

Handel's opera, "Orlando," deserves attention

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

Michigan Opera Theatre returned to Detroit's Music Hall, its old home Sunday evening and broke away from mainstream repertoire. The company presented the Academy of Ancient Music in George Frederic Handel's "Orlando."

Christopher Hogwood conducted 28 musicians performing on original instruments and five impeccable vocalists to recreate a 1733 Handel performance in a semi-staged version.

Hogwood, one of the first musicians to capitalize on the value of these long buried masterpieces, founded the academy in 1973 and literally wrote the book on "Handel." In Handel's day, there was more

action in the audience than on stage. They played cards, talked and only listened to their favored singer. The slow moving, stylized direction in this production is authentic.

Hogwood used Handel's orchestral seating arrangement for his Baroque orchestra with modifications. Handel's orchestra was seated in two semi-circles just below the stage. He placed the lower strings, brass, and continuo on his left with the upper strings to his right and with himself in the center as conductor.

SUNDAY EVENING Hogwood did a 180-degree turn and placed the orchestra on the stage behind the singers. The musicians sat in a complete circle facing each other and Hogwood, rather than the audience — the lower strings on the right and the upper strings on the left.



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Besides the interesting seating arrangement, the delicacy of the sound of the theorbos (lute), the viola d'amore, the recorder and the valveless horns is something that isn't captured on recordings. In a live performance, the fragile balance of the instruments and voices can be relished.

The large chorus ideas of the 19th century have penetrated to "Messiah" performances, but the magnificence of that work has made people

neglect the composer's great operas. To really grasp the greatness of this work, it must be noted that the first act trio, the partial duet in the third act and the final ensemble are among the first found in operas.

The ethereal trio was sung by Lynne Dawson, an electrifying soprano, as Angelica, Emma Kirkby, the famous Baroque soprano, as Dorinda and Catherine Robbin, the smooth mezzo, as Medora.

Kirkby was weak and didn't live up to her more than 80 recordings,

but Dawson and Robbin were so sensational that they alone would make anyone appreciate the value of this music.

THE CASTRATO ROLE, Orlando, was filled by countertenor James Bowman who brought a romantic interpretation to the "mad" scene. The countertenor option for the castrato role has only one other alternative, to have it sung by a mezzo-soprano. Here the countertenor voice provided an interesting challenge to the imagination, but lacked depth and power for the dramatic part. From the historic descriptions, the castrati apparently had that power.

For pure, vibratoless tone and high tenor, falsetto-like voice, Bowman was matchless. In his mad scene duet with the two viola d'amore, Bowman delivered the evening's most rewarding moments.

Bass David Thomas as the instigator and magician Zoroastro were convincing.

Costumes were modern and subtly relevant. To represent royalty, Dawson donned a rust colored waistless dress that turned gold wherever the stage lights focused on it. As the shepherdess Kirkby wore a textured rust with her hair in a Renaissance style. Robbin took the pants role wearing a black and white pants outfit. The men wore tails.

In Handel's time, the singers were apt to sing in either English or Italian. In Handel's opinion the Italian language was more suited to musical sound than English. Hogwood's cast sang the three-hour opera in Italian.

As more people come to value the rich beauty of the numerous da capo arias in pieces such as this one, perhaps surtitles should be considered.

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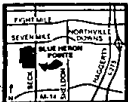
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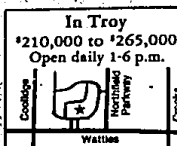


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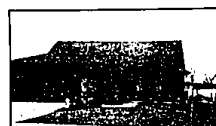
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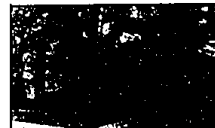
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