

# Opera con Brio

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## A Compelling Game of Power: Handel's *Siroe*

The Karlsruhe International Handel Festival, 2025

Handel's *Siroe, Re di Persia* of 1728 is a problematic work, at least at first appearance. A product of the waning years of his productive First Academy period, it was one of five operas tailored for the famous "rival Queens," Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Borodoni. Handel used the verbose libretto of the young Pietro Metastasio, with its convoluted plot, ill-suited, it would seem, to Handel's inclination to move the drama forward rather than to linger over many simile arias and the like, or to focus on the sopranos' rivalry for the affections of the castrato superstar of the day, Senesino. As distinguished Handel Scholar Winton Dean comments, "we are faced with Handel at the height of his powers struggling with a recalcitrant libretto and an ungainly bunch of characters. They spend so much time deceiving each other or being deceived, or both, that none emerges in a strong positive light."

Five composers in Italy, beginning with Leonardo Vinci for the 1726 carnival in Venice, had already set the libretto. Then Nicola Haym, Handel's frequent librettist, cut some half of Metastasio's rather lengthy recitatives, but left the arias untouched, an inordinate number of simile arias (fully one third of the twenty-four numbers). Yet beneath the serpentine plot - with all its disguises, eavesdropping, asides, and the like - the struggle for power, personal and political, dominates as the love, jealousy, and vengeance of all its characters operate within the story's larger framework of a coup.

Still, the essence of the piece is actually rather straightforward: like King Lear, the Persian king Cosroe denies the throne to the rightful heir, his eldest son Siroe, loyal to the core. Instead, he favors the younger son, the rather neurotic and conniving



Rafat Tomkiewicz (Siroe); Sophie Junker (Emira)

Photo: Felix Grünschloss

Medarse. Complications to the plot come from the two “rival” sopranos, Laodice and Emira. Both are enamored of Siroe – in spite of the facts that Laodice is (we are told) Cosroe’s mistress and that Emira spends almost the entire opera in male disguise as “Idaspe,” the king’s confidant, in order to carry out revenge on Cosroe for having murdered her father. The love between Siroe and Emira, with the divided loyalties of each, is the springboard for much of the dramatic conflict, as is Siroe’s perpetual rejection of Laodice (and the consequent conniving by both her and the evil Medarse).

I first encountered this rarely performed work at BAM (the Brooklyn Academy of Music) in 2004, reportedly, the first fully staged modern production. It was distinctly odd, with the costumes vaguely suggesting Fascist Italy and with the protagonists wearing pasty white makeup, adding an element of camp. The ensuing laughter was certainly nothing Metastasio nor Handel intended. Roughly a decade later, the 2013 Handel Festival in Göttingen had great success incorporating such *Regietheater* elements as relocations and even modifications of the story, mixed period dress, excessive sexuality, and the like. Then roughly another decade later in 2022, the equally renowned Handel Festival in Halle, in a production I was unable to attend, took another approach with a reportedly innovative multimedia take on this unwieldy operatic rarity.

Finally, it was left to the youngest of the three major Handel Festivals, the Karlsruhe International Handel Festival, a couple years later in its 2024 production, revived in 2025, to find the delicate balance between entertaining camp, hyperbolic *Regietheater*, and compelling multimedia effects to demonstrate that genuine music drama and vivid theatricality could be found in a work that may seem to defy coherence. They did so via the inventive focus from Karlsruhe’s experienced director Ulrich Peters who used the popular fantasy TV series *Game of Thrones* as a creative springboard.

As the brief pre-opera lecture emphasized, the approach did not necessarily count on the audience’s familiarity with the series and its web of often violent political conflicts among noble families vying for the throne. Nor was it a bold-faced descent into *Regietheater*. But the approach did mirror the basic narrative thrust, scenic fantasy effects and lighting, and even some of the quasi-Medieval costuming of the epic TV series, to enhance the opera for those who did know it. What emerged was not just a convoluted quest for the throne, but an opportunity to show how Handel’s arias embodied the suffering and aspirations of each character with an inspired and powerful voice, thus compensating for the relative isolation and dislocation of the characters and the relative lack of dramatic momentum that the many simile numbers fostered. Thus the opera also stood on its own as an engrossing story of intrigue, cunning, and convoluted power struggles that anyone could understand.

Right from beginning, a scrim showing a dense forest welcomed the audience into this doom-laden, murky world. Large print on the scrim outlined the backstory to the plot... not unlike in a good serial adventure. When the action begins, a spiked iron throne, à la the *Game of Thrones*, was center stage, with King Cosroe setting the plot in motion quizzing his two sons about their inheritance. Along the way, with all characters in striking medieval attire, various touches reinforce the opera's *Game of Thrones* template, with even a dragon floating in the ringed heavens as the malignant younger son, Medarse, brings down the curtain to Part One with his vibrant simile aria "Frà l'orror della tempesta" ("Amidst the horrors of the tempest"), gloating at the prospect of success while feigning humility.

Eventually, and sometimes not too logically as per the formula of baroque *opera seria*, all plots are exposed, conflicts resolved, and loyalties reaffirmed. But not without Mr. Peters' further nod to the *Game of Thrones*. Medarse, loser in the quest for the throne, remains prostrate on the ground as Laodice with an inspired burst of fury, leaps onto the spotlighted vacant throne. Above, in the void where surtitles had been throughout the opera, three words remained: "To be continued."

Indeed, these two characters, the contemptible Medarse and the hypocritical Laodice, were so forcefully portrayed by experienced Italian countertenor Filippo Mineccia, specialist in Handel castrato roles, and the young Israeli lyric soprano Shira Patchornik, it was hard



Filippo Mineccia (Medarse); Ks. Armin Kolarczyk (Cosroe)

Photo: Felix Grünschloss



Rafat Tomkiewicz (Siroe); Shira Patchornik (Laodice)  
Photo: Felix Grünschloss

not to root for them. (Indeed, I had rooted for her also when she won both first place and the audience award at the 2021 Innsbruck Cesti Competition.) At Karlsruhe one could say that she not only stole the throne but also the show, both in projection of psychological complexity and in how well she handled the wide range of compelling arias, designed especially for Cuzzoni, known for her liquid melismas. Especially effective was her expressive minor key siciliano lament “Mi lagnerò tacendo” (“I shall pine away”) in Act I as she is compelled to recognize (having just encountered Siroe) that her love for him will never be reciprocated. Later in the opera, facing the empty throne, she gave Cuzzoni’s reportedly favorite aria, “Se il caro figlio,” all the requisite brio it needed to curse Cosroe’s fierce heart for his unjust treatment of the now imprisoned Siroe.

As for Emira, I had especially looked forward to hearing the charming Belgian soprano Sophie Junker – another winner of the Cesti Competition of 2012 - whom I had heard on many occasions in London, Gottingen, and the US since then. However, this was not to be, since in each of the two performances I attended, she had to withdraw because of illness. Winton Dean has said of Faustina’s key role that Emira’s disguise ensures she can seldom speak in her own person; alas in Karlsruhe Ms. Junker’s illness ensured she could

never even sing in her own voice! Instead, Swedish mezzo-soprano Annastina Malm, who had recently sung the role at Halle, performed from the pit as Ms. Junker pantomimed the role on stage. It was a credit to all that it worked so well; Ms. Malm’s warmth and expressiveness radiated from the pit with ease, impressively so with such brief rehearsal time, while Ms. Junker’s impeccable well-rehearsed sense of the role made for seamless coordination. And all the support from conductor Attilio Cremonesi, also an esteemed vocal coach, helped.

Cosroe, and his estranged son, Siroe, reflect the great strength of this opera: how effectively Handel gets to the core of each character’s internal struggle and turmoil. In the last of Cosroe’s three arias, “Gelido in ogni vena” (“In every vein my blood runs cold”), the versatile Italian-born German baritone Armin Kolarczyk brought the hefty mix of power and nuance necessary to project his poignant depiction of bitter remorse as he presumes (mistakenly) that Siroe faces execution.

As for the titular character himself, esteemed Polish countertenor Rafal Tomkiewicz brought all the elements of refinement and secure vocalism necessary for singing the role written for Handel’s great castrato, Senesino. Siroe’s early arias are perhaps less heroic, but his Act III prison scene, in Dean’s words, “lift him and the opera to an altogether higher plane.” Who could argue, given Mr. Tomkiewicz’s sensitive and dramatic delivery of both Metastasio’s accompanied recitative and ensuing aria (an addition by Handel.) “Deggio morire, o stelle” (“I must die, o stars).” The poignant B flat minor scena became the highlight of the evening as he eloquently sang of his agony facing death, aided by the plunging thrusts of the orchestra and Maestro Cremonesi’s crisp and abrupt shift in dynamics.

There are many to praise for this engrossing production of Handel’s supposedly “dysfunctional” opera with its plethora of isolating arias. Among other things was Christian Floeren’s revolving set designs with their seamless transitions from the grandeur of a



large prone statue (of the pre-opera assassinated king) to poignant interior locales as with the king's chamber and prison scenes. The lighting design by Christoph Pöschko wonderfully complemented these scene shifts and scenes too. For example, the omnipresent shades of blue captured much of the opera's chilling atmosphere, and contrasted strikingly with the visceral reds for flames (often linked to Medarse and/or Laodice). With the fine musical forces at hand, both orchestral and

vocal, it all made for an engrossing and unified evening in which the human connections in the "recalcitrant libretto and an ungainly bunch of characters" came alive. Over the years, *Game of Thrones* has been a great success with an international fan base; in just one night Karlsruhe's production of *Siroe*, with or without one's familiarity with this TV series, emerged too as a compelling success with its diverse and talented international cast. And, of course, Handel helped.

*Siroe* Ensemble

Photo: Felix Grünschloss