A Letter from our Artistic Director

Our final production for this season will be George Frideric Handel’s 1733 opera Orlando, based upon Ludovico Ariosto’s epic poem Orlando furioso (1532). Two performances are scheduled on the Main Stage of the Staller Center, Saturday, April 13 at 8 p.m. and Sunday, April 14 at 3 p.m. Carlo Lanfossi will give a pre-opera lecture in the Recital Hall one hour before each performance. (See his synopsis and his historical notes on pp.3-4 of this issue).

We have put together a wonderful production team for Orlando. My colleague Arthur Haas, Professor of Music and Director of the Stony Brook Baroque Players will conduct the production. Toronto-based stage director Guillaume Bernardi makes his Stony Brook Opera debut as stage director. We are pleased to welcome back Camille Assaf as costume designer, and Maruti Evans as set and lighting designer. The production will also feature video projections designed by Ien DeNio.

Arthur Haas describes Orlando as “a rarely seen spectacle that should not be missed, because it really does have something for everyone. The opera marks a real turning point in Handel’s operatic career. He was starting to lose favor with the opera-going public in London for two reasons. The oratorio was gaining in popularity because it was based on Biblical stories and it was in English. Also, rival opera companies were taking away from Handel’s public as well as from his pool of singers.

“Handel wrote Orlando to seize back the momentum, and it worked gloriously. He managed to get Senesino, one of the most famous castrati in London at that time, to sing the lead role. He also composed a work that the public would adore.

“The story of Orlando has a number of dramatic elements that excited the public in the same way that a best-selling novel would nowadays. We see a hero’s struggle between immortal glory and a love interest that distracts him from his destiny. There are also several love triangles that open the door to deceptions between the characters, heartbroken lovers, and vows of vengeance. There is even a mad scene in which the enraged, even deranged hero breaks everything in sight and has visions of hell appearing before his eyes.

“Handel even threw in a fair bit of magic: the magician Zoroastro saves the other major characters from Orlando’s rages with the hope of restoring the hero to his path of glory. There is even an eagle that descends from heaven with a “potion” to help restore Orlando’s sanity.

“All this drama is brought together with some of the most beautiful vocal music that Handel ever wrote. Arias, duos, a trio, all with virtuoso and poignant ornamented da capos, accompanied by a stylish orchestra consisting of strings, recorders, horns, harpsichords, theorbos, and Baroque harp.”

This issue is devoted entirely to Orlando. In addition to the synopsis and historical notes by Carlo Lanfossi, I’m sure you will enjoy my interview with our wonderful stage director, Guillaume Bernardi. I look forward to seeing you at our performances. Thank you for a wonderful season!

--David Lawton
Meet Stage Director: Guillaume Bernardi

During a break in one of the staging rehearsals for Orlando, I found a few moments to interview Guillaume

DL: What are the challenges for contemporary singers, and indeed for contemporary audiences, of staging Baroque opera in general, and Handel’s Orlando in particular?

GB: In my view the biggest challenge is the considerable cultural gap that exists between our reality and the world of the Baroque artists that created baroque operas. Orlando offers good examples of this issue. There is first the text itself. At that time, Ariosto’s poem Orlando furioso was so well known that the characters didn’t even need to be introduced. Moreover, all the previous episodes that led to the situation that we find at the beginning of Handel’s opera were taken for granted. In the eye of an eighteenth century audience member, Angelica doesn’t need an introduction, and everybody knows how she fell in love with Medoro. Similarly the set of values is again, of course, completely different from ours. In a way, the transgressive nature of Angelica’s love for Medoro is completely lost to us. Yet this element is crucial to understand the drama: it is essential to realize that Angelica should have loved Orlando. When Orlando discovers that Angelica has given herself to Medoro, it is not only his love for her that is wounded but his whole notion of a chivalric world view that collapses, it is this combination of things that leads him to madness....

DL: How do you address these issues in your production? Please tell us about how you and your design team have conceived this production both theatrically and visually.

GB: This production is clearly positioned as relating to the period of Handel, but not attempting to create some historical reproduction of it. The main element of the set is a series of arches, and this motif come from actual buildings of Handel’s time: the orangeries, those green houses where orange trees were kept during the winter in Northern countries. But this architectural theme is extremely stylised so that it can also serve as a projection surface. In the original production of Orlando, there were spectacular set changes that we will ‘translate’ into video projections.

DL: Orlando, like many Baroque operas, has a complex and intricate plot. What are the large dramatic themes that this extraordinary work addresses?

GB: What is complicated in Orlando is the pre-plot elements: all the events that took place before the play starts, and were generally well-known to the audience of the time. The original libretto that Handel used, was written by Carlo Sigismondo Capece, a librettist belonging to the reformist movement L’Arcadia. This movement had already moved away from what they saw as the excess of the baroque, and had taken French neo-classicism as a model. As a result, the plot is really quite simple. Handel introduced a kind of *deus ex machina* character, the magician Zoroastro, who manipulates the key moments of the action. Because of the character, the key theme of the opera is a moral dilemma: the hero Orlando is pulled between Love and Glory. Love drives him crazy. His sanity is restored and he chooses then the path of Glory. The original Italian libretto simply focussed on the vagaries of Love....

*Continued on page 4...*
DL: Although this is the first time that you have directed a production for us, I remember vividly your work with our cast of Cavalli’s *Eliogabalo* several years ago, when you joined us as coach for Italian theatrical diction. I know that you have been doing similar work with our *Orlando* cast as part of the rehearsal process. Can you describe how you work with our cast on the Italian text, and why this is such an important part of the rehearsal process for an opera such as this one?

GB: I have now for many years dedicated a lot of attention to the delivery of the Italian text of the baroque libretti. I feel that the rhetorical and metrical aspects of those texts are often ignored or misunderstood. Yet for those texts (and therefore for that music) to reach its full potential, it is essential to understand and honor those dimensions. *Eliogabalo* still belonged to an earlier phase of the Baroque, when text had a greater importance in the operas. By the time of Handel, music is clearly at the heart at the form. Yet, it is essential to master those aspects of the libretto to do justice to Handel’s music. Handel, as it is well known, had spent a number of years in Italy, and mastered both the language and its literary form as it appears in his opera. He is a composer incredibly sensitive to the dramatic potential of text. For those reasons we did spend a lot time in rehearsal process just reciting the text with various forms of declamation.

DL: What lies ahead for you in the future, professionally speaking?

GB: The day after the last performance of Orlando I fly to France to take up quite a different role from that of baroque opera stage director. I will be the dramaturg on a new dance piece by South African choreographer Boyzie Cekwana. But this will just be short interlude. From the end of May, I will be at the Festival d’Aix en Provence coaching the singers of a Cavalli opera, *Elena*…

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**Orlando**

*George Frideric Handel*

*A Synopsis by Carlo Lanfossi*

**Act I**

The magician Zoroastro tries to convince the knight Orlando (one of Charlemagne’s soldiers) to go to war and not waste time chasing love. Orlando decides instead that Glory can be also achieved through the passions of Love. In a forest, the shepherdess Dorinda is lamenting the lack of passion in her life, when she suddenly sees Orlando carrying a recently rescued princess, Isabella. Angelica, the Queen of Cathay, and the object of Orlando’s love, is actually in love with the African prince Medoro, whose wounds were healed while once being hosted by Dorinda. Zoroastro warns Angelica that Orlando is after her. With a magic trick, he hides Medoro behind a fountain while Orlando approaches Angelica. Orlando leaves, and the two lovers can finally declare their love. To soothe Dorinda’s disdain, Angelica gives her a jewel.

**Act II**

Dorinda tells Orlando that Angelica is in love with Medoro, and shows him the jewel that he actually once gave to Angelica. Medoro and Angelica, driven by love, carve their names in a laurel tree. When Orlando sees those inscriptions, he first threatens to kill Angelica, but Zoroastro takes her away on a cloud. Jealousy destroys Orlando’s mind, until Zoroastro saves the knight from his own madness by bearing him off on a chariot.

**Act III**

Dorinda is providing shelter to Medoro. Orlando arrives, and—still insane—declares his love for Dorinda, whom he believes is Venus. The shepherdess then tells Angelica of Orlando’s madness, but also that he has destroyed her cottage and killed Medoro. Angelica is inconsolable. Zoroastro, after having transformed the scene to the Temple of Love, restores Orlando’s mind. Dorinda tells the hero that he killed Medoro, and for this Orlando attempt suicide. However, Zoroastro has in fact saved Medoro, and the opera ends with a celebration of Glory and Love.
**Historical Notes**

Orlando (1733) is the first of three Handel operas based on the Italian poem Orlando furioso by Ludovico Ariosto (the other two are Ariodante and Alcina, 1735). One of the most important epic poems in the history of Italian literature, Orlando furioso was written by Ariosto between 1516 and 1532. The action takes place at the time of the war between Charlemagne and the Saracen Agramante, King of Africa. Battles, love romances, fantastical and magical elements, are mixed together with a touch of psychological insight. It is no surprise, then, that this highly visionary material deeply influenced the later Baroque aesthetics, and formed the basis for many 17th- and 18th-century operas. Orlando’s chivalric deeds, and his unrequited love for the pagan princess Angelica, constitute the main core of the Italian libretto L’Orlando, written by Roman Arcadian poet Carlo Sigismondo Capece. This libretto was first set to music by Domenico Scarlatti (1711, Rome), and then anonymously adapted for the new Handel production of 1733.

It seems that Handel was convinced to set to music Orlando by the English dramatist Aaron Hill who, in a letter from December 1732, encouraged him to take up moral subjects mixed with “fine machinery” that would teach and seduce the audience at the same time. The 1711 L’Orlando looked like a good subject, and Handel quickly worked on the opera in order to be ready for the premiere at the King’s Theatre in London on 27 January 1733. At that time, Handel was running the Second Royal Academy of Music, but soon he would have to face the rival Opera of Nobility that would eventually take some of its most important singers, among them the famous castrato Senesino (Francesco Berardi), who interpreted the main role of Orlando in the 1733 premiere.

The presence of a castrato such as Senesino was probably one of the main reasons why Orlando has been regarded as one of the most unconventional Handel operas. Senesino was not only a good singer, but also primarily an extremely talented actor. It is no surprise, then, that Handel deploys the singer/actor as Orlando throughout the entire opera, including highly dramatic moments such as the stunning mad scene at the end of act II. Here, Handel asks a frantic Orlando to express a wide variety of passions and emotions (not to mention the very uncommon use of 5/8 meter for a few bars describing the confusion of the protagonist’s mind).

Even if the 1733 production was certainly not a big hit (only ten performances are recorded), today Orlando is considered one of the most interesting experiment in Handel’s career, an achievement testified by the most recent and applauded productions such as the 2005 staging at New York City Opera. --Carlo Lanfossi
In this last Newsletter for 2012-2013, I want to express my deep gratitude to the following individuals who made tax-deductible contributions to the Long Island Opera Guild in support of our productions this season. We could not have presented our performances without their generous support:

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There is still time to make a tax-deductible contribution to the Long Island Opera Guild. Contributions in any amount are welcome. Just make your check payable to the Stony Brook Foundation and send it to me care of the Department of Music, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY 11794-5475. This year two of our members decided to make a five-year commitment to our Opera Guild, with donations of $500 per year, and $1,000 per year, respectively. Pledges such as these over a definite time period help us to plan our finances for each season. If you are interested in making such a pledge, please contact Katie Stockhammer, Development Officer for the Arts at Stony Brook University, at the following e-mail address:
katie.stockhammer@stonybrook.edu

I look forward to seeing all of you at Handel's *Orlando*!

Sincerely,
David Lawton
Artistic Director, Stony Brook Opera
I. Full Production of Handel’s *Orlando*

*(Three performances)*

- Wednesday, April 10, 2013 at 12 noon: preview performance, Brookhaven National Laboratory
- Saturday, April 13, 2013 at 8 p.m.: Staller Center Main Stage, Stony Brook University
- Sunday, April 14, 2013 at 3 p.m.: Staller Center Main Stage, Stony Brook University

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**BOX OFFICE**

Tickets for Handel’s *Orlando* are $20 general admission and $15 students and seniors, and are available at the Staller Center Box Office. For tickets call (631) 632-ARTS or online at [www.stallercenter.com](http://www.stallercenter.com).

For more information call the Department of Music at (631) 632-7330