

Review: Handel's 'Rinaldo,' With Period Brass in Good Repair

By James R. Oestreich

June 16, 2016

Despite its understated, lowercase name, [operamission](#) is a company with big and varied ambitions — none bigger, surely, than its multiyear campaign to perform all 39 of Handel's Italian operas, with a full orchestra on period instruments. It reached No. 4 on Tuesday night with "Rinaldo" at Merkin Concert Hall, and it was hard to know which was more remarkable: the presence of four countertenors, two of them very fine; or of four Baroque trumpets, and players to wield them adequately.

"Rinaldo," the first Handel opera to have found its way to the Metropolitan Opera, in 1984, deals fancifully with the First Crusade, of the 1090s. Goffredo, the Christian general, has pledged the hand of his daughter, Almirena, to the heroic warrior Rinaldo if they can defeat Argante, the Saracen king of Jerusalem. Argante's alliance with Armida, the queen of Damascus and a sorceress, complicates matters, yet in the end the two are not only defeated but also converted to Christianity.

Most concert opera productions these days include a touch of staging, and the singers here engaged in occasional byplay, with a gesture or a caress. But for the most part, Handel's effects — as with Armida's entrance "in the air, singing seated in a chariot pulled by two dragons spouting flames and fire from their mouths" — hardly lend themselves to half measures.

So it was stand and sing, with most of the soloists intently reading from scores. Still, several created vivid impressions: [Christine Arand](#), a fiery, statuesque soprano, as Armida; [Randall Scotting](#), a flexible, expressive countertenor, as Rinaldo; [Nicholas Tamagna](#), an intense countertenor, as Goffredo; and [Franco Pomponi](#), a strong if occasionally bluff baritone, as Argante.



Standing from left, Nicholas Tamagna, Randall Scotting and Malia Bendi Merad at Merkin Concert Hall on Tuesday. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

[Malia Bendi Merad](#), a dulcet soprano, sang the evening's big number, "Lascia ch'io pianga" (whose gorgeous melody Handel had used before) beautifully, but was a little too retiring in her overall stage presence.

Jennifer Peterson, the director of operamission, conducted an effective though not altogether polished performance from the harpsichord. The cellist Ezra Seltzer lent strong support in continuo passages.

But it was a second harpsichordist, Patrick Jones, who momentarily stole the show in one of Handel's wackiest and most inscrutable inventions: the extended improvisations that punctuate, not to say undercut, Armida's vengeance aria that ends the second act. Whatever Handel may have intended here, Mr. Jones's disruptions provided a bit of comic relief sorely needed in a three-and-a-half-hour evening.