

Philology, Practice and Baroque Theatre

A conversation between Angela Cauzzi and Ottavio Dantone - November 2018.

Angela Cauzzi:

How does *Rinaldo* 2018 come to life?

Ottavio Dantone:

There are many variants of Händel's *Rinaldo*, some of which have been much altered, such as the one staged in 1718 in Naples, where arias by other composers were also added. The most authoritative and relevant versions that we know of are those of 1711 and 1731, and they are the starting point for this new staging. Händel made several changes to adapt the 1711 version to the new cast he had available. Only the role of Almirena, for soprano, remained unchanged. Other roles were transposed from alto to tenor (Goffredo), bass to alto (Argante) or soprano to alto (Armida). Rinaldo, while remaining in the alto range, was adapted to the voice of the Senesino, who was more at ease with a lower tone. The role of Eustazio was also completely removed, a cut that had already occurred since the opera was resumed in 1717. I therefore decided to do the same operation: to adapt the score to the vocals of the cast I was working with, based on the two existing versions.

A.C.

What score is the performance based on?

O.D.

I worked on a new critical edition (edited by Bernardo Ticci n.d.r.), conducted on autograph manuscripts and other existing sources. I chose to use a new edition because I believe that writing a critical edition of an Opera is very much based on the constant and continuous progress made in knowledge of the repertoire, sources and baroque performing practice.

The manuscript of an Opera presents itself as a "living" form of Art, subject to an ever new study and approach whose aim is to interpret and understand the composer as best as possible and to provide the contemporary performers and audience with the best text to reproduce the Theatre of the past centuries.

A.C.

How was the orchestral staff chosen?

O.D.

Today we often have the means to recreate the original orchestra setup of the performances of the past, thanks to the letters, the theatre payrolls, the chronicles of the time and even sometimes the musical iconography. However, we have to consider that, at the time, the staff was a function of the place and the particular performance. There was also a certain freedom in the use of wind instruments, especially oboes and flutes.

These instruments were almost always played by the same musicians and could be included in the score even where they were not explicitly indicated, to give a particular colour or to reinforce the melody. In the choice of the ensemble, therefore, I did not want to reproduce Händel's orchestra of the time, but I made my choice following the same criteria of the time, i.e. according to the performance and the performance practice.

A.C.

What criteria were used to make the variations in arias?

O.D.

The ability to improvise and the art of musical variation are characteristic of the Baroque operatic repertoire. Thanks to the study of treatises and performance practice we now can make and reproduce variations in just as both instrumentalists and singers did at the time. There are two types of embellishments: a first, simpler type, which we can define as small ornamentation, consists of trills and passage notes performed on the same melodic line. The second type is much more complex, such as the one used in the arias' *Da Capo*. In these cases the singers used to create their own variations, which were not necessarily improvised on the spot. Indeed they had to amaze or excite the audience even more strongly, and this very often required the singer or others, sometimes the composer himself, to write the variations. I always take great care of the ornamentation for the *Da Capo*, adapting it from time to time to the vocality of the singers for whom it is intended. I then discuss it with them in order to make changes, if necessary, to adapt the variations to the peculiarities of each performer. I find it much more philological to write new embellishments today than to perform those written for the past, obviously respecting the style. This was and still is the practice.

A.C.

What does it mean for you to philologically perform an opera today?

O.D.

Very often one runs the risk of dwelling on certain aspects that are barely the surface of the philological and informed approach to the baroque repertoire. I believe that in order to perform this repertoire correctly it is not enough to use only the original instruments or to perform note by note everything we read in the manuscripts. We have seen how often cuts and modifications were made in the 18th century. The 1731 version of *Rinaldo* is full of changes and much more streamlined than the first version. It was perfectly normal at the time to adapt the text to the needs of the moment, to cut recitatives and parts of arias, to make transpositions, etc.. For me to philologically perform a work means assimilating its language as much as possible, understanding its aesthetics, the rules and codes that determine its emotions. Trying to faithfully reproduce a performance exactly as it happened at the time is a bet that is lost at the start, it is impossible (just think of the voices of the castrati, who no longer exist).

Only through the understanding of everything that surrounds Music can we access this repertoire with awareness. And we will realize that, at the end of the day, making cuts to an opera is the most philological choice we can make.