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MUSIC REVIEW

A Magician Pulling Strings to Prove a Point: Love Stinks



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

From left, Wolf Matthias Friedrich, Dominique Labelle and Diana Moore performing Handel's opera with the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra at Alice Tully Hall.

By ALLAN KOZINN
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Handel's [opera](#) "Orlando" has had a peculiar life. It was little more than a footnote in Handel's day. He composed it in 1732, to an anonymous libretto based on Ariosto's "Orlando Furioso." He performed it only 10 times in 1733, then dropped it entirely, never bothering to revive it. It languished until the 20th century, when conductors (mostly of the period-instrument persuasion) began to nudge it into the repertory alongside "Alcina" and "Ariodante," Handel's two other works based on Ariosto.

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"Orlando" has a persuasive new champion in Nicholas McGegan, who led his superb [Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra](#) of San Francisco and five fine singers in an invigorating performance at Alice Tully Hall on Sunday afternoon, as part of the [Mostly Mozart Festival](#).

The brevity of the work's early life is a mystery, given that the score is packed with Handelian vocal writing at its best.

The aria styles are varied — emotional *accompagnato* arias seem nearly to outnumber the purely showy *da capo* ones — and Handel even offers pictorial touches, as in the shepherdess Dorinda's lovelorn *arioso*, "Quando spieghi tuoi tormenti, amoroso rossignolo" ("When you sing of your woes, amorous nightingale"), which is suffused with

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birdcalls. Other arias are underpinned with dance rhythms that carry and comment on the passions of the text. And much of the orchestral writing is top-drawer.

Granted, "Orlando" has a convoluted libretto. Orlando, a knight, cannot decide whether to pursue heroic quests or love, so Zoroastro, a magician, orchestrates an adventure that shows him how chaotic love can be: Orlando falls in love with Angelica, and Dorinda is in love with Medoro. Dorinda and Orlando are out of luck: Angelica and Medoro are happily betrothed.

The situation drives Orlando over the edge — Handel gives him a magnificent mad scene — and convinces the decidedly more sensible Dorinda that love is dangerous (but manageable). In the end Zoroastro restores Orlando to sanity so that he can turn his attention to glorious knightly exploits.

Although the work is an opera seria, it is so rich in comic possibilities that Mr. McGegan and company justifiably played up its farcical side in this semi-staged concert reading. The soprano [Yulia Van Doren](#) made the most of these comic implications in her portrayal of Dorinda but never overdid them. Her voice blossomed as Handel fleshed out her character, and she — like the other singers here — brought consistently interesting, often athletic embellishments to the repeated sections.

In the title role the countertenor [Clint van der Linde](#) was curiously mopey from the start; he did not behave much differently in the mad scene from the way he did otherwise. His clarion timbre takes getting used to, but he shaped Orlando's music dramatically. [Dominique Labelle](#) used her flexible, burnished soprano thoughtfully in her dignified characterization of Angelica, and her florid ornamentation was often dazzling.

[Diana Moore](#), the mezzo-soprano, matched those qualities beautifully in her smooth-toned, compassionate account of Medoro. Zoroastro's appearances are few, but [Wolf Matthias Friedrich](#), a bass with a rich, deep tone, sang them commandingly.

Mr. McGegan arrayed his orchestra onstage in an oval surrounding two end-to-end harpsichords, a seating plan that some paintings suggest may have been the norm for a Baroque pit orchestra. He led a brisk, vigorous performance, and the orchestra sounded fine, its odd seating notwithstanding.

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