Opera con Brio

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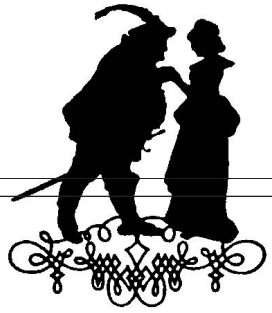

Caldara's *Ifigenia in Aulide* and Vivaldi's *Il Giustino*

Two Highlights of the 2025 Innsbruck Festival

"Who is pulling the strings?" This intriguing question served as the template for the fascinating and diverse 2025 Innsbrucker Festwochen der Alten Musik. While there are a host of applications to this existential question - from performance practice to philosophical nuances of particular works - it was in its three staged operas that the Festival best explored the question's many ramifications. First up was the principal offering of the Festival, the rediscovered *Ifigenia in Aulide* of 1718 by Antonio Caldara, the first staged performance of Caldara's opera in over 300 years. Next up came the annual "Barockoper:Jung" offering, Vivaldi's vibrant 1724 drama per musica *Il Giustino*, the pseudo-historical story of the peasant Giustino's adventurous rise to power. Towards its end, the Festival presented the only work I was unable to attend, the sequel to the story of Ifigenia from Greek mythology, Tommasso Traetta's 1763 *Ifigenia in Tauride*. (Opera con Brio's guest reviewer, Charles Jernigan, has written about this opera and the production in a separate piece.)

Life-Size Puppets Enliven Caldara's *Ifigenia*

As the informative Festival notes clarify:

> *...the 'sacrifical drama' of 'Ifigenia in Aulide'– in which the gods and goddesses pull the strings of human destiny – will be staged by the Catalan puppet Companyia Per Poc directed by Anna Fernández and Santi Arnal who will delight the audience with a combination of puppetry and images steeped in Baroque aesthetics.*

Happily, this was exactly the case. The innovative artist, Ms. Fernández, indeed prepared us for this wonderfully colorful production in her pre-opera talk and demonstration of initial sketches for the production. When the curtain went up, we were mesmerized instantly with the radiant backdrop resulting from these sketches, impressionist shapes of animal figures, images of nature and the like. This

Neima Fischer, Elisena with her puppet; Shakéd Bar, Clitennestra; Marie Lys, Ifigenia
Photo: Birgit Gufler

set the stage for the innovative use of life-sized puppets by the three female characters, Clitennestra (Clytemnestra), her daughter, Ifigenia, and Elisena – a character added by the librettist Apostolo Zeno to the standard version of the Euripides tragedy in which the Greeks must make a human sacrifice to Diana to overcome the becalming that has stranded them enroute to Troy.

And who must this victim be? None other than Ifigenia. But wait! Zeno – to accommodate the demands of a *lieto fine* (happy ending) for the occasion celebrating the name day of Charles VI in Vienna, had used the version of the story which included the second, secret Ifigenia, daughter of Helen and Theseus, to whom Zeno gave the name Elisena. At opera's end, she volunteers to be the sacrificial victim with her suicide. Happy ending? Perhaps not, but it served the purpose. Farfetched? Probably so, but this is where the life-like puppet figures add credibility to the entanglements ensuing from various intrigues and manipulations of plot. Indeed, the puppet counterparts of the three women reveal how each is torn between the choices made for her against her own wishes. All this well encapsulated the central theme of the Festival, "Who is pulling the strings?" - destiny versus self-determination.

Only Elisena, with her double identity, has a puppet right from the beginning. Clitennestra gets no puppet until the second act when her frustrated husband, Agamennone (Agamemnon), vehemently commands her to obey his decision to sacrifice their daughter. As for Ifigenia, she gets a puppet to maneuver only when she finally agrees to be the sacrificial victim. The women are dressed in flowing striped gowns of assorted colors by Costume Designer Alexandra Semenova – Elisena in blue and white, Clitennestra in blue and deep orange, and Ifigenia in blue and faded pink – with their surrogate puppet companions similarly dressed. These three women are all victims with uncertain identity and unwilling acquiescence.

Shakéd Bar, Clitennestra; Marie Lys, Ifigenia
Photo: Birgit Gufler

Each sang with assurance and poignant élan, starting with soparano Marie Lys as a most convincing Ifigenia. Her poignant aria before her supposed sacrifice was a highlight of the evening. Mezzo-soprano Shakèd Bar made for a forceful distraught Clitennestra, especially in her confrontations with Agamennone. And soprano Neima Fischer, with mellifluous and graceful phrasing, supported tenderly by her puppet friend, made for a moving Elisena.

Filippo Minecchia, Teucro; Martin Vanberg, Agamennone
Photo: Birgit Gufler

The macho men for their part, with bare chests, animal-skin robes and high helmets, faced no such ambivalence in character. Yet vocally they were no less impressive. They included wide-ranged tenor Martin Vanberg as a compelling Agamennone; countertenor Carlo Vistoli, an equally compelling Achilles with his brilliant fioratura; and tenor Laurence Kilsby, an appropriately clever and impudent Ulisse (Ulysses). But what perhaps most pulled this vibrant performance together for the captivated audience in the spacious Tiroler Landestheater was Music Director and conductor Ottavio Dantone leading his spirited idiomatic Baroque orchestra, Accademia Bizantina.

This was no small feat given that the essence of Caldara's music is a refinement and subtlety of orchestration that takes careful handling to fully realize. This Maestro Dantone fully accomplished, both with the extensive recitative passages and with meticulous support for the singers and their endless vocal sequences and acrobatics. One may wonder why this fine work has been absent from the stage for 300 years, while those of Handel (whom Caldara influenced) and Vivaldi have not. I think perhaps it takes a special sensitivity to this very poetic style of Caldara's music to bring it alive, the kind of sensitivity we had in this performance. And thus the Festival's reputation for unearthing forgotten Baroque masterpieces continues, happily so.

Fortune takes hold in Vivaldi's *Il Giustino*

And so it did with the four stunning Barockoper:Jung performances of Vivaldi's *Il Giustino* which began a week later with a cast of winners from last year's annual international Singing Competition for Baroque Opera "Pietro Antonio Cesti" (AKA the Cesti Competition). I attended the first two, and reports are that every sold-out performance captivated the audience, which is no surprise given the high level of Barockoper:Jung performances of early years, even when given in the risky outdoor venue of the University of Innsbruck's Theology Faculty. I still have the 4-euro blankets I purchased on two of these frigid occasions, Cesti's *Orontea* in 2014 and Handel's *Ottone* in 2019. No need for that in the intimate, superb black-box studio theater, Haus der Music, Kammerspiel.

Back in 2010, capping the first season of his fourteen-year tenure as Innsbruck Artistic Director, Maestro Alessandro De Marche scheduled Innsbruck's very first staging ever of an opera by Vivaldi, which happened also to be Vivaldi's very first opera *Ottone in Villa* (1713). Up until this year a dozen or so operas and oratorios by Handel had been sprinkled among its many Baroque offerings, but the Festival has since that time continued to foster the long overdue recognition of Vivaldi's operas also. Thus, it was nice to see a performance of *Il Giustino*, one of the best of Vivaldi's 90 some operas, roughly half of which have survived in manuscripts of varied readability. Indeed, *Il Giustino* was one of Vivaldi's operas that had helped foster the renaissance of his operas in recent decades, revived for the first time in 1985 by Alan Curtis in Vicenza (and later recorded by him).

Massimo Frigato, Polidarte; Thoma Jaron-Wutz, Vitaliano; Maximiliano Danta, Anastasio; Jiayu Jin, Arianna; Sarah Hayashi, Fortuna and Leocasta; Justina Vaitkute, Giustino; Lucija Varšić, Andronico; Benedetta Zanotto, Amanzio
Photo: Birgit Gufler

This year, the exceptional cast of eight winners performed the opera, which, along with the innovative direction by Claudia Isabel Martin, also nicely dovetailed with the Festival's theme, "Who is pulling the strings?". This time it was Fortuna herself. As Ms. Martin explains in her comprehensive program notes:

> *The figure of Fortuna particularly fascinates me – not as an omnipotent force of fate, but as a source of inspiration, a mythological starting point. In our production, she is portrayed in a double role with Leocaste. This gives the divine authority a human face and brings fate closer to individual responsibility.*

Leocaste is sister to Emperor Anastasio whose marriage to Empress Arianna is first celebrated in the opening scene and then interrupted by threats of discord from Vitaliano, the tyrant of Asia Minor. In the second scene, we first encounter the peasant Giustino, lamenting his fate as common ploughman; he soon falls asleep and dreams of military glory. Enter Fortuna, to the tune of "Spring" from Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. Then, following this fitting interlude of birth and renewal, the endearingly energized soprano Sarah Hayashi, in her only aria of the opera as Fortuna, commands the idle commoner to "shake off sleep… grasp fate…stop the wheel spinning."

And so he does. With a quick sleight of hand, Fortuna disappears behind the tower on a rotating stage and appears from the other side in the next instant, without Fortuna's glasses and signature blue glove, as Leocasta. (The talented castrato Girolamo Bartoluzzi first performed the role of this prominent protagonist in Rome.) Giustino immediately rescues Leocasta from a meandering bear, and she, finding him not unattractive, invites him back to court. The wheel of fortune takes over. Only some three hours later, after further adventures ranging from encounters with a sea monster to a kidnapping and yet more devious identity changes, will the wheel stop spinning; Giustino finally becomes co-emperor with Anastasio and (of course) weds Leocasta.

This opening gambit for Fortuna/Leocasta defines the production. Towering blocks in varying configurations on the rotating stage facilitate the instant scene changes called for in the libretto. At times, walls of the blocks close in on characters as though fate were closing in on them; at others, a

Thoma Jaron-Wutz,Vitaliano Photo: Birgit Gufler

quiet bucolic scene or interior space gives a chance for a character to breathe (or rather sing). Sometimes a clock hangs over the set as in the first scene - when the entire cast in stark homey garb is gathered stoically around a long table – and in the last, when they gather again. Sometimes the hands on the clock move forward and backward throughout the performance. Finally, at opera's celebratory end, a playful Fortuna removes her glasses and flings a pocket watch back to the table. All turns of the wheel of fortune cease.

Vivaldi wrote *Il Giustino* about midcareer in Rome (1724) for an all-male cast, including four superstars of the day, since a Papal edict forbade the appearance of women on stage. No need for such a restriction with the diverse young and enthusiast Barockoper:Jung cast. Heading it was contralto Justina Vaitkute in a trouser role as the titular character, perhaps matching the agility of the renowned alto castrato Paolo Mariani of the first Rome performance. In a glorious aria with an unusual solo psaltery obbligato late in the opera, "Flo nel petto un cor si forte," she also reflects expressively on how destiny has summoned him from plough to the royal court. Countertenor Maximiliano Danta gave an equally impressive accounting of the bedeviled Emperor Anastasio, first sung by the virtuoso male soprano Giovanni Ossi. A highlight was the poignant aria "Sento in seno" in which pizzicato strings mirror the "sea of tears" at his just having learned of Arianna's abduction.

As for Arianna, the role written for the famous soprano castrato from Perugia, Giacinto Fontana known as "Il Farfallino" ("the little butterfly"), clarion soprano Jiayu Jin was a joy throughout, especially in her often-Neapolitan style arias. One of these, was the poignant "Son pronta al cenno" as she prays for safe breezes to waft the three of them home - Arianna whom Giustino has just rescued from a sea monster (a billowing wave of blue cloth), and Anastasio just reunited with her. With the staccato strings, her wide-ranging first section and legato second section made for a stunning close to Part I.

The rest of the cast was equally impressive, including the two tenors, Thomas Jaron-Wutz as a compelling Vitaliano, a tyrant turned merciful, and Massimo Frigato as Polidarte, Vitaliano's envoy. The performance happily included Andronico, mezzo-soprano Lucija Varšić, as brother to Vitaliano, a character cut from the Curtis recording (as well as by Handel in his opera a few years later).

Justina Vaitkute, Giustino; Lucija Varšić, Andronico - masquerading as Flavia; Sarah Hyash as Leocasta Photo: Birgit Gufler

Although not crucial to the drama, this second brother certainly adds to the plot's complexity. Masquerading as a court lady, "Flavia," he, like Giustino, is in love with Leocasta and does what he can to be near her. Ms. Varšić gave a subtly persuasive portrayal of the elusive Andronico. Finally, near opera's end, in a concluding supernatural episode, the voice of Giustino's father reveals that Giustino, Vitaliano and Andronico are all

brothers….as fate would have it! Only the traitorous General to the Emperor's troops, convincingly sung by soprano Benedetta Zanotto, remains estranged from this familial group.

What radiated throughout the evening was the joy and panache with which these dynamic and promising young singers brought to life this remote pseudohistorical drama, first sung by legendary superstars from another time and another place. Coupled with the incisive playing of Barockorchester:Jung, led by esteemed specialist in idiomatic performances of early music, Italian conductor Stefano Demicheli, they all brought to life the vivid theatricality of Vivaldi's inventive score. All together it embodied a viable and enjoyably modern approach to a stunning baroque opera. Good fortune indeed pulled the strings. One hopes also that good fortune will follow this talented group of young singers.

Justina Vaitkute, Giustino; Maximiliano Danta, Anastasio; Jiayu Jin, Arianna Photo: Birgit Gufler

At the right, the Opera House (Tiroler Landestheater) and in the foreground, The House of Music
Photo: Richard B.Beams