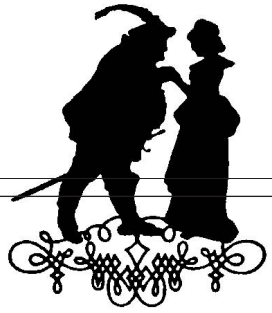
Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Tamerlano as Metaphysical Drama

The Göttingen International Handel Festival, 2025

Some fifteen years ago in 2010, the Göttingen International Handel Festival presented a production of Handel's darkly colored middle-period masterpiece *Tamerlano*. As I wrote at the time, the heavily cut, misguided attempt to update the spare, dark world of the opera was, alas, one of the esteemed Festival's rare fiascos, with stage antics and excessive movement that either blurred or simply distracted from the taut drama. Happily, this year's production compensated for this disaster, with a fresh, stylized take on the opera that captured the essence of what this powerful work is basically all about - the impassioned interaction of doomed characters caught in an intricate web of often contradictory struggles.

The opera takes place during the Ottoman conflict of the 14th century and follows the captured Turkish leader, Emperor Bajazet, from his imprisonment in the opening of the opera by the Tartar leader, Tamerlano, to his on-stage suicide in the end. But as innovative Italian Director Rosetta Cucchi wrote in the program book, not the historical context, but "...the exposure of human passion will be the common thread that will hold the concept of this show together." Indeed this was the case. It all takes place in a black-box set designed by Tiziano Santi, edged by white tube-lighting, in which these two powerhouse characters and others will interact.

The austere overture in c-minor from the FestspielOrchester, led wonderfully by Artistic and Musical Director George Petrou, immediately set the overall mood. During it, an enraged Tamerlano, in a dark suit, flails about with a sword in stylized fashion and "slays" one by one the six silent, ghostly figures dressed in the white coats and trousers of Costume

Lawrence Zazzo, Tamerlano Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Designer, Claudia Pernigotti. These otherworldly figures, "metaphysical characters" (as Ms. Cucchi calls them) appear often around Tamerlano and the other characters, representing "the fears and remorse of a tortured soul."

Lawrence Zazzo, Tamerlano Photo:Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Soon, in his flippant opening aria, Countertenor Lawrence Zazzo projects the arrogant, spoiled essence of the pointedly Trumpian Tamerlano, "rigid, square and apparently without mercy." Wrapped up with self-image, he methodically stamps his signature on one edict after another, sitting on his throne-like chair. A fleeting sexual liason in the wings completes the picture. Yet gradually in the course of the opera, he will become increasingly unhinged; again in Director Cucchi's words, "...his world both internal and external is crumbling imperceptibly."

In stark contrast, the vanquished Bajazet, first emerging from his cell in ragged attire during a throbbing extension of the overture, travels a path of psychological ascendancy. In his majestic opening aria, Tenor Juan Sancho forcefully projects Bajazet's pride and determination. At the end of the opera, his heart-wrenching rendering of the death scene in the opera's monumental finale reaffirms his strenghth of character.

Juan Sancho, Bajazet Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Perhaps the most brilliant stroke of Ms. Cucchi's concept came following Bajazet's heroic suicide, his response to defeat and degradation. In an alcove at the rear of the stage, stunningly highlighted by Lighting Designer Ernst Schießl throughout the opera, Bajazet is laid to rest atop a platform soon to be occupied underneath by the prostrate, deranged Tamerlano. And the dark final chorus in g-minor brings another effective stroke: Maestro Petrou halts the orchestra midway, leaving the a capella chorus to close the opera with a poignant diminuendo that fades to pianissimo, then to silence.

We've come a long way in this taut drama, set in a single day. Without lovely groves or seascapes to distract, all takes place in just the claustrophobic space of the black box representing the great palace Tamerlano has conquered. And there are no intricate subplots, only the tight web of strained relations between the other characters caught too in a trap from which, given their temperaments, there can be no escape. Bajazet's daughter, Asteria, and the Greek king, Andronico, struggle to maintain their mutual love amidst Tamerlano's pursuit of her. Irene, the jilted fiancé of Tamerlano, in disguise much of the time, tries to reclaim her rights with the help of her confidante, Leone, a kind of frustrated suitor himself.

Handel provides balanced casting for these four characters, with six arias each for Andronico and Asteria, four arias for Irene, and two for Leone. Especially compelling was the fine Countertenor Yuriy Mynenko as Andronico. Caught early on in the dilemma typical in baroque opera of having another (Tamerlano) in love with his beloved Asteria, he apostrophizes her in a tender love song ("Bella Asteria"). An exquisitely simple and pensive piece for voice and continuo only, this aria was designed to show off the skills of the renowned castrato Seniseno in the first production.

And perhaps it was in part to show off the impressive skills of Mr. Mynenko that Ms. Cucchi chose to close Act I not where Handel ended it, with his expanded scena in the same yearning vain, but with Andronico's dramatic accompagnato and vibrant aria expressing his anguish at Asteria's presumed betrayal that would have followed soon in Act II. This enabled Mr. Mynenko to bring the now lengthy expository act to an exhilarating close. Adding to the impact was Ms. Cucchi's unsettling tableau in the rear alcove as Andronico imagines a promiscuous Asteria on a couch with a series of suggestively silhouetted lovers.

Yuriy Mynenko, Andronico Photo:Alciro Theodoro da Silva

As for Asteria, Soprano Louise Kemény brought much of the expressive quality that Handel would have expected in his favorite prima donna of the day, the famed Cuzzoni. Her clarion top notes highlighted her frustration, caught in the vice between two men, the barbaric Tamerlano and her beloved, the more civilized Andronico. The production aptly catches her predicament during her opening siciliano. As she curses Andronico, who Tamerlano has led her to believe is false, she circles around the perimeter of the stage yanking down one by one the hanging white coats of the six enigmatic "metaphysical" characters.

Louise Kemény, Asteria Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Later, having pledged herself to Tamerlano as his Queen with the secret goal of killing him, she finally extricates herself from this unsettling situation. She does this at the ending of Act II with one of the most compelling and carefully constructed scenes Handel ever wrote (inexplicably cut in Göttingen's earlier *Tamerlano* in 2010). One by one she turns to each of those who had falsely accused her of betrayal - Bajazet, Andronico, and finally Irene. Each in turn answers with a brief da capo Arietta before exiting. But in Ms.Cucchi's concept, they don't really exit as per convention: instead, Bajazet takes his place in the "alcove" behind bars, Andronico, now also robed in white, stands by Asteria. And Ms. Kemény, closing the Act at last, finally has a chance to shine in a full da capo aria "Se potessi un di placare" ("Ah so happy! How at ease"), a glorious awakening from a night of horror.

The two other members of the impressive cast were effective foils in the drama: Mezzo-soprano Dara Savinova as the jilted Irene and Bass-baritone Sreten Manojlović, her escort, Leone. Ms. Savinova, with especially rich lower tones, instantly captured Irene's spirited nature in her buoyant, determined entrance aria. In her stylish mulberry outfit, and with her assertive stage presence, she was an apt complement to the more restrained presence and light soprano of Ms. Kemény.

Dara Savinova, Irene; Sreten Manojlović, Leone
Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva

Mr. Manojlović made for an equally effective presence with his resonant bass and compelling persona in the minor, but important role, as Leone, in part an objective observer. In Handel's first version (1734), he gets just one aria, strategically placed at the center in Act II, with his Polyphemous-like bravado about the quirks of love. Then immediately the screw begins tighten with Bajazet's wrenching da capo aria reflecting not only his inner strength, but also his stated desire to punish his daughter for her supposed betrayal. But Handel decided later in his version of 1731 that Leone could serve an

equally important function by trying to reassure the frustrated Irene, and he added a second bravura aria in Act III, happily included in this performance. In Ms.Cucchi's take on the encounter, Leone has also overstepped his bounds, pointedly trying to woo Irene as well; his reward is a martini in his face.

This may seem a trivial diversion, but in fact it plays pointedly into the final scene of this production. For the revision in 1731 Handel also cut some of the major musical material between the death of Bajazet and the final chorus, filling the interim only with a brief secco recitative before the final chorus. Thus omitted were the rather perfunctory reconciliations, à la baroque convention, between Tamerlano and both Irene and Andronico respectively.

And Ms.Cucchi tightened things further carrying through with the thread of ambivalence and uncertainty that hampers any attempt to conjure order from disorder. Bajazet's death is not off stage following his powerful closing monologue, but takes place in a large throne-like armchair, pointedly less ostentatious than Tamerlano's in the opening scene. Andronico picks Bajazet up, cradling him in his arms, and carries him back to a top bunk in the alcove. On their respective "thrones" the paired off couples on either side of the stage during the final unsettling chorus are Asteria and Andronico, in otherworldly white, and Irene and Leone on the other side in a befuddled stupor. And Tamerlano? Deranged, he is soon prostrate on the bottom bunk in the alcove below Bajazet, just where he belongs. *Silenzio*

Director Rosetta Cucchi's metaphysical concept, with its ghostly figures frequently involved, heightened the drama and tragedy of Handel's powerful opera. Of course kudos must also go to the fine cast and other musical forces under the direction of Maestro Petrou. All in all, this was a stunning production, one not soon to be forgotton.

The Final Scene Photo: Alciro Theodoro da Silva