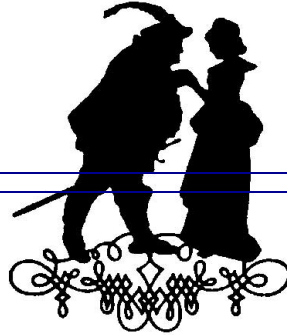


# Opera con Brio

Summer 2011  
Richard B. Beams



## Vivaldi Takes Center Stage in Summer 2011 Two Hits, One Miss

While the operas of Handel have been the principal focus of the baroque revival in the past few decades, it now seems that Handel's renowned contemporary, Antonio Vivaldi, can claim an equal place. Productions world wide in recent years have shown the viability of most of Handel's some forty-nine operas on the stage; one that especially stood out was this summer's *Amadigi di Gaula* at Central City Opera (see [www.operaconbrio.com/Amadigi.pdf](http://www.operaconbrio.com/Amadigi.pdf)). Yet the operas of Vivaldi are now receiving long overdue recognition as well. This summer alone, three major new productions reflected the scope, diversity and dramatic potential of Vivaldi's exhilarating vocal music for stage.

These three works included the colorful, exotic rarity *La verità in cimento* at Garsington Opera (seen on June 29 and July 1), an apt choice for the enterprising company's first season at the Getty's Wormsley estate in rural Oxfordshire. Another was Vivaldi's best known opera, *Orlando furioso*, (seen in Nancy on June 24 and 26) in a shared production between Theatre des Champs-Elysees in Paris, Opéra National de Lorraine in Nancy, and Opéra de Nice. Finally, in

this Vivaldi-filled summer, came the first ever opera by Vivaldi at Santa Fe Opera, *Griselda*, (seen July 16 and 20) in a much-anticipated new production by Peter Sellars. Only the latter was a disappointment, and certainly not because of Vivaldi's glorious music.

As I pointed out in my article of 2009, "The Case for Vivaldi," (see [http://www.operaconbrio.com/ocb\\_newsletter\\_5.09.pdf](http://www.operaconbrio.com/ocb_newsletter_5.09.pdf)) roughly half of Vivaldi's ninety-some opera have survived in manuscripts of varied readability. Many now reside in the extraordinary collection preserved today at the Biblioteca Nazionale in Torino (visited by a group from *Opera con Brio* two years ago). The independent label Naïve plans to record this massive collection in its special "Vivaldi Edition." Its self-stated mission is "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 18<sup>th</sup> century's most exhilarating vocal music." Deemed "the most ambitious recording project of the twenty-first century," the undertaking is now well on the way to completion, scheduled for 2015. All three of this summer's productions have already received outstanding recordings under the expert baton of Vivaldi specialist Jean-Christophe Spinosi and his Ensemble Matheus: in 2002, *La verità in cimento* (Vol. 16); in 2004, *Orlando furioso* (Vol. 24), and in 2006, *Griselda* (Vo. 32).

### Garsington's *La verità in cimento* sparkles

Spinosi had thus paved the way for the Garsington revival of *La verità in cimento* (*Truth Put to the Test*) not only with his recording of the work, but also with a tour of the work through France and Italy preceding that recording. Yet Garsington can in a way lay claim to



Garsington Opera's new home at Wormsley Photo: Mike Hoban

matching this achievement. Its production is in fact the second in a series of three Vivaldi operas – early, middle, and late period – that Garsington Opera is currently bringing before the public. The first, two years ago, was the relatively early *L'incoronazione di Dario* of 1717 (see [http://www.operaconbrio.com/ocb\\_newsletter\\_5.09.pdf](http://www.operaconbrio.com/ocb_newsletter_5.09.pdf)). Next year the series culminates with *L'Olimpiade* (1734), a late work that explores amorous episodes amidst Olympic athletes – a fitting choice for the Olympic year of 2012. (The work is wonderfully recorded in Vol. 15 of the Vivaldi Edition by Rinaldo Alessandrini and the Concerto Italiano.) Garsington's striking production, directed by David Freeman, built around an icy white tree with branches stretching the full width of the stage, seemed well suited to the contemporary architecture of the new, but still intimate Pavilion, with its steel and glass frame. It was this cool *tinta*, in such an intimate context, that certainly helped Vivaldi's colorful piece come alive, just as it had in 1720 at the tiny Teatro Sant'Angelo in Venice, where (as in Garsington) it ran for nearly a month.



Diana Montague as Damira in *La verità in cimento*

The particular glory of this score is the varied use of solo instruments (horns, trumpets, oboes, bassoon, *flauto grosso* and *flautino*) to complement the always-inventive strings; the score, played brilliantly by period-instrument soloists under baroque specialist Laurence Cummings (who recently took over as Artistic Director of the Göttingen Handel Festival) was a delight to savor. A balanced and apt cast helped. The typically Venetian, excessively convoluted plot revolves around babies exchanged at birth, mistaken identities, conflicting emotions and motivations. Vivaldi divides six singers neatly; three older generation characters, three younger.

The older generation includes the Sultan, the Sultana (Rustena), and his long-term, ever-plotting mistress (Damira); the younger generation, the Sultan's two sons (one by Rustena, the other by Damira, but switched at birth) and a visiting Princess (Rosane), who both sons pursue. Three performers with seasoned musicianship brought the older generation to life: tenor Paul Nilon, dark-toned mezzo soprano Jean Rigby, expressive in the far-ranging emotional spectrum of her arias (especially her slow despairing aria with recorder obbligato, "Fragil fior") and the florid mezzo Diana Montague, effortless and riveting as the wronged mistress, especially in her fluid coloratura.



Ida Falk Winland as Rosane and Yaniv d'Or as Melindo  
Photo: Johan Persson

Of the younger three, Swedish soprano Ida Falk Winland was a delight as the minxy Rosane, sometimes over shadowing the two fine countertenors, Yaniv d'Or and James Laing, the half-brother "suitors." All in all, the opera was a delight, carefully directed by David Freedman. The attractive cast, coupled with some of Vivaldi's most sparkling music, made fleet-footed semi-comic Venetian opera a hit of the summer at Garsington. If one knows Vivaldi, and/or the available recording, this should have been no surprise.

## A taut and powerful *Orlando furioso*

One might have thought that *Orlando furioso* would have been the perfect opera for Garsington's mid-period choice, since this "heroic-magical drama" premiered on stage at the Teatro Sant'Angelo at precisely the midpoint of Vivaldi's operatic career - in 1727, fourteen years after his first opera in 1713 (*Ottone in villa*, given a revival at the Innsbruck Early Music Festival last summer, as well as a stunning new recording, Vol. 46 of the Vivaldi Edition), and his final opera, fourteen years later in Vienna (*L'oracolo in Messenia*). At any rate, it was Jean-Christophe Spinosi and his forces that brought this great work to the stage this summer, in the exquisite and intimate Opéra National de Lorraine of Nancy (as well as in the two other venues mentioned previously).

And what a treat it was. The exceptional cast was much the same as in Spinosi's vibrant recording, exhibiting the same enthusiastic virtuosity within the demanding, lean athleticism of the orchestral sound, always so exciting with Spinosi. (A terrific review of this "blazing" recording appears in the May 2005 issue of *Opera News*.) One notable exception to the recording cast was countertenor Max Emanuel Cencic as Ruggiero rather than the ever accomplished Philippe Jaroussky. No matter. A hit of the evening was Cencic's gloriously sung pastoral aria, "Sol da te," with obbligato flute, indeed a showstopper.

The central focus was naturally the mesmerizing, progression of Orlando's madness by contralto Marie-Nicole Lemieux, first convulsed in her breathless "Nel profondo" (so rich in harmonic nuance, for all its vibrant thrust); then later fully crazed in "Scendi nel Tartaro" – with the kind of vocal control one thought was exclusively the province of Marilyn Horne. Notably, Vivaldi develops Orlando's descent into madness mostly in recitative and arioso – so much so that the third act contains no true arias.



Marie-Nicole Lemieu as Orlando Photo: Alvaro Yañez

*Orlando furioso* is quite a different work than the quixotic *La verità in cimento* - a work that demonstrates to the fullest Vivaldi's surprisingly effective dramatic talent, with its cluster of similar rather than contrasting musical elements in a single scene. As critic Andrew Porter, an astute observer early on of the Vivaldi renaissance, asserts, these operas "are not merely strings of arias, however fascinating, lovely, and various... they are also musical dramas deserving of serious attention." Conductor Claudio Scimone, who led Marilyn Horne in the landmark recording of 1977, concurs. He calls *Orlando furioso* one of the most important creations of his genius and the opera itself "perhaps the most original and interesting of his works for the stage." Any one who attended this performance would certainly agree.

Another highlight was mezzo Jennifer Larmore in the role of the sorceress Alcina, commanding right from her bravura entrance in a display piece of exceptional richness. For this role Vivaldi had selected his young protégée Anna Girò, a talented pupil he had trained himself - soon to be nicknamed Annina del Prete Rossa. It was a role that demanded constant dramatic commitment; as Goldoni would later say, "she was not pretty, but she had grace, a dainty figure, fine eyes, fine hair, a charming mouth, not much of a voice, but great acting



Jennifer Larmore as Alcina Photo: Arnaud Lance

ability." Fortunately, the glamorous Ms. Larmore sang wonderfully with effective dramatic command, exploiting each stage of the ill-fated Alcina's quest for power and love with gripping psychological richness, as certainly Anna Girò had done.

The libretto itself says, "Only the island of Alcina...is the setting in which the action takes place, although in the vast epic (Ariosto's famous *Orlando furioso*) the numerous exploits involve half the world, so to speak. Such actions have been limited by us...to the love, madness and recovery of Orlando." The Pierre Audi's production in Nancy was set simply in an elegant Venetian palace of Vivaldi's time, bleak in a monochromatic gray hue. It was all that was needed to let the visceral intensity of this dramatic and musical masterpiece come to life. The production let the music do the work - music that represents one of the high responses to Ariosto's monumental epic poem.

The elegant set for *Orlando furioso* Photo: Alvaro Yañez

## *Griselda* falters at Santa Fe Opera

Alas, at the Santa Fe opera a month later, the new production of Vivaldi's *Griselda* met with less success. Perhaps it was merely the fact that the spacious (yet beautiful) opera house itself is not conducive to baroque works written for performance in small spaces, like those of 18<sup>th</sup> century Venice. Perhaps it was the apparent disconnect between the vibrant cyclorama by renowned LA artist Gronk and whatever action transpired (or didn't) in the vast and vacant space on stage. Or perhaps it was some of the vocal performances not always able to meet the exacting standards of a Vivaldi opera in spite of the fine conducting by Grant Gershon. Whatever the case, this much-heralded first major production of *Griselda* in the United States (and first ever opera by Vivaldi at Santa Fe) was not an unequivocal success. For whatever reason, many in the audience had abandoned the theater by the second act, unlike at both Garsington and Nancy where audiences remained riveted until the final note.

Perhaps part of the problem was the opera itself, which pushes further the kind of dramatic elements found in *Orlando furioso*, more recitative, for example. As Maestro Spinosi points out in liner notes to his stunning Vivaldi Edition recording of the opera (Vol. 24), "far from forming a mere string of memorable arias, the score of *Griselda*



Paul Groves as Gualtieri and Meredith Arwady as Griselda  
Photo: Ken Howard

is deeply marked by the instincts of a dramatist, obstinately refusing to hand the operatic stage over lock, stock and barrel to the acrobatic arabesques of the virtuosi.” Long sections of recitative (as in the mad scenes of *Orlando furioso*) are “no simple accessory to the opera’s achievement: the soul of the Vivaldian theatre, it remains a crucial element in the language of the composer’s late maturity.” The opera opens with some six minutes of recitative; it closes with over ten minutes of recitative, just preceding the brief final chorus. Without an intimate performing context, all this may be less palatable to the audience

So too is the story, which is for a contemporary audience about as unpleasant and disturbing a tale as one could conjure up. It first appears as the final (100<sup>th</sup>) tale of the narrative masterpiece *The Decameron* by the early Renaissance Florentine humanist Giovanni Boccaccio. The patient and long-suffering Griselda undergoes numerous and humiliating trials from her cruel husband Gualtieri, all concocted to eventually demonstrate the moral superiority of this archetypal faithful wife in a brutal male-dominated world. Chaucer will also retell the story in his *Canterbury Tales*, before it becomes a libretto for some thirty operas in the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. (The most celebrated of these is by Alessandro Scarlatti in 1721.) The young Carlo Goldoni adopted an earlier text for Vivaldi’s version of 1735.

The libretto that Vivaldi set makes a notable change in the motivation of King Gualtierio. To counteract the lingering public objections of his marriage to a commoner, he announces his intention to test Griselda’s loyalty. He first banishes Griselda, pretending to have slain their daughter Costanza and later threatening to slay their own young son. She must then endure the spectacle of his marriage to the unsuspecting Costanza, who has lived abroad since her birth and also would much prefer her own beloved Roberto. Through all this and more, Griselda remains strong and steadfast; finally rewarded for her submissive acceptance and loyalty, she is reunited with her “beloved” and “loving” husband.

### Sellers’ interpretation of *Griselda*

A hard scenario indeed for a contemporary audience to swallow, as Peter Sellers readily acknowledged in a preliminary seminar and in his program notes as well: “The story is frankly horrible: you read it (Boccaccio) and you are horrified. This is impossible! How can this

be allowed?” The trouble is, Mr. Sellers is here talking about Boccaccio, not the Goldoni libretto that Vivaldi enthusiastically set to music. In trimming the three-act structure to two acts, Sellers made cuts and alterations that seem to undermine the integrity of the piece, especially in the central role of Griselda. Such adjustments, according to Mr. Sellers, involved pieces that “were out of touch with Boccaccio’s *Griselda*.” But he overlooks the fact that Vivaldi was not setting Boccaccio, whose 100<sup>th</sup> and final story has its symbolic subtext (within the context of plague stricken Florence) of an inexplicable force of cruel punishment; he was setting Goldoni, who simply seeks to entertain with the story of an abused woman and a cruel husband, embellished with typically convoluted Venetian subplots.

One such cut is a dramatic show of fortitude from Griselda in an aria midway through the work as she vehemently confronts, one after the other, Ottone (her would-be suitor) and Corrado (knowing confidant to the King). With stark, clipped phrases and dramatic pauses, she first confronts Ottone: “No, non tanta crudeltà” (“no, not such cruelty!”); she then turns to Corrado: “Deh, ti muova almen pietà / un infelice figlio” (“I beg you to have pity on my Son”). Then to both: “Spietato tiranno” (“Merciless tyrants!”) Later, toward the end of the opera, Sellers not only eliminates Griselda’s similar anguished expression of pain, “Son infelice tanto” (“I am so deeply unhappy”), but also replaces it with the opening movement of Vivaldi’s *Stabat Mater*. In his note, he defends the substitution: “the image of the Virgin Mary at the foot of the cross brings us full circle to Boccaccio and his parable of grace.”

Hence in Sellers’ interpretation we get a more submissive creature in the character of Griselda than the one Vivaldi (and Goldoni) created. It seems Mr. Sellers neither trusted nor understood the place of Griselda within Vivaldi’s *dramma per musica*, nor did he accept as appropriate the extent of agitated, dramatic vocal writing Vivaldi provided for her. For the first time in his career, Vivaldi assigned the title role of an opera to his famous pupil Anna Girò. She dominates much of the opera with music assuming many different forms but with one consistent characteristic – scant melodic thrust. As Goldoni said of her, “Mademoiselle Giraud does not like to sing in the languorous style; she would like an aria of expression or of agitation, an aria that conveys passion by different means, by words, for example, interrupted by heaving sighs, with action and movement...” This was precisely the type of music Vivaldi wrote for her. As Jean-Christoph Spinosi comments in his stellar Vivaldi Edition recording, it is music “designed to be acted as much as sung...full of such heaving sighs with chopped up words, an effect achieved by a succession of rests which are absolutely fundamental in performance.”

Yet Mr. Sellers quipped, in his typically hyperbolic way in both the symposium on *Griselda* and in his pre-opera lectures, that by the end of the opera the audience would have had enough of “a barking German shepherd.” Ho, ho! Is this a justification for usurping the heroine’s final moment of angst by inserting a more mellifluous extract from Vivaldi’s own *Stabat Mater* (albeit an especially moving one)? The excised piece is explicitly not a lament, but is totally consistent with the character Vivaldi has created. Like her earlier poignant aria ending Vivaldi’s Act I, “Ho il cor già lacero” (“my heart is torn to pieces”) it includes striking broken rests, effectively stressing the ever-strained angst of the bewildered, agitated Griselda.

Here's the text:

Son infelice tanto (I am so deeply unhappy)  
 Che / non mi basta il pianto (And tears do not suffice)  
 A / dileguar mie pene. (To ease the pain.)  
 La morte / chi / mi dona? (Who will give me death?)

My slash marks in the Italian text indicate the dramatic pauses. How powerfully Vivaldi exhibits the disorientation of Griselda by countering the would-be logical pauses at the end of the lines with these disjunctive breaks. The repeats on the isolated "la morta" and "chi" reinforce with a visceral thrust her distraught state. It is a powerful piece, totally consistent with the character Vivaldi (and Anna Girò) had created. Perhaps Mr. Sellars, admittedly perplexed on how to update this work, would have been better to have let us experience the unpleasantness of it all. (If the audience could handle *Wozzeck* later in the Santa Fe season, they could certainly handle this!)

Indeed the closing image of this production created a striking if unintended parallel to Berg's shocking, horrific 20<sup>th</sup> century opera, leaving the baffled Griselda alone on the stage. The final jubilant chorus, sung off stage, becomes grimly ironic as she continues her servile sweeping, like an oblivious lost child. Indeed Mr. Sellars acknowledged in his pre-opera talk how perplexed he was by the meaning of it all, and how he struggled with many approaches to the ending, given his attempt to find contemporary meaning in the work. But perhaps it would have been best not to try at all. A good friend who attended the opera with me, Charles Jernigan, an expert in Italian literature and opera, nicely articulated this point of view:

I think that if a company does this work, they should just accept the story as it is and not try to make Griselda a heroine or pretend that there is some message in it for our time. Just be honest and admit that the story does not fit well with twenty-first century mores. One can make a case that in Boccaccio, in the context of the plague frame and the 100 stories, it does make sense in a symbolic way. But in Vivaldi that context is not there; you have the story of an abused woman and a cruel husband, and that is that. There is no reason to think that Vivaldi meant Gualtiero to be a stand in for an inexplicable god who visits unspeakable cruelty on the "subjects" just to reward them in the end (like Job). I think a production should just let the audience enjoy the glorious music and be done with it.

### A cast of varying strengths

The choice of performer for the title role, Meredith Arwady, the hefty young contralto who has been singing Erda at the Metropolitan Opera, alas became another handicap to bringing Griselda to life. Her restrained movements, less-than-articulate phrasing, and often-covered lower register were far removed from the Girò ideal, let alone from the kind of stifled fortitude the role should exude. Another singer in the wrong role was the otherwise fine tenor Paul Groves as Gualtiero. His heaving of notes seemed more suited to the romantic repertoire, and his unidiomatic ornamentation (especially in the da capos) seemed forced and insecure. Still, there was a certain expressive urgency to his many recitative passages, especially those revealing his cruelty.

All was far from lost, however. A surprise was Yuri Minenko, a young countertenor from the Ukraine in his American debut as Gualtiero's troubled confidant, Corrado. With captivating virtuosity, he supplied all the fireworks expected in arias by Vivaldi. The other counter tenor, the well-known David Daniels, displayed his usual purity of tone as Roberto, Costanza's besieged suitor. (He cancelled on opening night; Jason Abrams effectively took over the role in his Santa Fe debut.) The production pointedly gave Mr. Daniels pride of place by closing the first of its two acts with his beautiful expression of lost hope, "Dal tribunal d'amore" ("From the tribunal of love"). His poignant, fluid melismas on "ah" wonderfully highlighted his mellifluous ease with the aria. Inexplicably, however, an important later aria, "Che legge tiranna" ("Oh tyrannical law"), was cut. The virtuoso piece, with angular force and sudden fermatas, reflects how he too (like Griselda) is fated to suffer in silence. It was a missed opportunity to give more bite to this role, as Vivaldi did, and an unfortunate omission of an important aria. Again, why rewrite Vivaldi - especially with someone like David Daniels on hand?

Mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard was certainly an attractive Costanza, often dazzling in her agility and the technical ease of her ornaments. Likewise, Soprano Amanda Majeski was often riveting in her trouser role of Ottone, given three carefully placed arias amidst the frustration of her unrequited love for Griselda. When all is said and done, however, the vocal performances often paled next to those on the Spinosi recording, one of the most captivating of all recordings of Vivaldi's operas. Such a comparison is unfair, of course, given contrasting performance conditions; still, one cannot help making the comparison.

### A production of varying strengths

The production had its strengths as well. Although Mr. Sellars may have been misguided to presume that it was necessary to once again update to a contemporary urban environment, complete with thugs in sunglasses toting machine guns and other directorial clichés, there was still much to savor – beyond the simple fact that one at last had a chance to hear this glorious opera on stage. One was Gronk's omnipresent giant cyclorama, endlessly captivating in its many shadings and accents provided by the sensitive, carefully directed lighting of James Ingalls. Rather than distract, the selective lighting was often interesting and provocative.

In the symposium, Mr. Sellars had commented how typically there is



Amanda Majeski as Ottone and Paul Groves as Gualtiero  
 Photo: Ken Howard

much more harmonic daring in Handel than in Vivaldi. True enough. His analogy was that you had the chance thus to contemplate the myriad nuances of say, the color red. (Rather like standing before a Barnett Newman painting.) Such was the case, effectively so, at the close of Act I with David Daniels as Roberto in his virtuosic meditation on a cruel destiny mentioned above, highlighted by the red, red, red of Gronk's tableaux. At other moments, the lighting might purposely yet appropriately leave characters in the dark during their recitative, as when Roberto and Costanza confer while others in the light plot their fate.

Indeed many colorful shadings punctuated the whole evening, to the relief of the vast empty stage and relatively static direction. Costume designer Dunya Ramicova reported (in the symposium) that Costanza's frilly ball gown with ruffled petticoats was intended to suggest a "quinceañera" dress, the costume young Mexican-American girls use for coming out ceremonies. The production itself (including the Gronk mural) sought to honor allusions to the Southwestern visual and cultural splendor. This was at best only partially successful. Other characters wore extravagant New Mexican-influenced costumes (pointedly, it seemed, clashing with the mural – Corrado's lime-green suit, for example).



The cast of *Griselda* against Gronk's striking backdrop  
Photo: Ken Howard



David Daniels as Roberto Photo: Ken Howard

Six years ago Sellars (and Gronk) staged Osvaldo Golijov's problematic *Ainadamar*, turning the fascinating piece into a celebrated hit. This time, taking another problematic work, they were less successful. Over the years, Mr. Sellars has often been brilliant in "contemporizing" operas he has directed, and I have greatly admired most of these works, from Handel's *Orlando* in 1981 at ART in Boston, set at Cape Canaveral with Orlando portrayed as an astronaut, to the recent *Hercules* at Chicago Lyric Opera, poignantly shifting the focus to the struggle of war veterans to return to normalcy and to the often destructive gap between those at war and those at peace. That recent production was both thought provoking and powerful; but the Sellars re-invention of *Griselda* for Santa Fe simply did not work.

## Viva Vivaldi

Even with Santa Fe's problematic *Griselda*, however, the summer of 2011 was indeed a Vivaldi summer to remember. Santa Fe Opera deserves credit for taking on the difficult task of bringing a Vivaldi opera to life on its stage, and I hope this partially successful endeavor will not discourage them from doing so again. Garsington Opera deserves special praise for their ongoing Vivaldi cycle, which continues next year with *L'Olimpiade* – a fitting tribute to this most "Olympian" of composers, now receiving just recognition for his considerable achievements in the engaging ever-competitive arena of baroque opera. But perhaps conductor and Vivaldi specialist Jean-Christophe Spinosi deserves the gold medal for fostering, in recording and on the stage, this thrilling renaissance of Vivaldi operas.

.....

### Baroque Jewels:

#### A Comparative Study of Operas by Handel, Vivaldi and Scarlatti on Related Themes

In the winter of 2012, Opera con Brio will do its part with a special course focusing on the various interpretations by Vivaldi and his baroque contemporaries of similar works. Highlights will not only be *Orlando furioso* and *Griselda* (each of which has invited numerous other interpretations), but also Vivaldi's late great masterpiece *L'Olimpiade*. All three are readily available in Vivaldi Edition recordings. For more information, visit [www.operaconbrio.com](http://www.operaconbrio.com).