



## Power, glory of 'Orlando' emerge anew

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The American Repertory Theater's production of Handel's "Orlando," currently at the Loeb Drama Center, is a unique venture in the artistic life of the city and of the country. The run of more than 30 performances is probably longer than the entire performance history of the work since its premiere in 1733. The production is not in the context of a musical but of a theatrical season, and it is winning the support of people you never see at the opera. The performances are the result of an extensive rehearsal schedule that has permitted a thoroughness of preparation unheard of in the world of American opera; the length of the run will mean that most of the musicians involved will have performed "Orlando" more often than anything in their careers, with benefit both to it and to themselves. And the opera is being seen and heard in a theater of appropriate size and technical resources — the Loeb brings the audience into a unique relationship with the performers and the music.

But none of these is the reason that this "Orlando" seems lastingly important. Certain theatrical productions become a part of the history of art, because they change our way of looking at things, listening to them and thinking about them. "Orlando" takes a place in that proud company, not because it is, perfect, for it is not, but because it attempts so much and so triumphantly succeeds in the most difficult things that it attempts. What conductor Craig Smith and director

Peter Sellars and their colleagues have done is re-establish for today's American audiences the validity and communicative power of baroque opera, a form of art that had been pronounced dead even within the lifetime of one of its greatest creators, George Frideric Handel.

Handel's operas, and there are more than three dozen of them, offer almost impossible obstacles. To begin with, they depend on a type of

Above, Medaro (Mary Kendrick Sego) observes his beloved Angelica (Jane Bryden). Below, Dorinda (Susan Larson) attempts to restrain the madness of Orlando (Jeffrey Gall).



vocal virtuosity that is even less common in our day than it was in the composer's. Furthermore principal roles in all of Handel's operas were written for a surgically altered species of singer, the *castrato*, that is now extinct. The plots of the operas are convoluted and constructed according to obsolete strictures of stagecraft — each character must have an entrance aria; each character must leave the stage after each of his arias. The scenic demands are often extraordinary; Handel's audiences expected lavish spectacle, magic effects, fire-breathing dragons and chariots coursing into the sky. And while the characters of Handel's opera are drawn from history and from literature that were entirely familiar to audiences of his time, they are strangers to most of us today.

Furthermore the operas unfold on a time-scale remote from most contemporary expectations of art; the "action" intrudes and disappears with the suddenness of the accidents of real life, while the emotional intensities awakened by such action can be spun across an aria lasting ten minutes. Furthermore each of Handel's principal singers, and their publics, expected a series of 5 or 6 such arias, composed to expose all their vocal, emotional and dramatic capacities. And most of these arias are in the *da capo* form, which means that the singer repeats the principal section of an aria with ornaments and commentary of his own after a contrasting central section, in effect doubling the length of time allotted to the ex-

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# They took Handel seriously

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pression of each sentiment. And while repetition in the disco or in certain avant garde music is supposed to suspend attention, to create trances, in Handel its function is to enforce attention.

There were fewer than a dozen performances of Handel's operas in England in the 200 years between 1755, when he was still alive, and 1955. Most of the stage productions since, including the most famous one in America, the "Julius Caesar" that brought Beverly Sills to international fame, have begun with the fundamental assumptions that Handel cannot be trusted, that the conventions within which he worked are dead. The assumption continues that through heavy cutting (particularly of da capos), transposition, reordering, the insertion of music from other operas and other equally dubious devices, these works can be made more nearly like the operas of the standard repertory, and therefore more "relevant" or at least "accessible" to modern audiences. This has nev-

er worked: in destroying the qualities of Handelian opera, modern producers and conductors have not created the qualities of anything else.

Smith and Sellars began instead by taking "Orlando" seriously, by saying Handel was a great musical dramatist and that "Orlando" is a great opera, and then by asking "What is the nature of its greatness?" and "How can we communicate that in the theater?"

Their achievement takes its strength from the inherent dramatic strength of Handel's music, which shines through some necessary but weakening compromises that were made in rehearsal and performance. The countertenor scheduled to alternate with Jeffrey Gail in the male alto title role, for example, didn't work out, so Sanford Sylvan sings the part transposed by an octave — a terrible idea made acceptable only by Sylvan's vocal and dramatic artistry. The budget has restricted the size of the orchestra, so that some of the mu-

sic sounds thinner than it ought to. Rather than accept the cuts that the ART management suggested, Smith volunteered to tighten the performance by rejudging some tempos, and the result is that this is an evening without Handel's larg-

Most seriously the decision was made to perform the work in Italian, as it was in Handel's day. What is gained in a slightly spurious "authenticity" (Handel, after all, had an Italian cast singing in its native language) is lost in immediacy, directness of expression and declamatory authority. The recitatives particularly suffer — only the two alternating Orlandos seem to realize that in these stretches of the opera lie their greatest acting opportunities.

But what really matters is that the opera is being performed complete, except for the repeats in the overture; and Smith's great contribution, and the basis for all of Sellars' work, is his belief that each aria and recitative means something, that it has its own color and character, its own emotional and dramatic force. He has found this out in every number and realized its contribution to an accumulative effect, and he has communicated these realizations to the singers, to the players of his orchestra, to his superb continuo musicians (harpichordist Suzanne Cleverdon and cellist Shannon Snapp), and through them, to all of us.

Some of Sellars' work depends on conceit — not personal vanity, but the poetic process of saying that things apparently unlike are in fact similar; his way of putting something onto the stage is analogous to the way the extravagant extended similes and metaphors work in the language of the libretto. Thus Orlando the Crusader becomes Orlando the Astronaut; Zoroastro, Handel's magician, becomes "scientist, magician, and Project Supervisor." "A little wood, interspersed with the coats of shepherds" becomes a trailer park in the Everglades. Because of the work of designer Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz, costumer Rita Ryack and lighter James F. Ingalls, most of these conceits become beautiful to look at; because of Sellars' own sense of theater and image-making power, they invariably have theatrical effect.

It does seem, though, that these conceits are of unequal interest — some of them illuminate character, situation and music and make us think; others are merely devices that catch us for a moment. For example, the libretto calls for a large fountain to rise out of the earth



One of the two casts, from left: Zoroastro (James Maddalena), Angelica (Janet Brown), Medora (Pamela Gore), Dorinda (Sharon Baker) and Orlando (Sanford Sylvan).

and conceal one of the characters; up from a trapdoor rides a Halsey-Taylor drinking fountain. It's good for a laugh, but what does it mean? The self-satisfactions inherent in Zoroastro's personality and moralizing become one of the great running jokes of the performance, but is this anything Handel or his audience would have understood, or approved? (Of course, there is some support in the score for this. Zoroastro sings of moral blindness with smug certainty; the music isn't at all like the meandering music of "The people that walked in darkness" in "Messiah.") But Zoroastro must also have something to do with the sublime, even with the operations of grace — he is, as generations of Handel scholars have pointed out, an ancestor of Mozart's Sarastro.)

The trouble with most of the negative criticism about Sellars' work on "Orlando" is that it remains on the level of objecting to his conceits — but they are only a part of his accomplishment. What really matters is not what he has decided Handel's libretto is like, but what he knows the music is. There is hardly a moment in this production that is not true to the truth that is in the music — its formal integrity, its emotional content, the things it knows about people.

When there is a formal design in the music there is a formal design on the stage; when the formal design is shattered, so is the pattern of what we are looking at. In Handel the twisting plot of an opera remains an excuse for the expression of emotional reaction to it. And whatever you think of what Sellars has done with the plot of Handel's libretto, what he has incontestably done is give us all of the music's emotions, and in all their intensity, variety, and complexity. The result is that characters who begin as clichés — the princess and the plebe, the good-natured shepherdess Dorinda, who

plays the Eve Arden role — become real people as the action progresses, because they have experienced so intensely the joys and pains that real people experience. They fall in love with the wrong person; they feel guilty that they cannot return the feelings that others give to them; they can't cope.

In fact the form of baroque opera is one particularly aligned with Sellars' own talent and temperament. He likes to put contradictions and ambiguities onstage, rather than glossing over them; "Orlando" urges him to do this as a part of its very nature. In the music we hear nearly everything twice, so we have the opportunity to examine each melodic structure, to feel each emotion, through a different perspective. The great second act of "Orlando" expands this built-in complexity into the design of an entire act. Its four sublime slow arias are an exploration of the deep emotional meanings that can be exacted from the same "conventional" pastoral themes; three of its fast arias are expressions of emotional extremity, one of them culminating in madness.

We know from accounts of the baroque stage that emotion was communicated by a codified system of gestures now lost to us. Sellars creates such a system anew. His sources are diverse — paintings, drawings, statues, the Oriental theater, the mime of classical ballet, Broadway, the movies and the minstrel show. But they are united by the force of his artistic vision and by the fact they are all based as well in his own acute and sympathetic observation of human behavior. Is there any moment in "Orlando" more touching than when Medora is carving the name of his beloved Angelica in the tree, and she kneels at his side, joining her arm to his and guiding his hand as he carves?

In the great stretches of Sellars'

staging the music becomes motion; over the course of the evening you notice the patterns of motion, the way each character has his own vocabulary of gesture which shades into those of the other characters as their feelings and destinies come together and part. The audience responds most directly to the boundless yet pointed comic invention of Sellars' staging of three of Dorinda's arias — these are hilarious (and they have historical point, for the first Dorinda was a *commedia* actress, famous for front-and-center flirtation with the assembled public).

But many of the serious episodes are no less entrancing (and how rapidly the serious can follow on the comic, the supernatural on the ordinary). There is, for example, the glorious trio at the close of the first act when Sellars translates the turning of the intertwined vocal lines into complex patterns of crossings and cross-purposes, and breathtakingly beautiful symmetrical turnings across the floor of the stage. There is the scene of Orlando's madness when the misshapen rhythms of music become terrifyingly misshapen gesture (and how haunting is the passage when Orlando is isolated in a pool of light as the lamp descends, imprisoning him amid the phantoms of his own mind). There is the extraordinary duet in the final act where Orlando and Angelica begin with opposing positions and vocabularies of gesture which gradually and only for a moment coalesce in the intimacy of shared pain. And there is the wonderful final moment of the opera when the characters have come together and parted so many times begin to leave to lead their separate lives — and then, suddenly, turn and smile at each other and at all they have shared.

Handel is real; to tell us that is the glory of "Orlando."



Jane Bryden, "Angelica" in one of the two "Orlando" casts.