



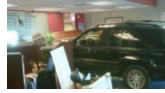
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# Philharmonia Baroque handles 'Orlando'

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John von Rhein  
Classical music critic  
August 13, 2011

Despite ongoing, well-meaning efforts, Chicago has yet to establish a period instruments orchestra that can rival the best national and international brands. So visits here by such ensembles as the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra can be inspirational, showing local musicians what can be done with applied talent and perseverance.

Conductor Nicholas McGegan's San Francisco-based ensemble returned to Ravinia on Thursday night to present a concert version of one of the gems of Baroque opera, Handel's "Orlando." In virtually every respect this was a model of how to bring works of the period alive, in stylish if stripped-down form.

The intimate Martin Theatre was the perfect size to accommodate the piece, which was performed complete (3 1/4 hours, with one intermission), minus the elaborate stage machinery called for in the score. With McGegan's orchestra occupying the rear of the small stage, the five singers enacted their romantic entanglements at the apron, occasionally plopping down on benches to voice their florid frustrations in some of Handel's choicest arias, duets and trios.

Fully staged productions at Lyric Opera in 1986 (starring the great Marilyn Horne) and at Chicago Opera Theater in 2008 have affirmed "Orlando's" considerable musical merits. The improbable plot pivots on a four-sided romantic entanglement: The knight Orlando pines for queen Angelica, who spurns him in favor of the soldier Medoro, who is loved from afar by the shepherdess Dorinda. So distraught is Orlando that he goes picturesquely bonkers and has to be restored to sanity by Zoroastro, a kind of wizardly stage-manager.


The McGegan "production" goes back to 2009 and, with one or two cast changes, is the one heard here Thursday. The British-born maestro drew playing from his fine group of period instrumentalists that was true to the letter as well as spirit of Handel's miraculous score. Tempos were judicious, rhythms nicely sprung, articulations crisply drawn, phrasings nicely dovetailed with the vocal lines.

The orchestra's playing was unfailingly alert, full of vitality, attentive to dramatic flow, the clean timbres of gut strings aerated by pairs of alto recorders and natural horns, with theorbo (long-necked lute) and harpsichord continuo helping the recitatives to flow with the naturalness of conversation.

The title role (created for the famed countertenor Senesino) requires great vocal strength, stamina, lyric beauty and command of the treacherous vocal demands of Orlando's mad scene. South African countertenor Clint van der Linde brought a voice of sweetness and agility to the part even if he had to force somewhat during the unhinged hero's "Ah Stigie larve! Ah scelerati spettri!"

The alluring Russian-American soprano Yulia Van Doren stole the show as Dorinda, the only character in the opera who isn't manipulative or mad. Her luscious voice has a pure, shining high extension, and she sailed through the coloratura leaps, plunges and flourishes

**John von Rhein**



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with uncanny ease. All of this was allied to a charming and expressive characterization.

Although her soprano turned somewhat edgy under pressure, Canadian soprano Dominique Labelle invested Angelica with imperious aplomb through fine musicality and technique. British mezzo Diana Moore sang sensitively and was convincingly masculine of manner in the trouser role of Medoro. Wolf Matthias Friedrich's firm bass-baritone boomed impressively as the magician Zoroastro, although his constant mugging for dramatic effect soon grew tiresome. All five singers embellished the *da capos* of their arias generously.

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