



Medoro and Angelica, 17th century by Matteo Rosselli

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NOTES ON ORLANDO

BY ANDREW PORTER

George Frideric Handel—who spent most of his life in London, a naturalized Englishman, and settled on that spelling of his names—was born in 1685, like J.S. Bach and Domenico Scarlatti. Although he is best known as the composer of the sacred oratorio *Messiah*, he was, as the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* puts it, “by training and inclination primarily a composer for the theatre.” Winton Dean, in his *Handel and the Opera Seria*, made high claims for Handel as an operatic composer: “A Handel opera is a far more complex

and subtly organized phenomenon than it looks on paper. If these operas, including their librettos, are subjected to the detailed study they deserve ... it may be found that Handel’s mastery of opera as a fusion of music and drama is scarcely less absolute than that of Monteverdi and Mozart, though it is very differently organized.”

In some forty Italian operas and twenty English music dramas (the latter written for performance in the theater, though not for staging), Handel gave expression to just about the full range of human experience. Myth, history,

and romance—the Bible, Sophocles and Euripides, Herodotus and Xenophon, Tasso and Ariosto, Corneille and Racine, Milton, Dryden, and Pope—supplied his subject matter. And he composed so abundantly that there are likely to be new adventures in store all lifelong for even the most assiduous Handelian.

He was born in Saxony. As a young man he spent three years at the Hamburg Opera (1703–6) and then four traveling in Italy, where his *Rodrigo* was produced in Florence (1707) and his *Agrippina*, with very great success, in Venice (1709). One might say that he united thorough German musicianship with firsthand experience of contemporary Italian operatic craft at its most exciting. He was quick to learn, and famously unreluctant to borrow (and improve on) other men’s good ideas. In 1710, aged 25, he went to London for the first time, and there, at the Queen’s theatre, he brought out *Rinaldo*—the first Italian opera especially composed for the British capital. *Rinaldo* was scenically and musically spectacular, a display of all Handel’s powers.

Other operas followed in a fairly steady stream for three decades. To put *Orlando* into context, one may summarize some periods in Handel’s career. The “First Academy” period began in 1720. A group of noble enthusiasts, under royal patronage, had decided to establish Italian opera in London on a long-term basis. They engaged the King’s Theatre (formerly the Queen’s, but now George I had succeeded Queen Anne), a musical director (Handel), a manager (Christian Heidegger), a house librettist (the poet Paolo Rolli) and a scenic designer (Roberto Clerici). In 1719, Handel traveled through Europe recruiting his company: the Academy was opened in April 1720 with Giovanni Porta’s *Numitore* and then Handel’s *Radamisto*. In the second season, the great castrato Senesino arrived; two seasons later, the great soprano Francesca Cuzzoni. London, as Winton Dean put it, “became the operatic center of Europe, with the best composers, the best singers, and creditable scenic designers.”

The First Academy reached its peak with three heroic operas: *Giulio Cesare*, *Tamerlano* (both 1724) and *Rodelinda* (1725). In 1726, a second *prima donna*, Faustina Bordoni, was engaged. Handel then wrote five operas in which he had to strive to give equal prominence, equal opportunities, to his two leading ladies and at the same time not slight his *primo uomo*. But “second *prima donna*” is a contradiction in terms:



George Frideric Handel
by Thomas Hudson
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the rivalry between the two first sopranos became intense, and at a performance in 1727 they actually came to blows on the stage. Meanwhile audiences, partisans of one singer or the other, grew increasingly unruly. Catcalls were not uncommon. After eight seasons, the First Academy came to an end in an atmosphere of squabbles, recriminations, and disgust on the part of the serious-minded. The runaway success of *The Beggar’s Opera*, which opened in January of 1728, was hardly the cause of its demise but—with its two heroines who try to tear out one another’s eyes—a mocking reflection, rather, of the state to which opera had fallen.

Handel was not deterred for long. At the end of 1729 he launched his “Second Academy,” with *Lotario*. He gave five seasons at the King’s and then three at Covent Garden—the theater John Rich had built with the profits of *The Beggar’s Opera*. Among the glories of this period were *Orlando* (1733) and *Ariodante* (1735) two of his finest operas. *Alcina*, another masterwork of the period, appeared shortly after *Ariodante* and was even more successful, but it was Handel’s last operatic triumph. The Second Academy foundered not on internal but on external rivalry. The Opera of the Nobility, a competing concern, had opened in 1733 and had lured away most of Handel’s best singers. London could not support two opera troupes in cutthroat competition, and in 1737 both companies, in sad financial disorder, broke up.

There followed for Handel some unsettled but still fecund years. By now he was also working in an alternative medium to Italian opera: it might be called English music drama (“A Musical Drama” was the billing of his *Hercules*), though it is usually called oratorio. It was drama in the vernacular, freed from the conventions of *opera seria*, freed from the requirements of painted scenery, and in large part freed from the temperamental conflicts that flourish so easily in the glare of the footlights. Stage directions remained, but they were printed in the audiences’ word-books, not enacted. The Aeschylean drama *Saul* (King’s 1733) had demonstrated at its highest the new freedom and power of Handel’s work in this form. The composer, it seems, thought of leaving England. The success of *Messiah* (1742) and of *Samson* (1743) may have changed his mind. But it was not until 1747 that Handel’s life settled into a regular and comfortable pattern, which lasted twelve years, until his death.



The Damsel and Orlando, c.1793 (oil on canvas) by Benjamin West (1738–1820)

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Orlando, Dean says, is “musically perhaps the richest of all Handel’s operas.” It was the first of his three operas whose plots are drawn from Ariosto’s romantic epic *Orlando Furioso*—the others being *Ariodante* and *Alcina*. All three are Second Academy Operas. And *Orlando* is in another way a landmark in Handel’s career, being the last piece he composed for the Second Academy before most of his singers defected to the Opera of the Nobility.

Orlando is a romantic opera. The preface to the libretto declares that “the immoderate Passion that *Orlando* entertained for *Angelica* ... and which, in the end, totally deprived him of his Reason, is an Event taken from *Ariosto’s* incomparable Poem, which being universally known, may serve as an Argument to the present *Drama*, without any larger Explication.” But the *Orlando Furioso* is hardly known universally today. (Later in the century, Mozart’s Guglielmo, in *Così fan tutte*, declared himself more deeply in love than an Orlando, more grievously smitten than a Medoro.) It had been supplying operatic plots from Marco da Galiano’s *Medoro* (1619) and Francesca Caccini’s *La Liberazione di Ruggiero* (1625; the first opera composed by a woman) onward.

Ariosto’s poem is a romance, a long-sustained adventure story filled with color and incident, and wide-ranging in its locations. *Ariodante* deals with one self-contained episode from it, set in Scotland; *Alcina* with another, set on the enchanted Caribbean island where the sorceress snares Ruggiero by her magic art. But *Orlando* treats the central theme, the hero’s love and madness. The libretto underlying Handel’s opera was written by Carlo Sigismondo Capece and set by Domenico Scarlatti in Rome, 1711. But for Handel’s use it was thoroughly reworked. Two characters were dropped. (Well, the princess Isabella still makes a brief, mute appearance; in Scarlatti’s opera she has six arias to sing.) Orlando’s tutelary genius, Zoroastro—a skillful condensation of the various mages and sages who move through Ariosto—was invented and added. Comparison of the Scarlatti and the Handel librettos shows the intervention of a dramatist—it is tempting to assume it was Handel himself—who not only shortened the work (Scarlatti’s libretto has 1634 lines, and Handel’s 632) but was also interested in human character, human plights, and their eloquent theatrical presentation.

The opera is carefully shaped, the sequence of numbers carefully planned and balanced. Consider the three act endings. Act I concludes with a marvelous trio in which Angelica and Medoro, while rapt in their own love, also seek to comfort the heartbroken Dorinda, who has unwisely allowed herself to fall in love with Medoro. Act II closes with Orlando’s great mad scene: a series of ariosos, changing key and changing tempo (some bars are in 5/8) in response to the hero’s almost Freudian hallucinations, then running into a rondo whose deceptively simple main theme frames wildly disparate episodes—the first poignantly chromatic, the second stormy.

The end of Act III affords one of the many examples of Handel’s disturbing the standard *opera seria* forms for dramatic effect. Orlando, believing that in his madness he has killed Angelica, embarks on a suicide aria. But instead of running its regular course, it is suddenly interrupted by Angelica herself, leading the key to the major and so, through recitative, into a final *coro* far more elaborate than the usual perfunctory “signing off.” The characters have won through a storm of passions to wisdom and harmony. ❁

This article first appeared in the 1985 San Francisco Opera magazine and has been edited.

The late Andrew Porter was the former music critic of The New Yorker, The Times of London, the Financial Times and translated the libretti of 37 operas.