

Handel's Ariostan Heroines: With Particular Reference to *Ginevra, Principessa di Scozia*

David Kimbell

Towards the end of the operatic phase of his career, Handel composed three works on episodes from Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*; all of them, *Orlando*, *Ariodante* and *Alcina*, were written and staged in London between 1732 and 1735. (Table One)

TABLE ONE

Handel's Ariosto operas

ORLANDO

Composed October-November 1732; Premiere 27th January 1733, King's Theatre, Haymarket - text adapted from *L'Orlando, ovvero La gelosa pazzia*, by Carlo Sigismondo Capece, music by Domenico Scarlatti, Rome 1711

ARIODANTE

Composed August-October 1734; Premiere 8th January 1735, Covent Garden - text adapted from *Ginevra, Principessa di Scozia*, by Antonio Salvi, music by Giacomo Antonio Perti, Villa di Pratolino 1708

ALCINA

Composed February-April 1735; Premiere 16th April 1735, Covent Garden - text adapted from *L'isola d'Alcina*, librettist unknown, music by Riccardo Broschi, Rome 1728

These were critical years for Handel. Support in London for Italian opera was proving much less assured than it had seemed back in the years around 1720, when the so-called Royal Academy of Music had been launched to provide opera of the very highest quality at the King's Theatre in the Haymarket. Relationships among artists and patrons had been soured by personal and professional jealousies. During the 1733-34 season Handel found himself competing with a rival ensemble, which came to be known as the Opera of the Nobility; a year later, for the 1734-35 season, the Opera of the Nobility, with most of the best Italian singers now on its books, was able to take over the Haymarket theatre, the scene of all Handel's earlier operatic triumphs in London. Handel himself was obliged to move to the less fashionable Covent Garden.

John Rich's new theatre at Covent Garden was not an opera house, but music played an important part in many of the entertainments staged there. Handel may have lost his biggest Italian stars, but he did now find himself with a small chorus and ballet troupe at his disposal and, with characteristic entrepreneurial flair, promptly set about making effective use of them, in both *Ariodante* and *Alcina*. He may have had to put up with having a higher proportion of English singers in his company; but this only encouraged him to make English oratorio a more regular ingredient of his theatrical seasons; when an organ 'remarkable for its variety of curious stops' (*Daily Post*) was installed in March 1735, he seized the opportunity to adorn his entertainments with new-composed concertos, performed by himself.

I do not know what turned Handel's mind to Ariosto at this particular juncture, so that of four new operas composed in the years 1732 to 1735, three were modelled on episodes from the *Orlando*

furioso. But it is an interesting coincidence that at just this time his old colleague Paolo Rolli, who had been the first Italian Secretary of the Royal Academy and the author of some half dozen of Handel's opera libretti produced between 1721 and 1727, was reading Ariosto with his royal pupil, Frederick, Prince of Wales.¹ Nor do I know whether Handel at this or any other time, read Rolli's 1728 essay, *Remarks upon M. Voltaire's Essay on the Epick Poetry of the European Nations*, in which Rolli defends Ariosto against Voltaire's strictures, most interestingly, from our point of view, justifying the role of enchantment, magic and allegory in poetry, and citing Spenser and Shakespeare as exemplars of an English taste for such themes.²

The standing of the three Ariosto operas is high, and though Winton Dean and John Merrill Knapp don't reach them in their magisterial survey of the first twenty-two years of Handel's operatic career,³ they have enjoyed more critical attention and more performances than most of the Handelian repertory. The chorus and ballet dimensions of *Ariodante* and *Alcina* have often been viewed as supplying a welcome enlargement of Handel's operatic resources; while critics from Burney onwards have appreciated in *Orlando* the extraordinary structural and musical consequences of having a hero who was "furioso".

I want to try a rather different tack. Like so many of Ariosto's tales, the episodes selected by Handel all deal with varieties of erotic love:-

First there is the story of Angelica, whose beauty turns the head of every man who sets eyes on her, creating havoc among the ranks of Charlemagne's paladins, and driving the greatest of them, Orlando, quite mad; but she finally falls in love with the simple soldier Medoro; then the story of Ariodante and Ginevra, whose love is deepened and strengthened as a result of the ordeals to which they are subjected; finally the story of Alcina, to whose already potent sexual allure are added magical powers, which enable her to turn into beasts or plants or rocks or streams the lovers of whom she has wearied.

Since we have here a single general theme - erotic love - manifested in a number of sharply different forms, the three operas provide an appropriate focus for exploring some of Handel's resources as a composer of opera: to be specific, to address the question of whether he can interest us in his dramatic characters, as Mozart and Verdi and Wagner and Strauss manifestly can; and if so, in what kinds of way?

It would be sensible first to be clear that in scrutinizing the art of characterization as it is practised in early 18th-century opera, one is unlikely to find what Pope believed he found in Shakespeare: that 'every single character [...] is as much an individual, as those in life itself; it is impossible to find any two alike; and such, as from their relation or affinity in any respect appear most to be twins, will, upon comparison, be found remarkably distinct'. More to our purpose is likely to be what Johnson found there:

[Shakespeare's] characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; [...]they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespere it is commonly a species.⁴

I shall follow Ariosto's lead and give "le donne" precedence over "i cavallier" - the prima donna over the leading castrato. In *Alcina* her primacy is evident; even in *Orlando* and *Ariodante* the first

soprano is the central character around whom the action hinges. There is a further consideration, perhaps even more to the point: to examine what aspects of the composer's craft and imagination are serving to illuminate dramatic character is a problematic exercise. For the performer was central to the creation of 18th-century opera; the music was bespoke for her, and therefore it is not always easy to determine what elements in the music the composer provides for the singer, and what for the character the singer represents. In dealing with Angelica, Ginevra and Alcina that problem is simplified, because all three roles were written for Anna Strada.

Anna Maria Strada del Pò had been Handel's leading lady since the opening of the so-called Second Academy in 1729, the sole and single prima donna who, it was hoped, would be able to reconcile the partisans of Faustina and Cuzzoni, the two prima donnas whose rivalry had enlivened the London scene so scandalously in 1726 and 1727. However, in Burney's memorable, if ungentlemanly, words, Strada's personal charms did not assist her much in conciliating parties, or disposing the eye to augment the pleasures of the ear; for she had so little of a Venus in her appearance, that she was usually called the Pig.⁵ But she remained loyal to Handel when most of his Italian stars deserted to join the Opera of the Nobility, and she therefore "created" several roles in his early English oratorios, including those of Deborah (in the oratorio of the same name) and of Josabeth in *Athalia* (both 1733), as well as all the leading soprano roles in his Italian operas, from *Lotario* (1729) to *Berenice* (1737). Burney also tells us that Handel played a principal part in Strada's own musical education: 'from a coarse singer with a fine voice, he rendered her equal at least to the first performers in Europe'.⁶ And he did that, in part at least, by composing for her with exceptional care.

In Table Two, I quote excerpts from the prefaces to these operas. All of them refer to Ariosto's poem, and the "Argument" of *Alcina* takes the usual form of claiming entitlement to make a few alterations in the interest of dramatic effect. Those to *Orlando* and *Ariodante* go a little further in their highlighting of the term "passion", an idea evidently central to Johnson's comments on Shakespeare's characterization, and which might fittingly be taken as a watchword in approaching Handel's.

TABLE TWO

Excerpts from the prefaces to the libretti

Orlando : The immoderate Passion that *Orlando* entertained for *Angelica* , Queen of *Catai* , and which, in the end, totally deprived him of his Reason, is an Event taken from *Ariosto* 's incomparable Poem, which being universally known, may serve as an Argument to the present *Drama* , without any larger Explication. [...] tends to demonstrate the imperious Manner in which Love insinuates its Impressions into the Hearts of Persons of all Ranks; and likewise how a wise Man should be ever ready with his best Endeavours to re-conduct into the Right Way, those who have been misguided from it by the Illusion of their Passions.

Ariodante : [...] The Foundation of this Story is taken from the fifth Book of *Ariosto*, and is somewhat alter'd, to give the greater Force to the passions of the Actors, and a more extensive Field of Variety to the Musick.

Alcina : [...] The Story is taken from the sixth and seventh Cantos of *Ariosto*, but partly alter'd for the better Conformity of Drama.

Handel's operas rank among the supreme artistic monuments of an age fascinated by the phenomenon of human passion and tireless in its determination to understand it. The fascination goes back through the seventeenth century, at least to Descartes, whose last important work was a treatise on the 'passions of the soul' (1649). The passions became an object of analytical scrutiny; Locke devotes a chapter to them in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*; musical theorists suggest how composers might evoke or express them. Late in the century two odes by Dryden, the 'Ode for St. Cecilia's Day' and 'Alexander's Feast', both of them later set to music by Handel, commend the powers of music specifically in respect of the passions: 'What passion cannot music raise and quell?'

By Handel's time, the passions were seen as mainsprings of character, and one of the principal aims of Handelian opera was to explore and to scrutinize them, to 'raise and quell' them. Typically, in each scene, attention focusses on one character; at the climax of the scene the action freezes; others group themselves round this central figure, and she gives voice to her passion. The dramatic design is formal and ostensibly simple - a pattern of continuo-accompanied recitatives, issuing in solo arias.

Alcina will serve as an exemplar of Handelian opera as a parade of passions. And it might be appropriate to begin with a parenthesis on the remarkable expressive power of this particular opera. *Alcina* is an enchantress, and the opera is often described as a "magic opera", because of its abundance of spells and transformation scenes and other miscellaneous magickings. But that absolutely does not mean that the opera is a mere escapist fantasy, somehow less "true" than the bulk of Handel's dramatic work. Rather to the contrary, such a theme enables him to explore certain aspects of the human condition, certain kinds of truth, for which there was no room in the rational, historical, real-people world of most of the heroic opera of the age.

For the decorum of heroic opera demanded that, eventually, everyone in the opera, good and bad alike, surrendered to the power of reason, listened to the dictates of the heart, to the promptings of conscience; accepted their common humanity and came to a final ceremony of reconciliation (the so-called *lieto fine*). Looked back at through the cultural experience of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such heroic operas embody a kind of psychological optimism which we find almost literally 'impossible'.

A magic opera like *Alcina* could dare to be different: for *Alcina* was not an 18th-century lady, but a wicked enchantress, and she did not need to come to a good end. When passion threatens to overwhelm her, she does not need to step back from the brink; without surrender, without compromise, *Alcina* abandons herself to her passions until they do destroy her, and in doing so the enchantress becomes, paradoxically, one of the most vulnerable and fully human of Handel's operatic creations.⁷

Table Three shows the sequence of solo arias - two in each act - through which we come to know *Alcina*. All of them are in what is commonly described as 'da capo form', a piece of musical jargon of minimal helpfulness; for it tells us nothing beyond the fact that the principal section of the aria (the setting of the first quatrain or tercet or couplet of the poem) is repeated after the second section (the setting of the second couplet or tercet or quatrain). Like all Handel's characters *Alcina* is presented to us in a multitude of different moods: sometimes introspective, sometimes dynamic; sometimes blinded by passion, sometimes able to step back and comment with clear-sighted objectivity; sometimes in soliloquy, sometimes addressing others, whether beseechingly or threateningly or seductively.

Each of these aria functions has its own repertory of musical resources, and it would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that the whole variety and richness of early 18th-century music is contained in them. I have signalled something of this variety in the Table, together with a brief indication of the musical implications of the descriptive terms used.

TABLE THREE

Alcina - Alcina's arias

Act I

No.7, 'Dì, cor mio': chamber music style, framed in ritornellos
Aria

No.13, 'Sì, son quella': solo song style, with orchestral postlude in the principal
Aria section

Act II

No.24, 'Ah mio cor!': lament, with central section in concerto style
Aria

No.26/27, Recitativo accompagnato & Aria

'Ah! Ruggiero crudel - Ombre pallide': dramatic scena

Act III

No.32, 'Ma quando tornerai': concerto style, with slow dance (sarabande) in
Aria the central section

No.35, 'Mi restano le lagrime': dance song (siciliana)
Aria

Chamber-music style : suitable for intimate moods, employs a musical language in which the materials are interchanged flexibly and conversationally between voice and accompanying instruments

Solo song : accompanied simply by continuo: likely to be adopted when a character feels vulnerable, lonely, abandoned.

Dramatic scena : the operatic equivalent of the great self-communing monologues of poetic drama, drawing on all the resources in the book, but especially on those like accompanied recitative which permit a very particularized response to the poetry.

Concerto style : where vigorous or heroic action is demanded, Handel is likely to turn the aria into a concerto movement, treating the voice with the virtuosity that might be expected of a solo violin or oboe, and framing its brilliant outpourings with ritornellos for full orchestra.

Dance songs : not real dances, but arias in the manner of minuets, sarabandes, sicilianas etc.; commonly, not always, the full orchestra plays throughout, so not much is made of the ritornello versus solo episode contrasts of the concerto style, and the voice sings along with the instruments. Most of these arias are love-songs, whether joyful or tender or melancholy or heartbroken; for 'Dancing is Love's proper exercise', as the poet says.

From a dramaturgical point of view the treatment of Alcina is typical of Handelian opera, with a single large-scale aria marking the culmination of each of her interventions in the drama.

Orlando is a more disorderly tale, with a looser, more inconsequential structure. In addition to the authentic Ariosto characters, Orlando, Angelica and Medoro, it boasts two non-Ariostan figures, the shepherdess Dorinda - an at least partly humorous role - and, presiding over the whole bizarre action, a magician-prophet, whom the librettist names Zoroastro. Other Ariosto characters flit briefly in and out without having anything either to say or to sing, and other Ariosto incidents are fleetingly alluded to. The general air of bewilderment seems apt as a mirror of the turmoil in the mind of the raving Orlando, the extraordinariness of whose role comes to its climax in the great mad-scene at the close of Act II.

Table Four shows that the music of Angelica partakes of this sense of bewilderment. Some arias are relatively normal, but others, especially those containing an element of ensemble, are certainly not. They comprise a grand trio with Medoro and Dorinda at the end of Act I, and a series of extraordinary movements described some as arioso, some as duet.

TABLE FOUR

Orlando - Angelica's arias

Act I

No.10, 'Ritornava al suo bel volto'(This song is taken over by Medoro at the Arioso close)

No.11, 'Chi possessore è del mio core'(This follows the arioso after a very brief Aria recitative)

No.14, 'Se fedel vuoi ch'io ti creda'
Aria

No.16, Terzetto (with Dorinda and Medoro)
'Consolati, o bella'

Act II

No.22, 'Non potrà dirmi ingrata'
Aria

No.23, 'Verdi pianti'
Aria

(These two arias follow one another in the second scene of the act, with only some 20 bars of simple recitative separating them)

Act III

No.29, 'Così giusta è questa speme'
Aria

No.33, Duetto (with Orlando)
'Finchè prendi ancora il sangue'

No.38, 'Per far, mia diletta'(sung by Orlando, but at the close taken over by Arioso Angelica)

In her first arioso Angelica simply surrenders her song to Medoro, who, taking it up in the same style, claims it as his own. In Orlando's Act III arioso, it is Angelica who takes over the music from him, dispelling his mood of suicidal despair with a tender impulse of sympathy and consolation. Nor is the duet a duet in any conventional sense: I would rather incline to describe it as a contested song. Believing Medoro is dead, Angelica prepares for her own death at Orlando's hands, singing a cavatina in a mood of tender elegy.⁸ As one might anticipate in such an abbreviated aria, the words are sung twice, once in a move to the relative major key, and once in a parallel move back to the tonic; again as one might anticipate, each half is rounded off by an orchestral ritornello in the

appropriate key. But when we reach the Aflat ritornello, it is claimed by the raging Orlando who, by supplementing it with, as-it-were, a vocal obbligato transforms it into an expression of his own bloodthirstiness. During the second half of Angelica's song, her music is challenged, phrase by phrase, by Orlando; and he appropriates the closing ritornello as he had done the ritornello in the middle of the movement. So a piece that had begun as an elegiac lament sung by Angelica, closes as the song of Orlando's menacing insanity.

In such a movement as this Handel is surely extending the range of his resources as a musical dramatist a little further. The movement is not the parading of single passion; rather it has become, we might say, a psychological field of influence, in which the passions may be shared or contested or redirected.

To summarize so far: Handelian opera employs a dramaturgical structure which throws the passions of the characters into high relief, but treats them in a relatively generalized and stylized manner. Because of this high degree of stylization the opportunity of fruitfully varying or subverting expectation is always available. And the period's full range of musical genres and styles is at the composer's fingertips to be transcribed, adapted, plundered, cited, as appropriate, to express passions that have some congruence with these genres and styles.

Having established these general facts about Handel's practice, we may examine the music of Ginevra in *Ariodante* (dramatis personae in Table Five), in search of such finer compositional points as might be felt to shed some light on my topic: the composer's inventiveness in finding imaginative details that chime suggestively with the poetry, with the character's moods and emotions, with the dilemmas in which the drama places her. This is not simply a matter of bringing forward each of our trio of Ariostan heroines in turn to claim her share of attention. Evidently the role of Ginevra, compared with Alcina and Angelica, is designed from a different perspective again, and from a perspective which makes it reasonable to hope that her music will be particularly helpful in coming to an understanding of Handel's art of musical characterization.

TABLE FIVE

***Ariodante* : DRAMATIS PERSONAE
(from the original 1734 Libretto)**

The King of Scotland, Father of	Mr. Waltz
GENEURA [sic throughout], promis'd in Marriage to	Signora Strada
ARIODANTE, a Vassal Prince	Signor Carestini
LURCANIO, his Brother	Mr. Beard
POLINESSO, Duke of Albany	Signora Maria Negri
DALINDA, a Lady of the Court, secretly in love with Polinesso	Mrs. Young
ODOARDO, Favourite of the King	Mr. Stoppelauer

Whatever its other qualities, *Ariodante* is remarkable for the simplicity of its story and the transparency of its characters; Table Six shows how Handel used this fact. With the partial exception of the pastoral interlude of song and dance at the close of Act I, Ginevra has, at each of her appearances on stage, not one aria/duet but two. The first is sometimes designed on a simpler architectural scheme, sometimes it is cut short by a dramatic interruption, sometimes it is a "da capo aria", but in an exceptionally brief or concentrated form; later in the scene she sings a complete aria on a grander scale. The purpose of this procedure seems to be to create a musical portrait of Ginevra - not on the face of it one of Handel's most "interesting" heroines - more fastidiously

nuanced than almost any other of his heroines. When a single passion predominates (as it does in the betrothal scene, I. 5-6), its interior and extrovert facets can be set off against one another; when sharp contrasts of emotion are required (as in the opening scene), the first song can be used to define - so-to-speak - the disposition of the character, which may help make more humanly plausible the emotional outbursts set off by subsequent dramatic events.⁹

TABLE SIX

Ariodante - Ginevra's arias

Act I	
Scenes	Gabinetto reale
1-4	
No.1,	'Vezi, lusinghe': single-section "cavatina"
Arioso	
No.2,	'Orrida agli occhi miei': concerto style
Aria	
Scenes	Giardino reale
5-6	
No.6, Duetto (with Ariodante)	'Prendi da questa mano': dance song (minuet), interrupted
No.7,	'Volate, amori': concerto style
Aria	
Scenes	Valle deliziosa
12-13	
No.14, Duetto (with Ariodante) e Coro	'Se rinasce nel mio cor'
No.15, Duetto (with Ariodante) e Coro	Si godete al vostro amor': both duets are dance songs (gavottes) and use the same musical materials
Act II	
Scenes	Galleria
6-10	
No.27,	'Mi palpita il core': dance song (louré) in very concentrated form
Aria	
No.29/30, Recitativo accompagnato and Aria	'Il mio crudel martoro': dramatic scena
Act III	
Scenes	Giardino Reale
3-5	
No.43,	'Io ti bacio': exceptionally brief: 20 bars including da capo
Aria	
No.45,	'Sì, morirò
Aria	
	(Neither aria in this scene is comfortably classified. Number 43 might be described paradoxically as an orchestrally accompanied continuo song, meaning that the orchestra does little but fill out a harmonization of the vocal melody such as a continuo player might supply. Number 45 is

perhaps best conceived as a concerto style aria of rather antique format.)

- Scena
10-11 Appartamento destinato per carcere di Ginevra
No.49, 'Manca, oh Dei!' and Sinfonia: arioso interrupted by sinfonia
Arioso
No.51, Duetto (with Ariodante)
'Bramo aver mille vite/mille cori': chamber music style framed in ritornellos

The opening scene

The opera's opening scene, scenes 1-4 of Act I, provides a good illustration of the way in which Handel uses the twofold presentation of his heroine. Its central figure is Ginevra herself, but, of course, Ginevra in her untried state, before her character has been matured and purified by grief and suffering. In the arioso she sits in front of a mirror, delighting in a beauty that will enamour Ariodante the more; in the testy aria she expresses her loathing of Polinesso, Duke of Albany. In Handel's reworking of Salvi's libretto the arioso replaces a lengthy recitative conversation with Dalinda, and the effect of this substitution is to shift its focus from sisterly chatter (which includes their very different assessments of Polinesso's character) to the direct expression of a simple, rather vain and girlish happiness which plays little part in the rest of the opera. In repulsing Polinesso's avowal of love (really his ambition for the throne) she provokes the malevolence which in turn will create the trials that will temper her character.

What Ginevra sees in the mirror is the theme of the arioso, and because the mirror is part of the decor, the opening ritornello serves also as a scene-setting prelude or sinfonia. The a+b+c articulation of the opening line of text ('Vezzi, lusinghe, e brio') prompts a 3-bar incipit, and the fact that this is love music justifies its fully-scored dance style (it is a quickish sarabande). But a substantial part of the ritornello is taken up with decorative pattern-making formed of auxiliary notes and leaping octaves: Ginevra is not without vanity, in which she is, as it were, corrected with a sudden simplification and a drop in dynamics at the cadence.

Music example

1



**CLICK TO
ENLARGE**

When Ginevra begins to sing, this decorative element reappears frequently and with a variety of effects: in bars 13-31 it simply lubricates the short phrases of singing; at bar 42f it provides a peaceful background to the more simple, eloquent and sustained expression of her love; in the Coda (bars 56-73) it creates a musical stasis enfolding the self-absorbed Ginevra in decorative patterns of sound, like a woman in a Mucha poster.

In No.2 the vigour of Ginevra's hostility to Polinesso demands the resources of the concerto style: energetic passage-work, vigorous declamation, the antiphonal clash of soloist and orchestral tutti.

But the form is startlingly brusque and obsessive. The aria is one of three movements which Ginevra begins without waiting for a ritornello, and its thematic material arises almost entirely from the declamation of the opening words: the foot-stamping octave drop and reiterated notes ['a'], and the semiquaver overflow ['b'] both have the same scalic descending figure 'c' in the bass to support them (Mus.ex. 2), and these three figures are reiterated again and again during the course of the aria ['a' x 11; 'b' x 6; 'c' x 16]. The frequent concertato antiphony between voice and orchestra underlines the breathy petulance of a song where only twice in the principal section does Ginevra sustain her articulacy so far as to create 2-bar phrases (bars 11-13, 15-16). This is girlish name-calling, with little princess-like poise until the middle section of the aria.

Music example

2



**CLICK TO
ENLARGE**

The garden scene

This second scene of Act I ranks with the greatest love-scenes in Handelian opera. It begins with one of his loveliest ariosi, and closes with the first of a series of stupendous arias sung by Ariodante; the claims of state and dynasty are nobly voiced by the king; and Ginevra, who in her opening scene has given something of the impression of a spoilt child, becomes true and wholly charming in the presence of her love.

The love-duet 'Prendi da questa mano', No.6, is in minuet style; various features integrate it more fully than usual into dramatic action: the omission of the opening ritornello; the interruption of the *dal segno*; and a deployment of the voices that one might feel justified in describing as psychologically realistic. The subject and answer style of the opening phrase (1-17) gives the royal princess precedence; Ariodante, having answered this opening phrase, moves forward, so-to-speak, to harmonize, then to echo Ginevra's song; in the imitative phrases of the middle section he takes the lead. Bars 63-77 of this middle section bring together all the resources of the style: imitation (led by Ariodante), antiphony (a free inversion of that in the principal section), parallel singing. A fine rhetorical point is the speeding up of the declamation, threatening the minuet decorum at "il barbaro rigore"; and a fine musical point is the interjection of the "prendi" motif in the orchestra above the 'mai, mai' antiphony of the singing voices.

In the duet Ginevra and Ariodante pledge their love and their determination to withstand every trial of cruel destiny. In the aria 'Volate, amori' Ginevra's joy overflows in the most rapturous concerto style. While the emotional pattern of the scene is already established in Salvi's source-text, the aria text is new, presumably because Salvi's original aria, 'O scemami il diletto', had already been used by Handel in *Radamisto* (1720). Within the common language of the concerto style it would be difficult to imagine a sharper contrast than that between the fixated reiterations of No 2 and the endlessly inventive and enchanting variants Handel plays on his materials in this aria.

The opening ritornello has the threefold articulation common in this feature of the design: (a) a thematic incipit; (b) a figured sequence (which becomes the source of the melismas on "volate"); (c)

a strangely insubstantial, though repetitive, cadence phrase, which sounds as if it is echoing off into the distance. (Mus.ex. 3)

**Music
example 3**



**CLICK TO
ENLARGE**

Much of the exuberant mood of the music is owed to the florid melismas on "volate". But before they begin, the whole text has been sung to a 4-bar tune, which the orchestra echoes. It is a tune which serves as a musical image of the words: the winging cupids, the ecstatic "gioja immensa", the exhortatory cadence on "celebrar". (bars 8-12) Throughout the principal section of the aria the treatment of the melisma is deliciously inventive, beginning (15-16) with an only loosely connected variant, then with voice and orchestra in invertible counterpoint on figure b of the ritornello, but reharmonized (17-21); note, too, how the declamatory countermelody evolves into a distinctive thematic idea (violins, bars 21-22) which will be taken up again in bars 37-9.

In the middle section of the aria rhythmic discontinuity becomes a symbol of Ginevra's speechlessness; the shift from up-beat to down-beat phrases is striking; so too the derivation from the "volate" countermelody of a cunningly spun-out theme, especially its "tanto" figure, which in these 16 bars is heard no fewer than twelve times in the voice alone.

After this aria Ginevra will not sing another melismatic phrase until her final duet with Ariodante in Act III.

Act II: the gallery scene

Having taken a very full part in Act One, Ginevra is absent from the stage for most of Act II, reappearing only in its final scene. Though unaware of the vile plot of which she is the victim, she is nonetheless perplexed by the strange behaviour of her heart; is this a foreboding of joy or of pain? After she has been denounced as faithless and unchaste, the grand scena that closes the act expresses her despair in an accompanied recitative of suicidal-mythological cast, leading to a great aria in austere polyphonic style.

Despite its tiny scale, the aria No. 27 constitutes a complete da capo form. In the principal section the "palpito" that troubles Ginevra is suggested by the rhythmic highlighting of the loured effects: double-dotted notes, frequent silences, staccato instrumental articulation; the aria's introspectiveness is suggested by fact that the word-setting is almost entirely syllabic, and that the most commonly applied dynamic marking is *pp*.

The tonal pattern of the middle section ('E' gioja? o dolore? chi sa? che cos'è?') is strikingly dark, especially at the overwhelming of "gioja" by "dolore", when the circle of fifths at bars 23f goes C minor, F major, *Bflat minor*, Eflat, Aflat/*F minor*. The music stays in this subdominant minor, and the cadence by which it returns for the da capo to C minor is *almost* a plagal one: even if the final

semiquaver is read as sharp6/3, the sharp6 is missing in the instruments, giving the weakest imaginable apology for a dominant-equivalent chord. (Mus.ex. 4)

Music example

4



**CLICK TO
ENLARGE**

Ariodante is an opera in which the orchestral scoring is exceptionally full and rich: in Act II, so far, only No.22, Lurcanio's aria 'Tu vivi', has had a less than 4-part orchestral texture. It is therefore the more striking that Ginevra's closing aria, 'Il mio crudel martoro', which is composed in Handel's richest and most serious style, which is preceded by a full-scale *accompagnato*, and which is placed at the emotional climax of the opera, should have only the thinnest scoring: unison violins with continuo. Clearly this has some purpose: I would suggest the purpose of blending the eloquence of a grand dramatic scena with the interiority of chamber music.

The opening ritornello presents a series of austere instrumental patterns, which give some sense of the scale of the aria (note the slow harmonic movement, the tonal juxtapositions, the faster harmonies as the violins break into semiquavers [in other words there is expressive intensification not just surface animation]), but clearly are not thematic. When the voice begins to sing, that ritornello material proves to be the backdrop to a vocal line which is wholly declamatory and often (for example, at bars 13-17) recitative-like. The extent to which the music continually resets the words is a striking feature: note, for example, the long silent bars where Ginevra has called on death; or how at bars 27 and 35 the instruments join in a more eager and urgent statement of Ginevra's words, where previously they had served as an unimpassioned background; or how some ritornello figures are given quite different contours when they do at last materialize in the accompaniment, for example at bar 37f. Most remarkable in this respect is the closing ritornello, which bears only a faint and fleeting resemblance to the opening one (from bar 48); nor does it echo or take up material from the voice; instead it is recast in the form of a treble-bass dialogue - a dialogue which may perhaps serve to intimate the sympathy of the sentient world which had seemed so lacking in the *accompagnato* recitative and in the opening stages of the aria.

This aria was to have been followed by a ballet (only sketched in Handel's autograph score), in which two groups of dancers act out the conflict of hope and despair that troubles Ginevra's dreams. It is unlikely that it was ever performed as part of *Ariodante*: there is no mention of it in the surviving librettos, and the music was subsequently transferred to *Alcina*.

Act III

Ginevra has regained her composure to the extent of being able to bid her father a dutiful farewell (no. 43). But worse than the threat of impending death is the shame of learning that she has only Polinesso as her champion in the lists. So the love and pain of the first aria in the scene is complemented in No.45 by despair and what she feels to be ignominy. The text of this latter aria is curiously shapeless, but does perhaps mirror the grim march of the action to its climax:

Recit:Così mi lascia il padre? Oh cor, sta forte!

Il minor de' miei mali è sol la morte.

Aria: Sì, morirò, mà l'onor mio
Meco, oh Dio! morir dovrà?
Giusto Ciel,
Deh, pietà del reggio onor! [10](#)

Sinfonia for change of scene

No.43 is another tiny aria (only 18 bars, including da capo) in parlante style, in which, in an arresting reversal of customary procedure, the whole text is sung before the orchestra enters. The word-setting is entirely syllabic, save for the modest trills and graces with which Ginevra attempts to behave with proper courtly deference to her royal father; despite its extreme concentration, it has a fully scored four-part orchestral texture.

It starts, though, like a continuo song, and the sound of the solo voice singing broken phrases into the silence is its most poignant expressive effect, especially when the key seems to sink a tone (bars 2-3), one of the most desolating resources in Handel's harmonic book. Another harmonic coup, the more extraordinary because it is underlined by the first entry of the orchestra at bar 4, encapsulates in a single harmonic progression the dolce/severa paradox the aria embodies. This Neapolitan 6th resolving on to V7 in third inversion [with the pedal note G binding the two harmonies] provides also the crucial expressive move in the middle section:

d c Eflat [A] d in principal section (bars 1-5) is paralleled by
F g Bflat [E] a in the central section (bars 8-11) (Mus.ex. 5)

Music example 5



**CLICK TO
ENLARGE**

In No. 45 the scene's turmoil of emotions is reflected in the irregularity of form and manner: recit - largo - allegro, without da capo, and accompanied by an orchestra in which obbligato instruments contend in different styles. Instead of being laid out in the usual aria form, the text is treated like a (baroque) sonata or concerto movement in which the principal allegro is preceded by an adagio introduction. The instrumental provenance of the style is underlined by the scoring, with violin and cello solos in addition to a 5-part string ensemble. And the effect of this - because of the music's rhythmic relentlessness and fulness of scoring - is that the orchestra less supports Ginevra's song than sweeps her along on its own momentum. Although the second part of the aria text, on which the greater part of the aria is built, is ostensibly a prayer, even here Handel does not allow Ginevra to take shaping control of it. And all this is apt, because by this juncture she feels herself utterly powerless, utterly at the mercy of a malign destiny.

The opera's closing scene includes a tragic cantabile for the condemned heroine, which is interrupted by a fanfare-like sinfonia announcing deliverance, and the second of her love-duets with

Ariodante. This is her first full da capo piece in Act III and her first happy music since Act I. Its relatively lean scoring (unisoni violins, viola and continuo) allows the lovers maximum space for their florid jublations. Its finest expressive point comes in the middle section, where the setting of the text makes a feeble figure of speech deliciously eloquent. The (in-itself-senseless) phrase 'ma in questo che ti dono' veers in replication round the tonal universe [E-A, A-D, Fsharp-B, B-E], then the voices join for a moment in a phrase that gives the whole section a grammatical backbone ['più che in mille, vi sono'], before drawing every expressive resource together to realize 'constanza, amor, fè': over a suddenly broadening bass line the voices abandon their antiphonal carollings and entwine in tender lyricism, richly laden with suspensions and, for the only time in the duet, supported by four-part orchestral harmony.

Evidently, in undertaking an analytical scrutiny of Handel's operatic arias, many topics are worth investigation:

The placing of the arias in the unfolding of the dramatic action.

The varieties or liberties or reinterpretations of design and scale which Handel takes with the aria form.

What one might describe as the generic variety of the arias (dance-song, concerto-aria etc.), and how these generic varieties are combined, or borrowed from, or cross-fertilize with one another.

The contrasts of tuneful song and florid song and declamatory song, of abrupt and expansive phrasing, of the measured or hurried or lingering delivery of the words, all of which commonly transform the vocal line - at least, transform significant, salient passages of the vocal line - into an ideogram (to borrow Luigi Dallapiccola's term) of its poetic/dramatic purpose.

The relationship of this vocal line with the orchestral framework and accompaniment in which it is set, a relationship which might include contrapuntal, harmonic and colouristic factors.

No doubt the list might be extended, but that will suffice. The present examination of aspects of *Alcina*, *Orlando* and *Ariodante* suggests that the sum of these things constitutes something like a methodology for the representation of character in Handelian opera.

University of Edinburgh

Endnotes.

[1](#) G.E. Dorris, *Paolo Rolli and the Italian Circle in London* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton & Co, 1967), p.150.

[2](#) G.E. Dorris, op.cit. pp.197f. Despite their professional association, Rolli and Handel were not on particularly cordial terms. Writing to a friend, the castrato Senesino, in 1729 and 1730, Rolli describes himself as 'always most reserved towards [Handel]', and judged his operas to be 'worthless'. Deutsch, *Handel*, A Documentary Biography (London: A. & C. Black, 1955), pp. 237, 254. Handel, for his part, at least felt that Rolli's librettos were sufficiently serviceable to return to them again for his very last opera, *Deidamia* (London 1741).

[3](#) W. Dean & J.M. Knapp, *Handel's Operas, 1704-1726*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987 (rev. ed. 1995)

[4](#) Quotations are from 'Mr. Pope's Preface' in *Prologomena to the Dramatick Writings of Will. Shakspeare*, Volume the first (London: 1788), p. 7, and 'Dr. Johnson's Preface' in *Prologomena to the Dramatick Writings of Will. Shakspeare*, Volume the first (London: 1788), pp.113-114.

[5](#) This and the following quotation are from Burney's *General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period (1789)* in Burney, *General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (ed) Frank Mercer, Vol. II (London: Foulis & Co, 1935), p.762.

[6](#) Burney, *General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (ed) Frank Mercer, Vol. II (London: Foulis & Co, 1935), p.762.

[7](#) Cf. Winton Dean's discussion in *Handel and the Opera Seria* (London: OUP, 1970)

[8](#) The term "cavatina" is used in accounts of early 18th-century music to indicate a short aria in one single section, lacking, that is to say, the middle section and repeated principal section of the full-scale "da capo aria".

[9](#) There is of course nothing absolutely new about a character singing more than one aria in a scene; it was commonplace in 17th-century opera, and Handel himself had done it often enough in his earlier works, most obviously in his very first opera, *Almira, Königin von Kastilien* (Hamburg 1704). What makes his treatment of Ginevra in *Ariodante* noteworthy is the fact that the pattern is so systematic, and that it comes from a period when Handel had long adopted the more usual 18th-century procedure illustrated in *Alcina*.

[10](#) The final line of this lyric would at least rhyme if the word-order were inverted: 'Deh, del reggio onor pietà'.