

Muzio Scevola, HWV 13
Rome, 500 BC

Overture

War is raging in three continents.

Our characters:

ORLANDO, a count, on his inevitable descent into madness – Andrew Rader, countertenor

LURCANIO, his rival – Christopher Sokolowski, tenor

ELMIRA, being romantically pursued by Lurcanio – Martha Eason, soprano

CLEOFIDE, Lurcanio's sister, formerly in a relationship with Orlando – Evelyn Nelson, soprano

AGILEA, a young maidservant, observing Orlando's descent – Kathryn Summersett, soprano

FENICE, friend to Lurcanio, formerly loyal to Orlando – Kevin de Benedictis, baritone

We bring you a sampling this evening of a dozen of G. F. Handel's Italian operas. His opera Muzio Scevola is a peculiarity in that Handel only wrote the third and final Act. This opera was commissioned as a scheme for three composers to show their wares, an unofficial 'competition,' of sorts, at least in the London public's eye. As the eminent Handel scholar Winton Dean states, "...there was no doubt about its verdict."

Act I is by Filippo Amadei, who also happened to be a cellist in Handel's orchestra, and Act II by Giovanni Bononcini, both celebrated opera composers of the time.

Each composer was allowed an Overture. Handel was clearly aware that London theatre-goers would be making comparisons, therefore he jam-packed his Third Act with much variety and detail.

Please enjoy our selection of some of Handel's rarely performed treasures; there are 27 more operas where these came from, and they're all good...

Orlando, HWV 31
France, 8th century

Wars aside, Agilea has a few words on love...

AGILEA

*Amor è qual vento,
che gira il cervello;
ho inteso che a cento
comincia bel bello
a farli godere,
mà un corto piacere
da un lungo dolor.*

*Se uniti due cori
si credon beati,
gelosi timore
li fan sfortunati;
se un cor è sprezzato,
divien arrabbiato,
così fà l'amor.*

Love is like the wind,
that spins the brain;
I have understood that to hundreds
it begins very well
to be enjoyable,
but a short pleasure
brings a long sorrow.

If two hearts are united
they believe themselves blessed,
jealous fears
make them unfortunate;
if a heart is burst,
it becomes angry,
such is love.

Ariodante, HWV 33
Scotland, 8th century

Lurcanio has long been pursuing Elmira, but she refuses to hear his words of love.

LURCANIO

*Del mio sol vezzi rai
v'ascondete ora da me,
mà perchè?
senza voi viver non sò.*

*Quell' ardor che da voi scese,
che m'accese,
e m'arde ancora,
e arderà per sin ch'io mora
quei la vita al cor donò.*

The sun's charming rays
are now hidden from me alone,
but why?
Without you, I don't know how to live.

This intensity that descends from you
lights me up,
and fires me still,
and will burn me until I die;
it gives life to my heart.

Orlando
France, 8th century

ORLANDO

*Imagini funeste, che turbate quest' alma,
e non avrò sopra di voi la palma?
Sì, già vi fuggo e corro, a inalzar col valor novi trofei!
Ti rendo, oh bella gloria, i affetti miei!
Mà, che parlo, e non moro!
e lascerò quel idolo che adoro?
Nò! parto! e fia mia gloria
più servir ad amor, ch'aver vittoria!*

*Non fù già men forte Alcide
benche in sen d'Onfale bella
spesso l'armi egli posò.*

*Nè men fiero il gran Pelide
sotto spoglie di donzella
d'Asia i regni minacciò.*

Funereal images, that disturb this soul,
and shall I not be victorious over you?
Yes, I've fled, and raised new trophies with valor!
I return my affections to you, oh beautiful glory!
But what am I saying, and I am not dying!
And I shall leave that idol whom I adore?
No! I go! And may my glory be
more to serve love than to obtain victory!

Hercules was not less strong
in the bosom of beautiful Omphale
as when he often lay down his arms.

Nor less fierce the great Achilles
concealed in a woman's dress
threatening the kingdoms of Asia.

Deidamia, HWV 28
Scyros, 1200 BC

Sinfonia

Fenice observes Orlando's reckless ways.

FENICE

*Al tardar della vendetta
o la scorda, o non l'aspetta,
e sen ride l'offensor.*

*A fin l'empio scorgere suole,
che in esempio il Ciel lo vuole
gastigato dell' error.*

At the delay of vengeance
either forget it, or don't expect it,
and laugh at the offender.

The villain who finally reaches his goal,
made an example in Heaven,
is chastised for his error.

Rodrigo, HWV 5
Hispania, 8th century

Cleofide has been betrayed in love by Orlando, distracted by his heroic ambitions, and seeks counsel from her brother Lurcanio.

LURCANIO

*Fra le spine offre gl'allori
di sua man la gloria a noi.*

*E non è sparso di fiori
il sentiero degli eroi.*

Among thorns, the laurels offer
glory to us with its own hand.

And the paths of heroes are not strewn with flowers.

Porò, HWV 28
India, 300 BC

An auspicious turn of events in the battleground bring Cleofide and Orlando into a reconciliation. They pledge a reaffirmation of their love.

CLEOFIDE/ORLANDO

*Caro/Dolce amico amplesso!
al mio seno / al core oppresso
già dai vita e fai goder;*

*tua mi rendo, / a te mi dono,
idol mio, fedel ti sono,
son per te costante e forte;
teco voglio vita e morte;
spera, oh bella/cara, e non temer!*

Dear/Sweet friendly embrace!
At my breast / To an overwhelmed heart
it already gives life and makes pleasure;

I return to you, / I give myself to you,
my idol, I am faithful to you,
I am constant and strong for you;
with you I want life and death;
hope, oh beautiful / dear, and do not be afraid!

Partenope, HWV 27
Naples, in antiquity

LURCANIO

*Contro un pudico amor cotanto sdegno, protervi Dei?
perchè soffrite che dalle mie bandiere ribellasse fortuna?
ah! sventurato amante,
ah! infelice guerriero!
quando spero aver gloria e un volto amato,
m'è contrario l'amor, nemico il fato.*

*Barbaro fato, sì,
la speme mi tradi;
povero amore!*

*Non veggo nelle stelle,
al foco mio rubelle,
che rabbia, crudeltà, sdegno, furore.*

Such scorn against a pure love, arrogant gods?
Why should my followers suffer a rebellious fate?
Ah, forlorn lover,
unhappy warrior!
When I hope to have glory and for once to be loved,
love is averse to me, fate is the enemy.

Barbaric fate, yes,
hope betrays me;
pitiful love!

I don't see in the stars,
stolen from my fire,
anything but rage, cruelty, scorn, and furor.

Silla, HWV 10
Rome, 80 BC

Orlando confronts Lurcanio for his disrespect and lack of morals; Agilea intervenes, attempting to alleviate the mounting conflict between the two men.

ORLANDO

*Con tromba guerriera
m'invita la fama l'orgoglio a pugnar.*

*D'un alma severa
gloriosa vittoria saprò riportar.*

With warlike trumpet
fame invites me to punish pride.

Having a stern soul,
I shall know how to summon up glorious victory.

Teseo, HWV 9

Athens, in legendary antiquity

Agilea checks in on Orlando, sensing that he may be leading himself into danger. She is also concerned with her friend Fenice, and begs Orlando to learn his fate. She prays to the gods for both men.

AGILEA

*Deh serbate, oh giusti Dei,
quella vita per cui vivo,
o pria fatemi morir!*

Please keep him alive, oh just gods,
that life for whom I live,
or first make me die!

*Che più viver non saprei,
se di vita fosse privo
chi può sol farmi gioir.*

I will not know how to live any longer
if he were to be deprived of life;
he who alone can make me happy.

Sosarme, re di Media, HWV 30

Lydia, in antiquity

Elmira, also concerned with the fate of Orlando and the others at battle, sends a bird to return with news of their safety.

ELMIRA

*Vola l'angelo del caro nido,
mà sempre fido
a quel ritorna la cara sua per consolar.*

The bird flies from its dear nest,
but always faithful
on its return to console its darling.

*La tigre ancora
se mai s'accora
scorda fiera senza quando il suo sangue vuol riamar.*

Yet if the tiger is ever worried,
it forgets its pride
when its blood wants to love again.

Sosarme

Lydia, in antiquity

ELMIRA/ORLANDO

*Per le porte del tormento
passan l'anime a gioir.*

By the gates of torment
souls pass in order to be joyful.

*Sta il contento
del cordoglio sul confine,
non v'è rosa senza spine,
nè piacer senza martir.*

Pleasure remains
of anguish on the frontier,
for you there is no rose without thorns,
nor pleasure without torture.

Arminio, HWV 36

Germany, under the Roman Empire, 9 AD

Lurcanio's agenda is upset by Elmira's attention to Orlando; he requests Fenice's assistance.

*Mira il Ciel, vedrai d'Alcide
e le guerriere armi omicide
lampeggiar cinte di stelle.*

Observe the heavens, you'll see Hercules
and the armed bloodthirsty warriors
shooting flashing belts of constellations.

*Ma nel tempio ancor di Gnido
il possente Dio Cupido,
splendor fà l'anime ancelle.*

But even in the temple of Knidos
the powerful god Cupid
makes the souls of maidservants sparkle.

Giulio Cesare in Egitto, HWV 17

Egypt, 48 BC

Orlando has been missing, and Cleofide fears he will never return. She blames her brother Lurcanio for all he has deprived her of, when she hears a sudden noise.

Orlando has heroically survived. He convinces her he is not a ghost, and urges her to rally their dispersed troops and join him in battle. His new ambition is to conquer not only Egypt, but the world.

CLEOFIDE

*Da tempeste il legno infranto,
se poi salvo giunge in porto,
non sà più che desiar.*

In storms the wrecked ship,
if it can safely make it to port,
knows nothing more than desire.

*Così il cor trà pene e pianto,
or che trova il suo conforto,
torna l'anima a bear.*

Thus the heart, amongst its suffering and tears,
now that it finds its comfort,
changes the course of the soul into happiness.

Ariodante

Scotland, 8th century

Elmira has at last perceived the clarity of Lurcanio's love. Blaming her earlier innocence, she hopes that she is now worthy of him.

LURCANIO

*Dite spera, e son contento,
dolci labbra del mio ben!*

ELMIRA

*Spera, spera io già mi pento,
novo ardor m'accende il sen.*

Say there's hope, and I'll be content,
sweet lips of my beloved!

There's hope, I already regret my mistakes,
new ardor enflames my breast.

LURCANIO

Dunque amasti? o Dio, che sento!

ELMIRA

...un traditor!

LURCANIO

Ami ancor?

ELMIRA

*Io già mi pento,
che si male amai sin' or.*

So you loved him? Oh god, what am I hearing?

...a traitor!

Do you still love him?

I already repented
having loved that bad man until now.

Orlando

France, 8th century

ORLANDO

*Ah! stigie larve, scelerati spettri,
che la perfida donna ora ascondete,
perchè al mio amor offeso
al mio giusto furor non la rendete?*

Ah, Stygian ghosts, villainous spectres,
who are now hiding the treacherous woman,
why, to my offended love,
to my justified fury, don't you return her?

*Ah! misero e schernito, l'ingrata già m'ha ucciso!
Sono lo spirito mio da me diviso,
sono un ombra, e qual ombra adesso io voglio
varcar la giù ne' regni del cordoglio!*

Miserable and mocked, the ingrate has already killed me!
I have been separated from my own spirit,
I am a shade, and as a shade I now want
to surmount the reign of anguish!

*Ecco la stigia barca;
di Caronte a dispetto
già solco l'onde nere.
Ecco di Pluto le affumicate soglie,
e l'arso letto!*

Here is the Stygian boat;
in spite of Charon
I already plow the black waves.
Here Pluto's smoldering thresholds
and the burnt bed!

*Già latra Cerbero,
e già dell' Erebo
ogni terribile squalida furia sen viene a me!*

Already Cerberus barks,
and already from hell
every terrible miserable fury comes to trouble me!

But that fury, who alone has been torturing me, where is she? It is Lurcanio!
I see him fleeing in the arms of Proserpina, now I am running to tear her away from him...

Ah! Proserpina is weeping?
My fury is abated if even in hell one weeps of love!

*Vaghe pupille, non piangete, nò,
che del pianto ancor nel regno
può in ogn'un destar pietà.*

Lovely eyes, do not weep, no,
for even in the kingdom of tears
it may awaken pity in each.

*Mà sì, pupille, piangete, che sordo al vostro incanto,
ho un core d'adamanto,
nè calma il mio furor.*

But yes, eyes, weep, for deaf to your enchantment,
I have a heart of diamond,
nor can my fury be calmed.

Deidamia
Scyros, 1200 BC

Fenice and Agilea discuss the age old trials of love and war. Constancy, affection, afflictions of the heart: Fenice's values in love are a lesson for all.

FENICE

*Degno più di tua beltà,
questo cor ritornerà
dalle prove del valor.*

More worthy of your beauty,
this heart will return
with proofs of its valor.

*Lo sprezzante tuo piacer
perch'ho l'animo guerrier
è a te d'onta, a me d'onor.*

The disdain of your pleasure
because I have a warrior's soul
is to you shameful, to me honorable.

Ariodante
Scotland, 8th century

CORO
*Ogn' uno acclami bella virtute,
che sempre lieta sa trionfar.*

Everyone applauds beautiful virtue,
that, always happy, knows how to be victorious.

*Sa trionfar ogn' or
virtute in ogni cor,
se l'innocenza bella ha sol per scorta;
sa innamorar il Ciel,
sprezzar di Parca il tel,
portar la gioja all' alma, e la conforta.*

Every virtuous heart
knows how to be victorious,
if beautiful innocence has the sun as her escort;
Heaven knows how to inspire with love,
the curtain to scorn Fate,
to carry joy to the soul, and soothe it.