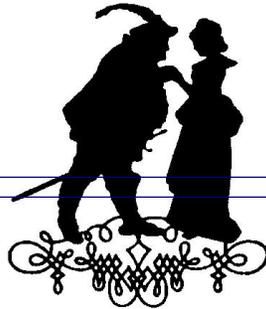


Opera con Brio

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A Baroque Jewel – *Imeneo* Charms

Göttingen International Handel Festival 2016

The centerpiece every year at the International Handel Festival Göttingen is usually a staged Handel opera in the intimate Deutsches Theater. For many years the Festival was well known for its idiomatic, authentically Baroque productions; more recently the Festival has strayed from this tradition with more contemporary productions, happily so in most cases. This year, in May of 2016, for Göttingen's first-ever presentation of Handel's "operetta" *Imeneo*, the Festival returned to a historically informed production, complete with baroque-inspired costumes, gestures, and dance – all illuminated by the soft embracing glow of candlelight. Under the able direction of Sigrid T'Hooft, choreographer and Baroque specialist returning after her successful 2012 production of *Amadigi di Gaula*, and with Artistic Director Laurence Cummings once again inspiring the FestspielOrchester Göttingen to its usual level of excellence, this was an enchanting evening of idiomatic Baroque opera.



Matthew Brook (Argenio), William Berger (Imeneo), Stefanie True (Clomiri), Anna Dennis (Rosmene) and James Laing (Tirinto) Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Handel's penultimate opera (or "operetta" as he called it, probably due to its relatively light tone and brevity) has sometimes rightly been labeled a neglected Mozartian jewel; like Mozart's *dramma giocoso*, *Così fan tutte*, the taut, tuneful work involves a romantic



Anna Dennis (Rosmene) and Matthew Brook (Argenio) Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

quadrangle revolving around the issue of marriage. Before the opera begins, pirates have abducted two sisters, Rosmene and Clomiri, sent overseas to participate in rites for the goddess Ceres. Not to worry. Imeneo (aka Hymen, the Greek god of marriage) had accompanied them and soon defeats the pirates, rescues the sisters and returns them to their native Athens. Here the opera begins. By “operetta” convention, Rosmene is honor-bound to marry the man who rescued her, assuming he so chooses – which he does. (The younger sister, Clomiri, is smitten by Imeneo, but to no avail.) Naturally, the complication is that Rosmene’s heart belongs to another, her betrothed, Tirinto. The only other character in the opera, the girls’ pompous father, Argenio, harangues Rosmene mercilessly about her duty. Eventually she gives in and weds Imeneo, although it is clear from Handel’s music – and made especially clear in this production – that she (and indeed Handel) is ambivalent about this decision.

In recent years, the once neglected piece has enjoyed successful revivals, with varied contemporary approaches. Two I attended were first in 2004 at Glimmerglass Opera in the United States that made the piece an amusing domestic drama about a dysfunctional family in nineteenth-century New England. The set was a lavish second-story facade of a weathered clapboard house; most of the action took place on a steeply raked

shingled roof in front. A second production, almost a decade later in March of 2013, was at the London Handel Festival, a performance led by Maestro Cummings at the Royal College of Music. In this case the production presented a contemporary social comedy in which, as a critic in *The Financial Times* put it, “a group of well-heeled young pleasure-seekers play out their romantic crushes and jealousies against a background of sun, sea and sand.” These well-groomed young occupants sang their way through massages, facials, and a cocktail hour, as though in a modern hotel spa, playing to the mirth, frivolity, and irony implied in the libretto. The sparkling performance indeed confirmed the theatrical viability, let alone the musical

worth, of this masterful work. The spare set – the remains of a Greek temple looking out over ascending steps to the Mediterranean – provided a simple and striking frame.

Göttingen’s delightful production, for all its differences, was a fitting Baroque extension of this idea. The libretto’s description for the scene of all three Acts is “A Pleasant Garden” (“Deliziosa”). This is exactly what we get from stage and costume designer Stephan Dietrich – an elegant Baroque garden overlooking the Mediterranean, with movable flats expanding or closing the space with Greek pillars and/or more vegetation. We viewed the stage as through a large picture frame around the proscenium, with Baroque-styled candles flickering along the front edge of the stage. All this helped the audience savor not only the elegant set and sumptuous costumes, but also the appealing flow of the production.

And what a delightful flow it was. Baroque gestures from dancers and singers alike often coalesced into stunning tableaux, and stylistically informed dance interludes often complemented the performance, always bound up with plot and character one way or another. Indeed Maestro Cummings lengthened the evening, happily so, with some additional music to accommodate Ms. T’Hooft’s Baroque dance company, Corpo Barocco. (This included sections from the *Water Music*, Concerto

Grosso op. 6 Nr. 7, and two harpsichord suites, Nr. 4 and Nr. 7, orchestrated by Mr. Cummings.) Additional dance sometimes accompanied selected arias and choruses as well. Handel's opera actually calls for no dance per se, but the nature of the music, so wrought with dance rhythms, certainly invites it.

Noteworthy was how sparingly Ms. T'Hooft actually employed both solo dance and the full dance ensemble, admirably so since *Imeneo* after all is an opera, (or operetta if you like), not a ballet. The first scene focuses almost entirely on Tirinto and his pain at losing his beloved Rosmene to pirates. There is not even a hint of dance until the second scene when the offstage chorus of Athenians, who play no part in the action, sings the lively bourrée "Viva Imeneo." Dancers appear from the wings immediately, invigorating the buoyant melody with Baroque dance steps. Handel includes this chorus three times in the Act – a second time almost immediately after Imeneo's entrance, a third time at the close of the act, following Imeneo's concluding aria. These danced choral numbers effectively reinforce Handel's frame for the act, and the delightful "coda," an orchestrated harpsichord suite, invites us to savor the moment with dance alone.

In Act II, Ms. T'Hooft delays the dance even longer, until the advent of Tirinto's big jealousy aria, "Sorge nell'alma mia," almost midway through the act. This brings out the dancers, now a rollicking band of black-



William Berger (*Imeneo*) with dancers from *Corpo Barocco* Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

bearded, black-clad pirates, who add more than a touch of whimsy to reinforce the "operetta" tone of the piece. Soon, after a gentle aria from Clomiri, the dance element expands with the insertion of additional orchestral music. Eventually the off-stage chorus again concludes this increasingly tumultuous act with a serious, homophonic gavotte in a minor key. During it, the pirate dancers reappear, and another interpolated orchestral coda with dance provides the appropriate somber finale.

In Act III, the integration of the dance with the stage action reaches its impressive, although somewhat ironic, apotheosis. Before the finale, Rosmene has a prolonged, feigned, mad scene, an extended accompanied recitative, basically a delay tactic, fraught with ambiguity about her impending choice to marry for duty (*Imeneo*) or love (*Tirinto*). Ghostly black-clad figures mime the contrived scene. Eventually, reluctantly, she chooses *Imeneo*, and all culminates in a magnificent duet for her and the disconsolate *Tirinto*, "Per le porte del tormento" (Through the gates of torment). This penultimate number, which Handel borrowed from *Sosarme* and added two years later for a Dublin concert performance of the opera, was not included in the original production. Ms. T'Hooft choreographed this magnificent duet with flowing movements that emphasized all the pain and ambivalence of their parting.



Pirate dancers from *Corpo Barocco* Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

In the final chorus, a homophonic minuet *triste* in minor, Handel shows his sympathy for the personal sufferings of those who must choose duty over love; the carefully choreographed scene leaves poor Tirinto alone and isolated at the side of the stage. The 2014 London Handel Festival production, by contrast, paired the two couples at the end. Their backs to the audience, Rosmene and Imeneo, Tirinto and Clomiri gaze out to a sunset over the sea. But behind their backs, à la the ambivalence inherent in the close of *Così fan Tutte*, the audience sees Imeneo and Clomiri, as well as Rosmene and Tirinto, reach to one another and clasp hands. A nice touch, but the Göttingen production was probably more in keeping with Handel's intent. The music tells all, and the dance helped! Fittingly, the choreographed conclusion of the opera was the glory of the night.

The visual element was indeed the embracing element of this production, from the stylized Baroque gestures of the elegantly clad singers that reinforced every nuance of emotional expression, to the solo dances that sometimes complemented their arias. It must be stressed, however (much to Ms. T'Hoof's credit), that the solo dance element was not overdone. Some years ago I attended a performance of Vivaldi's *Farnace* by famed choreographer Lucinda Childs; the production was advertised as being an inventive new genre, "ballet-opera," which indeed it was with a dancer doubling each singer, typically popping on stage with every ritornello, then retreating into the wings as it ended. This was all quite stunning, but the approach in Göttingen was much more selective, in keeping with the restrained elegance of the production as a whole - with its Baroque gestures, colorful costumes and all.

On occasion, but not often, a solo dancer interacted with the singer, as for example with Tirinto's catchy tune in Act I, "Mi chiederesti," in which he refuses to give up Rosmene. At each varied and poignant string ritornello a solo male dancer captured the ambivalence of the piece. During the next number, in which Clomiri sings a lovely little minuet, "V'è un'infelice," sung to Imeneo as she hints of her affection for him, a gentle, affectionate solo from a female dancer adds expressive movements. But Imeneo's response, "Esser mia dovrà la bella tortorella"



James Laing (Tirinto) with dancer Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

("She [Rosmene] must be mine, the beautiful turtle dove"), is without dance, although the rhythmic thrust of the piece would seem to invite it. Only with the third refrain of the chorus "Vien Imeneo," mentioned above, which follows immediately closing the act, does dance return.

For all the effective integration of movement and music, it was still the five impressive vocal soloists who contributed much to the production's success. Baritone William Berger, a Baroque specialist, was a secure Imeneo, with just an arioso and two arias (the first in Act I and the second, in Act II sung before the curtain). One wished he had had more to sing, but Handel put him in his place, by denying him more arias (clearly his sympathies were with Tirinto). Bass-baritone Matthew Brook was equally fine, with the range and depth of his bass just right for the two terrific and rather heavy-handed arias for the girls' father, Argenio. Likewise, the light clear soprano of Stefanie True was just right for the charming soubrette role of Clomiri, for whom Handel happily provides three lovely airs, especially the above-mentioned minuet "V'è un'infelice." I say "happily" because two years after the London premiere, Handel mounted two concert performances of *Imeneo* in Dublin. Among the various alterations, he eliminated all three of Clomiri's arias. In the Fabio Biondi performance of this edition at the Halle Handel Festival last year (in June of 2015) poor Clomiri, with just some fragments of recitative to sing, had little chance to shine.



James Laing (Tirinto) and Anna Dennis (Rosmene) Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Rosmene and Tirinto each had six arias and many chances to shine. Soprano Anna Dennis commanded all the resources for singing a role that, after all, is the lynchpin of the opera. In her rich outpourings, although a tad blousy at times, she captured the essence of this ambivalent character. I found her especially expressive in the lighter pieces, like her entrance aria, “Ingrata mai non fui,” addressed playfully to each lover, and her short prayer with solo cellos that opens Act II. In Act III, her mad scene was a true *tour de force*.

The sweet-toned countertenor James Laing was also most effective in the more subtle moments of his emotionally charged arias, of which there were many. His pure-voiced, nuanced singing inflected the text wonderfully. Such was the case, for example, in his opening lament, “La mia bella perduta,” with just continuo accompaniment, and his slow aria, “Pieno il cara,” in Act III. On the other hand, he did not have the passionate tone, the range, or agility for the great Vivaldian bravura aria of Act II, “Sorge nell’alma.” On opening night he seemed a bit off, but even in the repeat

performance the aria lacked the bite and vigor the piece demands. Overall, however, he was effective, and the final duet with Ms. Dennis, “Per le porte,” with its close weaving of gorgeous legato phrases and blended harmonies, was exquisite on every level. If the big bravura aria didn’t steal the show (as it often does) this magnificent duet certainly did.

But what made the evening so memorable was the beautiful and apt integration of dance and music. The exquisite flow of movement illuminated the attractive and apposite music wonderfully. And the close of the opera with the choreographed final duet and chorus turned out to be truly cathartic, countering the label of a simple “operetta.” Maybe Handel was just teasing us with the label after all. Winton Dean writes that the work’s individual flavor “almost entitles it to rank as a minor masterpiece.” Of Dean’s description Andrew Porter writes, “that ‘almost’ seems needlessly cautious.” Göttingen proved him right.



William Berger (Imeneo) and James Laing (Tirinto)
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva