



Handel's Portraits of Italy in the Early Chamber Cantatas

Ellen T. Harris

Introduction by Jane A. Bernstein

This presentation was given at the 1909th Stated Meeting, held at the House of the Academy on December 13, 2006. It was followed by a musical performance by Pamela Dellal, mezzo-soprano; Daniel Ryan, cello; and Michael Beattie, harpsichord.

Ellen T. Harris is the Class of 1949 Professor of Music at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 1998.

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Portrait of G. F. Handel. Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale, Bologna, Italy. © Bridgeman-Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.



Jane A. Bernstein

It is a great pleasure to introduce my dear friend and colleague, Ellen T. Harris, one of the most distinguished musicologists of our generation. She is the Class of 1949 Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Before coming to MIT, Harris taught at Columbia University and at the University of Chicago, where she served as Chair of the

Department of Music. An outstanding scholar of Baroque music, she is considered one of the foremost experts on the music of George Frideric Handel.

Harris's interest in musicology began during her undergraduate years at Brown University. Her teacher Ivan Waldbauer recognized her talents and urged her to pursue graduate studies at the University of Chicago. The late 1960s were not an easy time for women in the academic world. There were no role models for us, and social expectations at that time went against women pursuing a career in higher education. During her first year as a graduate student, she sought the advice of the eminent musicologist, Edward Lowinsky. Now, Lowinsky was not generally known for his kind mentorship of students. But he realized Ellen's brilliant potential and encouraged her – indeed, he insisted that she continue her studies in musicology. Her other teachers at Chicago included such luminaries as Howard Mayer Brown, Leonard Meyer, Philip Gossett, and her thesis advisor, Robert Marshall.

Her dissertation on the pastoral genre in Handel was an interdisciplinary study on national styles in seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century literature and music drama in Italy, Germany, and England. Soon published as *Handel and the Pastoral Tradition*, it became the definitive monograph on the subject, one that would resonate in her later works.

Both scholarship and performance have always played an important role in Professor Harris's oeuvre. In 1987, she simultaneously brought out her second book on Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* along with a new critical edition of the musical score. Her volume was the first full-length study of Purcell's masterpiece. It delved into the opera's historical and cultural background, considered the libretto from the perspective of prevailing literary conventions, and discussed eighteenth- and late-nineteenth-century performance practices. Only two years later, she oversaw a thirteen-volume critical facsimile edition of seventy-one librettos documenting Handel's operatic career.

Over the years, numerous articles and reviews by Professor Harris concerning opera, performance practice of vocal music after 1600, and the English Baroque have appeared in many journals and newspapers. One of my favorites, "Handel the Investor," which won the prestigious Jack Westrup Prize, moves from the musical to the economic world as it elucidates Handel's financial expertise through an investigation of the accounts he held at the Bank of England.

Of all her publications, the jewel in the crown is her latest book, *Handel as Orpheus: Voice and Desire in the Chamber Cantatas*. A milestone in Handel research, it not only explores the Italian cantata – a hitherto neglected yet important genre in the Handelian repertory – but also places these chamber works in their social and cultural context, and in so doing opens a window onto the life of a very private composer. For this publication, Harris was honored with the two top book awards in her field: the Louis Gottschalk Prize from the Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and the Otto Kinkeldey Award from the American Musicological Society.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention Professor Harris's extraordinary accomplishments as an administrator. Upon her arrival at MIT she served as Associate Provost for the Arts. In that capacity, she published articles on censorship in the arts and arts education that appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *The Aspen Institute Quarterly*. Last year she was honored with the Gyorgy Kepes Prize for her contributions to the arts at MIT.

Finally – and I'm saving the best for last – Ellen Harris is also a very talented musician. Many of us have had the pleasure of hearing her live musical demonstrations during her presentations, but few know that she could have pursued a career as an opera singer. During her years as a graduate student, she trained at the American Conservatory and became an active member of the Repertory Opera Theater in Chicago. She continued to study voice privately while an Assistant Professor at Columbia and was about to audition for the New York City Opera when she was offered a position at the University of Chicago. At that point she chose to follow the path that led to the academy. Nonetheless, she has performed as a soprano soloist at two of Boston's great landmarks: Fenway Park, where in 1991 she sang the National An-

them, and Symphony Hall, when she made her 1997 Boston Pops debut under the baton of John Williams.

George Frideric Handel, famous for his English oratorios and, of course, his masterpiece *Messiah*, is one of the most illustrious composers of all time to write for the voice. And, as we will hear tonight, given Ellen Harris's exceptional talents as a scholar and singer, she is the preeminent person to talk about this great composer's life and music.



Ellen T. Harris

The confluence of Handel and the month of December has traditionally meant a performance of *Messiah*. Nowadays, as a result of the ever-expanding Handel opera revival, it could also mean the opening of an opera production, as with the Metropolitan Opera production of *Rodelinda* in 2004. My topic tonight, however, is neither opera nor oratorio, but rather the musically rich cache of Italian chamber cantatas that Handel wrote before his composition of either opera or oratorio had reached full maturity. Because some of these survive in fragmentary form and others in multiple versions, it is difficult to say exactly how many cantatas Handel composed – in the same way that we are comfortable declaring, for example, that he wrote forty-two operas – but one hundred is about right.

In late 1705 or early 1706, when Handel was twenty, he crossed the Alps – or possibly just took the sea route from Hamburg – to Italy. In Germany, his experiences as a professional musician had been exclusively in the public arena. In 1702, while studying law at the university in his hometown of Halle, he took a

position as a church organist; but in 1703 he left his studies and his job, possibly under the influence of his friend Georg Philipp Telemann at Leipzig, and traveled to Hamburg to try his hand at opera. At the public opera house, he was hired first as a freelance orchestral musician, but quickly took on composing and conducting responsibilities after his talent was discovered. Over three years, he composed four operas for Hamburg; the music survives for only one.

Once in Italy, Handel moved away from composing and performing in the public sphere and into the world of private patronage. His Italian compositions, with the exception of

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his opera *Agrippina* for the public opera of Venice, were written for private performance in the apartments, chapels, or theaters of his private patrons, including the Medici in Florence; the Cardinals Pamphili, Ottoboni, and Colonna, as well as the Marchese (later Prince) Ruspoli in Rome; and the Duke Gaetani d'Aragona and his wife Aurora Sanseverino in Naples.

Handel did not secure long-term employment at any of these houses, where many musicians were regularly engaged, perhaps because of his nationality and Lutheran religion. It may also be that Handel deliberately avoided accepting this kind of commitment. Like his father, a surgeon who held court appointments but also maintained a large city practice, Handel never accepted a position like the one held later by Haydn at Esterhazy, which involved specific daily duties in service of an employer. While in Italy, he largely maintained his independence, working without salary as a guest of his hosts and returning music for hospitality.

After leaving Italy in 1710, Handel took a position at the court of Hanover, and the employment was such that it gave him, or required him to take, extensive entrepreneurial opportunities. Although the Elector of Hanover, Georg Ludwig, was second in line to the throne of England after his mother Sophie, the dowager electress, Queen Anne, the last of the Stuart monarchs, wanted none of the electoral family in England during her reign. As a result, the Hanoverians were dependent on political envoys in London for delivering communications from Hanover and gathering information to send back. Handel's strong desire to try his hand at public opera in London therefore served the Elector's interests. He was allowed to travel, or was sent, to that city with the freedom to

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make independent professional explorations but also, undoubtedly, with the task of ingratiating himself at the highest levels of society and returning information. In his first year in London (from late 1710 to the summer of 1711), Handel quickly made his way into the inner circles of Anne's court and also scored a huge hit with his first Italian opera for London, *Rinaldo*. He wrote not one note for Hanover, but on his return there a year later, was duly paid for his services.

Handel traveled again to London late in 1712, but this time he ran into difficulties with his German employer. Queen Anne, having negotiated a peace agreement with France in the War of Spanish Succession, requested that Handel compose a *Te Deum* for the national day of celebration. As the queen's separate peacemaking was strongly opposed by her German and Dutch allies, her choice of Handel to compose the celebratory music was at least partly a political move, for the participation of the Hanoverian court composer on such a public occasion would suggest a wider international agreement than existed. The Elector, adamantly refusing to

be implicated in Britain's unilateral peace, resolved the issue by firing Handel. The Hanoverian envoy in London then strove to calm tempers all around. In the end, Handel's dismissal stood, and as is well-known, he composed the *Utrecht Te Deum* and *Jubilate* for Queen Anne. When the dust settled, however, the envoy wrote in numeric code to the Elector that Handel "will continue to tell me all he knows." Georg Ludwig, of course, became king of England in 1714.

The 1710s were a tumultuous time for England and for Handel, and at many points the composer may not have been sure of his future. His personal goal was clearly to write opera, and with the establishment of the Royal Academy of Music in 1719 this dream became reality. Before this time, however, Handel had sought out alternate means of support, including the kind of private patronage he had experienced in Italy. Although the vast bulk of his cantatas were written in Italy, one or two can be associated with Hanover, and a handful come from these years in London as a result of the patronage of Lord Burlington, the Earl of Carnarvon (later the Duke of Chandos), and perhaps others. When Handel acquired his own house in 1723, he finally became independent of the hospitality of patrons. Freed from the necessity to write private music, he chose never again to write a chamber cantata.

Between 1600 and 1750, the Italian chamber cantata was arguably the most pervasive form of vocal music. Unlike the Protestant church cantata, the chamber cantata was typically for one singer with a *continuo* accompaniment consisting of harpsichord and cello (or one or the other of these instruments). Sometimes the cantata took on a more expansive and often more dramatic form with the inclusion of additional singers and instrumental forces, but by far the most common type was a succession of two arias preceded by recitative for solo voice and *continuo*. The texts were generally secular and in a pastoral idiom. Although the majority of the cantata shepherds pine for lost or unrequited love, a few, in reference to the War of Spanish Succession, talk of putting down their pipes and taking up arms, while others represent spiritual shepherds pursuing lost souls.

Given its diminutive size, the chamber cantata was typically written for private performance, either for an aristocratic patron or for meetings of elite intellectual societies, such

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as the Arcadian Academy in Rome, a city in which there was a good deal of overlap between the private *conversazione*, or salons, of individual patrons and the meetings of the Academy. Although most of the cantata texts remain anonymous, some can be attributed to the patrons themselves or other Academy members. Giovanni Maria Crescimbeni, one of the founders of the Arcadian Academy, describes the cantata as a literary genre invented in the seventeenth century specifically for the purpose of musical composition. It uses long and short line lengths (typically mixed seven- and eleven-syllable lines, or *versi sciolti*, in the recitative; and eight-syllable lines in the arias) without a regular rhyme scheme. By and large, Handel's cantatas adhere to all of these norms.

Although Handel wrote most of his cantatas in Italy, a group of about ten new cantatas and ten revised cantatas originate later in England, and the popularity of the genre in both countries led to the publication of many books of cantatas, making these works available for home performance even to those who did not, or could not, commission cantatas themselves. Alessandro Marcello published a book of twelve cantatas in Venice, in 1708, when Handel was in Italy. Albinoni's book of 1702 was dedicated to the Medici who were among Handel's patrons. Bononcini and Ariosti, Handel's operatic rivals in England, published books of Italian cantatas in London in 1721 and 1728, respectively. And the English composer Thomas Roseingrave published a set in 1735 with texts by Paolo Rolli, a member of the Arcadian Academy whose poems Handel also set in London. Handel, however, never published any of his cantatas, which is surprising not only because of the widespread popularity of cantata books, but also because he published in all the other genres in which he composed.

Handel knew the musical value of his cantatas and certainly did not withhold them because he felt them lacking in quality. Indeed, he frequently turned to the cantatas for inspiration in the composition of later works. Some of his early operas, such as *Agrippina* and *Rinaldo*, may be said to be largely based on borrowings from cantatas; but even in his last oratorio, *Jephtha*, of 1751, Handel dipped into the cantatas for musical material. Did Handel decline to publish his cantatas because he had made the decision to rely on them compositionally, or did he decide to reuse the glorious music they contained because he had made up his mind not to publish them as cantatas? The answer, of course, cannot be known, but the question is one we will want to think about in the course of the evening.

The sheer number of baroque cantatas, and their seeming lack of singularity, given the apparently repetitive pastoral imagery, has discouraged scholarly and musical attention.¹ It is difficult, therefore, to place Handel's cantatas fully into their musical context; however, I can say with assurance that his contributions to the genre are lacking in neither quality nor individuality. Handel's reuse of the music attests to this on the musical side, and the texts, once closely examined, begin to come alive with well-defined portraits of his patrons. That is, just as the classical pastorals of Theocritus and Virgil depict contemporary personalities and issues, so do the pastoral texts Handel set to music. In the large dramatic cantata *Oh, come chiare*, for example, Handel's patron is depicted in the character of the shepherd Olinto, who says he will exchange his pastoral bagpipe for the warlike trumpet; Olinto Arsenio was the pastoral name Ruspoli assumed in the Arcadian Academy. The other characters are the Tiber River and Glory. All three are led by a benevolent star (*astro clemente*), referring to Pope Clement XI. The cantata *Stelle, perfide stelle!* describes the pain of departure on leaving Rome and a lover behind, and its subtitle reads *Partenza di G. B.* I have argued that this work might be in the 'voice' of (Georg) von Binitz, who, according to Handel's friend, Johann Mattheson, traveled with Handel to

Italy; he may also be the companion of Handel mentioned in the Ruspoli documents.

All of the music Handel wrote for Naples can be associated with the wedding of Tolomeo Gallio, Duke of Alvito, and Beatrice Tocco on July 19, 1708. The serenata (that is, a large-scale cantata) *Acis, Galatea e Polifemo* is specifically tied to Alvito in Handel's manuscript where he signs the work "Napoli li 16 di Giugno, 1708 d'Alvito." The bride was the niece of Aurora Sanseverino, who appears, at least phonetically, as Handel's Neapolitan patron in the composer's biography published by John Mainwaring in 1760, one year after the composer's death. Mainwaring is a critical source, as he must have received his information about Handel's pre-London years direct-

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ly from the composer, either first- or second-hand. Given the Italian title of Donna, the patroness would have been called by Handel Donn' Aurora, which was duly transmitted by the Englishman as Donna Laura, creating a confusion that took years to unravel.

The story of *Acis, Galatea e Polifemo* tells of the love of Acis and Galatea and the death of Acis at the hands of the raging monster, Polyphemus. It may initially be difficult to understand why this tale would be appropriate for a wedding, but the answer lies in metaphor. At the very beginning of the serenata, Acis describes himself as a stream that rushes "among tree-roots and rocks until it at last arrives murmuring with silver steps to kiss the seashore"; after his death he undergoes a metamorphosis into just such a stream, rushing to the sea to be united perpetually with the sea nymph Galatea. The union of the rushing river with the bosom of the sea was an image commonly used to represent undying love.

In another cantata that Handel set in Naples at the same time as *Acis, Galatea e Polifemo*, and probably by the same author, Nicola Giuvo, the text explains the metaphor clearly. *Sento là che ristretto* begins with a description of a

brook in the "narrow confine of stumps and rocks," struggling through high banks to unite itself with the sea. After the first aria, in which the river yearns for the sea, the text continues: "Nice, I am the brook, and the beautiful sea is your soft breast." The singer in this cantata is surely that of the bridegroom, and his beloved Nice the bride, Beatrice. In the cantata *Nell'africane selve* the singer again addresses Nice, describing himself as a lion that has been captured by the beauty of her eyes. In *Nel dolce tempo* a shepherd relates how he saw and fell in love with a shepherdess; no names are given but the location is identified by the textual reference to the Volturno River that flows into the sea just north of Naples after passing Piedimonte d'Alife, the primary residence of Donna Aurora.

In Rome, the cantatas most closely identified with portraits of specific individuals are those associated with, and having texts by, Cardinal Pamphili, Handel's first Roman patron. During the first half of 1707, Handel set four cantatas and one oratorio with texts by Pamphili. At least three of these point specifically to Handel or Pamphili, and describe Pamphili's admiration for the young composer. We tend now to picture Handel exclusively as a stout, older man in a full-bottomed wig, but this is a false image of the younger man. He is described by the Dowager Electress of Hanover as "quite a handsome man," and a musician "who surpasses everyone who has ever been heard in harpsichord-playing and composition."² He was also highly educated and cultured. Prince Ferdinand de' Medici stresses his gentility, and not his musicianship, in a letter of recommendation stating that Handel had "honest sentiments, civility of manners, and full command of several languages."³

Pamphili's attraction to Handel raises the issue of homoeroticism in the cantata. The pastoral poetry of Theocritus and Virgil freely encompassed both same-sex and heterosex-

1. See Ellen T. Harris, *Handel as Orpheus: Voice and Desire in the Chamber Cantatas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), for an in-depth study and for further references.

2. As quoted in Donald Burrows, "Handel and Hanover," in *Bach, Handel, Scarlatti: Tercentenary Essays*, ed. Peter Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 39.

3. As quoted in Carlo Vitali, "Italy – political and musical contexts," in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, ed. Donald Burrows (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 43.

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ual love and treated both as beautiful to gain and painful to lose, and the Italian cantata followed this model. Further, Roman aristocratic (and Arcadian) society honored same-sex love in this classical tradition despite draconian legal prohibitions against sexual relationships between men. I hope in my lifetime it will become unnecessary to point out that, like heterosexuality, homosexual relationships span a wide range of human emotion, from admiration and longing to passionate love and sex. That Pamphili's texts seem to cover a goodly part of this range tells us nothing about either Handel's reaction to Pamphili or his feelings upon being given these texts to set. Nor can we glean anything definitive from the reports that later in life Handel referred to Pamphili as an "old fool"⁴ or that he is rumored to have had an affair with a prima donna while in Italy.⁵ Even if true, neither anecdote would close the possibility of a reciprocal relationship of some kind between the composer and the cardinal.

In Pamphili's text for the oratorio *Il trionfo del tempo ed il disinganno*, which Handel set in May of 1707, Pleasure, on the one side, and Time and Undeception, or Truth, on the other, compete for the soul of Beauty. Music exists in Pleasure's kingdom, and when Beauty hears the sound of an organ, she immediately asks for the origin of the heavenly tone. Pleasure then indicates the living "youth," specifically the twenty-two-year-old Handel who would

have been at the keyboard playing the Organ Concerto that occurs at this point. In response to the concerto, Pleasure comments that "the graceful youth awakens sweet delight with enticing tones, and with new allurements gives listening its own pleasure," and Beauty replies that "his hand has wings, or rather his hand makes music more than mortal." Pleasure's allures, apparently including Handel as an object of desire, are significant, and Beauty (perhaps Pamphili himself?) is torn. Before making the correct choice, she expresses her desire "to have two hearts in my breast, so as to give one to repentance; the other I would give to pleasure."

In the cantata *Tra le fiamme*, which Handel set in July, Pamphili identifies himself more closely. The text compares the deadly flight of Icarus with the fatal attraction of moths to a flame, none of which can rise, like the phoenix, from its own ashes. The phoenix (*fenice*) was Pamphili's Arcadian name, and while the cantata warns against allowing unregulated passion to take wing and cautions man to take only imaginative flights of fancy, the text of the first and last aria contains the confession that the author/singer's heart is already playing dangerously among the flames (*tra le fiamme*).

In what is probably the last text by Pamphili set by Handel, the cardinal mentions Handel by name, describing him as superior to Orpheus. The text of *Hendel, non può mia musa* states that while Orpheus could stop birds in flight and beasts in their tracks, and make trees and rocks move, he couldn't make any of these things sing. How much greater then is Handel, who, Pamphili continues, "forced my muse into song, just when it had hung the plectrum on a dry tree and was lying motionless." The musical conceit, implying that Handel's arrival in Rome had awakened Pamphili's poetic muse, barely conceals a sexual reading – and, in point of fact, the cardinal's muse had not been slumbering. Furthermore, the three texts by Pamphili that were set by Handel describe a clear trajectory, from Handel's music arousing "delight" in *Il trionfo*, to inspiring a dangerous attraction that only a phoenix (Pamphili's Arcadian identity) could survive in *Tra le fiamme*, to affecting a (sexual) reawakening in *Hendel, non può*. Let me reiterate, we have no way of knowing whether the cardinal acted on any of these feelings, nor can we determine Handel's response. We will, however, come

back to Handel's rather wry setting of the cantata comparing him to Orpheus a little later.

Although a number of Handel's cantatas have taken on new life with the recognition that they offer individual portraits, most lack this kind of specificity. It seems likely, however, that cantatas frequently contained personal allusions, even when these are now lost to us. A manuscript of cantatas owned by the castrato Andrea Adami, a favorite of the Cardinal Ottoboni, includes watercolor miniatures, tentatively attributed to Pier Leone Ghezzi, at the beginning of each work. These do not depict simple shepherds and shepherdesses in pastoral surroundings, but rather aristocratic characters in recognizable Roman surroundings, providing yet another "glimpse behind that curtain of stylisation which the cantatas were supposed to weave."⁶

In many cantatas, it is impossible to establish the sex of either the singing voice or the beloved. Tightly controlled by artifice, the chamber cantata permitted the intimate expression of intense emotion through concealment.

The conventions governing both the texts and the performance of the cantatas made disguise easy. For example, even though cantatas are written from a male perspective, the vast majority are set in the treble range. That is, as occurs frequently in baroque opera as well, the gender of the performer did not necessarily relate to the character depicted. The character of Ruspoli in Handel's cantata *Oh, come chiare* was sung by a woman. The distraught nymph in *Delirio amoroso*, the first cantata Pamphili wrote for Handel, was sung by a male castrato (and may represent Pamphili himself). Men were often cast as women

4. As quoted in Winton Dean, "Charles Jennens's Marginalia to Mainwaring's Life of Handel," *Music & Letters* 53 (1972): 164.

5. As reported by the Dowager Electress of Hanover: see Burrows, "Handel and Hanover," 39.

6. Reinhard Strohm, "Scarlattiana at Yale," in *Händel e gli Scarlatti a Roma*, ed. Nino Pirrotta and Agostino Ziino (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1987), 131.

or, at least, represented with feminine imagery. In religious works, for example, the soul is always gendered female, as is the character of Beauty, who represents the soul (and also Pamphili?) in *Il trionfo*. In Handel's oratorio *La resurrezione*, written for Ruspoli, the role of Mary Magdalen was premiered by a woman; but after the Pope objected to the presence of a woman on the stage, even in a private villa, the role was taken over by a castrato. It is conjectured that at the premiere of *Acis, Galatea e Polifemo* in Naples, Acis was sung by a woman and Galatea by a castrato; at a later performance both roles were taken by castrati.

In addition to the nonspecific gender tradition of performance, the cantata texts themselves frequently obscure the sex of the beloved, as the Italian language makes it easy to hide sexual gender behind linguistic gender: by using metonymy to refer to the beloved as "the beautiful eyes" or "the charming lips"; by using words that have no sexual gender, such as "il mio tesoro" (my treasure); or by using elision to hide the sexual identification, as in "l'amo," where the pronoun could be either "him" or "her" (*lo* or *la*) – that is, "l'amo" could mean either "I love him" or "I love her." In many cantatas, therefore, it is impossible to establish the sex of either the singing voice or the beloved. Tightly controlled by artifice, the chamber cantata permitted the intimate expression of intense emotion through concealment.

Lungi n'andò Fileno, one of Handel's cantatas copied for Ruspoli in August 1708, offers this kind of intense experience. It provides a rare example of a cantata that specifies a male beloved. The singer bewails the absence of this loved one, named Fileno, who has departed for parts unknown. At first the singer's eyes dissolve in tears, and the sounds of weeping and sighs resound in neighboring caves and caverns. However, the singer realizes that tears will not bring pity and welcomes death instead.

Is the character represented by this singer male or female? Our actual singer today, as in Ruspoli's household, is a woman – Pamela Dellal. In two of the cantatas she will perform, she must take on the character of a man: the Neapolitan bridegroom in one and Cardinal Pamphili in the other. In *Lungi n'andò Fileno*, however, there is a question. I wonder if on hearing the cantata sung by a woman you will

automatically give the voice a female sexual identity, and if so, whether you would hear it differently were it to be sung by a counter-tenor. There would, however, be no historical validity in such an experiment.

In my view, *Lungi n'andò*, like most of the cantatas without a specific referent, is best understood in its full ambiguity. Although in this case the beloved's name is identified as male, the text can be understood to represent non-gendered human emotion and passion. Its intentional nonspecificity allows multiple interpretations, permitting each auditor to place him- or herself into the role and to experience with the singer the pain of unrequited love. This is, in fact, what ultimately distinguishes Handel's music for me: its ability always to place the listener inside the emo-

What ultimately distinguishes Handel's music for me is its ability always to place the listener inside the emotion, to make the emotion not something that is viewed in another, but something that is personally experienced.

tion, to make the emotion not something that is viewed in another, but something that is personally experienced. That is, whether or not Handel depicts a specific individual known to us today, he offers portraits of human emotion. All three of our cantatas tonight accomplish this in different ways.

The Neapolitan cantata, *Nel dolce tempo*, which tells, unusually, of a happy, requited love, savors the pleasure and delight. In the first aria, the bass line is created out of a descending chain that continually collides against a neighboring note before releasing into consonance. The effect is a kind of *frisson*, as if the shepherd is feeling little sparks of joy. Certainly, he relishes the word "pastorella," lingering over it with a sense of expansion and emphasis by doubling the sense of measure (by hemiola). In the last aria, he

abandons himself completely to joy, joining the birds trilling in the harpsichord with a long melisma on the word "sing" (*cantar*).

One struggles to imagine the twenty-two-year-old composer's initial reaction to being given the text of *Handel, non può mia musa* to set: was it horror, embarrassment, amusement? Whatever his first reaction, he took a humorous, somewhat ironic, approach to the text in his setting. Where the text states that Orpheus stopped birds in flight and beasts in their tracks, Handel uses an awkward short-long, long-short rhythm that depicts a kind of creeping paralysis, leading up to repeated silences in the music following the word "stop" (*fermar*), so that the musicians themselves act out the reaction of the beasts. The second aria focuses on the "harmony of the new Orpheus." At these words, Handel ironically halts all harmonic motion; by sustaining a single note in the bass for eight measures, he wryly depicts the "new harmony" as a monotone. The music historian Charles Burney, who knew Handel personally, wrote that "his natural propensity to wit and humour, and happy manner of relating common occurrences, in an uncommon way, enabled him to throw persons and things into very ridiculous attitudes." His setting of *Handel, non può* may be taken as a musical example of this side of his character.

Lungi n'andò, in contrast to both of the preceding cantatas, is riven with despair and dissonance. The first aria, depicting endless weeping, is set in a *largo* (very slow) tempo with a complex combination of triple and duple time, not just consecutively but concurrently. Here, the flowing tears offer no release; rather, the rhythmic disjunctions create a sense of the suffering and sorrow mentioned in the text. Further, as opposed to *Handel, non può*, the harmonies are constantly shifting underfoot (from E minor to A minor, to D minor, to G minor, back through A minor to B minor, to G major, etc.), as if the bereft lover has lost his bearings with no secure resting place. The second aria depicts the wish for death to end the cruel pain. Its bass and melody both unwind inexorably, as if this ultimate destination is inescapable, the widely disjunct intervals depicting the ever-present ache of longing for the absent loved one.

These three cantatas offer a glimpse into the musical riches that have lain undiscovered

among Handel's works. *Nel dolce tempo* has been recorded twice, but only one is still available. The other two cantatas have never been recorded, and I myself have never heard them performed. In my view, Handel kept his cantatas private because he considered them personal. As we revel with him in *Nel dolce tempo*, chuckle with him in *Hendel, non può mia musa*, and weep with him in *Lungi n'andò Fileno*, some delight can surely be taken, as the Arcadian Academy members certainly did, in thinking about the pastoral portrait of the Duke of Alvito and his bride, the way Handel's self-portrait makes fun of Pamphili's panegyric, or what unidentified aristocrat lurks behind the façade of the beloved Fileno. You may find, however, also like the members of that older Academy, that if you have ever loved, laughed, or wept, the strongest portrait of all in these works is of your own emotion. ■

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