



Women in Handel's operas and oratorios

By Donald Burrows

'[Handel's] women are portrayed as rounded, complex characters, not simply damsels in distress'

In descriptions of Handel's operas and oratorios, it is often remarked that he showed exceptional power and sensitivity in the presentation of the female roles. The opportunities presented to him in the librettos were large, and he took full advantage of them: his music takes the dramatic portrayal of characters well beyond the hints given in the lyrics. In many of Handel's operas and oratorios, women are as important to the plot as men in terms of their political power and influence as well as in personal relationships. Furthermore, the women are portrayed as rounded, complex characters, not simply damsels in distress. The situation of Cleopatra in 'Giulio Cesare' involves a subtle interplay of personal and political motives; the female leads in Handel's dramas form a complete spectrum from the virtuous (Asteria in 'Tamerlano') to those with no recognisable redeeming features (Alcina and Athalia), via innocent victims of circumstance (Ginevra in 'Ariodante').

That many of the women are in positions of power in the dramas is a reflection of the remarkable equality of opportunity for women and men on the stage. Much attention, then as now, was paid to the castrati who played the leading male roles in the Italian operatic tradition to which Handel brought his musical genius. But a successful opera company needed talented and convincing leading ladies as well. Hence, people talked about Cuzzoni and Faustina as well as Senesino and Farinelli. Moreover actresses enjoyed ambiguous reputations: they were lionised while at the same time tainted with the suspicion of personal immorality. King Charles II's fondness for actresses set the tone.

It seems most Italian 'first ladies' of the London opera were regarded more highly than theatre actresses: criticism was directed instead at the high salaries they drew from the British economy. Nevertheless, as Handel shifted his focus from Italian opera to English oratorio, he started to mix singers from the 'English actress' tradition with Italian divas. During the 1743 opera season at Covent Garden, Handel employed a majority of soloists from the acting tradition with women one contemporary described as 'goddesses from the farces'. The 'goddesses' at

the time included Mrs Cibber, the subject of a well-publicised matrimonial court case, and two others who may have been involved in extra-marital relationships.

Handel composed 'Semele' for the following season, using a mainly 'English theatre' cast, though he replaced Cibber with Francesina, a versatile singer who had previously sung in his Italian operas. Although it might perhaps be defended as a classic morality drama, 'Semele' was unashamedly secular, in which the main motivations involved sexual attraction and jealousy. The tragic dénouement remains most vivid in the minds of the audience, but Handel's treatment of the opening scenes is equally powerful and shows a remarkable understanding of Semele as she faces the prospect of marriage to a man who is not the subject of her wishes. By received tradition Jupiter was a god with an insatiable sexual appetite, but that is only part of the story: clearly this is a relationship Semele wants. It is the jealousy of another woman, Juno, that eventually destroys her.