George Handel – Silla (2017)

No Handel opera is as enigmatic as Silla. His fourth London opera, it was composed in 1713 to a libretto by Giacomo Rossi, also the librettist of the composer's first great London triumph Rinaldo (1711). And that is just about the extent of any certainty on the subject. It might have been premiered in 1713 in London in a private concert at the Queen's Theatre, but even this remains unconfirmed. This is one of Handel's few historical operas, being concerned with Plutarch's account of the latter part of the life of Lucius Cornelius Sulla, who after taking Rome became a tyrannical despot who murders his opponents, before suddenly retiring to his country estate to enjoy his leisure. The libretto being somewhat weak, it leaves Silla an unlikely candidate to regain a place in the repertoire, but it definitely contains lots of thoroughly rewarding music. Handel itself utilized a significant part of it in his next opera, Amadigi di Gaula. Fabio Biondi and Europa Galante join an overwhelming vocal cast headed by a fantastic Sonia Prina in the title role, with Martina Belli, Sunhae Im, Vivica Genaux, Roberta Invernizzi, Francesca Lombardi Mazzulli, and Luca Tittoto also excelling in their respective parts. Biondi's ensemble perform with their trademark elegance and precision in a recording made in the Konzerthaus in Vienna over three days in January 2017. --- Editorial Reviews, amazon.com

Silla, the slightly-flawed and somewhat mysterious early London opera by Handel, receives a fine, if not overwhelming, performance here by Darlow and the London Handel Orchestra. This recording, taken from a live performance in 2000, remains (at this time) the only complete version in the catalog. The mystery is two- or even three-fold. First, a complete score was lost until recently located in a California library. Second, we have no record of a public performance in 1713, the opera's completion date, or even any mention in the London press of the time. Thirdly, (and this is also the major flaw), why would Handel choose to write a work about an unredeemed bloodthirsty Roman tyrant (the actual historical figure, Sulla) who was possibly a wee bit paranoid?

Silla, however, has one very noteworthy characteristic in the Handel opera canon: almost all the
music appears to have been (knock on wood!) originally composed for this work; no borrowing or self-filching. In fact, Handel immediately mined Silla for music in his next opera, Amadigi di Gaula. The workbook (score and stage direction) found in the Huntington library in California in 1969 not only allowed Darlow to reconstruct the show, it also contained a clue to the work's background. The workbook had a front-page dedication to the Duc d'Aumont, the recently-named French ambassador to England. This strongly suggests the reason for the lack of mention of Silla: instead of being a public for-profit venture, this was a privately contracted special occasion opera--either put on for the Duc or by the Duc for English bigwigs as a one-shot deal. For Handel, perhaps not a lot of money, but, depending on who was in the audience, maybe a lot of high-class PR. Anyway, we can only speculate--until some revealing London diary or daybook is unearthed.

Artistically, the final "mystery" is the most interesting: what was the relevance of the story of the bloodthirsty and greedy Lucius Cornelius Sulla (from Plutarch), the general who, in 82 B.C. defeated other Roman armies and occupied the city. Sulla, a consul who had been a brilliant general, assumed near dictatorial powers after the occupation of Rome, and proceeded to murder thousands of people who didn't fit into his plan for the city and empire (including around 1,000 of the nobility). This story makes for something of a protagonist-less opera. Giacomo Rossi, the Silla librettist, tweaks the tale with the usual love interests, but overall it's a dark story-arc. It has been suggested that the negative storyline was conjured up as a reference to the recent fall from favor of the Duke of Marlborough, the brilliant victor of the War of Spanish Succession who'd pushed his luck a bit too far with the Queen. I'm inclined to be dubious about this idea. --- Rollo Tomassi, amazon.com

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