

Vivica Genaux

Mezzo-Soprano

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Critic's Notebook

Learning to Love Handel, Just in Time for 'Semele'

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Vivica Genaux, standing, with Elizabeth Futral in Handel's "Semele."

"I didn't like Handel," said the mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux, her large dark eyes widening to share a scurrilous secret.

Talk about bucking a trend. In today's opera world, where Handel productions are sprouting up right and left, such a statement verges on the politically incorrect. It is all the more incongruous coming from a singer who has built her reputation on the foundation of early music; who has sung and

recorded a good number of Handel operas; whose new Virgin Classics CD features Handel and Johann Adolf Hasse; and who is to make her [New York City Opera](#) debut tonight in “Semele,” a dramatic oratorio-cum-opera by, of course, Handel.

“I used to accept Handel operas because I knew I was missing something,” Ms. Genaux said, half laughing at herself. “Handel has a lot of virtuosity, but it always strikes me as being a little more instrumental than vocal. I always have to keep myself on a short leash when I’m singing Handel. I’ve never yet done a Handel where I can just let it all out. But I finally had my little raptus when I was doing Handel concerts in the spring. I finally like Handel. It’s so cool.”

And not a moment too soon. This season she is scheduled to do three new Handel roles.

The mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux, who makes her City Opera debut tonight.

Ms. Genaux, 37, exudes an exotic fascination. Her small face is dominated by wide eyes and a [Julia Roberts](#) smile that give her a distinctive, elfin beauty that she has parlayed into androgyny in stage portrayals of a couple of dozen men — the trouser roles that are the bread and butter of a mezzo Baroque specialist.

Her voice is as striking as her looks: less striking, even, for the light, free upper notes or rich chocolaty lower ones than for the runs of coloratura that she releases with jackhammer speed, gunfire precision and the limpid continuity of spring raindrops.

She is also an international star, particularly in the early-music world. So it is notable that she has been away from New York for so long. In the late 1990’s she was practically a fixture in this city, staking out the bel canto terrain with annual appearances at the nearby Caramoor International Music Festival; a production of Rossini’s “Cenerentola” with the [Opera Orchestra of New York](#); and an acclaimed debut at the [Metropolitan Opera](#) in 1997, substituting for Vesselina Kasarova in Rossini’s “Barbiere di Siviglia,” on a week’s notice.

Ms. Genaux subsequently went off to Europe and made her first solo album, “Arias for Farinelli,” featuring music written for the 18th century’s most famous castrato and winning accolades from every corner — except, evidently, the Met, which thanked her with a couple more appearances in “Barbiere” and then silence. She did give New York recitals in 2002 and 2005, but she hasn’t appeared in New York opera for some time.

Ms. Genaux is philosophical about her absence from the Met. “There’s probably a bit of incompatibility involved,” she said. “I don’t have a huge voice. The productions that I have done in larger houses have not been the highest on my list in terms of personal enjoyment. I’m lucky in the Baroque that you usually get to do a new production, because it’s never been done before.” Like Hasse’s “Solimano.” Or Vivaldi’s “Bajazet.” Or even “Semele,” which City Opera is doing for the first time.

Ms. Genaux comes by her exoticism — and her considerable linguistic abilities — honestly: her mother is from Mexico, but of Swiss and German heritage; her father, a college chemistry professor, is Belgian and Welsh; and she grew up in Fairbanks, Alaska. Music and dance were a natural way to help get through the long, dark winters. Ms. Genaux danced, played the violin and began studying voice at 13 in the studio of the esteemed soprano Dorothy Dow, when her family was on sabbatical

for a semester in Galveston, Tex. Ms. Dow put Ms. Genaux on a serious diet of opera: Siebel's aria from Gounod's "Faust," Musetta's waltz from Puccini's "Bohème."

"I would be just absolutely painful on those high B-naturals with Musetta," Ms. Genaux said, with her ready laugh, "and Dad was, like, 'Is that going to hurt her?' " 'No, no, her voice is going to open up.' "

"I think she really did know what she was talking about. But to the day she died, she maintained that I was a soprano, not a mezzo."

Her later teachers — Virginia Zeani and, for the last 10 years, Claudia Pinza — may or may not have concurred. But the difference, in Ms. Genaux's case, seems as much one of temperament as of timbre. She didn't actually emerge as a mezzo until after her graduation from [Indiana University](#) (to which she had transferred after a few unhappy semesters at the [University of Rochester](#), trying to follow her family's scientific bent by studying genetics).

"I realized the characters seemed to be a lot more fun," she said, adding that she didn't have much of a taste for the consumptive heroines of the "Bohème" or "Traviata" variety. "I had always had problems with Mimi — 'O, woe is me' — and I didn't like Violetta much, either."



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times
The mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux, who makes her City Opera debut tonight.

There was also, perhaps, a natural gravitation toward trouser roles. "Coming from Alaska," Ms. Genaux said in a German television documentary about her life, "I always felt that the feminine side

was not useful because you're working in a very harsh environment where the most useful characteristic you can have is knowing how to change a tire at 40 below. It took me a long time to be comfortable with being feminine."

So Ms. Genaux's City Opera debut is a kind of departure. While her other Handel roles this year include Rodrigo, and Polimesso, the villain in "Ariodante," she is, in "Semele," singing not just one but two women: Juno, and Semele's sister, Ino. Juno, particularly, is forcing her to confront issues of women and power head on.

"Juno is very much in control of the situation," she said, "but not in a cutesy, manipulative kind of way, like the Rossini girls. It's kind of like playing Caesar as a girl."

Like Ms. Genaux, the director of "Semele," Stephen Lawless, is a late convert to Handel: this is the first Handel opera he has done. But he needed little conversion to appreciate Ms. Genaux. René Jacobs, the acclaimed early-music conductor who led Ms. Genaux's Farinelli album and several recordings since, is a good friend of his, Mr. Lawless said.

"He asked who was in 'Semele,' " Mr. Lawless said, "and when he heard Vivica was in it, he said: 'Wait. Just wait.' "

Despite Ms. Genaux's newfound fondness for Handel, her heart belongs to the other composer on her new CD, Hasse, one of the most famous composers in the 18th century but obscure in the 21st.

"Singing Hasse is like being at a vocal spa, for me," she said. "It just fits like a glove. It's the only composer that I've found that I can just not worry about technique and not worry about me. I can just enter into that music and just glory in it, just have a great time." The CD includes arias from "Arminio," one of Hasse's many operas, and one of his cantatas. He is also figuring prominently in her concert schedule for this season.

Still, she is looking forward to her coming Handel roles. Particularly Polimesso, which she is to sing in Paris in February. "I'm looking forward to playing an evil character for the first time," she said with her inevitable laugh, eyes sparkling.

"I like liking Handel," she said. And it's a good bet that New York will like liking her.