

Oberlin Opera Theater: Handel's *Alcina* (Mar. 9)

by Daniel Hathaway



Just before the lights dimmed in Hall Auditorium on Wednesday evening, March 9, a young couple in the row behind me commented on the plot synopsis for George Frideric Handel's *Alcina*. "I read it before I auditioned for the opera," one of them said, "and I never figured it out." The other replied, "I just read it now, and I don't have a clue!"

Probably nobody goes to hear a Handel opera for the story line, but here's the gist: *Alcina* is a sorceress who lures heroes to her enchanted island and transforms them into objects or other life forms — flowers in the case of Jonathon Fields' Oberlin production. Ruggiero, a Crusader, is the latest to be floralized. His fiancée Bradamante comes looking for him, accompanied by her guardian Melisso. At the court, they meet Oberto, a young page who is searching for his father.

The plot thickens as Morgana, *Alcina*'s sister, falls for Bradamante, making her own sweetheart Oronto jealous. (Oh, by the way, Ruggiero is sung by a woman and Bradamante is pretending to be a man, so you can imagine how things get mixed up.) Ruggiero and Bradamante finally extricate themselves from the nefarious powers of the twisted sisters, restoring all those flowers back to human beings. General rejoicing.

Except for the opening and closing choruses, all of this action is related through a long string of *da capo* arias, vocal forms that begin with an "A" section, move on to a contrasting "B" section, then repeat the "A" section. The format gives singers both the opportunity and license to festoon the original music with elaborate ornamentation and flights of fancy the second time it comes around. That's what Handel's audiences came

to hear, and the composer gave them a lot of lovely music to enjoy during the course of the 2-½ hour show — and much of that twice.

Given the number of “trouser” roles and disguises, *Alcina* is a boon for female singers. The Wednesday-Saturday cast — Morgan Griffith (Alcina), Sage De Agro-Ruopp (Morgana), Elise Thora Wolkmann (Oberto), Siena Miller (Ruggiero), and Olivia Cosio (Bradamante) — brought strong credentials and splendid vocal flexibility to their roles. As Melisso and Oronte, bass Perry Bleiberg and tenor Tayte Mitchell made a fine match for the women.



While Handel didn't give him a lot of action to draw on, director Jonathon Field staged the arias imaginatively. He created a highly amusing scene when Alcina's transformed suitors were first revealed. Changed into flowers, they poked heads and arms out of garish cutouts as if Puritans had shamed them by putting them into the stocks. And he staged the scene where Morgana falls for Bradamante as a hilarious caricature of someone suddenly turned delirious with love. Jean-Francois Revon's fantastically colorful sets were brilliantly lit by Jeremy K. Benjamin, and Chris Flaharty's generally-ancient period costumes resonated perfectly.

In the pit, conductor Christopher Larkin drew consistently stylish playing from the Oberlin Chamber Orchestra. After many similarly scored arias, it was a breath of fresh air to hear — late in the second act — one aria with a fine cello obbligato (Angelique Montes) and another that featured two horns (Logan Bryck and Helen Fleischer). Albert Bellefeuille provided attentive harpsichord underlay for recitatives.

Finally freed from their flowery impediments, the chorus brought the show to a triumphal conclusion with their lively singing and dancing. After such a slew of *da capo* arias, a change in musical style was both needed and welcome.

Photos by [Yevhen Gulenko](#).

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