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Photo: Dominic M. Mercier

Glass Handel: Shattering Opera

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

What if you had lots of talent, fame, friends, faves, ideas, and money to play with—and you threw it all into a work you label “opera”? You might come up with *Glass Handel*, Opera Philadelphia’s much-hyped debut at the Barnes Foundation’s central atrium.

In his gee-whiz essay in the substantial booklet handed to attendees, countertenor star [Anthony Roth Costanzo](#) notes his fascination with the repetitions expressed in the music of George Frideric Handel and Philip Glass. That theme, he intended, would bind this set of songs and arias together. His essay breathlessly recounts his development of this work—phone calls, chance meetings, artist friends introducing him to other creative types, hectic plane trips, dinners, conversations, and other thrilling (to him) encounters that collected the artistic team who made *Glass Handel* happen. Of this long list, I beg your patience to present a few: artist [George Condo](#) (who paints a back-lit canvas in the course of the show), [Adam Larsen](#) (projection designer and filmmaker, coordinating the videos), [Justin Peck](#) (choreographer and New York City Ballet star), [Ryan McNamara](#) (designer of the chair-moving system that enforced an ever-changing seating plan, to which the audience was subjected), [Raf Simons](#) (costume designer and Chief Creative Officer of Calvin Klein), and [Visionaire](#) (a collaboration of producers/overseers Cecilia Dean and James Kaliardos). The total result was decidedly less than the sum of the production’s complex parts.

A quick overview of what I experienced in the cavernous Barnes atrium: I was thrilled to be seated, initially, close to what I perceived would be the dance stage, where I eagerly anticipated watching three remarkable dancers—[Patricia Delgado](#), [David Hallberg](#), and [Ricky Ubeda](#). When the overly-bright house lights dimmed, a herd of hefty red-clad folks marched in, surrounding Costanzo, who mounted a platform near the orchestra (conducted by Corrado Rovaris). Costanzo wore a shiny red puff-suit reminiscent of a Lancaster County heirloom tomato. But soon, I was absorbed by Ubeda, unfolding a series of arching, spoking gestures, pacing the tiny stage area, covering it with his arabesques and reaches. I was up close to see his red and black, fishnet-and-spangle outfit flow and swing, revealing his bare legs and red Calvin Klein underwear (yes, the name was left, boldly printed, on the waistband), along with his fine

control of big movement in a small space. Costanzo energetically sent his magnificent soprano voice into a Handel aria, and then into a Glass song (no lyrics provided in the program; I grasped no connection between these works), to which Delgado danced. After Ubeda's brief embrace, she was left solo on the postage-stamp stage, repeating moves I recognized from his dance, though her facial expression and energy seemed more anguished. Same costume and underwear.

Then, my chair and I were hoisted onto a roller and I was wheeled to the other side of the orchestra, in front of the in-progress canvas that Condo (I presume) was creating. I strained to see the dance stage, for Hallberg had entered and I desperately wanted to watch this stunning dancer in motion. Damn those red-clad chair movers, pulling me off just at this high point! Tempted to be naughty and jump from my wheelchair to stand along a wall, I suspected that I would be controlled into submission, so resigned myself to the indignity of being managed. Meanwhile, Costanzo shed his tomato outfit and stood in red spike-heeled boots and a wide, blue babydoll dress (with bows and puffed sleeves) to sing another Handel work. Hallberg, I saw from afar, was riffing on the vocabulary the other dancers expressed, but his suspensions in wide-armed arches and multiple spins seemed more extended, more musically afloat. When he went toward the floor, I lost him altogether. I noted that other viewers placed before Condo's canvas were also craning to see Hallberg across the orchestra and through the countertenor's costume.

As more alternations of Handel and Glass ensued, I was wheeled off, *further* from the dance stage, to a spot far too close to video screens playing—during my time there—a sadomasochistic display of elegant young women strapping half-naked young men onto torture wheels and into pseudo-guillotines. Alas, the live, breathtaking Hallberg was dancing magnificently, way down at the other end of the hall. Straining to glimpse him, I observed again that many of my audience companions attempted the same: live dance over video—amen! Costanzo exchanged his blue dress for a black and white nightgown, which had the advantage of blocking less of my view toward the distant dancers. Now, all three were there, initially moving in unison, then establishing their own lanes on the crowded dance floor to repeat their phrases. A blessed blackout brought it all to a close.

My experience of opera has been the collaborative forces of literature, music, visual design, and movement coalescing to project a powerful dramatic narrative of some sort. Costanzo, with friends, went in reverse: assemble a set of apparently unrelated favorite songs, throw together every technological device your high-powered friends offer, slam them together as you disrupt audience attempts to make any sense of it all, and you have shattered opera into the fragile shards that I experienced in *Glass Handel*.

[*Glass Handel*](#), Opera Philadelphia, The Barnes Foundation, Sept. 22, 23, 30

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