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Trendsetter: Telemann und Keiser

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Since 1967 the city of Magdeburg, in eastern Germany, has organized the Telemann-Festtage in honour of the composer's birthday. Georg Philipp Telemann was born there, on 14 March 1681, and so the festival takes place around the middle of that month; in 2024 it ran from 8 to 17 March. It normally involves an academic conference, although that was not the case this year. The twenty-sixth Magdeburger Telemann-Festtage also celebrated the three hundred and fiftieth birthday of Germany's greatest baroque opera composer, Reinhard Keiser (1674–1739), juxtaposing passions, operas, cantatas and instrumental music by Keiser and Telemann, and presenting repertoire by various predecessors and contemporaries. To open the event, Barthold Kuijken – this year's Telemann prize-holder – and Le Pavillon de Musique performed rarely heard works by Jean-Baptiste Lully, André Campra, Keiser, the *genius loci* and the concerto 'Il gardellino' by Antonio Vivaldi. While Keiser didn't adhere strictly to the Lullian template for the French overture – for example in the opening movement to his opera *Der bey dem allgemeinen Welt-Friede von dem großen Augustus geschlossene Tempel des Janus* (The Temple of Janus Closed at the Universal Peace by the Great Augustus (Hamburg, 1698)) – Telemann's overtures remained much truer to Lully's model.

Of the more extravagant productions, *Penelope* was the first on the programme. Based on Keiser's *Ulysses* (Copenhagen, 1722), this pasticcio – arranged by music director Mirjam-Luise Münzel – tries to tell the story of Odysseus from the woman's point of view, as the title suggests. The excerpts from *Ulysses* were complemented by movements from overture-suites and vocal pieces by Telemann, as well as a chaconne from Jean-Féry Rebel's *Ulysse* (Paris, 1703), whose libretto provided the model for *Ulysses*. Together with the dramatic nature of the music, Sophia Körber, as the protagonist, essentially carried the performance, with her soprano voice, rich in nuance, and her committed acting. The Ensemble Wunderkammer involved itself with superb and colourful instrumental playing, which was a joy to hear. Why the part of Circe, the evil sorceress, was given to a countertenor, Johannes Wieners, as in a recent recording of *Ulysses*, remained unclear. Admittedly, this ambiguity in relation to gender helped us to grasp that the character was not a prospective ally of Penelope's. As the wooing Urilas, baritone Vincent Hoppe fought a losing battle. A choir composed of local male amateur singers appeared nearly naked, and the sexual innuendos were clear. Given that the main object of this pasticcio was to tell Penelope's story from her perspective, the reciting of a misogynist text ('Das Frauen-Volck ist voller Tücke' (womenfolk are a deceitful lot)) – given originally (in 1722) to Arpax, the merry-making servant of Ulysses – ultimately worked to undermine this goal.

An autograph score for a 1729 version of *Der blutige und sterbende Jesu* (The Bloodied and Dying Jesus (Hamburg, 1704)) by Keiser was identified by Christine Blanken, a J. S. Bach scholar, as recently as in 2006. This passion oratorio caused a scandal at its original performance: for the soprano parts, Keiser had enlisted female singers from the Hamburg opera house where he acted as Kapellmeister. He also set a text by poet Christian Friedrich Hunold (also known as Menantes) to rather dramatic music. Such theatrical aspects were concentrated on the *turbae* in the rendering by Vox Luminis, directed by Florian Heyerick (who stepped in at short notice for

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Peter Van Heyghen). On the other hand, the galant – at times even sentimental – trends of Keiser's music of the 1720–1730s, contemporary with the early output by Carl Heinrich Graun and Johann Adolf Hasse, have become more apparent. It is worth noting that Hasse was even accused by Johann Adolph Scheibe of plagiarizing from Keiser.

The first opera that Telemann composed in his capacity as music director of the Hamburg opera house, in 1722, was *Sieg der Schönheit* (Victory of Beauty). It was chosen as this year's festival production by the Theater Magdeburg. A complete score is extant only for a version performed at Brunswick in 1728, probably prepared by Georg Caspar Schürmann, Kapellmeister at the Wolfenbüttel court. Many arias from the original 1722 production, though, survive in reduced form. This lavish work is set in Rome, sacked in 455 by the troops of Geiserich, a Vandal king. Telemann composed a very colourful and ambitious score, employing woodwinds, a pair of horns and trumpets as obbligato parts. Unfortunately, musical director Michael Hofstetter replaced the two chalumeaux called for by the composer with flutes. The singers were mostly on a remarkably high level, exceptionally so in the cases of countertenor Terry Wey and tenor Ludwig Obst. The Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin got better and better with each of the three performances. A great obstacle to the musical success of Telemann's work were the staging decisions made by director Kai Anne Schuhmacher. Although her biography did credit her with 'focal point opera' ('Schwerpunkt Oper'), her directing relied heavily on the (great) acting of the singers rather than on their vocal abilities. Noisy discussion among the children who were extras on stage spoiled the overture. Indeed, most of the music was drowned out by action on the stage, without much visual relief that would have let the music breathe. Everything was subjected to what was going on above the orchestra pit. Thus coordination between the instruments situated there and the singers when they were at the back of the stage did become a problem, and any delight in the many qualities of this rarely performed opera was lessened.

Lessons in 'how to do opera in Germany' could be taken, too, from the single performance given of *Der gestürtzte und wieder erhabene Nebucadnezar, König zu Babylon, unter dem grossen Propheten Daniel* (The Overthrown and Again Exalted Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, under the Great Prophet Daniel (Hamburg, 1704)), in a production originating from the Theater Heidelberg. Again on a libretto by Hunold (Menantes), Keiser composed effective and inspiring music, from which a certain young violinist in the Hamburg opera orchestra (George Frideric Handel, of course) took a lot of ideas when he travelled on to Italy and London. Among this night's singers, the young soprano Dennis Orellana excelled. He played the part of Darius, a prince of Media, who is wooed by two princesses. Under the musical direction of Dorothee Oberlinger, the Philharmonisches Orchester Heidelberg surprised with a flexible response to the demands of the instrumental parts, the strings played with baroque bows, and there were baroque trumpets. Stage director Felix Schrödinger and production designer Pascal Seibicke set the action in what appeared to be an oligarch's household. However, apart from a very grand bed in the middle of the stage, chairs and a table, there was virtually no scenery whatsoever. The old, sick and decaying oligarch was King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (Florian Götz, baritone). His queen consort, Adina, was a cigarettes-and-men-consuming vamp right out of the box of clichés – a role very well sung by soprano Hélène Walter. To enhance the catharsis and deconstruct the originally happy ending, Nebuchadnezzar died alone on stage, sitting in a wheelchair, to the nicely sung sounds of the chorale 'Ach! wie flüchtig' (Ah! how fleeting) in Bach's harmonization.

This year's traditional concert by the Biederitz Kantorei and the orchestra Märkisch Barock, led by Michael Scholl, featured Telemann's *Matthäuspassion* of 1762. Its music was vintage late-style Telemann. One of the surviving partial autograph score's oddities is the part of the Evangelist, which changes suddenly from (male) alto to bass. Jonathan Mayenschein did full justice to the alto portion of the role.

The passion oratorio text *Der für die Sünde der Welt gemarterte und sterbende Jesus* (The Story of Jesus, Suffering and Dying for the Sins of the World) by Barthold Heinrich Brockes, Hamburg poet

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and senator, was set by the most sought-after German composers of their time. Among them, earning pride of place, were those of Keiser (1712), Telemann and Handel (both 1716), and Johann Mattheson (1719). From these four compositions a pasticcio version was assembled, during the decade 1720–1730, in Hamburg. It survives in two manuscripts held in Berlin and Wrocław. More than half of it is by Telemann, the rest consisting of excerpts from Keiser's and Handel's settings, to which four pieces by Mattheson have been added. A substantial prelude to – and a fugue within – a chorus from Mattheson's setting, together with an aria, aroused more interest in this work. Ensemble BachWerkVokal, directed by Gordon Safari, achieved alluring moments with the music by Keiser and Handel. To grasp Telemann's to the full, they too often lost the necessary dramatic grip. Consequently, the last two arias by Telemann were rendered far too weakly.

An issue that performers certainly encounter in Magdeburg is the highly challenging acoustics in the available spaces. Felix Koch coped masterfully with the Paulus church hall while directing five cantatas from the 'French' cycle (1713–1714) by Telemann, so called for its use of French stylistic features (a real 'tempête' in one cantata, an instrumental prelude reminiscent of Campra, and the use of chaconne and rondeau forms). It was sung by the Gutenberg Soloists and played by Koch's Neumeyer Consort. This turned out to be one of the most strongly affecting artistic achievements of the twenty-sixth Magdeburger Telemann-Festtage.

Among the many uplifting occasions were some further remarkable concerts: Vox Luminis Orchestra with sonatas à 5 by Tomaso Albinoni and Telemann; chamber music by Telemann and Johann Gottlieb Janitsch performed by Musica Gloria; and demanding secular vocal music by the two main composers sung by Franz Vitzthum, accompanied by the Capricornus Consort. Another concert, with soprano Kathrin Lorenzen, violinist Liv Heym, cellist Konstanze Waidosch and harpsichordist Alexander von Heißen, consisted of cantatas by Keiser, Telemann and Bach, and instrumental works by the latter two, closing with an aria from the latter's opera *Die Last-tragende Liebe oder Emma und Eginhard* (The Burden of Love, or Emma and Eginhard (Hamburg, 1728)). For the finale, Michael Schneider directed Julia Kirchner, Marie Sophie Pollak, André Morsch and La Stagione Frankfurt in excerpts from operas by Keiser and Telemann, arranged according to the titles of the five movements of the *Symphonie fantastique* by Hector Berlioz to create an *opéra fantastique*. The energy and effort invested in this year's Magdeburg Telemann festival resulted in a renewed appreciation of Keiser and Telemann as two of the great 'trend-setters' of their era.

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