

The German Who Relished Italian Opera

George Frideric Handel's "Rodelinda, Regina de' Longobardi" Brings Baroque Beauty to the Met



by Robert Holzer

Viva il caro Sassone!" Never did an epithet say more about its

subject than did this one, with which a Venetian audience supposedly acclaimed the 24-year-old George Frideric Handel. When the cry went up, German composers had been adapting Italian styles and genres for just over a century. None, though, had enjoyed the triumphs of the young genius from Halle, who spent nearly four years conquering listeners in Florence, Rome, Naples, and Venice. The aforementioned cheer can be said to have crowned his stay, for it was occasioned by "Agrippina," the hit of the 1709-1710 season and Handel's first operatic masterpiece. His mastery of Italian opera continued in the visits and emigration to England that followed, and the form, which he practically introduced to that nation, remained at or near the center of his art for some 30 years.

Yet such labors were to be Handel's historiographical undoing. As musical and literary tastes changed, his Italian operas fell out of the repertoire. The near unbroken string of recitative and da capo aria that distinguishes late Baroque opera came to be seen as too static, too stylized, too artificial. The castrato was less and less the voice of heroic expression. Celebrations of benevolent despotism lost their appeal.

For Handel, perishability bred distortion, for other great chunks of his music were instead never forgotten. The English oratorios of his final two decades made him the first composer to achieve widespread immortality, but they also made him a sort of Anglican musical divine rather than the consummate *uomo di teatro* he had been. By the end of the 18th century, German-speaking countries had also taken his oratorios to heart; 19th-century scholarship, in turn, barely changed this attitude. For though it made all Handel's music available in a complete edition, his instrumental works gained the most, the "Concerti grossi," "Water Music," and "Music for the Royal Fireworks" solidifying their place in the canon. The operas, still shunned by public and specialists alike, had to wait for the next century.

And so it was, in the great rethinking of everything that followed World War I, that Handel's operas began returning to the stage. But it was not until the



A scene from Act I of Handel's "Rodelinda." (Photo by Marty Sohl/Metropolitan Opera)

aftermath of a still more radical upheaval, the 1960s, that these works began to enter the mainstream. On a purely practical level, the mercifully vanished art of the castrato was revived by countertenors, male falsettists capable of negotiating the same register as their mutilated predecessors. In the manner of Olympic athletes—faster, higher, stronger—successive generations have done so with ever greater ease. The use of original instruments complemented the new vocal timbre. At the same time, the attractions of diversity made it possible for audiences to embrace the very elements lost to that had repelled opera-goers past.

It is no surprise, then, that here the ever-adventurous New York City Opera took the lead in reviving Handel. The more cautious Metropolitan Opera, now presenting a limited run of "Rodelinda, regina de' longobardi" (first heard in London in 1725), took him up

later, in one-off productions in the 1980s. Revivals of "Giulio Cesare" a few years back showed that Handel's time at the Met had finally come, as did the debut of "Rodelinda" last season. Here thanks are due

soprano Renée Fleming, for it was her wish to sing the title role that brought the work to the Met stage, a use of star power at its most praiseworthy.

Unfortunately, Ms. Fleming is the

weakest element in the current revival. Sloppy diction, haphazard phrasing and faulty technique were often in evidence, as in the virtuosic aria from Act I, "L'empio rigor del fato." Things improved somewhat towards the end and she achieved real pathos in Act III's "Se il mio duol non è sì forte." By contrast, the other returning cast members, alto Stephanie Blythe (Eduige), tenor Kobie van Rensburg (Grimoaldo) and bass John Relyea (Garibaldo), were strong throughout. The best by far, though, were countertenors Andreas Scholl (Bertarido) and Christophe Dumaux (Unulfo), both making their Met debuts. Mr. Scholl is a consummate artist, joining beauty of tone, technical perfection, and deep understanding of every word. His first aria, "Dove sei, amato bene?," transformed the production from very good to unforgettable. Mr. Dumaux is almost his equal, offering effortless fluid singing in arias such as Act I's "Sono i

colpi della sorte." Conductor Patrick Summers led a reduced, 18th-century-sized orchestra in a crisply articulated, if sometimes frenetic reading.

The production is by veteran Handelian Stephen Wadsworth. As in his stagings for City Opera, costumes and sets evoke Handel's time rather than the libretto's, which in "Rodelinda" is 7th-century Lombardy. The choice is valid, for Baroque stagings pretended no historical accuracy and singers appeared in contemporary dress. Wadsworth's results are always beautiful, and often apt: the library for Act II, Scene 1 nicely complements the debate between good and evil counselors, Unulfo and Garibaldo attempting to sway the usurping King Grimoaldo to their respective side. The outdoor scenes, lovely as they are, are instead less convincing. An obelisk commemorating Bertarido, exiled and presumed dead, is placed next to the stables. And though the background is countryside, the contrast between man and nature in the first two scenes, between the palace and the "bosco di cipressi" in which are found the tombs of Langobard kings (thus the libretto), is lessened. The set makes even less sense when it reappears in Act II, Scene 2. Without a "luogo delizioso" (the source from which Handel's librettist worked mentions fountains and "giochi d'acqua")—in short, a park—the sounds of "ruscelli e fonti" of which Bertarido sings in "Con rauco mormorio" become pointless. Finally, Mr. Wadsworth requires too much movement. The sliding stage used to effect scene changes is not a bad idea, but the incessant motion of the characters is: Garibaldo, for example, exits the aforementioned scene on horseback. I imagine that Mr. Wadsworth fears audiences will not tolerate the static dramaturgy of Baroque opera, but as Mr. Scholl's singing demonstrated, they will. Each aria stops time, a trait long held to be a weakness of this repertoire, but it can be a strength. The preternatural beauty of Handel's music connects one to his characters' psychology in the most profound ways; out of such enchantments great theater is born. Perhaps future Handelian productions will embrace this virtue. For now, the Met offers a compelling "Rodelinda," whose final performance will take place on May 19.

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Concert to Honor Joseph Volpe

The Metropolitan Opera will celebrate the career of general manager Joseph Volpe, who retires after 42 years, with a star-studded gala concert on Saturday, May 20. The Gala Concert, which brings the 2005-2006 opera season to a close, will include performances by nearly 30 vocal artists, including sopranos Natalie Dessay, Renée Fleming, Mirella Freni, Karita Mattila, Ruth Ann Swenson, Kiri Te Kanawa, and Deborah Voigt; mezzo-sopranos Stephanie Blythe, Olga Borodina, Susan Graham, Denyce Graves, Waltraud Meier, Frederica von Stade, and Dolora Zajick; tenors Plácido Domingo, Juan Diego Flórez, Marcello Giordani, Ben Heppner, Salvatore Licita, Luciano Pavarotti, and Ramón Vargas; baritone Dwayne Croft, Thomas Hampson, and Dmitri Hvorostovsky; bass-baritone Ildar Abdrazakov; and basses James Morris, René Pape, and Samuel Ramey. The company's principal guest conductor, Valery Gergiev, and Maestros Marco Armiliato, James Conlon, and Patrick Summers will conduct the artists, orchestra and chorus of the Metropolitan Opera in a program comprised of arias, duets, and ensembles.



Joseph Volpe

Chicago/Museum of Science and Technology A Gathering of Modern Day Leonardos



by Arturo Vittori

I was recently a guest at the opening of the Museum of Science and Industry of Chicago's new exhibit, "Leonardo da Vinci: Man, Inventor, Genius," to showcase some of my recent work. The exhibit, organized in collaboration with the Italian Cultural Institute of Chicago, registered 6,000 visitors during the first weekend of its opening. It will run through September 4, 2006.

The purpose of the exhibit is to highlight Leonardo's creative spirit, his incredible powers of observation and ability to envision inventions and mechanical devices far ahead of his time. It reveals the true depth of this famed Renaissance man, his innovative spirit and how his genius lives on today. To illustrate this, visitors are invited to take a journey through more than 60 custom-built wooden models of Leonardo's most innovative designs and inventions, related to flight, civil machines, mechanical devices, including a hang glider, helicopter, military tank and elegant bridge structures—many of which can be traced directly to today's technology.

These models have been produced from Leonardo's original drawings by Italian craftsmen in Florence and are displayed for the first time in the U.S. Numerous models are interactive enough so that guests can pull and crank to better understand their purpose and operation.

The section of the exhibit where my partner Andreas Vogler and I have been invited to participate is devoted to "Modern Day Leonardos." Its aim is to show how Leonardo's



"DesertSeal," shelters for extreme environments by "Architecture and Vision" currently on display at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.

legacy still inspires and challenges us today. The Museum's curators have selected 40 "Modern Day Leonardos" inventors in whose work one can find Leonardo's passionate and inventive spirit and who will inspire a new generation to dream, create and invent the future. Among them are Brazilian architect Jaime Lerner, selected for his urban planning concepts;

American aerospace designer Bart Rutan for his Spaceship One; and, American inventor, artist, engineer Chuck Hoberman, internationally known for his transformable structures.

We are very proud to have been selected as "Modern Day Leonardos," as well for the architectural works and projects designed by "Architecture and Vision" (AV). Our work is

presented in the exhibit with a multimedia presentation of the entire array of AV projects, as well as a physical model and prototype.

One of our projects on display as a model is the "KineticPavilion," a dynamic urban sculpture designed as an outdoor public pavilion. This kinematics sculpture changes its shape and configurations dynamically, according to different

environmental inputs like the sun, wind and the movements of the people around it. The idea is to let people appreciate and enjoy the beauty of the sculpture and the energy of the environment, at the same time using the space underneath as a social place for meeting and dialog, a cultural exchange platform. Foreseen to be mobile as a travelling pavilion, it could be shown in various public spaces, such as in squares and parks.

Also on display is a prototype of "DesertSeal," AV's tent study for extreme environments. It uses the specific temperature curve found in hot arid regions, drawing cooler air from higher altitude into the tent. Air pressure helps to stabilize the tent in the wind. Newly-developed solar film is used for additional energy gain to power electric fans. The beauty of this structure derives from its functionality and efficiency, particularly dealing with such natural energies as the sun and wind. "DesertSeal" makes use of the technologies and materials developed for space exploration applied for terrestrial projects, the so-called "down-to-earth" concept: small transportation but large deployment volume, lightweight inflatable structure. A prototype of "DesertSeal," built by the company Aerosekur (Aprilia/Italy), was shown in 2005 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

As an Italian, I was glad to rediscover Leonardo's work in Chicago and to see the work of my company presented next to the genius of the Renaissance and among renowned contemporary inventors from all over the world.

Arturo Vittori is an architect/designer and co-founder of "Architecture and Vision," a design company.



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