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Handel Opera
Presentation – Past and Present

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Abstract

What differences, if any, exist between the performance of Handel opera during his lifetime, and contemporary performances? To what extent do these differences reflect the need to adapt Handel's operas when performed out of their original context, and how does knowledge of original performance practices enhance the singer's ability to interpret and present characters in performance?

This study investigates the ideas outlined above, exploring the social and cultural environment of *opera seria*, its conventions, and the way in which Handel's operas were presented during his lifetime, later providing a comparison with contemporary productions. It aims to enhance understanding of the production and musical aspects of staging a Handel opera, and to illustrate how this knowledge can assist in performance.

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Introduction

In early 2002 the Conservatorium of Music at Massey University, Wellington, began planning a production of Handel's opera *Giustino*, to be performed using a young cast and on a strict budget. The writer of this study, herself a singer in this production, became intrigued by the material at hand (which to a singer unversed in the complex traditions of *opera seria*, seemed foreign), and eager to discover how the director would present the work to a contemporary audience. Of particular interest were the theatrical aspects involved in the presentation of a Handel opera. Hence this study is the direct result of a 'performers curiosity'; it attempts to provide insight into the way in which the operas of George Frideric Handel were presented during his lifetime, and how this does or does not inform the productions mounted during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, by answering the following key questions:

1. How were Handel's operas presented during his lifetime, and what were the social and cultural factors that influenced this presentation?
2. How have productions of Handel opera been presented during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? ie. What treatment has been given to the conventions of *opera seria*?
3. To what extent does this treatment reflect the need to adapt the work, performed out of its original context, to better communicate with 'modern' audiences?
4. How can knowledge of the conventions of *opera seria* assist singers of the twenty-first century in the performance of Handel opera?

Chapter one begins by detailing the history of sung drama in England prior to Handel's arrival, providing the background for the genre in which Handel worked. This section gives insight into the reasons behind some of the conventions of *opera seria*. The chapter then outlines the social, cultural and political environment in which Handel lived and worked, the nature of his audience, and the creation of the Royal Academy; these factors all had considerable influence on the composition and presentation of his operas.

Chapter two investigates the original presentation of Handel's operas, outlining the conventions and performance practices of *opera seria*, both musical and theatrical, in order to gain a more focussed understanding of the way in which they were performed. This knowledge is crucial to any comparison made with performances of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Chapters three and four provide a link between the original production of Handel opera and contemporary presentations. Chapter three investigates the decline of Italian *opera seria*, detailing the reasons behind Handel's transition to the composition of oratorio; chapter four provides insight into the revival of his operas, highlighting the events which ignited renewed enthusiasm for them.

The final chapter of this study explores the ways in which Handel opera has been presented since the middle of the twentieth century. It identifies any trends or common characteristics between the productions, and compares these with the performance practices of Handel's lifetime.

Handel in Context

Sung Drama in 17th and early 18th Century England, Political Influences, Handel's Audience, Creation of the Royal Academy

In order to gain a more accurate understanding of and appreciation for Handel's operatic works, it is first necessary to understand the social, cultural and political environment in which they were written and first staged. These factors all influenced the content of Handel's operas and the nature in which they were presented. This chapter outlines these influences, first investigating the background to sung drama and Italian opera in England prior to the arrival of Handel.

Sung Drama in 17th and early 18th Century England

> Although *Rinaldo* was far more coherent musically than the various kinds of "opera" that preceded it, London audiences experienced Handel's work as an improvement over earlier operas, not as something wholly different in kind. (Winn, 1996-97. p.113)

Handel's *Rinaldo* (1711) was the first complete Italian opera to be composed for the London stage. However this was not London's first encounter with sung drama. 'Sung drama' or 'opera' was a genre of great diversity and variation of style, one that co-existed with the heroic dramas produced by Dryden and his contemporaries in a vibrant theatrical scene. The cross pollination of the two genres, opera and the heroic play, is evidenced by William Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes*, a fully sung work produced as early as 1656. Insight into the status of English opera is gained through the following comment made by Davenant:

> The Musick was compos'd, and both the Vocal and Instrumental is exercis'd, by the most transcendent of England in that Art, and perhaps not unequal to the best Masters abroad; but being *Recitative*, and therefore unpractis'd here; though of great reputation amongst other Nations, the very attempt of it is an obligation to our own. The Story represented (which will not require much apology because it expects but little praise) is Heroical........(Davenant cited in Winn, 1996-97. p.115)

Davenant seems to infer that English opera was not as advanced as that in 'other Nations', first making a comparison between the composers and vocal and instrumental performers of England with the 'best Masters abroad', stating that they were 'perhaps not unequal'. His choice of words here indicates that he may have recognised that England was isolated from some of the best performers in the world, many of whom had returned to the Continent due to the civil wars between 1642 and 1651. Davenant's assertion that English composers had an 'obligation' to attempt the forms and styles of music being produced abroad, in this case recitative, confirms his view that English opera was not up to date in this arena.

Dryden regarded *The Siege of Rhodes* as the original model for the genre of heroic play, which Winn (1996/97) claims owed much of its formal structure to its musical origins. Despite the fact that it was fully sung, the work was entered in the Stationers' Register as 'a maske', not an 'opera'. By contrast, *The Fairy Queen* (writer unknown, produced at Dorset Garden in 1692), contained dialogue as well as music, yet its title page described it as 'An Opera' (Hume, 1998). These two works help illustrate not just the diversity of styles of sung drama in seventeenth century London, but also the problems encountered when trying to name or categorise works and track the development of one particular genre. Figure 1 (cited in Hume, 1998, p.17) is a table of 'operas' performed in London before the establishment of the Queen's Theatre, Haymarket, illustrating this diversity.

Figure 1. 'Operas' performed in London prior to the establishment of the Queens Theatre, Haymarket in 1708.

Hume (1998, pp.17-18) claims that "no clear differentiations can be made among works designated 'Opera', 'Comedy', 'Tragedy', 'Masque' and 'Pastoral'", and that it is necessary to use the term 'opera' loosely in order to encompass the many representations given under the genre title. If one accepts the term 'opera' as loosely encompassing the wide range of sung dramatic works in seventeenth century London, it is possible to identify similar and dissimilar characteristics between these works and Handel's operas.

Strong emphasis was placed on the words in seventeenth century English opera; it was a literary form as much as a musical one. This contrasted with contemporary operas by continental composers, whose mantra was '*prima la musica e poi le parole*' (Hume, 1998), placing utmost importance on the music. As a result composers for the

London stage rarely had much influence over the shape and meaning of their works. The low status of the composer during this period is well illustrated by the fact that their names often did not appear on the title page of their works.

Like continental opera, English opera was often celebratory in nature and written in order to help mark a certain occasion. The marriage in 1673 of the Duke of York to Mary of Modena provided one such occasion. Charles II, the reigning monarch, was a great fan of opera and sent dramatist Thomas Killigrew to Italy to recruit singers for a proposed theatre devoted solely to opera, in Moorfields. Despite these well-placed intentions, Charles II did not have the sufficient resources to run a court opera, or even to help subsidise productions mounted in public theatres. Consequently, these theatres were under no financial obligation to present works that promoted the king and his ministers and critical political commentary was common.

Some librettists took advantage of the looseness of the operatic form of the time to build in this political commentary, however not to the same extent as those in Italy and France where "operas served as an expensive form of propaganda [political commentary was positive and flattering]: 'opera theatre is first and foremost an instrument of political authority'" (Hume, 1998, p.22). Of the many variations of 'operatic' forms in seventeenth century England, the masque was the most politically suggestive. Of course, whatever the content of the text, it was quite possible that it was 'swamped on the night', hidden behind the fancy dress, beautiful women, extraordinary scenic displays and other distractions that made masque performances such grand occasions. In fact, while operatic works did contain an element of political allegory, their main feature and appeal to audiences was spectacular production effects, not content (Hume, 1998).

Among the most spectacular productions were those staged by Thomas Betterton. These were performed at the Dorset Garden theatre, a venue closely associated with the increased operatic activity in London from the 1670s. Following Davenant's death in 1668, Betterton succeeded him as co-manager of the Duke's Company and designed the Dorset Garden theatre, ensuring it was capable of staging the multi-media spectaculars he was committed to producing. These included *The Tempest*

(1674), *Psyche* (1675), *Circe* (1677), *Albion and Albanius* (1685), *The Prophetess* (1690), *King Arthur* (1691) and *The Fairy Queen* (1692). These productions were extremely expensive to mount owing to the requirements of special machine and scenic effects, elaborate costuming, and large casts. Whereas an ordinary play took approximately four to eight weeks to prepare, preparation and rehearsal of one of Betterton's productions ranged from six months to two years, a factor which further increased the production expense (Milhous, 1984). The cost of new productions staged during the 1670s ranged from £1,200-1,500. This was a substantial risk at a time when the annual operating budget of the Dukes Company was no more than approximately £5,000. The total cost of staging productions during the 1680s and 1690s was even greater. For example the total cost of *Albion and Albanius* was £4,000 (Milhous, 1984). In order to help fund these productions, ticket prices were raised twice and sometimes three times their usual cost of 4s. (boxes), 2s. 6d. (pit), and 1s (second gallery). However this measure alone was not enough to cover the huge expense of such productions, and the theatre relied on the solid profits it made from staging ordinary plays on at least two hundred days each season to help subsidize the cost: "assured profits from plays guaranteed the sums ventured on opera" (Milhous, 1984. p. 570). As a result, operatic productions were regarded as special and occasional events and were not the sole focus of the company, which staged just one new production each season.

Throughout the 1680s there was pressure from the court for companies to produce through-sung opera. The productions of *Venus and Adonis* in 1682, with music by John Blow, and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* during this decade helped satisfy the King's thirst for opera with recitative. Semi-operas continued to be staged almost every year from 1690 – 1701 with many works revised and restaged, such as *The Indian Queen.* Locke and Purcell both acknowledged the Italian influence in reference to their productions of *The English Opera* (1675) and *The Music of the Prophetess* (1691) respectively (Winn, 1996-1997). During this time Italian musicians began to return to England and were also a source of influence for English musicians and composers. Thus, London audiences had been exposed to the Italian style of opera before Handel's arrival.

During the first decade of the eighteenth century there were several attempts to stage Italian operas, some sung in Italian, others translated into English. A form called the *pasticcio* was employed during this time, with popular arias connected together without much thought being given to the plot or the flow of the drama. Borrowing and reworking of material was not a new phenomenon however; composers such as Purcell had already been known to rework and adapt earlier music for new productions, while others even adapted the music of other composers. During this time composers were expected to provide music that had a fresh approach but was not necessarily from original material.[1] It was not until the mid eighteenth century that the concept of originality began to blossom. Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) states:

> An imitator shares his crown, if he has one, with the chosen Object of his Imitation; an Original enjoys an undivided applause. An Original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of Genius; it grows, it is not made: Imitations are often a sort of manufacture wrought up by those Mechanics, Art, and Labour, our of pre-existent materials not their own (Young cited in *Reworkings and issues of originality,* n.d. Retrieved on January 22, 2004).

Despite experimentation with Italian opera, English semi-opera continued to be produced as late as 1706, when Betterton staged George Granville's *The British Enchanters*. Up until this time, when John Vanbrugh began planning his company at the Haymarket, opera had never been the sole focus or sole source of income for a theatrical company. Encouraged by the apparent profitability of the Dorset Garden theatre, Vanbrugh campaigned to gain a theatrical monopoly for himself. He failed in this attempt however, and was forced to accept a "government-mandated genre split: he got an opera monopoly at the Haymarket, and Christopher Rich got a theatrical monopoly at Drury Lane" (Milhous, 1984. p.571). Vanbrugh designed and built the Haymarket Theatre, later to be the home of the Royal Academy, and based his new company there. Failing to realise that the successful production of opera at the Dorset

[1] Handel himself was widely known to rework and adapt his own music and the music of others for his operas, more often than many of his contemporaries. By the early nineteenth century, with ideals of originality firmly in place, Handel was accused of plagiarism "for practices that seem today like particularly excellent examples of what had been a long and distinguished tradition of creatively reshaping borrowed material" (*Reworkings and issues of originality,* n.d. Retrieved on January 22, 2004).

Garden theatre had only been possible with the subsidy provided by ordinary plays, Vanbrugh was convinced that this monopoly would provide him with the opportunity to establish his Italian opera company and in the process make healthy profits. This was not to be the case and the huge salaries demanded by his singers and musicians became a major stumbling point. Unlike the earlier operas staged by Betterton, where performers were taken from the regular acting company and were not a principal expense, Vanbrugh was forced to pay his singers and musicians salaries often four times what they would have received in the theatre. Figure 2 (cited in Milhous, 1984. p.572) provides a summary of Vanbrugh's financial commitments for the spring of 1708, detailing this expense as well as others involved in production of his operas:

Vanbrugh's obligations for the spring of 1708

Singers	2,400
Musicians	1,030
Dancers	800 (includes costumes)
House servants	640
Theater rent	800[b]
Light	320
Budgeted for two new operas	1,275 (clothes and scenes only)
Printing bills	60
	£7,325

Figure 2. Summary of Vanbrugh's financial commitments, 1708.

By April 1708, one month before the collapse of his company, Vanbrugh acknowledged defeat:

> That altho' the Queen shou'd be pleas'd to allow a Thousand pounds a Year towards Salarys; And that the Towne shou'd by Subscriptions take off the Load of Cloaths & Scenes: the Daily Charge wou'd Still rise to full a hundred pounds a day: Which is the most the House can ever hope to receive the Season throughout one Performance with an other (Vanbrugh cited in Milhous, 1984. p.573).

Thus, by the time Handel arrived in London in 1710, London audiences had been exposed to a wide variety of musical entertainments and sung drama. While the works themselves are not easily categorised, they share common characteristics. These are: (1) the use of spectacular scenic and machine effects and elaborate costuming, in order to gratify audience's demand for entertainments as pleasing to the eye as to the

ear; and (2) many of the works contained music by composers who had been influenced by the Italian operatic style, while others were original Italian operas adapted for the London stage through translation or reworking of musical material. However, it was not until Handel's *Rinaldo* in 1711, that London audiences experienced an opera that successfully blended music and drama with spectacular effects. Librettist Aaron Hill summed up the important contribution *Rinaldo* made to the development of opera in London in his preface to the libretto:

> 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 Dramma, 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 (Hill cited in Winn, 1996-1997. pp.132-133).

Political Influences

England of 1710 was a country undergoing great social and political change. The civil wars of 1642-1651 had ended with Charles II fleeing to France and remaining there until returning to London at the invitation of parliament in 1660. However he did not return to a stable government or regime and by 1688-89 the country was again on the brink of civil war. Parliament had triumphed over the Crown and a party-driven political dispute involving the ideals of this period (a set of social and cultural values inextricably linked with the way society and authority were set up), began to be conducted in the public arena. This was the first time a Western country had experienced such a public political dispute. In the eyes of many other European countries, the English appeared forward thinking and innovative. Weber suggests that the political events that occurred during this period "marked the start of modern, ideologically defined political parties" (Weber, 1997. p.45).

Handel could not avoid becoming involved in and affected by these political events. Because he was an operatic composer, composing works for what was then considered the most significant musical genre, he was immediately immersed in the world of the elite and some of the most influential political personalities. Aside from the Houses of Parliament, the opera house was the venue where the political elite met most frequently. Hence opera, and Handel himself, were "by definition intimately linked with political elites and whatever was going on among them" and were "affected by the internationalism of aristocratic life in this period...." (Weber, 1997. p.45).

Upon his arrival in London, Handel was employed by the house of Hanover to help prepare for the Succession. It was probably as a result of this that Handel enjoyed a warm relationship with the Court. However when the government changed in 1711 from a majority of Whig to Tory membership, Handel's loyalties were divided between the Hannoverians and the new cabinet. Handel succeeded through his great political intelligence and social capabilities and managed to sustain a good working relationship with both parties (Weber, 1997). He kept his distance from political extremists, preferring to associate himself with more moderate personalities. He also distanced himself from the attacks made by the Whigs on the Church of England, and those made against Italian Opera.

The commentary in pamphlets, poetry and essays illustrates the extent to which opera was intertwined with politics. Due to the failure of parliament to pass a law censoring the press in 1695, commentary in this arena went unchecked. The following passage, taken from a pamphlet of 1727 during the height of competition between Handel's two sopranos Faustina and Cuzzoni, illustrates the complicated nature of this operatic and political commentary:

> Which of the two is the Agressor, I dare not determine, lest I lost the Friendship of my Great Noble personages, who espouse some the one, some the other Party, with such Warmth, that it is not now, (as formerly) *i.e.*, are you High Church or Low, Whig or Tory; are you for Court or Country, King *George* or the Pretender: but are you for *Faustina* or *Cuzzoni, Handel* or *Bononcini.* There's the question. This engages all the Polite World in warm Disputes; and but for the soft Strains of the Opera, which have in some Measure qualified and allay'd the native city of the

> *English*, Blood and Slaughter would consequently ensue (Cited in Weber, 1997. p.46).

Religious issues, bred out of the English suspicion of Roman Catholicism, played an important role in the resistance from some parts of society to Italian or 'continental' opera in London. After the death of Charles II, his brother James VII of Scotland and II of England ascended the throne but became so unpopular due to his support of Roman Catholicism that the English parliament invited his son in law, William of Orange, to replace him. William accepted this invitation and James was forced to flee the country, actions which prompted the Jacobite rebellions and fuelled the fires of religious debate. Catholicism became the most popular scapegoat in England during the eighteenth century with Catholics being blamed for, among other things, the Great Fire of London in 1666 (Weber, 1997). Inevitably Italian opera became a target for commentary in pamphlets and general debate, due to its origins in a Catholic nation. The following excerpt, again focusing on two of Handel's most famous singers, sopranos Faustina and Cuzzoni, illustrates the climate of fear of Catholicism that existed in early Eighteenth Century London:

> 1. They come from *Rome*
> 2. The Pope lives at *Rome*
> 3. So does the Pretender.
> 4. The Pope is a notorious Papist;
> 5. So is the Pretender;
> 6. So is Madam *Faustina*,
> 7. And so is Madam *Cuzzoni*
> 8. King George (God bless him) is a Protestant;
> 9. The Papists hate the Protestants
> 10. The Pope hates King *George*
> 11. The Pretender can't abide him.
> 12. But Madam *Cuzzoni* and Madam *Faustina*, love the Pope, and in all Probability the Pretender.
>
> Ergo****************
>
> From whence I infer, that it is not safe to have Popish singers tolerated here, in England; but on the contrary, it would be a great Security to the Protestant Interest to have a Clause added to some Act of Parliament, obliging all Foreign Singers, Dancers and tumblers, to adjure the Devile, the Pope, and the Pretender, before they appear in Publick (Cited in Weber, 1997. pp.51-52).

Changes within the social structure of London, particularly within elite circles, also had an effect on Handel and the nature of his operas. One change was the relocation of many of London's elite families to newly built houses in the West End, shifting the social focus of daily life away from court and towards new clubs, coffee-houses and theatres. The Kings Theatre, built by Vanbrugh and the venue where Handel staged many of his greatest operas, became a significant gathering point for political leaders and the elite, a group which comprised members of the nobility and men and women who through their professions came into contact with the aristocracy (including doctors, financial agents, musicians and artists, cultural entrepreneurs and high-class prostitutes). The British peerage system itself was one of the smallest in Europe, and this meant that compared with other countries a smaller number of families held a large amount of political power. This inspired great respect from French and Italian nobles, who mixed frequently with the London elite, and this respect trickled through to other social outings such as the opera. Weber suggests that the respect held for the London opera theatre by foreign nobility helped to justify the immensely high fees that singers earned there (Weber, 1997).

Handel's Audience

Handel took into account the audience for which he was composing opera.

	1688–98	1755–9
£0–49	1,161,876 (83.55%)	1,299,218 (84.41%)
£50–99	157,956 (11.36%)	135,666 (8.8[illegible]%)
£100–199	13,062 (0.94%)	51,186 (3.33%)
£200–400	53,066 (3.82%)	40,400 (2.63%)
£400+	4,626 (0.33%)	12,670 (0.82%)
All families	1,390,586 (100%)	1,539,140 (100%)
Total population England & Wales[4]	5,500,520	6,309,470
Total population England only[4]	4,961,692	5,993,415

Figure 3. Summary of average incomes in London, 1688-98 and 1755-9

Figure 3 (Hunter, 2000. p.34) shows that lower income and destitute families made up the majority of the population at approximately 84 per cent, the middle class made up just 12-13 per cent, while an even smaller percentage, around 3 per cent, constituted families whose income was between £200-£400. At around 10s 6d for the boxes and pit, and 5s, 3s 6d for the galleries, ticket prices for Italian opera at the Haymarket theatre were 2.5 to 4 times the cost of those for ordinary plays (Hunter, 2000), hence regular attendance at or subscription to the opera was limited to families whose annual income was £400 or more, a mere 12,670 families. This number was potentially even smaller due to the fact that, despite it being a favourite entertainment of the elite, opera still had to compete with other attractions available to these families, such as pleasure gardens, private clubs, racing and grand tours. However opera did remain an important way for the elite to confirm their status:

> Musick is so generally approv'd of in England, that it is look'd upon as a want of Breeding not to be affected by in, insomuch that every Member of the Beau-monde at this Time either do, or at least, think it necessary to appear as if they understand it; and, in order to carry on this Deceit it is requisite every one, who has the Pleasure of thinking himself a fine Gentleman, should, being first laden with a Competency of Powder and Essence, make his personal Appearance every Opera Night at the Haymarket (Quotation from *The Weekly Journal 1725* cited in Weber, 1997, pp.47-48).

Despite the fact that it was possible for members of lower economic groups to attend the opera very occasionally through purchase of the cheaper tickets in the galleries, opera remained an entertainment designed primarily for the small percentage of the population that was the elite. Handel acknowledged this and composed his operas with this group in mind, catering to their desire for expensive and lavish entertainments. He was assisted in this goal by his own membership of the elite, which afforded him the necessary inside knowledge.

Indeed Handel enjoyed a lifestyle that no other composer then and few since have enjoyed, supported by an annual income of £600 from the Royal family. This income placed him firmly in the top 0.3 per cent of households in England and confirmed his status amongst the elite. Handel did not escape criticism for this lifestyle however, even from close associates. One of his closest friends, Joseph Goupy, painted a

caricature of Handel published in 1750 (figure 4, cited in Cervantes and McGeary, 2001. p.611), which highlighted four concepts considered most important to Handel. These were pension, benefit, nobility and friendship. The caricature, entitled *The true Representation and Caracter & Co.*, paints Handel in a less than flattering light, hinting at gluttony, vanity and excess as characteristics held by the composer. Hunter suggests that the caricature may have been prompted by Handel eating food of a higher quality in a separate room while Goupy, his dinner guest, ate less appealing fare, and that it was responsible for the deterioration of their friendship (2000).

Figure 4. 'The true *Representation and Caracter & Co.*', etching and engraving by Joseph Goupy. 1750.

Creation of the Royal Academy

Following the collapse of Vanbrugh's ill-fortuned opera company in 1708, opera continued to be produced at the Haymarket under Owen Swiney, William Collier and Aaron Hill. This new collaboration did not last long and during the season of 1712-1713 Swiney departed for the Continent, leaving a string of unfinished business behind him:

> Mr Swiny Brakes & runs away & leaves ye Singers unpaid ye Scenes & Habits also unpaid for. The Singers were inn Some confusion but at last concluded to go on with ye Opera's on their own accounts, & devide ye Gain amongst them (Quotation from Colman's Opera Register cited in Milhous, 1984. p.576).

Between 1713 and 1717 a small number of opera performances were given each season at the Haymarket under J.J.Heidegger who was obliged, just as his predecessors, to pay large salaries to his singers and provide expensive scenery. Like Vanbrugh and Swiney, Heidegger struggled to meet the daily running costs for the company. Milhous suggests that there was a: "clear sense of how essentially similar opera budgets were each season between Vanbrugh's optimistic beginning in 1708 and Heidegger's last independent venture a decade later" and that "the fragmentary state of our figures does not obscure a consistent and depressing picture" (Milhous, 1984. p.582).

During the early months of 1719 Handel was heavily involved in plans for a new company, which was intended firmly to establish Italian opera in London. This was to be the Royal Academy of Music. King George I, a fan of opera, granted a Royal charter enabling the company to be founded and promised an annual subsidy of £1,000. The joint stock company was also financed through subscriptions. These subscribers were members of the nobility and elite motivated "partly from a genuine desire to see first-class opera in London and partly because subscribing was an appropriate way of exercising the artistic patronage expected from persons of their rank in society" (*The Royal Academy of Music*. n.d. Retrieved January 22, 2004). They were responsible for electing the directors of the company (also members of the elite), and many were amateur musicians or were familiar with Italian opera as a result of

their travels abroad. Handel was charged with the responsibility of gathering together for the Academy a company of the best singers and musicians from the Continent:

> Warrant to Mr Hendel to procure Singers for the English Stage,
> Whereas His Majesty has been graciously Pleas'd to Grant Letters Patents to the Severall Lords and Gent. Mention'd in the Annext List for the Encouragement of Operas for the during the Space of Twenty one Years,....I do by his Majestys Command Authorize and direct You forthwith to repair to Italy Germany or such other Place or Places as you shall think proper, there to make Contracts with such Singer or Singers are you shall judge fit to perform on the English Stage. And for so doing this shall be your Warrant Given under my hand and seal theist 14th day of May 1719 in the Fifth Year of his Mats Reign.
> To Mr Hendel Master
> of Musick.......
>
> Holles Newcastle
> (Cited in Larue, 1995. p.4).

Later that year Handel was appointed "Master of the Orchester with a Sallary" (*The Royal Academy of Music.* n.d. Retrieved January 22, 2004).

The Academy was established on the unrealistic assumption that there would be full or near to full houses on each night of the season. Season ticket subscriptions, at 20 guineas for 50 performances, provided approximately £4,000 pounds per annum. This, together with the annual subsidy from the King, an estimated £5,000 from daily ticket sales and £1,000 in miscellaneous income (£11,000 in total), was not enough to cover the annual expenses of the company. Figure 5 (Milhous, 1984. p.583) details these expenses, highlighting the fact that the high fees paid to singers were a major expense of the company:

Budget forecast for the Royal Academy, 1720–21

Singers		Other expenses	
Faustina	1,500		
Senesino	1,500		
Durastanti	1,100	Dancers	1,000
Robinson	500	Scenery and costumes	2,500
Galeratti	400	Expenses per night	2,500
Salvai	300	New operas	400
A bass	300	Poets	200
Benedetti	400	Staff salaries	300
Gordon	400	House rent	400
Total	£6,400	*Total*	£7,300
		Grand total: £13,700	

Figure 5. Budgeted expenses for Royal Academy, 1720-21

Although these were forecasted expenses (and the singers actually engaged by the company during its first season were Senesino, Berselli, Boschi, Lagarde, Durastanti, Galeratti and Salvai) the Academy was later known to pay up to £1,500 to each of Faustina, Cuzzoni and Senesino at the same time (Milhous and Hume, 1997). The following quotation from a contemporary source perhaps best summarises the poor financial status of the company as a result of the high expenses associated with producing first class Italian opera (James Ralph cited in Milhous, 1984. p.587):

> our Taste is so refin'd, and our Judgement so solid in relation to all Parts of Musick, that such an Entertainment cannot be supported but by the Tip-top Performers of the World; and they will have Prices equal to their Merit....It would be highly unreasonable to expect that the Directors of the *H___y-M___t* Th__re should amuse us at their own private Expence; they run a great Risque to please us, in engaging for vast Sums, whilst it is left to our Choice whether we'll come or no, to ease them of Part of the Burden: Nor can they with the highest Prices be certain of coming off clear one Season, unless they have crowded Houses every Night.

Despite its financial woes, the Academy still managed to stage eight artistically successful seasons of opera, the highlights of which were perhaps the productions of *Giulio Cesare* (1724), *Tamerlano* (1724) and *Rodelinda* (1725).

Original Performance

The Da Capo aria, Singers as Superstars, Castrati, Visual Effects, The Exit Convention, Structure of Opera Seria, Acting Styles, Costume

> Unless we can visualise Handel's operas in their full theatrical setting – and this involves understanding the conditions under which he worked, the conventions he accepted and shared with his audiences, and the manner in which he refined upon the practice of his contemporaries – it is not only impossible to enjoy them to the full, but difficult to grasp what they are about (Dean, 1969. p.3))

What makes up the theatrical setting in which Handel's operas were originally presented? As well as understanding the social, political and cultural climate of Handel's time, an understanding of the conventions of the genre in which he worked is useful. Such understanding benefits analysis of both the musical and production aspects of Handel's operas, thus discovering how the composer exploited and developed the conventions of *opera seria* to full advantage, and how these conventions should be presented in modern day performance.

The *Da Capo* aria

Opera seria was a genre bound by strict conventions that created a framework for composers to work within. The slightest deviation from this framework could create immense dramatic and musical effect. The most important of these conventions was the *da capo* aria, written in ABA form with a contrasting middle section flanked by two sections of the same material. Each aria was designed to display a particular emotion, or *Affekt*. *Secco recitative,* which was accompanied by *basso continuo*, connected the arias and helped to set up the dramatic context, thereby advancing the drama. There was great emphasis given to the solo voice: up to fifty arias could be included in a single opera. This reflected the taste of the audience of the time, who revelled in virtuosic displays by their favourite singers and did not always give their full attention to the performance:

> In all eighteenth-century London theatres members of the audience seem to have felt free to come late; to wander about; to talk with friends in boxes; and to depart whenever they pleased.... The social and economic standing of the opera's pit and box patrons was on average far above those of the other theatres, but there is no reason to suppose that standards of attention and decorum were much higher (Milhous and Hume, 1997. p.61).

Handel exploited the dramatic possibilities of the *da capo* convention by intensifying the contrast between the A and B sections. The emotion in the first A section was contrasted with that in the B section and upon returning to the A section the singer was expected to present the first emotion with renewed energy, enhancing the original melodic line with tasteful decorations. Pier Francesco Tosi, one of the most admired castratos of the late seventeenth century, published *Opinioni de'cantori antichi e moderni* (Observations on the Florid Song) in 1723, a text that provides valuable insight into the style of vocal ornamentation of the baroque period. Of the *da capo* aria, he wrote:

> In the second [part] they expect, that to this purity some artful Graces be added, by which the Judicious may hear, that the Ability of the Singer is greater; and, in repeating the Air, he that does not vary it for the better, is no great master (Tosi cited in Dean, 1970. p.154).

When composing arias for his operas Handel occasionally indicated in the score appropriate points for singers to perform ornamentation, however he did not write it out in full as it was expected to be improvised by the singer. Hence, when performed by a singer of great technical skill and musicality, a Handel aria could be presented in a fresh way during each performance throughout a season. Such a singer was Faustina Bordoni, one of Handel's principal sopranos. In 1726 Johann Christoph Nemeitz referred to Faustina when he wrote that she:

> Always sang the first part of an aria exactly as the composer had written it but at the da capo repeat introduced all kinds of *doublements* and *maniere* without taking the smallest liberties with the rhythm of the accompaniment; so that a composer sometimes finds his arias in the mouths of their singers, far more beautiful and pleasing than in his own original conception. (Nemeitz, 1726, cited in Diack Johnstone, 2001 November. p. 620)

The survival of one of Handel's autographs, the aria 'O caro mio tesor' from his fifth London opera *Amadigi* (1715), provides a significant exception to the rule. It is thought to have been prepared by the composer for an inexperienced singer who did not possess the adequate skill required to improvise her own ornamentation (Dean, 1970). This score[2], helps to "throw light on Handel's artistic intentions and methods of work" (Dean, 1970. p.151) by providing evidence of the type of ornamentation Handel expected in his arias. While Handel's autograph of the entire opera did not survive, early manuscript copies are available. Figure 6 (cited in Dean, 1970. pp.155-6) provides a comparison between the manuscript of Chrysander, and Handel's autograph, the differences illustrating the ornamentation written out by Handel.

[2] Held in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

2

Chrysander

Fitzwilliam

e vieni a consolar quest' alma amante e

vie - ni a con - so - lar quest'al-ma a

-man - te vie-ni a con-so-lar quest'

alma a-man - te e vie - ni a con - so - lar

quest'al-ma a-man - te e vie - ni a

con - so - lar quest' al-ma a-man - te

Figure 6. 'O caro mio tesor' from *Amadigi*, 1715. Handel's autograph compared with Chrysander score.

This example suggests that Handel planned his ornamentation carefully, beginning with little or no ornamentation and increasing both the frequency and complexity of the ornamentation as the aria progresses.

Handel's orchestration was dominated by the use of strings; he employed thirty, divided 12.8.6.4.2, for the mad scene in *Orlando* (1733) and the end of act 2 in *Alcina* (1735). However, he also made full use of other instruments in the baroque orchestra with the tonal colours of the harpsichord, trumpets and bassoons being fully utilised. At all times, the orchestration enhanced and supported the dramatic impact of the aria. *Rinaldo* featured the use of four trumpets, creating a brilliant heroic sound appropriate to the subject matter of the opera. By contrast, the scoring for Cleopatra's aria 'V'adoro, pupille' in *Giulio Cesare* (1724), provided a sympathetic and sensual mood through the use of muted strings, theorbo, harp and concertante viola da gamba (Hogwood, 1984).

Singers as 'superstars'

Aside from the *da capo* aria, two of the most important features of *opera seria* were its singers and spectacular scenic and machine effects, more of which will be discussed later in this chapter. Due to the emphasis placed on the solo voice in *opera seria*, individual singers played a prominent and important role, often rising to 'superstar' status in their own right. The large fees that singers commanded, discussed in chapter 1, give some indication as to the influence they held over *opera seria*. Not only did composers have to carefully craft their operas according to the size and type of cast in their employ, the final aesthetic appeal of their operas was also strongly influenced by the singers themselves and was dependent on the level of their skill and artistry in performing ornamentation. LaRue (1995, p.2) asserts:

> Certainly the most widely accepted critical view of eighteenth-century opera seria from the beginning of that century until the present is that at that time the opera was characterized by the singers' interference with and domination of the composers' and librettists' aesthetic integrity.

The influence of singers extended as far as the number and type of arias a composer wrote for them. Conventions of *opera seria* demanded that the composer set five arias each for the leading castrato (*prima uomo),* the leading female singer (*prima donna*) and the leading tenor, and four arias for the *secondo uomo* and *seconda donna.* However Handel did not compromise his artistic integrity for his singers. In fact the virtuoso singing of castrati Senesino and sopranos Cuzzoni and Faustina played an important role in the success of his academy operas:

> An examination of Handel's Royal Academy operas reveals that the significance of the cast to his opera composition was fundamental, and the nature of his artistic relationships to his singers was neither compromising nor trivial (LaRue, 1995. p.7).

Castrati

Of the singers in an *opera seria* cast, perhaps the most unique were the castrati. The inclusion of these singers, castrated as young boys in order to 'preserve' the purity and clarity of their voices, in addition to female voices meant that the texture of *opera seria* was largely made up of solo high voices, reflecting eighteenth century audience preference. Each castrato had different strengths, just as any other type of singer, and while some were known for their impressive technique in florid passages, others were recognised for the sensitivity and pathetic quality of their voices. Barbier (1996. p.92) describes the sound of the castrati as "an intermediate sound in which the best characteristics of a child's voice and a woman's voice were fused together". The castrati were able to perform with great virtuosity, possessing superior breath management capabilities, which came as a result of years of practice and the development of the ribcage. In addition, the castrato's vocal cords were shorter than those of a 'normal' man but longer and more muscular than those of a woman. These factors all combined to create the brilliant and pure sound so admired by audiences. Of Senesino Quantz (cited in LaRue, 1995. p107) wrote:

> Senesino had a well-carrying, clear, even, and pleasantly low soprano voice (mezzo soprano), a pure intonation and a beautiful *trillo*....His way of singing was masterful, and his execution perfect. He did not overload the slow movements with arbitrary ornamentation, but brought out the essential ornaments with the greatest finesse. He

> sang an allegro with fire, and he knew how to thrust out the running passages with his chest with some speed.

While female sopranos were often used to portray youth and innocence, castrati often played the role of the lover-hero; Handel wrote the role of Ruggiero, a knight in love with his fiancée Bradamante but under the spell of the sorceress Alcina, (in the opera of the same name), for a castrato. However, these roles could be interchanged, with castrati sometimes playing female roles and female singers sometimes playing the part of the male lover-hero. For example, during the spring of 1720 Italian soprano Margherita Durastanti fulfilled the role of the *primo uomo* in the Royal Academy's productions of Porta's *Numitore* and Handel's *Radamisto*, due to the fact that the academy had not yet been able to contract a 'genuine' *primo uomo*, namely Senesino (LaRue, 1995). This loose interchangeability of gender, and the presence of the castrati, meant that there was a great deal of sexual innuendo played out on the *opera seria* stage. Sexual innuendo was in fact a strong attraction for audiences who enjoyed the freedom of imagination that it allowed:

> By dwelling on the margin between the masculine and the feminine, the castrated male body permitted its audience to generate sexual desires otherwise forbidden in normal social discourse. This erotic free space was further heightened when (as was often the case in Rome, where women were forbidden from the stage) the castrati took on female roles in drag (Abel, 1996, p.136).

Harris (2001) goes further to suggest that Handel himself, who lived and worked during a cultural era that acknowledged and condoned homosexuality, was not unaffected by the blurring of lines of sexuality:

> Although Handel's love life remains veiled, the eighteenth-century context demonstrates, I believe, that a component of same-sex love and desire is far from untenable (Harris cited in McGeary, 2002 November. P.610).

Particularly affected by the castrati were the women of the eighteenth century who made very public displays of sexual idolisation and affection; a few left their husbands to follow castrati around Europe. These women, some the wives of notable figures or themselves members of the nobility, often fainted with pleasure during a

performance by a castrato. Many threw tributes onto the stage as a means of expressing their adulation for the castrati who, as well as holding seductive powers when on stage, were "perfect Don Juans in everyday life" (Barbier, 1996. p.136).

Visual Effects

Visual effects were also a major draw card for audiences of Handel's operas, just as they had been in earlier English opera. In *opera seria* scenery was intended to create a sense of wonder and amazement, and scene changes themselves were carried out in full view of the audience[3], adding to the spectacle. At the Haymarket theatre (and later at Rich's theatre at Covent Garden) Handel had the best resources of the time available to him. The Haymarket theatre was small by modern standards, also notably smaller than some contemporary opera houses of the Continent. The interior, including the performing space, stage and audience seating, was just 32.9 metres long by 16.2 metres wide (Stahura, 1998). Despite the intimacy of the theatre it was well equipped with an elaborate system of machinery that enabled Handel to present dramatic scenic effects. The main tools for scenery were pairs of panels or flats that were slid on from the wings using a series of specially designed grooves, indicated by the dark lines parallel to the front of the stage in figure 7 (cited in Hunter, 2000. p.39).

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[3] This was because the curtain was raised and lowered just once during a performance – see page 32 for further detail.

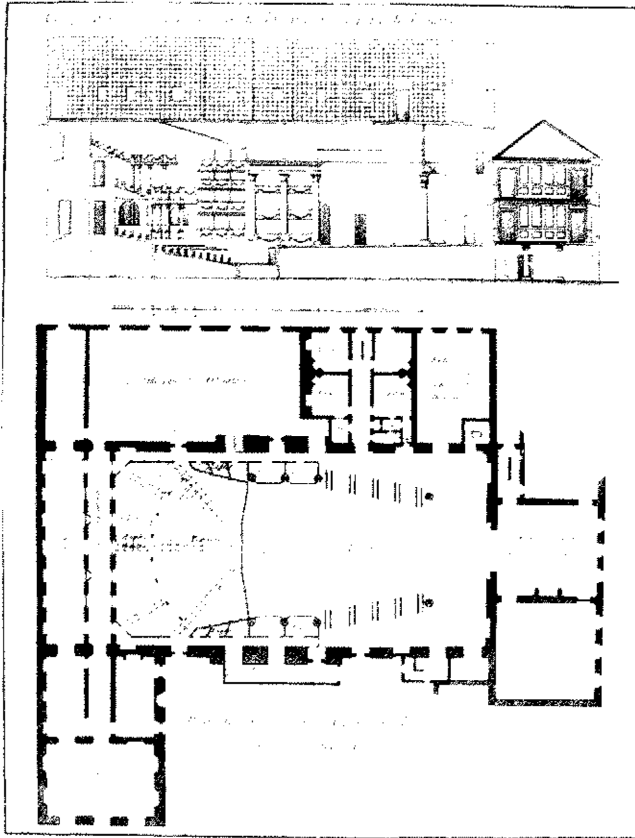

Figure 7. Plan and cross section of the first King's Theatre, Haymarket, showing five pairs of grooves used to slide wing flats.

These grooves could have either been built in above the stage, or cut into the stage floor itself, an option which would have allowed scenery to be moved from beneath the stage through the use of wooden poles connected through the floor to under stage carriages. This carriage system would have allowed wing flats to be moved on and off at the same time and increased the possibilities for flats to be at an angle perpendicular to the stage, allowing the creation of side walls. Stahura (1998. p.100) states:

> Whether the Haymarket Theatre had either this system of simply onstage slats is unknown. The high expectations for scenery in Italian opera argue strongly for the carriage system.

Whatever the method of grooves used, it is known that the space between the left and right grooves grew smaller towards the back of the stage, utilising perspective to create the illusion of depth. Adding to this effect, the wing flats also became shorter towards the back of the stage. Drops could also be lowered or raised to either decrease or increase the illusion of depth, and also allow for machinery to be set up out of view of the audience. Handel made full use of the depth of the stage during crowd scenes and scenes where particularly spectacular effects were required. For example, in

Rinaldo a boat was required to move from the stage, indicated by the following stage directions (cited in Stahura, 1998. p.105):

> [Middle of scene iii.] [Rinaldo] breaks violently from [Goffredo and Eustazio's] hold, and enters the Boat; which immediately steers out into the open Sea, and Sails out of Sight; Then the mermaids leave singing and disappear. Godfrey and Eustatio, seem confounded at the Accident.

The illusion of the ocean was created by a set of rotating battens that were covered in cloth padding. The mermaids are seen 'dancing' in the ocean, an effect created through the use of traps. The boat, really a cart moved by stage crew who remained out of sight from the audience, moved through the 'ocean' and off the stage through the wings. During such scenes, the depth of the stage exceeded that of the auditorium where the audience sat.

The use of machinery was a major tool in providing the spectacular scenic effects so popular with the audience of the time. As there was virtually no wing space, machinery was brought onstage from behind a backcloth, which hid the area designated for its operation. Some larger pieces, such as the mountain used in *Rinaldo*, were taken onto stage in pieces and assembled there. The detail of the stage instructions (cited in Stahura, 1998. p.106) for the mountain scene in *Rinaldo* help to illustrate the importance machinery played in creating such spectacular effects:

> Act III. Scene i. A dreadful Prospect of a Mountain, horridly step, and rising from the Front of the Stage, to the utmost Height of the most backward Part of the Theatre; Rocks, and Caves, and Waterfalls, are seen upon the Ascent, and on the Top appear the blazing Battlements of the Enchanted Palace, Guarded by a great Number of Spirits, of various Forms and Aspects; In the midst of the Wall Emeralds, and all sorts of precious Stones. At the Foot of the Mountain is discover'd the Magicians Cave.
>
> [Later in the scene] Godfrey and Eustatio, with drawn Swords, and follow'd by their Soldiers, ascend the Mountain, regardless of the Magician who calls after them.
>
> [Later still] Godfrey, Eustatio and the Soldiers, having climb'd half way up the mountain, are stopp'd by a Row of ugly Spirits, who start up before 'em; The Soldiers, frighted, endeavour to run back, but are cut off in their Way by another Troop, who start up below 'em; In the midst of the Confusion, the Mountain opens

> and swallows 'em up, with Thunder, Lightning, and amazing Noises. Godfrey, Eustatio, and the Soldiers who escape, return in great Confusion to the Magician's cave.
>
> [Later still] they reascend the Mountain, while the Magician stands at his Cave Door, and sings, to encourage 'em. The Spirits, as before, present themselves in opposition, but upon the Touch of the [magic] wands, vanish upward and downward, with terrible Noises and Confusion. They gain the Summit of the Hill and entering the Enchanted Arches, strike the Gate with their Wands; when immediately the Palace, the Spirits, and the whole Mountain vanish away, and Godfrey and Eustatio are discover'd hanging on the sides of a vast Rock in the middle of the Sea; with much Difficulty they reach the Top, and descend on the other Side.

A further effect was the use of water. Many operas staged at the Haymarket Theatre featured water fountains or rivers and these scenic effects, (using real water), attracted audience members because of the cooling quality they provided during hotter months. An advertisement for a performance of the opera *Clotilda* on 16 May 1711 read: "and by reason of the Hot Weather, the Waterfall will play the best part of the Opera" (Stahura, 1998, p.102). This must have been successful for a subsequent advertisement for Handel's *Rinaldo* later that month stated: "The Water Scene as 16 May" (Stahura, 1998, p.102).

Clever lighting added to the impact of spectacular scenery and this was provided by a series of candles and oil lamps. The forestage, an area measuring 4 metres deep by 12.2 metres wide in front of the proscenium arch, where principal characters did most of their performing, was lit by suspended chandeliers and footlights. These footlights were probably oil lamps, which could be removed through the use of a recessible tray, thus dimming the forestage lighting. Chandeliers were also suspended above the stage area behind the proscenium arch and these were able to be raised or lowered, depending on the amount of light required for any given scene. Candles were mounted on brackets on the back of the wing flats, and these were able to be rotated to either increase or decrease the amount of light spilling onto the stage. The light from these candles was also manipulated through the use of shields or blinds, which helped darken the stage. Special lighting effects, producing different moods, were achieved through the use of coloured transparencies, and sulphur was sometimes thrown onto the candles to produce sudden increases in light. This was the traditional means of

portraying thunder and lightning. In addition, the sound of thunder was provided by rolling balls or stones down a wooden ramp, sometimes called a 'thunder run'.

As for the audience, Stahura (1998) suggests that lighting in the form of portable illumination was also available to allow them to study the opera's libretto during the performance.[4]

The Exit Convention

The 'exit convention' of *opera seria* was well exploited by Handel. It was traditional for each character, upon finishing singing his or her aria, to exit from the stage. This resulted partly from deference accorded singers of the time, who enjoyed the opportunity to stand and sing their aria to the audience, displaying whatever virtuosity they could, and then leave the stage after their applause. Potentially, this could create great dramatic problems, resulting in the action progressing very slowly. *Opera seria* has been described as "a world of threats and blackmail, in which emotions are unconfined but action is limited" (Dean, 1969. p.12). Handel negotiated a way around this convention in a number of ways. One such method was to have a character fall asleep on stage in full view of the audience, as occurs in the first act of *Giustino* (1737) when upon completing his aria the hero Giustino lays down to rest and falls into slumber.

Structure of *Opera Seria*

In *opera seria* the curtain rose and fell only once during a performance; after the overture and at the end of the last act. The overture, by tradition having no musical relationship with the rest of the opera, was performed with the curtain down. Handel however, modified this convention in some of his operas to raise the curtain during the overture, thereby connecting this material with the action of the opera (Dean,

[4] A passage in the novel *Amelia* (1751) by Henry Fielding, in which the heroine attends a performance of a Handel oratorio, hints at this possibility when the heroine meets a man who "procured her a book [libretto] and wax-candle" (Fielding (1751) cited in Stahura, 1998. p.99).

1997). The lack of intermediate curtain closures between scenes or acts had a great effect not only on the musical structure of the opera, but also on how it was presented to the audience. Unlike the operas of Mozart, which often end an act with an ensemble after which the curtain falls, this was only possible for Handel in the last act. Instead, he often began his operas with a crowd scene, so that the curtain rose to reveal a scene that launched straight into the action and plot of the opera. Finally, after a series of recitative and arias, after which each character would follow the exit convention and leave the stage, the act would usually finish with an aria or occasionally a duet. If handled poorly, this could lead to an anticlimactic conclusion to an act. Handel's strategy was to compose concluding arias that, while usually focussing on a pivotal issue in the plot, were extremely strong in emotion and intensity. These arias often dealt with tragic material, were slow and simply written, and often followed a succession of lively arias. This provided a great musical and emotional contrast and as such sufficient dramatic impact to end the act strongly. In keeping with another convention of *opera seria* Handel concluded his operas with an ensemble, (the final coro), after which the curtain would fall. Traditionally, the function of this coro was to end the opera on a happy note; any characters who had been in conflict would suddenly reconcile their differences in this final statement.

Acting Styles

The acting style employed in eighteenth century opera houses was based on rhetoric, a style which emphasised expression that was clear, disciplined, powerful and evocative. Actors and singers alike mastered the elaborate system of gestures used by orators to enforce their message. These gestures symbolically portrayed emotions and enforced the importance of certain words in a phrase. Acting styles were therefore highly stylised. Singers remained stationary during an aria, except perhaps for a change of position during the middle sections. Barnett (cited in Parker, 1980. p.67) suggests that they also did not interact with other characters during an aria, but instead addressed their singing toward the audience and reserved interaction for the recitatives:

> The rule here (and this is a fundamental rule for opera) is that you act in the recitatives and then make a clear break, go down towards the apron and sing the aria more or less as a concert piece, thus stepping out of the acting area.

Dean (1997. p.251) disputes this view however, stating:

> There is no reason to suppose that the singers took no notice of the other characters on stage: they are often directed to address two of them in alternate phrases, or one in the A section and another in the B section. In solo scenes they advanced to the apron and addressed the audience directly.

Whether or not singers interacted with other characters during an aria, it appears that in solo scenes they certainly addressed their singing towards the audience. One of the most important requirements for a singer on stage was that he or she remained decorative, moving with absolute grace and elegance. Every part of the singers' body from the eyes, head and shoulders, to the arms, fingers, torso, legs and feet, contributed to the portrayal of this grace. Barnett (cited in Parker, 1980 January. p.66). states that:

> the singer actor must always look elegant even when expressing a violent passion. Thus, one never stands with the weight on both feet and one always seeks and elegant contrast between the two arms, between he hands and feet, head and shoulders, and so on. Always one must be artistically satisfying to look at!

A treatise on rhetorical delivery called *Chironomia*, by the Reverend Gilbert Austin, was published in 1806. This source further confirms that singers (indeed all those who performed on stage) should hold grace as an utmost ideal:

> The body must be supported, if grace be consulted, on either limb, like the Apollo, the Antinous, or other beautiful and well executed statues" (Austin, 1806/1966. p. 296).

Austin provided a complete summary of gesture, detailing the movements of relevant parts of the body in both descriptive language and illustrations. For a selection of these illustrations see Appendix 1. Of all parts of the body employed in gesture, he

stated that the eyes held greatest importance in portraying dramatic ideas and emotions:

> In the external demeanour nothing will be found so effectually to attract attention, and to detain it, as the direction of the eyes" (Austin, 1806/1966. p. 101).

Before the word, the eyes were instrumental in discovering the passion. The common pattern for displaying a new passion was that the eyes and or face moved first, then the hand in gesture, then the voice (Barnett, 1980). When making a gesture, the way in which the body moved was just as important as its position. Austin, (1806/1966. p.349) continues:

> As the head gives the chief grace to the person, so does it principally contribute to the expression of grace in delivery. It must be held in an erect and natural position for when hung down it expresses humility, when turned upwards arrogance, when inclined to one side it expresses languor; and when stiff and rigid it indicates a degree of barbarity in the mind. Its movements should be suited to the character of the delivery, they should accord with the gesture, and fall in with the action of the hands, and the motions of the body....".

Austin outlined several significant gestures (detailed in Appendix 2) that were used in the theatre. As well as significant gestures, there were also a range of less prominent gestures which in their own right played a vital role in the successful and tasteful portrayal of a character. Of these less prominent gestures, Austin wrote:

> A slight movement of the head, a look of the eye, a turn of hand, a judicious pause or interruption of gesture, or a change of position in the feet often illuminates the meaning of a passage, and sends it full of light and warmth into the understanding. And the perfection of gesture in a tragedian will be found to consist more in the skilful management of the less shewy action, than in the exhibition of the finest attitudes (Austin, 1806/1966. p. 497).

The importance of gesture in *opera seria* was not lost on the singers employed by the Royal Academy, who made use of the conventions of the genre to varying effect. Soprano Cuzzoni was perhaps not as talented an actress as she was a singer:

> Cuzzoni had a very agreeable and clear soprano voice, a pure intonation and beautiful *trillo*.....with its tenderness she won the hearts of her listeners....Her acting was somewhat cold, and her figure was not too favorable for the theatre (Quantz cited in LaRue, 1995. p. 138).

Costume

The grace and elegance of the acting style employed by the singers of *opera seria* was matched by the costumes they wore. Female characters wore beautiful gowns that were decorated with feathers and gems. To further characterise the costume, embellishments such as flowers, leaves, shells and appliquéd designs were added. Despite the variation of character that the use of these materials afforded, at all times the silhouette of the dress reflected the up to date fashion of the period, worn by noble women at court. Male characters wore soft flowing shirts under vests or armour, the design for which was influenced by the muscles of the torso. Over this, heroic characters wore a cape and helmet decorated with plumes of feathers, helping to portray the nobility of the character. The skirt of the male costume reached mid-thigh, the hem of which was supported by either tulle or a whalebone hoop. Just as female costumes were decorated with jewels, so were the costumes for male characters. Not only did this add to the beauty and overall effect of elegance of the singers, through their sparkle they performed a role in "illumination' whose purpose was to define the performer" (Inigo Jones cited in Opera Atelier, 1998. ¶ 13). For the same purpose singers sometimes wore white gloves and white makeup, which allowed the audience to see their expression more clearly. Figure 8 (on page 38, cited in Lindgren, 1987. p.101) provides an example of the types of costume worn by singers in Handel's operas. It shows soprano Cuzzoni in an elegant gown decorated with flowers and elaborate designs, flanked by the two castrati Berenstadt and Senesino, dressed in suitably noble attire.

Fig.8. Engraving by John Vanderbank, 1723, of a performance of Handel's *Flavio*, featuring singers Berenstadt, Cuzzoni and Senesino.

Transition

Decline of Italian Opera Seria in London

> We cannot be surprised that Handel eventually devoted his energies to English oratorio: the wonder is that he clung so pertinaciously to Italian opera for more than a decade after the financial collapse of the Royal Academy. Oratorios were popular, cost-effective, and highly suitable to the personnel and performance calendars of the English theatres: a concatenation of fortunate circumstances from which Handel was to profit handsomely the rest of his life (Milhous and Hume, 1997, p.63).

The Royal Academy succeeded in its aim to introduce and firmly establish Italian Opera in London, staging eight artistically successful seasons. However, due to a lack of attention to long-term finances, by 1728 it had used approximately £20,000 in capital and was forced to close its doors for the last time (Milhous and Hume, 1997).

Handel and J.J.Heidegger continued to produce opera between 1729 and 1734, assisted by an agreement with the Academy's directors allowing them to use its scenery and costumes. However, this venture met with strong competition from the new and extremely popular ballad operas now being produced at Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields. The presence of two unlicenced theatres, the 'Little Haymarket' and Goodmans' Fields, provided further competition. During the 1733-4 season a new company, devoted solely to producing Italian opera, was formed. This was the Opera of the Nobility which moved into the King's Theatre at the same time as Handel accepted an invitation from John Rich to present opera and oratorio at Covent Garden. In a market that had already proved difficult even when the Academy had held a monopoly over Italian opera, it was inevitable that direct competition between the two companies was not sustainable. For a time, the Opera of the Nobility, which boasted the engagement of star castrato Farinelli, seemed to have the advantage over Handel:

> Signor Farinelli, who came to England with the highest expectations, has the satisfaction of seeing them fulfilled by generosity and favour as extraordinary as his own talents. The others were loved: this man is idolized, adored; it is a consuming passion. Indeed, it is impossible to sing better. Mr. Handel has not omitted to produce a new Oratorio, which is given on Wednesdays and Fridays, with chorus and orchestral accompaniments of great beauty. Everyone agrees that he is the Orpheus of his age and

> that this new work is a masterpiece. He plays the organ himself in it, with consummate skill. He is admired, but from a distance, for he is often alone; a spell draws the crowd to Farinelli's (*Le Pour et Contre,* May 1735, cited in Hogwood, 1984. p.127).

In an attempt to compete with the Opera of the Nobility and draw greater audience numbers, organ concertos were added to Handel's oratorio concerts, but in vain:

> so strong is the Disgust [probably in the sense of 'change of taste' rather than 'revulsion'] taken against him, that even this has been far from bringing him crowded Audiences....*Handel* whose excellent Compositions have often pleased our Ears and touched our Hearts, has this Winter sometimes performed to an almost empty Pitt...His Loss is computed for these two Seasons at a great Sum (*Old Whig* cited in Hogwood, 1984. p.127).

Eventually, competition between the two companies became too intense and by 1737 the Opera of the Nobility was forced to close. By this time Handel, who had produced his last great operatic work, *Alcina*, at Covent Garden in 1735, had worked himself into the ground in an attempt to prove that despite a lack of public enthusiasm for Italian opera, it could still be written (Hogwood, 1984). In 1737 he visited the vapour baths of Aix la Chapelle, staying for six weeks in order to regroup and regain his energy.

First and foremost a composer for the theatre, Handel did not turn his back on producing opera. He staged his last opera, *Deidamia,* during the 1741 season; however it was not a success and was discontinued after just three performances. At this time Handel received an invitation from Lord Lieutenant William Cavendish to present a season of oratorio concerts in Dublin, Ireland. This was to be a turning point in Handel's career. The composer had suffered much public criticism of his artistic decisions and become estranged from the London public, which had once wholly supported him. He was accused of being too proud, flying "in the face of a gentleman's preconceived notions of how a man of his station ought to act. In 1740 he went further and contradicted their notions about how music ought to sound" (Taylor, 1987. p.169). It seems that Handel, in an effort to develop the strict conventions of *opera seria*, had caused offence amongst the opinionated opera-going public of

London, who had strong ideas about how music for that genre should sound. A letter, published in the *Daily Post* on 4 April 1741, urged:

> I wish I could...persuade the gentlemen who have taken Offence at any Party of this great Man's Conduct (for a great Man he must be in the Musical World, whatever his Misfortunes may now too late say to the contrary :) I wish I could persuade them, I say, to take him back into Favour and relieve him from the cruel Persecution of those little Vermin, who, taking Advantage of their Displeasure, pull down even his Bills as fast as he has them pasted up, and use a thousand other little Arts to injure and distress him (Cited in Hogwood, 1984. pp.165-6).

The public criticism that Handel had endured was perhaps a contributing factor in his decision to accept the invitation of Lord Cavendish and travel to Dublin at the end of 1741. He remained in Dublin for 10 months, the longest period of time he had been away from London since first settling there, and enjoyed a warm welcome and artistic success, presenting a series of 'musical entertainments' including performances of his new oratorio, the *Messiah*. A letter, written during this time by Handel to Charles Jennens (librettist of the *Messiah*), expressed the success he was enjoying and his reluctance to return to the critical London operatic scene:

> The report that the Direction of the Opera next winter is committed to my Care is groundless. The gentlemen who have undertaken to middle with Harmony can not agree, and are in quite a Confusion. Whether I shall do something in the Oratorio way....I can not determine as yet. Certain it is that this time 12 month I shall continue my Oratorio's in Ireland (Handel cited in Taylor, 1987. p.171).

Upon his return to London, Handel revised his oratorio *Samson* for performance at Covent Garden, and in doing so achieved a good measure of success, illustrated by the following passage:

> Our Friend Mr. Handell is very well, and Things have taken a quite different Turn here from what they did some Time past. The Publick will be no longer imposed on by Italian Singers and some wrong Headed Undertakers of bad Opera's and find out the Merit of Mr. Handell's Composition and English Performances. That Gentleman is more esteemed now than ever. The new Oratorio [Samson]...has been performed four Times to more crouded Audiences than ever were seen, more People being

turned away for Want of Room each Night than hath been at the Italian Opera (Faulkner's Dublin Journal, 1743, cited in Taylor, 1987, p.171).

In 1743 Handel was offered a thousand guineas by Lord Middlesex to write two new operas for the London stage. He declined the offer, receiving widespread criticism from members of the aristocracy as a result: "All the opera people are enraged at Handel" (Mary Delany, 1744, cited in Taylor, 1987, p.172). Handel no longer relied upon the patronage of the nobility, but instead began the transition to an independent provider of musical entertainment for a wider audience base.

Handel continued to receive criticism from some members of the nobility, however there was dissention within this group as some supported Handel while others did not. This division culminated in a lawsuit between the Directors of the opera and its subscribers (concerning subscription arrears) and the closure of the opera in 1744-5. The extent of unrest amongst opera supporters, and the closure of the last remaining provider of that genre, allowed Handel to focus on composition and production of oratorio and ensured that he was finally able to escape the strong hold that Italian opera had held over him "when he was no longer interested in composing it" (Taylor, 1987, p.169).

Handel's oratorios were met with some opposition due to their subject matter (which presented a moderate theological view and not the freethinking ideas common amongst some at the time). Despite this, they provided the catalyst for the coming together of Anglicans and Dissenters and, after Handel's death in 1759, contributed towards redefining the "identities of the nation, the monarchy and the British people" (Weber, 1997, p.54).

Revival

Rediscovery of Handel's Operatic Works

> It should be axiomatic that if we propose to revive a work in an unfamiliar idiom whose traditions of performance have been completely lost, we must study the aims of its creator and his methods of realizing them, even if we have to employ substitutes of equivalents (Dean, 1983, p.107).

The first revival of a Handel opera (and indeed of those that followed), was probably not given with a full understanding of the 'aims of its creator and his methods of realizing them'. These aims, along with many of the traditions of *opera seria*, had fallen into obscurity in the years following Handel's death in 1759.

Despite the fact that much of his instrumental and oratorio music continued to be performed at commemorations held in England from 1784, Handel's operas ceased to form part of the traditional operatic repertoire. There were a number of reasons for this sudden demise. Changing contemporary tastes meant that Handel's operas were viewed as museum pieces which belonged to a restrictive and out-of-date genre, *opera seria*. Audiences of the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were to prefer the operas of Mozart, Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerke*, and the vernacular operas of Verdi (Dean, 1983). Handel's operas fell out of publication; apart from five that were published between 1787-97 by Arnold, none was published in its complete form for more than a century after Handel's death.

An interesting illustration of the status of Handel's operas in the beginning of the twentieth century is provided by the fact that none was included in Gustav Kobbè's 'Complete Opera Book', published in London in 1919. It was not until well into the twentieth century that Handel's operas began to once again be performed. An important step towards this revival was the publication of Handel's 39 surviving operas by Friedrich Chrysander in the years between 1878 and 1885. However, this alone was not enough to instigate a full-blown revival. Interestingly, the main thrust came not from England, but from Germany, Handel's country of origin.

In 1920, art history teacher Oskar Hagen staged a production of *Rodelinda* at the Stadttheater, Göttingen, the first performance of a Handel opera since 1754. This production sparked a series of Handel festivals in Germany which saw eleven different operas being revived by 1930. In the space of five years 222 performances of *Giulio Cesare* were given in 34 different cities. Hogwood (1984, p.270) suggests that the renewed interest in Handel's operas was partly a reaction against the Wagnerian dramas that, strongly based on naturalism, dominated during the early twentieth century:

> It was difficult to stage Wagner outside the accepted conventions of naturalism; but whereas audiences would resist abstraction in Wagner they were happy to accept it in Handel.

Handel's operas were seen by Hagen and other German producers as lending themselves to abstract and stylised presentation, due to the structured nature of the arias. They believed that this structure discouraged naturalistic expression of emotion, promoting instead expression that was formal and objective. Sets and lighting during this period were designed to reflect ideals of strength and form and many featured images of ancient Greek mausoleums and stadiums (Hogwood, 1984).

Although these productions succeeded in renewing interest in Handel opera, they were not entirely an accurate reflection of Handel's intentions. Hagen made numerous cuts and changes, all of which altered the operas considerably. Nearly all the *da capo* sections of the arias were removed, and some arias were left out altogether. Omitting such big sections disrupted the overall plan of the operas. The orchestration was re-scored to better suit the Romantic orchestra and there was no use of ornamentation. Parts originally written for castrati in the soprano or alto clefs were automatically written down an octave and sung by a male. This severely disrupted the texture of the opera and ignored the fact that the high voice had been the most revered in baroque *opera seria*. It is possible that this 'hybrid' treatment of Handel's operas was in part responsible for their not being accepted quickly by twentieth century audiences: "not because their texture has puzzled modern audiences, but because they have scarcely even been allowed to hear it" (Dean, 1969, p.201).

Performances continued to be given in Germany during the 1930s. In the years leading up to, and during, World War II, advancement of the revival of Handel's operas was slowed due to censorship by the Nazi regime of all works by German classical composers.[5]

At the conclusion of the war the enthusiasm for presenting Handel's operatic works continued in Germany and in 1952 Halle, Handel's birthplace, initiated a series of annual festivals. Until this time, Germany had stood alone in the revival of Handel's operatic works. Other countries, including England (the country for which his operas were originally written) had not yet attempted a revival. This was rectified in 1955 by English scholar Edward J. Dent who translated and staged Handel's *Deidamia* at St. Pancras Town Hall, igniting the spark for an English revival. The outcome of this performance was the formation of the Handel Opera Society, an association that has continued to produce at least one of Handel's dramatic works each year.

The bi-centenary of Handel's death in 1959 provided further impetus to the revival of Handel's operatic works. This important anniversary prompted a significant Handel festival in London, which saw the production by the Handel Opera Society of *Rodelinda* and *Semele*. Another two annual festivals were initiated during this year, one at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, by Anthony Lewis, the other at the Unicorn Theatre in Abingdon, by Alan and Frances Kitching. The latter enterprise provided an invaluable contribution, staging the British premiere of *Aggrippina*, and four other operas (*Floridante, Giustino, Sosarme* and *Lotario*) that had not been revived anywhere since Handel himself last staged them. Soon, countries such as Italy and America followed the example of Germany and England and began producing Handel operas.

Central to the renewed enthusiasm for and production of Handel's operas was what became known as *Zeitgeist*. This approach encompassed the bourgeoning desire during the mid-twentieth century amongst purveyors of all types of art forms, to expose the past. In particular, musicians were interested in rediscovering the music written by composers before Beethoven. Inevitably out of this interest grew the beginnings of the 'authentic

[5] Of interest is an article published in *The Times* on the 16 February 1942 – see Appendix 3.

movement'. Although not confined to *opera seria*, the concept of authenticity (now surrounded by controversy), is particularly important to the genre.

Robert Donington first published *The Interpretation of Early Music* in 1963, with subsequent editions released in 1965 and 1974. He states:

> The first assumption, that we can best serve early music by matching our modern interpretation as closely as possible to what we know of the original interpretation, may be called the doctrine of historical authenticity (1974, p.37).

This 'doctrine of historical authenticity' was certainly not always followed, as witnessed in the operas staged by Hagen, and others in England. The majority of productions mounted in Germany by fully professional companies were dominated by consideration of dramatic impact; as a result, the structure and integrity of the music suffered. In contrast to this, productions in England staged by smaller amateur groups and university music departments were characterised by less spectacular production effects, (due to the small budget on which they operated), but greater attention to musical detail. Dean (1983, p.105) suggests that the operatic productions of this time were inadequately informed and ill-equipped to present Handel's operas in an 'authentic' manner:

> It becomes apparent that we were inadequately equipped, erratic in our aims, and weak in practical scholarship; impractical scholarship in matters of performance is apt to be a hindrance rather than a help. There was bound to be a great deal of the blind leading the blind; all too many experiments have illustrated the words so genially set by Handel: 'All we like sheep have gone astray'.

Gradually, the concept of 'authenticity', well intentioned but arguably impractical and unachievable, began to be overtaken by that of 'historically informed performance'. This latter term suggests a performance that incorporates ideas gleaned from the practices of the past, but does not claim to be authentic. This approach is also limited and 'naïve' (Walls, 2003). Walls suggests that performances, indeed performers, should reflect the knowledge now available through performance-based research (Walls, 2003, pp.166-7):

> Performance-practice research is concerned with establishing (and, in performance, implementing) truths about a real past in the confidence that this will increase our

> understanding and appreciation of great music....historical sources enrich our understanding of the music and stimulate the imagination. For performers to exploit fully this wonderful resource, it is crucial to maintain an awareness of the difference between historical research and the application of historical research.

Performances given during first few decades of the revival of Handel opera were characterised by the distortion of the composer's musical and dramatic structure, the result of a lack of understanding of the conventions of *opera seria.* However, by the middle of the twentieth century ideas of authenticity in the performance of Handel opera had begun to percolate, and knowledge regarding original performance practice was becoming available. The next chapter investigates the presentation of Handel's operas in the time since the revival, in order to discover whether this trend towards 'historically informed' performances persisted and, if not, what is the cause and effect of modernisation.

Presentation Since the Revival

'Historically Informed' versus 'Modernisation', The Question of Castrati, Scenery and Costume, Acting Styles, Orchestration and Ornamentation, Case Study – Staatsoper's Alcina

By the middle of the twentieth century the revival of Handel opera was well underway and subsequent contemporary productions have been presented in a wide range of styles[6]. For the purpose of analysis, it is useful to categorise these productions into those that were 'historically informed', and those that were 'modernised'. The contrast between these two approaches is clearly illustrated by two separate productions of *Orlando* given at the same time in America.

'Historically informed' versus 'Modernisation'

The historically informed approach to staging a Handel opera is evidenced in figure 9 (Hogwood. 1984. p.152). a scene from a production of *Orlando* in St. Louis by British conductor Nicholas McGegan. This production attempted to convey the spirit of *opera seria* through recreation of the stage and orchestral conditions of the time. Singers wore historical costume adorned with elaborate decorations. and similarly decorative headgear which made use of plumes of feathers. The set was made up of wing flats, a backcloth and drops, emulating the scenery used during Handel's lifetime. The lighting experienced by audiences during Handel's lifetime was recreated through the use of chandeliers and footlights. Further, just as the orchestra in Handel's time had been seated at the same level as the audience (a higher position than that used in many modern opera houses, whose pits tuck the orchestra away, virtually out of sight), the orchestra for this production was seated in full view of the audience, at the same level as the stalls.

[6] Throughout this chapter the term 'contemporary' will be used in reference to productions of Handel opera during the last half of the twentieth century, and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Figure 9. Nicholas McGegan's production of *Orlando* at St. Louis.

In contrast, Peter Sellars' production of *Orlando* (figure 10, cited in Hogwood, 1984. p.264) was modernised. Set in the space age, with a synopsis that began: "At Mission Control, Kennedy Space Center, Zoroaster, Project Supervisor, is studying distant galaxies" (Porter, 1999), the production made sparse use of scenery, and modern style costumes and lighting.

Figure 10. Peter Sellars' production of *Orlando*

This comparison highlights the different approaches taken when producing Handel opera. However, in order to draw accurate conclusions about the style and nature of contemporary productions, it is necessary to investigate further, focussing particularly on the important characteristics and conventions of *opera seria*.

The Question of Castrati

The absence of castrati from modern day society, and hence from the opera houses, forms one of the most important and unavoidable differences between contemporary productions of Handel opera, and those produced during his lifetime. The question as to what type of singer should be used to perform roles originally written for castrati has been approached in a variety of ways.

As chapter 4 outlined, the productions by Hagen during the 1920's transposed the castrati parts down an octave. This transposition of Castrati parts was still being practiced in Germany during the 1980's. Dean (1983, p.106) suggested that this was because "soprano and alto voices are regarded as incompatible with the German conception of the *Held* or hero". At the same time in England however, mezzo-sopranos were being used to perform castrati roles. For example, a 1979 production of *Giulio Cesare* at the English National Opera featured mezzo-soprano Dame Janet Baker in the title role of Caesar. This allowed Handel's music to be sung in the tessitura and key that he had originally conceived. It was also a very Handelian practice because, as chapter two outlined, Handel himself sometimes utilised female singers to fulfil a role originally written for castrato.

Since the tradition of mezzo-sopranos playing the role of men (called 'trouser roles') in Handel's operas was established, another voice type has become more and more apparent; the countertenor. Like mezzo-sopranos, countertenors (singing in falsetto voice which allows arias to be sung in their original keys) have begun to fill the role of the hero in Handel's operas. The title role in a production of *Giulio Cesare* at the Sydney opera house in 2000 was played by a countertenor, and in a production of the same opera at the San Francisco Opera in 2002, all three roles originally written for castrati were played by countertenors to "splendid effect" (Lazere, 2002).

Scenery and Costumes

The Cambridge Handel Opera Group, Cambridge University, has produced ten Handel operas since 1985, the most recent being *Serse* in 2003. The staging for each of these operas was unique and dependent on the nature and content of the opera itself, however in all productions staging was designed to reflect the qualities of visual beauty and elegance conveyed in original productions of Handel opera (Cambridge Handel Opera Group, 2003).

Another production that sought to capture the spirit of Handel opera through the use of scenery and costumes was that of *Giustino*, by the Massey University Conservatorium of Music in 2002. Although restricted by budget and the small space in which the opera was staged, designer Nicole Cosgrove succeeded in creating an elegant and visually stimulating setting. Singers wore costumes inspired by original performances of *opera seria*: male characters wore flowing shirts underneath vests of armour, the skirt of each costume reached mid thigh, and the nobility of the Emperor was indicated through the use of a golden helmet. Similarly, female characters wore gowns decorated with elaborate patterns, and the Empress wore plumes of feathers in her hair to indicate her status. The rose coloured pinks and creams of the costumes complemented the shades of the set. One reviewer wrote of the set and costume design: "Cosgrove used the space's elegant proportions with beautiful hangings, drapery and plinths, allied with beautiful period costumes, to illustrate Roman settings" (Wiltshere, 2002). The costuming in the San Francisco Opera Company's 2000 production of *Semele* (see figure 11, cited in Lazere, 2000) was also historically inspired. Costumes were in eighteenth century style with the elaborate use of an "abundance of crinolines, brocades, nettings, trains, beading, tassels and jewels" (Lazere, 2000).

Figure 11. A scene from *Semele*, produced by San Francisco Opera in 2000

Not all productions, however, have aspired to recreate precisely what was done in Handel's time, choosing instead to introduce some modern elements. For example, the set of the 2002 production of *Giulio Cesare* at San Francisco Opera was "in the spirit of an artificial, fantasy entertainment of the 18th century, rather than an attempt at realistic or historical accuracy of any sort" (Lazere, 2002). This included the use of flats painted to look like a stone monumental palace, and a multitude of properties such as plumed fans, candelabra, lances, sphinxes and cushions. Similarly, the New York City Opera's production of *Rinaldo* in 2000 mixed modern elements with the baroque spirit of 'spectacular' (Anson, 2000). This production made use of panels, walls and curtains that moved in and out, allowing set changes to occur with speed and fluidity between scenes and echoing the performance practice of Handel's day. Scene changes were also executed smoothly in San Diego Opera's 2002 production of *Ariodante*, with one reviewer referring to the impressive 'invisible' set movements (Kragen, 2002); and in the Lyric Opera of Chicago's February 2003 production of *Partenope* "everyone moved easily in a landscape that magically shifted from the queen's austere reception hall to a dreamy world where gigantic, billowing blue silk curtains expressed their torment and a golden globe shimmered with their hopes" (Delacoma, 2003).

The production of *Giulio Cesare* at the Sydney Opera house in 2000 made effective use of water, echoing the traditional use of fountains and waterfalls in *opera seria* while adding a modern twist. A large pool of water formed the central focus for a solo scene involving Cleopatra. During the scene, which was dimly lit, Cleopatra poured oils and

scattered rose petals into the water, creating a sensual and calming atmosphere. She then proceeded to de-robe and lower herself into the bath (maintaining her modesty in the process), and sing the majority of her aria in the water. This provided a spectacular scenic effect without distracting from the dramatic impact of Cleopatra's aria.

Some productions have extended the modernisation of Handel's operas further still, completely moving them away from the setting that was originally conceived by Handel and introducing entirely modern, foreign elements. Sellars, who staged the production of *Orlando* referred to earlier in this chapter, directed a production of *Theodora* at Glyndebourne that ended with an onstage lethal injection in front of a chorus dressed in baseball caps; and two productions of *Giulio Cesare*, one in Munich with stage action dominated by a giant dinosaur and the other set in the Middle East.

Acting styles

Like the original performers of Handel's operas, singers in productions staged by the Cambridge Handel Opera Group were encouraged to make use of "physical movements and gestures appropriate to the style of the music, thereby creating a sense of unity between Handel's music and the visual presentation" (Cambridge Handel Opera Group, 2003). The convention of using gesture in *opera seria* has influenced a number of other contemporary productions of Handel opera. Singers participating in San Diego opera's production of *Ariodante*, made use of gesture in order to reinforce the emotion of each aria: "director John Copley has restrained the stage action to the most minimal of gestures (lots of clenched fists and sweeping capes)….." (Kragen, 2002); and in the production of *Partenope* by Lyric Opera of Chicago "the action was as simple as a strongly slammed door and a glare hurled across the huge stage" (Delacoma, 2003). The production of *Giustino* by the Massey University Conservatorium of Music also made strong use of gestures with singers being encouraged to choose one or two strong gestures to use throughout each aria, thus enhancing the portrayal of each particular *affekt*. The production's director was praised for providing "elegant, restrained and stylistically strong direction [that] was well realised by the stance and gesture of the young cast to recreate the style of *opera seria*" (Wiltshere, 2002). Not all contemporary productions

utilise baroque gesture however, as the case study on Staatsoper's *Alcina* will illustrate later in this chapter.

Orchestration and Ornamentation

> Another thing that I think is the death of Handelian opera is the orchestra pit, which is a nineteenth-century invention. In the eighteenth century the orchestra was at the same level as the stalls, or maybe a foot lower, and the most important players faced the stage, so they could accompany the singers directly just as they would in a concert. That's why you have these fantastic oboe and violin obbligatos: they are actually making music with the singers, without the silly medium of the conductor doing semaphore to relay between two people who can't hear or see each other (Nicholas McGegan cited in Sherman, 1997, p.253).

This chapter has already illustrated how in the St. Louis production of *Orlando* McGegan avoided the problems caused by the 'modern day' orchestral pit, by positioning his orchestra at the same level as the stalls. The use of the orchestral pit in contemporary productions, resulting in communication problems between singers and instrumentalists (especially during obbligato passages), is not the only issue regarding the orchestra that requires consideration. The question over whether to use baroque, or 'period', instruments is just as important.

Indeed, an influential factor in the use of period instruments in contemporary productions is the existence and availability of performers who specialise in baroque technique. In his programme notes for the Massey University production of *Giustino*, conductor Michael Vinten wrote: "The orchestra may also seem unHandelian. The only excuse is that it better uses the resources of the Conservatorium instrumentalists". Dean (1983, p.111) suggests that "not many players possessed the skill, experience or historical knowledge to give a satisfactory account of the music".

Ornamentation of *da capo* arias in contemporary performances of Handel opera has also been influenced by the level of skill possessed by musicians, in this case singers. Chapter two outlined the importance of ornamentation in *opera seria*, improvised by singers of Handel's time who were trained in the art. Many contemporary singers however, do not

possess the skills required to improvise ornamentation; instead, ornamentation is worked out in advance, notated and rehearsed prior to the performance. Some productions, staged in the early years of the revival of Handel's operas, were given without any ornamentation at all, while others have been dominated by an abundance of decorations:

> In many modern revivals the licence to decorate seems to have gone to the head of the singers, or less forgivably, the conductor: they twist the line out of shape, add rocketing top notes regardless of the affect, transpose whole sections into a high register, and in addition to marring the eloquence of the music sometimes make mincemeat of Handel's style (Dean, 1983. p.111)

Case study - Staatsoper's *Alcina*

The Staatsoper Stuttgart's production of *Alcina* (cited Arthaus Musik 649-438, 1999.), directed by Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito, combined a mixture of modern and traditional elements. Analysis of the presentation aspects of this production provides an interesting example of one possible approach to staging Handel opera for a contemporary audience.

Three male roles including that of Ruggiero (originally written for the castrato Senesino), were played by mezzo-sopranos; a very Handelian practice. Singers performed *da capo* arias adding stylistically appropriate ornamentation in the return to the A section. It is impossible to know whether these ornaments were prepared in advance by the singers. However, in the spirit of original performances of Handel operas, they were sung in a spontaneous manner, appearing improvised.

The set was dominated by a giant gilded frame in the centre of the stage, around which the action was played out. From scene to scene the function of the frame changed; in some scenes it functioned as a mirror, reflecting the action that was going on in front of it while in others, the reflective surface would disappear and solid panels were slid across behind the frame. This created a space for singers to interact behind it, effectively framing the action and changing the depth of the stage. In this way the production

honoured conventions of *opera seria* through the use of the full depth of the stage, and the smooth and rapid way in which sets were changed in front of the audience.

Like the productions staged during Handel's time, the Staatsoper production did not use a curtain between acts. Incorporating this convention with the use of modern technology, the directors extended it further by not using a curtain at the conclusion of the opera. Instead, a full lighting blackout was used, during which time singers moved into their places for the curtain call.

The exit convention of *opera seria* was honoured in this Staatsoper production; each singer left the stage after singing his or her *da capo* aria. Usually the singer was given space in which to do this, allowing for meaningful looks or gestures to be made between characters which helped to make sense of the fact that the character left the stage. Just as Handel developed the use of the exit convention during his lifetime by directing characters to fall asleep on stage, the Staatsoper production varied the use of the convention. After one of her arias, Alcina fainted on stage, thus providing her with the opportunity to stay on stage amongst the action.

As well as being true to some conventions of *opera seria*, this production of *Alcina* also incorporated modern elements. Unlike in Handel's time, and in some modern productions that have already been mentioned, singers in this production did not use gesture as the principal tool to portray emotion. Instead, they made use of more contemporary acting techniques with free and flexible body movements. Singers did however, make strong use of the eyes and face for expression, an important component of gesture outlined in chapter two. Alcina and Ruggiero, particularly, interacted in a very familiar, seductive and sexually explicit way (see figure 12; DVD cover for Staatsoper Stuttgart's production of *Alcina*, 1999).

Just as costuming during Handel's lifetime reflected the fashions of the period, the costumes in this production were inspired by contemporary fashions. In this way the Staatsoper production honoured the spirit of Handel Opera without seeking to directly replicate it. The men and three women who played male roles were mostly dressed in modern suits. The costumes that provided the most shock factor were worn by Alcina. She appeared in a series of slinky, see-through, figure-hugging black dresses, while her less promiscuous sister, Morgana, was dressed in a sensible yet short dress and cardigan.

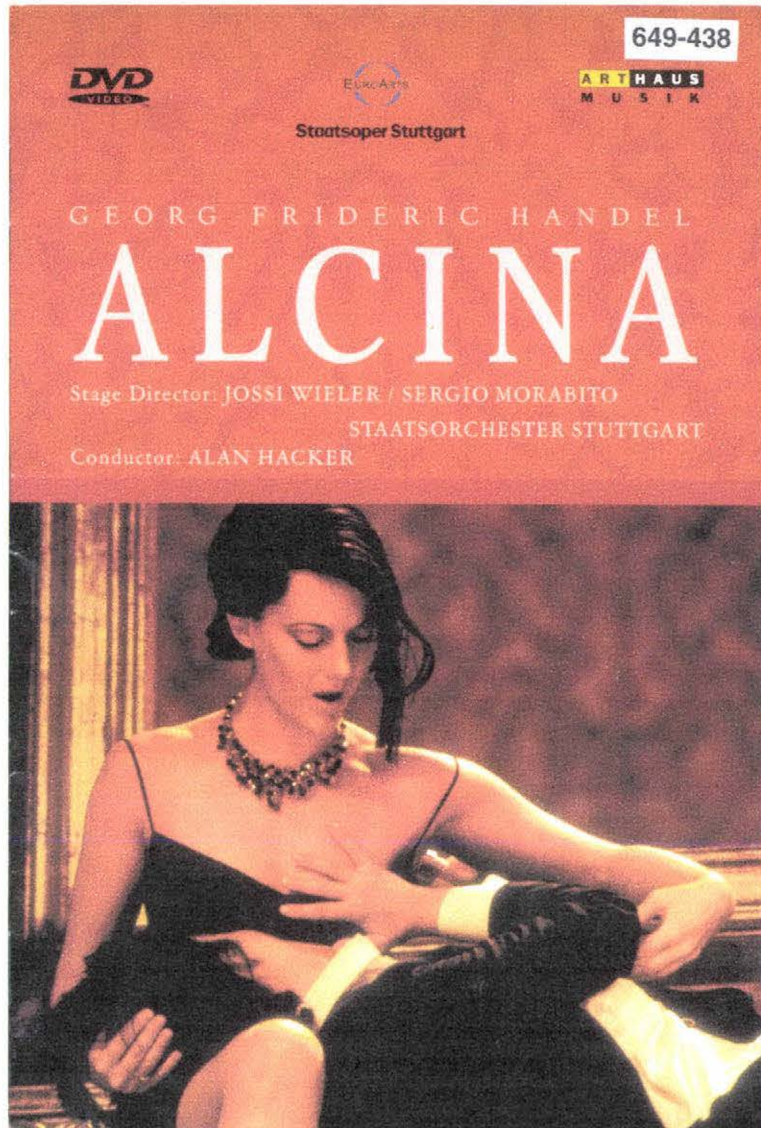

Figure 12. The DVD cover from the production of *Alcina* by Staatsoper Stuttgart, showing Alcina and Ruggiero in contemporary dress and using a flexible interactive acting style.

Effective use of lighting during this production added dramatic impact. A blackout was used immediately after the death of Alcina, allowing her to leave the stage and then return as an apparition during the final 'happy ending' coro. Another poignant moment in the opera was created during Alcina's aria *'Mi restano le lagrime'*. The entire stage was lit at the beginning of this aria then slowly the lighting around Alcina began to fade until finally there was just one spot focussed on her. Hence the use of lighting helped to highlight the sense of loneliness portrayed by Alcina in her aria. The lighting in the

following scene was extremely harsh, creating lots of shadows and enhancing the aggressive nature of the aria, *'Babara! Io ben lo so'*, sung by Oberto.

This production of *Alcina* utilised historical knowledge of performance practices of *opera seria* and in doing so honoured many of its conventions. In contrast, some aspects of the production were modernised in order to more clearly communicate with contemporary audiences. While it is difficult to gauge the precise effect of this approach to presentation of Handel opera without experiencing it in the flesh[7], this writer believes that a successful blend of 'historically informed' and 'modernised' elements was achieved, without disruption to Handel's musical or dramatic composition.

[7] The writer of this study viewed the Staatsoper performance of *Alcina* on DVD recording.

Conclusion

> Historical sources, even when they use the language of prescription, cannot restrict creativity. There is inevitably too wide a gap between what they can tell us and actual performance for that to be so. But they will help us to understand the works we wish to perform and they may offer creative musicians an imaginative resource (Walls, 2003, p.171).

This study was motivated by the very reasons outlined above. The writer set out to discover the traditional conventions and characteristics of *opera seria* in order to enhance her own understanding, and thus provide a more enriched interpretation of Handel's music and characters in performance.

The 18th century opera house was an important meeting place for members of London's elite. As such, Handel's operas were designed primarily as lavish entertainments for this social group. They were significantly characterised by the use of spectacular scenic and machine effects, and elaborate costuming. Adhering to the strict conventions of *opera seria*, the use of *da capo* arias resulted in the dominance of the solo singer, particularly the high voices of the castrato and soprano. These singers had significant influence over not only the structure and composition of Handel's works but also the overall artistic effect, through ornamentation of their arias. The use of gesture by the singers was an important tool for symbolic portrayal of emotions.

Armed with the knowledge of how Handel's operas were presented during his lifetime, directors, producers and performers of contemporary productions are faced with the decision of how these conventions should be presented in a modern context. They must decide whether they wish to recreate the style and traditions of original productions, aiming at authenticity, or whether they wish to adapt the conventions to better communicate with a modern audience. One argument for attempted authenticity is presented by Toronto's opera company, Opera Atelier:

> Our attempting to achieve a degree of authenticity does not mean that we are trying to recreate a particular, historical performance. Rather, our purpose is to present 17th or 18th century operatic or dramatic performances according to the technical frame works and the aesthetics ideals of the period, so far as scholarly research and the exigencies of a modern

> theatre-situation will allow. We do not wish to present something new, using elements of an old style. We are trying to recreate an ancient art form, as purely as possible, a strangely beautiful, stylised and disciplined type of performance, which not only tells us a great deal about the past, but is also capable of giving us pleasure in the present (The Making of An Opera - Opera Atelier's Unique Vision, no date. ¶2).

The writer of this study asserts that complete authenticity when producing Handel opera is not practical, nor attainable. This would require building a venue with the same atmosphere (no air conditioning), acoustics, stage dimensions, lighting and set machinery used in Handel's day; the assembly of a baroque orchestra consisting of period instruments, played by specialist musicians accomplished in baroque style and technique; the assembly of a similarly skilled group of singers, able to improvise ornamentation spontaneously, and a group of castrati singers; and the assembly of an audience with the same social and cultural ideals, as well as the same listening perspective held by audiences of eighteenth century London. Walls (2003. p.3) suggests "We cannot escape the fact that we already know the music of Brahms, Berg, and Birtwistle and that knowledge colours our apprehension of earlier music".

Rather than aiming for complete authenticity when staging Handel opera it is possible, and in this writers' view desirable, to present productions that emulate the spirit of *opera seria* and, as far as is realistically possible, the conventions of the genre. Historically informed productions of this nature, such as those presented by conductor Nicholas McGegan for example, belong to one of two categories identified through the study of contemporary productions; the other category consists of productions that have been 'modernised'.

Modernisation of Handel opera in contemporary productions has occurred in a variety of ways. In some productions, such as those staged by Peter Sellars, modernisation was achieved by manipulating the setting of the opera, placing it in a time and place that was more relevant to the audience concerned. Another way in which Handel's operas have been modernised is the use of less formal, stylised forms of presentation. In the Staatsoper's production of *Alcina*, singers utilised contemporary acting techniques, displaying free and flexible body movements. This realistic acting technique is more familiar to modern audiences, and hence more instantly identifiable

than the rhetorical gestures used during the 18th century[8]. This production of *Alcina* also made use of contemporary fashions. On one level this could be interpreted as modernisation, as singers were not dressed in historical costume. However on another, this use of costume did adhere to the traditional practice of *opera seria*, with singers wearing costumes influenced by the fashion of the time.

While the method of presenting singers in modern dress and using modern acting techniques has its obvious advantages, allowing for a modern interpretation of the plot and relationships between the characters, it also has its drawbacks. The whole premise of the operatic genre is based around the assumption that audiences will have the ability to accept that a story is played out in front of them through song, with characters singing despite being in the most unlikely of situations - on their deathbed, for example. This premise, sometimes referred to as the 'suspension of disbelief', is easier to succumb to when opera is based in another world and presented in a heightened, stylistic manner. Because of the modernised approach taken to the production of *Alcina*, 'suspension of disbelief' became harder to achieve. It was difficult to forget that the women who played men were in fact women, because of the modern dress that they wore. This, combined with the highly suggestive nature of some of the acting, created a lot of confusion and sexual innuendo. With its mixture of sexual innuendo and revealing costumes, this production provides a good example of those that are modernised to the extreme, seeming to want to test the limits of what even our modern society is willing to accept. Despite this, the presence of sexual innuendo in *opera seria* is nothing new, and as such it is possible that by creating an atmosphere of sexual ambiguity the director of *Alcina* intended to make a reference to the sexual currents that were a strong element during Handel's lifetime.

One further way in which Handel's operas have been modernised is through the use of modern technology. A modern take on the printed translations of libretti made available to 18th century audiences of *opera seria* (allowing them to follow the story more clearly) is the use of surtitles, projected electronically onto a screen; instead of candles and oil lamps, electric lighting is used to add atmosphere and dramatic effect;

[8] The writer acknowledges that acting on the operatic stage can never be described as 'realism' as the large dimensions of the modern opera house do not permit such techniques. Therefore, acting by singers in any opera must have a heightened element, ensuring that movements are large enough so as to be visible from the very back of the house.

and machinery, used to create scenic effects, has been updated as technology has advanced.

While techniques of modernisation such as those mentioned above can have their advantages in contemporary performance some, such as the change in architectural styles since the baroque period, have their disadvantages. This change, while unavoidable, has resulted in much larger venues with acoustics quite different to those encountered by Handel, and for which he conceived his music. This can have a detrimental effect on the performance of Handel opera, in some cases making the orchestra and singers harder to hear. Some opera houses have tried to get around this problem by using amplification, however this can sometimes add to the problems. One reviewer of a Handel opera produced at the New York City Opera described the auditorium's acoustics as 'iffy' and said that they had been "problematically 'enhanced' with amplifiers" (Anson, 2000). The same reviewer went on to describe how one singer sounded just as loud when singing into the wings, as when she was at the front of the stage facing the audience. One of the greatest characteristics of Handel's music for his operas, indeed all of his music, is its organic and seemingly improvised nature that exudes grace and elegance, something of which is surely taken away when fed through an electronic system.

Contemporary opera companies must decide which voice type should be used as a substitute for the roles Handel originally wrote for castrati, usually that of the male heroic lead. Early revivals in Germany cast men in these parts, transposing the music down an octave, a practice which resulted in the distortion of both Handel's musical texture and characterisation. In later years, companies began to cast mezzo-sopranos in these roles, a practice which Handel himself made use of when there were no castrati available. In the twenty-first century, however, the role of the mezzo-soprano in substituting for castrati has been challenged by another voice type, that of the counter-tenor. Counter-tenors have a gender advantage of mezzo-sopranos due to the fact that they are males playing male roles. This allows modern productions to present visually convincing drama, while still maintaining the musical texture that Handel

intended for his operas.[9] It is more difficult for a modern audience to accept a woman playing a man, than it was for the audiences of Handel's time who were more familiar with this operatic tradition. However, some contemporary audience members are not accustomed to the timbre of the counter-tenor, created by singing in the falsetto register, and this is a hurdle which mezzo-soprani do not have to overcome. This writer attended a performance of *Giulio Cesare* at the Sydney Opera House in 2000, in which the title and some more minor roles were played by counter-tenors. The first encounter with the sound provoked feelings of surprise and a certain amount of unease. Thus, it is largely a matter of personal opinion as to which voice type one prefers to hear singing the roles that were originally performed by castrati. Providing Handel's music is sung with the spirit and vibrancy intended and the singer's performance is dramatically convincing, there is no right or wrong answer to the question of mezzo-soprano versus counter-tenor.

This study has found that, on the whole, contemporary performances of Handel's operas aim to honour the traditions of *opera seria* and the spirit in which Handel intended his works to be performed. Contemporary productions fall into one of two categories: 'historically informed' or 'modernised'. Modernisation of Handel's operas occurs mainly in the method of delivery, rather than the delivery itself. External factors such as the development of technology have changed certain aspects of presentation, however modernisation of these elements is not unlike the performance practice during Handel's lifetime, when the latest machinery and set techniques were employed to provide spectacular scenic effects. This writer believes the main purpose for modernisation of Handel's operas is to make them more accessible to modern audiences, thereby successfully conveying the story and its message. Because contemporary audiences differ greatly from those of the eighteenth century, it follows that some forms of modernisation can be justified and provide a valid contribution to the performance as a whole.

McGegan raises an interesting concept worthy of consideration:

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[9] The movie 'Farinelli', based on the life and career of one of the most successful castrati ever, also provides modern audiences with the opportunity to experience *opera seria* with a male playing the heroic lead. This is achieved through the use of digital synthesisation to create a sound close to that which historians believe belonged to the castrato.

> I don't know that any of us have seen Baroque gestures really done. We've seen some attempts, but if you don't do them under candle light there's no point in doing them...The only reason Baroque actors used those gestures was so they could get across what they wanted to get across in the dark. A gesture is of a certain size in order to be seen, and if you can see everything so clearly that all you need to do is raise your finger a little, then everything else is overacting. I think the only way in which Baroque gesture works is if it's part of a total package. The proportions of the stage, the sets, the costumes and the lighting all have to be right (Nicholas McGegan, cited in Sherman, 1997, p.253)[10]

This statement, that for baroque gestures to be successfully performed on the contemporary stage they must be supported by the 'total package', suggests that for Handel's operas to be successful in a contemporary setting, each component must work as a single entity for the performance to work as a whole. The aim of presenting a well-balanced production of Handel opera to a contemporary audience, can only be assisted by the acquisition of knowledge regarding performance practices in *opera seria*. Such knowledge provides directors and performers with a strong base from which to begin the creative process, and as a result strengthens the integrity and stance of their decisions regarding performance practice. The importance to performers of knowledge obtainable through historical research is perhaps best summed up by Walls (2003, p.10):

> Performance practice research is, however, more than an important imaginative resource. It is a vital key to our understanding the very incomplete record represented by musical notation....research into historical performance practice has and ought to have a life of its own as a legitimate scholarly activity separate from its application in performance. This autonomy is in the final analysis a crucial guarantor of its usefulness to performers.

[10] Although the use of gesture in baroque *opera seria* did assist singers in portraying emotions clearly to the audience from a stage lit by candles and oil lamps, McGegan fails to acknowledge the importance of rhetorical delivery which, as chapter two illustrated, was closely linked with the use of gesture.

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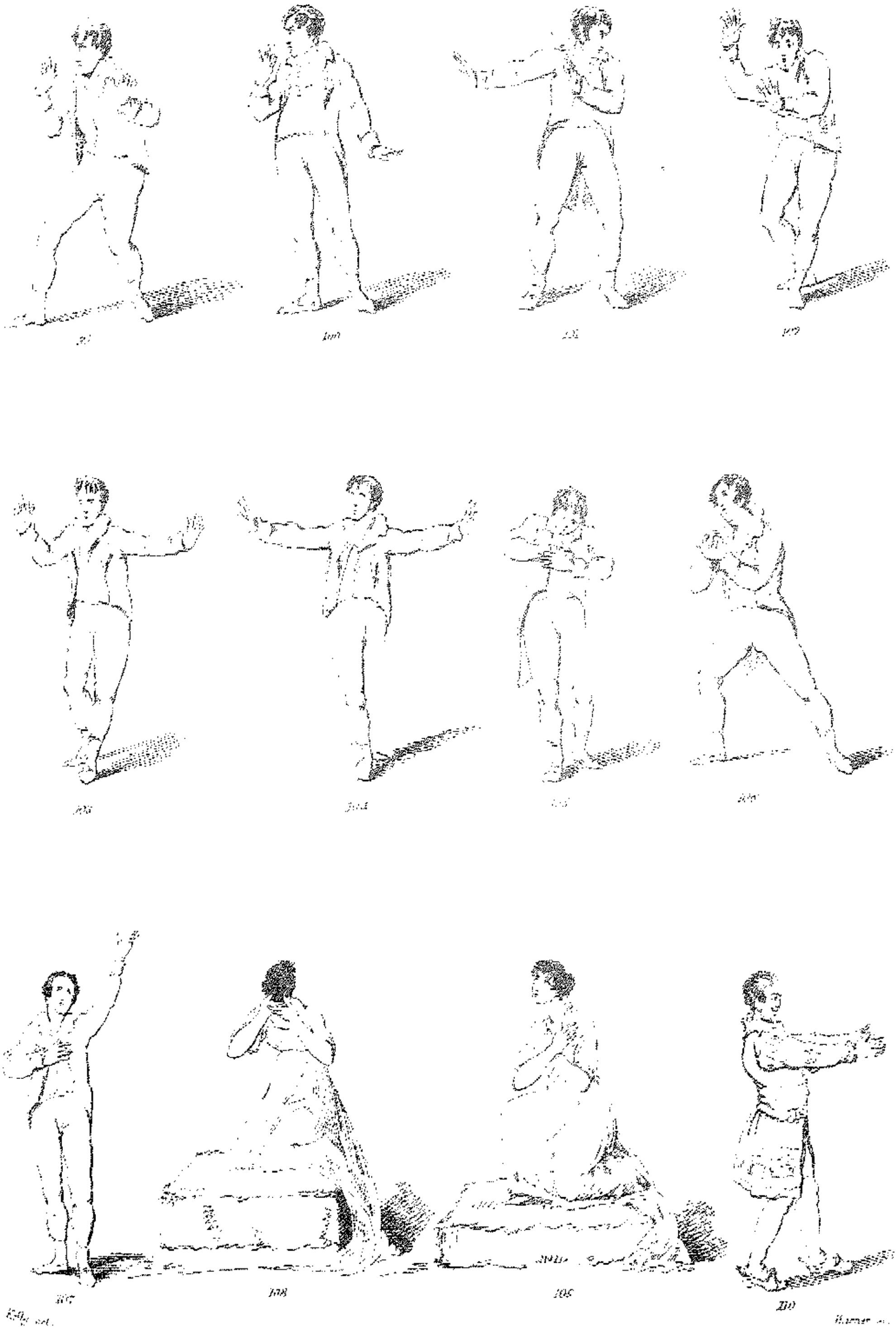
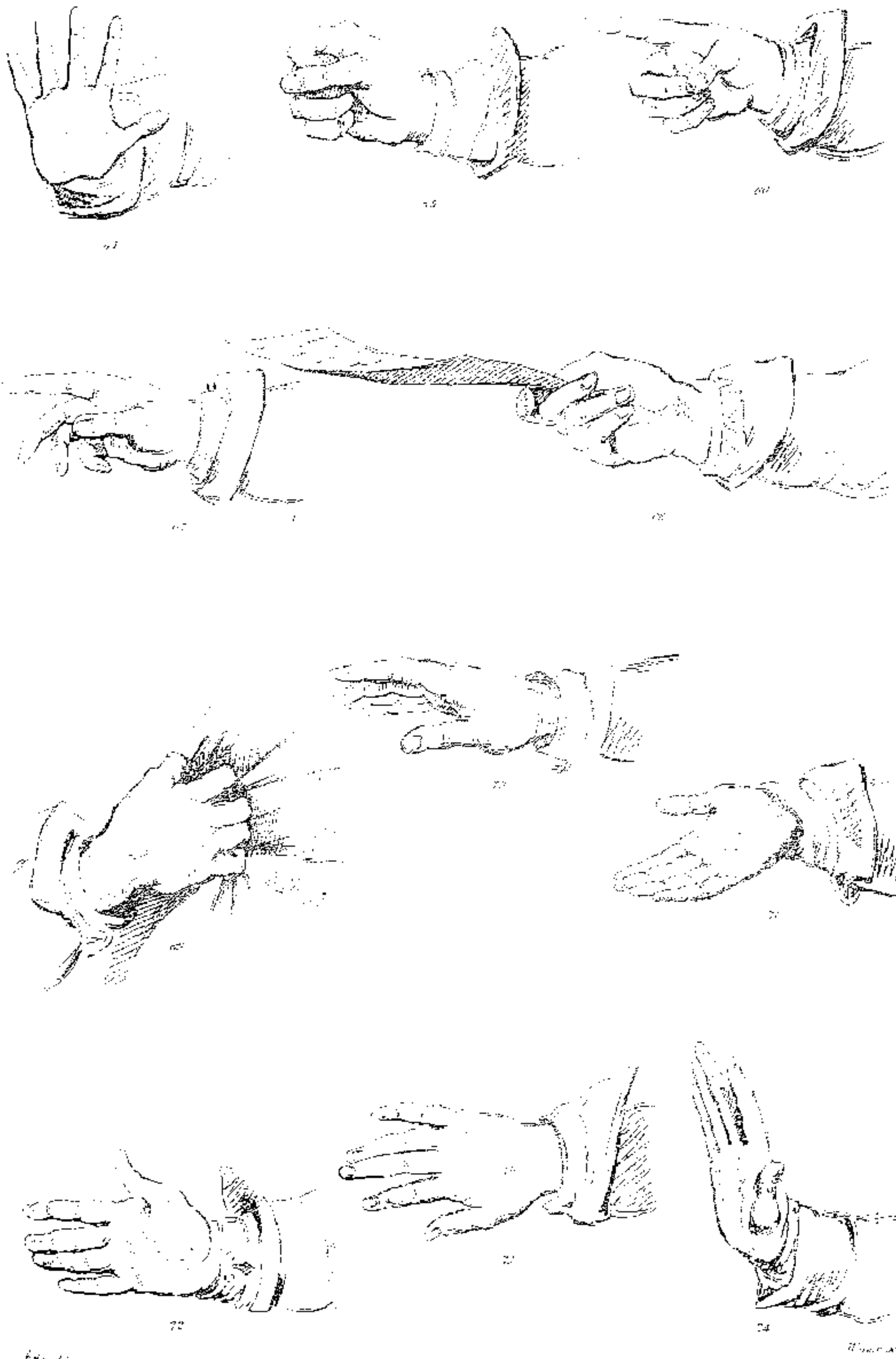
Appendices

Appendix 1



Appendix 1 – Significant Gestures, illustrated in Austin (1806/1966, plate 10).



Appendix 1 Positions of the Hands used in Gesture (cited in Austin, 1806/1966, plate 7).

Appendix 2

Complex Significant Gestures

The Head and Face

The Hanging down of the head denotes shame or grief.

The holding it up, pride or courage.

To nod forwards implies assent.

To toss the head back, dissent.

The inclination of the head implies bashfulness or languor.

The head is averted in dislike or horror.

It leans forward in attention.

The Eyes

The eyes are raised in prayer.

They weep in sorrow.

They burn in anger.

They are downcast or averted in anger.

They are cast on vacancy in thought.

They are thrown in different directions in doubt and anxiety.

The Arms

The arm is projected forwards in authority.

Both arms are spread extended in admiration.

They are both held forwards in imploring help.

They both fall suddenly in disppointment.

The Hands

The hand on the head indicates pain or distress.

On the eyes, shame.

On the lips, injunction of silence.

On the breast, it appeals to conscience, or intimates desire.

The hand waves or flourishes in joy or contempt.

Both hands are held supine, applied or clasped, in prayer.

Both descend prone in blessing.

They are clasped or wrung in affliction.

They are held forward and received in friendship.

The Body

The body held erect indicates steadiness and courage.

Thrown back, pride.

Stooping forward, condescension or compassion.

Bending reverence or respect.

Prostration, the utmost humility or abasement.

The Lower Limbs

Their firm position signifies courage or obstinancy.

Bended knees, timidity or weakness.

Frequent change, disturbed thoughts.

They advance in desire or courage.

Retire in aversion or fear.

Start in terror.

Stamp in authority or anger.

Kneel in submission and prayer.

(Cited in Austin, 1806/1966, pp.482-484)

Appendix 3

Article from 'The Times'

ORATORIOS ARYANIZED BY NAZIS

From our Special Correspondent

GERMAN FRONTIER, Feb.15

The expurgation of the masterpieces of German art from Jewish contamination is reported to be making rapid progress, and it is pointed out that this is all the more remarkable as Germany is engaged in a life and death struggle in which the concentration of the nation's entire strength on essentials is imperative. The texts of all the oratorios are being rewritten…It is expected that the 'Aryanization' of all the works of the German classical composers, notably Bach, will take many years.

(Cited in Hogwood, 1984, pp.272-3)