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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Atalanta

Innsbrucker Festwochen, 30.08.2026 [ENA]

If any of Handel's twenty-eight London operas deserves a bright rebirth, it is *Atalanta*, one of his most famous operas. Written at breakneck speed in the spring of 1736 and completed on 22 April, just five days before the royal wedding it was meant to honour, the pastoral drama HWV 35 celebrated the marriage of Frederick, Prince of Wales, to sixteen-year-old Augusta of Saxe-Gotha.

It was not ready in time for the ceremony itself; when it finally opened at Covent Garden on 12 May, the state visit of the court concluded with fireworks let off on the stage during the final chorus. Eight performances followed within four weeks, and the Prince of Wales personally commanded two revivals that November. That the piece has since drifted to the margins of the Handel canon says more about the awkward class politics of its plot — an aristocratic couple flirting in shepherd's clothing before duty ultimately reclaims them — than about the score, which is one of the composer's most airborne inspirations.

The Innsbrucker Festwochen der Alten Musik, in the framework of its jubilee 50th edition and under its Barockoper:Jung format, have chosen it exceptionally well.

The libretto, adapted anonymously from Belisario Valeriani's *La caccia in Etolia* (1715), moves through Ovid rather than through it. *Atalanta*, Princess of Arcadia, hides in the woods of Aetolia as the shepherdess Amarilli; Meleagro, king of Aetolia, follows her disguised as the shepherd Tirsi; around them Aminta and the crafty Irene pursue their own comic misunderstandings, until Mercury descends to bless the couples and confirm the popular acclaim in a *licenza* whose fireworks the eighteenth-century audience took quite literally.

Handel's response is a pastoral of unusual concentration: hunting-horn signals braided through the choruses, a wonderfully melancholy garden aria for Meleagro ("Care selve, ombre beate"), a duet ("Amarilli? / Oh dei! / Tirsi?") whose whispered self-recognition is one of the most disarming moments in all of Handel, and a finale built as a chain of jubilant choruses and instrumental festmusik — a Klangfeuerwerk that reads today as a jubilee gift ready-made for the 50th Festwochen anniversary.

The Innsbruck production, running from 21 to 26 August 2026 at the Kammerspiele of the Haus der Musik, gathers the freshest voices Baroque opera currently possesses. Under this Barockoper:Jung banner, the roles are entrusted to laureates of the 2025 Cesti Competition: Portuguese tenor Salvador Simão, first prize and

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audience award, as the shepherd Aminta; French baritone Pierre Gennai, third prize and Young Artist Award, as Mercurio; and — cast around them — Silvia Porcellini in the title role, Sarah Hayashi's Meleagro, Justina Vaitkute's Irene, and Peter Edge as Nicandro.

Every one of them was already tested by the Innsbruck jury in a Handel arena; this is not a student showcase but a graduation exhibit for a generation of stylists who have grown up inside historically informed practice. In the pit sits the Orchestra of the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, arguably Europe's finest teaching orchestra for early music, under harpsichordist and conductor Andrea Buccarella — a musician whose Bachian pedigree (winner, Leipzig Bach Competition 2018) sits happily alongside the Handelian lightness this score demands.

The staging is entrusted once again to the Belgian pair François de Carpentries and Karine Van Hercke, whose Innsbruck *La fida ninfa* was celebrated for its dreamlike visual invention; the pastoral world of hunters, nymphs, shepherds and villagers appears to be in confident, playful hands. *Atalanta* is not the Handel opera one goes to for existential shadows. It is the Handel opera one goes to for hunt-horns at dawn, for young voices tasting their first serious roles, and for a final display in which good humour and civic joy are — one exceptional time — the entire point. Given the anniversary occasion and the calibre of the cast, this jubilee *Atalanta* looks set to become one of the most joyful evenings of the entire 2026 summer.

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