



THE HANDEL INSTITUTE
NEWSLETTER

Professor Brian Trowell, chairman of The Handel Institute since 1987, resigned in September on health grounds. He is succeeded by Professor Donald Burrows, who heads this issue of the *Newsletter* with an appreciation of Brian's contribution and some thoughts for the future. There are also reports on the summer Handel festivals in Germany and two

reviews by Winton Dean – one of the first-ever Handel opera production at Glyndebourne, the other of Broomhill Opera's *Tolomeo* at Christ's Hospital. Finally we publish news of recent changes in the management of the Hallische Händel-Ausgabe and information on events taking place in 1999.

Terence Best

LOOKING BACKWARDS — AND FORWARDS

My first public words as Chair of The Handel Institute must be to record the appreciation of the Trustees and Council for Brian Trowell's service as my predecessor. Brian was the first person to hold the office, joining the Institute at its foundation in 1987. Although preparations had been laid during the preceding years by a Provisional Council under the chairmanship of Gerald Hendrie, the Institute had to find its feet very quickly. Our negotiations had already established two British representatives on the Editorial Board of the Hallische Händel-Ausgabe (*HHA*), and the Institute provided the reservoir of specialist scholarly expertise that would support our participation in this international enterprise. As Chair of the Institute, but not a member of the *HHA* board, Brian represented us in the international negotiations (in circumstances that now seem to belong to another world) with our new colleagues in East Germany, and again in the revised arrangements that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall. When he assumed the chairmanship, he was King Edward Professor of Music at King's College, London, and breathed some activity into

the link with the College that had been written into our constitution. His first few months of service also saw the first proposals for a Handel conference, to be combined with hosting a meeting of the *HHA* board, and the first whispers of the Institute's involvement in the long-term management of the Gerald Coke Handel Collection.

During eleven years Brian led the Institute with tact and firmness through a succession of interesting and often challenging situations. The period saw three successful conferences, one of them resulting in the publication of a substantial book, and the development of our relationship with the *HHA*. Brian was our signatory on the first agreement setting up the Gerald Coke Handel Foundation, and served as one of our initial representatives on its Council of Management. On our behalf he represented our interests in contacts with the Handel House project, and he set a personal example by maintaining Handelian topics among his multifarious research interests. Although he has felt it appropriate, for health



reasons, to resign his places on the Council and Trust, we are sure that he will maintain his interest in the Institute and we look forward to an informal continuation of his participation in our affairs.

Apart from the succession to the chair, the recent months have seen a number of changes in the Institute's personnel. I welcome John Deathridge, the current King Edward Professor, as the King's College representative on the Trust, and record our pleasure that Curtis Price has agreed to return as a Trustee. During the last year we have also added Elizabeth Gibson, Andrew Jones and Reinhard Strohm to our Council. It is remarkable that our sister institutions in other countries are similarly going through a period of change. It was apparent during the recent meeting of the American Handel Society at Maryland that they, too, are welcoming new Officers and Directors. Most notable, however, are the recent changes in the management of the *HHA*.

The death of Bernd Baselt in 1993 was a grievous blow to the Edition, and we must acknowledge a large debt of gratitude to Klaus Hortschansky (Münster) and Siegfried Flesch (Halle) who, as General Editors, have directed the project during the last five years. Upon Dr Flesch's recent retirement, Professor Hortschansky stepped down and there arose an opportunity for a fresh approach. On 4 October Wolfgang Ruf (Ordinarius in Music at the University of Halle-Wittenberg, and President of the Händel-Gesellschaft) and Terence Best were appointed the new General Editors; Professor Hortschansky and Dr Flesch stay on as members of the Editorial Board, which is otherwise unchanged. Terence's appointment is a sign of the effectiveness of the international relationships that have been built up during the last fifteen years in connection with the development of the Halle edition; we can take some pride in this recognition of one of our Institute representatives, but at the same time we need to remember that the General Editorship is a responsible and active office that will need our support.

Participation in the Halle edition was the initial reason for the Institute's foundation, and it continues to keep us busy. Similarly, we are committed to a role in the maintenance and development of the Gerald Coke Handel Collection (which has recently been accepted for the nation), and our attention is now about to be engaged also in the planning of our November 1999 conference. Whatever else we take on in the future, these must remain our core activities. Although the *HHA* edition is produced in Germany (and the grandest Handel festivals take place there Germany and in America), Britain remains the richest location for Handel sources and, arguably, for Handelian scholarly expertise.

But active Handel scholars under the age of forty are not numerous anywhere in the world, and the proportion of them in Britain is disturbingly small. The completion of the *HHA* will take at least another quarter-century, and the volumes awaiting attention include large and challenging operas and oratorios. There is an urgent need for us to pass on our skills, and our experience of Handel sources, to a new generation. Handelian topics must retain a prominent place in the attention of the international scholarly community, and indeed of the wider public. Through the Handel Institute and Byrne Awards we have given some assistance to young scholars and performers, but it is disturbing that the research awards have attracted so few applications from Britons. The difficulty of diverting talented young scholars and musicians (and, incidentally, more women) to Handel should not be underestimated: editing the score of a major Handel work requires a combination of musician-ship and intellectual talents that is rare enough in any case.

Nevertheless, I hope that the next few years will see us nurturing Handel-related activity for the future, as well as fulfilling and expanding on our now well-established responsibilities.

Donald Burrows



THE HÄNDEL FESTSPIELE IN GÖTTINGEN AND HALLE 1998

The now-regular pattern of the two midsummer German Handel festivals was followed again in 1998: Göttingen ran from 28 May to 2 June, followed after a day's interval by the larger festival in Halle (4-9 June). As seems customary nowadays, each festival had a theme, though this may not always be a good idea if events are strait-jacketed to fit it, particularly in the scholarly conferences that usually form

part of the proceedings: good papers by budding young scholars, relevant to the wider field of Handel studies, might otherwise be forthcoming but may be excluded or not even called for because they have nothing to do with the chosen theme. English members put this point strongly to the meeting of the Vorstand of the Georg-Friedrich-Händel-Gesellschaft in Halle, and it seemed to be well taken.

GÖTTINGEN

Handel and the World of the Orient

There being no conference at Göttingen this year, the theme was not developed as a topic for discussion, though it was the subject of an address by Professor Peter Bachmann, who gave it the tempting English title 'From Arabia's spicy shores'. In his paper, and in an extended essay in the programme book, Bachmann dealt with the way in which the Middle East was viewed in Europe in Handel's time and with the influence of such a view on contemporary librettos. An interesting connection is that the University of Göttingen has one of the leading schools of Arabic studies in Germany; it mounted an exhibition entitled 'Encounter with Arabia'.

The two major works performed, *Tolomeo* and *Alexander Balus*, had an Eastern connection. *Tolomeo* was the latest Nicholas McGegan show, directed as before by Drew Minter. The usual ingredients were present and mostly very good – a sensible, traditional staging with gorgeous costumes, and scenery on painted flats that could be changed in seconds; first-rate singing by people who know what they are at in Handel; a period orchestra (The Hanover Band), and McGegan's lively and joyous conducting. The title-role was taken by an old Halle hand, Annette Markert, who seemed rather underpowered in the first performance

but had more confidence in the second; David Walker did what he could with the somewhat uninspired role of Alessandro; Dean Ely's resonant bass and strong acting brought, as always, power and authority to the villainous Araspe, and the Seleuce of Kendra Colton grew in stature as the evening progressed. But the real star of the show was Dominique Labelle as Elisa: her singing and acting were outstanding and earned her a justified ovation.

The one weakness of the production was a lack of consistency in acting technique. Minter attempted to use stylized Baroque gestures, but they were adopted only by some of the actors some of the time, notably by David Walker; however, they were almost totally ignored by others, especially Dominique Labelle, whose acting was thoroughly naturalistic. When the antique gestures were applied, they gave the impression of being stuck on as afterthoughts, although in the second performance there was some improvement in this respect. I thought The Hanover Band played well, but there was some criticism of it among the higher echelons of the Göttingen musical establishment. As usual, the performances were sold out and enthusiastically received.

The first orchestral concert brought us the well-respected Concerto Köln in works by Handel (*Tamerlano* overture and *Alexander's Feast* Concerto –

Eastern references, of course!), Campra, Rameau and Gluck, whose *Pilgrims of Mecca* overture provided some romping oriental music of the late 18th-century 'Turkish' variety: surely Mozart had this piece in mind when he composed the overture to *Die Entführung*? The Eastern offering from Campra was 'La Turquie' from *L'Europe Galante*. The performers were rapturously applauded and highly praised. I was less impressed: the ensemble and tuning were a little unsure at the start, and some of the tempi were too fast, especially in the Handel pieces; but the imaginative scoring of the Rameau, including a wind machine and exotic percussion, came over very well.

The other major work of the festival was *Alexander Balus*, given by the Kammerchor and Barockorchester Stuttgart, conducted by Frieder Bernius. This was a magnificent performance, with Derek Lee Ragin in the title-role, Mark Padmore (Jonathan), Gotthold Schwarz (Ptolemy), Sandrine Piau (Cleopatra) and Christine Brandes (Aspasia). Everything went right, from the solo singing to the orchestral playing and superbly dynamic contribution of the chorus. The oratorio came over as a very fine work indeed, in spite of the lameness of Thomas Morell's libretto in the first two acts. The exquisitely scored aria 'Hark, hark! He strikes the golden lyre' was quite magical, and Cleopatra's final aria 'Convey me to some peaceful



shore', sung by Sandrine Piau with enormous intensity and tears in her eyes, brought out handkerchiefs all over the Johannis-Kirche. An enthralling experience.

There were some attractive fringe events, of which one of the most delightful was a lunchtime open-air concert in the Wilhelmsplatz given by a young wind-group, the Kaiser-Quintett, from Hamburg. They played some of Handel's wind music and the 'St Anthony' chorale, and gave sparkling accounts of the overtures to *The Magic Flute* and *The Italian Girl in Algiers*. It made the beer go down very well.

Rather less enjoyable was the second Nachtkonzert (I missed the first). The programme was Spanish and Moorish music for vihuela, guitar and 'arabic lute' – that East again! – some Scarlatti on the harpsichord, and Handel's Spanish cantata (HWV 140) for voice and guitar. The concert began late, was punctuated by long pauses and never came across the vast spaces of the St Marien-Kirche; it was all rather dreary.

A packed Lutheran Festival Service on the Sunday morning in St Jacobi was graced by a lively rendering of the Chandos Anthem 'My song shall be alway', well sung in very passable English by the choir of the church, accompanied by an extremely competent 'Kammerorchester St Jacobi'. The members' meeting of the Göttinger Händel-Gesellschaft agreed on a new constitution and radical changes to the organisation, but the future of the festival seems assured for some years.

The University Choir and Orchestra gave a choral concert consisting of *Silete venti* and *Dixit Dominus*. In the motet, the soprano soloist sounded a little flat at times and the student orchestra, playing modern instruments, was weighed down by a lumbering continuo department and rather lacked

expressiveness. But things perked up enormously in *Dixit Dominus*, which was given a fine and energetic reading, with strong soloists and choir, and generally lively tempi.

The last event that I attended was a very entertaining and well-played chamber concert given by the Deutsche Händel-Solisten of Karlsruhe, conducted by Nicholas McGegan. There were arias and instrumental pieces by Handel, Purcell, Telemann and Bach (the solo cantata, BWV 51), and some items from the extraordinary and (to me) quite unknown *Bizzarie universali* of William Corbett (1675-1748) – the Eastern-flavoured Concerto alla Turchesca and the Concerto alla Muscovita, complete with Kremlin bells. Rare curiosities indeed, and great fun. There was also a third Nachtkonzert, a harpsichord recital by Richard Egarr and another orchestral concert, all of which I missed – you can't do them all, even in a small town like Göttingen. The smallness is part of its charm, as is the welcome everyone gives you. Once again it was a splendid festival, much to be recommended as part of every Handelian's Grand Tour.

HALLE

Metastasio in Music outside Italy

The theme was chosen to celebrate the tercentenary of the poet's birth. Two of Handel's three operas set to Metastasio texts, *Poro* and *Ezio*, were performed, along with an interesting rarity, Reichardt's setting of the poet's Passion libretto.

The festival opened with the usual ceremonial occasion in the opera house, an address of welcome in several languages by the ever-charming Oberbürgermeister Klaus Rauen, and the award of the Handel prizes. This should have been followed by the première of *Poro*, but in his

speech Dr Rauen gave us the sad news that Patricia Spence, who was to sing the title-role, had been taken seriously ill only a few hours before and was in hospital in intensive care; there being no understudy, the staged performance could not take place. A concert performance had been hastily organised, without the role of Poro; inevitably the duets involving the hero, which are an important feature of this opera, had to be cut along with the rest of his part, including all the recitatives in which he sings.

It was therefore a grievously truncated opera that was presented, but it was the best that could be done and we were grateful for what there was. The stage-set was visible and looked attractively oriental. The performance of the singers and orchestra (the Händelfestspielorchester on original instruments) was excellent, and competently directed by the English conductor Paul Goodwin. There was a laudable attempt at concert-performance-style semi-acting, quite remarkable given the short time available for preparation. The second performance was given on the stage, as Patricia Spence had recovered; naturally, this reviewer and others had tickets elsewhere and was unable to attend, but accounts given by friends indicated that it was good enough to make us regret having missed it.

Halle has a more crowded programme than Göttingen, so it was even more difficult to avoid missing events because of clashes. I had with regret to forgo *Messiah*, which was given two performances by The English Concert under Trevor Pinnock to huge acclaim (well merited, according to reliable information). I also missed a Marc Minkowski concert entitled 'Italian Vespers' (*Saeviat tellus, Laudate pueri* HWV 237, *Salve Regina* and *Dixit Dominus*) – my spies tell me that it was vintage Minkowski, very powerful



with some frightening tempi; some chamber concerts in the Händelhaus, including a harpsichord recital by Skip Sempé; and a pairing of Handel's *Choice of Hercules* with Hasse's Metastasio setting *Alcide al bivio* – all reported to be of excellent quality.

I took the opportunity of hearing a pair of fascinating rarities: Johann Friedrich Reichardt's *Passione di Gesù Cristo* (1785) and Bontempi's *Dafne* (Dresden, 1671). Reichardt was important as a pioneer who first brought Handel's music to the attention of the German public in the second half of the 18th century (see Bernd Baselt's chapter in *Handel Collections and their History* (OUP, 1993), the book of the papers given at the first Handel Institute conference). He was also a very competent composer, whose *Passion* had great success in Berlin, Paris and London. The music is well crafted and orchestrated, in the manner of the 1780s, and his choral writing is powerful, clearly owing much to his revered Handel. The reason for its performance at this festival was that the libretto is by Metastasio, and that, unfortunately, is its great problem.

We are spoilt by our familiarity with the great German *Passion* oratorios, of which the librettos seem to have a proper balance between Biblical narrative and commentary that illuminates, but does not hinder, the dramatic impetus of the Gospel account. Metastasio's text has not a flicker of drama, being merely a series of laments on the situation by Peter, John, Joseph and the disciples, written in the poet's mellifluous Italian but without a single word of the narrative. The aria-texts are mostly in da capo form, but Reichardt skilfully adapted some of them to later aria techniques akin to sonata form, an idea discussed in an interesting paper by Ellen Harris in the Metastasio conference later in the festival. The performance, directed

by Gothart Stier, was very good in all departments, especially the soloists.

I left at the interval to attend a late-night open-air show, Bontempi's *Dafne*, delightfully performed in the glorious courtyard of the Moritzburg by a fine team of singers and a small period-instrument group made up of the Bellum Musicum Weissenfels and the Lautten Compagny of Berlin. The opera is typical 17th-century stuff, with comic peasants getting mixed up with the gods Venus, Juno, Apollo *et al.* The original German libretto was used, and the locals in the audience hugely enjoyed its racier moments, the subtleties of which passed me by. The set was a classical façade with an upper gallery for the gods, and one felt that the work could have been so performed in 1671. The music, which was beautifully sung and played, is lively and has more variety from number to number than is sometimes the case in early opera; some clear separation of aria-like sections from recitative foreshadows the next development in the genre. The orchestra made delicious noises, with a luscious continuo group comprising two positive organs, cello, viola da gamba, lutes, theorboes and guitars; Wolfgang Katschner directed from a selection of the three last-named. The evening was warm and moonlit, and the whole show a delight.

Saturday evening brought a 'Georg-Friedrich-Händel Gala' at the opera house, with renowned countertenor Axel Köhler, the soprano Claron McFadden, tenor Kobie van Rensburg, and the Händelfestspielorchester. After a generally impressive rendering of the *Ode to St Cecilia*, the rest of the evening was devoted to lollipops from *Ariodante*, *Rodelinda*, *Flavio*, *Semele* and *Giulio Cesare*. It was enjoyable, but it has to be said that Köhler is past his best and does not enthral as he used to. Howard Arman conducted this concert

after a four-hour stint with *Ezio* in the afternoon in the sweltering Goethe-Theater at Bad Lauchstädt. It was not surprising that in trying after that to conduct a choir and orchestra from two keyboards at once he fell victim to some lapses of ensemble: he and the solo cellist in the gorgeous air 'What passion cannot music raise and quell' in the *Ode* did not quite make it eye to eye.

At the members' meeting of the Georg-Friedrich-Händel-Gesellschaft on the Sunday morning, Donald Burrows presented greetings from The Handel Institute. There was much concern at the sad news from London about the Handel House project, and Professor Wolfgang Ruf, the president, proposed writing a letter to *The Times* expressing these feelings on behalf of the Gesellschaft in Halle. This was put to a vote and carried unanimously (it was later carried out).

In the afternoon there was the second performance of *Ezio* in Bad Lauchstädt. We had been warned that the production was one of those camped-up modern interpretations, but after a few anxious moments at the beginning it settled down into a magnificent performance, one of the best I have heard of a Handel opera. The Freiburger Barockorchester played like angels for Arman, and a splendid cast led by David Cordier in the title-role held us spell-bound for four hours, which seemed not a moment too long.

The production by Pet Halmen did indeed have some silly moments, such as the opening scene in which Valentiniano was revealed on a couch with both male and female bedfellows, and Varo taking off his shoes and socks, and much else, and handing them to members of the orchestra as he sang one of his big arias; the costumes went from ancient Roman via 18th-century wigs to vaguely modern outfits, and at one stage Valentiniano came on dressed in natty all-white



18th-century gear that made him look remarkably like Handel. But at least the main rules of opera seria production were observed: no main character was on stage when he or she should not have been, and they mostly sat or stood to sing without fussy business designed to entertain a stupid audience bored by da capo arias (the odd glass of champagne quaffed on stage did not really spoil things). So we emerged into a thunderstorm impressed and satisfied by a performance that had done justice to a fine opera.

Afterwards there was a pleasing open-air concert in the park opposite the theatre, the 'Historische Kur-anlagen' by the lake. Under the title 'Amore mio – Handel on the pond', a charming series of ballets was performed under floodlights on an elaborate platform built in the middle of the lake, representing a huge sea-monster. The dancers were gorgeously dressed in baroque costumes based on contemporary designs, and an amplified orchestra played the Water Music, *Terpsicore*, and the Fireworks Music (with spectacular pyrotechnics to accompany the latter), and sent us home cheerful to Halle on the stroke of midnight, after seven hours of continuous Handel. Fortunately for our more basic needs, the catering facilities at Bad Lauchstädt had remained open all day.

The scholarly conference was devoted to Metastasio, and there was an interesting variety of papers in both English and German. From the Anglo-American side Donald Burrows spoke about Burney's life of the poet and Ellen Harris discussed 'Metastasio and Sonata Form', while Richard King lightened the generally serious tone with a witty exploration of Metastasio's early comedy *L'Impresario delle Canarie* and the hilarious English translations of this delightful send-up of opera seria. Other papers dealt with

Metastasio's work in relation to Handel, Gluck, Mozart, France and Germany (an account of these follows).

The final concert that I attended was 'In memoriam Pietro Metastasio' in the opera house, with Axel Köhler and the celebrated Musica Antiqua Köln, directed by Reinhard Goebel. There were some interesting things to be heard – music from two pasticcios devised by Handel to Metastasio librettos (*Catone* and *Semiramide riconosciuta*), including a sinfonia by himself and arias by Leo, Porpora, Vivaldi, Vinci, Hasse and Feo; then arias from *Siroe* settings by Handel, Vinci and Hasse. Köhler was again disappointing, and the music served only to demonstrate Handel's effortless superiority over his contemporaries, whose strumming basses and predictable clichés began to be wearisome by the end of the evening. It was a pity that no-one had told Goebel that the concerto published as No. 4 in Walsh's first issue of Op.3 is not by Handel (it was presented as his, and well played).

Thus another Halle festival came to an end. As usual, it was packed with good things, and the reaction of its audiences confirmed the continuing vigour of the understanding and appreciation of Handel's music in his native land and city.

Terence Best

Conference on Metastasio

The theme of the conference was the effect of Metastasio's librettos outside Italy – how they were received in Vienna, Dresden and London, and how they were modified for performance there. Donald Burrows read a paper on Burney's *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Abate Metastasio* (1796), comparing this book with Deutsch's documentary biographies of Handel, Mozart and Schubert. Burney, also, included many extracts from Metastasio's voluminous correspon-

dence, which gives an authentic picture of the poet, especially as he supplemented them with his own impressions on meeting Metastasio in 1772. However, the letters also give the impression that they were intended for publication, unlike those of the Mozart family: in his written pronouncements as well as in his public behaviour, Metastasio, who lived at the Viennese court from 1730 until his death, was certainly never naive.

The rest of the conference was devoted to general papers on Metastasio-reception and more detailed studies of individual works. In the first category there was an excellent paper by Bruce Alan Brown on 'Metastasio and the Ballet'. The poet had very precise ideas about the stage realization of his dramas, was well acquainted with the convention of having ballets between acts and, in his 'feste teatrali' or 'azioni teatrali' (*Le Cinesi*, *Alcide al bivio*), worked with representatives of the Viennese dance reformers such as Gasparo Angiolini. Furthermore, Metastasian opera-texts were used for ballet scenarios in the late 18th century: Brown listed, with their sources, a large number of ballet performances based on known Metastasio opera-texts, of which the huge popularity was demonstrated by the fact that not a single line of the poet's verse was spoken or sung – the plot and emotions were sufficient basis for the performance.

Reinhard Wiesend spoke on 'Metastasio-Reception in Germany around 1750' and synthesized some well-known facts: (1) Metastasio's *melodrammi* are not to be viewed as self-sufficient works but were written expressly to be set to music; (2) the first setting cannot automatically be regarded as definitive; (3) study of different settings of a particular libretto should be based purely on questions of text and take into consideration the



circumstances of opera performance as an influence upon it. Wiesend examined Metastasio's *Alessandro nell'Indie* in Galuppi's setting, which was performed in Venice and transferred to Munich unaltered, a most exceptional phenomenon for the time. He also described as a kind of 'Enlightenment opera criticism' a performance of Metastasio's *Ezio* at Bayreuth in 1748 (musically a pasticcio) in which the libretto was cut to 30 per cent of the original so as to be unrecognisable.

The early Metastasio drama *Ezio*, which was performed in Handel's setting as part of the Festival, became a token example for the conference. Set by Hasse, Graun, Jommelli and Gluck, as well as Handel, it was dealt with by every other speaker in the programme. The only paper devoted to Hasse, whose Metastasio operas are among the most famous of the time, discussed his *Ezio* settings of 1730 (Naples) and 1755 (Dresden). Anja-Rosa Thöming pointed out that in his later years Hasse deliberately turned once again to Metastasio and his concept of drama, especially in aria composition.

That Pietro Metastasio has an important place also in 18th-century oratorio was discussed by Kenneth Nott, who is to edit *Jephtha* for the HHA. Nott explained the fascinating way in which J. C. Bach, in his *Gioas, re di Giuda*, created for London a synthesis of Metastasio's text and Handelian tradition, by beginning and ending each act with anthem choruses and introducing conspicuous concertante elements in the interchange between vocal and instrumental forces. Finally, Steffen Voss dealt with the hitherto unknown circumstance that there was also a Metastasio influence on Hamburg church music, in which the driving force was the leader of the Senate and Telemann pupil Jacob Schuback (1726-84).

Anja-Rosa Thöming

RODELINDA (Glyndebourne) TOLOMEO (Broomhill Opera)

Glyndebourne's production of *Rodelinda*, which I attended on 25 June, was – astonishingly – its first of any Handel opera. It was an excellent choice. *Rodelinda* is a masterpiece of the specific gravity of *Fidelio*, and on the same subject, conjugal fidelity in the face of malignancy and oppression. For some unfathomable reason the producer, Jean-Marie Villégier, evidently not believing in the work or not understanding it, chose to treat it like a Rossini farce, loading not only the recitatives but nearly every aria with obtrusive and often fatuous business. There was much packing and unpacking of suitcases, flowers tossed around pell mell, characters popping on and off stage, tussling and rolling about on the floor, repeated recourse to the bottle, the coffee cup or the hip-flask, and – ultimate absurdity – the dead villain getting up during the final ensemble and serving champagne to the rest of the cast. Everything seemed designed to distract attention from the music. Updating is not necessarily a defect, though it is seldom an asset; but the choice of Mussolini's Italy viewed in terms of a Hollywood movie of the 1920s was singularly inept, spreading a veneer of triviality over a profoundly serious conception.

The result was to cripple not only the characterisation but the entire drama and to pull the rug from under a musical realization that had many admirable qualities. For the most part the singing was first-rate. Anna Caterina Antonacci, with a voice perhaps more naturally suited to Romantic opera, began shakily in *Rodelinda*'s initial exposed cavatina, but was very moving later, especially in the wonderful aria 'Ritorna, O caro' and the ensuing duet with Bertarido (this was the one scene that came off,

since the producer for once kept his hands in his pockets). The German countertenor Andreas Scholl sang Bertarido's music with full and steady tone but scarcely cut a heroic figure. This, however, was his stage début, and he was constantly handicapped by the production, being required to sing one of his biggest arias while trying on four overcoats. What the producer thought he was doing in Bertarido's 'Scacciata dal suo nido' is anybody's guess. The weak-kneed tyrant Grimoaldo, whose villainy is gradually undermined by self-doubt and a guilty conscience, is one of Handel's greatest tenor parts, and Kurt Streit did it justice. Louise Winter, got up like a movie queen, could make nothing of Eduige, who also develops in the course of the opera. Umberto Chiummo played Garibaldo, a black-hearted villain, as a poor imitation of a Rossini buffo and performed the circus act of singing an aria with a lighted cigarette in and out of his mouth. If all three of Unulfo's arias misfired, it was not the fault of the singer, the countertenor Artur Stefanowicz.

William Christie conducted the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment with total command of the style, plenty of drive and a sure pacing of the arias, except that his evident love of the music tempted him to drag out the cadences like a bus approaching a scheduled stop. Handel's operas are no mere strings of arias; they have a cumulative dramatic tension liable to evaporate if the conductor pauses after arias in the expectation of applause, which does not always follow. As a postscript it may be added that the BBC broadcast two days later sank to a new low, the announcer describing in mincing tones not the plot of Handel's opera but the travesty enacted in the theatre, with coy allusions to assorted film actresses.



A month later (21 July) Broomhill Opera mounted a production of Handel's *Tolomeo* in the sub-Glyndebourne of Christ's Hospital. In this opera, too, the plot revolves round a separated married couple, and again the second act ends with a parting duet for the hero, consigned to prison, and the wife with whom he has only just been re-united. The two duets are so similar, not only in situation but in key (tragic F-sharp minor) and tempo, that Handel exchanged them in revivals of both operas. *Tolomeo*, however, suffers from a disjointed libretto and cannot rank among Handel's greatest operas, despite some marvellous music and three scenes, one in each act, that reveal him at the height of his powers.

The performance, necessarily on a less ambitious scale than that of *Rodelinda*, with modest sets and less powerful voices, was far truer to the composer's vision and consequently more rewarding. Charles Sturridge's production, which never erred in taste, made the best possible case for the opera. Nicholas Kraemer conducted the Raglan Baroque Players with a secure grasp of the style, though he too might have quickened things up a little at the joins. A Russian countertenor, Slava Kagan-Paley, while not endowed with a great voice, put much feeling – for words as well as music – into the part of Tolomeo, written like Bertarido for the castrato Senesino. Of the two heroines, written for the most eminent sopranos of the age, Jeni Bern projected the haughty princess Elisa, Faustina's role, with much spirit and clear, well-focused tone, while Jennie Such made a pleasant contrast in the more passive Cuzzoni part of Tolomeo's wife Seleuce. Mark Stone, an excellent bass, did full-blooded justice to the villain of the piece.

Why is it that our professional companies make repeated blunders in tackling Handel's operas, whereas less ambitious enterprises have again and again shown the right path, even if they lacked the facilities to press home the advantage? The answer must be that the former, mistrustful of Handel's power to move a modern audience, ginger him up with all manner of gimmicks and concepts, whereas the latter, convinced of the operas' dramatic genius (otherwise they would not attempt them), allow nothing alien to intervene between composer and audience. What is needed, of course, is a combination of the skill of the former with the vision of the latter. Handel's stature as one of the greatest opera composers is surely clear by now. I was reliably informed that *Rodelinda* sold out more quickly than any other opera in Glyndebourne's season. All the more reason for it to mount another Handel opera – there are plenty of masterpieces waiting in the wings – and to engage a producer prepared to take the work seriously and approach it with a measure of humility.

Winton Dean

THE BYRNE AWARD

Applications are invited for the 1999 Gerard W. Byrne Award in aid of **Handelian performance**. The purposes of the award are to support performances, especially of neglected Handelian works, which might not otherwise take place, and to assist young professional musicians at the start of their careers. One or more awards may be offered, up to a total of £1000. The deadline for applications is **1 April 1999**. Further details from the Honorary Secretary (address below).

HANDEL CONFERENCE

"Great among the Nations"

Handel and the various national styles of his period are the theme of the next Handel Institute conference, to be held in London on 20-21 November 1999. The timetable will run on a half-hourly basis, so papers will be restricted to 20-25 minutes. Proposals and abstracts (about 100 words) are now invited and should be sent by **1 March 1999** to Dr Elizabeth Gibson, 15 Pyrland Road, Highbury, London, N5 2JB. All offers will be carefully considered and proposers notified as soon as possible

LONDON HANDEL FESTIVAL Spring 1999

Provisional programme

20 March

Anthems for the Chapel Royal
(St George's Chapel, Windsor)

23-26 March

Lotario
(Royal College of Music)

2 April

St Matthew Passion
(St George's, Hanover Square)

8 April

Ero e Leandro
Fillide e Aminta
(St Andrew's, Holborn)

15 April

The Triumph of Time and Truth
(St George's, Hanover Square)

21 April

Italian cantatas
(St George's, Hanover Square)

To join the mailing list
ring 0181 680 3815 or
fax 0181 667 9915.

The Handel Institute is a registered charity (no. 296615). All enquiries should be addressed to the honorary secretary: Professor Colin Timms, Department of Music, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, England.