

II. Handelian Opera in England: Technology Transfer in the 18th Century Roy Lisker, 1987

The opening night of *The Beggar's Opera*, November 29, 1728, in the Royal Theater and Lincoln's Inn Fields, is one of the benchmarks of European cultural history. Its initial run of 62 nights broke all previous theatrical records. As the saying has it the proceeds "may Gay rich and Rich gay." Showing little respect for the traditional view that poets must live like beggars to write good librettos about them, John Gay cleared around £ 2000 , a sum which, depending on one's notions of purchasing power, might be anywhere between \$50, 0000 and \$100,000 today. Rich, the production manager, grossed over £ 4000: the money was used to establish Covent Gardens. It is certain also that Dr. Johann Christolph Pepusch, runner-up on the London social register of distinguished German imports, had no cause to complain of the outcome.

The *Beggar's Opera* was, and is to this day, a direct attack on every holy and/or sanctimonious institution that has ever served as a proper for respectability in the capitalist world. One of these was the Royal Opera, directly satirized in the script and indirectly undermined at the box office. At no time in English (and by cultural ties American) history has Italian opera, Italian baroque opera to be precise, (very different from 19th century Italian opera) ever been a matter for such heated political passions as it was in the century of the Enlightenment.

In the same season the Royal Academy of Music, the opera company supported by the crown, directed by Georg Friedrich Handel and managed by the very capable if dubious business acumen of John Jacob Heidegger and Aaron Hill. went into default.

This was in no way due to the fact that *The Beggar's Opera* was a smash hit: the Royal Academy had gone into irreversible decline long before. But the comparisons were invidious: there was in addition political capital to be gained in ascribing the failure of the latter to the success of the former.

When the first Royal Academy collapsed, London had been the Italian Opera capital of Europe for 8 years. This was a bizarre cultural anomaly due to England's great material wealth, and left no long range effects on the dependable mediocrity of English music, including opera. However, London had at last grown weary of a form based on alien aesthetic values and foreign theatrical conventions, sung in a language few understood and supported on a narrow social base: the wealthy, the aristocratic and the highly educated: that is to say, the elite.

This disaffection with opera was combined with a mounting chorus of scathing personal attacks against Handel himself. Many of England's opinion and taste-makers were only too glad to see him embroiled in difficulties. Handel was unavoidably associated with the German monarchy and there were certain persons eager to tie any fondness for Handel's music to a covert approval of the policies of the house of Hanover. This sort of artistic guilt-by-association is still commonly practiced today.

Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, the founders of modern journalism in English, decided to use him as a scapegoat: there can be no other word for it. Addison, still smarting from the humiliating flop of his own operatic venture *Rosamund* (1707, music by Clayton; 3 performances) relentlessly castigated Italian Opera:

*“Long has a race of heroes filled the stage
That rant by note and through the gamut rage*

*In songs and airs express their martial fire
Combat in trills and in a fugue expire
While lulled by sound and undisturbed by wit
Calm and serene you indolently sit
And from the full fatigue of thinking free
Hear the facetious fiddle's repartee. "*

Steele resented Italian opera for a different set of reasons: it was luring customers from his own concert rooms in York Buildings, Drury Lane! Between the two of them a stream of malicious articles against Handel and his music was unleashed starting with the production of his first London opera, *Rinaldo* , in 1711 . It is astonishing to us who live in the age of Punk Rock and Motown, to read of Steele accusing a composer like Handel of "reveling in noise for its own sake!" Addison, who must have known little about music, set about ridiculing everything else associated with his opera productions, staging, choreography, special effects. Evidently forgetting that he'd proven his own incompetence as an opera librettist, he proposed replacing *Rinaldo* by an opera of his own invention: "The Cruelty of Atreus":

" The scene wherein Thyestes eats his own children is to be performed by the famous M. Psalmanazar, lately arrived from Formosa the whole supper being set to kettledrums."

Rinaldo proved itself impervious to these onslaughts. Even as late as 1731 it was being revived to packed houses.

No special ability was required for launching personal attacks on Handel: evidently his personality must have been difficult. Many people did like him however, although even they referred euphemistically to his "dry sense of humor". There are many spicy anecdotes surrounding him, which indicate that his 'dry humor' . though endearing to us over the perspective of a few

centuries, may also explain why his singers so readily abandoned him to go work for his rivals at moments critical to the success of his operatic productions.

When Cuzzoni, (the temperamental prima donna whose fights with the equally vain Faustina would be satirized in *The Beggar's Opera*) refused to sing *Falsa Imagina* from *Ottone* , Handel picked her up and threatened to throw her out the window. And when a Scottish tenor objected to Handel's florid continuo , and swore that he would jump into the harpsichord if it persisted, Handel asked him to name the date , to give him time to take up a subscription: the public would pay to see him jump before it would pay to hear him sing!

The saga of Handel's endless struggles with the unique set of boundary conditions of English musical life puts in the shade the paltry histrionics of all the mythological heroes that people his operas. It is important to recall that as little as a century before his arrival England was considered by the musical world to be among the most musical countries of Europe. In church music in particular England was deemed to be on a par with Italy and the Netherlands. A century of religious wars, starting from the suppression of the monasteries in 1549 and culminating in the Civil War of 1640 (?) so thoroughly disrupted musical life that even today it has yet to regain its former pre-eminence.

If a nation is wealthy , then that which cannot be obtained at home may be imported from abroad. In Handel's case indeed it did not have far to seek, since he was Hanover's outstanding composer, the German state joined to England through the expedient aristocratic marriages that passed for foreign diplomacy at that time. Nor could England, outside of music, be deemed in any sense a cultural backwater. It was one of the golden ages of English

letters, of which that nation has known so many, the reign of good (if slow-witted) Queen Anne, the age of Swift, Pope, Gay, Johnson, Dryden, Arbuthnot, Addison, Steele, Sheridan and Goldsmith. Hostility to opera was endemic among the *literati*, although Pope, honest enough to rely on the opinions of others in areas where he lacked knowledge, singles Handel out for praise in *The Dunciad* . Still: he didn't like opera either.

None of this mattered in the long run: neither the condemnation of the intelligentsia, nor the political factionalism and back-biting, nor the highbrow tone of opera seria , nor the lack of a viable musical context. What really happened is that from the moment he set foot on English soil, Handel took the nation by storm. His ascendancy was unrivaled for half a century until his death in 1759. He filled its ears and hearts with the excitement that only a great genius may impart, one who as well was in possession of an incredible amount of drive, a well-nigh unbreakable spirit, and very high , very inflexible standards,

Nobody else in the local context even came near him. Giovanni Bononcini, his only serious rival in London for a short time, did write some very good music, before being hounded out of fair Albion in disgrace on trumped-up charges of plagiarism. He was no match for the vicious battles that raged around Italian opera. Both the minor composer Attilio Ariosto, and the major one Nicola Porpora, did make the London scene for a few years, yet they too beat a retreat, though with more discretion.

The Arne brothers also tried their hands at creating a national opera. They ended up plagiarizing the very man they were trying to oust: Handel, who else? From season to season Handel gave London society unpopular operas in a foreign language, yet wrested the unqualified acclaim of everyone: *Rinaldo. Teseo.*

Amadigi, Radamisto, Floridante, Ottone, Tamerlano, Giulio Cesare , up to *Orlando* in 1733, followed by *Ariodante* and *Alcina* , after which his output in this medium goes into a decline. Yet, it is only after he's carried the musical form of his own invention, the English Oratorio, to the incomparable heights of the *Messiah* in 1741 , that he finally abandons Italian opera for good.

The demise of the Royal Academy of Music had certainly not been the end of the road. Following a period of re-assessment and a trip to Italy, Handel returned in the fall of 1729 with seven new singers. The importation of fresh talent put the second Royal Academy on a solid footing. It produced operas, mostly Handel's, until 1737.

Orlando , the zenith of Handel's career as an opera composer, is also the occasion for his greatest crisis . It opened at the Haymarket Theater on January 27th , 1733 . Immediately upon completion of its run of 10 performances, all of his singers (with the exception of the soprano Lastrada) , led by the irascible castrato Senesino , (who may have had all he could take of Handel's dry humor) trooped out of the Haymarket and went to work for the newly formed *Opera of the Nobility* . This was the rival company that Frederick, Prince of Wales, had established just to spite his sister, Princess Anne - because she happened to be Handel's music student! London could barely support even one opera company. The predictable outcome, ruin for the both of them, was five years in the making.

In March of that same year Handel committed a grave political blunder by doubling the price of admission for his opera *Deborah* , to one guinea. The timing could not have been worse. The Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, had just pushed the Tobacco Excise Tax through Parliament. This law was so unpopular that it

merits comparison with the Stamp Tax on tea leveled against the colonies. The parallel is more than apt, as it brought the nation to the verge of civil war. The association of overpriced music and the new tax with the monarchist circles was inevitable. That Handel's fortune's survived at all in this period must be attributed to the strong support of the Crown, his own energy and stubbornness, and the superiority of his musical gift which triumphed over all.

Orlando, and the Dilemma of Baroque Opera

It is very difficult to reproduce the state of mind that created and understood the phenomenon of baroque opera in its own time. The expectations which audiences brought to the opera were very different from our own. The political structure was of another age: the patronage of kings and popes did not foster the growth of the same kinds of cultural forms and institutions that derive from NEA grants, university music departments, mass communication and public education.

Yet this cannot be the whole story, because Shakespeare, living a century before Handel, has never lost his popularity in 400 years, whereas the Baroque Opera in Italian, and its offshoots in other parts of Europe, was as dead as a doornail until the middle of this century. Only today, in this time of Handel tercentenary celebrations, are we really investigating ways of reviving this immense treasure house of musical masterpieces in such a manner that it may once again live on the stage.

The standard arguments against baroque opera do not explain its eclipse even before Handel's death. It is sometimes explained that it was a clockwork medium: entrances and exits required precise timing. Yes: as they do today. Then there are technical difficulties to deal with: for example. there were no intermissions.

something unacceptable to modern audiences. Attendance at the opera as a general rule was a social event on a scale inconceivable today. Audiences carried on conversations in loud voices all through the performances. They ordered cakes and hot chocolate, and ate them the way we crunch popcorn today at the movies. They spat on the floor. They even carried on conversations with singers on stage who happened not to be singing at that moment. One therefore suspects that, if anything, modern audiences should be *better* able to appreciate the opera of Handel's period, free from such distractions. Finally it is said that the plots were fabulous and unreal. If this were the sole reason for the defunct status of baroque opera, then all operas from Mozart's Magic Flute to the Ring cycle should have long fallen into neglect.

I discount all these arguments. Such incomparable music as Handel, Vivaldi, the Scarlattis, Hasse, Lotti and others wrote for the opera could have weathered all the adversities of time, were it not that a pernicious blight lay in the very marrow of the genre, rotting its substance and laying waste its aspirations to durability in the very period in which it reached the pinnacle of accomplishment: I speak of the institution of the male *castrato*, also called *musico* or *evirato*, which dominated Italian opera in the century from 1650 to 1750.

Given all the arguments that have been advanced for the failure of opera in English to take root in the 18th century, I've not come across anyone who makes the fairly obvious suggestion that, for whatever reasons of national temperament and political economy, the English had no intention of castrating a crop of 6-year-old boys each year for a generation or so, because of the dream that 20 years later there might emerge a great voice that could sing the male leads in some hypothetical English opera!

That the custom, practiced principally in Italy, of castrating singers in their childhood, was barbaric, and judged as such in its own age, is incontestable. The operation was illegal in all the Italian city-states, yet everywhere performed with tacit approval. The boys were generally orphans or the children of paupers who, sincerely or cynically, were encouraged to believe that dazzling musical careers awaited them. The operations were done in sheds hidden away in the countryside, perhaps in the daytime when the neighborhoods would be out working in the fields, the child strapped to a table and the shutters drawn to keep out prying eyes. Yet the cries of the victims must have carried a long ways: they were selected, after all, for their strong voices. Anaesthetics, such as they were, were very primitive. One can only hazard a guess as to how many children died under the knife, or later from infections and complications. At that time one could still die from an infected scratch on the thumb: antiseptic medicine lay 200 years distant in the future. Thousands of Italian boys were castrated in the 17th and 18th centuries, a figure which covers only those that survived the operation. The rest, no doubt thousands more, are permanently lost in the tempests of history.

What is known for a certainty is that the majority of these unfortunates never did develop the voice of a professional singer as they advanced into maturity. Unless this happened, they stood a fair chance of being turned out into the streets as mutilated freaks, to fend for themselves as best they could.

The practice of employing castrato singers “ *ad honorem Dei* ”, had its origins in the Catholic church. In 1586, the use of castrato singers in the choirs of the Sistine Chapel was officially authorized by Pope Sixtus V. In a famous Papal Bull, in which he states that four castrati should be engaged for the choir, he gives as

justification his own condemnation of the presence of women on the stage.

Castrators wouldn't work for nothing. One hesitates to speculate as to what financial interests underwrote their trade: the creation and grooming of a castrato singer was obviously a long-term high risk investment. Although the Catholic church did not set up its own castration factories, its approval must have been seen as good for business, in as much as all the castrati worked in church choirs until the emergence of the opera in the 17th century.

The castrato permeates the Italian opera from the time of the first experiments in that form by Peri, in 1600. All subsequent operatic composers use them: Monteverdi, Cavalli, all the way up to Mozart. They appear in 3 of Mozart's operas: "La finta giardiniera" ; "Idomeneo"; and "La Clemenza di Tito." In the end it was only the great authority of Rossini, who detested the institution, that drove the castrato off the stage.

However in Handel's time one can state that the very form of the opera as a genre had been shaped as a vehicle for the display of castrato virtuosity. The world of opera revolved about him as the planets revolve about the sun. The most famous names of the day were Bernarchi, Caffarelli, Nicolini, Farinelli, Senesino. They comported themselves in every way like prima donnas, being vain, irritable, childish and conceited. Some of them, such as Pistocchi, were however persons of great quality and breadth of culture.

An insatiable appetite for lewd anecdotes about castrati swelled the public imagination. Just as we have our 'Polish' jokes and 'elephant' jokes today, so they had their 'castrato' jokes. There is no doubt that part of the public appeal of the opera was in this prurient aspect.

In some essential sense, the castrato *was* Italian Baroque Opera. It was only when the climate of opinion moved to the general recognition that the castrating of young children to create potential opera singers was ethically unacceptable, that the art form which had grown up around it withered away. Yet the use of castrato singers in the Vatican choirs persisted until 1903, when it was finally banned by Pope Pius X. As for the Bull of Sixtus V, my most recent information indicates that it has never been repealed. The title role in *Orlando* was sung by a castrato, Senesino. He was one of the great singers of the age, though not the equal of Farinelli, who worked for the rival Opera of the Nobility. That a figure such as the Orlando of Ariosto, a veritable incarnation of sexual jealousy, should be portrayed on the opera stage as a warbling eunuch, someone who could never know those delights which, through their being denied, causes madness, must have strained the credence of even the 18th century aficionados. Certainly the situation posed a considerable artistic dilemma for Handel. The “madness” which bursts into bloom in Orlando’s mind when Zoroaster’s magic descends upon it in the last scene of Act II, seems to have nothing to do with the jealous frenzy in which Orlando tramps about in Canto 23 of Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* :

*“ But his surpassing force do so exceed
All common men that neither sword nor bill
Nor any other weapon did he need;
Mere strength sufficed him to do what he will
He roots up trees as one would root a weed
And e’en as birders laying nets with skill
Pare slender thorns away with easy strokes
So did he play with ashes, elms and oaks”*

There was no way that Handel could arrange for Senesino to carry on like this, either in deeds, words, or music. Therefore Handel makes him manic-depressive rather than paranoid-schizophrenic. Orlando hallucinates. He sees himself in Hell. He hears the howls of Cerberus. He sees his rival, Modero, being cradled by Proserpine, and starts to cry. He becomes silly rather than frenzied, dancing knock-kneed gavottes in the midst of morbid grieving. His fury is, indeed, "emasculated". Instead of falling victim to raging macho madness, Orlando turns into the same kind of helpless, pitiable wretch that Senesino may well have become in real life were it not for the magic of his voice.

That Handel knew his business and had made the conscious decision to depict something other than jealous rage is clear. One need only listen to the tirades of Polyphemus in the English-language pastoral *Acis and Galatea* (libretto by John Gay, of *Beggar's Opera* fame) . The fury of Polyphemus as expressed in the music is so terrifying that it can arouse panic in the heart of even a listener of today. By no stretch of the imagination could one turn a Senesino/Orlando into a Polyphemus.

Likewise, there was, in general, no way of transforming Italian opera into some English equivalent. Although male heroic roles were present in baroque opera, the castrato singer undermines the role. Also, the personal tragedy of the castrato undermines the abstract tragedy on the stage. The irony of spurned love and wounded pride being portrayed by a mutilated artist who's been denied love and robbed of pride, makes any depiction of jealousy ludicrous. Therefore Handel neatly sidesteps the issue, replacing jealousy by melancholy, anger by depression, rage by sleep.

Were it not for the blatant contradiction inevitable in basing an artistic genre of high culture on a barbaric industry, the absurdities present in the fabrication of Orlando's madness would not be found in a work that is, in all other respects, a masterpiece of both music and theater. The characterizations are full and engrossing, the recitatives brimming with warmth, variety and emotional subtlety, the arias among the finest that Handel ever wrote: *Verdi piante* ; *Sorge infausta* ; *Amor e qual vento* ; *Semi rivolgo al prato* : jewel follows jewel. The Terzetto "*Consolati, o bella* ", recalls the tenderest settings in Bach's cantatas of the Bride/Bridegroom dialogue, notably "*Wir danken, wir preisen* " of Cantata 134, "*Wie soll ich dich, leisten* " of Cantata 152 and others.

The prevailing affection is melancholy, the sad, hopeless longings of Orlando and Dorinda towards the self-infatuated couple Angelica and Modero, who combine indifference to the passions they've aroused with ingratitude: Angelica owes her life to Orlando, Modero to Dorinda. Dorinda's passion is "virtuous", Orlando's "criminal", yet their pleading songs arise out of a similar condition and neither of them come even near to fulfilling their desire.

The obligatory "happy ending" , one of the iron-clad conventions of *opera seria* which composers must have found irksome, is turned by Handel to very good effect. Through its comic suddenness it conveys the idea that most of the things that people fight over are really silly anyway. In a joyous round of song and under the benevolent eye of the wise Magus Zoroaster , everyone shakes hands and becomes friends.

One can't help but ask oneself if Handel was morally comfortable when he wrote operas that centered around the institution of the castrato. It is unlikely that he approved of it: the

singers were there, Handel didn't create them, he just wrote for them. It may be that by diversifying into the Oratorio, he recognized that his operas would fall into oblivion once the musical world became disgusted with the industry that fashioned its musical raw material. Also, by refusing to write opera in English, Handel may have intended to prevent the emergence of a castration industry in his adopted homeland.

Composers at Handel's level usually write for the most accomplished technicians of their times. The castrato singer was a virtuoso beyond anything existing today. Hindemith's concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* , music for dedicated amateurs, is an anomaly in music history. Great composers aim for the virtuosos; Handel was no exception.

