

Opera con Brio

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Handel on the Hudson, May 2025

Giulio Cesare at Hudson Hall and Carnegie Hall

My first experience attending an opera by Handel on stage was in 1966 with *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, at the New York City Opera, one of the company's greatest triumphs and a breakthrough event for a young soprano, Beverly Sills. I was thrilled. But little did I (nor many others) know that in this scrambled, heavily transposed, and severely cut version only three of thirty-three arias were performed complete. (Conductor Julius Rudel commented at the time the score presented such an "embarrassment of riches [that] we just had to cut some of the arias." The scrambling of arias included moving Cleopatra's lament in Act III over the supposed death of Cesare, the magnificent "Piangerò la sorte mia," to her first entrance, about twenty minutes into the opera to hook the audience immediately. Their love duet closing the opera, the exquisite "caro bella" came early in the second act!

Fast forward some two decades later to 1985, the tri-centennial of Handel's birth, when Carnegie Hall's Handel Festival set the world ablaze with three uncut concert performances of operas by Handel, *Orlando*, *Ariodante*, and *Alessandro* – plus a sensational, uncut concert performance of *Semele* on Handel's actual birthday, February 23, 1685. The same year, just a few miles away in upstate Purchase, New York, the PepsiCo Summerfare Festival performed, finally, a complete staged *Giulio Cesare*. Andrew Porter wrote in the *New Yorker*, "now, at last we have had a complete *Giulio Cesare*... a production responsive at every point to the seriousness, the splendor, the humors, and the variety of the work, alert at every moment to the movements and the meanings of the music." (Peter Sellars was the director and Craig Smith the conductor of this modern *Cesare* rising out of the Middle East. Soon it came to Boston as well.)

It took a while, but finally the Met brought Handel's great masterpiece to the stage in 2013, with Baroque specialist Harry Bicket eliciting a stylish and idiomatic performance from the Met orchestra in David McVicar's captivating production first seen in Glyndebourne. Happily, Maestro Bicket is still at it with Handel, chiefly as Artistic Director and Conductor of The English Concert, one of Europe's finest period orchestras. For the last ten years a highlight of their multi-year Handel project has been another opera-in-concert at Carnegie Hall. And this year was no exception, a glorious, full-bodied *Giulio Cesare* on May 2, 2025.

But wait - that's not all. In the very same week, one hundred and twenty miles or so up the Hudson River (just an easy two-hour train ride), a carefully trimmed, but equally compelling performance of *Giulio Cesare*, the last of six in April and May, occurred in the delightful town of Hudson, NY. The site was the restored historic Hudson Hall, built in 1855, the oldest surviving theater in the state of New York. Although the venue could not have been more different from NYC's splendid Carnegie Hall (built in 1891), each performance managed to be "alert at every moment to the movements and the meanings of the music," to borrow Andrew Porter's words.

Well known already for his innovative productions and love for Handel, American director R.B. Schlather was the one to thank for the production of *Giulio Cesare* in Hudson, which I attended first. It was the second in a series of three Handel operas for Hudson that began with *Rodelinda* two years ago, (a production which will be "re-envisioned" with Maestro Bicket and Director Schlather at Sante Fe Opera in 2026). The series in Hudson will finish eventually with Handel's final Italian opera, the comic/serious *Deidamia*. The *New York Times* has called this series, in a quote now on company T-shirts, the "best news in a while for the NY opera scene." No wonder, for as Mr. Schlather writes in his brief introductory program note regarding the physicality and sheer energy of Handel's music: "that's the vibe for this Handel series in Hudson: bold, visceral, and unapologetically thrilling."

No words could better describe this captivating *Giulio Cesare*, anchored by Rukus, the visceral, conductorless period instrument ensemble of twelve. As they began the overture, nestled in the corner of two large, angled black walls in front of the auditorium's proscenium, a sensually clad dancer, Davon Rainey, peeped from around the far corner. Acting as a de facto guide or silent emcee, she then pranced seductively across stage to a blackboard where she meticulously spelled out E-G-Y-P-T, eliciting a repetitive response from the audience after each letter. Thus were we welcomed, with an air of captivating insouciance, into a direct, easy to follow and playful account of Cesare's conquest of Egypt and, finally, of Cleopatra.



Davon Rainey, Dancer Photo: Matthew Placek

With both comic and sensual tones appropriately established, the more dramatic elements of the plot, vengeance and lust, emerge with bold lighting often casting telling shadows of performers on the dark walls. And Davon returns frequently in many moments of pantomime, before her playful farewell gesture at the final curtain. With a wink and a wave, she departs around the lone window ledge at the near corner, a reminder that amidst all the high-spirited drama there were many moments of comic intent. The audience rose instantly, applauding enthusiastically.

All this might sound a little like hocus pocus, or even *Regietheater* ("Eurotrash"). Not so. Rather, with a catwalk bisecting the audience providing space for impromptu theatricality, a talented, young and charismatic cast cut to the core of the drama at every turn, whether intense or playful. It all reminded me

of a stunning *Così fan tutte* I was lucky to experience at the Santa Fe Opera in 2019 where Maestro Bicket and Director Schlather also had teamed up, with the same Costume Designer, Terese Wadden, to create a spare, timeless production of similar musical drive and theatricality. With no scenery to speak of, save the occasionally windowed wall and careful spotlighting, by Masha Tsimring, the focus was on the often silhouetted characters – and on the inner workings of the heart and mind still relevant today.



Song Hee Lee as Cleopatra Photo: Matthew Placek

Soprano Song Hee Lee, eye-catching in a short, glittering dress, gave an impressive portrait of the many-sided young Cleopatra, often playful and flirtatious. She sang her joyful final aria, “Da tempesta,” with a flippant walk along the catwalk to the ensemble in the corner. A showstopper, it highlighted her bright tone and impeccable coloratura as well.

Countertenor Randall Scotting as Cesare showed all the resolve needed for this role; especially effective was the stalking aria “Va tacito” with obbligato horn as he taunts (or rather hunts) their nemesis, the tyrant Tolomeo. As for Tolomeo, the fervent countertenor Chuanyuan Liu strode around the set in a tight red jacket like a devilish playboy. His animated aria, “Domerò la tua fierezza,” with its dramatic cadenzas, drove home to his sister, Cleopatra, that he will yet tame her.



Raha Mirzadegan as Sesto; Meridian Prall as Cornelia
Photo: Matthew Placek

Two of the other principal roles were the most somber: Cornelia, widow of the murdered Pompey, and her young son Sesto. Their tragic, *serioso* roles became especially poignant in Handel’s hands, as well as in Mr. Schlather’s concept. Against the bleak black wall, the pair, mezzo-soprano Meridian Prall as Cornelia and soprano Raha Mirzadegan as Sesto (with shades of the young Lorraine Hunt), closed the first act in the magnificent mother-son duet “Son nata a lagrimar” (“I was born to weep”). No dancer was needed here as this gentle expression of sadness quite unexpectedly surfaced.

Heading down river to Manhattan the following Sunday (while Hudson performed the last of its six performances), I certainly got what I had expected from Maestro Bicket and The English Concert: an impeccable cast and orchestra in an idiomatic and complete *Giulio Cesare*. And the stunning performance indeed included some of the foremost Handelians of the day: esteemed British soprano Louise Alder catching every nuance in the infinite variety of the heroine’s eight arias, from charming frivolity to radiant maturity; equally esteemed French countertenor Christophe Dumaux as Cesare (Bicket’s Tolomeo for the 2023 Met production), a consummate singer unfazed by various antics during his terrific cadenzas; and American countertenor John Holiday as Tolomeo, whom I have followed enthusiastically



Christophe Dumaux as Cesare; John Holiday as Tolomeo
Photo: Fadi Kheir

from his days at Julliard to his appearance last year as Farnace in Boston Lyric Opera's *Mitridate*. His clarion top notes were an apt complement to the dazzling yellow body suit and floor-length purple cape for this sleazy would-be king.

Irish mezzo-soprano Paula Murrihy, familiar to me in many roles, was perfect as Sesto, with a wonderful candor and directness in her timbre and her manner. And her duet with Cornelia, mezzo-soprano Beth Taylor was, as in Hudson, a poignant close to the first act. This is not to forget poor duped Achilla, the fine baritone Morgan Pearse, wrestling throughout with the ambivalence of loyalty and honor, nor the nimble Curio, bass Thomas Chenhall, another carryover from Bicket's *Cesare* at the Met.



Paula Murrihy as Sesto; Beth Taylor as Cornelia;
Morgan Pearse as Achilla Photo: Fadi Kheir

Again, these vocal stars were not unexpected, nor was the overall strength and conviction of all musical forces from The English Concert, whom I have heard every year they have performed since the outset of this Handel series in 2013 with *Radamisto*. During this period the series has expanded from a single annual event in Carnegie Hall to become part of the offerings in opera houses worldwide. It has also expanded from a singular concert format to something one might call a semi-staged opera. This was the great surprise coming down from Hudson - another performance of such heightened theatricality. It was as though Mr. Bicket and Mr. Schlather had once again joined forces.

For example, the plot kicked off early on when Achilla sauntered across the wide stage with a shopping bag; opening it, he offered up the severed head of Pompey to the shocked Cesare and others. But to the audience the effect was oddly comic, rightly so in this heroic, but comically tinged opera, which is no *Salome* after all. At the other extreme, in the opening of Act Two, came one of the most sensuous scenes in all opera. Cleopatra, having been pretty much a flirt in the first act (wonderfully so via the teasing antics of Ms. Alder), turned on her seductive allure in the famous staged vision of herself as Virtue in the aria "V'adoro, pupille." (Winton Dean called it "an epitome of seductiveness seldom equaled in any period." ... matched only by



Louise Alder as Cleopatra with Maestro Bicket and The English Concert Photo: Fadi Kheir

Salome I might add.) Mr. Bicket moved Ms. Alder and the stage band of nine solo instruments behind the full orchestra as she enchanted Cesare with her clarion tones. But where was Cesare? He was in the auditorium with the audience. And like us, he was swept away by it all, although only he got to vocalize a few words of wonder during the aria.



Christophe Dumaux as Cesare Photo: Fadi Kheir

These two examples, help illustrate the degree to which “concert opera,” especially in Maestro Bicket’s hands, moved from the kind of stand-and-sing performances (however well done) of the Handel tri-

centennial performances at Carnegie hall, into the realm of “semi-staged” opera. Highly dramatic moments like the stabbing deaths of Achilla, and later Tolomeo were not left to the imagination. Moreover, characters interacted with each other and even sometimes with the instruments. The poignant and sometimes playful interlacings of obligato instruments with various characters were a delight, for example, in Act I, Sesto with the cello in “Cara speme” (“Dear hope”) or Cesare with the obligato horn (by Ursula Paludan Monberg) brought front and center. Perhaps most delightful



Christophe Dumaux as Cesare; Ursula Paludan Monberg: horn Photo: Fadi Kheir

of all was Cesare's songbird aria with the flute, as he finally had a chance on stage for a full response to Cleopatra's sensuous display. Neither he nor flutist Kary Bircher, in playful imitative exchanges, wanted to let go of the moment.

And all this theatrical interplay took me back up the river to Hudson. Indeed both performances, staged or "semi-staged," were true to Handel in showing how this great opera is, after all, concerned with credible emotions of real people, not just with spectacle and/or spectacular singing. Both Mr. Bicket and Mr.

Schlather deserve much credit not just for overseeing their respective idiomatic performances, but also for showing how, by putting emphasis on character as much as on music, Handel remains still relevant today for we frail humans. I trust this will continue with Hudson's upcoming *Deidamia* and the English Concert's *Hercules* next year. The juxtaposition of the two fine Handel productions, up and down the Hudson River, performed with such imagination and brio, demonstrated that there is no single formula for performing Handel's magnificent operas and oratorios. For this we can all be thankful.



Christophe Dumaux as Cesare; Louise Alder as Cleopatra; Members of The English Concert
Photo: Fadi Kheir