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CRITIC'S PICK

Review: As New York's Opera Scene Empties, Another Rises Upstate

R.B. Schlather's vibrant staging of Handel's "Giulio Cesare," playing in the Hudson Valley, is a bright spot in a bleak landscape for Baroque work.

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Reporting from Hudson, N.Y.

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Giulio Cesare NYT Critic's Pick

New York City Opera had recently shuttered when the director R.B. Schlather started to present Handel operas in a white-box gallery on the Lower East Side of Manhattan about 10 years ago. Those spare, surreal stagings of "Alcina" and "Orlando" felt like an elegy for City Opera's innovative productions, and for its devotion to Handel — most famously, a landmark 1960s "Giulio Cesare" starring Beverly Sills.

Now, as Schlather's vibrant vision for "Giulio Cesare" plays at Hudson Hall in Hudson, N.Y., the landscape for opera — especially Baroque opera — is even bleaker in New York City, two hours south by train.

The Metropolitan Opera, whose 4,000-seat theater isn't a natural fit for early music, does less than it used to, and it's become more or less the only game in town. City Opera was revived in name, but as a wan shadow of its former self. The Brooklyn Academy of Music used to be a destination for revelatory Baroque stagings by the likes of Les Arts Florissants; no more. Lincoln Center, ditto. Carnegie Hall presents Harry Bicket's English Concert in a single Handel performance a year — on May 4 it's, yes, "Cesare" — but unstaged, in concert.

Upstate, Schlather has been unfurling a series of Handel productions with the terrific period-instrument ensemble Ruckus; "Cesare," running through May 2, comes on the heels of "Rodelinda" at Hudson Hall in 2023. It is a precious bastion of an ever rarer breed.

His directorial style in dealing with this composer's works has gotten clearer with experience. "Alcina" and "Orlando" were always quirky, often thrilling and sometimes bewildering. But this substantially yet intelligently trimmed "Cesare" — with intermission, it's just under three hours — is a stylishly straightforward account of a story of vengeance and lust set amid Julius Caesar's campaign to conquer both Egypt and Cleopatra. Hudson Hall has a proscenium, but Schlather's set pushes the action downstage in front of it with two angled walls painted iridescent black. Under Masha Tsimring's stark, shadow-throwing lighting, those walls twinkle like a starry sky.

A fashion-show catwalk extends from this space, bisecting the audience. Used for some entrances and exits, it is a permanent reminder of the sheer theatricality of Handelian virtuosity, and a silent dancer, Davon, periodically stalks it like a showgirl, a kind of fairy spirit of performative exuberance.

But that virtuosity coexists with — indeed, is a vessel for — emotional truth. Schlather has always been gifted at eliciting intense performances, daring both vocally and physically, and he draws them out of this young cast. (Really young: This is the first opera that the soprano Raha Mirzadegan, who as Sesto sings a floating rendition of the aria "Cara speme," has ever been in.)

The soprano Song Hee Lee, wearing Terese Wadden's slinky, glittering Tina Turner-style miniskirts, molds her bright tone through one of opera's greatest progressions of arias, as Cleopatra transforms from insouciant seduction to despair to ecstatic triumph. The countertenor Randall Scotting, as Cesare, uses his agile voice to convey first authority, then vulnerability; another countertenor, Chuanyuan Liu, plays the tyrant Tolomeo as a sadistic playboy.

Ruckus, just a dozen members strong and playing without a conductor (and with some well-chosen moments of ominous synthesizer bass), describes itself aptly as a band: It's that tight, and that wild. The group is tender accompanying the serene mezzo-soprano Meridian Prall, as Cornelia, in "Priva son d'ogni conforto," and then fiercely crisp the next moment, joining Mirzadegan in "Svegliatevi nel core."

At a talkback after the performance, Schlather said that for the next installment in his Hudson series, he has a much more obscure title in mind: "Deidamia," Handel's final opera in Italian before he turned to English-language oratorios. With the climate ever chillier in New York City, it would be a coup for an opera scene that deserves more and better than it's been getting.

Giulio Cesare

Through May 2 at Hudson Hall in Hudson, N.Y.; hudsonhall.org.

A correction was made on April 24, 2025*: An earlier version of this review described incorrectly the voice type of the singer Raha Mirzadegan. She is a soprano, not a mezzo-soprano.*

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