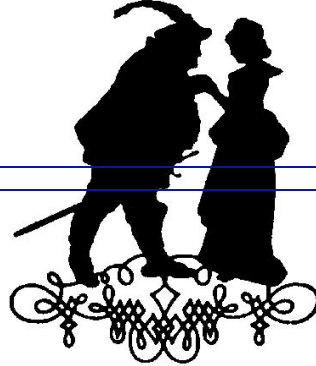


Opera con Brio

Spring 2009
Richard B. Beams



Santa Fe 2008 – Reaching New Heights

“The countertenor David Daniels reportedly has a little trouble adjusting to the high altitude of the Santa Fe Opera,” reported critic Anthony Tommasini in his August 4 review in *The New York Times* of Handel’s *Radamisto*. “It’s understandable that some singers, however fit, might find oxygen a bit wanting at the company’s open-air theater in the mountains, just north of the city at 7,500 feet.”

Then four days later, *The New York Times* acknowledged receipt of an email from a reader who pointed out that the theater’s actual altitude was just 6,886 feet. Double-checking by consulting topographical maps, Joyce Idema, the director of press and public relations for the opera company, confirmed that the altitude of the theater was in the neighborhood of 6,900 feet: “We’ve always said Santa FE Opera is 7,500. There’s nothing deliberate about it. That’s just been the legend of the times.”

No matter. By any measure Santa Fe’s 2008 season reached new heights, indeed a fitting cap to the eight-year tenure of its General Director, Richard Gaddes, who retired at the end of this season. Each of the season’s five presentations was at a consistently high level, indeed keeping alive the more important legend of the company’s

founder and first general director, John Crosby. Not only did the company continue its admirable tradition of a Baroque opera with *Radamisto* (in a co-production with English National Opera), but it continued its equally admirable commitment to promoting new operas,

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John Crosby Theatre at the Santa Fe Opera (Photo: Robert Reck)

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The Case for Vivaldi

The operas of Handel were perhaps the great new discovery in the latter part of the 20th century. However, today new productions of Handel’s magnificent operas abound. Recent box office hits at major US houses alone have included *Rodelinda* at the MET, with Renee Fleming in the title role, *Giulio Cesare* at the Chicago Lyric Opera with Danielle de Niese and David Daniels (in the captivating production from Glyndebourne), *Tamerlano* at Washington Opera, again with David Daniels and with Placido Domingo, *Ariodante* in San Francisco, with Susan Graham, and *Radamisto* in Santa Fe, once again with the ubiquitous Handelian, David Daniels.

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Santa Fe 2008 – Reaching New Heights

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in this case Kaija Saariaho's *Adriana Mater*, receiving its first American staging since its Paris premiere in 2006. Innovative productions of two of opera's greatest comedies, Verdi's ever green *Falstaff* and Mozart's eternally vibrant *Le Nozze di Figaro* (performed more times than any other opera at Santa Fe) kept the standard repertory alive, and Paul Curran's stunning staging of Britten's *Billy Budd* equaled the heights reached in his *Peter Grimes* of 2005.

Picking highlights is no easy task (and perhaps less precise than fixing altitudes). In chronological order, the *Radamisto* thrilled at every level – six fine Handel singers, crisp idiomatic conducting from Baroque specialist Harry Bicket (following up on his success in Handel's *Agrippina* in 2004 and Rameau's *Platée* in 2007), and a snappy, colorful set filled with predatory creatures – masked warriors, a dragon, brooding crows and the like.

The predator of the plot is King Tiridate of Armenia, determined to conquer Thrace and with it Zenobia, faithful wife of Radamisto and heir to the Thracian throne. Despite this betrayal, Tiridate's own wife, Polissena (for whatever reason) remains faithful to him. Santa Fe productions typically make startling use of the absence of any curtain; here, one is struck immediately by the walls of the besieged city, a long concave span of violet wallpaper sprinkled with black floral Persian motifs, ominous black birds of prey (ravens) brood at the sides; Radamisto appears rising from the wall, a quiver full of fierce arrows. The hunt is on.

Polissena, Tiridate's degraded queen, emerges from the orchestra pit, terrified, for her opening arioso "Sommi Dei." Soprano Laura Claycomb imbued the role with dignity and poise, even as director David Alden twice has her rolled in and out of carpets (once would have sufficed), or when she is frequently pawed maliciously by her tormented husband. For his part, the fine Venezuelan bass, Luca Pisaroni (who in the role of Figaro proved as fine a comic figure as he was a villain here – and equally charismatic in both roles) powerfully realized Tiridate.

A special tribute belongs to mezzo-soprano Deborah Domanski who took over the role of Zenobia in all performances of the opera just two days before rehearsals began. (The scheduled Christine Rice had to withdraw from the production due to medical reasons.) An apprentice singer in the 2006 and 2007 seasons, Ms. Domanski's feat compares with that of apprentice Eudora Brown who on equally short notice took over the title role in the 2004 production of *Beatrice et Benedict*. Especially fine was her poignant acceptance of death, "Son contenta di morir," with the elegant mix of mellifluous lyric mezzo voice and strings.

As for Radamisto, as Mr. Tommasini goes on to point out, the sensational countertenor David Daniels "seems to have adjusted just fine" to the oxygen deprived altitude of the company's open-air theater in the mountains. As star of this heroic opera, Radamisto gets some of Handel's finest music, and Mr. Daniels, in his Santa Fe debut, was up to all demands – from the elaborate fioratura in "Perfido" early on to the expressive lament, "Ombra cara," for his wife whom he believes dead, closing the first act (as performed by Santa Fe) to his final aria of the opera "Qual nave smarrita," a sorrowful and pathetic simile aria as his captive father, King Farasmane, is led in. (Alas, base-baritone Kevin Murphy, effective in this important role, is denied his only aria. Indeed, following the lead of Handel's later more compact version of the opera, the production cut at least one aria from



Deborah Domanski as Zenobia and David Daniels as Radamisto
(Photo: Ken Howard)

all the characters save Polissena.) Another smaller role, that of Tigrane, the Prince who serves Tiridate but finally betrays him, was effectively sung by the lively soprano Heidi Stober, although she, alas, was denied two arias from the earlier version.

Handel's opera, with its plethora of vocal fireworks, was the hit of the season in 1720 – the first season with the Royal Academy of Music in London. Successive seasons would include such masterpieces as *Julio Cesare*, *Rodelinda*, and *Tamerlano*. But *Radamisto* began it all, and Santa Fe was equal to the task of bringing this seminal work to life.

The two great comic works of the standard rep, *Falstaff* and *Figaro* were realized with equal success. In them it was not vocal fireworks that held the audience, but the imaginative flourishes that embellished two traditionally conceived productions. In *Le Nozze di Figaro*, a striking scene greets the audience even as they take their seats; rows of long-stemmed flowers on the stage stretch upwards, their bright colors glistening in the light. Figaro's bedroom? Not to fear: during the overture six servants in powdered wigs both restore tradition and place us solidly in the 18th century as they pluck the flowers making space for the action. But throughout the opera the flowers never quite disappear entirely, either lingering as a telling background (after all, what does Cherubino leap into from the window?) or reappearing in bouquets – for the Countess, for Barbarina, etc. The final scene in the Count's garden is wonderfully prepared.

Just as *Figaro* showed what an inventive director (Jonathan Kent) could do within the bounds of tradition, so did the *Falstaff* directed by Kevin Newbury, which remained true to Shakespeare's original setting (and Verdi's) but with imaginative touches. Especially effective was the use of the young pageboy, Robin, a pantomime role made as ubiquitous as *Figaro*'s flowers. As Mr. Newbury explained in his commentary in the SF Opera Magazine, *Crescendo*, he and scenic designer Allen Mohyer focused on the theme of childhood in *Falstaff*:

The opera begins with Falstaff's page opening the curtain on the action, prepared to learn everything he can from the Great Knight, and it ends with a parade of children dressed as phantoms and fairies, both participating in and observing the consequences of a life devoted to mischief and vice... We begin in Falstaff's room at the Garter Inn, which, in our production, is essentially a barn. As a result of his wayward lifestyle, Falstaff has been relegated to a space barely fit for animals, littered with hay, farm equipment, liquor bottles...

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Santa Fe 2008 – Reaching New Heights

The Ford's home, by contrast, is all neatness and civility, points out Mr. Mohyer – at least until the end of Act II. Then, with Falstaff encased in laundry basket, it becomes barn like. The young Page witnesses all this, scampering too and fro, as messenger, between both worlds. My favorite moment with the page came in the opening of Act III when the water-soaked Falstaff sits facing the page and mutters dejectedly “Mondo reo. Non c’è I virtù. Utto declina.” (“Evil world. There’s no virtue any more. Everything’s declining.”) With each pause, the page nods silently, man to man at the bar, as it were, commiserating.



Anthony Michaels-Moore as Sir John Falstaff and Trevor Wilson as his page (Photo: Ken Howard)

As in *The Marriage of Figaro*, the action in *Falstaff* also moves eventually outside into the open air. (Verdi felt a breath of fresh air would keep the audiences in their seats.) Yet no traditional magical forest emerges. Instead a mass of gnarled trunks and branches, human-like, suggests that the great Huntsman's Oak has itself “come to life.” This is a wonderful metaphor, it seems to me, paralleling another famous oak in literature, which Prince Andrea twice encounters early in *War and Peace*. When he first passes the tree in early spring, Andrea feels the still leafless ancient oak seems to support his disillusionment with the world. Weeks later he encounters the young Natasha for the first time; returning, he passes the oak, now in full leafage. Transfigured, Andrea is filled once again with a sense of “joy and renewal.” (Life is not over. He is just 31!)

Life renews itself. Is it fantasy? As in *Figaro*, we find that in spite of the focus on males in the respective opera titles, the women are the ones who really pull the strings. Is Falstaff, like the Count, “reborn”? Forgiveness abounds in the closing moments of each work. What is the lesson for the Page, for the children of Windsor, (for my two grandchildren, Matt and Abby, ages 10 and 8) who remained enchanted through both performances on successive nights? Perhaps that of Falstaff, who like Verdi in his final opera found a world of tolerance and humility: “Everything in the world is jest... Laughs well he who laughs last.”

As in *Radamisto*, musical highlights abound: the Falstaff of Anthony Michaels-Moore and the Count of Mariusz Kwiecien stood out. Each is a baritone who seems to own his respective role - the former in his

good-natured, amiable account of the title role, the later, with his telling mix of lechery, power, and, yes, even comic phrasing. Of course, the ensemble is the thing in both operas, and the casts throughout brought to life vividly these miraculous numbers.

While ensemble pieces like *Falstaff* and *Figaro* have typically fared well in Santa Fe, equally effective in recent years of Gaddes' tenure have been such powerful dramatic productions as the sensational *Peter Grimes* of 2005 and this year's *Billy Budd*. As staged by Paul Curran, each made the most of Santa Fe's unique and relatively limited stage which, in the case of *Billy Budd*, became a cross-section of the HMS Indomitable viewed from the bow, rigging rising out of sight above the stage. Majestically, the rigging stretched – like the opera's innocent yet doomed protagonist – toward the heavens above. A menacing contrast came when the one-ton main deck pivoted upwards revealing the claustrophobic lower-deck barracks of the crew.

Indeed, Santa Fe at its best can just capture the essence of a work in its staging. Happily, this production had all the cast and musical accoutrements to match the striking set, starting with the youthful, athletic Teddy Tahu Rhodes, a resonant baritone from New Zealand whose agility clambering through the rigging out shown vocal prowess perhaps, but helped make believable both his dominance over the crew as well as his power to kill Claggart with one blow. In essence he captured the spirit of Billy Budd as surly as Anthony Dean Griffey had with clarion vocal prowess Peter Grimes in 2005 – two visionary protagonists destined to be “lost on the infinite sea.”

Of course it is Captain Vere who utters these words, both in the Prologue and Epilogue, reflecting on his ambivalent role in the events of the opera. He could have saved Billy. Britten's elevation of the stature of Vere with this poignant framing device places him at the center of the action; hence a credibly young Vere facilitates the main stage action, and this we had in the articulate tenor of William Burden. His expressive vulnerability made him the vocal highlight of the evening, rightly so. (Too often as with the Veer of Peter Pears in his last years, the emphasis seems more on the elder, almost nostalgic and aloof Captain Veer.) As Claggart, the third of the vocal triangle, Peer Rose complemented in an effective though not fully malevolent bass.

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Billy Budd (Photo: Ken Howard)

Santa Fe 2008 – Reaching New Heights



Monica Groop as Adriana (Photo: Ken Howard)

This was the one opera of the season in which the apprentices could shine in the chorus. As in *Grimes*, the chorus (all male in the case of *Billy Budd*) is a critical element, in which the great set pieces, filtered with sympathetic individual vignettes, are central. These numbers were simply stunning, and it was an added bonus to hear a famous Billy Budd of some years ago, Richard Stilwell, as Mr. Redburn. With Edo do Waart in the newly created position of Chief Conductor leading Britten's largest opera score with theatrical flair (yet also with careful attention to detail), this was an evening to remember – one of the most memorable evenings at 6,886 feet above sea level.

Following the long tradition of American premiers of contemporary operas, including the successful American premiere of Kaija Saariaho's ruminative *L'Amour de loin* in 2002, was this season's *Adriana Mater*, her equally reflective yet even more personal recent work. As the program notes assert:

Adriana Mater is a deeply personal work, as Saariaho and Maalouf (Amin Maalouf, native of Lebanon, librettist for both operas) intended, not just because it chooses to zero in on Adriana's story against the vast, grainy panorama of war, but also because it distills its writers' most vivid memories – both of motherhood and of the realities of violence.

As the notes also point out, unique to the work – indeed perhaps to the 400-year history of opera – is the fact that *Adriana Mater* is a woman's story told by a woman, looking in this case at war and its human toll through a woman's eyes. (The other four male-titled operas of the Santa Fe season offer evidence; though women have their say, and indeed often manipulate the plot... especially in the two comedies... the perspective is male.) At any rate, all this demands a lead character of particular sensibility, which Santa Fe had in a poignant and expressively sung portrayal of Adriana by Finnish mezzo-soprano Monica Groop (who also sang the role earlier this year for the Finnish National Opera).

Although much of the opera's often dense and shattering music encapsulates a claustrophobic world from which there seems no exit, it is through the character of Adriana that eventually a healing vision

grows, as she moves from rape victim to reconciliation with her son, thus breaking the cycle of violence revenge might have perpetuated. Indeed Joseph Kaiser, as the impulsive son, Yonas, brought affecting brilliance to this important tenor role; but it was Ms. Groop who brought the inward drama of her static, ruminative, interior life to the surface. In the final line of the opera, Adriana sings poignantly to her son, "I need to rest my head for a moment on a man's shoulders." The lingering silence, and measured embrace of mother and son, after a life of war-torn turmoil, was as affecting as any I have experienced from the Santa Fe stage.

Happily, the extraordinary 2008 Santa Fe Opera season once again reflects the company's "passionately held belief that opera is a living, dynamic art form." As with the stubborn oak, a cycle of perpetual renewal keeps the company alive and well, whether it be an adjustment of the altimeter or a changing of the guard. Departing General Director Richard Gaddes was recently one of four recipients of the first National Endowment for the Arts "Opera Honors" award, shared by three other luminaries (Carlisle Floyd, Leontyne Price, and James Levine) "who have made extraordinary contributions to opera in the United States." The new director is Charles MacKay, following a successful 23-year tenure as general director of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. All signs are good; he should do equally well at the new altitude.

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Santa Fe 2009

La Traviata - Verdi

Don Giovanni - Mozart

The Elixir of Love - Donizetti

Alceste - Gluck

The Letter - Moravec

Santa Fe 2010

Madame Butterfly - Puccini

The Magic Flute - Mozart

The Tales of Hoffmann - Offenbach

Life is a Dream - Spratlan

Albert Herring - Britten

The Case for Vivaldi

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Star power was certainly part of the allure, but these and numerous other productions of Handel's operas worldwide over recent decades have shown the viability of the composer's forty-some operas on the stage; indeed they have proved to be as stage worthy as they are incomparably beautiful and expressive musically.

Now it appears to be the turn of Handel's renowned contemporary, Antonio Vivaldi, who claimed to have written over 90 operas. Roughly half seem to have survived in manuscripts of varied readability. Many now reside in the extraordinary collection preserved today at the Bibliotheca Nazionale in Torino, visited by a group from *Opera con Brio* last fall. Happily, the independent label Naïve plans to record this massive collection in a special "Vivaldi Edition," designed "to reveal the full genius of Vivaldi, not only as a composer of instrumental music, for which he was already known, but as the creator of some of the 18th century's most exhilarating vocal music." Deemed "the most ambitious recording project of the twenty-first century," the undertaking is already partially complete with many fine new recordings of Vivaldi operas already produced.

All signs are that the great discovery of the 21st century may indeed be the operas of Vivaldi. Certainly, listening to these recordings, the musical substance is there: the rhythmic energy, the Italianate lyricism, and the famous descriptive effects so familiar in such well-known works as *The Four Seasons*. But the question remains, as it once did with Handel: how stage-worthy are these operas?

Recent productions in Europe have made strong cases for the dramatic – as well as musical – viability of Vivaldi's operas. For example, *Ercole su'l Termodonte* at the 2006 Spoleto Festival packed dramatic punch in a stunning production (fortunately preserved beautifully on DVD). As part of a mini-Vivaldi festival in the fall of 2007, the sparse productions of both *Ercole su'l Termodonte* and Vivaldi's late masterpiece, *Bajazet*, in the intimate Teatro Malibran of La Fenice were equally powerful dramatically, led by the virtuosic Baroque specialists Europa Galante under the direction of Fabio Biondi.

But the most compelling case of all for the stage-worthiness of Vivaldi's operas came this past June from the Garsington Opera's captivating production of Vivaldi's relatively early opera, *L'incoronazione di Dario*, written for Venice in 1717. This production kicks off an enterprising plan by Garsington to present three Vivaldi operas – early, middle, and late period – in alternating years through 1012. A logical mid-period choice might be the most well-known of Vivaldi's available scores, *Orlando Furioso* (1727); however, Garsington has already announced the final choice, due in four years time: *L'Olympiade* (1734). This work explores amorous episodes amidst Olympic athletes, an apt choice for 2012 – an Olympic year as well. Look out 21st century; here comes Vivaldi!

Why did Garsington's *L'incoronazione di Dario* work so well? To start, there was the idiomatic musical direction from Baroque specialist Laurence Cummings conducting the new critical edition from the Antonio Vivaldi Italian Institute. He was aided by a capable cast which, if at times uneven vocally, certainly managed to project both Vivaldi's lyricism and dramatic flare. Additionally, the thoughtful direction of David Freeman with appropriate updating – often necessary in Baroque opera to foster dramatic unity – helped capture the unique "tint" of this captivating early work.



Manor house at Garsington Opera

Vivaldi cast Dario, the young lover and male hero who becomes the Emperor of Persia, as tenor rather than the usual castrato. For Vivaldi, an astute man of the theater, this choice clearly set the tone for the piece, particularly given the elegant youthful voice of Annibale Pio Fabri for whom he was writing. In the Garsington production, the singing of the experienced tenor Paul Nylon became perhaps a little too Pucciniesque (as more than one critic has pointed out), but this was not entirely inappropriate given the progression of his character. His pursuit of the heroine Statira leads him from restrained nobility to prolonged inner anguish and eventual despair, as he verges on killing himself as well as his two rivals. Fittingly, *Orlando Furioso* (already set by Vivaldi and soon to be set again by others) seemed an influence on various elements in the direction. Like "mad" Orlando, for example, the distraught Dario escapes the famous Garsington gardens to slash apart a tree on stage.

The opera itself, however, centers less around Dario – one of three pretenders to the newly vacant throne of Ciro, Emperor of Persia – than on Ciro's two daughters. The elder, the "mentally slow" Statira is heir to the throne; the younger, conniving and manipulative, is Argene, who soon seeks to wrest both Dario and the throne from her sister. Coincidentally, another offering of Garsington's summer season was *Così fan Tutte*. An article by Henrietta Bredin in the program focused on how operatic sisters (as in *Così*) are often set up as contrasting characters – in *Eugene Onegin*, the bookish Tanya versus the light-hearted Olga; Strauss's obsessively vengeful Elektra versus the timid Chrysothemis. Well might Statira and Argene have been included, and the director wonderfully articulated the contrast even before the music began while each sleeps on stage. The secure Statira rests peacefully amidst pink chiffon frills, while the insecure, impressionable Argene tosses restlessly in blue-striped PJs, with security blanket and over-stuffed teddy bear, a 50's victrola next to her. (Early on she hugs an Elvis record jacket – whose image, it turns out, Dario strikingly suggests.)

The young Croatian mezzo Renata Pokupie as Statira was an especially attractive heroine; she caught the essence of Vivaldi's music for her, generally light and spirited, and the audience delighted in her growth from innocent to empress. En route, Vivaldi gives her some especially affecting moments. A glance at two of these helps

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The Case for Vivaldi



Garden view, Garsington Opera

illustrate the particular “tinta” of this piece. Indeed, the fact this opera, like many of Vivaldi’s works, is no mere “patchwork” of arias and recitatives, but has its own unique character may itself be a surprise. In this piece, the coloristic use of obbligato instruments – as with many of his early Venetian operas – is the thing. But here instruments are used to advantage on occasion for specific dramatic purpose as well, following the lead certainly of the extensive obbligato writing in Vivaldi’s spectacular oratorio *Juditha Triumphans*, written just the year before (1716) for the Pieta, and also anticipating what would be a trademark of the Mantua operas soon to come.

One of the especially poignant moments comes in Act I with a *Viola all’Inglese* as obbligato. The largo aria, “L’adorar belta che piace,” has no da capo. It is a simple binary piece, in fact a “Cantata” composed by Statira’s learned but lecherous tutor, Niceno. His verses are meant to reveal his secret passion for the oblivious and innocent young girl, and he hovers lasciviously around her as she innocently sings the cantata. The *Viola all’Inglese* reaffirms her innocence.

An equally effective moment for Ms. Pokupic comes in Statira’s 2nd act gentle scolding of Dario, “Se palpitarti in sen.” Here two recorders enrich the orchestral color – and seem to encourage Dario’s exit into the adjacent Garsington gardens to fetch flowers, egging him on toward Orlando-like madness. The inventive orchestral color continues, with the immediate contrast of a bassoon and violin obbligato as Niceno then sings his buoyant observation “Non lusinghi il core amante.” (Bass Russell Smyth help make this captivating number a hit of the night!) Toward the end of the opera, Vivaldi provides more exquisite orchestral color for Statira as she, with full comprehension, sings to Dario, “Sentiro ra ramo e ramo” (“I shall feel the happy breezes”). The playful overlapping of viola and cellos solos catches the essence of her exuberance. (Alas, we only got the “A” section of this delightful piece, cut short no doubt to move the action more quickly toward Dario’s ensuing “madness.”

The influence of *Orlando Furioso* in the director’s approach to *L’incoronazione di Dario* was especially evident in the character of Statira’s nasty rival sibling, Argene. By the end of the opera, finally losing out on love, she transforms into a vehement “Alcina” – exiting with a ferocious *Aria di Furie*, “Ferri, cappi, sangue, morte” (“irons, getters, blood, death... my rage will always be with me”). Would that the placid mezzo Wendy Dawn Thompson had been up to this moment. However, overall both she and the director effectively presented the development of character that Vivaldi so carefully articulates. She moves from loving sibling (the two bonded in an early duet), to early infatuation with the handsome face of Dario (clutching her Elvid/Dario record cover), through various ploys to gain and keep Dario’s affections. Eventually, like Alcina, she resorts to any deceit to gain her end. The original Argene, Anna Maria Fabbri, had in fact played the sorceress Alcina in the 1714 production of *Orlando furioso*,

in the same theatre, besides creating many other exciting villainous roles; evidently these nasty but electrifying characters were somewhat of a specialty of hers – as well as Vivaldi’s.

But perhaps what most made this production work was the modest reshaping of sequences to heighten an aspect of the opera inherent in the score – Vivaldi’s confining the mythic-heroic remnant of Orlando/Dario to relatively secondary stage action. Thus relative minor characters are elevated in status – the bass tutor, Niceno, for one, but more importantly, two rival suitors for Statira’s hand and the throne, Oronte (who has the support of the people) and Arpago (a captain, who has the support of the army). Thus the quintessential Vivaldian aria of lament, the gentle *siciliano*, does not go to Dario, but to Oronte (originally a castrato contralto but given to tenor Nichols Watts in Garsington). His moment of elegiac reflection on his hopes to win Statira for bride, “non mi lunginga vana speranza” was so eloquently and idiomatically expressive, one wished he had been given the title role. Through some further abridging of recitative in this production, his next aria (for the moment rejecting the love of Alinda) “Se fui contento” (“I was once happy with your devotion”) becomes rather a “cabaletta” to the *siciliano*.

In Vivaldi’s version, the tutor, Niceno, closes the first act with a “simile” aria expressing his hope amidst the turbulence of “mountain winds.” Act II concludes with a fiery aria sung by Dario in an Orlando-like vein, foreshadowing his increasingly less sane behavior in the third act. Garsington, however, closed the second of its two acts with another *siciliano*, sung by a secondary character, Alinda, Princess of the Medes, who loves Oronte. She laments her misfortunes in this simile aria, “Io son quell augeletto” (“I am like a little bird”) which closely follows after Oronte’s “double aria.” Exquisitely sung by soprano Sophie Bevan at a daringly slow tempo, the aria (formerly used in *Juditha Triumphans*) became the poignant highlight of the evening and a suitable prelude to the long dinner break soon to come. Her slow exit in the fading light after her expressive meditation left us with the image of the lone throne on stage – a single chair in isolated splendor – bringing into focus the powerful simplicity that was the very essence of this thoughtful, insightful production.

With this production, Garsington made its first excursion into the orbit of Italian Baroque opera; happily it will not be its last. In the year 2010 the opera company’s 21-year residence at Garsington will come to an end. Yet the renaissance of Vivaldi’s operas will continue and accompany them as they make the transition to a new home. Could there be a better collaborator for this fine company than the newly recognized, multi-faceted and powerfully dramatic composer of opera, Antonio Vivaldi?

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Garsington Opera 2009

Fidelio – Beethoven

Mirandolina – Martinu

La cenerentola - Rossini

Opera con Brio: Upcoming Courses

Fall 2009: **The Operas of Benjamin Britten**

Winter 2010: **Gustav Mahler: Opera Composer in Disguise** (14 weeks beginning in late January)

Spring 2010: **Britten and Shostakovitch: Two 20th Century Masters of Song and Chamber Music**
(7 weeks in April and May)

Fall 2009: The Operas of Benjamin Britten

(14 weeks beginning in early September)

This course will explore the sixteen operas of perhaps the most important composer of opera in the 20th century, Benjamin Britten, illuminating not only the works and their literary sources, but the man himself and his special sensitivity to performers and performances. The citation for the prestigious Aspen Award in 1964 reads:

To Benjamin Britten, who, as a brilliant composer, performer, and interpreter through music of human feelings, moods, and thoughts, has truly inspired man to understand, clarify and appreciate more fully his own nature, purpose and destiny.

In accepting this award, Britten stated:

I certainly write music for human beings - directly and deliberately. I consider their voices, the range, the power, the subtlety, and the color potentialities of them; I consider the instruments they play - their most expressive and suitable individual sonorities; I also take note of the HUMAN circumstances of music, of its environment and conventions.

These moving and very human works include the following:

- Two milestone works: *Peter Grimes*, the opera hailed in 1945 as the foundation of a new post-war schools of English opera, and *Paul Bunyan*, hailed in 1941 for its great contribution to the genre of American opera.
- Two children's operas: *The Little Sweep* (1949) and *Noye's Fludde* (1957). "It is futile to offer children music by which they are bored, or which makes them feel inadequate or frustrated, which may set them against music forever," wrote Britten in accepting the Aspen Award. These operas are a joy for adults and children alike.
- The chamber operas: *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), an interpretation of the antique tragedy in terms of Christian morality; *Albert Herring* (1947), an enchanting domestic comedy; *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), a thrilling adaptation of the short story by Henry James.
- Four large-scale works based on literary sources: *Billy Budd* (1951), a powerful adaptation of Herman Melville; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), an opera which fills the abbreviated Shakespeare text with fascinating blends of color; *Owen Wingrave* (1970), again a Henry James short story, commissioned specifically for television; and *Death in Venice* (1973), his last work for stage, based on Thomas Mann's novella - a supremely evocative opera, using a large-scale orchestra for the creation of tiny, concentrated chamber-music textures.
- Three "parables for church performance": *Curlew River* (1964), *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966), *The Prodigal Son* (1968), each offering morals at different levels - personal, political, and domestic - and bringing important innovations in Britten's discrete instrumentation and dramaturgy.

In accepting the Aspen award, Britten restated his fundamental belief about the nature of a musical experience:

A musical experience needs three human beings at least. It requires a composer, a performer, and a listener; and unless these three take part together there is no musical experience... Music demands more from a listener...it demands some preparation, some effort, a journey to a special place, saving up for a ticket, some homework on the programme perhaps, some clarification of the ears and sharpening of the instincts. It demands as much effort on the listener's part as the other two corners of the triangle, this holy triangle of composer, performer and listener.

Come join *Opera con Brio* this fall for "some clarification of the ears and sharpening of the instincts" and for a journey through the operas of a very special composer, perhaps the greatest musician of the last century.



Opera con Brio

The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Course Information and Registration

The Operas of Benjamin Britten will have an evening, morning and afternoon session. Participants may vary sessions between evening, morning and afternoon if necessary. Public transportation is available to each location.

Section A: Wednesday evenings, 7:00 - 10:00 PM

First session: Wednesday, September 9

Section B: Thursday mornings, 9:00 AM - 12 PM

First session: Thursday, September 10

Section C: Monday afternoons, 1:00 - 4:00 PM

First session: Monday, September 14

Location: Sections A and B meet at 119 Bellevue Street, West Roxbury; section C meets in Founder's Room at Pine Manor College, 400 Heath Street, Chestnut Hill, MA. Public transportation is available to each location.

Course Fees: \$425 per course (Seniors \$400; Couples, \$800)

To register for this course, please complete the form below and return it with a registration fee of \$25.00 to:

Richard B. Beams, *Opera con Brio*, 119 Bellevue Street, West Roxbury, MA 02132

For further information, call 617 469 0584 or email: operaconbrio@verizon.net

Opera con Brio, LLC, is an opera-education program, now in its 30th year, conducted by Richard B. Beams, opera lecturer, past recipient of NEH Fellowships in both Opera and Literature and Verdi Studies, and Adjunct Professor at Pine Manor College. Classes include lectures, discussion and recorded musical examples.

Registration Form

Name _____ Senior _____ Couple _____

Telephone: (____) _____ Email: _____

Address _____

I/we wish to attend **The Operas of Benjamin Britten:** Sect. A _____ Sect. B _____ Sect. C _____

Please send information on additional course offerings as soon as available. _____