



At Lucerne, a weeklong Easter festival has come to blossom

LUCERNE, SWITZERLAND

Rare Handel oratorio is keynote in a program filled with choral music

BY JAMES R. OESTREICH

By now many music lovers, having heard critics grouse for years about the glut of Handel "Messiah" performances at Christmas, know that the work was written for Lent. But those listeners, critics included, may be hard pressed to name another Handel oratorio written for the Easter season.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt and his venerable period-instrument band, Concentus Musicus Wien, provided an answer here on Sunday evening with a persuasive account of Handel's "Oratorio per la Resurrezione di Nostro Signor Gesù Cristo." The performance, at the concert hall of the KKL (Kultur- und Kongresszentrum Luzern), was a keynote of sorts for the Lucerne Easter Festival, a weeklong event that is this year awash in noted performers and major, mostly choral, masterpieces.

"La Resurrezione" — relatively early Handel, from 1708 — does not qualify as a towering masterpiece. Nor, for that matter, does it rate highly as a choral work.

It is basically a sacred drama, consisting of recitatives, arias, a couple of duets and a chorus to end each of the two acts. The plot, such as it is, pits the forces of good — an Angel; Mary Magdalene and Mary Cleophas, grieving witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion; and St. John the Evangelist — against a hapless Lucifer.

MUSIC REVIEW

The work was not staged originally but sung, unacted, before painted scenery.

Handel's vocal writing is lavish with coloratura. His instrumentation is imaginative and sometimes ingenious.

You could have learned some of this from the 1989 Harmonia Mundi record-

ing of the work by Nicholas McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, but not all of it. For Mr. Harnoncourt uses a new edition (by Terence Best, from 2010), based on "new insights and sources," he writes in a performance note, that prove revelatory.

In particular, he cites a more varied use of the viola da gamba and the deployment of a trombone. "In more than 50 years of performing," he adds, "I've never encountered such a constellation."

The presence of the trombone makes all the difference, as the instrument tracks Lucifer in his misadventures with bloated arrogance or flatulence, as appropriate. Ruben Drole, a baritone, was delightful as the Devil, if that is not an oxymoron. And Dietmar Küblböck matched him beautifully on an antique trombone, playing with a power and bite that left the instrument's immediate ancestor, the sackbut, a distant memory.

The gambist's duties were subtler and more diverse, and Christophe Coin handled them well, apart from a momentary lapse in concentration. Others played splendidly too, in an orchestration that gave even the bassoonist and the massed cellists and double-bassists opportunities to shine.

As for the other vocalists, the soprano Christine Schäfer, as the Angel, provided a spark and a spunk that effectively offset Mr. Drole's persona. Her slightly disembodied tone and a certain skittishness in her coloratura seemed appropriate to her incorporeal character.

Another soprano, Roberta Invernizzi, supplied a more human quality as Mary Magdalene and impressed both in her grief, and in her rejoicing at Jesus' resurrection. Wiebke Lehmkuhl, the contralto, as Mary Cleophas, was a fit partner in her duet with Ms. Invernizzi and really shone in her late aria questioning the little birds and brooklets in search of her redeemer.

The tenor Toby Spence made the most of the colorless character of John, singing with solid, attractive tone and good agility.

Mr. Harnoncourt presided over it all

with a sure and flexible hand, allowing the singers rhythmic liberties and encouraging them to add lavish embellishments in repeated material. All this imparted life to somewhat predictable alternations of recitatives and da capo arias that could have grown tedious.

The performance was recorded for broadcast on Swiss radio on Easter Sunday.

The 23-year-old Lucerne Easter Festival is an offshoot of the Lucerne Festival in summer, which was founded by Arturo Toscanini in 1938 in opposition to the Nazi-controlled Salzburg Festival in Austria. Lucerne was never a serious rival to Salzburg in sheer quantity, but it has provided many worthy events over the decades.

Blessed with the acoustical excellence of the KKL hall, which opened in 1998, and guided by Michael Haefliger, who became executive director in 1999, the festival has positively thrived. It is now home to the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, conducted by Claudio Abbado, and the Lucerne Festival Academy, directed by Pierre Boulez.

And this year, especially, the Easter festival has come into its own. Three concerts of Brahms by Bernard Haitink and the Chamber Orchestra of Europe are part of a cycle that will conclude during the summer.

In addition, the events this week include performances of Bach's "St. John Passion," by Ton Koopman and the Amsterdam Baroque Choir and Orchestra; Liszt's "Solemn Mass for the Dedication of the Basilica in Gran," by Nicolás Pasquet and forces from Weimar, Bayreuth and Lucerne; and Tchaikovsky's opera "Eugene Onegin" in a concert version, by Mariss Jansons and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. As if that weren't enough, the mountains have — so far, at least — served up a glorious feast of spring weather.

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Nikolaus Harnoncourt conducting his period-piece band, Concentus Musicus Wien, during the Sunday night performance of Handel's "La Resurrezione" at Lucerne.