

Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



With The English Concert's Refined and Elegant *Solomon*, Carnegie Hall's Commitment to Handel Continues

Back in its 1984-85 season, Carnegie Hall presented a Handel Opera Festival in celebration of the important Handel tricentennial year. For me, and many others, at the outset of the Handel renaissance, this three-concert series was the first chance to savor a complete Handel opera in live performance. The first of the series, in the fall of 1984, was *Orlando* (which critic Will Crutchfield called “the first uncut professional performance of any Handel opera in New York”); the second, in January, was the magnificent *Ariodante* (led by Raymond Leppard, with Tatiana Troyanos and June Anderson in the leads); and finally, the third, in April, was the rich and varied *Alessandro*, also uncut.

If this wasn't enough, the glorious centerpiece of that year-long Carnegie Hall Festival was the performance of *Semele* on Handel's 300th birthday, February 23, 1985, in the infrequently performed complete “First 1744 Covent Garden Version.” The extraordinary cast included Kathleen Battle, Marilyn Horne, Rockwell Blake, Sam Ramey, and Sylvia McNair with conductor, John Nelson. In his review of that evening, *New York Times* critic Donal Henahan wrote:

It is difficult to imagine, in this Handel year, any event doing more honor to the composer than the spectacular performance of *Semele* that took place on Saturday



Harry Bickett and The English Concert; The Clarion Choir; Ann Hallenberg as Solomon; Miah Persson as Solomon's Queen and First Harlot

Photo: Steve J. Sherman

evening at Carnegie Hall. For admirers of Handel's many-leveled art, and the craft of singing, it was a night to mark down.

Today, happily, more than four decades into the renaissance of Handel operas, many of these works have now deservedly become almost repertory staples in opera houses worldwide, frequently performed with period instruments. Key Handel Festivals abroad like those in London and Germany (Göttingen, Halle, and Karlsruhe) also continue their enticing surveys of both Handel's operas and oratorios. Here in the US, Carnegie Hall continues its commitment to Handel. Each year it brings The English Concert, one of Europe's finest period orchestras, and its Artistic Director and Conductor, Harry Bickett, to

perform a Handel opera (or oratorio) in concert. And once again New York audiences have the chance to savor an idiomatic performance uncut and unencumbered. This year, Handel's monumental *Solomon* from 1749, performed on March 12th, was the ninth installment in ten years (with a timeout for Covid); it was splendid on every level.

The oratorio indeed has been called a magnificent "song of celebration," which in four often elaborate tableaux honors the famous biblical king's new temple in Jerusalem, his happy marriage to a beloved queen, his famous wisdom in settling the dispute between two mothers, and finally his sumptuous welcome to the visiting Queen of Sheba. As Sir John Eliot Gardiner states as quoted in the program notes:

[For all this] Handel demanded a grander more sumptuous orchestra for *Solomon* than for any earlier oratorio, and it contains a high proportion of choral music, written in his most imposing ceremonial style.

This was evident from the start. Following the brisk overture, The Clarion Choir, led by its artistic director Steven Fox, opened with the grand antiphonal chorus, “Your harps and cymbals sound” soon followed by the wistful opening of the next chorus, “with pious heart and holy tongue then.” This soon morphed into the vibrant fugato, “till distant nations catch the song.” There is no better way to describe the stunning choral work of this opening sequence than to echo the group’s apt name, “Clarion”: brilliantly clear. And so it was throughout the evening, with the many diverse choruses of *Solomon*, generally regarded as among the greatest Handel ever wrote, often descriptive and written in eight parts.

Understandably, the chorus, as the builders and citizens of Solomon’s “golden city,” assumes the commanding role in the oratorio – unlike in most Handel operas where the chorus per se is absent. But opera aficionados would not be disappointed. First off, by this time in his career, Handel took care to assure a proper balance in his oratorios between soloists and chorus. Secondly, the principal soloists of this English Concert performance matched the best of Carnegie Hall’s seminal Opera Festival almost four decades ago, and indeed equaled the best out there today in the now-expanded array of Handel singers.



Ann Hallenberg as Solomon

Photo: Steve J. Sherman

Perhaps in order not to detract from the central role of the chorus, Handel refrained for the most part from writing the kind of arias of dazzling virtuosic display that frequent his operas. But the arias in *Solomon* are poignant and apt, designed not to take too much attention from the chorus. Moreover, Handel cast the vividly drawn Solomon as a mezzo-soprano. Sometimes the role is sung by a baritone, or even by a countertenor as with Jeffrey Gall in Boston in the mid ‘80s or Iestyn Davies, a frequent interpreter of the role.

But Maestro Bicket chose one of today’s great baroque specialists, eloquent mezzo-soprano Ann Hallenberg. In her beautifully secure, mellow voice, she was the perfect counterpoise between the pair of priestly roles (effectively florid tenor James Way and solid bass Brandon Cedel) and the two higher soprano roles, Miah Persson as Solomon’s Queen (and First Harlot), and Elena Villalón as the visiting Queen of Sheba. Additionally Ms. Hallenberg was the perfect complement to the omnipresent chorus, as for example during

the third act when she became an effective, but not intrusive MC, introducing the four choruses entertaining the Queen of Sheba in the manner of a Purcellian masque.

This talented cast also included the other mezzo-soprano, Niamh O’Sullivan, formidable as the depraved second harlot who bursts in to initiate the central focus of the second act, the masterfully dramatic trio between her, the first harlot, and the moderating Solomon. There again the rich mezzo of Ms. Hallenberg was persuasive in the trio, the single dramatic number of the oratorio.

Other vocal highlights, to mention a few, were the tender duets between Ms. Hallenberg and Ms. Persson, in the first act as the beloved queen and in the second act as the victor of the baby-splitting judgment. Closing this dramatic scene, Ms. Persson sang with heart-wrenching subtlety, the pastoral air “Beneath the vine,” a gem from the score with intimate selective scoring from flute and strings to match. Writes Handel scholar Winton Dean: “On the stage this air has a profound and sublime rightness to which no explanation can do it justice.” The audience in Carnegie Hall was enthralled.

In the original score, Handel assigned the three leading soprano parts, one in each act (Solomon’s Queen, First Harlot, and Queen of Sheba) to the same singer. With all that Ms. Persson has to sing in the first two acts (including two exquisite love songs early on as Solomon’s Queen), it is usual to bring in a fresh soprano voice for the Queen of Sheba, as in this performance. Cuban-American soprano



Ann Hallenberg as Solomon; Miah Persson as Solomon’s Queen and First Harlot
Photo: Steve J. Sherman

Elena Villalón seemed a perfect fit to sing the final pastoral air of the oratorio, “Will the sun forget to streak.” Bidding farewell, she assures Solomon that never while the sun remembers to rise will she forget Solomon, his court, and his wisdom. While Mr. Bicket deftly shaped the exquisite orchestration, (including a single oboe, and all flutes in unison, against *sempre staccato* repeated chords in the strings), Ms. Villalón smoothly weaved the evolving vocal line through the unique texture.

In a few moments, one final, glorious chorus, “Praise the Lord with harp and tongue,” sent a rapt audience on its way, not soon to forget all it just saw and heard. Nor can I ever forget the years of Handelian glory Carnegie Hall has brought its audiences, beginning with its seminal Handel Festival of 1984-85. Let’s hope Carnegie Hall’s commitment to Handel will continue in this “golden hall” - and for at least another 10 years with the impeccable forces of Harry Bicket and The English Concert in all its precision, delicacy, and beauty.