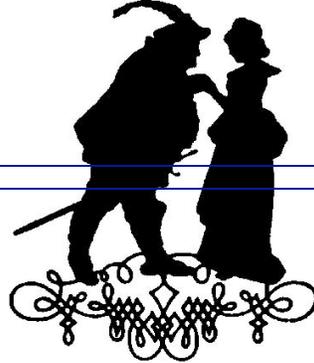


# Opera con Brio

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## 2010 Handel Festival in Göttingen A Contemporary *Tamerlano*

### A hit and a miss

For his penultimate year as Artistic Director of the Göttingen International Handel Festival, Nicholas McGegan first led the Festsspiele Orchester Göttingen in a brisk performance on May 10 of Handel's darkly colored middle-period masterpiece, *Tamerlano*. He followed on the next evening with a Gala Concert focusing on Cleopatra Scenes by Handel and his lesser-known contemporaries. The latter event, sparked by the expressive singing of soprano Dominique Labelle in diverse interpretations of Cleopatra, was certainly the more satisfying occasion; the fault in the flawed production of *Tamerlano*, however, was not McGegan's, nor the inspired orchestra's.

On the contrary, the fault lies squarely on the head of Swedish stage director Johanna Garpe. Unable even to remain around for opening night, she left behind a misguided attempt to update the spare, dark world of *Tamerlano*, which follows the captured Turkish leader, Emperor Bajazet, from his imprisonment in the opening of the opera to his on-stage suicide in the end. The stark opening scene bodes well, with the vanquished Bajazet, sitting cross-legged against the red backdrop, a perforated black rectangular tower behind him. In the opening aria, tenor Thomas Cooley effectively projects Bajazet's isolation and determination, yet this noble opening soon gives way to distracting stage antics.

### Directorial distractions in *Tamerlano*

The arrogant and spoiled Tamerlano, (counter tenor Christopher Ainslie) always wrapped up with self-image, preens his way through his entrance aria well enough. Smitten with Bajazet's daughter, Asteria, he has renounced his own betrothed, Irene, and thus promises to pawn her off on his victorious Greek general, Andronico, who



Christopher Ainslie, Tamerlano; Clint van der Linde, Andronico; and Thomas Cooley, Bajazet (Photo: Theodoro da Silva)

loves Asteria. Andronico's response to this typically baroque dilemma is the pensive aria "Bella Asteria," a tender love song apostrophizing his beloved. But you wouldn't know it from the action on stage. Circling Andronico are both Bajazet and Tamerlano, who gradually encumber the singer with their convoluted handshakes, reaching between Andronico's legs and around his neck, in awkward pretzel formations.

Handel wrote the exquisitely simple and expressive piece, for voice and continuo only, to show off the skills of the renowned castrato Seniseno. Refined countertenor Clint van der Linde was up to the task

*Continued on page 2*



Christopher Ainslie, Tamerlano; Clint van der Linde, Andronico  
(Photo: Theodoro da Silva)

indeed. But who could focus on the flowering interplay of vocal line and bass with all this distraction? Not I. It was no easier at the end of the act. Here Handel closes with another Seniseno showpiece, “Benche mi sprezzi,” expressing his steadfast love for the seemingly disdainful Asteria. But as he sings, all the other characters roll around on the stage in various brief couplings. What’s going on? Group sex? Power struggles? Symbolic free play?

To be sure, the director was seeking to capture (I presume) the emotional nuances, the complexities, indeed even the power struggles in relationships that permeate this somber work. And occasionally she did so, effectively letting the isolated emotion of the moment properly expand with the da capo. Opening the second act, arm wrestling between Tamerlano, the bully, and Andronico, though simplistic, makes the point, as does the vain Tamerlano serenading a bust, before smashing it. But too often, stage antics and excessive movement simply distracted.

Another example of gratuitous stage direction comes with the bass Leone, in Handel’s version, a secondary character, and confidant to Andronico. In this production his minor role expands to that of submissive sidekick to Tamerlano as well. A rather frustrated would-be wooer to Asteria, Leone is forced, for example, to listen to Andronico express what are indeed his own feelings of despair and



Christopher Ainslie, Tamerlano (Photo: Theodoro da Silva)

love for Asteria. All this is well and good, given the ambivalence that permeates the opera. In Handel’s first 1724 version Leone gets just one aria in the second act; in the later 1731 version, Handel adds a second aria, “Nel mondo e nell’abisso” (“In the world and in hell...I fear not all that can be invented”), which was also included, happily, in this performance. But who could focus on the music in this bravura number while Leone, sung by the able bass Lars Arvidson, strips methodically to his under shorts? Is the audience so obtuse as to not realize Leone’s forced bravado and vulnerability amidst his anguished predicament without all this distraction?

### Disruptive cuts to the score

To be sure, the production does make clear that in this somber world, each character reaches out to touch, to connect, to resolve, to heal, to comfort. The stark set helps – with only a coffin-like black chest and the two tall rectangular towers sliding to variously form doors, a wall, a prison, etc. But this doesn’t compensate for unnecessary distractions, let alone infuriating cuts in the score. Indeed judicious trimming of a Handel score for contemporary performance is commonplace, but a compensating sensitivity to the composer’s intentions is equally important.

In Act II, Garpe’s concept suffered the most through requiring cuts of material that I know Maestro McGegan fought to retain. For Handel, the ubiquitous da capo aria was a form that provided one of his most powerful musical and dramatic tools. At the center of the opera comes a strategically placed respite with Leone’s Polyfemous-like aria about the quirks of love. Then “the screw begins to turn” with Bajazet’s crucial da capo aria, “A suoi piedi Padre esangue” (“Though she dreads not my disdain”). The aria’s wrenching Bach-like line reflects not only Bajazet’s stated desire to punish his daughter for her supposed betrayal, but also his inner anguish. Cutting the repeat of this great aria, as well as the intervening “B” material, completely deprived the tortured father of the possibility of any embellished display of inner anguish (as baroque convention would invite); rather, the unduly rushed “andante” became almost perfunctory, upsetting Handel’s carefully developed chain of numbers, increasingly passionate in their expression, from the proud opening C Major aria right up to the noble sequence of Tamerlano’s heroic suicide. This cut also deprived us of one of Handel’s most dramatic and moving tenor arias.

More unsettling was the dismantling of the ensuing finale of Act II, one of the most compelling, inventive, and carefully constructed scenes Handel ever set to music. The finale includes extensive recitative, a brief arioso for Bajazet, a trio, three miniature exit arias, and finally a sweeping grand da capo aria for Asteria. Garpe’s production inexplicably cuts the three exit arias, leaping straight from the dramatic trio to Asteria’s expression of momentary happiness that ends the act. This cut completely undermines Handel’s carefully balanced scene, and even Handel’s intent at this climactic moment.

Let me expand. Handel himself trimmed some of the highly dramatic recitative in the 1731 version, but he didn’t touch a note of the trio, which explodes as Tamerlano, Bajazet, and Asteria react to her sudden disclosure that she planned to stab Tamerlano at the first chance she got. Tamerlano then sentences father and daughter to death, and leaves Asteria, her true defiance now clear, to face her father, Andronico, and Irene.

Handel scholar Winton Dean describes the sequence that follows:

The scene has the same kind of appropriateness in setting out the relations between characters concerned...as the scene

*Continued on page 3*

between the king and his three daughters at the beginning of Shakespeare's great *King Lear*... The three characters successively express approval of Asteria's action... [with] brief admissions they have misjudged her. With its controlled key scheme (3 exit arias in E minor, E major, and G major respectively) and deliberately condensed forms (no ritornellos except to usher the characters off), this is one of those points which triumphantly validate the artificiality of *opera seria*.

Indeed, as Winton Dean also states, the scene has "a kind of implausibility from the point of view of 'real life.'" But that is precisely the point. *Tamerlano* is Handelian *opera seria*, indeed a work widely acknowledged as one of the supreme masterpieces of baroque *opera seria*. The suspending of dramatic momentum in the three exit arias is the essence of Handelian opera. Alas, this production's attempted naturalism eclipses Handel's dramatic intent completely. During the trio, Tamerlano signals Leone to shave Bajazet's beard and then to handcuff Asteria, taking off her ornate wedding dress as well. The exit arias are all eliminated as we jump directly to Asteria's joyful B flat aria of hope, "Se potessi un de placare" (Ah how happy...) As Handel conceived the scene, not only is the accumulated tension of the recitative and trio finally relaxed with the sequence of the three exit arias, but also Asteria's brief moment of moral triumph and hope ends the act with cruel irony. In Garpe's direction, the sequence is simply wrong. What motivation exists for Asteria's aria of momentary optimism?

Neither the updating nor the contemporary dress in the production is problematic; indeed Erika Landertinger's costume designs were for the most part both telling and appropriate for the characters. However, not allowing Handel's music and dramatic concept the freedom to expand emotion and to articulate the drama is problematic. Unfortunately, such cutting of music (as in Bajazet's Act I da capo aria) and distortion of structure (as in the finale of Act II) in the interest of a director's "concept" is too often a malaise of productions of Handel's operas these days. However, I hate to see this premier Handel festival follow suit.



Thomas Cooley, Bajazet, (Photo: Theodoro da Silva)

### A balanced cast struggles to realize the director's concept

Overall, the mostly balanced cast struggled admirably to realize the director's concept. However, the men rather outclassed the women. Clint van der Linde had an especially natural way with trills; Mark Ainslie's light and nuanced phrasing also brought a properly menacing "tinta" to Tamerlano. Franziska Gottwald as Irene had a most

attractive alto timbre and projected a striking presence on stage, arriving flamboyantly with her flight bag (whose sole contents, a wedding dress, would easily pass airport security). However, Kristina Hansson, a mostly effective soprano, sometimes gave a bland account of some of Asteria's demanding pieces, especially the poignant "Cor di padre" opening Act III where, with weariness of spirit and a laboring dotted rhythm, she expresses her fears that she will lose both her father and lover to Tamerlano. Alas Handel's striking changes of dynamics were only tentatively realized. Interestingly, Handel's first draft for the conclusion of Act II concluded with this number, a scheme in fact that would have better suited this production – not that I would recommend the shift since the aria serves so well as an opening portent to the events of Act III.



Dominique Labelle  
(Photo: Lino Alvarez)

Only occasionally do we approach the level of Handelian singing that Dominique Labelle brought the following night to the Gala Concert presenting Cleopatra Scenes by various composers: Handel, Hasse, Graun and Mattheson. Her opening bravura number, Heinrich Graun's brilliant Neapolitan-style aria from his 1742 opera *Cleopatra and Caesar*, set the tone. She projected the dynamic *fiorture* with flawless ease. Later, unencumbered by disruptive stage antics, the poignant "Piangero, la sorte mia" from Handel's *Giulio Cesare* could make its intended impact. Effective also was the final selection, the death scene from Johann Mattheson's *Cleopatra*, as expressive *diminuendo* and subtle phrasings brought the scene to a shattering close.

### Looking ahead

Next season, Artistic Director Nicholas McGegan will presumably be able to let the music take center stage in his final production as Artistic Director, a traditional baroque rendering of Handel's spectacular "magic" opera *Teseo*, again to be performed in the intimate Deutsches Theater. Happily, the production promises to be the kind for which Göttingen has been renowned over the years, complete with a dominating sorceress, Medea, and much magnificent music from early in Handel's operatic career. A very different work than *Tamerlano*, *Teseo* offers great potential for the clear delineation of characters and dramatic pacing that Ms. Labelle brought in concert. Optimally Maestro McGegan will let the music work its magic, as he is certainly able to do when not hampered by a director's misguided concept.

The following year, British conductor and harpsichordist Laurence Cummings will take over the Festival as Artistic Director. Indeed, the music direction should still be in good hands. Mr. Cummings, Musical Director of the London Handel Festival (who just made his US debut conducting *Orfeo* with the Handel and Haydn Society), is considered one of today's foremost advocates of historically informed performance practice. (See my review of Vivaldi's *L'Incoronazione di Dario* for Garsington Opera ("The Case for Vivaldi") at <http://www.operaconbrio.com> by selecting "Spring 2009" under "Publications.") The ever-evolving Göttingen Handel Festival, with a new Managing Intendant as well, Hermann Baumann, also promises an expanding performance context which will reach out to new audiences. All to the good. But to rephrase the famous words of musicologist Joseph Kerman, let the music articulate the drama.