

Hudson Hall, Hudson, NY
RODELINDA, Music by George Frederic Handel. Libretto by Nicola Francesco Haym based on
a libretto by Antonio Salvi.

Directed by R.B. Schlather. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Vieni, Vieni!”

Queen Rodelinda’s fervent plea for her husband’s return is part of the wish of director R. B. Schlather who hopes that a company producing the operatic works composed by George Frederic Handel, can become established in Hudson, New York at the historic Hudson Opera House, now known as Hudson Hall. Judging by the attendance and the audience reaction to his maiden voyage with “Rodelinda,” that vision is coming closer. A sold-out house cheered the work and the workers with a well-deserved standing ovation and a constant recall to bow at the end of the 2 hour 35 minute performance.



(from left) Sun-Ly Pierce, Brennan Hall, Teresa Buchhola, Karim Sulayman,
Keely Futterer, Douglas Williams; Photo: Matthew Placek.

Handel wrote 42 stage works in addition to his many oratorios, many of which have been staged as operas as well. “Rodelinda” was one of three composed and produced in 1724/25, the other two being “Tamerlano” and “Giulio Cesare.” All were based on the Italian “Opera Seria.” Many of his works have been produced in recent memory by New York City Opera and the Metropolitan Opera, so the idea of a company producing Handel’s stage works seems odd at first but hearing this one on small stage with an intimate music ensemble playing only the appropriate period instruments makes a difference.



Sun-Ly Pierce;
Photo: Matthew Placek

Due to the peculiarities of voices in the eighteenth century the casting of this production requires some creative viewpoints by Schlather. Bertarido, Rodelinde's husband was written for an Alto/Castrato. Keeping his music in the appropriate keys and tone the role here was cast with mezzo-soprano Sun-Ly Pierce whose acting was the equal of her vocal production. From her first appearance in the set's high window through her capture and ultimate challenge sword play she gave one of the most dynamic performances.

The other Alto/Castrato role, Councillor Enulfo, a supporter of Bertarido, was taken by counter-tenor Brennan Hall who sang with an intensity not anticipated from that vocal place. When he was slain by the actual king the shock of it was brilliantly displayed by this fine

singer/actor. The convoluted plot, sung here in Italian was sometimes difficult to follow, although the surtitles helped most of the audience get through the complicated story.

Karim Sulayman, a Lebanese-American tenor, sang the role of the usurper Grimoaldo who desires Rodelinda, and is willing to throw aside Bertarido's sister Eduiga. Sulayman also stood out in this exceptional company, his rich, almost golden voice giving his arias a sense of nobility beyond purpose.

The two women in the picture are both wonderful singers. As Eduige, Theresa Buchholz had the additional chore of squirreling around the set on the floor or hugging the walls as if for life itself. She is a wonderful singer, her rich mezzo-soprano voice giving her character a special gracefulness.

Her solos and duets were so very glorious to hear that her character, the spurned princess, eventually became a much treasured one.



Brennan Hall (Unulfo), Karim Sulayman (Grimoaldo);
Photo: Matthew Placek

Handel seems to have been overly fond of the aria/cabaletta form, a solemn and serious



(from left) Teresa Buchholz, Keely Futterer, Sun-Ly Pierce, Brennan Hall; Photo: Matthew Placek

song, followed by a short recitativo/dialogue and climaxed with a bright, up-tempo lyrical tune that gave the singer an opportunity to show off her high notes. Rodelinda has at least three of these in the first of the opera's seven scenes. Keely Futterer as the Lombardy Queen handles them all with the dignity they deserve and the joy they warrant. She was most impressive in these moments.

Schlather's singers were supported by the music

ensemble "Ruckus" led by Clay Zeller-Townson who took his twelve member group through some of Handel's finest music. A small string section was augmented with Doug Balliot's Bass, Paul Holmes Morton's Thearbo and Elliot Figg's Harpsichord, with Zeller-Townson himself playing Bassoon.

Schlather was responsible for the set and costumes and the too dim lighting was designed vby Masha Tsimring. But those production values aside Schlather and company presented a fine show that should be a good omen for Handel in Hudson in the years to come. At least I hope so.

+ 10/30/2023 +

Although the show has closed it deserves attention and we hope the company will be back soon. There are still more than 40 of Handel's works to be performed.

