



## Handel and London

Roger Parker

9 October 2006

In my last lecture, the final music was an ecstatic love duet sounding out from carnival Venice. The year was 1643, and “opera” was, by my count, less than ten years old. As I said then, though, it already boasted many of the traits that would remain over most of its 400-year history towards us. Most importantly, it had established itself as a genre, a cultural product with a set of characteristics, ones that its consumers would expect to see repeated (which doesn’t mean, of course, that they could not also be titillated when their expectations were denied). That closing love duet was a good case in point. To hear two lovers at the end of the show had become an expectation—something to look forward to, something that would bring two of the individual singing voices together in a sonic climax. And so, it was added to Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* by another composer: by someone who was responding to audience desires.

In this lecture we’re going to move on seventy or so years, to drop in on George Frideric Handel as he began his operatic career in London, in 1711. What had happened in the interim? As I mentioned last week, opera quickly expanded away from its beginnings in Venice, and by the end of the seventeenth century it had a firm place in many of the main Western European urban centres. It almost always kept something of its “public” nature, of the fact that audience members paid cash to attend; but in most of the places it migrated to, this relatively democratic aspect would have to make an accommodation with a prevailing court culture, an accommodation that took on various guises. So, in Florence the Medici family embraced the new genre, as did the Spanish viceroy in Naples and the Papal authorities in Rome. By the end of the century, opera also had serious footholds in three other countries; but in each of them there were telling differences. In France the court of Louis XIV at first welcomed this exotic Italian import, but (small surprise) soon got nervous of such cultural “invasion” and evolved its own, highly distinctive brand, sung in French, called “tragédie en musique” and (as the name suggests) strongly influenced by France’s powerful and prescriptive tradition of spoken drama. The German-speaking lands were generally more welcoming of Italian incursions, Vienna in particular establishing court adaptations of opera which retained the Italian language. German-language opera was slow to take off, although there were some interesting experiments in Hamburg. The third country to open its doors to opera was of course England, but here again a strong tradition of spoken drama meant that entirely-sung drama was very slow to gain acceptance. Henry Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* (1689) was a famous example of English-language opera, but one of very few. Stage plays with elaborate musical diversions were generally preferred.

During the course of these migrations through Europe, opera had evolved considerably from the rather anarchic form it had first assumed in carnival Venice. But certain constants remained. When it travelled abroad, it was generally classed as strange and extravagant: it’s no accident that the most famous definition of opera remains that given it by Dr Johnson in his *Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755. When the venerable doctor called it an “exotic and irrational entertainment”, he summed up foreign attitudes to a phenomenon that was always wildly expensive, and that for the most part ignored the aesthetic dictates of other forms of art. Nor should we assume that even in Italy it was free from such accusations. It was not just in Venice that the entire opera industry in Italy was kept afloat by the tourist trade: in other words, by people who attended the opera to wonder at its exoticism—its difference from the everyday and the routine.

Perhaps this basic extravagance is partly why the history of opera has always been punctuated by efforts at “reform”: by attempts to domesticate its exoticism and irrationality; in particular to bring it closer into line with the “rules” that still governed spoken drama. One such “reform” in the late seventeenth century purged opera of many of the features we enjoyed in Monteverdi’s *Poppea*. A typical Italian opera of the early eighteenth century tended to have far fewer characters and far less variety of musical forms than we found in *Poppea*.

Most of the minor characters had fallen away, and with them disappeared the comic aspect of the plot: what I called last week the “carnival” undercutting of the serious action that was such a feature of Venetian opera. (Comic opera, as we’ll see in the next lecture, took on a form of its own, one that eventually came to rival the serious genre.) So far as musical forms were concerned, there was also a process of rationalisation: the rich mixture of styles celebrated by Monteverdi was generally reduced to just two types of discourse. The first was “recitative”, which became much simpler and more formulaic than the famed recitar cantando of early opera. Usually accompanied only by a string bass instrument and the harpsichord, this recitative was very close to spoken declamation, and was the medium in which almost all stage action would unfold. The second type of discourse was “aria”, which comprised a prolonged, musically elaborated frozen moment of reflection on the part of one of the characters. Operas were then made up of a continual alternation of recitative and aria; duets or other ensembles were rare; the chorus was often non-existent.

This is the kind of opera that Handel inherited when he came on to the London scene. In many ways, the endless recitative/aria alternation may seem more formulaic, more predictable and less flamboyant than what had happened in Venice. On the other hand, early-eighteenth-century opera had two important advantages. While the wild anarchy of Monteverdi’s *Poppea*, as we saw, made any political message ambiguous at best, these simpler plots could (and did) deliver simpler moral and political messages, ones quite in keeping with an age in which art was basically thought of as didactic and “improving”. The other advantage was that this kind of opera allowed for a more complicated musical argument: the musical glory of the drama, the solo aria, became much more developed, thus allowing characters to gain greater complexity, and of course allowing the star singers who impersonated these characters to have vehicles of ever-greater elaboration in which to dazzle the audience with their virtuosity.

Precisely why Handel turned up in London in 1711 is not clear. Although it was, then as now, the largest and richest city in Europe, its attractions as a place where a composer might make his living by writing Italian opera were not obvious. As mentioned a moment ago, England’s strong tradition of spoken theatre made it difficult for completely sung drama to establish itself. In the late seventeenth century, the greatest successes were so-called “semi-operas”, which mixed spoken dialogue and music (Purcell was again the most prominent composer). What is more, and as we shall see, England retained (perhaps still retains) an ambiguous position towards opera, in particular towards its sheer flamboyance and, well, foreign-ness. But there was a further aspect of London, one that both made the capital an excellent place to foster extravagant theatrical entertainment and led to that entertainment’s periodic downfall. This aspect centred on the relationship between the country and its monarchy.

While most of the petty states in Italy had the equivalent of “sovereigns” who played an important part in artistic display of many kinds, and while the operatic spectacles arranged by Louis XIV were legendary, England’s royal family had a much-reduced role. There had been, you might remember, a little unpleasantness in the middle of the seventeenth century between the crown and its subjects. In the process, one king had become several inches shorter by the most drastic of means. In spite of the Restoration, nothing was ever the same after 1649. One upshot of this much reduced royalty was that London theatres typically operated in a mixed economy: one in part supported by royal and noble patrons, but also financed in joint stock companies and other “democratic” organizations. When these enterprises ran well, the revenue they raised could compete with centre on the international market: London could, and for a time did, hire the most expensive singers and scene painters, etc.; it became the musical capital of Europe so far as performers were concerned. But this system of ownership was extremely fragile financially: speculation was rife, shady special interests were common; bubbles could be created and duly burst.

Handel’s first London opera, *Rinaldo*, entered directly into this world. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, the architect and playwright Sir John Vanbrugh enlisted the help of some noble patrons and many stockholders to build a venue for opera, the King’s Theatre in the Haymarket. It was strictly a money-making proposition. By means that are unclear, Vanbrugh managed a dodgy deal with the government, ensuring legislation that controlled which theatres could perform which types of entertainment, and assuring his theatre a monopoly on operatic events. He thus gained a decisive advantage over his main rival, the theatre at Drury Lane. Although this monopoly did not last long, there were some years in which the King’s Theatre enterprise flourished, helped along by a series of operas by Handel and by a roster of star international singers.

This was, though, always a genre on the edge: feeling its way through the thicket of early capitalism on the one hand, but also having to fend off rather serious attacks on its very existence from a portion of the community. Hogarth’s engraving *Masquerades and Operas* (or the *Bad Taste of the Town*), dating from 1724, is a wonderfully economical depiction of the opposition some Englishmen felt towards the new genre.

## EXAMPLE ONE: HOGARTH'S MASQUERADES AND OPERAS (1724)

On the left is the King's Theatre, with the impresario in an upper window inviting in the crowds. Beneath, the audience is being herded in by a devil and a fool. Above them is a poster depicting a typical operatic scene, with, on the left, a soprano and two enormous singers in costume (these were castrati, who were often depicted as grossly oversized); to the right of the singers are three noble patrons on their knees, saying "Pray accept £8000". In the foreground of the main picture are a couple of "plain men" from the country, one scratching his head in confusion; and there's also a forlorn figure with a wheelbarrow, carting away the (now useless and unfashionable) pearls of the English dramatic tradition, Shakespeare, Congreve, Dryden and Ben Johnson: the sign over the barrow says "waste paper for shops". On the right another crowd mills around a cheap pantomime version of Dr Faustus. In the background are three more aristocratic patrons, posturing and idly admiring the new "cultural" scene and its fancy Italian architecture. It's good to bear this picture in mind, as a kind of scenic backdrop to the debates that have always raged around opera, and that were intense in Handel's London.

Let's now plunge into that building on the left, and into the operatic world of Rinaldo, which had its premiere at the King's Theatre on 24 February 1711. Handel, then in his mid-twenties, had already had operatic experience in Germany and Italy. One of his operas had indeed been a great success in the Venetian carnival season of 1709-10, a circumstance that had possibly led to his invitation to London. For his London debut, the manager of the King's Theatre, Aaron Hill, planned something exceptional. This would be the first Italian opera specially composed for the London stage (the few previous efforts having been cobbled together from pre-existing works), and no expense would be spared. Hill wrote a canny Preface to the printed libretto, in which he made clear that failings of past efforts in comparison with his own production (SEE EXAMPLE TWO):

*As I ventur'd on an Undertaking so hazardous as the Direction of OPERA's in their present Establishment, I resolv'd to spare no Pains or Cost, that might be requisite to make those Entertainments flourish in their proper Grandeur, that so at least it might not be my Fault, if the Town should hereafter miss so noble a Diversion.*

*The Deficiencies I found, or thought I found, in such ITALIAN OPERA'S as have hitherto been introduc'd among us were, First, That they had been compos'd for Tastes and Voices, different from those who were to sing and hear them on the English Stage; And Secondly, That wanting the Machines and Decorations, which bestow so great a Beauty on their Appearance, they have been heard and seen to very considerable Disadvantage.*

*At once to remedy both these Misfortunes, I resolv'd to frame some Damma, that, by different Incidents and Passions, might afford the Musick Scope to vary and display its Excellence, and fill the Eye with more delightful Prospects, so at once to give Two Senses equal Pleasure.*

Aaron Hill, Preface to the libretto of Rinaldo (London, 1711)

So, the public would have music written especially for the singers, and these singers would have their effect considerable enhanced by the addition of scenic beauties to outdo anything seen before in Italian opera. This was a bold vision for the future, and Hill was right to make the most of it. The libretto in which Hill proclaimed his new venture contained the complete text of the opera, both in Italian and English. Given that most of the audience would have understood very little Italian, such visual aids were very important. We should remember that theatres were not darkened as they are now, and thus that it was usual to follow the libretto during the performance, perhaps particularly in the recitative.

EXAMPLE THREE gives you an outline of the main characters, a line-up that is quite typical of opera at this period. The scene is set during the First Crusades (1096-99); the Christians are laying siege to Jerusalem. On the Christian side are Goffredo (contralto), the commander of the army, his brother Eustazio (alto castrato) and his daughter Almirena (soprano). Almirena is engaged to a young warrior called Rinaldo (soprano castrato). On the opposition is Argante (bass), the king of Jerusalem, who loves a sorceress called Armida (soprano). It would, I think, not be in our best interests for me to try to explain in detail the intricacies of the plot. Suffice in to say that in Act I everyone gets introduced and has an aria or two, usually laying out her or his main motivations and passions. At the end of the act, Argante and Armida try to weaken the Christian cause by kidnapping Almirena. In Act II, Rinaldo comes looking for his beloved and is captured.

This, I'm afraid, is where the plot thickens, because Argante then falls in love with Almirena, and Armida falls in love with Rinaldo. Argante also finds out that Armida is straying in her affections for him, and he's not best pleased. In fact, at this stage not a single character is happy. In Act II all these difficulties unwind. Rinaldo and Almirena are released through the application of competing Christian magic; battle is joined and the Christians win. All ends happily, though; Argante and Armida convert to Christianity and are forgiven.

Why is the plot so complicated? People at the time often complained about the complexity, and also about the artificiality of it all. Basically, though, the confusions and about-turns are a function of the larger musical structure, and particularly of the fact that each of the major characters must be given a series of arias spaced out across the opera (between three and eight per character in Rinaldo), and that these arias must be contrasting in mood, thus giving the singers an opportunity to display their command of various emotional situations, and also producing, by the end, a sense of a "composite" character. There was also the convention that singers tended to exit after their arias (to create maximum effect). These musical imperatives were, then, the engine that manipulated the plot into its various twists and turns. To put this another way, it was the singers around whom the plot was constructed, not the plot along which the singers were arranged. Looked at from the singers' point of view, the structure is not at all confusing, but rather an ordered progression of contrasting arias.

As soon as we look at any of these arias in detail, we can see that their internal structure was also formed primarily with the singer in mind. Almost all the arias are in so-called "da capo" form: an initial "A" section, outlining the basic mood, is followed by a "B" section, always different musically, sometime similar in sentiment and musical mood, sometimes notably contrasting; then follows a literal repeat of the "A" section, in which the singer was expected to add elaborate ornamentation. Let's look immediately at an example of this "da capo" form at its simplest: the very first aria in the very first scene in Rinaldo. The scene shows a besieged city of Jerusalem, with soldiers coming out to do battle. To one side are the encampments of the Christian army. In the brief opening recitative Goffredo tells his clan that they can look forward to victory; then comes the aria (SEE EXAMPLE FOUR):

## ATTO PRIMO

### SCENA I

(recitativo)

#### GOFFREDO

<i>Delle nostre fatiche</i>	Great Rinaldo, our efforts
<i>Siam prossimi alla meta, o gran Rinaldo!</i>	Mean we are close to our goal!
<i>Là in quel campo di palme</i>	What remains to us
<i>Omai solo ne resta</i>	Is to gather the final harvest
<i>Coglier l'estrema messe,</i>	Of palms on the battlefield.
<i>E già da' lidi eoi</i>	From the shores of the east
<i>Spunta più chiaro il sole,</i>	The sun shines more brightly
<i>Per illustrar co' rai d'eterna gloria</i>	Making bright with glorious rays
<i>L'ultima di Sion nostra vittoria.</i>	Our final victory over Sion.

(aria)

<i>Sovra balze scoscesi e pungenti</i>	Only on steep and jagged cliffs
<i>Il suo tempio la gloria sol ha.</i>	Does glory build its temple.
<i>Né fra gioie, piaceri e contenti</i>	It is not with joys and pleasures
<i>I bei voti ad apprendere si va.</i>	That is can be conquered.



Let's look at the aria text in some detail, because it's entirely typical of the mass of arias in the opera, and can also tell us something important about this kind of opera's project. As you see, the words are, like the opera as a whole, sententious and moralising: basically, they tell us that the route to achieving glory is a hard one, but that difficulty adds to the strength of the goal. This abstract moral message is expressed in the first two lines (which constitute the entire text of the "A" section) through an elaborate metaphor, a metaphor that uses the natural world as its stage. So, we have those vivid images, of the cliffs (*balze*) that are steep (*scoscesi*) and jagged (*pungenti*); and these images lead us to the *tempio* (temple) and its glory (*gloria*). This is very direct, naïve almost, in its message; and that directness is echoed in the musical setting, which does everything it can make those pictorial images musically manifest: to communicate them vividly to the audience. The codes that translate the images into music may take a bit of getting used to, but once you have them, they can be compelling.

So, let's hear that first "A" section; see if you can locate some of the ways in which Handel's music tells the story. Goffredo is sung by Bernarda Fink; The Academy of Ancient Music is conducted by Christopher Hogwood:

*Handel, Rinaldo, Act I, scene 1, "Sovra balze scoscesi e pungenti". Decca 467 087-2*

I hope that some at least of the "codes" were obvious. Most clearly there is a clear contrast between two main musical ideas: the sharp, jagged rhythms and melodic lines for those steep, jagged rocks; and then there are long held notes, stubbornly repeated pitches and elaborate passage-work for the "temple" and its "glory", these words being expanded and elongated in order to stress their importance.

Let's continue from where we left off, listening to the contrasting "B" section and then the reprise of "A". As you see, the text of "B" offers a classic case of contrast, mentioning that there's no easy way—that pleasure won't get you to glory. Handel changes the key, but those jagged rhythms still echo in the orchestra, reminding us of the true didactic purpose. Then come the reprise of "A", and the chance for you to admire the singer's ornaments and perhaps enjoy again those word-painting gestures.

*Handel, Rinaldo, Act I, scene 1, "Sovra balze scoscesi e pungenti". Decca 467 087-2*

A few more points about the musical surface of the aria. You'll have noticed that the "orchestration" is very simple and schematic. Just cello and harpsichord for the recitative, then strings and oboes for the aria. In most "normal" arias there's no sense of "orchestral thought", such as one finds from Mozart onwards: it's a more mechanical process, in which the strings and oboes either play together or alternate. There are, as we'll see in a moment, sometimes unusual orchestral sounds in Handel's operas, but they are exceptional. Under normal circumstances, everything is geared towards making the solo singer the most important part of the musical fabric; and the task of the singer was, as we have seen, fundamentally to imitate nature and thus control it.

The best way to illustrate the fabric of the opera as a whole is to give you some indication of the sheer expressive range of these arias, these singer vehicles. When the "other side" of the cast appears (those opposing the Christian army), it is introduced by magnificent scenic splendours (SEE EXAMPLE FIVE/1):

Argante comes from the city on a triumphal, horse-drawn chariot, followed by a huge number of footguards and riders; coming down in solemn procession, he approaches Goffredo, who advances to meet him.

And to accompany the splendours we get a sudden injection of musical colour, two trumpets and drums appear for the first time in the opera. Again the aria text is nothing more than a collection of vivid images, this time the hissing of Alecto's serpents and the hungry barking of the six-headed Scylla. You'll hear the hissing musically translated into upwardly sweeping violin scales, and the barking into the bass's angular leaping line. Again, it's all very literal; but the magnificence of the musical effect carries all before it, particularly when sung as well as it is here, by Gerald Finley.

*Handel, Rinaldo, Act I, scene 3, "Sibillar gli angui d'Aletto". Decca 467 087-2*

Another good example of this "scenic" music comes shortly afterwards, when Armida (Argante's partner in crime) makes her appearance (SEE EXAMPLE FIVE/2). As the scene description says, "Armida sings as she flies through the air, seated on a chariot drawn by two dragons which bellow and pour flames and smoke from their mouths". Again, you'll here some obvious musical imitation: this time the idea the encircling furies is depicted by an insistently repeated octave leap in the voice and the strings; and of course by the thunder machine working overtime. Luba Orgonasova rises nobly above the tumult.

*Handel, Rinaldo, Act I, scene 5, "Furie terribili". Decca 467 087-2*

These blood-and-(literally)-thunder moments are skilfully placed in the opera, and always alternate with gentler inspirations. But the central idea of musical imitation is always there. As a final example of how far this could be taken, I want to play you an aria in a much quieter vein, one that follows after the huffing and puffing of Argante and Armida and is clearly in vivid contrast. It's for the Christian general's daughter, Almirena, and takes place (SEE EXAMPLE FIVE/3) in "a Delightful place with fountains, paths and aviaries in which birds are flying about and singing". As you see, the words are again of the simplest, with obvious pastoral imagery. The little birds and gentle breezes all dutifully combine to ask a simple question. What they also remind us is that the eighteenth century was a great age of landscape—of attempts to fashion nature into a coherent order; in a sense, this delight in order landscape was part of the same project found in the use of natural imagery in operatic arias, and so the two coming together here is quite fitting.

But the theatre manager Aaron Hill wanted in this aria to go further. Not content to have a scenic backdrop of fountains, paths and aviaries, he decided that nature could be made theatrical in a more immediate way. Joseph Addison, in *The Spectator*, takes up the tale (SEE EXAMPLE SIX):

As I was walking in the Streets about a Fortnight ago, I saw an ordinary Fellow carrying a Cage full of little Birds upon his Shoulder; and, as I was wondering with myself what Use he would put them to, he was met very luckily by an Acquaintance, who had the same Curiosity. Upon his asking him what he had upon his Shoulder, he told him that he had been buying Sparrows for the Opera. Sparrows for the Opera, says my Friend, licking his lips, what? are they to be roasted? No, no, says the other, they are to enter towards the end of the first Act, and to fly about the Stage.

*Addison, The Spectator, March 1711.*

A paradise indeed, in which the outdoors would be transported into the theatre, and in which beautiful singing would view with nature for the ascendancy. Handel did his best to join in the project, and supplied a portative organ and a piccolo. With Cecilia Bartoli as Almirena, and with the liberal help of some local ornithologists, he manages to transport us. As if to emphasise the "naturalness", this aria is not a "da capo", but seems rather to obey the whims of nature (SEE EXAMPLE FIVE/3).

*Handel, Rinaldo, Act I, scene 6, "Augeletti che cantate". Decca 467 087-2*

Cecilia Bertoli, in what must be one of the most delightful Handel operatic recordings ever made. After such beauties, it pains me to tell you that birds released into the theatre constituted a realism too far, and I'm sure you can guess the reason why. A later commentator in *The Spectator* made all too plain that nature could still have the power to disrupt the most carefully-planned of Arcadian fantasies (SEE EXAMPLE SIX):

There have been so many Flights ... let loose in this Opera, that it is feared the House will never get rid of them; and that in other Plays they may make their Entrance in very wrong and improper Scenes ... besides the Inconveniencies which the Heads of the Audience may sometimes suffer from them.

*Steele, The Spectator, March 1711.*

There are many more arias that one could play—the sheer variety of Handel's first London opera is remarkable even by his standards—but we must wind to a close. *Rinaldo* was a crucial moment in the history of opera in London—a moment whose eventual success changed the course of operatic life for twenty years or so, and Handel's life with it. But the path was never easy, and financial crises seemed endemic to the genre. To survive, opera needed the very best Italian singers. But, then as now, these stars knew their worth. Nicolini, the castrato for whom the name part in *Rinaldo* was written, was paid 800 guineas a season; patrons paid half a guinea a ticket; by the standards of the day, these were astronomical prices. The heyday was in the 1720s, when the so-called Royal Academy (again, financed by a mix of royal patrons and stock-holders) allowed Handel to produce a steady stream of operas. But in the 1730s disastrous competition came in the form of a rival Italian company, and also from theatres who would perform English-language theatrical entertainments. In 1728 John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* scored a huge success, in part through its successful, Hogarth-like lampoon of the extravagances of Italian opera. By the early 1740s Handel gave up opera altogether, and (to our great good fortune) decided to write oratorios instead. He became in the process a national monument; but his very success in the new, popular genre made opera all the more precarious.

Opera, of course, continued in London after Handel's great successes: the city's unprecedented wealth was an assurance of success, particularly in attracting the best singers. But after Handel's day London was always a follower of others' fashions: it never managed to be at the forefront of operatic production. There were, admittedly, some intriguing might-have-beens. In the early 1790s, for example, Wolfgang Amadé

Mozart was invited to come to the capital. Had things gone differently, he might have produced a stream of masterpieces for the London stage. But he died, quite suddenly, in Vienna, and instead London got the symphonies and oratorios of Joseph Haydn. Mozart in London: there's a thought for an alternative history: imagine what he might have written. But to meet the operatic Mozart, we will have to move to Vienna, where Italian opera was easily transplanted, and where, in the hands of a young upstart from provincial Salzburg, it experienced one of its greatest moments.

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