

Synopsis

This production of *Ottone* is dedicated to Winton Dean, eminent scholar and champion of Handel opera, who died in December 2013. We hope the work meets his helpful, exacting standards.

Ottone, German king and now Emperor is about to marry a Byzantine princess. When the ship carrying her to Italy is attacked by 'Saracen' pirates, he pursues them and takes their leader prisoner. His promised bride, Teofane, proceeds unmolested to meet Ottone in Rome.

In Rome a rival prince (Adelberto) and his powerful mother (Gismonda) stage a coup d'état. Adelberto claims the throne, and tries to claim Ottone's bride as well. Teofane is confused: this man does not resemble the man in the portrait sent to her.

Ottone's defiant prisoner refuses to disclose his name, or show obedience. Matilda, Ottone's sister, arrives at camp and reveals to him Gismonda's seizure of Rome; although betrothed to Adelberto, Matilda knows that he has used and rejected her, so she undertakes to lead an army against him. Ottone praises her loyalty.

At court, Teofane is baffled by the tough-minded Gismonda (who pretends to be the mother of Ottone, rather than a rebel); as her marriage to 'Ottone' is about to take place, the real Ottone storms the city, and Adelberto rushes to defend himself. Teofane is left in lonely confusion.

Ottone returns to court with two captives: the silent pirate Emireno and the defiant Adelberto, who complains that he has not enjoyed Teofane before death.

Confronting Adelberto with his treachery – both personal and political – Matilda's infatuation overwhelms her. She confers with Gismonda, who rejects any idea of begging Ottone for mercy – though the mother's belligerence cools as she thinks of the fate of her son.

Interval

Just as Ottone and Teofane are at last to meet, Matilda intervenes; she pleads for mercy for Adelberto. Ottone consoles her with an embrace,

but rejects her plea – and this is observed by Teofane, who misinterprets their intimacy. As Matilda leaves with a curse, Teofane also flees.

Emireno and Adelberto have escaped prison by Matilda's contrivance. In a cave by the sea at night they prepare to flee. There Teofane by chance has strayed, yearning to return to the east. Adelberto abducts her, and Emireno makes good their escape.

Gismonda, concealed, has witnessed their flight. Matilda arrives moments too late. Together they call for night to hide their deed, and the desperate fugitives. Matilda hurries back to court when Ottone, too, is drawn to this sea cave, in search of Teofane.

Gismonda taunts Ottone: his rival Adelberto is free, has taken Teofane, and will return with an army.

A storm has forced the escaping party to land on a desolate shore. When Adelberto goes to reconnoitre, Teofane claims that either Ottone or her brother, a Byzantine prince, will avenge her abduction. Questioned, she reveals that her brother was ousted by a usurper, but as the usurper has now been defeated she expects her brother's return. Emireno recognises his lost sister, and goes to embrace her – which she first interprets as an assault. On Adelberto's return, Emireno overwhelms him and pledges to return to Rome with his captive and his sister.

Learning that Adelberto has taken Teofane with him, Matilda is furious. Gismonda exults in revealing to Ottone that Matilda was complicit in the escape – so that he is surrounded by betrayal. Matilda swears to make amends by killing Adelberto.

Emireno returns with the captive Adelberto. Matilda is about to kill him when Adelberto's miserable confession softens her heart. Gismonda scorns her weakness, takes the dagger, and makes to kill herself. Teofane stops this, calling for clemency.

Startled by love, Ottone agrees – just as Adelberto, wakened by Matilda's compassion, vows to love her.

Brother and sister, husbands and wives, mother and son, ruler and subjects pledge a new faith, and a new love, strengthened by suffering.

OTTONE AND THE OTTONIANS

James Conway

James Conway discusses the history behind the story of *Ottone*

As Tom Holland's bracing history *Millennium*¹ makes clear, Otto I (AD 912-973) was a remarkable ruler, a determined successor to the imperial title of Charlemagne. Just as the Franks had been a surprising but worthy tribe to assume the mantle of the empire in the west, so too were the Saxons a hundred years later. Not so long after that Saxons had been regarded as frightening barbarians, Otto I emerged as one of the greatest kings of the 'dark' ages, ruling an empire from northern Germany to Byzantine southern Italy, from the Hungarian plain to the marches of Lorraine. The ancestral home of this *reich's* rulers matched fairly closely with that of the 'German' Georges who came to rule in England in Handel's time.

In the dynasty founded by Otto I's father, known as Henry the Fowler, there were three



Painting of King Otto II

¹ Little, Brown 2008; Abacus, 2009

Ottos; Handel's sources were not picky when it came to Ottonian lore, and our opera's hero inherited aspects of all three.

Otto I was certainly the most successful warrior and tactician; his second wife (the first was a daughter of the English Saxon king Edward the Elder) was Adelaida, a Burgundian-Italian princess of great beauty, wealth and vigour. I apologise for cutting the one line referring to Adelaida – in which Teofane suggests that the woman presenting herself as Ottone's mother does not deserve the reputation for graciousness for which Adelaida was famous – but I figured the fewer names of absent folk we had to conjure with, the better. This Adelaida was the one an Italian king Berengar (Gismonda's husband: I also edited references to him) tried to secure as a bride for his son and heir Adalberto. At the time 18 years old and already the widow of one King of Italy, Adelaida had the temerity to lock herself up in a fortress and propose marriage to the widowed Otto instead.

Adelaida and Otto I started having sons quickly. As it turned out, their industry was timely; back home in Germany Otto's son by his English wife, Liudolf, was busy teaming up with discontented nobles to overthrow him. (Indeed, the antipathy between Ottonian fathers and sons – and brothers – matches quite neatly with the enthusiastic hatred of fathers and sons in the Hanoverian dynasty, much lampooned in Handel's day).

It was their third son, the future Otto II (955-983), who was married to a Byzantine princess, Theophanu. She arrived in Italy, weighed down with gold and jewels, and was only slightly undervalued when it was revealed that the Byzantine emperor (John Tzimiskes, himself a usurper and a voluptuary, and poisoned before much could be made of the alliance) was her uncle and not her father.

Theophanu's worth was quickly measured by her father-in-law. The marriage – in St Peter's Basilica, no less, and consecrated by the Pope – appeared to achieve the union of the empires of east and west in the person of

a stocky, red-headed Saxon and his elegant, gilded bride. Thereafter she supported her young husband's unsuccessful attempt to wrest southern Italy from the eastern emperors (now that a new and hostile line had succeeded her uncle).

As far as I can tell Theophanu did not discover a brother disguised as a pirate in the course of this over-ambitious campaign (though the possibility is not at all far-fetched; the biggest business of the epoch was slavery, focused then on what we now call Europeans abducted and transported by pirates to more advanced regions in the east, in north Africa, and in Iberia). She could have done with such a brother; her brave but hapless husband died of diarrhoea before he could return to quell new rebellions there, and her son Otto III (980-1002) was abducted by his cousin Henry, son of another notorious traitor. Nonetheless, Theofanu quaked not, nor did she flee: before long she had the same rebellious nobles waiting upon her son as a sign of their fealty, and she was his highly effective political guardian.

Until Otto III reached maturity, his mother Theophanu shared the regency with her indomitable mother in law, Adelaida, and with Matilda, the only sister of Otto II. Matilda was a remarkable woman, though hardly the love-starved Valkyrie of Handel's opera. Aged eleven, she succeeded her grandmother and namesake as Abbess of Quedlinberg – presiding over an abbey rich in learning, power and sanctity. When her father Otto I and brother (later Otto II) went to Italy, she was left in charge; later, she managed the Diet which guarded the birthright of her infant nephew Otto III. In her honour – and because it raises the stakes of the relations in *Ottone* to the level of those in *Rodelinda*, in which Eduige so resembles Matilda – I have made Matilda the sister of Ottone, rather than his cousin. For the more warlike side of her character, I looked to a distant cousin in the next generation, the redoubtable Matilda of Canossa.

Poor Otto III, the wonder of the western



Otto I's victory over Berengar II

world for learning, piety and (latterly) skill in diplomacy and warfare, died at 21 in the malarial swamps outside Ravenna. On the way to marry him was another Byzantine princess, Zoe, the daughter this time of the dreadful Constantine VIII. Among Otto III's many achievements was his role in the 'taming' of the Magyars, and the creation of the Christian kingdom of Hungary; he brought the crown from Rome that was placed on King Stephen of Hungary's head by Saint Adalbert of Prague.

This Adalbert was one of the great men of the Holy Roman Empire. He was named for St Adalbert of Magdeburg, the protégé of Otto I whose attempts to convert Kievan Rus' (the loose federation of East Slavic tribes that present-day Russia, Ukraine and Belarus all claim as their cultural ancestor) came to nothing. The new Adalbert was appointed to the bishopric of Prague by Otto II, and he was

a spiritual inspiration to the young king and to his son; dislodged from his bishopric by the local duke when he threatened to upset the thriving trade in slaves, he went east as a humble missionary and was hacked to death in what has become devoutly Catholic Poland, by the unruly, pagan Prussians.

I have no doubt that these several Adalberts (and probably some ideas relating to the sentimental Stuarts of Handel's day) sing in Handel's character, these Byzantine princesses, these Matildas and Ottos (and Georges and Fredericks of Hanover). Opera is a strange sort of history, but it is history nonetheless – and each production is a wonderful excuse to explore histories, and ideas of history. **James Conway**



Photograph courtesy of
Dorothy Cross and Frith
Street Gallery

Director's Note

James Conway

By any reckoning, I have been phenomenally lucky: as General Director of English Touring Opera I have been able to work closely at seven operas by George Frideric Handel, and even to mount five of those in one season (the Handelfest of 2009, which is the shared achievement of which I am in ways most proud). In my last job I was able to give the first *Tamerlano* in Ireland, followed by *Flavio*, *Amadigi*, *Rodelinda* and *Ariodante*, all of which toured internationally with surprising distinction (though to be honest I was more excited that they were esteemed in Mullingar and Skibbereen).

These astonishing operas have been treasure to me, and I feel that through them I have been able to communicate what I feel is valuable about opera. Happily, they have also made me many friends; I will not forget pre-performance talks around the country, especially a damp night in Malvern before a performance of *Tolomeo* where it all came right, lean, true and heartfelt – and the rich correspondence that followed with many who were there.

Choosing another one to produce is tricky, when so much that is good has gone before. Hankering for *Radamisto*, which I have never seen well-served, I went for *Ottone*, which I have never seen. Academics – even famous champions – have not been kind to *Ottone*, despite its extraordinary success in Handel's day. I had to remind myself that academics may not know an opera's real power in the theatre, and if they do see a performance they may struggle to unburden themselves of opinion and knowledge at the door.

I wanted to live with *Ottone*, and to do my best to bring what is complex and compelling and strange about it to you, because it is an uneasy piece: it agitates, somehow, and

threatens to spin off into brilliant solitudes, rather than a drama. More particularly, I was drawn to this opera because of its compelling relationships, and its extraordinary psychological landscape.

Having dwelt a while with Agrippina and her son Nero last Autumn (our music editor Peter Jones, copying in my translation, ironically called them “that lovely family”), it has been like growing up to turn to Gismonda and her son Adalberto. All the dangers of mothers and sons are explored in this relationship: I saw quickly that they not only get great music (especially in the version where Handel gives Adalberto ‘Pupille sdegnose’ instead of ‘Ad innalzar I flauti’, as we have done), but that they are roles for real actors.

Then we have two pairs of near relations – two brothers and sisters in our version, though Mathilde and Ottone are called cousins in the libretto. Siblings who look like lovers, or who are mistaken for assailants, or who are separated by war or infatuation, have exciting possibilities on stage. At first oppressed by the fairy-tale foolishness of the pirate/prince who turns out to be the brother of the friendless princess, I came to view their awful solitudes as an opportunity to explore how one finds out who one really is, and what relation really means. Fairy tales are never foolish, I should have known – they just cut to what is important in a dreamlike way.

Mathilde has the brilliance of Handel's best characters, who are perverted by infatuation, starved by it as we all have been at some stage, driven to feel what is bad about themselves in their effort to be seen, recognized, loved by someone who is indifferent – or by a harsher judge, the self. Even within individual arias she shows how her passions devour her ‘finer’ instincts.



Louise Kemeny as
Teofane and Andrew
Radley as Adelberto in
rehearsal for *Ottone*

She is the perfect foil to the apparent hero, Ottone, just as Dardano is the unstable reflection of Amadigi [in Handel's 1715 opera *Amadigi di Gaula*], or as Polinesso might have been an Ariodante, had he been loved (it's not just in fairy tales that beasts are sometimes tamed by affection!).

Ottone hasn't Emireno's rough charm or Adalberto's pathetic appeal; he doesn't really know what's wrong, but something surely is if you are victorious in war and policy and yet so conspicuously alone and uninformed. His motivation was the least clear – but I think I found it in the insecurity he feels with respect to Teofane, the lover who eludes him, who seems to choose the dark, interesting side (Adalberto), and in so doing seems to say to him: you are not worthy of a Byzantine princess, you are a jumped-up Saxon savage, you have power but you have no idea what to do with it. Of course, this is the way he might think of himself, in an unguarded moment.

With Teofane the objective is to avoid moaning, I thought. On the other hand, there is an invitation to dissect a child-bride who may wear rich garments, but has lost all her rich association, all comfort and power – someone truly alone, having to decide whether to give up when her illusions are

lost, or to be strong enough to make the best of a world without illusions. Like so many of Handel's heroines, she does far more than warble: she discovers loss, isolation, impurity, and she is stronger than the fighting men around her. Like Ginevra (*Ariodante*), Seleuce (*Tolomeo*), Emilia (*Flavio*), Asteria (*Tamerlano*), Rodelinda, she walks forward, tries to heal the loved and unloved, calls for a humble future and trusting, unstarred bonds.

And apart from all this opportunity find depth of character in restlessly inventive music and noble text, who could look away from an opera set where sea meets land unhospitably, where civilization and the unconscious clash. The scene that first drew me to *Ottone* was the one set in a cave by the sea at night, where all the characters assemble and do not find each other, where prisoners escape, women call out for more darkness to hide their thoughts and loves, and where hero and heroine lose all confidence in who they are. In that setting Adalberto, hitherto at least as sympathetic as his rival Ottone, reveals his essential corruption: each in turn becomes more truly who they are, even though it feels as if they are losing who they have been.

James Conway

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