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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Rarely Heard Masterpiece Reclaimed in Bayreuth

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There are Handel operas that arrive already surrounded by a modern performance tradition: Giulio Cesare, Alcina, Rodelinda, Ariodante, and Agrippina have become familiar territory for singers, conductors, directors, and audiences. Then there are works such as Floridante, written for London in 1721 and too often relegated to the margins of the composer's extraordinary operatic output. Bayreuth Baroque's new production offered a persuasive reminder that such neglect is not a verdict on artistic quality. Under the theatrical direction of Max Emanuel Cencic and the musical direction of Markellos Chryssicos, Floridante emerged as an opera of striking emotional sophistication: a drama of love, political ambition, jealousy, concealment, and unstable identity, carried by music that repeatedly reveals Handel at his most inventive and searching.

The opera's plot has all the essential elements of a classic *dramma per musica*. Elmira, ward of the Persian satrap Oronte, loves the victorious military commander Floridante. Oronte has promised the couple his blessing if Floridante returns triumphant from the war against Tyre. Yet victory changes nothing, because Oronte himself becomes consumed by desire for Elmira and breaks his word. Around this central conflict, the opera develops a second chain of frustrated love: Oronte's daughter Rossane is separated from her beloved Timante, prince of Tyre, who enters the Persian court in disguise.

Political rivalry is thus inseparable from the private passions of the characters, while the question of Elmira's true identity gives the work a further layer of dramatic uncertainty. Cencic's approach appears ideally suited to Floridante, an opera that can seem structurally conventional on paper but becomes dramatically alive when its characters are treated as psychologically credible individuals rather than as a succession of aria types. The director has long combined a singer's knowledge of vocal rhetoric with a highly developed sense of Baroque theatre's stylisation and emotional intensity.

In Floridante, the real dramatic motor is not spectacle alone but the damage caused when power becomes indistinguishable from private desire. Oronte's reversal—first promising Elmira to Floridante, then claiming her for himself—sets the opera's moral temperature. His authority is exposed as unstable because it is governed by obsession, jealousy, and self-interest. That conflict gives Floridante a particular character among Handel's heroes. He is a military victor, but the opera's deeper test is not whether he can win a battle. It is whether he can survive the arbitrary exercise of political power and hold onto a form of emotional integrity.

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Handel's music understands the tension between public heroism and private vulnerability with exceptional subtlety. The grander, more extrovert numbers establish a world of command, honour, and courtly grandeur; the more inward arias reveal fragility, longing, and bewilderment. A performance must make both dimensions audible. Otherwise Floridante becomes either too passive in his suffering or too conventionally heroic in a drama that is far more emotionally ambivalent.

Markellos Chryssicos is a conductor whose work in eighteenth-century repertoire is distinguished by rhythmic alertness, stylistic knowledge, and an ear for vocal line. In an opera as seldom performed as Floridante, his task is especially important. The score must be presented not as an archival curiosity but as living theatre: a sequence of musical situations in which orchestral colour, harmonic direction, articulation, and tempo reveal the changing stakes of the drama. Handel's orchestration may be more compact than in some of his later London operas, but its expressive possibilities are far from limited.

The instrumental writing shapes atmosphere, defines social hierarchies, and illuminates the characters' inner conflicts with a precision that the best historically informed performance can bring vividly into focus.

One of the greatest pleasures of a serious revival is the discovery of an opera's own particular sound world. Floridante is not merely an early draft of Handel's later achievements, nor should it be judged against the expected parade of familiar "greatest hits." Its musical identity lies in the way Handel gives emotional contrast a continuous dramatic function.

Love is never simply tender; it is shadowed by fear. Loyalty is never uncomplicated; it is tested by disguise and political calculation. Grief and longing become occasions for vocal ornament, but also for emotional exposure. The da capo aria, in this context, is not a formula but a dramatic device: the return of the opening section allows a character to revisit an emotion after reflection, self-deception, shock, or renewed determination.

The opera's female characters are especially richly drawn. Elmira is far more than a passive object of male desire. Her position at the centre of political and personal conflict gives her a remarkable emotional range: fidelity to Floridante, resistance to Oronte, anxiety over her own identity, and the need to act within a court controlled by men whose promises cannot be trusted. Rossane, meanwhile, carries a more openly lyrical thread of separated love. Her relationship with Timante, prince of the defeated Tyrians, enlarges the opera's perspective. Their story makes clear that the political conflict has wounded more than one couple and that conquest does not produce emotional resolution.

Timante's disguise as a slave offers one of Baroque opera's most characteristic dramatic motifs: rank becomes unstable, identity becomes performance, and social order is revealed to be contingent rather than

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absolute. Such scenes can be played as light intrigue, but they also possess serious political resonance. In Handel's world, disguise often enables truth to emerge. A prince who must appear as a slave learns what power looks like from below; a ruler who abuses authority reveals his own moral poverty.

The Bayreuth Baroque Opera Festival is a particularly fitting setting for this rediscovery. Its commitment to rare repertoire, virtuoso singing, and historically informed musical practice makes it possible to encounter *Floridante* not as a footnote but as a fully realised theatrical event. The production is a coproduction with the International Handel Festival Karlsruhe, another institution central to the revival of neglected Handel repertoire, and it confirms the artistic value of collaboration between festivals willing to take repertoire risks.

What makes *Floridante* so rewarding is precisely its mixture of familiarity and surprise. Its emotional world is recognisably Handelian—love tested by power, characters caught between duty and desire, a final movement towards restored order—but its musical and dramatic contours remain fresh because the opera has not been worn smooth by constant repetition. This Bayreuth production makes the strongest possible case for hearing it again: not as a rarity for specialists alone, but as a work of genuine theatrical richness, psychological acuity, and musical beauty.

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