

## Identity After Collapse by James Darrah Black

Handel's *Tolomeo, re d'Egitto* begins in a world after an implied period of collapse and follows a literal upheaval of social order.

Our title character has lost almost everything that once made him recognizable: his throne? Gone. His birthright, homeland, marriage, very public name, and the life he believed was secured by birth? All gone too. He arrives into Handel's world as a flawed human in exile under an assumed identity. He has been stripped not only of power but even of the costume that allowed power to be felt and seen. Around him, the other "survivors" are also caught in unstable forms of disguise fueled by longing, ambition, loyalty, and misrecognition. Love? (Handel's characters do *love* to love). Love survives, but only *barely*. Desire advances but rarely without uphill resistance. Political violence has already done its damage offstage before the opera begins; what remains is the intimate and quite literal human wreckage.

I find this juxtaposition of affirmed greatness and questioned identity is what makes *Tolomeo* so quietly devastating and artistically alluring. This is not simply another opera about kings and power. It is an opera about what happens when identity must shift and be placed under unfamiliar and unbearable *human* pressures.

Handel's characters still thrive and live inside the high formal world of opera seria, with its codes of nobility, honor, constancy of tonality, and vocal displays of brilliance, but the emotional life beneath those codes is anything but formulaic. Again and again, Handel allows his music to expose what the characters within are trying to conceal. The arias do not merely decorate the drama, they suspend time—stretch it—so that a private crisis can be examined from the rich interior of the mind.

Premiered in 1728, *Tolomeo* comes near the end of one of Handel's most intense periods of prolific operatic creation in London. The machinery around him was changing. Italian opera production in England via Handel's familiar avenues was crumbling in slow motion, both financially and culturally. The old structures of taste, patronage, and star-driven theatrical (often supernatural) spectacle were beginning to show some cracks. This simple historical context imbues *Tolomeo* with eerie resonance. It is for us a work about a ruler without a kingdom, written at a moment when Handel's own operatic kingdom was being challenged and evolving.

And yet this opera is not ever the music of defeat. It is music that speaks to human endurance, and the composer definitely seems to have understood something radical about deep human feeling and drive: he senses that the most painful states are often not the loudest ones. Grief can become beautifully controlled and hushed in its intensity. Fidelity can become almost unbearable in its restraint and what is not said more of a weapon to wield than rage. Jealousy can wear the mask of elegance well. Despair can unfold inside a melodic line of astonishing poise before being unleashed in true fury. *Tolomeo* asks us to listen for pressure beneath all of the beauty, fracture beneath the form, and ultimately find survival beneath ritual.

For a contemporary audience, opera's capacity to evoke emotion through unexpected and sometimes even contradictory musical gestures may be its greatest power. We all know something about living through collapsed certainties. We know about public selves becoming unstable, about exile from the life one thought one had earned, about the strange difficulty of being recognized correctly. In *Tolomeo*, characters are not simply hiding from one another. They are trying to survive the terrifying gap between who they are, who they have been, and who the world now allows them to become.

This production brings together historically rooted musical performance and theatrical investigation as equal partners. Philharmonia Baroque offers the living pulse of Handel's sound world: period instruments, rhetorical clarity, and the sharp expressive intelligence that this music demands. Long Beach Opera's role as co-producer gives the project another crucial dimension. LBO has long understood that opera's past is not a museum wing but a volatile archive, a place where old forms can be made newly dangerous, intimate, and present. In joining forces, these institutions make a statement about how early opera can live now: not by softening its strangeness, but by allowing that strangeness to speak with full force.

This is the signature significance of the collaboration. Philharmonia Baroque brings us close to the historical body of the score, its instruments, colors, articulations, and expressive grammar. Long Beach Opera brings a contemporary theatrical appetite for risk, immediacy, and transformation as visual art. Together, they allow *Tolomeo* to exist neither as an antique nor as a concept imposed from the outside, but as a living encounter.

Handel's world is filled with rulers, exiles, lovers, rivals, captives, and survivors who all have agendas. But beneath titles or strong self-determination of purpose or identity, the opera asks: what remains of you when the world no longer recognizes you? *Tolomeo* answers not with certainty, but with music that reveals, with precise clarity and tenderness, that there is always a flawed human being beneath a crown. A person's true complexity is hardly ever captured by the simple reflection glimpsed in a mirror.