

MUSIC

Breeches, brocade and bonbons

Alexandra Coghlan

**Baroque Encounter
Handel Furioso**

Handel House Museum, London W1
Arcola Theatre, London E8

“Early music”. Earlier than what? We’ve come a long way from the bearded earnestness of the early period performance revival. There’s a freedom and a flexibility to the music of the 12th to 18th centuries that you just don’t get with the big Romantic repertoire, encouraging and even demanding experimentation. Whether you like your minuets and sarabands served straight up in britches and brocade or prefer something a bit more baroque’n’roll, there’s something to suit everyone.

Sitting in a wood-panelled salon, a series of Restoration worthies staring down at you from gilded frames on the walls, you’d be forgiven for imagining yourself back in Handel’s London. To some extent you’d be right: the meticulously restored Handel House Museum on Brook Street in Mayfair (next door to Jimi Hendrix’s former home) is a world away from the contemporary clatter outside.

Concerts regularly take place in Handel’s recital room, where the composer rehearsed and performed with the operatic greats of his day and once threatened to throw the soprano Francesca Cuzzoni out of the window. With a capacity of only 28, performances here are intimate, allowing you to hear this music as the original audiences would have done, in what is in essence a domestic setting. Proximity might dull the acoustic bloom you’d get in a concert hall, but what performers lose in soft focus, they gain in directness and human friction.

Playing on this unusual intimacy, a concert from the trio Baroque Encounter on 29 August invited us to take a musical stroll through London’s pleasure gardens. The group’s counter-tenor, Glenn Kesby, has an unworked simplicity to his sound that is well suited to the more popular repertoire of the 18th century. “The Little Coquette” by John Worgan was arch and appealing, its flightiness grounded by Claire Williams’s stylish accompaniment at the harpsichord, while “The Lass of Richmond Hill” by James Hook had all the freedom of the folk songs that it so closely imitates. Seduction took a more serious turn in “Lady Jane Grey’s Lamentation” by Giordani, its tragedy contradicted by the convulsive Lombardic rhythms.

Lauren Brant, on recorder, paid homage to the master of the house, performing Handel’s

“Recorder Sonata in F Major”. A slight tightness to her sound in the larghetto gave way to a lively allegro, with the third movement gaining new colours in the harp-like effect of spread chords on the harpsichord. Among so many musical bonbons, Telemann’s cantatas offered something rather more substantial but even the earnestness of Kesby’s coloratura couldn’t obscure the tongue-in-cheek morality of works that exhort us to drink, gamble and worse, so long as we do so in moderation.

From authenticity in Mayfair to experimentation in Dalston. At the Arcola Theatre between 27 and 31 August, Grimeborn’s *Handel Furioso*, directed by Max Hoehn, cut through the complexities of warring kings and mistaken identities and did away with most recitative, becoming a simple boy-meets-girl tale played out by two white-faced singers in a minimal set.

Taking the model of the 18th-century pasticcio – an operatic equivalent of the “jukebox” musical – Hoehn used arias from Handel’s operas as well as some of his chamber duets to create this slight, fable-like work. Occasional harmonic lurches (and one unfortunate oboe) aside, the result is artless and engaging, distilling music and emotion down to their essence. The soprano Robyn Allegra Parton (as the girl) and the mezzo Anna Starushkevych (as the boy) found a dramatic sincerity and sweetness that amplified their archetypes with surprising emotional heft.

Some superbly creative accompaniment from Julian Perkins (directing a small period band from the harpsichord) led us from first love to last rites in a tour of some of Handel’s loveliest music. “*Caro! Dolce! Amico amplesso*” from *Poro* found the voices writhing among each other with innocent obscenity, while *Ariodante*’s “*Neghittosi*” gave Parton scope for musical rage in coloratura that convulsed with fury. Starushkevych failed to find the stillness at the core of “*Dove sei, amato bene?*”, but in her later “*Cara sposa, amante cara*” there was a darkening of both vocal colour and intensity, finally showing this sternly beautiful voice at its best.

Early music might be an ambiguous term, but that reflects the range and flexibility of the genre. There’s nothing archaic or precious about music that’s as comfortable stripped back to the basics in Dalston as it is in the Royal Opera House; that can take as much reverence as revolution. With English Touring Opera offering a season of Handel, Monteverdi and Cavalli this autumn and the prospect of an anarchic *Rodelinda* from Richard Jones at ENO in February, baroque is as contemporary as it has ever been. ●

“*Handel Furioso*” is at the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford on 31 October and the Epstein Theatre in Liverpool on 2 November
Handel House Museum: handelhouse.org