

AN 18TH CENTURY SEASON ... POSTPON'D

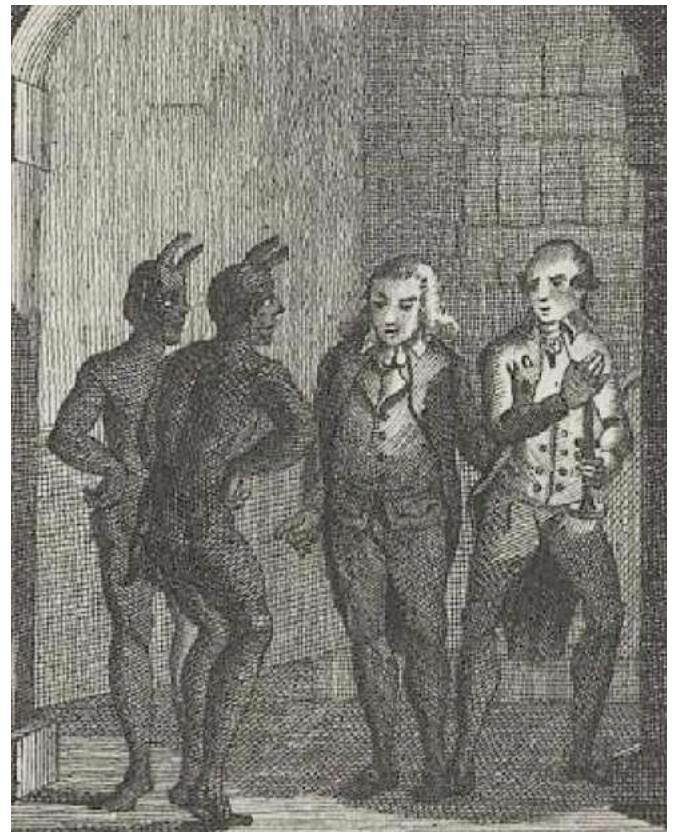
MICHAEL BURDEN, NEW CHAMBER OPERA'S DIRECTOR
OF PRODUCTIONS WRITES



Newsletter 64 has been written and compiled under circumstances which six months ago would - if even contemplated - have seemed fantasy. The lockdown brought New Chamber Opera to a halt for the first time in 30 years, cutting short 'An 18th Century Season' with our concert version of *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo* just squeaking under the wire on 8 March. Two weeks later, there were no performances to attend; the Summer Oratorio, Camilla de Rossi's *St. Alessio* conducted by Toby Stanford had had to be cancelled, and the Summer Opera deferred until 2021.

Like all opera and theatre companies, we initially thought - or at least hoped - that our programme might survive, but it quickly became apparent that wishful thinking was dangerous and misleading, and when I returned from Australia, we set about the business of cancelling the Summer Opera for this year. As it happens, I am writing this message on the day that would have been the Preview performance of *La Diavolessa* by the two men who were responsible for creating mid-century opera buffa.

But also today came the announcement that the Teatro Real in Madrid was preparing to re-open with a 'socially distanced' version of *La Traviata*, the world's first opera house to do so. From the illustrations, it seems that the cast members will stand on platforms in front of the chorus, who will be masked; the orchestra has been laid out with the correct distancing between the players; and the brass section has been placed behind screens. So, something is stirring. We early on took the decision not to attempt 'lockdown' opera; it certainly worked for some companies, but not for us. But things are afoot; can I encourage those of you are not currently on the electronic mailing list to join it in the coming weeks letting us know on: info@newchamberopera.co.uk



The frontispiece to the libretto of Galuppi's La Diavolessa, which shows the scene in which Gianino and Dorina (The 'She-Devil') pose as Turkish mystics to search for the treasure in Don Poppone's basement ... join us in 2021 for the resolution of this unlikely piece of action!

The Summer Opera: Galuppi, *La Diavolessa (The She-Devil)*

30 June (Preview), 3, 6, 7, 9, 10 July 2021, The Warden's Garden, New College

New Chamber Opera - New Chamber Opera Ensemble - The Band of Instruments - Phoenix - Cutting Edge

Singing Patron James Bowman *Director of Productions* Michael Burden *Director, the Summer Opera* Steven Devine *Director, The Band of Instruments* Roger Hamilton ·

Director, Opera Studio Joseph Beesley

Repetiteurs Joseph Beesley, Toby Stanford · *Company Secretary* Clare Atkinson *Comptroller* Graham Midgley · *Wardrobe* Diana Lintott, Fiona Hodges

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Reviewed: *La Vera Costanza*

by Curtis Rogers, originally for BSECS Criticks - <https://www.bsecs.org.uk/criticks-reviews/>

As a composer of opera in the second half of the eighteenth century, Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) still languishes far too much in the shadow of his younger Austrian contemporary, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1765-1791). Whilst the latter's masterpieces in the genre set the bar almost impossibly high, Haydn's attempts remain estimable in matching attractive, idiomatic music to the constantly shifting situations of the dramas. Indeed, if the twists and turns of the plot of *The Marriage of Figaro* are an enthralling challenge to keep up with – particularly in its Act Two finale, and throughout Act Four – that is almost straightforward by comparison with the endless reshuffling of love interests and identities, sometimes seemingly on a whim, in such a work as Haydn's *La fedeltà premiata* and *L'infedeltà delusa*.

La vera costanza is relatively more straightforward than that, although it still calls forth from Haydn an impressively symphonic finale in Act Two. This is surely the equal of anything by Mozart up to the point of Idomeneo, and taking into account the fact that the latter is a serious drama whereas Haydn's work is a comedy – if, admittedly, 'sentimental' in some elements perhaps, in the eighteenth century sense of that term. This version by New Chamber Opera also preserved its buffa elements in employing a witty translation by Gilly French and Murray Hipkin as 'High Fidelity', originally presented some years

ago by Bampton Classical Opera. New Chamber Opera also drew upon previous experience of mounting Haydn's comedies with performances of *Lo Speciale* and *Il mondo della luna* in recent years, the latter also featuring amorous intrigues in an improbable setting. Michael Burden's production in the ante-chapel of New College in the University of Oxford, places *La vera costanza* in the context of the fisherman Masino's wharf-side café, such as might be encountered in an English seaside town or village to provide comparatively more local colour, but the character types remained recognisably intact in the convincing and astute performances by the cast of young students.

The fisher girl Rosina is the figure whose true constancy gives rise to the opera's title and which runs as a steady point throughout the plot, around which the other characters hatch their schemes and ploys as they seek to satisfy their own ends. In the principal role Aine Smith was calmly confident, projecting the heroine's vulnerable innocence winningly, and rightly not protesting her virtue too much. Count Errico had married, but later abandoned, Rosina; now that he finds himself washed ashore in her place of residence, he falls in love with her again, even though his aunt, the Baroness Irene, desires that he look elsewhere for a spouse. Laura Coppinger was suitably haughty and uncompromising in that role, a typical instance of the meddling and indomitable

older female relative, whilst Richard Douglas interpreted Errico with considerable tenderness and warmth, perhaps downplaying the suggestion of the character's previous dishonourable behaviour.

Filippo Turkheimer sang and acted the part of Villotto, the vain fop who also pursues Rosina, with raffish good humour, bringing out a nature that is essentially feckless rather than viciously cunning. Dominic Spencer Jolly was a solicitous Masino, the café owner, and in this production turned into the brother of Rosina instead of her father, expressing keen anxiety and concern for her. James Gant's Ernesto was diffident and genial, and if he could have imparted more ardour to the performance, his cooler affection for Irene did at least serve as a point of contrast than the more hot-headed pursuit of Rosina by the other two men, as well as the soubrettish flirtations of Maryam Wocial as Lisetta, who makes advances to Masino. Joseph Beesley directed the company's instrumental ensemble in a performance of enthusiastic vigour, complementing the wit and bubbling pace of the narrative. Dynamic and textural contrast was necessarily restrained with one performer to a part, but they came together well in the extended scenes of more symphonic grandeur, and Toby Stanford's support on the harpsichord drove the recitatives with ideal tension and speed so as to advance the opera's natural comic momentum rather than hold it up.



Mailing List

Mailing Lists. Each hard copy and electronic mailing returns out of date addresses; it would be helpful if members of both mailing lists could keep their address up to date. Anyone who would like to join the electronic mailing list - used for reminders of forthcoming events - please let us know.

Lawrence Cumming



Anhad Aurora, who was musical director on New Chamber Opera's performance of Handel's Aci, Galatea e Polifemo writes on the masterclasses given by Lawrence Cummings as Visiting Professor of Opera

Casting my mind back to happier times of face-to-face musical interaction only deepens the pain of isolation and musical inactivity'. I was unsure whether to open a retrospective on Lawrence Cummings's visit to New Chamber Opera in March with this admittedly self-indulgent phrase. I ultimately decided in its favour, if only to address the elephant in the room. How else to begin? In the two and a half months since Lawrence coached us on Handel's *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo* (Naples, 1708), that virus has taken root, uprooting millions of cultural workers in the process. Quotation marks seems an adequate compromise.

Handel's *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo* has been unduly overshadowed by its younger sibling, *Acis and Galatea* (London, 1718), which has held sway with British audiences since its inception. Perhaps this is because of the attractive figure of Polifemus, whose 'Ruddier than the Cherry' provides an infectiously – no, eminently – grumbling Ohrwurm; or that Handel's London *Acis* guaranteed its widespread dissemination in its setting of an English-language text. It might simply be that the London *Acis* is cuter, in which case it really would assume the chief characteristic of the younger sibling.

The 1708 *Aci*, however, has it all: fast-paced action; ensemble numbers; virtuosic recitative; and the full gamut of eighteenth-century aria types. For producers and directors, its distinct advantage is its length, with the running-time falling just short of 70 minutes – in other words, long enough for a short evening's musical entertainment, but also sufficiently wieldy to occupy the first half of a longer programme. Yet *Aci*'s most alluring features – the fast-paced action and recitative – are those that render interpretation difficult, and it was around these matters of interpretation that Lawrence's masterclass was centred.

Prior to any interpretation of texted music, Lawrence counselled, must come an interpretation of text. This interpretative strategy does not suggest considering the text within the music. That much is a given in sung performance. Rather, Lawrence suggested that before tackling the braid of aria or recitative, performers should divorce the text from the music; they should declaim, analyse and unfold its shapes, inflections and modulations as poetry independent of musical content. Text is and always remains a vital entity in the musical whole; it is one of music's 'shaping organs', to misquote Wagner, regardless of whether it

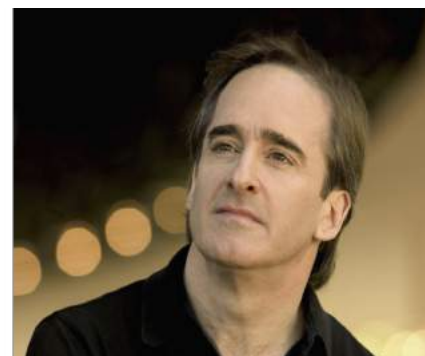
precedes music. This 'textual' strategy is also the closest we could conceivably come to a compositional retracing of steps. Handel examined text. Why shouldn't we?

To this end, chunks of the masterclass were apportioned to the discussion of the rhymes and metres of the spoken text, but formal talk swiftly spilled over into psychology: What was Polifemus thinking? How might Galatea have reacted here? How would you feel if this happened? We were encouraged to get into the bodies of our characters, to feel how they felt, to situate ourselves within their narrative place. I, too, nominally characterless, was pushed to perform the role of solo harpsichordist for which Lawrence is famed.

As soon as the text was remarried with the music, everything changed. Understanding the poetic function of individual words and their dependence on spoken stress allowed once-clunky recitatives to broach the smoothness and fluency of speech. The arias similarly attained a rhythmical freshness after their texts were scrutinised. After eight hours with Lawrence, Handel's first-born *Aci*, nearly 300 after its composition, started to regain some of its youth, and our performance a week later, reflected the lessons learned in the masterclass.

James Conlon

Indyana Schneider, who has sung a number of roles with New Chamber Opera and is now at the Wiener Staatsoper Akademie, writes on the masterclasses given by James Conlon as Humanitas Professor of Classical Music and Voice



Conductor James Conlon is Director of Music of Los Angeles Opera and Principal Conductor of the Italian RAI National Symphony orchestra. He is one of today's most esteemed conductors, with a career history spanning from guest conductor at the Metropolitan Opera, to Principal Conductor of the Paris Opera. He has also conducted at the leading opera houses of Milan, Vienna, St. Petersburg, London, Rome, and Florence. So, when Michael asked me whether I happened to be in London the week James Conlon was giving a New Chamber Opera masterclass, I swiftly booked a ticket from Vienna and told him yes. Absolutely.

My days in Oxford began with a lecture at Merton College's TS Eliot Theatre. Conlon led his audience on a tour through recent history; introducing us to composers and music suppressed by the Third Reich. (More information here - <http://jamesconlon.com/writing/recovering-a-musical-heritage-the-music-suppressed-by-the-third-reich/>). The lecture was not only academically interesting, but very moving. As a Jewish Music graduate, I felt like the perfect audience member. The lecture also

served to humanise Conlon in anticipation of the following day's masterclass, a treat often presented by New Chamber Opera – to meet the 'masters' of the masterclasses before they publically examine your singing.

Singing in a masterclass is a daunting experience. Your imperfections are showcased; your faults are examined, picked apart, in front of an audience. The trade-off is half an hour 1-to-1 with the very best in the business, a deal most singers will happily make. I decided to work on 'Il Padre Adorato' ('My Beloved Father') from Mozart's *Idomeneo*, which I've been using to audition at some of the big European opera houses with some successes, some failures. In the aria, Idamante has just seen his long lost father. However, instead of expressing joy at their reunion, his father orders him away, never to speak to him again. Unbeknownst to Idamante, his father has recently made a deal with Neptune – he can live only if he sacrifices the first living creature he meets, which happens to be his son, Idamante. The dramatic irony is cruel, and Idamante is completely overwhelmed and grief-stricken at his father's rejection. Despite this distressing content, it's quite a fun

and musically expressive aria to sing! You never know what the 'master of the class' is going to choose to work on during your time together. One challenge this aria presents is repetition of text and melody. We ask ourselves: why is my character repeating himself? How can I musically differentiate each iteration? I thought I might work on these questions with James Conlon. I was very wrong. Conlon had a very technical approach to my aria. We worked together on perfecting my Italian pronunciation, and singing through the passaggio (the difficult transition area between vocal registers). Conlon described singers as 'personally persecuted by their passagios', which made me and the audience laugh. He suggested thinking above the note, and even brightening the vowel to ease the transition, which helped immensely.

Overall, it was an excellent learning and performing experience. The masterclass concluded with a coronavirus 'elbow tap' – even then we were avoiding shaking hands. It's now been a few months since I've sung in front of an audience, and I'm looking forward to getting back on the stage soon and implementing my learnings into action!

Whilst in Lockdown, Indyana has created a podcast with fellow British opera singer, Sophie Kidwell. 'Diva Download' is a new podcast series interviewing stars of the opera world. Discussions topics range from the influence of choral backgrounds on opera careers, to singing with Pavarotti, to near death experiences on stage! Their first series includes guests such as: Dame Sarah Connolly, Sir Thomas Allen, Roderick Williams, Nuccia Focile, and more. You can find the trailer at: <https://anchor.fm/diva-download>. The podcast is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and other listening platforms in June. Just search 'Diva Download' in your favourite listening platform.