Opera con Brio

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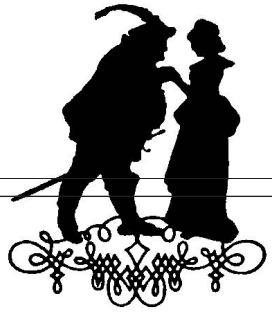

Remarkable Soundscapes
Ensembles of the Innsbruck Festival of Early Music, 2025

Samuel Butler (1874-1902), English novelist and critic, wrote in his *Notebooks*, "The out of the way bits of Handel are like the little side bits in such a town as Verona." Had he written this a hundred years later, he might have said that Italianate Baroque music, and not just Handel's, can be found some few miles north of Verona over the Italian Alps, in Innsbruck, at the annual Innsbrucker Festwochen der Alten Musik. Now in its 49th season, the Festival's presentation of major works by Baroque masters, known and not so well known, in roughly just one month was mind-boggling. These included three operas: two neglected rarities *Ifigenia in Aulide* by Antonio Caldara and its sequel *Ifigenia in Tauride* by Tommasso Traetta, as well a major opera by Vivaldi, *Il Giustino*. (Each of these was reviewed separately on *Opera con Brio's* website.)

But equal treats in my 10-day visit were the four extraordinary concerts reviewed below, sprinkled amidst these operas: *Die Kunst der Fuge*, an exhilarating take on Bach's great unfinished work, *The Art of the Fugue*; *Scarlatti!*, a comprehensive survey of his works in varied genres; *Im Zauberwald* (*In the Enchanted Forest*), an exquisite collection of works by Baroque composers (including Vivaldi and Handel) exploring the myriad examples of symbolism in nature; and *Harmonie*, an inventive take on a jewel of Handel's early vocal works, "Neun Deutsche Arien" ("Nine German Arias"). These out of the way "bits" (each in a different and equally attractive location) reminded me that there was no place I'd rather be than Innsbruck in August.

Die Kunst Der Fuge
Schloss Ambras Innsbruck, August 9

The elegant setting of the ornate Spanish Hall of Schloss Ambras provided an apt performing context for a performance of Bach's penultimate work, *The Art of the Fugue*, left unfinished in 1748, shortly before completion of the *B-minor Mass*. Bach's original intention was to create a model for the composition of strictly contrapuntal music (twelve fugues and two canons), all in the same key, d-minor. Yet he ended up

Roel Dieltiens' *Ensemble Explorations* Photo: Mona Wibmer

with an endlessly enticing work,possible for a varied array of instruments, from the simplicity of harpsichord, piano or organ, to string quartet and beyond. Yet he probably never envisioned a performance such as that given by the six musicians from Belgian cellist Roel Dieltiens' *Ensemble Explorations*. All but one played multiple instruments: Margarete Adorf, Violine; Helmut Winke, Violine and Viola; Saskia Fikentscher, Blockflöte, Oboe and Oboe da caccia; Dimos De Beun, Blockflöte and Orgel; Tom Devaere, Kontrabass and Violine; and Music Director Dieltiens, Viloncello, Violoncello piccolo, and Orgel.

It was an exhilarating treat from beginning to end. Bach's iconic contrapuntal masterpiece, all in austere d-minor, originally for single keyboard, blossomed into a work of extraordinary color and variety, played in an unorthodox sequence to enhance contrast. I have encountered this seminal work many times – often on harpsichord or piano, and occasionally with a string quartet (as with the Juilliard String quartet on the 300th anniversary of Bach's birth in 1985). Yet I have never felt more moved and entranced by it, with the new colors and understandings these various combinations of instruments brought to each number.

Capping the piece was the extraordinary final incomplete fugue, simply played by strings only, where Bach suddenly left off (a "Fuga a 3 Sogetti"). Having developed to their fullest potential the austere first and florid second themes, he suddenly introduces a third subject for the four notes that spell his name, B-A-C-H (B flat, A, C, and B natural). Then at the beginning of the triple fugue, the notation in the original manuscript simply stops. And so did this performance, to startling effect, leaving the audience in stunned silence.

Much has been written as to why. Was he knowingly bidding farewell to his long creative life, sensing the end was near? Perhaps. But why did he not proceed with the third theme (or even with a fourth) as counter subject? One thing is certain, however: Bach intended to leave *The Art of the Fugue* as a lasting model of a style of writing that was quickly becoming outmoded, to be studied as much as to be performed.

All the more credit goes not only to Bach, but also to *Ensemble Explorations* for inviting us to listen with care - with new insights and to enjoy more fully the glorious power of his music.

Accademia Bizantina Photo: Amir Kaufmann

Scarlatti!
Grosser Saal, Haus der Musik, August 11

Just two nights later, sandwiched between two further performances of *Ifigenia in Aulide*, Innsbruck's intrepid Music Director Ottavio Dantone led his spirited idiomatic Baroque orchestra, *Accademia Bizantina*, in yet another jewel: a vocal and instrumental program exploring music of the brilliant Neapolitan Baroque composer Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725). Performed in the grand hall of the stunning Haus der Musik, with its expansive view of Innsbuck's picturesque alpine scenery behind the stage, the performance was a delight from beginning to end. It included a diverse sampling of the prolific composer's several hundred cantatas and dramatic works, as well as a pair of eloquent Concerti Grossi to highlight his many exquisite instrumental works, and a final *Salve Regina*, reminding us that Scarlatti was a prolific composer of many religious works as well.

The first half of the program was taken up mostly with the gentle early serenata *Diana ed Endimione*, a cross between cantata and opera very popular at the time. Written for a large ensemble and two voices, this spacious, pastoral work captivated with two fine Baroque vocalists: Italian soprano Carlotta Colombo Diana, finalist in the 2022 Cesti competition and fast becoming an experienced Baroque specialist, and the outstanding alto, French countertenor Paul-Antoine Bénos-Djian. With élan they moved us through the multi-aria work based on the well-known episode from Greek mythology. In it, the cold and chaste Diana, goddess of the hunt, has inadvertently fallen in love with the beautiful shepherd Endimione. All ends with lessons well learned. By the end of Diana's final aria, in a moment of sudden stunned silence, it seems she has learned to be less unforgiving, he less despondent.

The second half of the program opened with three buffo scenes from Scarlatti's extensive output of Neapolitan operas. First came *Niceta e Morasso*, a delightful "divertimento teatrale" (comic scene) from his serioso opera *Emireno* about a couple having become disillusioned with love. Then came two archetypal comic intermezzi (scenes between acts amidst a serious opera): *Lucilla e Delbo*, comic dueling between Lucilla (an elderly nurse) and Delbo (a servant); then *Filandra e Selivino*, a slice of comic interplay between the seductive Filandra and the more passive Selivino. All three became especially lively vignettes in the hands of two talented singers, the young Slovenian tenor Žiga Čopi as the three women (en travesti, often with a nasal falsetto bringing many laughs), and the full voiced mellow Italian basso, Marco Saccardin. Who needed any staging with vivid performances like this?

A second elegant Concerto Grosso preceded the sole sacred work on the program, a *Salve Regina* for four voices, two violins and continuo. The solemn work, with its careful phrasing and counterpoint, was an apt close to a concert that paid tribute to the tricentennial of diverse and extensive output of perhaps the greatest master of 17th century vocal writing, Alessandro Scarlatti.

Im Zauberwald (*In the Enchanted Forest*)
Riesensaal, Hofburg, Innsbruck, August 16

A few days later, in the elegant grand hall at the neighboring Hofburg just across the street, the renowned period orchestra *Le Concert de la Loge*, led by its founder and violinist Julien Cauvin, performed a diverse collection of arias inspired by nature from leading opera composers of the day: two familiar, Vivaldi (1678-1741) and Handel (1685-1759); two less so, Francesco Geminiani (1687-1762), and Nicola Porpora (1686-1768). The evening included inspired vocalism from two fine young singers well versed in the Baroque aesthetic, vibrant Portuguese soprano Ana Vieira Leite, and rich-voiced French mezzo-soprano Eva Zaïcik. They capped the evening with a wonderful blending of their voices, a duet from Handel's delightful cantata *Aminta e Fillide* which captured also the commanding stage presence and deep sensitivity that each had exhibited all evening.

Although the program opened appropriately with an orchestral suite from Geminiani's *La Forêt enchantée* (*The Enchanted Forest*), it should be no surprise that arias from many of Handel's extraordinary output of 39 operas and 27 oratorios predominated. First up was the buoyant simile aria "Qual farfalletta" from his 1730 opera *Partenope* sung by Ms. Leite with the lightness of a butterfly fearful of losing its ability to fly, Last came the poignant (and famous) aria "As with rosy steps the morn" from Handel's penultimate oratorio *Theodora* of 1750, sung with radiant warmth by Ms. Zaïcik as she expands the metaphor of the light of hope after a dark night. As an announcement for the enticing program stated, their voices "sound as soft and sweet as the nightingale's song and unite with the orchestra in poetic, bucolic melodies." Indeed.

Yet these two arias also encapsulate the focus of the program, based on the subject of the enchanted forest from Torquato Tasso's epic Renaissance poem, *Jerusalem Delivered*, in which the forest is praised as a "mystical silent retreat." Quoting further from the program notes:

> *Natural symbolism [embodied in the 'simile' aria] and the doctrine of affectation [as with rosy steps the morn] finally found their perfect symbiosis in the Baroque aria. Bees, butterflies, flowers, trees, water, storms and thunderstorms are not decorative ends in themselves, but key words for understanding the musical design and the intended effect.*

This enticing program thus became, in all its splendid musical nuance, an "enchanted garden' in itself, a brief and happy respite from a world not so often enchanting.

Le Concert de la Loge Photo: Amir Kaufmann

Christuskirche Photo: Richard Beams

Harmonie
Christuskirche, August 18

Intrepid soprano Vieira Leite led the way to yet another rare treat two days later in the intimate Christuskirche, nestled with a fine view of the alpine scenery, just a five-minute bus ride from Innsbruck's center. It was Handel's *Neun Deutsche Arien* (*Nine German Arias*) performed by the expressive Ms. Leite, with her effortless and polished technique, and the Spanish Baroque chamber ensemble *Concerto 1700* led by its founder, violinist Daniel Pinteño. Celebrating its 10th anniversary, this Spanish chamber ensemble also included four equally accomplished Baroque musicians: Antonio Campillo on transverse flute, Ester Domingo on cello, Alfonso Sebastián on harpsichord, and Pablo Zapieco on archlute. Ms. Leite, fresh from *Im Zauberwald* two nights earlier, gave an equally commanding performance of the nine poignant arias that, although in German, display a thoroughly Italianate character, (much thanks coincidentally to the operas and cantatas of Alessandro Scarlatti).

There are a number of ways to approach this very special group of engaging German arias, basically a manifestation of God in nature, full of vivid imagery. It is not a song cycle per say of any given order, and no surviving details exist for either the basso continuo or for the obbligato solo parts, which share in equal measure throughout with the voice. *Ensemble Masques* at the Göttingen Handel Festival took one approach last year where they sprinkled among groups of the arias three of Bach's pieces for recorder. Along with an opening "prelude," Telemann's *Quartetto G-Dur*, this made for an expanded two-hour evening with intermission.

Concerto 1700 took an altogether different, approach, more taut, without a break, and pointedly more thought provoking. As the program notes explain, they divided the grouping of arias into four thematic chapters that reflect philosophical ideas of the day: "Deus sive Naturas" ("God or Nature"), "Über das Gute oder das Eine" ("On the Good or the One"), "Das ewig lebendige Feuer" ("The Eternally Living Fire"), and "Anima Mundi." Selected instrumental movements from Handel's own sonatas prefaced these groupings and/or individual arias. As the program notes continued, this grouping was, "to create a musical philosophical resonance chamber that does not seek to explain, but invites the listener to think and resonate."

This may sound a bit forbidding, but it all worked beautifully, and a related sonata led seamlessly into a group of arias. For example, opening the second group was the Adagio from Handel's Trio Sonata in D-Dur, op. 5, Nr. 2 (for flute, violin and basso continuo), which made a perfect prelude to the aria "Künft'ger Zeiten

Daniel Pinteño, Ana Vieira Leite, *Concerto 1700*
Photo: Veronika Lercher

eitler Kummer" ("Vain worries of the future"). With gentle legato phrasing, Ms.Leite immediately sang the beautiful aria, the only one the text of which does not extoll the glories of God in nature, but promotes instead spiritual serenity as overcoming earthly cares.

Beginning the final group of four songs was the Andante from Sonate in B-Dur, op. 2, a perfect preface to this section. Soon followed the delightful "Süsser Blumen Ambraflocken" ("Sweet fragrant petals of the flower"), where the rise and fall of the flute line suggested the movement of petals in the wind, rising from earth to heaven ("himmelwards"). Then closing the evening came "Mein Seele…" ("my soul…exalts and laughs at it all"), after which the joyful leaps from soprano and obbligato flute brought a burst of enthusiastic applause. By the end of the concert I was convinced these beautiful Italianate German Arias were also some of the most comforting and thought provoking pieces Handel ever composed, indeed a window into his soul.

As stated in my earlier review of the Festival's operas, the intriguing question "Who is pulling the strings?" served as the template for the 2025 Innsbrucker Festwochen der Alten Musik. Additionally, the Festival's focus on Italian music sought to immerse audiences in the 18th century sound worlds of Naples, Venice and Rome, showing how these worlds "pulled the strings" of baroque performance practice. It was worth a trip up from Verona…or indeed from anywhere… to hear for one's self.

On the left of the remarkable landscape, the side entrance to the Hofburg; on the right, the Opera House (Tiroler Landestheater); and in the foreground, The House of Music Photo: Richard Beams