



Arcangelo

PRESS REVIEWS – ‘THEODORA’ AT BARBICAN, 29/03/2023



“A SEARING PERFORMANCE OF HANDEL’S OWN FAVOURITE ORATORIO” – THE GUARDIAN

Period music powerhouse Arcangelo gave the alternately poignant and earth-quaking arias the deluxe treatment in this unstaged yet dramatic concert performance

Handel’s *Theodora* is one of classical music’s reminders that audience tastes change – sometimes radically. The oratorio was considered a failure at its Covent Garden premiere in 1750 and was pulled after only three performances. Even the theatrical austerity of Lent had failed to persuade opera-goers that a work about Christian martyrdom was a good night out. These days, though, there are recordings galore and the oratorio Handel apparently considered his best (move over, *Messiah*!) has enjoyed high-profile stagings by [Peter Sellars at Glyndebourne](#), [Christof Loy at Salzburg](#) and, most recently, [Katie Mitchell at the Royal Opera House](#).

This [Barbican](#) outing from period-performance powerhouse Arcangelo and their artistic director Jonathan Cohen was emphatically unstaged – albeit with “on-” and “off-stage” seating for the soloists. In fact it’s remarkable that the performance communicated so searingly when the shattering final seconds of various numbers involved another singer creeping on to the middle of the stage for the next scene, and when there were always too many chairs but never enough music stands. Like it or not, even concert performances have a visual element.

Yet searing it was, despite those distractions. From the overture's opening bars, Arcangelo's sound was alternately big-boned and lithe, the harsh ring of violins' open E strings periodically adding delicious bite. Elsewhere, the ensemble provided a frozen ground for some of Handel's most poignant arias. From his seat at the harpsichord – an additional pair of hands in Arcangelo's earth-quaking continuo section – Cohen was endlessly energetic, maintaining an overall sense of momentum through even the gentlest of da capo repeats and drawing a deluxe sonic blend (and a masterclass in diction) from the small chorus.

The soloists were largely at the expensive-mineral-water end of the vocal spectrum: pure, subtle and extremely tasteful. Anna Stéphany's Irene was mellow and light, while Stuart Jackson (Septimius) made Handel's lines sound as inevitable as breathing, his phrasing exquisite. Adam Plachetka's heavier, deep-pile bass-baritone provided effective contrast as Valens and Tim Mead's coppery Didymus was dramatically convincing. Louise Alder's Theodora was by turns poised, powerful, entirely inward. At times she seemed barely to sing at all – and the audience barely breathed.

“A NIGHT OF THOUGHTFUL LOVELINESS WITH HANDEL” – THE TIMES

Handel's music doesn't come much more sombre and darkly hued than his Theodora. This oratorio might not be his most dramatically exciting work – although the mouse racing across the Barbican stalls seemed fired up by it – but the music is full of great and grave beauty. Nevertheless, the 64-year-old composer's exploration of the religious persecution of the Christians in Roman times didn't win over its first audiences – the premiere in 1750 at Covent Garden was a flop.

Perhaps a performance like Arcangelo's would have wooed the punters. Jonathan Cohen, directing from the harpsichord, so often imbues Handel with thoughtful loveliness and this Theodora was no exception. Even after 170 or so minutes and three acts, I could have listened to more. Cohen's nimble period instrument orchestra gave us everything from stately tragedy to sprightly energy to yearning anguish. Solo lute accompaniment brought intimacy to several airs. And his choir's singing comes with a long list of virtues: superb blend, radiant tone, shapely lines, well-enunciated words.

But perhaps the glorious sound of the final chorus and the sheer bliss of the third act duet between the two fated lovers – exquisitely sung by Louise Alder and Tim Mead – sent me home wearing rose-tinted spectacles. Earlier there were doubts. Was it Handel or the soloists that took a while to warm up in the first act? And even though Theodora is an oratorio rather than an opera, and presenting it as a concert performance is a perfectly valid artistic decision, could it have benefited from some light direction to liven things up a little?

Still, singing from their scores, the cast of soloists offered welcome light and shade. Adam Plachetka was a suitably authoritative Valens, while Stuart Jackson's Septimius had an appealing gentle quality; both settled into their strides. Anna Stéphany's Irene was all poise and rich colour, giving us an unsentimental yet spellbinding As with rosy steps the morn. Mead's Didymus was at his best floating beautiful notes in The raptur'd soul, while in the title role Alder took us to the emotional heart of each of her arias.

“GLORIOUSLY DARK AND SOBER” – THEARTSDESK.COM

A chilly story gains plenty of human warmth in this vivid account

Handel's *Theodora* – voluptuously beautiful, warm-to-the-touch music, yoked to a libretto of chilly piety about Christian martyrdom in 4th-century Rome. It's a red rag to directors, and there's a relief to seeing the oratorio in the concert hall, where the composer is cut free from a lot of acrobatic conceptual wriggling. And really, when it sounds like this, you need nothing more.

Back in 2018 Jonathan Cohen and his period group Arcangelo brought *Theodora* to the Proms. Distant and correct in the cavernous Royal Albert Hall, it never quite caught fire. Five years on and Cohen and leading lady Louise Alder are reunited at the Barbican, and suddenly arm's length becomes close-up and the details – the end of a verse melting straight into the next without a breath, the flickering doubt in an ornament, a delayed resolution into a cadence – are absolutely in focus. And with a recording on its way, there's a chance of getting closer still.

Christian aristocrat Theodora and Roman officer-turned-Christian-convert Didymus are a tricky pair. There's a lot of talk of lilies and purity on his part, a lot of lofty heaven-gazing on hers, and a variant of the rom-com “No you hang up...”, except instead of ending a phone call they're tussling over who gets to be executed, is almost unbearable. They'll never be relatable, so instead Alder and countertenor Tim Mead imbue them with dignity and a sort of lit-from-within evangelical radiance. Alder's soprano is glossy as ever, and her control, giving us only a pin-hole first glimpse of the voice in “Angels ever bright and fair” before gradually releasing the full blaze as we move through Acts II, is absolute. Closing duet “Thither let our heart aspire” isn't a resigned stepping back from life, here it's a musical consummation, kindled by Cohen's coaxing strings. Alder is well-matched in Mead's stern purity of tone. The opening of his “The raptur'd soul” is a rebuke to the chattering violins, an extraordinary moment of time-stilling beauty.

Anna Stephany's Irene is the acolyte to Alder's charismatic cult-leader, sober yet humane through “As with rosy steps”. The restraint of the whole Christian faction is brilliantly set off by Adam Plachetka's storming Valens (**pictured below**) – a villain who announces himself in his first aria with all the tools of torture, and proceeds to loom with satisfying and unambiguous cruelty throughout. Only Stuart Jackson's Septimius seems miscast, his baggy, characterful tenor confined rather than released by the lovely legato lines of “Descend, kind Pity”. Cohen, directing from the harpsichord, brings darkness to the fore. The unsettled opening of the Overture sets the tone for jagged edges and sombre grandeur – most striking when it seeps into unexpected place: the ravishing duet “To thee, thou glorious son of worth”, where strings grind and tug against the current of the voices, pulling them apart even as they come together for a moment.

Without the visual cues of staging it's hard to bring clarity to a chorus who must constantly switch from Heathens to Christians and back again; but there was little doubt here. Diction was the driving force of really outstanding singing, carving everything cleanly, counterpoint impeccably balanced and phrased, and just a little more swing and outside-the-lines overspill from the Roman episodes, a little more vertical precision from the Christian ones.

Can you force belief on someone? Handel's theme rings horribly and pertinently true. *Theodora* may conclude otherwise, but the score itself is enough to make a believer of anyone. With the forthcoming recording, Cohen seems likely to add plenty of new converts.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

Handel's Theodora may seem perilously drama-light, but its chilly virtue became radiant in this excellent Arcangelo concert

As the basis for an evening's entertainment, Handel's *Theodora* may not seem promising. The heroine, a noblewoman in Syria in the third century AD, converts to Christianity in defiance of the Roman authorities; she's relentlessly noble and pure, with none of the inner conflict that make Handel's other characters so interesting. All the people around her exist just to reflect and glorify her virtue – apart from the beastly Roman governor who condemns her to life in a brothel. True, she escapes from prison by donning her lover's clothes, but this potentially exciting episode is glossed over, so as not to disturb the elevated tone.

All this non-drama is relayed in rhyming doggerel that, at last night's Barbican performance, was displayed in surtitles: helpful, even if it might have been better to leave the words in obscurity. And yet the piece soared, thanks to this performance from the period-instrument orchestra Arcangelo, which turned chilly virtue into radiant lyricism and noble pathos. As *Theodora*, Louise Alder had exactly the kind of exquisite small voice that makes emotional intensity seem bodiless and chaste. In the aria she sings from prison, she delivered the first two lines beautifully, after which came the lovely aria 'With darkness deep as is my woe', in which she allowed her voice to blossom just enough to be touching but not curdle into sensuousness.

The really telling moment in this aria was the huge pause after those opening two lines, which allowed the feeling of dignity and pathos to swell into the infinite and fill our souls. It was one of many such huge silences inserted by conductor Jonathan Cohen at points where normally one hears a brief pause, and it was a shrewd move on his part: it allowed the chaste understatement of the piece to seem vast rather than pinched.

Although it seemed as if Alder were born to play this heroine, she didn't dominate the stage. Anna Stéphanie, as *Theodora's* faithful companion Irene, found a different sort of pathos, more humble and less radiant. As the sympathetic Roman Septimius, the tenor Stuart Jackson cut straight to the emotional heart of 'Descend, kind pity'. Tim Mead (*Theodora's* lover Didymus) was nobly anguished, Adam Plachetka (the Roman governor Valens) was refreshingly blunt and vicious.

The chorus of Arcangelo was equally fine in the brief rumbustiousness of the pagan celebrations and the refined dignity of the closing chorus. As for the orchestra, it supplied the essential ingredients of a varied colour palette, together with rhythmic vigour and bite – without which the evening might have seemed pallid. Instead, it did full justice to one of Handel's noblest creations

“COHEN AND ARCANGELO CONNECT US TO THE SPIRIT OF THE WORK AND REVEAL HANDEL’S TRUE GENIUS” – SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL

Handel was almost 65 years old, his eyesight fast fading, when, in 1748, in collaboration with his librettist the Reverend Thomas Morell, he wrote his penultimate oratorio *Theodora*. Handel’s retirement from the operatic stage was imminent, and oratorio became his main means of creative expression. Quite why, on this occasion, he abandoned his previous and commercially successful practice of setting an Old Testament text in favour of this tale of Christian martyrdom is hard to say. After a glittering albeit financially unpredictable career as one of the most accomplished theatre directors and musical impresarios of his age, he was now in the last chapter of his life. Perhaps this was the right moment to turn his back on the demands of fashionable society – all grand spectacle, wit, drama and political intrigue – and devote his creative energies to greater reflection and spiritual fulfilment.

Theodora is, above all, an expression of Handel’s deep religious faith. After all, his smart house in Brook Street, Mayfair, was but a short walk from St George’s Church, Hanover Square, which he visited almost daily when in London. *Theodora* is also one of the most contemplative and introspective of his works, featuring aria after aria of ineffable beauty, delicacy and tenderness. The tragic story, set in the year 304 AD, centres on Theodora, a young Christian noblewoman who is enslaved in Roman-occupied Syria during the anti-Christian terror. Refusing to offer sacrifices to the Roman Gods, she is imprisoned and consigned to prostitution. Didymus, a seditious young army officer who is in love with her and has secretly converted to Christianity, tries to rescue her. Both are sentenced to death and are executed together.

Unsurprisingly, religious oratorios about piety, sacrifice and virtuous love did not find favour with contemporary audiences, and when Handel and Morell premiered *Theodora* at Covent Garden in 1750, it was a box office disaster. Nonetheless, the composer firmly believed until his death that it was his finest work. Handel’s contemporary, the music historian Charles Burney, recorded how Handel, looking out at an almost empty auditorium on the show’s third and last night, observed in his thick German accent: ‘*Nevre moind: de moosic vil sound de petter*’. He would doubtless have been delighted to see an almost capacity audience at the oratorio’s most recent London performance at the Barbican, by a fine cast of soloists and the period instruments and chorus of Arcangelo under the impeccable direction of Jonathan Cohen.

Although the Barbican’s sizeable auditorium is not ideal for a small ensemble of 31 players and a chorus of 27, Cohen, standing or accompanying from the harpsichord, coaxed a rare warmth, precision and vibrancy from his band. The cast of soloists could not have been bettered. Soprano Louise Alder as the eponymous Theodora possesses a voice which is lyrical, expressive, and masterfully controlled. Contrast her markedly restrained performance of the Part 1 air ‘Angels, ever bright and fair’ – chaste and exquisitely pure – with her expansive, soaring, almost airborne account of the Part 2 aria, ‘O that I on wings could fly’. Alder was perfectly paired with countertenor Tim Mead, who sang the part of Didymus. Originally composed for the celebrated castrato Gaetano Guadagni, Mead comfortably encompassed the role’s

wide vocal range. A stony-faced figure of righteousness throughout, he delivered arias such as 'Kind Heav'n, if Virtue be thy Care', with absolute clarity, and his duets with Theodora 'To thee, though glorious Son of Worth'. and the heavenly 'Thither let our Hearts aspire', were perfectly balanced and sublimely beautiful. Anglo-French Mezzo Anna Stéphanie's Irene, as the Christians' earnest cult leader, sang with honeyed tone, illuminating the familiar aria 'As with rosy Steps the Morn', with inextinguishable shafts of light. Tenor Stuart Jackson's Septimius, the conscience-stricken Roman officer who despite his friendship with Didymus dared not defy the law, brought great poignancy to 'Descend, kind Pity, heav'nly Guest', making his cruel boss Valens (in a barn-storming performance by stentorian bass-baritone Adam Plachetka) appear increasingly evil. The structure and overall success of the performance was however undergirded by the magnificent and versatile chorus, from whose (sometimes devoutly Christian, sometimes earthy heathen) ranks, came a strikingly fine young messenger (tenor Guy Elliott).

In the last 25 years, there have been a number of fully staged operatic productions of *Theodora*, from the ascetic and visually abstract Peter Sellers's version at Glyndebourne in 1996, with Dawn Upshaw in the title role, and Lorraine Hunt as the Christian leader Irene, to the recent and more controversial interpretation by Katie Mitchell, featuring pole dancing soloists in a red velvet brothel. Both memorable, yet, for me, it is Jonathan Cohen's unadorned and sensitive concert performance which let the music provide the drama, and connected us more closely with the spirit of the work and Handel's unquestionable genius.