

ORLANDO

It is perhaps surprising to learn that, of the 35 or so libretti which George Frideric Handel set for the London stage, very few were entirely original pieces of work. The very first, *Rinaldo* (1711), is in fact the only one which was wholly written for him. While the second, *Il Pastor Fido* (1712) was an adaptation of a 16th Century play, every text which followed was a reworking of an opera libretto which had already been set by at least one other composer.

However, none of these texts, which could be decades old, was set exactly as its author had first written it. The latest operatic conventions were accommodated, recitative (which bored London audiences) was trimmed, aria texts were changed to be more emotionally direct and, above all, alterations were made to suit the composition, character and strengths of Handel's company of singers.

Sometimes these changes were slight; *Partenope* (1730) and *Poro* (1731), for example, were set almost as their respective librettists originally wrote them. At other times, the changes were substantial. Carlo Capece's *Orlando*, inspired by Ludovico Ariosto's epic poem *Orlando Furioso*, was altered more radically than almost any other text which Handel set. As the musicologist Winton Dean wrote, this was "no mere adjustment of the old text to suit local conditions in London ... It takes a radically new direction." Two significant roles were almost entirely removed, while the shepherdess Dorinda took on a new, quasi-comic character. Most interestingly, an entirely new protagonist was introduced: Zoroastro, a sorcerer who has no equivalent in Capece's original. It seems that this was a deliberate choice by Handel, after the relative failures of recent, rationalist pieces such as *Poro* and *Ezio* (1732), to recapture the excitement generated by earlier 'magic' operas such as *Rinaldo* and *Teseo* (1713). Capece includes just one, brief moment of enchantment. The introduction of Zorosatro in Handel's text brought with it a dazzling panoply of magical effects, designed to show off what the early Georgian theatre could achieve: instantaneous scene changes, flying performers, large groups of extras, etc. It was a particular selling point that the "Cloathes & Scenes" were "all new."

Yet, to my mind, these magical incidents add very little to the narrative. Indeed, they risk distracting from a very



RAF Officer W. J. Lewis DCC, 1940.
Pastel on paper by Eric Henri Kennington (1888-1960)
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human drama of love, confusion, and betrayal, which is captured so precisely in Handel's profound score. The motivation of Zoroastro himself is also confusingly drawn. In preparing this production, I wanted to find a clear role for Zoroastro in the unfolding of the story, and also diminish the distractions of meretricious 'effects,' finding alternative ways to present those few moments where magic is vital for the function of the plot.

The primary feature of Zoroastro's character is his deep interest in Orlando's mental state. It is not easy to diagnose Orlando's exact condition as this libretto presents him, but it is clear that he is suffering from bouts of depression, mania, and psychosis. Zoroastro is ultimately shown to be capable of curing this psychosis and I was

interested, therefore, in the idea of interpreting the sorcerer as some form of doctor. Meanwhile, the character of Dorinda also began to present itself as one which would make sense in a medical context, as we are told that she has cared for the injured Medoro. Ariosto tells us his injuries were sustained in conflict, and a context of war is also crucial in making sense of the story of Orlando himself: he is a great warrior who has been distracted from his military duty by love.

The idea of taking this piece, which is so vague in its indication of time and place, and locating it somewhere absolutely specific appealed to me. Researching the history of mental illness and its treatment, I learnt that the 1930s was a period of great experimentation in this field. And by the end of that decade, of course, Europe had been plunged into war. This struck me as the ideal context in which to place this narrative.

As I researched further, it became apparent what further choices I should make to achieve the specificity I wanted. It is Britain in the early autumn of 1940. Orlando is a Royal Air Force pilot, a vital asset to the military while the Battle of Britain is raging. Zoroastro, perhaps a Jewish refugee from continental Europe, is a military doctor, seeking a cure to get the love-struck flying ace back into the sky. The scandal of King Edward VIII's abdication to

marry the American divorcée Wallis Simpson is a recent example of how love leads to dereliction of duty.

Medoro, meanwhile, is a soldier recently evacuated from Dunkirk, recuperating under the care of the young nurse Dorinda. Angelica, who talks frequently of returning to her homeland, is an American, at a time when America was still neutral. She has encountered Medoro on his arrival back in Britain from Dunkirk, and fallen in love with him. Very wealthy, she is paying for him to have the best private care money can buy. These five characters will encounter each other in a military hospital based, in fact, on a real hospital which was opened in 1933, and which still stands in West London.

Given that every location as stipulated by the libretto is outside, and that imagery relating to the natural world permeates it, it is perhaps surprising how little the rational, modern, interior world of this production is at odds with the text. In a few places, it's true, we have made a small textual adjustment, to ensure that what a character sings does not conflict with what the audience sees. However, in making these slight amendments to fit the circumstances of this performance, I like to think that I have channeled the spirit of Handel and how he approached existing texts for use in his own new productions. I hope he would approve. 🌸

REMEMBERING

THE LONDON BLITZ

- The Blitz refers to the strategic bombing campaign conducted by the German Luftwaffe against London and other cities in England from September 1940 through May 1941, targeting populated areas, factories, and dock yards;
- The first German attack occurred on Aug. 24 by accident as Luftwaffe bombers drifted off course and erroneously dropped their bombs on the center of London;
- The British retaliated with three bombing runs on Berlin which shocked the Nazi leadership;
- In a ferocious response, the Germans bombed London and other locales for 57 consecutive days;
- During the nightly bombing raids, people took shelter in warehouse basements and underground (subway) stations amid primitive conditions with no privacy and poor sanitation facilities;
- Despite the overwhelming losses, British morale surged and "Business as Usual" could be seen everywhere written in chalk on boarded-up shop windows;
- In late 1940, two devastating Luftwaffe attacks occurred: one on Coventry, an industrial city east of Birmingham, the other on central London resulting in horrific fire storms. Famous landmarks that were damaged included Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, and the Chamber of the House of Commons;



London Underground, 1940

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- Failure to achieve air supremacy over Britain led Hitler to postpone the invasion of England in favor of invading the USSR;
- During the eight months of the Blitz, 18,000 tons of explosives were dropped on England and over 40,000 men, women, and children perished. More than 375,000 Londoners were left homeless.

Source: Author Philip Gavin, the founder/publisher of the online site, The History Place.