



Accademia San Felice

Georg Friedrich Händel

(Halle 1685 - London 1759)

Rodrigo

articoli

From Tokafi:

Concert Report/ Ensemble San Felice: "Handel - Rodrigo"

Live at St John's Smith Square, London, May 17th 2008.

Even though reverence for his work has long stood in the shadow of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, Handel has been „the man%oo for this year's Lufthansa Festival up until now. His arias left a devastating impression on the first night and „Rodrigo%oo represents by far the most spectacularly staged performance of the entire week. With a special addendum to the program notes coming in flashy colors and with screaming neo-punk imagery, it is in fact a statement of historical correctness, musical discovery and of 21st century fashion at the same time. No wonder then, that my immediate seat-neighbors arrive clad in purple period clothes and sporting silver shoes - who said classical music did not have a pop factor? As an additional blessing, I have been given a chair in one of the first rows, allowing me to follow every tiny gesture or facial expression up close and personal.

To further enhance the experience, a video track is running non-stop alongside the musical development, operated from a faintly glowing Notebook just behind the curtains at the far right of the podium. Consisting of nothing but pencil sketches, whom the camera zooms in and out of, it neither adds to the story, nor to the mood, nor does it represent a contemporary piece of set design. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the images occasionally highlight certain parts of the text, depicting scenes of aggression, for example, as warlord Evanco and legionnaire Fernando (played by Susanna Rigacci and Caterina Calvi respectively) take the stage. Even though the video adds a certain depth to the action, it never really convincingly explains its existence and comes across as a bit of an anachronism, especially as part of a performance which comes accompanied with claims of high authenticity. „I still haven't figured out all of this projection stuff%oo, someone says during the interval. Me neither, actually. Who cares for such details, however, when there is so much music to be enjoyed. „Rodrigo%oo is no longer an obscure footnote to the Handel legacy, having already been recorded and performed several times before. Holes in the manuscript have been filled and historical analysis has replaced missing

arias with other, closely connected works from the composer's oeuvre. Its prestige is sure to grow even more, as the royal firework of melodies that Handel ignites here is almost beyond description. Every single one of the mere six characters is given at least one noteworthy aria and the two duets between Rodrigo and his wife Esilena are painfully beautiful. Even though the second act starts out in a contemplative mood, with many long recitatives slowing the pace of the opera down and the story lacking the dramatic urge of some of Handel's later works, its gradual rise towards the finale, which unites all singers in a glorified choir, easily makes up for this.

What I find so convincing about an „original practice%oo approach like the one directed by Federico Bardazzi and his good-humored and aptly titled Ensemble San Felice (who are all smiles during the performance) is that it shows the power of minimalism and how much can be achieved without the pomp of a humongous line-up. Separated into a small orchestra at the left (which lays down sensitive accompaniments in the arias) and an agile recitative trio on the right (who are just as passionate and energetic as their counterparts), the musicians develop a sound capable of depicting a wide range of emotions, from the tender to the furious, from the joyous to the depressed. The players even find themselves integrated into the theatrical action, as Bardazzi is gently „abused%oo for a stone pillar by Soprano Laura Cherici. With a cast as small as this one, each singer is given a unique chance to prove what she or he is worth. Greedily, everyone makes use of this opportunity tonight. Annamaria dell'Oste lays down a truly frenzied, yet fragile and hurt Florinda (whose lust for revenge causes all hell to break loose, when Rodrigo dumps her), Gloria Banditelli portrays Rodrigo as a man who, in the moment of truth, realises his family is the most important thing in his life and Leonardo De Lisi (remarkably the only male performer here) charges between ostensible strength and inner doubts with a supple and warm deep tenor voice.

Even though the conflict between Florinda and Rodrigo is at the heart of the story, one can not escape the notion that Handel fell in love with the character of Esilena when writing the opera. He has bestowed some of the most obviously charming, moving and contagious pieces on her, given her plenty of stage time and even sending her to Rodrigo's rescue in the deciding scene, when she saves both of their lives with a heartfelt plea for mercy. Quite naturally, then Laura Cherici is the focal personage of the evening, her shining lines rising high above the music, clear yet never without tiny impurities, growls of anger, despair or desperation, which make her voice so human and emotive. When her Soprano merges with Banditelli's mature Mezzo in the short but intense „Adio%oo, a hall of roughly 800 guests holds its breath.

One of the San Felice's is playing his violin amidst the crowds leaving St. John's at the end, sending them home with a musical souvenir and you can still hear people whistling some of the themes on the street blocks away from the church. Even though these will be the last notes of Handel for the Lufthansa Festival until it heads for Westminster Abbey on its final night, the former citizen of London is still „the man%oo in a city which has never forgotten him.

By Tobias Fischer

Lufthansa Festival of Baroque Music - Handel, s Rodrigo

Reviewed by: Kadir Hussein, Classical Source

Handel

Rodrigo - Opera in three acts to a libretto anonymously adapted from Francesco Silvani, s *Il duello d, Amore e di Vendetta* [reconstructed by Alan Curtis; sung in Italian]

Rodrigo - Gloria Banditelli

Esilena - Laura Cherici

Florinda - Annamaria dell, Oste

Giuliano - Leonardo De Lisi

Evanco - Susanna Rigacci

Fernando - Caterina Calvi

Ensemble San Felice

Federico Bardazzi

Luciano Alberti - Stage Direction

Enrico C. Maison - Costumes

St John's, Smith Square, London

Saturday, May 17, 2008

„Rodrigo%oo is one of only two operas (the other being „Agrippina%oo) that Handel wrote in Italy. He was 22 years old and learning his craft. Thus much of the music is conventional and could have been written by any decent composer of the period.

Act One is dull, though Acts Two and Three are more interesting, with Evanco ,s aria *CEll dolce foco mio*, and the duet for Rodrigo and Esilena in the last act both moving and enjoyable. Fortunately, Handel recycled some of the material from „Rodrigo%oo for his later operas, transforming it into truly memorable and outstanding music

This sold-out, semi-staged performance was part of the Lufthansa Festival of Baroque Music and, unusually for a Handel opera, an Italian cast performed it. The orchestra was superb, with wonderful contributions first violin, first cello and the first recorder. Federico Bardazzi conducted with grace and enthusiasm.

Of the singers, Gloria Banditelli was the only one with an outstanding voice: warm, smooth and evenly projected. She did not sound too sure of herself at first but it did not take her too long to get into her stride. Especially enjoyable was her *CEsiete assai superbe*, in Act Two with its superb runs.

Laura Cherici, s soprano has a mezzo tinge to its tone, as well as being

somewhat husky and grainy. It suited the character of Esilena, who has many slow lamenting arias; *Egli e tuo*, and *Perche viva il caro sposo*, both with cello obbligato, were especially attractive. Her spectacular aria *Per dar pregio*, at the end of Act One pitted her against the first violin - which won the contest with ease.

Annamaria dell'Oste, soprano is a brighter, colder sound with minimum vibrato, perfect for the character of Florinda, who was in fury most of the time! Her *Fredde ceneri d'amor*, in Act Two was excellent. The third soprano, Susanna Rigacci, has a wide range but had problems with her intonation in her first aria in Act Two, although she gave a good account of herself in her second aria.

Contralto Caterina Calve must have been very nervous. In Act One she was hesitant and her intonation suffered. She recovered for the second act: her only aria being better articulated and projected. The only male singer was the tenor Leonardo De Lisi, who was certainly very enthusiastic. His ordinary tenor has a good range but tends to lose focus and quality at the bottom. His intonation also suffered and his runs were frequently smudged. I wish I could be more enthusiastic. To hear Italians singing in their own language is a pleasure in itself ... but very few Italians know how to sing Handel (or Mozart for that matter).