sighs / the woes too like her own."

And so it was in this production. Although radiant mezzo soprano Vivica Genaux sang Juno (as she had Dejanira in *Hercules*) with shattering intensity and determination, she made Ino's long, full da capo aria one of the poignant highlights of the evening, with a radiant tone and a convincing presence. Aided by the refined strings, time seemed to stand still. And it continued to do so for the remainder of this scene, often cut as well: the heartfelt aria with its heavy dotted rhythm for Athamas



Vivica Genaux as Ino

Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva



Marie Lys as Semele; Marilena Striftombola as Cupid; Athens Chamber Choir  
Photo: AlciroTheodoro da Silva

(the fine countertenor Rafal Tomkiewicz) as he gradually discovers he is the unwitting cause of Ino's unhappiness; then their brief concluding duet of mutual pain. The production team deserves much credit for highlighting this moment, so central to the theme of unrequited love and an ensuing life of heartbreak.

Another welcome moment of contrast, after Jupiter has dropped all his seedy disguises in Act II, was his famous showpiece "Where'er you walk." Discarding his ragged attire for a showy gold-trimmed jacket, Mr. Ovenden as Jupiter apostrophizes Semele, his jewel in a gilded cage, with elegant restraint and warm tone just as Handel wrote it, "Largo e pianissimo per tutto." Now without disguise he remains aloof and motionless in his authoritarian way, any action being reserved for his adoring followers - members of the Athens Chamber Choir - to

whom the vivacious Cupid, delightful, clarion voiced soprano Marilena Striftombola, hands out sheet music. She in turn was so at ease with the requisite florid music, as both Cupid and Iris, that she could easily have essayed Semele.

But that was left to Ms. Lys, who later stole the show after Juno goaded her to further charm Jupiter. This she prepared to do as much with her acrobatics while dressing (yet again) as with her vocal coloratura in the flamboyant aria "Myself I shall adore." Again, this was one of those scenes - with constant attention to process of preening to the nines, from selection of a myriad choice of footwear to gilded outfit, and with large projected video poses in the background - where stage antics perhaps dwarfed musical values. But the audience roared its approval - just as Semele would have wanted.

## Apt music for a revitalized Festival

All of this would have been to no avail, however, had the musical forces been less compelling. Experienced Chorus Master from the Greek National Opera Agathangelos Georgakatos shaped his new choral group, Kammerchor Athen (Athens Chamber Choir) into an impeccable performance. In *Semele* they are a particularly human group, at times with weighty pronouncements, at others fully engaged in the action. Always with fine diction, they sang with an elegant glow and directness on the one hand, and with zest and almost reckless abandon on the other, especially at the end after Ino and Athamas avoid heartbreak and Apollo (also Jeremy Ovenden) descends to promise happiness following the final transformation, the birth of Bacchus, God of wine and giver of ecstasy. The chorus of priests at the opera's end, the jubilant "Happy, happy shall we be," was pure joy. And the fine contribution of the FestspielOrchester Göttingen conducted by fellow Greek, and Baroque specialist, George Petrou, was no less important. Its playing was idiomatic and vibrant, highlighted by crisp solos to supplement a fine cast of singers, who as always carry the day in any Handel opera.

This all helped make for a delightful and captivating performance of one of the great masterpieces of the expansive Handel catalogue. Some years ago, on February 23, 1985, I was fortunate to attend the concert performance of *Semele* at Carnegie Hall in New York City that honored to the day the 300th year anniversary of Handel's birth. The stellar performance and cast of the day (including Kathleen Battle, Marilyn Horne, Samuel Ramey, and Rockwell Blake, among others) convinced me both of the appropriateness of the choice for that occasion and of the work's potential for a staged drama. Likewise today, the Göttingen Handel Festival deserves much credit for its choice of the perfect work to celebrate, as a staged complement to the concert oratorio *Hercules*, the Festival's full return from the Covid years after the cancellation of its long-planned 100 year anniversary season. The Festival also deserves praise for demonstrating that this monumental work, be it oratorio or opera in disguise, can be such viable, compelling and even entertaining music theater.