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Andrew V. Jones

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Staging a Handel opera

The musical performance [...] was excellent, and had the rare virtue of giving the complete score uncut, as performed in 1741. [...] One was puzzled by the fact that Deidamia's lovely aria about a nightingale at the end of Act I was set in the Antarctic with the heroine seated on an iceberg and apparently addressing a penguin, while Ulysses was rowed around by American sailors in a rubber dinghy. [...] In Act II there was a scene in which everyone was under water (cue for Achilles to be a frogman), and the hunting chorus was performed in a wild-west setting among cacti (cue for someone to sit on one by accident).¹

THE combination of a historically aware² musical performance with a production style which—whether consciously or not—ignores the composer's instructions and the conventions of his day is now such a common feature of Handel opera performances that it has almost become the norm.³ Certainly it is seen as a selling-point, as is demonstrated by the publicity brochure for a recent production of Handel's *Flavio*, in which the musical director wrote: 'What makes the [name of opera company] unique is that while we perform on authentic instruments and in period style, I always insist that our productions are set in a contemporary situation—not just vaguely modern, but this year, today. That is my way of being authentic, because that is how things were done in Handel's day.'⁴ The vocabulary (especially 'unique' and 'authentic') raises questions that could profitably be discussed, but it is more important to set them in a broader context. No one would deny that updating a Handel opera produces problems: in the case of *Flavio*, for example, present-day Britain is not ruled by a governor from Lombardy, and men do not fight duels to satisfy slighted honour. But updating is only a symptom, and the underlying attitude is liable to affect more than just the visual

aspects of the production. The musical presentation of Handel's score might be historically informed in matters of performance practice, but it will not necessarily observe the composer's intentions at the most fundamental level: that of musical substance. Almost every performance of *Tamerlano* in recent years, for example, has ignored Handel's last-minute decision to end Act 2 not with Asteria's grief-laden aria 'Cor di padre', which he realized did not make sense in the dramatic context, but with her cautiously optimistic and dramatically appropriate 'Se potessi un dì placare'. (This practice continued even after the publication of the Hallische Händel-Ausgabe, in which the editor, Terence Best, printed Handel's final decision in the main text and emphasized its superiority in his comments in the Preface.)⁵ In the same opera some conductors find it difficult to respect the full extent of Handel's abbreviation of the final scene by omitting Asteria's aria 'Padre amato'; it is indeed a fine piece, but, together with the surrounding material which Handel also removed, it is anticlimactic after Bajazet's suicide. And how many performances of *Alcina* have included at the end of Act 2 the little scrap of recitative from *Ariodante* that Chrysander mistakenly printed on p.107 of his edition of *Alcina*? Even our knowledge of performance practice is selectively applied. The chief criterion by which historical awareness is assessed is the use of period instruments; other important aspects are often overlooked. For example, it is not unusual to hear the B section of a *da capo* aria performed at a different speed (it might be slower or faster) from the A section, even though Handel uses essentially the same musical material and

would have written a new tempo indication if he had wanted one. And it is common to hear a singer modify the last phrase of a *da capo* repeat so that it ends at the upper octave, thus ignoring all evidence about ornamentation in the 18th century and creating a lop-sided effect in the melodic structure of the aria as a whole. Of course not all present-day performances of Handel's operas display shortcomings such as these. Thanks in large part to the gradual appearance of operas in the Hallische Händel-Ausgabe,⁶ the notes and the words are often correct. Many singers, instrumentalists and conductors understand Handelian performance practice and style; and a few stage directors⁷ have been bold enough to put on productions whose visual elements take account of the staging, costumes and acting style that would have been familiar to Handel. All too often, however, it is difficult to escape the impression that the underlying attitude, especially on the part of the stage director, is based not on respect for the composer and his opera, but rather on a self-indulgent desire to impose an interpretation that has little relevance to the plot, or in the belief that a modern audience is incapable of appreciating the original on its terms, and has to be entertained by gimmicks and cheap jokes.

No doubt many of the decisions taken in preparing a Handel opera for performance are prompted by genuine and sincerely held convictions. But doubts creep in when one examines the inter-relationship between these decisions, or compares them with the composer's instructions, intentions and expectations, or assesses them in the light of an audience's actual (as opposed to imagined) response. And anxieties arise when one remembers that, because staged performances of Handel's operas are relatively infrequent, most members of an audience will have no point of comparison in either their past or their future experience. Hence they rely for their image of the opera on a single stage director and his particular conception, which might or might not have anything to do with Handel's conception. For audiences at the production of *Flavio* referred to earlier, the first arias of Emilia and Guido were 'illustrated' by video projections onto a huge screen that represented (in the producer's opinion) what they were really

thinking (stereotypical female and male views of marriage, set in a modern kitchen), and Flavio, the king of medieval Lombardy, appeared as a giant garden gnome who, having removed his costume, crawled into and out of a Wendy house, played with little electric racing cars and sucked jelly beans. However ludicrous they might be, these and other images will be Handel's opera *Flavio* for those audiences.

Any musical performance is based on a combination of the composer's intentions and the performers' interpretation, and on the interaction between them and a third element: the response of the audience. In the case of opera, not only the working-out of these elements but also the ways in which they interact is more complicated; and Baroque opera, in which field the works of Handel stand pre-eminent, represents a still more acute manifestation of the problem. Such interaction can have very significant consequences: three performances of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony will be far more similar than will three staged productions of Handel's *Giulio Cesare*. Differences between performances are not bad in themselves, but when they are so extreme that the identity of the opera is undermined, one might justifiably ask: what is a Handel opera? why are there such marked differences between productions of the same work? what is the attitude of the producer to Handel's opera and to his audience? has there been any discussion between the producer and the conductor?

There is no doubt that in Handel's mind the answer to the first question was, in the most general terms: it is a drama that is acted out on stage by singers accompanied by an orchestra—that is to say, it is a simultaneous representation of a story in singing and acting. Quite apart from the subjective evidence of the music itself, whose gestures are often so vivid that it is difficult to imagine a composer not having their physical equivalents in mind, there is objective evidence that, as he composed, Handel did indeed have a mental picture of what would be happening on stage.⁸ In Act 3 scene 5 of *Scipione*,⁹ for example, he inserted the stage direction 'sceso dal trono' ('having descended from the throne') alongside Scipione's name, at the moment when Scipione releases Berenice; it is

present neither in Salvi's source libretto (1704) nor in Rolli's adaptation for Handel. In the final scene of *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* it seems that Handel wished to make it absolutely clear that only Sesto and not his mother, Cornelia, should kneel before Cesare. The stage direction in the libretto is 'Cornelia e Sesto che s'inginocchia'; since the verb is singular, it must refer only to Sesto. But in the autograph score Handel rephrases the stage direction as 'Sesto e Cornelia, Sesto s'inginocchia'. His desire to emphasize the fact that only Sesto should kneel is significant. Before the opera began, Cesare had defeated Cornelia's husband, Pompey; throughout the opera Cornelia's words and music portray her as a noble and courageous woman. It is entirely in keeping with her character that, in the final scene, she should remain standing and thus retain her dignity. More striking still is Handel's addition of a stage direction in Act 3 scene 4 of *Rodelinda*, which displays total emotional involvement in the drama. Rodelinda, having found fresh blood on the floor of Bertarido's cell, assumes that her husband is dead. She addresses her son, Flavio, as 'orfano'; at this point Handel added the stage direction 's'inginocchia e abbraccia il figlio' ('she kneels down and embraces her son').¹⁰ For Handel—a true man of the theatre—an opera was what his audience would see as well as hear.

Differences between productions might be justified, or at least explained, by the paucity of detailed information in the source material about the visual aspects of the opera. To a certain extent this is a fair point: such information is usually restricted to the stage setting and crucial moves.¹¹ The lengthy and detailed descriptions of the spectacular sets and stage effects in *Rinaldo*, Handel's first opera for London, are exceptional in this respect: they reflect Aaron Hill's determination to achieve a sensational success by treating his audiences to a combination of virtuoso Italian singing and extravagant staging. (If the report by Sir Richard Steele can be taken at face value, reality might not have matched intention.) Most descriptions of the set are far more succinct than these, often being simply generic (e.g. 'a room in the palace', 'a prison', 'a wood', 'a delightful place'),

though essential items of stage furniture are always mentioned (e.g. a throne or a tomb). Occasionally no location is given (e.g. *Teseo*, IV.i, *Floridante*, III.i and *Scipione*, III.i). Scenic transformations are carefully described, for example in *Amadigi*, *Admeto* and *Alcina*.¹² Costumes are mentioned only when there is something unusual about them: Bertarido, the deposed King of Lombardy in *Rodelinda*, is seen returning from exile 'dress'd in an Hungarian Habit'; and rejected fiancées often return to their faithless lovers disguised as men—for example, Rosmira in *Partenope*, 'in the Habit of an Armenian', and Bradamante in *Alcina*, 'in warlike Man's Habit'.¹³ The more significant moves and gestures are given in the stage directions; most were printed in the libretto, but occasionally Handel added extra ones in the autograph score. Usually (but by no means always) entrances and exits are indicated, as are actions such as battles, fights, arrests, hiding, fainting, falling asleep, taking poison and dying. At moments of particular dramatic intensity, such as the throne-room scene of *Tamerlano* (the latter part of Act 2), the moves, gestures and even emotions are likely to be indicated very precisely.

Probably these instructions, together with decisions taken in the course of rehearsal about blocking and the precise placing of entrances and exits, were adequate for Handel's singers, who were, after all, engaged full time in the performance of *opera seria*; its conventions—both musical and dramatic—must have been second nature to them. The guidance in the sources is equally useful for today's stage directors and singers,¹⁴ but, in the very different artistic and professional context of the 21st century, it requires much amplification. At the most basic level, all entrances, exits, and moves and positions on stage have to be arranged in such a way that the drama works credibly and effectively.¹⁵ The dramatic context and the emotions conveyed by words and music will suggest the character of the moves, as well as appropriate gestures and facial expressions. It is at this point that a crucial decision has to be made: will the style that is adopted for movement, gesture and expression be of a naturalistic, post-Stanislavski kind, or will it attempt to re-create that of the 18th century?

The reason most frequently given for not adopting an 18th-century style in the visual aspects of a production is that the audience is a modern one, and will be unfamiliar with—even alienated by—such a style: a 21st-century audience will inevitably see the opera through 21st-century eyes, with all that that implies in relation to knowledge, expectations, preferences and prejudices; the producer's job is therefore to present the opera in a way that will carry meaning for a modern audience.¹⁶ A skeptic might wonder whether such an argument is disingenuous: that the producer's motivation is not to speak to the audience on its own terms but rather the desire to present his Concept of the opera's meaning to the audience;¹⁷ and members of an audience are just as likely to be insulted by condescension, or irritated by gimmicks and distractions, or puzzled and alienated by an incomprehensible production. Putting aside such possibilities, we might accept that there is, again, some truth in the assertion that a present-day audience will respond differently from an 18th-century one. Precisely the same point could have been made, however, around the mid-1960s, when historically informed performance of early music, hitherto largely restricted to the domain of the *cognoscenti*, was starting to gain wider acceptance. In that case commercial interests (especially those of recording companies) undoubtedly played a decisive role in ensuring that period instruments, together with appropriate techniques and performing styles, would, over the next couple of decades, become established and accepted. Far from alienating a modern audience, such instruments, techniques and styles are now seen (and marketed) as a positive attraction; the 'problem' was merely one of familiarity. The novels of Jane Austen are just as much embedded in their time as are the operas of Handel: the behaviour of the characters and the social conventions that they observe are far removed from those of the 21st century. But the receptive reader quickly becomes attuned to them, realizing that the universality of human experience transcends boundaries of time and place. Could it be that the modern audience is an excuse rather than a valid reason for updating a Handel opera? In any case, an argument based on the notion of a

shifting *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectation)¹⁸ must be treated with caution. It is certainly helpful to bury the notion of a uniform response to a work of art which will be experienced at all times and in all places, and in the broadest terms the different political, religious, social, cultural and educational environment of the early 21st century is bound to contribute to a difference in the response of a modern audience. But why should we replace one monolithic view of audience perception with another, slightly narrower one? An audience at any period comprises individuals, with differing expectations and perceptions. But more important than all such observations is the simple fact that human beings are blessed with the power of the imagination. They might enter the opera theatre cursing the weather and public transport, but after a few minutes they will be transported to a different world, whose inhabitants, nonetheless, display emotions with which they can readily empathize.

The job of the stage director in Handel's day was a modest one, probably combining the blocking of singers' moves with the function of stage manager and technical director; it was often undertaken by the librettist.¹⁹ Today's stage directors are accorded a far more exalted status. They are presumably chosen with an eye to the kind of production they will create; they will construct a personal interpretation of the opera: its meaning, its relevance for a modern audience, how it can be interpreted in the light of modern conditions (politics, psychology, gender studies and so on); their conception of the opera will constitute a major part of the publicity surrounding the production and of the subsequent reviews. It cannot be assumed that their chief concern will be to match the style of the musical performance, nor even, necessarily, to respect what is conveyed by the librettist and the composer. Stage production is regarded as independent of the music. This is symptomatic of a misapprehension lying at the root of the problem: that the musical and the visual elements of a Handel opera are autonomous, and can be interpreted—and hence experienced by the audience—separately. As I have argued above, that was certainly not Handel's conception of his operas, and it is not how an

audience experiences them in the theatre, where musical and visual signals reach the ear and eye simultaneously: if their substance and style complement each other, their combined impact will be the greater; if they conflict, the result will be (at the very least) a sense of confusion.

Perhaps, on the basis of what I have said so far, we might consider an alternative approach, based on the following propositions: a Handel opera, as conceived by the composer and as experienced by the audience, comprises both aural and visual elements, bound together intimately and inextricably; if respect for the composer's intentions and expectations is regarded as important in the musical representation of the opera, perhaps the same attitude might be extended to the visual aspects of the production; a historically informed style of production is in tune with Handel's music, and a modern audience is perfectly capable of understanding its validity; Handel's operas can most fully be appreciated if presented on their own terms, not through the distorting prism of the 21st (or any other) century. Certain prevalent attitudes need not be taken for granted; the possibility of period-style production could be more widely explored.

Clearly there are problems to be overcome, but they are not insurmountable. While it is true that

Handel's librettos and autograph scores give only limited guidance about the visual aspects that he had in mind, there is a wealth of information of a more general nature that has been accessible for many years, largely thanks to the research (and the teaching) of Dene Barnett.²⁰ The art of gesture was closely linked to the art of rhetoric, and it was natural that teachers of the 18th century (and others) should have frequent recourse to Quintilian, whose *Institutio oratoria* included basic instruction in the use of gesture. There existed a language of gesture, whose 'vocabulary' conveyed specific meanings that were understood by contemporary audiences. Many of these are immediately recognizable also to us today—for example, the seated figure slumped forward over a table, the face buried in one hand, the other hanging down loosely, to express despair (see the left-hand figure in illus.1), or a kneeling posture, the head tilted upwards, and outstretched hands clasped together to express pleading (see the right-hand figure in illus.2).

An important principle that emerges from the treatises, reports, pictures and other documents is that, while the purpose of gesture was to convey the sense of the words more vividly to the audience, prime importance was attached to elegance,



1 Johannes Jelgerhuis, *Theoretische lessen over de gesticulatie en mimiek* ... (Amsterdam, 1827), plate 14

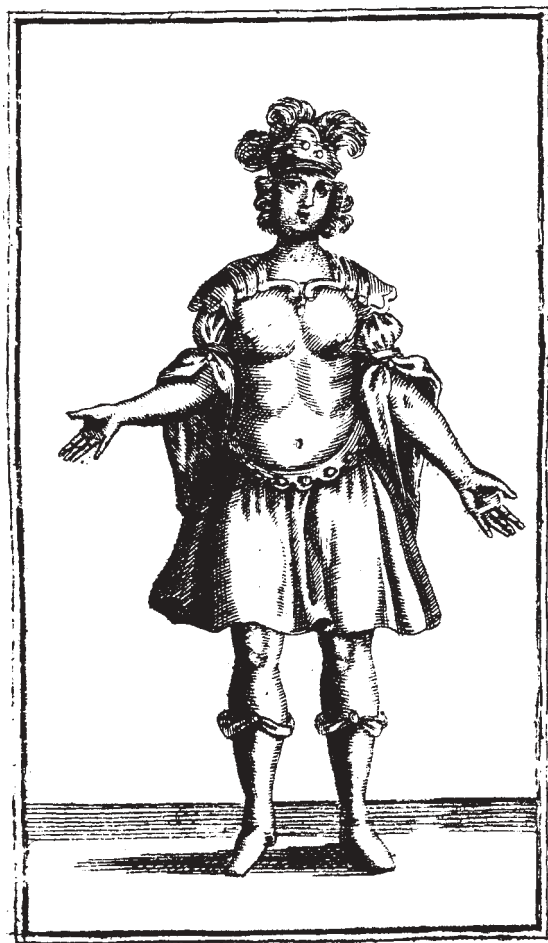


2 Johannes Jelgerhuis, *Theoretische lessen over de gesticulatie en mimiek* . . . (Amsterdam, 1827), plate 12

gracefulness and refinement; these qualities were at least as important as expressiveness. The concept of naturalistic acting was unknown; individuals and groups of actors were instead expected to present to the audience a beautiful picture. Beauty in this sense resided in the artful disposition of the body in such a way that elements of contrast, opposition and asymmetry created a pleasingly balanced effect. To display oneself straight on to the audience, for example, with left and right sides of the body (principally arms, hands, legs and feet) forming mirror images, with the weight equally placed on both feet, and the face upright and directed forward was not beautiful (see illus.3). Rather, the upper body might be turned one way and the head the other; one arm might be raised while the other points downwards; weight should be transferred to one leg (held straight) while the other (bent) is relaxed (see illus.4).

The principle of elegance extended to the individual parts of the body: a bent arm and wrist, and a supple, varied pattern in the fingers, for example, were pleasing to the eye. Straight lines were anathema not only in relation to the body but also with regard to an actor's movement across the stage;

theorists drew charts to illustrate routes from A to B that followed a curved path. Barnett's book is generously illustrated with reproductions from treatises of the time; he also includes photographs of a modern actor demonstrating 18th-century postures and gestures. Some important treatises are available in facsimile or modern edition: Franciscus (Franz) Lang's *Dissertatio de actione scenica* [. . .] (Munich, 1727) has been reprinted in facsimile and translated into German by Alexander Rudin (Bern and Munich, 1975); Gilbert Austin's *Chironomia* [. . .] (London, 1806, but written much earlier) has been edited by Mary Robb and Lester Thonssen (Carbondale, 1966); and *Theoretische lessen over de gesticulatie en mimiek* [. . .] (Amsterdam, 1827) by the Dutch tragedian, teacher and painter Johannes Jelgerhuis was translated and published as an extended appendix by Alfred Siemon Golding in his book *Classicistic acting: two centuries of a performance tradition at the Amsterdam Schouwburg* (New York, 1984).²¹ All these treatises contain detailed guidance, including numerous drawings to illustrate acting techniques; they constitute a rich resource for the modern stage director. None of this need be regarded as narrowly prescriptive.



3 Franciscus Lang, *Dissertatione de actione scenica* ... (Munich, 1727), Figure I between pp.18 and 19

Indeed, the danger of over-precise guidance was recognized by one of the writers just mentioned: Jelgerhuis criticized Riccoboni,²² who instructed actors as follows:

Whenever we extend an arm, the upper part of the limb should move before the lower. The hand, as the lowest part, should move last, with the palm directed down until the upper arm reaches the shoulder height, at which point the palm may be turned face up.

As Jelgerhuis rightly observes, such instruction risks turning an actor into a marionette. Moreover, a 21st-century actor, just as much as a 21st-century audience, needs to become attuned to a Baroque



4 Franciscus Lang, *Dissertatione de actione scenica* ... (Munich, 1727), Figure III between pp.28 and 29

style of acting, so that it feels natural rather than imposed.

It might be thought that such emphasis on elegance and so many constraints on actors' movements would impede or completely obstruct the expression of emotion, but this is far from the case. Nor does it follow that a stage director's imagination is hampered.²³ Handel's musical language was itself a highly stylized one: the overall structure of *opera seria* was dominated by the alternation of *secco* recitative and *da capo* aria, and the basic shape of the latter was thoroughly standardized by the early 18th century. Such 'constraints' were no impediment to Handel's creativity: the vast majority of his *da capo* arias follow the conventional pattern,

but within this his imagination and inventiveness yielded a huge variety of responses to the texts. Moreover, when the basic musical structure is so clear and so frequently employed, any deviation—from the smallest to the most substantial—produces a striking effect, as when, for example, an aria begins without an introductory ritornello,²⁴ or there is a change of tempo within the A section,²⁵ or (most radical of all) a *da capo* aria is interrupted or truncated by recitative.²⁶ And when the *da capo* aria is abandoned altogether and replaced by an extended *scena*, the effect can be overwhelming.²⁷ This highly circumscribed musical form, with all the opportunities that it afforded for subtle nuances as well as for extreme, even violent forms of expression, had a perfect counterpart in the 18th-century style of acting. Just as a musical move or gesture outside the confines of a conventional *da capo* aria could achieve an effect far greater than its intrinsic character or substance might seem capable of, so a physical move or gesture outside the domain of the elegant and refined could achieve a powerful effect in the theatre. If the great majority of *da capo* arias begin with an orchestral ritornello, one that opens with a phrase for unaccompanied voice will have a striking impact; if most arm movements are restricted to the space between the level of the shoulders and that of the waist, a clenched fist held high above the head will be positively shocking. The restrained gracefulness that informed 18th-century acting included the relationship between characters: actual physical contact was very rare. This convention, too, had enormous expressive potential: as long as two lovers (for example) delay the moment of physical contact, there is tension and expectation in the air; the atmosphere remains electrically charged right up until the moment when they finally touch.

If there is a difficulty in interpreting the evidence provided by the theorists, it is caused by the obvious and inescapable fact that their pictures are motionless: while the static poses can be observed and replicated, it is not necessarily a straightforward matter to fill in the intervening movements. Theorists sometimes add dotted lines to their pictures, or draw apparently multi-limbed actors, so as to indicate the beginnings and ends of

gestures, but even these do not convey a sense of the speed of movement. It requires only a little thought (and extrapolation), however, to make intelligent guesses: elegance is not going to be produced by abrupt, jerky movements but by gradual, smooth (and preferably curving) ones.

As to the danger of hampering the stage director, I must resort to personal experience to make my point. In the course of performing (so far) 11 Handel operas with the Cambridge Handel Opera Group, none of my stage directors²⁸ has ever complained about feeling restricted by the adoption of a period style in the production; and, more positively, I have been constantly amazed by the insight and imagination—quite apart from the professional skill—that they have brought to Handel's operas. It is perfectly possible to observe the conventions of 18th-century acting (as well as stage design and costumes) and to invent stage business that would have been recognizable to Handel, and at the same time to convey intelligible meaning to a modern audience.

One example must suffice. At the end of *Tamerlano* Bajazet, rather than submit to the tyrant Tamerlano, commits suicide. In the drastically shortened ending that Handel eventually created, Bajazet's death is followed only by 22 bars of *secco* recitative and the final *coro*, 'D'atra notte'. The optimistic, if not quite cheerful, words of the *coro* are undermined by Handel's sombre music. Notwithstanding any efforts that might be made to turn it into a dance, it is a sombre piece in E minor, dominated by plain crotchets, scale fragments peaking on the sixth degree of the minor scale, scraps of counterpoint and occasional suspensions. There are no stage directions, and it can legitimately be staged in a very simple manner, with the four principals²⁹ declaiming their words and music straight out to the audience. For our production in 2005, Richard Gregson staged the *coro* as a funeral cortège. Several bars into the music the procession emerges slowly from the wings, stage right, led by Asteria, who carries a blazing torch; Bajazet's body is carried on a bier by Tamerlano's guards. Asteria waits centre-stage for the procession to pass; as it pauses briefly she lifts the sheet to look one last time at her father. The procession leaves, stage left.

Asteria joins the end of the cortège, and throws the torch onto the funeral pyre, which blazes up, off stage. Thus Handel's sombre ending is reinforced by the imagination of the stage director; the dramatic effect was overwhelming in its sense of desolation and dignity, as a noble hero is laid to rest.

A stage director is perfectly at liberty to introduce icebergs, rubber dinghies and cacti into his productions if he wishes to do so—though it is curious that such behaviour is likely to raise fewer eyebrows than would be the case if a musical director were to introduce saxophones and ukuleles into the orchestra. What is surprising and disappointing is that so few stage directors are willing to attempt the re-creation of an 18th-century style in their productions of Handel's operas; indeed, there is almost a tacit assumption on all sides that

the expected and acceptable way to stage a Handel opera is to update it in one way or another, and to introduce extraneous elements of all sorts, both conceptual and physical. Such an attitude is surprising in the light of our diametrically opposed assumptions regarding the performance of the music: we expect to hear singers who understand the conventions of the 18th century, and an orchestra playing period instruments with the appropriate technique and stylistic awareness. The attitude is disappointing because it deprives audiences of the opportunity to experience Handel's operas as the composer conceived them: not only to hear the right notes sung and played stylishly, but also to see sets, costumes, movements, gestures and expressions that Handel would have recognized as falling within the bounds of the



5 A scene from the Cambridge Handel Opera Group's production of Handel's *Berenice* in 1993, showing Berenice (left; Ann Mackay) and Selene (right; Lynette Alcántara), with four Egyptian guards standing behind (Philippa Hobson, Riki Dolby, Felice Kuin and Annilese Miskimmon). (Photograph by Jonathan Wells)

possible. An historically informed style is no more of an impediment to the imagination of the stage director than it is to the singers and instrumentalists. On the contrary, it is a liberation: within a style characterized by restraint and refined elegance, subtlety and nuance become powerful expressive

devices, while disruption of the conventions achieves a shattering effect. If the visual and the aural are perfectly in tune with each other, we can confidently rely on Handel's genius to speak clearly and powerfully across the centuries to the sensibilities of a modern audience.

Andrew Jones is a University Senior Lecturer in Music at Cambridge, and Director of Studies in Music, Director of Music, and Fellow of Selwyn College. He founded the Cambridge Handel Opera Group in 1985, and has so far translated, edited and conducted 11 of Handel's operas; the next production will take place in early May 2007. His edition of Rodelinda for the Hallische Händel-Ausgabe has been used for performances in international opera houses throughout the world. avj1000@cam.ac.uk

1 T. Best, review of the 2002 production of Handel's *Deidamia* at Halle, *The Handel Institute newsletter*, xiii/2 (Autumn 2002).

2 The word 'authentic', now generally disparaged and abandoned in scholarly writings, unless placed in scare quotes, still seems to be a convenient shorthand for marketing and publicity purposes. Richard Taruskin has objected to 'historically informed' because it fails the 'invidious antonym' test; the same applies to 'historically aware' (no one would describe themselves as historically uninformed or unaware). Peter Walls (*History, imagination and the performance of music* (Woodbridge, 2003), p.10) prefers the neutrality of 'period-instrument' performance, with the obvious caveat that he is not referring exclusively to instrumental music—but, in a discussion of operatic performance practice, that epithet would sound very odd.

3 See W. Dean, 'Production style in Handel's operas', *The Cambridge companion to Handel*, ed. D. Burrows (Cambridge, 1997), pp.249–61. Many other examples could have been cited; an internet search for reviews of any of the frequently performed operas will yield a rich crop.

4 *Southbank* (July and August 2005), p.22.

5 *Tamerlano*, ed. T. Best, Hallische Händel-Ausgabe, ii/15 (Kassel, 1996), pp.xix, 127–30, 133–7.

6 Those that have appeared so far are: *Almira* (ed. D. Schröder; 1994), *Rinaldo* (ed. D. Kimbell; 2 vols., 1993, 1996), *Amadigi* (ed. J. M. Knapp; 1971), *Radamisto* (ed. T. Best; two volumes, 1997 and 2000), *Flavio* (ed. J. M. Knapp; 1993), *Tamerlano* (ed. T. Best; 1996), *Rodelinda* (ed. A. V. Jones; 2002), *Tolomeo* (ed. M. Pacholke; 2000), *Lotario* (ed. M. Pacholke; 2003), *Orlando* (ed. S. Flesch; 1969), *Serse* (ed. T. Best; 2003), *Imeneo* (ed. D. Burrows; 2002) and *Deidamia* (ed. T. Best; 2001).

7 I use the term 'stage director' for preference, and 'producer' as a synonym.

8 Of course, Handel was not unique in this respect: we know from their writings that Mozart, Verdi, Richard Strauss, Schoenberg and Britten, for example, had a similarly vivid mental image of the staging of their operas.

9 In the libretto it is scene 5; in Chrysander's edition (lxxi, p.90) it is scene 6; in the autograph score (London, British Library, R.M.20.C.6) it is scene 2 (Handel revised Acts 2 and 3 radically). The added stage direction is written on f.76v, above the right-hand end of stave 9.

10 A few bars later he added a second stage direction: 'si leva' ('she stands up').

11 For the operas up to *Scipione*, a convenient guide is W. Dean and J. M. Knapp, *Handel's operas, 1704–1726* (Oxford, 1987; rev. 1995): set

descriptions and stage directions from the contemporary libretto (and from the autograph score, whenever Handel provided supplementary information here) are woven into the synopsis of the plot. Facsimile reproductions of all the librettos are available in *The librettos of Handel's operas*, ed. E. Harris, 13 vols. (New York, 1989).

12 As yet, no drawing or painting has been identified that can with certainty be associated with the production of a Handel opera in London during the composer's lifetime. However, Lowell Lindgren has offered the conjecture that certain operatic drawings by John Devoto could have been associated with *Ezio*, 'The staging of Handel's operas in London', *Handel tercentenary collection*, ed. S. Sadie and A. Hicks (London, 1987), pp.93–119, esp. pp.105–12.

13 These translations are from the contemporary librettos.

14 Unfortunately its usefulness does not necessarily mean that it will be followed: a sword might be replaced by a machine-gun, or a chariot by a motor-bike—to mention only two of the less implausible possibilities.

15 Any stage director would legitimately expect to be allowed some latitude in the way Handel's stage directions are incorporated into the production, and in adding essential ones that are omitted in the sources.

16 Other 'arguments' that are sometimes voiced relate to the physical differences between the 18th- and the

21st-century theatre: they used candles and oil lamps for stage lighting; we use electricity; their auditorium remained illuminated during the performance; ours is darkened; they employed castrati; we employ women or countertenors in their place; and so on. In the present context these matters seem to me both irrelevant and trivial in comparison with questions of production styles and audience perceptions.

17 Or, in Dean's words: 'the producers' antics have stemmed from ignorance, cynicism or the lust to exploit a hyperactive ego': Dean, 'Production style in Handel's operas', p.257.

18 See in particular the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Robert Jauss.

19 On the history of operatic staging, see R. Savage, 'The staging of opera', *The Oxford illustrated history of opera*, ed. R. Parker (Oxford, 1994), pp.350–420; the 'Further reading' section on pp.490–91 is to be recommended.

20 D. Barnett, *The art of gesture: the practices and principles of 18th century acting* (Heidelberg, 1987); Barnett acknowledges the assistance of Jeanette Massy-Westropp. He had previously presented the fruits of his research in five articles in *Theatre research international*, ii, iii, v, vi (1977–81).

21 Apart from making the obvious point that theory usually follows practice, it is important to note that the

two early 19th-century treatises are avowedly backward-looking—that is to say, their guidance may with confidence be applied to the practice of the 18th century.

22 [Antoine] François Riccoboni, *L'Art du Théâtre* (Paris, 1750).

23 In a more wide-ranging discussion, the notion that musicological research obstructs imagination and spontaneity in performance is refuted in Walls, *History, imagination and the performance of music*; see especially chapter 8.

24 For example, Cleopatra's aria 'Piangerò la sorte mia' in *Giulio Cesare*, and Oberto's aria 'Barbara!' in *Alcina*.

25 For example, Zenobia's aria 'Deggio dunque' in *Radamisto*, and Berenice's aria 'Chi t'intende' in *Berenice*.

26 For example, Elmira's aria 'Notte cara' in *Floridante*, and Bertarido's aria 'Chi di voi fu più infedele' in *Rodelinda*.

27 For example, Bajazet's suicide scene at the end of *Tamerlano*, and Orlando's mad scene in the latter part of Act 2 of *Orlando*.

28 Tertia Sefton-Green in *Rodelinda* (1985); Jean Chothia in *Flavio* (1987), *Floridante* (1989) and *Amadigi* (1991); and Richard Gregson in *Berenice* (1993), *Partenope* (1995), *Alcina* (1997), *Admeto* (1999), *Orlando* (2001), *Serse* (2003) and *Tamerlano* (2005).

29 Irene, Andronico, Tamerlano and Leone; Asteria has followed her dying father off stage.

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