

## Orchestra has trouble holding on to Handel 'Siroe' opera eludes Venice Baroque

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Handel's operas continue their slow but steady march toward the center of the repertoire, uncovering new musical riches at every step. If we have to sit through the occasional mediocre and unpersuasive performance in the process, that seems a price worth paying.

Mediocrity certainly abounded in Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall Friday night, as the Venice Baroque Orchestra slogged through a tepid concert version of Handel's "Siroe."

This wasn't an evening to dim anyone's faith in Handel's evergreen creative genius. On the contrary, it only went to prove that his 40-odd operas depend on precisely the same things that any other opera requires: capable singing, stylish instrumental playing, an interpretive point of view.

Those virtues were in short supply during Friday's performance, presented by Cal Performances. Music director Andrea Marcon led a clunky, rhythmically unsteady account of the score and the cast, with one thrilling but bizarre exception, struggled to inject the necessary spark of virtuosity into the proceedings.

Granted, "Siroe," which premiered in 1728 and was quickly chased off the London stage by the runaway popularity of "The Beggar's Opera," is hardly top-drawer Handel.

The libretto, by the historically important but dramatically stiff Pietro Metastasio, offers the usual indecipherable muddle of political intrigue and romantic triangles. "Siroe" features a Persian king making a Lear-like attempt to figure out which of his two sons to bequeath his realm to, while the woman he loves dotes on one of them and the daughter of a murdered political rival, dressed as a man, seeks her revenge. Not even Handel could

quite conjure up coherent musical portraits of these outlandish cartoons.

But on the level of detail, the score's flood of inventiveness and ingenuity is never short of astounding. Each individual aria is a masterfully crafted portrait of ardor, regret, longing, jealousy or whatever other stock emotion may be called for, and however conventionalized a scene may seem when Handel sets his pen to it, it always emerges distinctive and fully realized.

Yet the performers must do their part as well, and on Friday only one singer -- a phenomenally gifted but slightly unhinged German soprano named Simone Kermes -- was in a position to bring a full dose of artistic intensity to the assignment.

Kermes is a singer of dazzling virtuosity, with a strong, crystalline soprano and the ability to toss off Handel's demanding coloratura with effortless precision

As Laodice, the apex of the father-son love triangle, she handled every aspect of her assignment with aplomb, from rapid pyrotechnics to the exquisitely melting lyricism of the lament "Mi lagnerò tacendo" ("I will quietly complain").

But Kermes is clearly an artist who thrives on excess, and she embraced every opportunity to push her performance into the sphere of borderline dementia. Her cadenzas and ornaments favored chromatic weirdness and extreme high and low notes, her facial expressions owed much to Gloria Swanson, and what had seemed exciting and vital at first soon came to feel mannered.

Still, with a strong director -- one who could subtly whisper "less is more" into her ear at key junctures -- Kermes would undoubtedly be a brilliant artist. And her performance was at least worlds away from the staid correctness or worse that prevailed elsewhere.

Countertenor Roberto Balconi did manage to bring some stylish presence to the role of the slimy younger son, Medarse, although his hooty tone and awkward register breaks were problematic. Soprano Katerina Beranova, announced as ill, produced a blandly pretty sound that might well have been impressive at full strength.

But soprano Liliana Rugiero sang the princely title role without power or presence, and bass Robert Koller, as the Persian king Cosroe, gave a musical impression of a butterfly, fluttering tantalizingly around the vicinity of the notes Handel had written without ever landing squarely on any of them.

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The Venice Baroque Orchestra performed Handel's "Siroe" at Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall.

