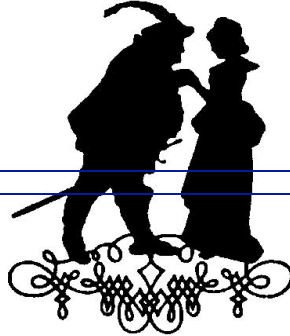


Opera con Brio

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Richard B. Beams



Göttingen Handel Festival 2011 A Double Edged *Teseo*

A Lively Opening Gambit

The evening's conductor relaxes on the patio before a performance of the opera he is about to conduct. His cell phone rings; he checks his watch. Uh-oh, it's time to start! He leaps to his feet and races up the stairs to the front entrance of the opera house, only to find the door locked, then up more stairs to try for entrance into the gallery. No luck. Downstairs he flies, seeking a way into the auditorium. More locked doors. He pounds on them. Puts his ear to the door. "Egad," he seems to say, "they're going to start without me!"

Reality TV? HD broadcast from the MET? Not to fear. It's just a video, displayed on the screen above the orchestra, of conductor Nicholas McGegan supposedly scampering to begin the evening's opera. But he's not going to miss the event after all; the side door of the intimate Deutsches Theater opens, and Maestro McGegan emerges in person, typically buoyant and beaming (and not the least bit out of breath!). The audience roars its approval.

This opening gambit ushered in the first musical event of Maestro McGegan's farewell season after a 20-year tenure as Artistic Director of the renowned Göttingen International Handel Festival. The event is an idiomatic production of Handel's French-influenced early opera, *Teseo*. The gambit also turns out to be the introduction to an innovative concept that wedded, in Maestro McGegan's own words, "historically informed performance practice with a glance into our own times." That is to say, the production, directed by frequent Göttingen collaborator and Baroque specialist Catherine Turocy, employed not only dancers from her stylish New York Baroque Dance Company, but also utilized occasional video clips, both live and previously filmed, to make Baroque tradition more palatable to contemporary audiences.



A celebratory dance from *Teseo* (Photo: Theodoro da Silva)

The performance thus existed on two levels: first, the opera itself using Baroque costumes and choreography; second, both live and recorded video sequences of behind-the-scenes activities on a screen over the stage (used also for surtitles). In the words of Ms Turocy, the goal was to offer "a period production with sidebars: the audience will experience the conventional opera while at the same time be able to see and read into the experiences of the performers as they are playing the characters... We thus hope to create a theatrical experience which is more in keeping with the way today's audience processes live performance."

Teseo, an Apt Choice

Did this extra-musical strategy succeed? Did it enhance or interfere? Whatever the case, *Teseo* is in fact an opera that in many ways plays naturally into Ms Turocy's concept, being more loosely structured and less conventional than the typical Handelian *opera seria* of the day. Indeed, *Teseo* is unique itself in Handel's forty-some operas. It was thus an apt choice not only for Ms Turocy's concept, but also for the theme of the Festival, "Vive le Baroque," which focused on the reciprocal influences between Handel and the French composers of his time.

The libretto was adapted from Philippe Quinault's *Thésée*, set to music by Lully some forty years earlier (in 1675). The French source indeed accounts for many of *Teseo*'s oddities. These include the five act form (performed as two big acts in Göttingen, the first ending with Lully's Act III); the almost whimsical placement of arias (i.e., not necessarily the usual recitative, aria and obligatory exit sequence, with its concomitant building and then discharging of emotion); moments that invite more dance; a chorus (most unusual in Italian opera seria of the day); and the prominence of a secondary pair of lovers.

Teseo is also one of Handel's only five "magic" operas. The plot revolves around the sorceress Medea and her usual enchantments, magic, and furies. She is not to be denied, especially when her love for Teseo is thwarted by the affection between him and Princess Agilea - who in turn is "under the guardianship" of the King of Athens, Egeo - and is loved by him as well. The loyal companions of Teseo and Agilea - Arcane and Clizia respectively, whose lover's tiffs are eventually resolved - round out the cast as the secondary pair of lovers. In Lully's version, Medea also had a loyal confidant, Dorine, who contributed to an extra love triangle; she survives in Handel's opera as Fedra, a non-singing role - who also finds her way into the opera via Ms. Turocy's concept.

For this festival occasion Göttingen indeed assembled a festival-level cast. Dominating the evening, as she does the opera itself after her entrance in Quinault's Act II, was Göttingen regular, soprano Dominique Labelle. Yet in this production we did not have to wait until her stage entrance to catch a glimpse of her. There she was, fully costumed, in the box at the left at the very opening of the opera, watching Agilea sing her reflective opening aria, "E pur'bell" in admiration of her beloved Teseo. In a parallel reality, during the first orchestral ritornello, Ms. Labelle admired a necklace just given to her by a would-be paramour sharing the box as well. During the closing ritornello she checks out the price on line, which we see magnified above the stage on screen. Not inexpensive!

An Innovative Directorial Concept

Thus began the concept hinted at earlier and articulated in the festival literature: a production blending a historical performance with glimpses into our time and the lives of the performers behind the scenes. At first I was irritated by this seemingly unnecessary, extra-musical intrusion. But my fears were partially allayed by the sparing and sensitive insertion of these bits, which rarely interfered with musical forces; mostly the extra business was briefly inserted during orchestral ritornellos.

The threads of the two worlds, opera and present-day reality, indeed sometimes merged with stunning effect. Midway through the first act, Ms Labelle was summoned from the box to prepare for her stage entrance as Medea (I'm sure to her great relief). Almost immediately after her departure, who should enter the box (in full baroque attire) but Fedra who proceeded to lavish Ms Labelle's suitor with amorous



Dominique Labelle as Medea in *Teseo* (Photo: Theodoro da Silva)

attentions, which he happily returned. Not until the next scene do we realize who she is: Medea's stage companion (a non-singing role). But by the end of Göttingen's Act I (combining Handel's first three acts), Ms Labelle certainly realizes Fedra's intentions towards her suitor in the box. She directs the middle section of her spectacular and vengeful showpiece aria, "Sibillando, ululando," calling for all sorts of plagues to fall upon her rival, Agilea, as much at the amorous couple in the box (Fedra and Ms Labelle's supposed lover) as toward Agilea, her rival on the stage (about to be engulfed by the furies).

A Festival Level Performance Indeed

This confluence of stage and modern-day reality, however, would never even have begun to work without the sterling musical performances, both in the pit and on the stage. This after all is what Handel is all about. The impact of Medea's grand incantation scene, one must admit, came from the impassioned virtuosity of Dominique Labelle sparked by McGegan's vibrant conducting. The dual view through Turocy's lens merely added an ironic edge to this spellbinding moment. Indeed Ms Labelle sang with conviction throughout the opera, giving powerful expression to all the varied arias Handel provides for her from her opening mellifluous cavatina, "Dolce riposeo," suggesting with the plangent oboe and pulsing strings a seeming peace of mind, (unusual for Medea, as everyone knows from the start) to her final parting shot in the opera, full of "sound and fury." (This followed her spectacular sweep to the stage in a chariot drawn by flying dragons - just as the libretto prescribes.) Dominique Labelle simply was Medea. However, in the final moments of the performance, on video we get a glimpse of her backstage and heading off with a tee shirt clad stagehand, an ironic denouement after her last fiery appearance on stage.

As a pointed foil to the formidable Medea, the lighter voiced soprano Amy Freston was an equally effective Agilea. In the first act, in her three arias, she wonderfully articulated the varying aspects of her love for Teseo. In the third of these ("M'adora l'idol'mio") her delicate, florid exchanges with oboe captured eloquently the rapture of her confidence in their mutual love. This, along with her frivolous kiss to the air as she left, wonderfully set up the contrast to Medea's entrance soon to follow. Ms. Freston was especially expressive too in reflective arias such as "Amarti io so Vorrei" later in the opera as she laments her fate, captive under Medea's malevolent spell. She indeed communicated, simply and directly, the stunning emotional impact of this most Scarlattian (and thus Handelian) of laments. Throughout the evening, her poised and vocally agile arias were jewels to savor.



Amy Freston as Agilea and Suanne Rydén as Teseo
(Photo: Theodoro da Silva)

I wish the same could be said of said of acclaimed Swedish soprano, Susanne Rydén, in the trouser role as Teseo. Admittedly Handel didn't help here, making Teseo, object of the affections of both Medea and Agilea, a much more passive character than we might expect. However, to take the aria "Qul tigre" for example, Ms Rydén confronted Agilea with disconcerting scoops and slides and little of the indignation that the text seemed to call for. Her earlier two arias (in Quinault's Act II), both with lively dance rhythms, are perhaps meant to suggest Teseo's youth and innocence. Not much of this came through, however, and indeed it was surprising to me that no dance elements were attached to these delightful numbers.

At any rate, an interesting insertion of dance numbers did enliven the entrance of Teseo just preceding these arias. Here a suite of lively combat dances from Lully's *Thésée*, martial and triumphant, followed his entrance. Handel also wrote a rare chorus for this entrance (sung by the principals at the side of the stage). Other insertions of dances by Lully enhanced, appropriately, the French "tinta" of this Italian version of the libretto. Still, I was surprised at the absence of dance during arias that seemed to invite choreography.



Drew Minter as King Egeo
(Photo: Theodoro da Silva)

Special commendation should also go to countertenor Drew Minter as King Egeo. Interestingly, he had sung the role of Arcane years earlier in the Boston Early Music Festival production of 1985. At the time, the *New York Times* critic Will Crutchfield praised him for his "stylish phrasing, fluent grace, and pure yet sometimes sensuous tone." The same could be said even twenty-five years later.

Curiously, in that earlier production, Egeo was a noticeably more malicious character. In Ms Turocy's concept, however, he became almost a buffoon, aided by the fact that she gave him the same kind of behind-the-scenes entrance as she had given Maestro McGegan. (A bit of over-kill here.) When he does enter, looking very much the buffoon as well, it was to general laughter. With his ensuing attempt to express his love to Agilea ("Ricordate a bella"), the off-stage frame kicks in again, as

both the would-be lover in the nearby box and the would-be lover on stage get a lesson in how to seduce; Drew Minter even read a guide to this effect in the middle section of his aria while the hopeful paramour in the box pays careful attention.

Perhaps it is yet another testament to the universality of Handel's music that such a different interpretation of Egeo could work. A highlight was the playful, almost slaphappy duet that soon followed between Egeo and Medea, the two malevolent manipulators. The audience signaled its approval enthusiastically again. At least there was no need for extra video bits here.



Dominique Labelle as Medea and Drew Minter as King Egeo
(Photo: Theodoro da Silva)

Finally, the pair of secondary characters was especially well cast as well, the part of Arcane taken by the brilliant countertenor Robin Blaze, that of the soubrette Clizia by soprano Céline Ricci. As Handel scholar Winton Dean says of this pair:

By writing for them in a more intimate style, Handel gives the whole opera an extra dimension that throws the main plot into relief. They are the only pair of secondary lovers in a Handel opera to enjoy two duets. Both are excellent, and particularly well integrated in their context.

Notably, their final duet of reconciliation, "Unito, a un pura affetto," sets up a striking contrast to Medea's chariot-borne final entrance. Ms. Turocy emphasized this contrast by including a stylish, gentle dance behind a scrim in the background (one of the few times a dance was involved during a song). Both Mr. Blaze and Ms Ricci were delightful throughout the opera, their relationship an engaging counterpoint to the stormy interactions of the other characters, right from their tender opening duet ("Addio, mio caro bene"). Indeed their scenes, lively enough in themselves, invited no offstage antics.



Céline Ricci as Clizia and Robin Blaze as Arcane
(Photo: Theodoro da Silva)

A Judicious Mix of Reality and Artifice

Yet the worlds of off-stage “reality” and on-stage artifice do complement each other well at times. An effective touch was to have the goddess Minerva arrive at the end of the opera in the now vacated box to the left of the stage, providing the requisite *deus et machina* to the chaos wrought by Medea. In Quinault, Minerva is no minor character, dominating much of the first act. In the final scene of his version, she arrives, “descending by machine” with a full array of singing gods and goddesses to put all right and to provide a happy and festive ending. In Handel, she has just this brief last minute entrance, but her strategic placement in the box provided effective reinforcement for the righting of both worlds, the festive on-stage scene and the joyous back-stage reality. There, as mentioned earlier, the video screen soon shows, Dominique Labelle, who began life in this very box pursued by her hopeful paramour, running merrily off with a tee-shirted stage hand, leaving the now rejected suitor nonplused in a final close up.

Once again, the question is, did such a frame work? Does the juxtaposition of historical performance with off-stage “reality,” as entertaining as it may be, enhance audience involvement?

The answer to the first question, I must admit, is a guarded yes. I found myself, during a second performance, less distracted by the non-essential (anti-musical) video clips. That was in part because Catherine Turocy used these so selectively and effectively. She basically knew to let the music work, which it did splendidly. If dramatic flow was sacrificed, at least the audience gained a compensating perspective on character and emotion (albeit often ironic).

In part, too, Ms. Turocy showed a special sensitivity in the shift from the French *Thésée* to the Italian *Teseo*, not only with the insertion of Lully’s dances, but also with the extra off-stage elements that pointedly broke down the “willful suspension of disbelief.” In Haym’s Italian libretto, elements of the plot are less fully explained, mostly because recitative is much reduced; arias pop up more frequently with characters often not exiting until they have sung another aria. Ms Turocy showed great skill in plugging the gaps, as it were, while effectively entertaining the audience as well (which after all was a primary aim of Baroque opera too.) Her vision lent whimsy and exuberance as well as moments of insight to the opera. Just as the original *Thésée*, set in Versailles, formed a bridge between the mythical realm of *Thésée* and the actual court of Luis XIV, so Ms. Turocy’s concept bridged the world of fabricated baroque artifice and the actuality of today, so dedicated to the breaking down of artifice.

The Music, as always...

But is such a frame necessary for audience involvement? Of course not. By chance, a week later I attended The Boston Early Music Festival’s production of a baroque rarity by Agostino Steffani, *Niobe: Regina di Tebe*. Thebes again, no less, but with a plot even more convoluted. The Early Music Festival, per usual, presented a meticulous and thoughtful period production, complete with baroque stylized hand gestures and dance (in fact with some dancers from Ms. Turocy’s New York dance Company). The musical forces, included as in Göttingen, some of the best early music specialists in the world – even Phoebe Carrai, whose violoncello usually finds its home with Maestro McGegan in Göttingen, as well as the sensational French countertenor Philippe Jaroussky in the lead. The performance was transporting, drawing its audience completely into the elegant, formal

world of the Baroque. (The same could be said of most earlier, famously idiomatic, baroque productions in Göttingen; my first was a compelling *Tolomeo* in 1998, also coincidentally with Dominique Labelle.)

Such productions are a vivid reminder that the show is on the stage, that the glory of opera is music, music that expands with the moment. The nemesis of HD films of opera, or reality-driven productions – as engaging as they may be – is that they potentially do not allow this to happen. Happily, in Göttingen this year, it was still Maestro McGegan and his musical forces that made this double-edge production of *Teseo* such a special occasion, that let music truly articulate the drama (to borrow Joseph Kerman’s familiar phrase). In the end, gamely working together to give us a lively and entertaining production, Catherine Turocy and Maestro McGegan achieved an effective balance between authentic Baroque staging and the more radical “concept opera” that so frequently rears its controversial head, as in Göttingen’s *Tamerlano* last year. (See my review of that production, “A Contemporary *Tamerlano*” at: <http://www.operaconbrio.com/Reviews.html>.)

A Fond Farewell to Maestro McGegan

Many years ago, in 1985, it was ironically Maestro McGegan who had led the Boston Early Music Festival production of *Teseo*. What New York Times critic Will Crutchfield said then could well be said of the 2011 Göttingen performance: “The Festival orchestra played beautifully, and the exuberant joy that could be read on Mr. McGegan’s face could also be heard in the lively rhythm and the verve for detail, for shaped phrases, for expressive solos.”

The Festival program rightly includes words of praise for Maestro McGegan from many who have worked with him. Catherine Turocy (who began working with Maestro McGegan in 1995) states, “Every year I am amazed at his insight and innate skills as a dramatic interpreter of Handel’s operas.” British conductor and harpsichordist Laurence Cummings (who has assumed the position of Artistic Director at the conclusion of this year’s Festival) adds, “Nicholas McGegan is such an inspiring exponent of Historical Performance...his contribution to period staging has been immense and his energy is awe-inspiring.”

The buoyant and beloved retiring Artistic Director of the Göttingen International Handel Festival, who shaped such an idiomatic performance from both vocal and instrumental performers - and who almost missed his farewell performance in the Deutches Theater - in the end is what made *Teseo* such a compelling evening in the theater. States Dominique Labelle, *sans* Medea attire, “His spirit, brilliance, passion, devotion to Handel’s music have transformed the town forever.” He will be sorely missed.

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Maestro McGegan (Photo: Randi Beach)