

## Anthony Roth Costanzo Is Handel's *Amadigi di Gaula*

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Last year, Boston Baroque announced a five-program, digital-only season for 2021-2022, a bold decision buoyed by its experience of streaming during the pandemic, which saw it picking up viewers and subscribers across five continents. In conjunction with IDAGIO, concerts would be performed in and streamed live from the television studio of local PBS affiliate WGBH before an audience of between 125 to 300 depending on health advice.

Staged and designed for digital, Handel's opera *Amadigi di Gaula*, a co-production between Boston Baroque and San Francisco's Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra & Chorale, is the latest in the series. Musically it is very impressive indeed with an outstanding cast led by Anthony Roth Costanzo in the title role and with Amanda Forsythe as the mercurial sorceress hell bent on having her amorous way with him.

*Amadigi di Gaula*—described as a “magic opera in three acts”—was a hit for Handel when it premiered at London's King's Theatre in 1715. The production was big on spectacle with the pièce de résistance a fountain that gushed actual water. So complex and potentially hazardous was the machinery, audience members were asked not to venture onto the stage, something it seems that was a distinct possibility back then. The composer's patron, King George I, attended several performances, and Handel made sufficient money to invest £500 in the South Sea Company (spoiler alert: he was smart enough to get out with a tidy profit before the bubble famously burst).

Oddly enough, Handel only revived the opera twice and after 1717 it disappeared for over 200 years. Perhaps the demands for stage magic were too daunting, or perhaps people worried that an opera written exclusively for high voices lacked musical variety? Either way, it has a splendid score, full of musical invention, and in recent years its modest cast size has seen it become increasingly popular with small to medium-sized companies.

Despite its arcane twists and turns, the plot is essentially simple. The knight Amadigi and his colleague Dardano have been ensnared by the enchantress Melissa. She fancies her chances with Amadigi but he is in love with—and loved by—the princess Oriana. Dardano, who also turns out to love Oriana, is eventually killed and Melissa, who is ultimately unable to part the faithful lovers, winds up taking her own life (though not in this production where Amadigi stays her hand). As always, Handel is adept at writing for real characters with real emotions, but he is often hampered by a storyline that relies too heavily on supernatural spells and divine intervention.



## The challenge: staging the supernatural

That is a problem ultimately unresolved by Louisa Muller's functional but low-budget staging. The singers convey plenty of feeling but too often the action falls back on Melissa waving her arms and the other characters feigning the effects of her dastardly enchantments. Nevertheless, all four singers are adept at building character, and all four voices are exemplary.

Christelle Matou's production design is basic, relying on suspended panels at the back of the studio on which Ian Winters projects suggestions of sea and forest as well as images that lend cover for absent magical effects. Costumes, which tend to show every stitch, are loose-fitting, timeless, and mostly in grays and deep blues. Muller places the orchestra stage center, which proves tricky as characters seem unable to sing from behind the band yet are often asked to scurry around it. That leaves a thinnish strip for the main acting area with nowhere to sit except the floor or some steps at the sides. The blocking is effective enough, but it all feels a little lacking in imagination and low on dramatic insight.

Martin Pearlman directs the 25-strong Boston Baroque orchestra in a weighty, dramatic account of Handel's score. With harpsichord and theorbo heavy in the mix (at least as transmitted via the livestream), there were times it could benefit from a little more fantasy and lightness of touch, but the playing is generally first rate and Pearlman delivers shapely arias and well-paced recitative.



The title role in *Amadigi* was written for the famous alto castrato Nicolo Grimaldi (known as "Nicolini") and its vocal heroics sit well for Costanzo who proves especially winning in the ravishing "Sussurrate, onde vezzose"—sung to the aforementioned magic fountain—with his brightly focused countertenor gliding effortlessly around the rippling vocal line. He's equally impressive in the lively "Sento la gioia," an aria with obligato trumpet that prefigures the famous hornpipe from the *Water Music* that Handel was shortly to serve up for a royal boating trip.

As Melissa, Forsythe has the perfect combination of brilliance and flexibility, her nimble soprano well-suited to the capricious sorceress's series of showstopper arias. She can do cheeky and playful, as in the florid high jinks of "Io godo, scherzo, e rido," or play the woman scorned in vengeance in arias such as "Destero dell'empia dite" with its sparkling oboes and flashing trumpet.

Dardano is a peach of a role with several of the score's finest numbers. Daniela Mack's wine-dark mezzo-soprano proves the perfect foil for Costanzo's edgier instrument. Hers is a rich, smooth instrument with a delicious depth to it, equally suited to the dusky fury of "Agitato il cor mi sento," the pastoral-inflected "Mia speranza" with its delicious recurring drone, or the penetrating emotions of "Pena tiranna io sento al core," which bears a striking resemblance to Handel's famous "Lascia ch'io pianga" from *Rinaldo*.

As Oriana, Camille Ortiz's creamy soprano contrasts well with Forsythe, whether in her many plangent arias or the feistier turns of the defiant "Affannami, tormentami."

The stream is available to watch [here](#) until Monday, May 23, 2022 with IDAGIO guaranteeing that 80 percent of the net revenue goes directly to the performers.

Pictured from top: Amanda Forsythe and Anthony Roth Costanzo as Melissa and Amadigi; Daniela Mack as Dardano; Camille Ortiz as Oriana.