



Opera at Curtis

Handel with Care

Curtis's spring staging of *Ariodante* revealed the interpretive challenges and rewards of Handel's music. **BY BRIAN WISE**

→ **THE CURTIS OPERA THEATRE** concluded its 2022–23 season in May with Handel's *Ariodante*, and in doing so, offered a cautionary tale for our own time, says David Stern, the production's conductor, and a noted Baroque music authority.

Handel's 1735 opera is a twisting tale of jealousy and misjudgment based on an episode in Ariosto's epic poem *Orlando Furioso*. The plot is fairly simple: Ginevra, daughter of the king of Scotland, is set to marry the knight Ariodante. But the duke Polinesso conspires, with help from a naïve servant, to make it appear as if he is having an affair with Ginevra, thus placing him in line for the throne. Both Ariodante and the king swallow the ruse. After misunderstandings and near disasters, Ginevra is exonerated, and she and Ariodante reconcile.

"It's about the choices we make," says Mr. Stern. "It means we must be more responsible with our understanding of the situations in front of us and not just say, 'I saw it on Fox News, so they must have been living together.' This is a cautionary tale of today as much as it was 300 years ago."

Ariodante featured the debuts of Omer Ben Seadia as director, and Mr. Stern, who conducted a student cast and members of the Philadelphia Baroque orchestra *Tempesta di Mare*.

Mr. Stern and Ms. Ben Seadia spoke with *Overtones* ahead of performances.

Handel's operas have taken off in the last roughly 40 years, but they are still rarely seen as core repertoire. What is your argument for staging *Ariodante*?

Omer: I would argue that this is core repertoire for emerging artists. Baroque allows us both to learn the foundations of opera, and there's a big connective tissue between Handel and new opera. Our approach allows for a lot of perspective, editing, dissecting, and dramaturgy as we look at this repertoire. For someone like me who does a lot of new opera at the same time, there are so many parallels between the two.

David: All Baroque music is about gesture. It's not about notes. It's not even that much about the voice. It's much more about the gesture. What does the gesture mean? It means that these notes are like sketches of human gestures, of rhetoric, so if we are being heroic or passionate or we're lying, there are certain gestures that are appropriated by composers to show psychologically what's going on in the character.

One frequent criticism of Handel operas is that, dramatically, they often contain a succession of arias and connecting recitatives without a lot of plot or stage action. What is your take on that?

David: In Handel's first acts, you take your time to find out who everyone is. They take a long time singing their arias. [You might say], 'Really? Can't we just start with the second act?' But with this one, we do get to know every character, and it gets involved in their story quickly.

Omer: Yes, this kind of defies all the tropes that we joke about with Handel—the lack of plot or the lack of dramatic timing. Here, you have everything. It's like he took all the notes from the executives and said, okay, 'You want action packed? I'll give you action packed!'

David: Right. I think he was right, except he was talking to another century. Frankly, this could be a very good story for Netflix.

Omer: Working on repertoire like this is so much like working on new opera these days because there's so much about the singers' ability to interpret the role. It almost feels like they're creating it for the first time. Handel leaves you so much [interpretive] room where Puccini doesn't. Puccini spoon-feeds you every bar; you know exactly what you're supposed to be doing, and he's writing in all the physical gestures. It almost means—and I say this carefully—that you don't need us [directors] for it!

David: The challenge then is keeping the musical and stage muscle in this and making sure that we keep up with the demand that the piece has. The mean guy, Polinesso, is truly a predator. There's all kinds of room for Omer to figure out how to make him truly, humanly evil. There's got to be a psychology to it, you can't just be two-dimensionally evil. That's the point. There's a lot of room to fill out the blanks, and the fact that Handel doesn't spoon-feed you means that it's the job of both of us to give singers the tools to figure this out.

How did you approach the staging?

Omer: With the design, we are focusing a lot on the concept of veils, from the physical wedding veil to this concept of using a veil to obstruct others' vision. It's a shadowy approach to see how we pour light on things and create shadows, darkness, and illusions as we go along.

A lot of the work I'll do with singers involves how we evolve physically on stage as well as psychologically. We also have singers singing outside of their age group, as we say. So, we're trying to figure out how that materializes physically.

David: There are some big pieces



Above, left to right: Omer Ben Seadia, David Stern

in this opera, and it's a big role both for the *Ginevra* and the *Ariodante*. The point is: How to use the voice so that it's constantly speaking and not over-singing.

Do you find that conservatories are more open to Handel these days?

Omer: I did Handel at Rice, Aspen, Juilliard, and now Curtis. It really is all the rage right now [laughs]. But again, we are trying to prepare students both for this period of music and also for modern opera. We're really in the golden age of new opera right now—or opera written in the last 20 years. This allows us to prepare [singers] for both.

And I will say, for directors, Handel is a pleasure. It really gives us a lot of room to shine, to interpret, to design, to bring something new. For audiences, you don't have to have prior knowledge, and you don't have to be educated in the style to connect with it. It is visceral, and if you sit down and open yourself up to it, you'll connect with it.

The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.