

Stage director Sigrid T’Hooft on emotions, candlelight and Göttingen ...



Handel gave his work the subtitle ‘Operetta’. Why?

SIGRID T’HOOF: Taken as a whole, *Imeneo* is a ‘lighter’ work in terms of dimension, cast and décor. The libretto calls for just one set, for example – in comparison to opera seria, where three or more stage sets are employed, that is indeed ‘small-scale’. Even the cast is relatively small. Yet the music is of unbelievably high quality.

And here the title role does not have all that much to sing, compared to his rival Tirinto, for example ...

In the Baroque period, it is often the case that the most important person in the plot is not the one who gives the opera its name. *Imeneo* was originally to have received its first performance at a wedding, as we learn from the text that formed the basis for the original libretto by Silvio Stampiglia dating from the year 1723. Essentially, the story is not about the love relationship with Tirinto, but about a marriage based on reason. In Handel’s day, it must have been clear to the audience from the outset that on grounds of social convention alone, the beautiful Rosmene must give preference to the heroic youngster from Athens. It thus naturally raises the tension to give Tirinto the largest share of the arias and duets rather than presenting him as a failure from the beginning.

In the production you are working with historical gestures. Are you aiming to create in this way a reconstruction of the work’s premiere?

Everything that I do is contemporary; nothing is reconstruction.

But the means you use for your realisation are derived from historical performance practice ...

Of course. But just like the music, the scenic realisation reaches the audience in the moment of the performance – in other words, today. The music is perhaps even more of a reconstruction, after all there is a score with clear indications concerning pitch, dynamics, tempo. We do not have that for the staging.

Broadly speaking:
the actor used to
paint the emotion,
now the actor
is the emotion.

What are the sources you turn to for the staging, then?

There is an infinite amount of information. Writers on rhetoric and theatre theorists go into the use of the hands and the body, books on prompting and libretti reveal to us something about the basic rules governing the mechanics of a production, members of the audience report in letters or diaries what they saw on stage. And not least, caricatures and satirical accounts reflect in an exaggerated manner what stagecraft was all about back in those days.

Where exactly does the difference lie, compared to theatre practice today?

The tradition of gesture existed without interruption into the 20th century. Between the world wars there was a great rupture. Broadly speaking: the actor used to paint the emotion, now the actor is the emotion. But the gestures of those days remain deeply rooted in our subconsciousness, so that even today everyone still understands them.

A further special feature of the production is the candlelight ...

Candles cannot always be replicated by electric light. The special atmosphere they create backs up the aesthetics massively and helps the singers, too. In addition, they allow the audience much greater freedom. Modern lighting direction steers the eye of the viewer almost like the focus of a camera operator. With candlelight flickering evenly, the viewer is his or her own director. The feedback that I receive from the audience ranges from “greater concentration” to “stronger emotional participation” and to “discovery of slowness”.

In 2012 you staged Amadigi di Gaula at the Göttingen International Handel Festival. What comes into your mind when you think of the city of Göttingen?

The feeling of being in a city with history. Short distances. And a certain *Gemütlichkeit*.