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**Handel Opera  
Presentation – Past and Present**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of**

**Masters  
In  
Music**

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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 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> 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.

Year	Title	Author	Composer	Genre	Notes
1691	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	First opera performed in London
1692	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Second performance of Amleto
1693	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Third performance of Amleto
1694	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Fourth performance of Amleto
1695	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Fifth performance of Amleto
1696	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Sixth performance of Amleto
1697	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Seventh performance of Amleto
1698	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Eighth performance of Amleto
1699	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Ninth performance of Amleto
1700	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Tenth performance of Amleto
1701	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Eleventh performance of Amleto
1702	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Twelfth performance of Amleto
1703	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Thirteenth performance of Amleto
1704	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Fourteenth performance of Amleto
1705	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Fifteenth performance of Amleto
1706	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Sixteenth performance of Amleto
1707	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Seventeenth performance of Amleto
1708	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Eighteenth performance of Amleto
1709	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Nineteenth performance of Amleto
1710	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Twentieth performance of Amleto
1711	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Twenty-first performance of Amleto
1712	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Twenty-second performance of Amleto
1713	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Twenty-third performance of Amleto
1714	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Twenty-fourth performance of Amleto
1715	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Twenty-fifth performance of Amleto
1716	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Twenty-sixth performance of Amleto
1717	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Twenty-seventh performance of Amleto
1718	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Twenty-eighth performance of Amleto
1719	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Twenty-ninth performance of Amleto
1720	Amleto	Antonio	Antonio	Opera	Thirtieth performance of Amleto

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 spectacles he was committed to producing. These included *The Tempest*

(1674), *Psyche* (1675), *Circe* (1677), *Albion and Albanus* (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 Albanus* 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.<sup>1</sup> 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, out 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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	1,930
Dancers	800 (includes costumes)
House servants	640
Theater rent	800 <sup>1)</sup>
Light	320
Budgeted for two new operas	1,277 (clothes and scenes only)
Printing bills	50
	£7,127

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 Drama, 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 Aggressor, 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 (8.81%)
£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 <sup>d</sup>	5,300,520	6,309,470
Total population		
England only <sup>d</sup>	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 Character & 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 Character & 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 Annex 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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	Dancers	1,000
Senesino	1,500	Scenery and costumes	2,500
Durastanti	1,100	Expenses per night	2,500
Robinson	500	New operas	400
Galeratti	400	Poets	200
Salvai	300	Staff salaries	300
A bass	300	House rent	400
Benedetti	400		
Gordon	400		
<i>Total</i>	£6,400	<i>Total</i>	£7,300
		<i>Grand total:</i>	£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).