

## *A turn on the wheel of fortune*

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Since moving back to their home on Unter den Linden in 2017, the Staatsoper have devoted a part of each November/December to neglected, forgotten and otherwise obscure operas from the baroque repertoire; the Barocktage series has thus far included works by (among others) Rameau, Purcell and Alessandro Scarlatti, often in high-profile stagings and performed by renowned period specialists. This year's new production of *Il Giustino* apparently marks the first time that any opera by Vivaldi has appeared on the stage of the Staatsoper; and while Barbora Horáková's lively staging kept the action clear and focussed, it was René Jacobs and the musicians of Berlin's Akademie für Alte Musik whose vivid performances revealed an engaging, immediately accessible work for which no specialist knowledge of eighteenth-century theatre was required.

Vivaldi may be one of the most recognisable names in the world of baroque music, but the scarcity of his operas is less surprising than it may initially seem. Even his most successful music dramas – often written quickly to meet the demands of various theatres – had lapsed into relative obscurity by the time of his death, and were thoroughly unknown by the time scholars began to venture into the depths of his oeuvre in the 1930s. *Il Giustino*, written for the 1724 carnival season in Rome, had to wait over 250 years for its next performance in 1985. Since then there has been a critical edition and at least three recordings – all from the CD era – but the opera has remained a relative rarity on stage.

As Vivaldi, like many composers of his time, was no stranger to the practice of recycling and reworking older material, modern performances have taken a relaxed approach to the notion of a definitive text. The music performed on this evening was René Jacobs' own 'shortened and revised' version, which included both cuts and additions, and amounted to some three hours of music spread out over 35 numbers. The subplot with Andronico was retained, but the original three act schema was restructured into two parts of roughly equal length. While a purist might argue that Mr Jacobs' version did not represent the truest possible form of the opera, almost all of the editorial decisions worked to the advantage of the staging.

Horáková, Il  
Giustino  
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Staatsoper Unter  
den Linden.

Vivaldi: *Il Giustino*. Barbora Horáková,  
director. Raffaele Pe (Anastasio), Kateryna  
Kasper (Arianna), Christophe Dumaux  
(Giustino), Robin Johannsen (Leocasta),  
Siyabonga Maqungo (Vitaliano), Helena  
Rasker (Andronico), Olivia Vermeulen  
(Amanzio, Fortuna), and Magnus Dietrich  
(Polidarte). Akademie für Alte Musik  
Berlin. René Jacobs, conductor



The story of *Il Giustino* is nominally set in the eastern Roman empire of late antiquity, specifically the beginning of the sixth century during the reign of emperor Anastasius I, but the events depicted are closer in spirit to the quasi-mythological fantasias of Ariosto. Although the original libretto – which had already been set, in various forms, by Giovanni Legrenzi, Domenico Scarlatti and Tomaso Albinoni, and would later be used by Händel – was divided into three acts, Mr Jacobs offered a version of two halves: the first dealt with the rebellion of Vitaliano against Anastasio, the kidnapping of the empress Arianna, and her rescue by Giustino, while the second was devoted to Amanzio's attempt to usurp the throne, Giustino's reconciliation with Vitaliano (would you believe they were long-lost brothers?) and the restoration of Anastasio. Although the division made sense on paper – the first half was high adventure, the second half palace intrigue – Barbora Horáková's staging suggested that the somewhat laboured mechanics of the plot were largely secondary to the demands of spectacle.



Vivaldi: *Il Giustino*. René Jacobs, conductor. Barbora Horáková, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, november 2022. © 2022 by Matthias Baus / Staatsoper unter den Linden.

In fact, the staging began none-too-promisingly, with a group of children running onto the stage yelling at the top of their lungs while the orchestra attempted to make themselves heard over the din. The children, who both doubled the principals and were later revealed to be the puppeteers controlling the action, had the distinct misfortune of recalling two different Staatsoper productions from 2019: Romeo Castellucci's staging of Alessandro Scarlatti's *Il Primo Omicidio* (also conducted by René Jacobs) – a promising production that fell flat when a group of children showed up to act out the story in parallel with the singers – and Yuval Sharon's disastrous *Zauberflöte*, in which the puppetry of the children was blown up to life-size proportions. Fortunately Ms Horáková had the good judgement to whisk the children off stage before the Sinfonia had ended – they appeared only sporadically to reinforce the idea that, yes, each one did correspond to a character – and not to overstate the puppet-show angle.

Instead Ms Horáková devoted her energies to the creation of strong archetypes and clearly rendered action. If the early scenes displayed a distracting penchant for campy overacting, the excesses were smoothed into an engaging rhythm even before the setting had shifted from the palace of Anastasio to the countryside of Giustino. The complex stage set offered a modern gloss on half-imagined eighteenth-century theatrical conventions, with multiple layers of painted backdrop raised, lowered and pulled aside to create a succession of different spaces. There were a handful of *ex machina* appearances from various deities (including Eros of ancient mythology and the standard white-bearded god of popular christianity), and in many scenes the wheel of fortune spun endlessly in the background. Yet if the elaborate stage machinery and occasional special effects were knowing nods to the tastes of Vivaldi's age, they were kept subordinate to well-crafted scenes that moved the action effortlessly from location to location and scenario to scenario, finding an appropriate tone for the drama of each moment without leaving the audience behind.

Admittedly not every aspect of the staging was equally successful. Although Arianna and Vitaliano were developed into figures of relative complexity and Giustino was able to coast

on his noble-strongman persona, the decision to make Anastasio effete and ineffectual – even if such a reading has some basis in the libretto – seemed at odds with the nobility of his arias. Even more troubling was the digital display built into the bottom of the stage, which proved helpful in clarifying the fast-paced changes of location, but grew somewhat tiresome when it started to offer its own running commentary on the inner thoughts of the characters. The arias themselves did a fine job of illuminating the moral and spiritual essence of the scenes, and the extra layer of commentary served mostly to rob the libretto’s poetry of any remaining ambiguity. Such reservations, however, were minor when set against the dramatic achievement of the whole.



Vivaldi: *Il Giustino*. René Jacobs, conductor. Barbora Horáková, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, november 2022. © 2022 by Matthias Baus / Staatsoper unter den Linden.

For all its stock plot complications and moments of spectacle, *Il Giustino* was written first and foremost a vocal showcase, and the staging acknowledged this by turning the area around the orchestra pit into a platform, allowing the singers to deliver their arias directly to the audience without an excess of projection that might have ruined the delicate balance between voice and instrumental ensemble.

Among the soloists, Kateryna Kasper’s Arianna was perhaps the most conspicuously stylish performance of the evening. Certainly it helped that Vivaldi himself seemed to have reserved much of the opera’s finest music for the Byzantine empress, but it was Ms Kasper’s ease of technique and broad emotional range that made each of her arias a delight. ‘Da’ tuoi begl’occhi imparà’, with its careful alternation between declamatory and introspective passages, marked a change from the frivolity of the preceding court scenes to a more serious mode of musical drama without sacrificing its essential lightness of touch. If Ms Kasper had no trouble exposing the deeper emotions beneath the playful veneer of the staging – as she did in the moving lament ‘Mio dolce amato sposo’ and the probing ‘Dalle gioie del core’ – there was perhaps no better encapsulation of Vivaldi’s buoyant style than the delightful ‘Per noi soave e bella’ that ended the evening’s first half.



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Both of the counter-tenor roles were given performances that stressed intimacy of phrasing over strength of projection. As Anastasio, Raffaele Pe was somewhat burdened by the staging’s curious vision of an ineffectual emperor, but his two solo scenes in the first half – the gently delivered war preparations of ‘Vedrò con mio diletto’ and the delicate cavatina ‘Sento in seno’ supported by pizzicato strings – added considerable depth to the character. His finest moment came in the second part with ‘Taci per poco ancora’ which wove elegant strands of anxiety into agitated phrasing. Christophe Dumaux used the opera’s first part to establish Giustino as an important figure in the drama, but his two greatest vocal moments came in the second part, a fine ‘Su l’altar di questo Nume’ and the superb ‘Ho nel petto un cor sì

forte’.

Siyabonga Maqungo, whose agile tenor stood out against the predominantly higher voices around him, provided the evening with a persuasive Vitaliano, convincingly cruel as the abductor of Arianna in the first half, but smoothing his path towards redemption by adding shades of nobility to the excellent 'Quando serve alle ragione'. Olivia Vermeulen, who had a brief appearance as Fortuna near the beginning, but whose Amanzio remained on the sidelines for much of the first part, bloomed into a delightful villain in the second half, sowing discord in Anastasio's mind and later channelling Chaplin's Great Dictator in her effervescent 'Si, vo a regnar'. Robin Johannsen's Leocasta summoned convincing heartbreak in 'Senza l'amato ben'; and if the character of Andronico is a plot-twist too far – he is a suitor of Leocasta disguised as a woman in order to be close to her, who also happens to be the brother of Vitaliano and Giustino – Helena Rasker nonetheless justified the character's presence with a triumphantly charged 'È pur dolce ad un'anima amante'.

Throughout the evening René Jacobs was able to summon a dazzling array of textures from the modest ensemble, in which the usual strings were bolstered by harpsichord, organ, lute, theorbo and harp, and augmented in certain numbers by pairs of period-appropriate wind and brass instruments. The orchestral accompaniment of the arias ranged from excitable to ethereal, but Mr Jacobs was also careful to highlight Vivaldi's arsenal of unusual and exotic sounds: Giustino's dream in the first part was rendered magical by a curious combination of high strings and sustained bass, trumpets in the loges conjured the martial spirit of Vitaliano's camp, and the garden idyll of Leocasta and the disguised Andronico was brought to life with an assortment of vintage bird whistles; and, for a modern audience, there were few moments in the evening more enchanting than the salterio accompaniment to Giustino's 'Ho nel petto un cor sì forte'.

Baroque operas are always something of a gamble for the modern opera house: although the genre has its own built-in fan-base – and there were indeed a small handful of score-studiers and air-conductors scattered throughout the auditorium – the Staatsoper Barocktage productions have often leaned heavily on glittery costumes, flamboyant stagecraft, and a knowingly modern (occasionally ironic) approach to the action in their attempts to make lesser-known early works more broadly attractive to a twenty-first century audience. Although *Il Giustino* was not without its moments of crowd-pleasing dazzle, it was often able to locate a near-perfect balance between performance and spectacle. With Ms Horáková and Mr Jacobs operating at similar levels of inspiration and a cast enamoured of Vivaldi's elegant style, the result was an entertainment of the highest order.