

**Handelian Opera in England 1711-1741:
Orlando and the institution of the Castrato**

Roy Lisker

1987; revisited 2012

The opening night of *The Beggar's Opera* (November 29, 1728, in the Royal Theater at Lincoln's Inn Fields, London) 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 profits "*made 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. John 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 to Handel on London's social register of distinguished German musicians, had little cause for complaint.

The *Beggar's Opera* was, and remains to this day, a direct attack on

every institutionalized prop for respectability in the capitalist social order. One of these was the Royal Opera, directly satirized in the script and indirectly undermined at the box office. At no time in English history has Italian opera (*Italian baroque opera to be precise, which is very different from 19th century Italian opera*) ever been a cause for such heated political passions as it became in the century of the Enlightenment.

While the Beggar's Opera was enjoying its' unprecedented run the Royal Academy of Music, the opera company, directed by Georg Friedrich Handel, supported by the crown 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 remained invidious: there was additional political capital to be gained in ascribing the failure of the latter to the success of the former. Within a few years Handel had re-established Italian baroque opera in England through

performances at the Queen's Theatre in Haymarket (founded in 1705). He was to remain at the helm for another 9 years, until 1737, when a paralyzing stroke left him almost totally blind.

By 1728 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 into the 20th century. However London had finally 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 persons could always be found 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. Still smarting from the humiliating flop of his own operatic venture *Rosamund* (1707, music by Clayton; 3 performances)

Addison 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 away 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 his very first London opera, *Rinaldo*, produced in 1711 . It is astonishing to us who live in the age of Hard Metal, Punk Rock and Motown, to read Steele’s

diatribes against a composer like Handel of “reveling in noise for its own sake!” Addison in his turn, who must have known little about music, set about ridiculing everything *else* associated with Handel’s productions, such as staging, choreography, costuming, lyrics, and 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 impervious to their onslaughts. Even as late as 1731 it was being revived to packed houses.

No special ability was needed for anyone to launch a personal attacks on Handel; evidently his personality must have been difficult. Still, many people did like him however, although even they referred euphemistically to his “dry sense of humor”. The spicy anecdotes that have come down indicate that his “dry humor”, perhaps charming for us with the perspective of more than 2 centuries, may also explain why

his singers abandoned him so readily, to go over to his competitors, at moments critical to the success of his productions.

When Cuzzoni (*the temperamental prima donna, whose fights with the equally vain Faustina are 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; that would give him time to take up a subscription. In his opinion, 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 European musical community to be one of the most advanced countries, musically, in Europe. Its' church music in particular was deemed to be on a par with that of Italy and the

Netherlands. A century of war, starting from the suppression of the monasteries in 1549 and culminating in the civil wars beginning in 1640 and continuing into the 18th century, so thoroughly disrupted musical life, that even today it has yet to regain its former pre-eminence.

If a nation is wealthy that which cannot be obtained at home may sometimes be imported from abroad. In the business of engaging a great composer the English court did not have far to seek, as Handel was in the employ of Hanover , the German state joined to England through the expedient aristocratic marriages that passed for foreign diplomacy in the age of European feudalism (circa 9th century CE to 1918).

Not that England was, by that time, in any sense a cultural backwater. It was another one of the golden ages of English letters, of which that nation has known so many, following upon the reign of good (if slow-witted) Queen Anne, the age of Swift, Pope, Gay, Johnson, Dryden, Arbuthnot, Addison, Steele, Sheridan, 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* . But 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 spite, nor the highbrow tone of opera seria , nor the lack of a viable musical community. What really happened is this: from the moment he set foot on English soil, Georg Friedrich Handel took the nation by storm. His ascendancy remained unchallenged for half a century until his death in 1759. He filled the ears and hearts of the English public with the excitement that only a great genius may impart, one in addition possessed of incredible drive, a well-nigh unbreakable spirit, and very high , very inflexible standards,

No-one else in the London scene even came near him. Giovanni Bononcini, his only serious rival in London for a short time, did write some very good music, that is to say before being hounded out of fair Albion in disgrace on trumped-up charges of plagiarism. Bononcini was no match for the vicious political 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. They also soon beat a retreat albeit with more discretion.

The Arne siblings (Thomas, Susannah and Richard) 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 forced London society to accept unpopular operas in a foreign language; yet he 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 genre goes into a decline. Yet it is only in 1741, after carrying the musical form of his own invention, the Oratorio in English, to the incomparable heights of the Messiah 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 with seven new singers to London in the fall of

1729. The importation of fresh talent put the Queen's Theatre on a solid footing.

Orlando, the zenith of Handel's career as an opera composer was also the occasion for his greatest crisis. It opened at the Queen's Theater at Haymarket 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, 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. Why?: 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 ruling class, was inevitable. That Handel's fortunes survived this period at all 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 obstacles.

Orlando and the Dilemma of Baroque Opera

It is very difficult to reproduce the state of mind of the era (from the *Orfeo* of Monteverdi in 1608, to the *Orfeo* of Gluck in 1762) in which the baroque opera thrived. The expectations which audiences brought to the opera house 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 cultural forms and institutions that derive from NEA grants, mass communication, film scores, and universal public education.

Yet this cannot be the whole story, because Shakespeare, writing more than a century before Handel, has not 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 by the end of the 18th century until the middle of the 20th. Only in this present time of Handel tercentenary celebrations, have opera companies begun to seriously investigate ways of reviving this immense treasure house of musical masterpieces, and to so in such a manner that it may once again come alive on the stage.

The standard arguments against baroque opera do not explain its eclipse even in Handel's own work lifetime and work. It is sometimes argued that it was a clockwork medium: entrances and exits required precise timing. Yes; as do most operas today. Then there are the technical difficulties: 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 those singers on stage who happened not to be singing at that moment. One might therefore think that, if anything, modern audiences should be *better* able to appreciate Handel's operas shorn of such distractions.

Finally it is said argued that the plots of baroque opera were fabulous and unreal. If this were the sole reason for the defunct status of baroque opera, then the majority of operas, from Mozart's Magic Flute to the Ring cycle should have long fallen into neglect.

I discount all there arguments. Such incomparable music as Handel, Vivaldi, the Scarlattis, Hasse, Lotti and others wrote for the opera could easily have proven a match for the fickleness of fashion and taste, 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 am speaking of the institution of the male *castrato* , also called

musico or *evirato* , which dominated the opera stage.

Given all the arguments that have been advanced for the failure of opera in English to take root in the 18th century, I have not yet 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 their children. The operations were done in sheds hidden away in the countryside, perhaps in the daytime when the neighbors 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 had been selected, after all, for their strong voices. Anesthetics, 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. Barring this 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. The use of castrato singers in the choirs of the Sistine Chapel was officially authorized in 1586 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 Peri's first experiments 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*. It was only the great authority of Rossini, who detested the institution,

that drove the castrato off the European stage.

In Handel's time however the very form of 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 sick 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 Ariosto's *Orlando*, 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, cause madness, must have strained the credulity of even the 18th century *aficionado*. Certainly the situation posed a considerable artistic dilemma for Handel. The 'madness' which bursts into full bloom in *Orlando's* mind when it is invaded by Zoroaster's magic in the last scene of Act II, would seem 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 castrated Senesino to carry on like this, either in deeds, words, or music. Handel’s solution is to make him manic-depressive rather than paranoid-schizophrenic. Orlando hallucinates. He sees himself in Hell. He hears the howls of Cerberus. He sees his rival, Moderato, 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 pasturale *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.

Generalizing, there was no way of transforming Italian opera into some sort of English equivalent. Although male heroic roles are present in baroque opera, the castrato singer undermines the role. At the same time 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. Handel therefore neatly sidesteps the issue, replacing jealousy by melancholy, anger by depression, rage by sleep.

Were it not for the blatant contradictions 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, *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 Angelica and Modero, the self-infatuated couple 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 close to fulfilling their desire.

The obligatory happy ending , one of the unbreakable 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 centered on the institution of the castrato. It is unlikely that he approved of it. The singers were just 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.(It is no doubt a far-fetched speculation to suggest that, 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 one can encounter today. Hindemith's concept of *Gebrauchsmusik*, music for dedicated amateurs, is an anomaly in music history. Professional composers aim for the virtuosos, either of their own era or the next. Handel was no exception.

