

BARD FALL EVENTS
PRESENTING DANCE, MUSIC, THEATER, AND MORE
Buy your tickets now, 845-758-7900 or fishercenter.bard.edu

THE RICHARD B. FISHER CENTER
FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
AT BARD COLLEGE

You are here: [Home](#) » [Opera](#) » McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque Doing Handel's Orlando at Tanglewood—Less is More

McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque Doing Handel's Orlando at Tanglewood—Less is More

Posted by [Larry Wallach](#) • August 23, 2011 • [Printer-friendly](#)



Dominique-Labelle Sings Angelica in Handel's Orlando, Nicholas McGegan Conducting.
Photo Hilary-Scott.

George Frideric Handel's *Orlando*
Tanglewood Festival

Seiji Ozawa Hall
Tuesday August 16 2011

Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra of San Francisco
Nicholas McGegan, conductor

Cast:
Angelica - Dominique Labelle, soprano
Dorinda - Yulia Van Doren, soprano
Medoro - Diana Moore, mezzo-soprano
Orlando - Clint van der Linde, countertenor
Zoroastro - Wolf Matthias Friedrich, baritone

Nicholas McGegan and his merry band of singers and instrumentalists rolled into Tanglewood on Tuesday night (August 16) to wrap up their tour of Handel's great opera *Orlando* after taking it to Germany, Chicago, and New York City. The wear and tear of a tour were nowhere evident in their joyful presentation of music and theatrics—the performers still sounded like they were in the thrall of first love with this rich and rewarding score. The only member of the cast who seemed droopy was the Orlando of Clint van der Linde, and this was clearly the persona that he adopted for the misanthropic hero who seems to have lost touch with his inner Achilles. We had to wait for the mad scene late in the second act to see him take charge of the stage; then, if there had been any scenery, he would have chewed it up.

Bass Wolf Friedrich's Zoroaster gloated his way through his role as the philosophical wizard who pulls the strings of the plot, relishing his power and zapping every other cast member in sight as if possessed of one of Harry Potter's spare (and invisible) wands. Yulia Van Doren, my pick for superstar of the evening, radiated charm, energy, brilliance, and the pleasure of having a soprano voice that was bright, flexible, sweet, and available for just about any whim she might be possessed to follow. While her character Dorinda mostly suffers from unrequited love, her resilience is one of the determining factors in the final outcome of the story, and we saw evidence of it at every turn (literally) in Van Doren's performance. It was not surprising that she got the lustiest cheers at the end of the evening.

The serious romantic couple consisted of the Angelica of soprano Dominique Labelle and the Medoro of mezzo Diana Moore. Both were fully engaged in projecting the affect of Handel's extremely varied aria and recitative forms, and both gracefully negotiated the technical demands of Handel's vocal writing while remaining fully in character. Moore made the stronger impression in this performance. Her character has greater range, going from a comic need not to hurt the smitten Dorinda while in the process of rejecting her, to a touching sincerity in avowing faithfulness to Angelica by carving their names in a grove of (sacred) laurel trees. The voice was vibrant, accurate, and capable of producing a range of colors. That was not the case for Labelle at first; perhaps she was feeling some of the fatigue of the tour with a voice that got the notes but was a bit monochromatic. As the evening wore on, she warmed up and by the third act was producing some thrilling runs and ringing high notes.

Presiding over the fun was Maestro McGegan, with a smile that rarely left his face. He is always enjoyable to watch—his body language and gestures are precise, expressive, detailed, authoritative and supportive all at the same time. For me, he has the right ideas about how to do this music. Every moment has dramatic value, there is no “filler” or mechanical “spinning out.” He shows the players that he loves the music, and (mostly) loves what they do with it. It didn't hurt that he had a brilliant band of historical instruments who knew the work as well as he did. The orchestra included the usual strings and oboes but also recorders, two violas d'amore (to assist in portraying Orlando's madness), a pair of horns, and a theorbo (bass lute) along with two harpsichords.

The orchestra was seated in an oval shape around the two facing harpsichords with the director on the right side at one of the keyboards. That meant that the violins were sitting with their backs to the audience, which seemed very odd at first, but proved to make good sense once things got under way. There was no scenery, which also ended up being a plus. The singers, wearing generic costumes, took possession of the front of the stage and projected the sense of scenery through effective mime and acting against the backdrop of the backs of the players. From the audience's vantage point, there was no temptation of watch fiddlers sawing or winds tooting while the singers were holding the stage. The only distraction was the attractive one of observing McGegan impelling the music forward and enjoying every note.

Although titled for its legendary super-hero, this opera is a love-story between two other characters, Angelica and Medoro, and there are important elements of comedy, pastorella, sensuality, and madness, which play a much larger role than the bellicose, heroic or tragic. There are even elements of drawing-

room farce, when characters are mistakenly suspected of wooing the wrong person, or when Orlando is having hallucinations. It is the theme of the power of love, which proves superior to force, that holds this seemingly contrived story together, and Handel's music remains firmly on track, demonstrating the ways in which each character experiences this power. For Zoroastro, wisdom consists in the rational understanding that the greatest danger to the true hero is disappointment in love, and that the exercise of strength comes in overcoming its debilitating effects. This is what Orlando has to learn—he moves from innocence to insight through a wrenching and prolonged journey through madness and out the other side. Dorinda's story is a light-hearted parallel: as a shepherdess, she takes an earthy approach, recognizing and accepting that her feelings for Medoro will persist whether they are reciprocated or not.

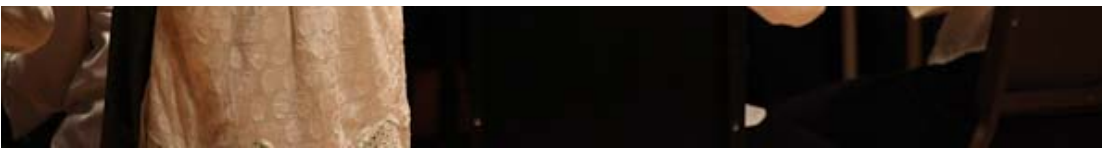
The short (and misleading) description of baroque opera describes a somewhat starchy and stilted form in which the action stops while characters sing emotionally repetitive arias revealing a single-minded state: Rage. Love. Mystery. Holy Awe. Despair, etc. The over-use of the Da Capo aria form means that at

least one-third of the music has been heard before. This one-size-fits-all description is an historical falsification that has been used to justify the neglect of an enormous repertory of operas by the world's major houses for the past century and a half. Even if a company like the Met throws in a Handel opera (often at the insistence of a leading singer) once every two or three seasons, the form remains marginalized and problematic. It requires conductors such as McGegan who understand where the drama resides within the score, and can bring it to the fore. Fortunately, there is an emerging generation of singers who understand that negotiating the demands of baroque vocal writing while projecting the intended affect is part of their craft. Last fall, I reviewed in *BR* [**a performance by the Juilliard 415 Ensemble under McGegan**](#) of Handel's early cantata *Tirsi, Clori, e Fileno* in which specially trained instrumentalists from that elite early program were joined by mainstream Juilliard singers who nailed the style with every bit as much stylistic authority and virtuosity as their instrumental counterparts. Absence of brilliant and capable singers is no longer an excuse not to be doing these treasures.

Handel's score, in fact, is infinitely varied and resourceful in conveying a nuanced and overarching emotional landscape. There are recognizable baroque conceits, as when, early on, Orlando resolves to bring his bellicose strength to the service of Love, with the help of a pair of horns, making a unique appearance in the opera. This aria is preceded by the first of many "accompagnato" recitatives which Handel uses to give dynamic musical expression to developing dramatic action. Here we got a first chance to notice McGegan's strategy for making the repetition of the first part (the "Da Capo") dramatically compelling. As in subsequent instances, the interpretation of the music was intensified through alteration of tempo, vocal dynamics, added ornamentation (some of which must have been improvised) and the use of the cadenza. In this particular aria, the conductor had a hand, since not only did the singer expand the penultimate moment with (unwritten) vocalizing, but he was joined harmoniously by the horns. McGegan consistently used the cadenzas to allow the singers to bring the feelings of their arias to their ultimate intensity, and it was the anticipation of such moments that grew as story developed momentum. So much for the static qualities of baroque opera.

Almost every set-piece in the opera could be cited for its felicities and surprises: the use of sung dialogues within arias (breaking the convention of a solo-dominated form) and ensembles that seemed to anticipate Mozart. Perhaps most astonishing, however, was the anticipation of Richard Strauss in the final trio of act I. Like the concluding trio of "Rosenkavalier" (1911), we had three high voices intertwining as the loving couple (Angelica and Medoro, both sung by women as in the original performance) persuades the third member of the triangle Dorinda to forgive them and accept her bereft state: think of Sophie, Octavian, and the Marschallin! Handel yields not one calorie of dramatic warmth to his extravagantly late-romantic colleague. In fact, the character of Dorinda emerges (partly thanks to the brilliant portrayal by Yulia Van Doren) as the most interesting and nuanced character. At the start of act II, her response to the song of the nightingale vacillates between major and minor, reflecting her complex response to this expression of love within nature. This is followed, oxymoronically, by Orlando's opposite stance, to pursue Angelica even if it means following her to hell, expressed by terrifying low-register coloratura runs that go on for as many as nine bars (upwards of 80 notes; sorry, I had to count them). Although Clint van der Linde managed this impressively, the effect is better revealed in a recording by the formidable Russian alto Elena Obratsova who nails every note with full power. It is in such moments that even the best counter-tenors remind us that these roles were intended for a different voice-type, that of the castrato.





Yulia Van Doren as Dorinda and Nicholas McGegan conducting in Handel's Orlando at Tanglewood. Photo Hilary-Scott.

Orlando's mad scenes provide the headline moments of the opera. Among the dramatic resources was the use of recorders and violas d'amore to provide a weird colors indicating Orlando's delusionary state. His "fury" is indicated by the unusual time-signature of five-eight in the accompanied recitative preceding his final aria in act II, a ground-bass form like "Dido's Lament" of Purcell built on a repetitive descending chromatic bass-line. Remaining mad well into act III, Orlando provides a comic moment when he declares love for Dorinda, who is at first amazed and then realizes that he is out of his mind; their duet, an alternation between his halting slow triple-meter and her lively duple, anticipates mid- and late-eighteenth century explorations of affectual opposition such as those of C. P. E. Bach (the trio *Sanguinaeus and Melancholichus* H. 579) and Beethoven (String Quartet in B-flat, op 18 no. 6). Also in act III, we have the juxtaposition of vocal acrobatics used for serious juxtaposed with comic purposes: Angelica's pity for Orlando and Dorinda's discourse on the craziness of love. In the latter, Handel's style illustrates madness from a comic perspective, with extended runs, over-the-top leaps, and stylistic modernisms such as voice and bass moving in unison. The composer here shows his awareness of new developments in operatic style as this aria occasionally reflects the pre-classical style of Pergolesi.

Handel's formal inventiveness carries him all the way to the final bars: Orlando's mind clears, he accepts his fate, and Handel constructs a genuine ensemble finale, foreshadowing those of Mozart's mature operas: in a flow of good spirits, each character expresses their acceptance or pleasure in the situation with Orlando wishing the lovers well, the lovers rejoicing, and Dorinda offering hospitality in her cottage. Handel labels this final moment "Coro," but this is no other than the five characters who have all genuinely developed in order to arrive at this common moment: the well-being projected by the music is indeed well-earned. All of this was reflected by the gleeful grin on the face of director McGegan.

A final word about operatic production values. While the stage at Ozawa Hall has none of the machinery or configuration that would enable Handel's special effects to take place (and those familiar with the Boston Early Music Festival's opera productions will have seen spectacular realizations of such effects in other operas), I found the absence of painted scenery, elaborate costumes, props, and magical effects to be minimal loss, and in some ways a gain. Aside of BEMF, so many operatic productions (baroque or otherwise) turn over the question of meaning to a stage director who feels obliged to be "original" and

"relevant," transforming the setting, period, and even the explicit emotional content of the music to fit a directorial conceit that often distances us from the meanings that are richly conveyed by the music and the singing actors alone. The fact that those meanings are present in the absence of physical and visual objects was amply demonstrated by this production, and it is hard to imagine that any audience member felt deprived or that their experience seemed diminished by such absence. On the contrary, the invitation to the audience to use its collective imagination to assist in the creation of this opera's reality seemed to make the experience a more joyously participatory one, in which we joined intimately with the conductor and band in supporting the reality projected by the singers, and in reaping the resulting rewards.

You might like:



Porgy and Bess at the A.R.T. – Opera as Broadway Musical



Boston Early Music Festival 2011 - I: Of Medieval Ovid and Schubert on the Fortepiano



The Barangaroo Review: Your concerns are important to us but we do not share them



Pre Raphaelite Drawings at the Art Gallery of New South Wales