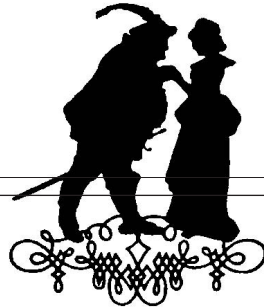


Opera con Brio

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A Stunning *Arianna in Creta* in Innsbruck

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By any measure Handel's 32nd opera, *Arianna in Creta* of 1733, is an unjustly neglected masterpiece, sandwiched as it is chronologically between two pinnacles of Handel's 49 operas, *Orlando* earlier that year and *Ariodante* two years later. But anyone who attended *Arianna* this August at the Innsbruck Festival of Early Music knows better; the production, with the young and talented singers of *Barockoper: Jung*, who flung themselves headlong into this demanding score, showed that the opera should really be ranked among the best of Handel.

Indeed, this has always been my opinion ever since first encountering the work at the Göttingen Handel Festival in 1999 in an elaborate period production complete with Baroque dance. My initial opinion was reinforced a few years later in 2005 at its scaled-down U.S stage premiere with Gotham Chamber Opera in New York and then a decade later with the young singers from the Royal Academy of Music at of the London Handel Festival. Finally, with a renowned

international cast headed by soprano Ann Hallenberg, a concert performance at the Halle Handel Festival in 2018 cemented for me the musical worth of this frequently overlooked opera.

And then came the recent Innsbruck production, illustrating that one needs neither elaborate idiomatic baroque dance nor a star-studied cast to capture the musical verve and dramatic aptness of this score that weaves its way through the ins and outs of the familiar mythical tale of the visit by Theseus (Teseo) to Crete and his slaying of the Minotaur, with the help of Ariadne (Arianna). It also helped to perform the elusive work in the intimate "black box" of Innsbruck's recently built Haus der Musik, the Kammerspiele theater with its fine acoustics, and with a Stage Director, in this case Englishman Stephen Taylor, who kept the focus on the singers within the ominous confines of a spare set where Athenian victims were to be sacrificed to the monstrous Minotaur.



Andrea Gavagnin, Teseo

Photo: Birgit Gufler

Some have hypothesized that the opera's vocal difficulty has caused the opera to be less frequently performed than other well-known operas by Handel. After all, Handel wrote it trying to put together a new company after the collapse of The Royal Academy of Music, the company he had successfully led for many years. Indeed, following a recent jaunt to Italy and then competing to survive against new competition (The Opera of the Nobility which had syphoned off most of his singers), he would seek to dazzle audiences with fresh, pointedly more Italianate, writing. Foremost in his plan was the hiring of the latest Italian superstar, mezzo-soprano castrato Giovanni Carestini.

And almost every one of his arias for the heroic Teseo, is a gem. All performances I had previously attended assigned this difficult role to a mezzo-soprano. In Innsbruck, however, Italian countertenor Andrea Gavagnin took over the role. He demonstrated right from his early aria of determination "Nel pugnar..." ("In the Fight...") his ability to handle the almost non-stop, impossibly difficult coloratura with admirable ease and precision. And this bravado aria, with vigorous melisma even on the opening words, was only the beginning. Equally virtuosic arias soon followed, especially "Qui ti sfido, o Mostro infame..." "Thy Fury, Monster, I defy..." a true tour de force as he prepares to fight the Minotaur.

The title role of Arianna, mostly a string of laments, is neither as extensive nor, on the surface, as demanding. Handel wrote the role originally for Anna Maria Strada, the only singer from Handel's company who did not defect to The Opera of the Nobility. She would then become his prima donna for much of the ensuing decade. Yet these poignant laments cannot be easy to sing effectively, and German soprano Neima Fischer, with her warmth and purity of tone and shining top notes, was perfect for the role, musically and dramatically, right from her opening aria "Deh! Lascia..." (Oh! Leave...) as she seeks to dissuade Teseo from his dangerous mission. And her two duets with Teseo made for a nice blending of the two voices, especially in the penultimate number of the score, the consoling "Mira adesso questo seno..." ("Behold my breast now more serene...")



Neima Fischer, Arianna Photo: Birgit Gufler

Indeed all the singers were impressive graduates of the Cesti Competition that the Innsbruck Festival holds each year for young singers, and there was no decline in quality in the rest of the cast. Handel had another new mezzo-soprano castrato, Carlo Scalzi, to portray Teseo's friend Alceste. In Innsbruck, the production created a nice trouser role for soprano Josipa Bilić,



Mathilde Ortscheidt, Tauride; Giacomo Nanni, Minos; Neima Fischer, Arianna;
 Andrea Gavagnin, Teseo; Ester Ferraro, Carilda
 Photo: Birgit Gufler

thoroughly convincing with her strong, clean sound. Right on the heels of Teseo’s opening bravura aria, she has an aria of almost equal determination and difficulty, “Tal’ or di oscuro velo...,” a more lyrical, triple time simile aria about how after the blast of a violent storm the peaceful sunshine will be all the more welcome, a sentiment she expressed with impressive warmth.

But the emotional heart of the opera comes with the magnificent aria of the second act, “Son qual stanco Pellegrin...” (“I’m like a traveler astray...”) as Alceste persuades his beloved Carilda, an imprisoned Athenian maiden, to flee with him. A graceful cello obbligato, along with the sensitive conducting from Angelo Michhele Errico, gave this moment its chance to shine. All this helped make the aria the highlight of the whole evening, rightly so, since this stasis at the center of the opera helps convey the central theme of the opera: faithfulness and love will overcome barbaric cruelty.

As for Carilda, mezzo soprano Ester Ferraro sang her relatively low coloratura with firm, dark tone, while another low-voiced female, contralto Mathilda Ortscheidt effectively handled the trouser role of the tyrannical exponent of barbarism, Tauride (originally

written for the Handel stalwart of earlier years, Margherita Durastanti). Ms. Ortscheidt’s attractive voice, precision and flexibility demonstrated why she was the first place winner of last year’s Cesti Competition. Her simile aria, “Qual Leon...” (“The Lion...”) flung in the face of Teseo made a compelling start to the second part of the opera. Bass baritone Giacomo Nanni, doubling as King Minos and Sonno (God of Sleep) rounded out this impressive cast.

There were no weak links, as was occasionally the case in Barockoper: Jung performances of earlier years at the less satisfactory (and often chilly) open-air Theological Faculty Courtyard. Throughout the evening, Maestro Errico effectively led the Barockorchester: Jung, providing support to all the singers, while the stage direction of Stephen Taylor and lighting by Christian Pinaud in this exquisite, intimate “black box” theatre helped make for a truly compelling musical and dramatic rendering. Indeed the austere updated staging, without superfluous distractions, let the singers shine. All in all, it was one of the most satisfying performances of this engaging opera that I have ever attended. Much credit goes to all involved.