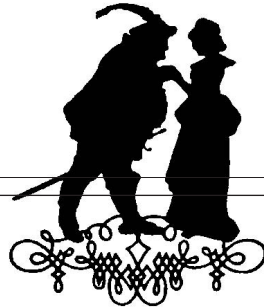


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Operatic Rarities Delight in Göttingen

The 2024 International Handel Festival

The title of this year's annual Göttingen Handel Festival was "Kaleidoskop." In an introduction in the program book, Artistic Director George Petrou explained why the Festival chose the image of the kaleidoscope as a metaphor for this inventive season:

...Handel's work has lost none of its relevance to the present day. Beauty in form, despite subjects that are not always beautiful—that is why we have chosen the image of the kaleidoscope... Sparkling little fragments, constantly reshaping themselves as they twist and turn - the music of George Frideric Handel is equally dazzling and constantly renewing itself.

And dazzle it did in the final long weekend of the Festival. The one concert I was unfortunately unable to attend was "Handel Fast Forward," jazz-inspired improvisations of Handel arias by Efrat Alony, prominent in the European jazz scene. But the rest was indeed a sparkling array of festive performances,



Juan Sancho as Sarrasine; Samuel Marino as Zambinella
Photo: Alciro Theodoro DaSilva

topped by the principal Festival opera *Sarrasine*, a pasticcio combining the 19th century novella by Balzac with mostly unknown and hitherto unperformed music by Handel. This in itself was worth the jaunt from Boston. And happily there was much more.



Ensemble Masques

Photo: Alciro Theodoro DaSilva

Nine Engaging German Arias

The weekend began with a rare treat in St. Paulus-Kirche, with its resonant acoustics: Handel's *Neun Deutsche Arien* (*Nine German Arias*) performed by Ensemble Masques with vibrant mezzo-soprano Sarah Romberger. I have never encountered these beautiful arias in a complete performance, having heard only five of them at the London Handel Festival a few years ago. Sparkling jewels of Handel's vocal works, they deserve to be heard more widely. Although in German, they display a thoroughly Italianate character, and all but one are *da capo* arias. But they have no surviving details of instrumentation for either the basso continuo or for the obbligato solo parts, which share in equal measure throughout with the voice.

Handel used texts from a collection of poems by the friend, poet and music lover he had known early on in both Halle and Hamburg, Berthold Heinrich Brocke (1680-1747). The collection was published in 1721 and titled *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott* (*God's Glory in the Garden*). Basically a manifestation of God in nature, the work is full of vivid imagery. A few years earlier, Handel had set the *Brockes-Passion*, his only sacred work employing a German text. The Festival gave its

first performance of this relatively neglected work in 2017. Now, finally, the Festival did justice to the even more rarely performed, and equally magnificent, *Nine German Arias*.

Although never published, written for private performance perhaps, Handel wrote them around 1725 during his First Academy period amidst such illustrious operas as *Tamerlano* and *Giulio Cesare*, and they contain more than casual similarities to these and other works of the period. They are not a song cycle per se and no particular order is indicated. But the format of the concert gave a chance to properly savour these varied arias by sprinkling among them three of Bach's pieces for recorder. Along with an opening "prelude," Telemann's *Quartetto G-Dur*, this made for a scintillating two-hour evening.

Ensemble Masques divided the expressive solo obbligato parts respectively between three instruments: recorder (with Julien Martin), oboe (with Nele Vertommen, whose virtuosity almost stole the show in the Telemann), and violin (with Tuomo Suni). Two equally accomplished musicians provided the continuo, Miguel Bonal on bass viol and Oliver Fortin on harpsichord. A group of four arias led off, perhaps appropriately, by the one aria whose text does not extoll the glories of God in nature but promotes spiritual serenity as overcoming earthly cares, "Künft'ger Zeiten eitler Kummer" ("Vain worries of the future"). It is also the one aria emerging notably from an earlier Handel composition, his Italian cantata *La Bianca Rosa*, later to become the beautiful sarabande from *Tamerlano*, "Bella Asteria"; its tranquility suggests the soul's serenity.

The rich tone from the beautiful legato phrasing of Ms. Romberger in this first aria indeed set us up for an evening of earthly delights, highlighted also by the charming effect of Handel's frequent word-



Ensemble Masques & Sarah Romberger Photo: Alciro Theodoro DaSilva

“Meine Seele...” (“My soul...exalts and laughs at it all”). A burst of enthusiastic applause followed this joyous aria closing the set of three songs in the second half of the program.

Finally, after a third Bach recorder sonata, the program ended with the delightful “Süßer Blumen Ambralflocken” (“Sweet fragrant petals of the flower”). The rise and fall of Ms. Vertommen’s oboe obbligato line suggested the movement of petals in the wind, rising from earth to heaven (“himmelwards”). A fitting conclusion indeed. By the end of the concert I was convinced these German arias are some of the most beautiful pieces Handel ever composed, indeed a window into his soul.

painting in both voice and obbligato instruments. Among those was her shimmering vocal line which, with obbligato violin in “Das zitterande Glänzen” (“The glittering reflections”), caught beautifully the dancing sunlight on the waves. Other memorable moments included the playful obbligato recorder in “Flammende Rose, Zierde der Erden” (“Flaming rose, ornament of the earth”), and the vibrant oboe supporting the leaps of joy from the soprano during

A Mighty Israel in Egypt

The following night took us from the rare and intimate to the familiar and grand, Handel’s 1837 choral oratorio, *Israel in Egypt*. Coincidentally, this magnificent work was an apt complement also to the aforementioned *Brockes-Passion* in Göttingen’s 2017 season. Indeed, over the years this mighty oratorio about the Israelites’ flight from Egypt as told in the



NDR Vokalensemble; FestspielOrchester Göttingen Photo: Alciro Theodoro DaSilva

Old Testament has become almost a staple at the Festival. This year, seasoned Musical Director Klass Stok led the FestspielOrchester Göttingen and NDR Vokalensemble in a breathtaking performance, all the more so thanks to the crisp acoustics from the newly-renovated Stadthalle Göttingen. The renowned word-painting for such plague-images as the flies, locusts, hailstorms and such was vivid and immediate. So too were the visceral massive choral numbers, alternately homophonic and intensely contrapuntal, both as impassioned characters and objective narrator. It was a stunning evening.

Two Riveting Chamber Concerts

On the other side of the coin, a pair of chamber concerts the next day recaptured the intimate, while also providing a counterbalancing frame for the principal focus of the season, the opera/pastiche *Sarrasine* in the afternoon. First, in the elegant Aula der Universität Göttingen, a frequent venue for Sunday morning concerts of the Festival, renowned harpsichordist Pierre Hantaï brought a full program exploring the relationships of three famous composers all born in 1685: Domenico Scarlatti, Handel, and Bach. As a quote from the program explains, “Scarlatti’s real excellence seemed to consist in a certain delicacy of tender expression (in his over 550 sonatas); Handel, on the other hand, possessed something brilliant and sparkling, in his playing, with astonishing dexterity of fingers.” Hantaï certainly brought out these respective qualities, first with a Sonata by Scarlatti, next with Handel’s *Suite d-Moll (HWV 436)*.

With roughly equal time for each composer, Bach finally had his moment with the *Partita Nr. 6 e-Moll (BWV 830)* from opus 1. Whatever the merits of the two early pieces, with Bach in Handaï’s hands, we had arrived at the pinnacle of harpsichord writing of the period. After a standing ovation, yet another half hour of encores ensued (all Bach), beginning with a second Partita. These completed about as scintillating a morning of harpsichord bravura as anyone could ever wish.



Duo Agion

Photo: Alciro Theodoro DaSilva

The evening then brought a sparkling performance by the Berlin-based Duo Agion of English music written in the era of Purcell and Handel. The venue was the nearby Reformierte Kirche with its intimate, tiered seating in the round. The dynamic young duo, an energized Semion Gurevich on violin and viola and the accomplished Agnieszka Skorupa on Harpsichord, recently won several competitions, including the Göttingen Händel competition last year. No wonder - with their virtuosity and nuance, both alone and in their deft duetting. Specializing in the performance of early music on period instruments, their captivating program included two works each by Purcell (a violin and harpsichord solo) and Handel (a Sonata for harpsichord and viola and Suite Nr. 5 for harpsichord). Other composers of the period included William Croft, Richard Croft, and Saverio Geminiani. An Irish jig made for a lively cap to the program; I was sorry to have them finish.

An Enterprising Opera-pasticcio: *Sarrasine*

For years Artistic Director George Petrou collected arias that Handel had discarded for one reason or another, not because they were of inferior quality, but for various dramaturgical reasons, ranging from the demands of a particular singer to rearrangements required for the music drama at hand. Mr. Petro and director Laurence Dale chose to showcase these

masterful arias not in concert, a viable alternative, but in the kind of music drama in which they might well have appeared some 300 years ago. They used the convoluted plot of a 19th century novella by Balzac in which Balzac himself narrates a journey back in time to 18th century Rome in order to hear a renowned opera singer, Zambinella. There he encounters Sarrasine, Zambinella's impassioned admirer, who does not realize Zambinella is a castrato.

Clearly for Mr. Petro, this story about the uncontrollability of love was fodder for the project. In addition, as he states in the program, "gender swapping and sexual ambiguities on stage were completely normal in the 18th century: sopranos embodied male title roles, male and female protagonists alike were portrayed by castrati." Moreover, reviving Balzac's novella as an opera-pasticcio, a patching together of arias from divergent contexts, allowed him to showcase the many worthy, but mostly unknown, arias by Handel that he had collected. In soprano Samuel Marino, Mr. Petro seems to have found a near-perfect embodiment for his castrato, Zambinella. With clarion and vibrant tone, Mr. Marino certainly captured the essence of what Mr. Petro accurately calls the "luminously brilliant voices" of those legendary super-star castrati.

But if this were all the reenactment counted on for success, it would not have worked at all. Upon a first hearing I was skeptical, regarding the plethora of musical numbers pressed seemingly at random into a preconceived 19th century plot as unduly contrived. But a second viewing at the Deutsches Theater the following day (the final performance of the Festival) had me feeling much better about the dramatic viability of this ambitious enterprise. Placement of musical numbers was far from random, and many unifying elements fostered a viable drama – be it 18th or 19th century or both.

In a Parisian hotel part way into Act I, Balzac (sturdy bass-baritone Sreten Manojlović) invites Madame de Rochefide, the famous soprano for whom he has amorous intentions (engaging soprano Myrsini Margariti), to join him in the fanciful excursion into the past. As would have been the case in Handel's day, the "castrato," Zambinella then makes her delayed spectacular entrance in billowing white formal attire, singing an alternative aria from *Alessandro*, with ample trills and confetti. At the outset of Act II, in an opera house with adoring fans in the wings, she makes a parallel spectacular entrance, now in a sweeping yellow gown. Following a joyous alterative chorus from *Alcina*, Zambinella sings an aria rejected from



Samuel Marino as Zambinella

Photo: Alciro Theodoro DaSilva

Giulio Cesare; “coy words, graces, and glances / are the powerful weapons of a woman / to overcome every heart.” Even if Mr. Mariano’s impressive ornamentation strained slightly at times, Zambinella assumed the required central status.

The binding theme of “the uncontrollability of love” was manifest in many ways, some more successful than others. Successful was a small carved statue of Zambinella that the aspiring French sculptor Sarrasine has been working on (and obsessing over). This becomes a ubiquitous fixture throughout the varied scenes (from studio to hotel room).



Marina Lara Poltmann & Kammerchor der Universität Göttingen
Photo: Alciro Theodoro DaSilva



Myrsini Margariti as Madame de Rochefide; Sreten Manojlović
as Balzac
Photo: Alciro Theodoro DaSilva

Less successful was the role of Mme de Lanty, (the acrobatic Marina Lara Poltmann) in attire similar to that of the five elegantly clad members of the Kammerchor der Universität Göttingen. Relentlessly, she mimes her uncontrolled reactions to events on stage. Perhaps this was an attempt at providing some comic relief, but her antics - including summersaults into box seats, over-exuberant conducting of two horns in another box, etc., often distracted from the superb musical performances of the Kammerchor and others on stage.

But overall, it was the music numbers that convinced, amidst the melodrama (spoken dialogue over music, arranged by Mr. Dale), predominant mostly in the second Act. Most effective was Handel’s familiar and poignant arioso, “Lascia la spina,” from the oratorio *Il Trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (performed earlier in the Festival) used as a unifying leitmotif of remembrance. Madame de Rochefide starts to sing it as an encore in the opening scene, but is cut off; in Act II Zambinella finally gets to sing it complete: “Abandon the thorn, /pick the rose;/you are seeking/your grief.” At other times it is interrupted and/or hinted at in one way or another. Eventually, in its original form as the Sarabande from *Almira* expanded a bit, it becomes the background for melodrama, as Sarrasine becomes the sacrificial lamb to Balzac’s sword, his illusions destroyed.

This final ritualistic execution, performed in slow motion, becomes another unifying feature of the work. Indeed the first act had ended with Sarrasine lifted Christ-like above the shoulders of men after a beating by the Cardinal (jealous, of course, at Sarrasine’s obsession with the primadonna of the day, Zambinella). As this titular character, renowned Handel specialist tenor Juan Sancho was indeed alive and singing with stunning virtuosity and warm tone throughout the opera, right from his first aria (an alternative aria from *Ottone*).

As part of the frame provided by the narrator, Balzac, Madame de Rochefide was also a major contributor to the pasticcio's structure as the object of Balzac's affection. The two dueted often right from the start in a number rejected from *Tamerlano* about peace and love being crowned with lilies and roses. Fittingly, Ms. Margariti had sung the first (incomplete) version of "Lascia la spina." Her dynamic stage presence and musicality helped make her an effective complement to the primary plot

around Sarrasine and his passion for Zambinella. Indeed it was she who recognized the glove from a frail old man in tattered military uniform in the opening scene, as the same military glove from the primadonna "castrato" in his young male persona.

We have come full circle; it takes one prima donna to recognize another, if a century apart. And an enterprising pasticcio lets revitalized lost music from three centuries ago live again as well.



Juan Sancho as Sarrasine creating a sculpture of his obsession, Zambinella

Photo: Alciro Theodoro DaSilva