

Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Rinaldo Reimagined

The Internationale Händel-Festspiele Karlsruhe, 2025

In February of 1711, Handel's opera *Rinaldo* had its triumphal premiere in London. Supposedly he wrote the opera in just two weeks, having "borrowed" about two-thirds of the music from works (cantatas, motets, oratorios and operas) he had written during his recent three-year sojourn in Italy. The opera, the first he had written for London, was a landmark in the history of opera, beginning a period of complete support from the English public for the music of Handel, and for anything Italian on the opera stage. This lasted for almost two decades, until in 1728 the raunchy, English-language parody of Italian opera, *Beggar's Opera*, put a dent in this enthusiasm. Thus in 1731, having successfully written some twenty Italian operas, and already having revised the popular *Rinaldo* three times (in 1713, 1715, and 1717 – mostly to accommodate available singers), Handel in 1731 would seek to recapture the audience's enthusiasm with a heavily revised version of this seminal London hit.

Thus what a delight it was that in February of 2025, the Internationale Händel-Festspiele Karlsruhe would revive this rarely performed version. The original *Rinaldo* has (happily) been performed frequently

with the 20th century renaissance of Handel's operas. Indeed it finally found its way in 1984 to the stage of the Metropolitan Opera in a star-studded performance, the first Handel opera it had ever performed. But this 1731 version has been sorely neglected, and Karlsruhe effectively corrected this oversight, revealing a version that is practically a whole new opera. Just as the first *Rinaldo* was basically a "mosaic" of different works, or a pasticcio, so was this final revision.

This reworked mixture included much additional music, including seven "new" arias taken from various recent operas, including *Amadigi*, *Partenope* and *Lotario*. It also included many internal changes such as the shortening of recitatives, changes of keys, and alternation of vocal types, etc. All this radically altered the shape of the plot, as well as the color of the work as whole. The principal focus of the original drama was the ensuing battle between the Christians, (led by their most formidable knight, Rinaldo) and the Saracens (led by Argente, claiming to be King of the now-occupied Jerusalem). It included orchestral battle music and such bravura arias as Rinaldo's spectacular aria "Or la tromba" ("Now the trumpet") with full



Valeria Girardello as Armida

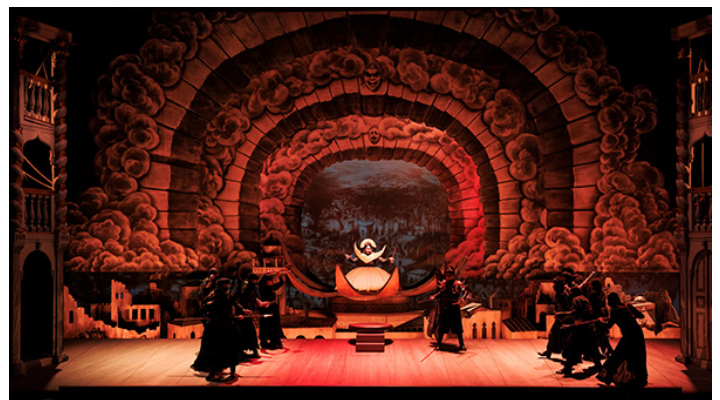
Photo: Felix Grünschloß

orchestra, including four trumpets and drums, before the ultimate battle. The revision focused more on the two love relationships - Rinaldo and his beloved Almirena and the enchantress Armida with her hot pursuit of Rinaldo and occasional affection for her co-conspirator, Argente. With reduced orchestral forces (one trumpet now), Handel revised the score in 1731 (without “Or la tromba”) in a way more suitable for the altered focus – less militaristic, more intimate and reflective.

This shift was aptly reinforced in Karlsruhe by visiting Italian conductor Rinaldo Alessandrini leading the Deutsche Händel-Solisten in an especially elegant and idiomatic performance, just as he had in a performance here in Boston a couple of years ago with the Handel and Haydn Society. So too with the inspired Stage Director Hinrich Horstkotte, doubling as set and costume designer, who effectively caught the essence of Baroque theatre in a modern context, engendering an evening both entertaining and dramatically true.

The original London production in 1711 was meant to wow its audiences with spectacle to complement its virtuosic singing; indeed the magic element was meant to show off the gifts of stage machinery, making the

opera reportedly one of the most glittering shows ever seen on the opera stage. The Karlsruhe production made no attempt to go this far, although at times it came close. The opening scene begins in perfectly realistic fashion with a panoramic view of Jerusalem, and the gold dome of its church prominent in the foreground. But at Armida’s entrance, we’re done with realism as the dome slowly opens like the stunning petals of a lotus flower, revealing Armida in gorgeous, elaborate golden array at its center. And eventually baroque theater, with the elegant layered sets by Mr. Horstkotte, takes over.



Valeria Girardello as Armida

Photo: Felix Grünschloß

To be sure, her fury-filled entrance in the original performance of *Rinaldo* was more spectacular; stage directions in the libretto read: “Armida in the air, in a chariot drawn by two huge dragons, out of whose mouth issue fire and smoke. Armida descending.” Yet while that entrance may have served to accent the fury of the not-to-be-messed-with Armida, the stunning, but less flamboyant, entrance in Mr. Horstkotte’s conception suggests how the enchantress will be smitten with love for Rinaldo during the opera. Even so, her still powerful entrance aria, “Furie terribili” (“Fearful furies”), a passionate invocation of the furies, may suggest otherwise.

And at every entrance, Italian mezzo-soprano Valeria Girardello made for a mesmerizing Armida, equally captivating in both in her dramatic intensity and incisive coloratura. Such was the case, for example, in her chamber-scored retort of Act II to Argante about her rival (Almirena), the assertive “Arma / lo sguardo” (“That proud and charming lady”) from *Lotario*. This replaced the original’s headlong aria “Vo’ far guerra” (“I want to make war”) in which she resolves for action with its famous harpsichord cadenza performed by Handel at the premiere. And while in Act III of the

original version she had no aria, in 1731 as part of the revised finale, Ms. Girardello sang with equivalent élan the opera’s penultimate aria “Fatto è Giove un dio d’inferno” (“Jupiter has become a God of Hell”) from *Partenope* – a mixture of rapid fire fury morphing into a legato of reflective grief.

For all this, Armida takes something of a back seat to Almirena in the greatly expanded role of Goffredo’s long-suffering daughter in the revised version—especially so with the beguiling portrayal by French soprano Suzanne Jerosme. She sang Handel’s well-known, often-recycled lament “Lascia ch’io pianga” (“Let me weep”) with grace and poignant effect, while her charming aria “Augelletti, che cantate” (“Charming Birds thus sweetly singing”) was equally affecting in her delicate bird-like passage work. Her magnificent baroque garden scenes were a delight, with a floating bird cage at one point, but the highlight of the evening was off stage, bringing an extended ovation. This was her brilliant exit aria “Parolette, vezzi e sguardi,” (from *Giulio Cesare*) on how a woman’s charms and glances can wow every heart. Sung before a full drop curtain as she entered the pit, she certainly wowed every heart in the audience with her bright, effortless



Suzanne Jerosme as Almirena

Photo: Felix Grünschloß

coloratura. Handel revised the role of Almirena in part for a faithful soprano Anna Maria Strada del Pò, and he fittingly allotted the final number of the opera to her (shortly on the heels of Armida's above-mentioned "Fatto è Giove") with the gentle aria "Si, caro, si" ("Yes, Dear, yes") from *Admeto* sung loving to Rinaldo at their reunion.



Suzanne Jerosme as Almirena; Lawrence Zazzo as Rinaldo
Photo: Felix Grünschloß

As for Rinaldo, more lover than hero in this revision, the esteemed American countertenor Lawrence Zazzo brought a nuanced and sensitive approach to the role, right through to his subdued chamber aria "Vedrò più liete e belle" ("I shall see more joyful and beautiful") in the final scene as he envisions being reunited with his beloved Almirena. The aria took over for the aforementioned eliminated "Or la tromba," the vibrant display of military prowess before the final battle in the original. It was hard not to recall at this moment the great mezzo Marilyn Horne in her signature role as Rinaldo first at the Met in '83 and then at Teatro la Fenice a few years later where, mounted on a giant statue of a white steed, she had to sing an encore in a darkened auditorium. Yet Mr. Zazzo on the other hand effectively eased such intrusions. Handel had set his role down a whole tone because of the alto castrato, Senesino, for whom it was written; Mr. Zazzo was thus

well suited for this role with his keen musicianship, his wide range for coloratura passages and his expressive legato. A highlight was the famous aria "Cara sposa" ("My dear betrothed") in Act I as Rinaldo expresses his grief at the abduction of Almirena.

Rinaldo's nemesis, Italian contralto Francesca Ascioti in the trouser role of Argante, was expressive in her light, buoyant chamber aria "Per salvarti, idolo mio" (replacing a more militaristic one from *Lotario*) as she apostrophizes about gaining the love of Almirena, and avoiding the wrath of Armida. But neither her flamboyant costume with wing-like red projections on her back nor her fine singing could inject the kind of dramatic tension into the role that bass Sam Ramey made in his debut at the Met in 1983.

Another radical vocal shift was transforming the original Goffredo, Almirena's father (and historical leader of the First Crusade, 1096-99) from contralto en travesti to tenor. Happily, the experienced Spanish tenor Jorge Navarro Colorado energized the relatively static opening scene (before Armida's entrance) with his vivid recitatives, secure baroque technique and agile coloratura in arias like "D'instabile fortuna" (borrowed from *Lotario*). This aria commented on the whim's of fortune just before Armida punctures the scene with her spectacular entrance.

In the end, all are reconciled, save Armida and Argante, who opt out of the happy initial resolution of 1711, which has them convert to Christianity after failing in a final battle. Still, what this innovative, more reflective 1731 version had done was place focus on the emotional entanglements of its six central characters, without sacrificing spectacle and magic completely. According to the introduction to the recently released Il Groviglio recording of this carefully crafted composite work, Handel aimed "to depict the steadfast loyalty of two lovers and the triumph of ethics and reason over hatred, intrigue and sorcery." Karlsruhe's production and musical forces certainly achieved this goal admirably.