

# *The impossible legacy of Senesino*

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The main reason why *Floridante*, written in 1721, has not achieved the same success as other works in the recent resurgence of Handel's operas has to be found mainly in the libretto, which even for baroque standards lacks credibility and coherence. The librettist Paolo Rolli had taken a perfectly workable earlier text by Francesco Silvani, *La costanza in trionfo*, and eliminated any sign of clear design, consistent characters and motivation. Such weaknesses are reflected in the music-dramatic impact of the work, and notwithstanding its musical richness

*Floridante* has not really found a footing on the modern stage: only four productions are recorded in the 20th century, a real contrast when compared with *Giulio Cesare*, written for some of the same singers only 3 years later in 1724, which has been revived over 200 times.

It is a real shame, because the score is blessed with some memorable and delightful melodies: in this work Handel, influenced by the enormous success of Bononcini (his colleague/rival in London, who was a real master of catchy tunes, especially in the pathetic style), had attempted to simplify his complex and heroic writing style. How successful 'il caro Sassone' was in overcoming the Italian at his own game is testified by Charles Burney, the 18th century English writer on music, who, in assessing the work, singled out the "charming slow arias" as "superior in very respect to those of Bononcini". Indeed some of the tunes from *Floridante*, like 'Finchè lo strale', 'Alma mia and Dopo il nembo' proved to be very popular in Handel's time.

So after *Lotario*, *Radamisto*, and *Ferdinando, Re di Castiglia* (an earlier version of *Sosarme*) we need to once again thank Alan Curtis and his Complesso Barocco for releasing another gem from the Handel canon. Curtis was indeed one of the pioneers in the rediscovery of *Floridante*, which he staged both in Ottawa and at Berkeley in 1990, recording the highlights from the opera, and it is likely that his convincing reading might have been enhanced by the experience of dealing with it in dramatic terms: strong contrasts in tempi, dynamics and colours contribute to sustain a dynamic energy throughout the work, which on the light of some recent recordings of Handel is indeed an achievement.

George Frideric Handel: *Floridante*, opera in tre atti, HWV 14. Marijana Mijanovich (Floridante), Joyce DiDonato (Elmira), Vito Priante (Oronte), Roberta Invernizzi (Timante), Riccardo Novaro (Coralbo), Sharon Rostorf-Zamir (Rosanne). Il Complesso Barocco. Alan Curtis, conductor. Three compact discs DDD, 163 minutes. Recorded at Chiesa di San Silvestro, Vitarbo (Italy) in September 2005. Archiv Produktion 477 6566

Curtis is obviously very aware of the need for variation in approaching baroque scoring, and this is particularly evident in the realization of the continuo, where theorbo, cello and harpsichord alternate and interact according to the dramatic situation.

Great part of the merit also goes to the singers, in particular Joyce Di Donato, who in the role of 'Elmira' confirms herself as one of today's most accomplished and intelligent interpreters of Handel. The timbre of her voice, with its rich velvety middle, is ideal for this repertoire, and her technique allows her to manage even the most demanding coloratura.

But it is her gift for dramatic delivery of the text and her willingness to take vocal risks that allow her to stand out: one only has to listen to her rendition of 'Notte cara' to realize the importance of real vocal presence in evoking the dramatic power of Handel's music, often short-changed by the dullness of many so called 'early music specialists'. Not at the same level, but still very idiomatic and convincing are the 'Rossane' of Sharon Rostorf-Zamir and the 'Timante' of Roberta Invernizzi, while Vito Priante is refreshingly agile in the demanding bass role of 'Oronte'.

Like other operas written for Senesino, *Floridante* presents a problem which is basically unsolvable: how to cast the main role. While some of the later *primi uomini* used by Handel were soprani, as in the case of Caffarelli or Carestini, Senesino was not simply a castrato, but an alto whose greatest strength was the dramatic delivery in the middle-lower register, as exemplified in the madness scene in *Orlando*. This means that most of the mezzo-sopranos who excel in Handelian trouser roles find the Senesino ones far too low. At the same time, the use of counter-tenors is debatable on the double ground of limited power and artificiality of the timbre, and the results are very often disappointing.

Unfortunately, Curtis opts for a strange compromise: a female voice which actually sounds like a counter-tenor. It can be argued that voices are often a matter of subjective taste, and surely Matijana Mijanovic has her admirers, but there is something highly artificial in her vocal production, and the final result lacks the richness in harmonics which characterizes a well produced voice, with a strange wobble that has little to do with a natural vibrato.

This has an impact on the range of colours and on the dramatic delivery, to the point that in an otherwise very successful vocal cast, the main role becomes the weakest link. With the present scarcity of real contraltos on the operatic stage, there are few options available, and bar the reinstatement of pre-puberal castration, none completely satisfactory, so we are doomed to have to accept a less than ideal solution when it comes to the Senesino operas - which unfortunately are the majority, as he was Handel's *primo uomo* from 1719 to 1732.

Still, it is a small price to pay when we are presented with scores of such richness and invention, especially when they are realised with the understanding and passion which above all characterise this recording.