



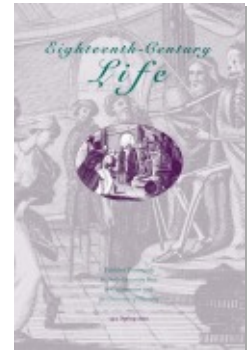
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Divining Zoroastro: Masonic Elements in Handel's *Orlando*

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The magician Zoroastro casts a long shadow over George Frideric Handel's opera *Orlando* (1733). He opens the first act with a dramatic monologue, and throughout the work it is only his intervention that keeps the hero Orlando from wreaking too much havoc in his madness. Eventually, it is Zoroastro who brings the opera to a peaceful conclusion, restoring Orlando to reason by means of a magical potion. Despite his central significance in Handel's work, however, the character Zoroastro is absent from Carlo Sigismondo Capece's libretto (1711) that forms the basis for *Orlando's* text, and the magician appears in only a single fleeting reference in Ludovico Ariosto's epic *Orlando furioso*, the literary source of the libretto. In fact, it is difficult to find any simple explanation for Zoroastro's presence in *Orlando*. In the words of Handel scholar Winton Dean, Zoroastro's "commanding figure shifts the whole focus of the plot, introducing elements of magic and spectacle and controlling the destiny of the characters by acting as a benevolent *deus ex machina*. Where did he come from, and who brought him into *Orlando*?"¹ Answering these apparently simple questions is a complex task, but one with major implications for how we can interpret the work as a reflection of eighteenth-century London culture.

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Perhaps the most pragmatic explanation for Zoroastro's presence, if also the least convincing, is that Handel and his librettist inserted the character into the plot as a vehicle for "magical" stage effects, hoping to draw crowds with the spectacle. But if Handel had wanted a magical character, why did the adapter not turn to any of the number of sorcerers who actually appear in *Orlando furioso*? Even the rhetoric surrounding Zoroastro and his actions is unusual for a Handel opera. This oddity is apparent from before the curtain ever rises; rather than spelling out the plot of the work, as was typical, the argument from the libretto prepares the audience for a kind of morality play:

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. The additional Fiction of the Shepherdess Dorinda's Love for Medoro, and the constant Zeal of the Magician Zoroaster, for the Glory of Orlando, tends [*sic*] 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 Endeavors to re-convert into the Right Way, those who have been misguided from it by the Illusion of their Passions.

This text raises more questions than it provides answers. Based on this passage alone, the action of the opera would seem to center more around Zoroastro than any other character; he is the one figure whose actions—"re-conducting" Orlando to "the Right Way"—are emphasized. In order to answer these questions and explain Zoroastro and his symbolism, we must put *Orlando* into the context of eighteenth-century London and particularly one of its most prominent, and mysterious, intellectual movements: Freemasonry.

Though its origins lay much earlier (exactly how much is open to debate), Freemasonry in the modern sense was born in London in 1717, with the creation of the first grand lodge from four independent lodges in the city. After that point, the popularity of—and the curiosity about—the organization became increasingly evident in English culture; by 1735, there were well over a hundred lodges, the membership of which extended from the middle classes to the upper echelons of the nobility and clergy.² Many of the grand masters from the 1720s on were drawn from the aristocracy, a well-publicized fact that undoubtedly contributed to the society's success.

As Japer Ridley claims, “The succession of noble brothers who served as Grand Masters in the years following 1723 very largely succeeded in reassuring the public that the Freemasons were not a dangerous and subversive organization” (41).

Free from persecution, at least temporarily, Masons were highly visible in society both as individuals and as a group, and non-Masons were eager to learn as much as possible about this alluringly secretive society. Announcements regarding Freemasonic meetings began to appear in the London press in the 1720s, and a number of pamphlets, both pro- and anti-Masonry, were published regularly, many printed in multiple editions. Particularly popular were those pamphlets that purported to reveal the secrets of Freemasonry to the uninitiated, the most famous of which emerged in 1730, written by Samuel Prichard. This work, entitled *Masonry Dissect'd*, was popular enough to go through at least five editions within a matter of weeks. The appearance and popularity of *Masonry Dissect'd* spurred several authors to compose pamphlets in reply to Prichard's accusations, notably *The Perjur'd Free Mason Detected* (1730) and *A Defence of Masonry* (1730–31), continuing to present the debate over Freemasonry and its values in a highly public forum.³ The public seemed to be developing an insatiable curiosity about all things related directly or indirectly to Freemasonry.

The Masons were certainly happy to give the public material for speculation, playing into this curiosity by their willingness to appear publicly in the 1720s and '30s. From 1721 to 1747 a procession to the grand festival, a Masonic celebration, was held yearly in the streets of London, and was evidently a splendid affair:

The brethren all met at the town house of the incoming noble Grand Master and a procession, preceded and followed by bands of musicians, was formed to march from there to the hall at which the Festival was to take place. The brethren would march two by two dressed in their aprons and jewels and carrying the emblems, symbols, and banners of the Craft, followed by the nobility in their carriages and chariots. Not surprisingly such processions attracted public attention. (Hamill, 77)

This procession provided onlookers with a good idea of what the “emblems” and “symbols” of Freemasonry were; in fact, parodies of the procession, and its symbols, were the reason for its eventual cessation in the 1740s (Hamill, 77). Given the general curiosity about all things Masonic, we should not be surprised that a composer and librettist might choose to create an

opera incorporating elements drawn from the secret society's ideology and symbolism.

Orlando was first performed on January 27th, 1733, and received about ten performances that season (the exact number is unclear).⁴ We do not know for certain who adapted Capece's libretto *L'Orlando, ovvero La gelosa pazzia* (1711) for Handel's use, but as Reinhard Strohm argues, for "stylistic, dramatic and cultural reasons" the most likely contender is Nicola Haym (1678–1729), with whom Handel had previously collaborated on *Tolomeo* (1728, also based on a libretto by Capece) and other operas during the years when Handel was composing operas for the Royal Academy (1719–28).⁵ Haym's authorship would push the creation of *Orlando's* libretto back to the late 1720s, since he died in 1729. According to Ellen Harris, the adaptation of Capece's libretto fits the Royal Academy years quite well, not only in the number of roles, but also in the expansion of Dorinda's character to match Angelica's, providing equal roles for dueling sopranos Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni, who would have sung the roles had *Orlando* been performed before the dissolution of the Academy (Harris, *Librettos*, xiv–xv).

Whoever adapted the original libretto, we also must consider the often considerable impact of Handel's own alterations of the text, as numerous studies have demonstrated. In *Radimisto* (1720), Handel's first opera for the Royal Academy of Music, for which Haym certainly adapted the libretto, it is clear that Handel suggested significant changes to his collaborator; Andrew Jones has recently addressed similar issues concerning Haym's libretto for *Rodelinda* (1725).⁶ Thus, even if the composer had little or nothing to do with the actual versification, it is certainly possible that Handel suggested including Zoroaster.⁷ For present purposes, it matters little who may have added the Masonic symbolism to *Orlando*, all elements of which were additions to the original Capece libretto and associated with the character of Zoroastro.

The curtain opens on Zoroastro, who has foreseen Orlando's ultimate return to reason. The magus urges the hero to eschew his passion for Angelica and follow the path of glory, but Orlando refuses. Angelica, though, has fallen in love with Medoro, who returns her affections. Orlando sees the lovers' initials carved into a tree, and realizing that Angelica has rejected him, descends into madness, eventually threatening the lives of Angelica, Medoro, and the innocent shepherdess Dorinda. Zoroastro intervenes, saving them all (at various times) from Orlando's

fury, and finally casting the confused hero into a cave, where the magician summons an eagle and magical potion to cure Orlando of his affliction. This magic succeeds, Orlando is returned to his senses, and a joyful reconciliation occurs in which Angelica forgives Orlando, and the hero chooses glory over love.⁸

The most immediately Masonic element of the opera is obvious even from this short synopsis: the very presence of Zoroastro, or Zoroaster, in the plot. More than one critic has pointed out the similarities between the magus and the character of Sarastro in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (1791), an opera with acknowledged Masonic symbolism.⁹ Both magicians are wise and benevolent patriarchs—as Dean notes, Zoroastro is the only male magician in any of Handel's operas—whose function is to lead the protagonist on his path to enlightenment.¹⁰

Masonic elements in *Orlando* go well beyond vague connections to Mozart's later opera; rather, there are numerous allusions in the libretto to imagery associated with Masons, as I will discuss in more detail, beginning with the significance of Zoroastro himself in eighteenth-century London. The details of the life of the Persian prophet Zoroaster, or Zarathushtra, are lost to us today. As Jenny Rose demonstrates, Zoroaster has been the subject of a great deal of literature since the third century BC, mostly depicting him as "Pythagoras's teacher, originator of the Chaldean Oracles, and the maestro of magic, astrology, and alchemy."¹¹ This image stuck with Zoroaster, carried through these Greek sources into the Italian Renaissance, where he may be seen, for example, in Raphael's famous fresco *The School of Athens* (1510–11). Much information regarding Zoroaster and the Zoroastrian faith that emerged around him was disseminated in London in 1700, with the publication of Oxford orientalist Thomas Hyde's *Historia religionis veterum Persarum eorumque magorum, Zoroastris vita* (1700), commonly called the *Veterum Persarum*, which remained a primary source on Zoroastrianism for quite some time (Rose, 92). The single visit to London of a Zoroastrian during the eighteenth century occurred in 1724 and lasted approximately a year, but despite his meetings with some important Londoners, this event does not seem to have made a large impact on the general public; nonetheless, it must have contributed somewhat to public awareness about Zoroaster.¹² The anonymous author of the second edition of the *Dictionarium sacrum seu religiosum* (1723), sometimes identified as Daniel Defoe, includes a significant entry on Zoroaster, in which the magus

is described as “a Man of exquisite Learning, and Craft.”¹³ Significantly, there is no entry on Zoroaster in the first edition of the book (1704), which would seem to indicate that his reputation was becoming more prominent in the early 1720s.

Aside from an increasing interest in the details of his life during this time, Zoroaster also garnered popular attention as a fictional character. He appeared prominently in Andrew Michael Ramsay’s (as Chevalier Ramsay) *The Travels of Cyrus*, published in Paris in 1727 and appearing in English translation the same year. *The Travels of Cyrus* rehearses the quest for knowledge undertaken by Prince Cyrus of Persia. In book 2, the prince seeks wisdom from the magi, who are led by Zoroastro. Over the course of some time, the magus reveals his ancient knowledge to Cyrus, leading to the prince’s eventual enlightenment. As Ramsay biographer George David Henderson claims, in *The Travels of Cyrus*, “Education is regarded as essentially spiritual and moral, to make a man and not a pedant, not merely one who has been told a great many things, but one whose life will be governed by the highest principles, and one whose main concern will be for others.” Henderson also believes that “the brotherhood of man is explicitly taught” in the text.¹⁴ Eighteenth-century Freemasonic readers would undoubtedly have found this journey parallel to their own. Ramsay, it is worth stressing, was himself a prominent Freemason, eventually becoming the grand master of French Freemasonry. In 1737, he gave a speech, later published, in which he claimed that the requirements of a Mason are to “protect your brothers by your authority, to enlighten them by your knowledge, to edify them by your virtues, to succor them in their necessities, to sacrifice all personal resentment, and to strive after all that may contribute to the peace and unity of society,” a statement that could just as easily have come from the pages of *The Travels of Cyrus*.¹⁵

We can detect the influence of Ramsay’s book in several elements of *Orlando*. For example, *The Travels of Cyrus* establishes Zoroaster’s abilities in astrology, which reflects the first scene of Handel’s opera (which I will return to shortly), and also explains the association between Zoroaster and the genii:

[The magi] had not our optick glasses to magnify objects and bring them near; but the penetrating spirit of Zoroaster saw further than the eye can reach by their help; because he was acquainted not only with all the experiments of the ancients and their traditions, but also with the occult sciences revealed by the Genii to the first men.¹⁶

In *Orlando*, the magician appears with four genii in the final act, when Zoroastro rescues the hero. This rescue itself is highly reminiscent of Ramsay's text: while Prince Cyrus is studying with Zoroaster, the death of his beloved, Cassandra, causes the prince to spiral into near madness in his grief. Only a timely intervention from Zoroaster is able to restore the future ruler to his senses. We can also see a bit of self-reflexivity in Handel's opera; *The Travels of Cyrus* informs readers that the magi "looked upon music as something heavenly, and proper to calm the passions, for which reason they always began and finished the day by concerts" (48). Thus, Handel's opera itself, both through its text and through its music, was "proper to calm the passions"—a clear motive to patronize the opera house. Audiences at *Orlando* in 1733 were essentially seeing Zoroaster/Zoroastro serve in precisely the same capacity as he had in *The Travels of Cyrus*: as a wise leader who saves a hero from himself by teaching him to temper his passions.

Although *The Travels of Cyrus* remained prominent in England for decades, its popularity was at its zenith in the years immediately following its publication, from about 1727 to 1729. Chevalier Ramsay became something of a celebrity in London; he was inducted into the Royal Society in 1729 and awarded an honorary doctorate in civil law from Oxford in the following year. The public prominence of both Ramsay and his work made *The Travels of Cyrus* timely subject matter for reference on the operatic stage.¹⁷ Indeed, if we credit Haym with writing the libretto for *Orlando*, it would have been precisely during this period that the text was adapted. Furthermore, *The Travels of Cyrus* was quite popular with members of the nobility—Handel's potential patrons and subscribers—since it constantly reinforced ideas of enlightened monarchy as the supreme form of government.¹⁸

However significant an impact *The Travels of Cyrus* may have had on the libretto of *Orlando*, Zoroaster was likely borrowed for many more reasons than just a desire to capitalize on Ramsay's success. As was the case with many intellectual trends in London at the time, aspects of Zoroaster, however fictionalized, and of Zoroastrianism were adopted into the history and iconography of Freemasonry. James Anderson, in the first official history and rulebook of Freemasonry, the *Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (1723), alludes to Zoroaster's wisdom and perceived authorship of the Chaldean Oracles, but stops short of mentioning his name, saying that "upon the Tygris [*sic*] and Euphrates . . . flourish'd many learned Priests and Mathematicians, known by the Names of Chaldees and Magi, who preserv'd the

good Science, Geometry. . . . But it is not expedient to speak more plain of the premises, except in a formed Lodge."¹⁹ Despite Anderson's apparent reluctance to discuss him, it would seem that Zoroaster was known to be a significant figure in Freemasonic symbolism. As Rose tells us:

The Masonic brotherhoods served as a channeling and synthesizing force for much of the intellectual ferment of eighteenth-century Europe. Of particular interest in this context is the Masonic employment of Iranian motifs, particularly the use of "Zoroastrian" symbolism in the higher degrees. The most common traditions of Freemasonry claim Zoroaster and Pythagoras as ancient masters in the Craft. (121–22)

The association between Zoroaster and Masonry seems to stem to some extent from book 1 of Hyde's *Veterum Persarum*, which connected Zoroastrianism to the building of Solomon's Temple, a cornerstone of Masonic culture. Many histories of Freemasonry trace the order's beginnings to the masons who constructed the temple, and any connection between Zoroaster and those origins would have rendered him an important figure to eighteenth-century Masons.

The choice to add Zoroaster as a major character in *Orlando* seems unlikely to have been arbitrary, considering his prominence in Masonic thought.²⁰ Furthermore, several of Zoroastro's scenes in the opera make further reference to the Masonic qualities of his character, and include Masonic imagery. Act 1, scene 1 opens with the wizard "contemplating the Motions of the Stars," a clear reference to his status as an astrologer. This reputation is further emphasized in the same scene by the presence of Atlas in the background, supporting the celestial sphere on his back.²¹ The celestial globe is a common image in Masonic art, often paired with the terrestrial sphere to represent the duality of the heavens and the earth. Often in Masonic imagery the celestial and terrestrial globes sit atop Joachin and Boaz, the two columns of Solomon's temple, which are among the most important symbols in Freemasonry. Furthermore, according to James Stevens Curl, in Freemasonry "The celestial and terrestrial globes are indicators of the universal claims of the Craft, and of the widespread need for charity."²² Particularly this last association seems relevant to *Orlando*, as it is through Zoroaster's charity that Orlando is restored to sanity and the lives of the innocent Angelica and Medoro are spared. The fact that the initial scene also features "a Mountain in Prospect" is likewise significant, since

the Freemason's journey to enlightenment was often allegorically represented as an ascent up a mountain. *The Travels of Cyrus* also mentions Zoroaster's visits to "the sacred mountain" (45). Thus, the setting informs us that Zoroaster has completed his journey to wisdom and reason already, and the mountain top stands in opposition to the "horrid cavern" into which Orlando descends in the depths of his madness.

Another suggestive Masonic symbol in *Orlando* is the eagle Zoroastro summons in the final act. The stage directions indicate that the magus makes "a Signal with his Wand, and four Genii in the Air accompany an Eagle, who descends with a golden Vessel in his Beak. . . . Zoroaster sprinkles the Liquor over the Face of Orlando, and then retires, after which Orlando rises retourn'd to his Senses." The eagle here seems unnecessary, particularly given that the genii in the air alone would certainly provide the audience with sufficient spectacle. Again, Hyde's *Veterum Persarum* is helpful in explaining this anomaly. The text describes how a vision of a flying eagle appeared in front of the sun, rendering the day into night, fortelling the coming of Zoroaster and the founding of Zoroastrianism.²³

The magic potion itself could allude to the single use of Zoroaster's name in *Orlando furioso*. In canto 31, the lovesick Bradamante suffers from an apparently incurable jealousy:

Rejection, scorn and all the pains of love,
The sufferings which last for many a year,
Can, when recalled, increase the pleasure of
More joyful times when Fate is less severe.
But that dread poison nothing can remove
From a sick mind, for none is deadlier.
No happiness, no merriment avails
To cure a jealous lover of his ills.

.....
This is that poisoned wound for which there are
No potions, unguents, salves or antidotes;
No secret charm, no magic formula
Such as the book of Zoroaster quotes,
No vigil for a favourable star,
No cabbalistic sign which power denotes,
Not all the magic arts, could heal that sore
For which, alas! death is the only cure.²⁴

In *Orlando*, Zoroastro provides what he cannot in Ariosto's epic, by using his powers to cure the hero's madness. It is significant that it is the eagle—a symbol of Zoroastrianism—that provides the means (the magic potion) to bring Orlando back from insanity. The pursuit of enlightenment is, of course, a prominent theme in *Die Zauberflöte*, with Sarastro (clearly a representation of Zoroaster) standing in for a Masonic grand master as the arbiter of reason. Zoroastro serves a similar function in *Orlando*, returning the hero to the path of reason. The dictum of the libretto's argument, that a "wise Man should be ever ready with his best Endeavors to re-conduct into the Right Way, those who have been misguided from it by the Illusion of their Passions," sounds as though it could have come directly from eighteenth-century Masonic writings. Orlando's journey thus becomes equivalent to that of the Masonic initiate.²⁵ In Prichard's *Masonry Dissect'd*, the initiate's proper answer to the question "What do you come here to do?" is "Not to do my own proper Will, / but to subdue my Passion still; / The Rules of Masonry in Hand to take, / And Daily Progress therein make" (9). With the help of Zoroastro, Orlando is able to accomplish this task and return to the path of reason. While it is difficult to imagine a setting of Orlando's story that did not to some extent address the conflict between madness and reason, in Handel's opera, this dichotomy assumes a central importance symbolized by the juxtaposition of the hero's progress with Zoroastro.

It seems that Zoroastro cannot declaim more than a few lines of text without extolling the glory of reason and the danger of giving in too much to emotion. He orders Orlando in act 1, scene 2 to "Refine that Heart from each unmanly Passion," and in act 1, scene 8, he tells Angelica that he knows of her "fatal Passion" for Medoro. Zoroastro later chides the two lovers in act 1, scene 4, saying "Incautious Pair, to what a threatenng Danger Ye stand expos'd by your imprudent Passion!" Following this passage, the magus sings an aria that is essentially a paean to Reason:

Thro' unending dark Meanders
 Each unwary Mortal wanders,
 When a sightless God's the Guide
 Still the fatal Path pursuing,
 To inevitable Ruin,
 When with Reason unsupply'd.
 Thro' &c.

Here we receive the opera's moral: those who follow the blind god (Cupid), as opposed to reason, are led to their demise. Orlando is nearly destroyed by his love-induced madness, but also Angelica and Medoro, in their "imprudent Passion," are saved from death only through Zoroastro's timely intervention. In act 3, scene 5, the audience is given this moral directly, with the magician's line, "Let all now learn by poor Orlando's Fate, That Reason Frequently is lost in Love."

While it may be argued that the struggle between love and glory is not a theme restricted to Freemasonry, control of the "passions" in favor of the merits of "reason" was nonetheless a central tenet of the secret society. It seems likely that audiences, at least those in the know, would have made the connections between Zoroastro and the Masonic symbols associated with him in *Orlando*. But what would prompt Handel and his librettist to include Masonic elements in an opera on the London stage in the first place? To answer this question, we must return to the role of Freemasonry in eighteenth-century London society.

By the late 1720s, when the libretto to *Orlando* was most likely written, the Royal Academy was struggling seriously to stay financially solvent. Attendance in 1728 hit new lows and, in Donald Burrows's words, "The whole Academy enterprise seems to have lost public confidence."²⁶ Alluding to Freemasonic ideals and imagery in an opera at the Royal Academy might have provided much-needed subscription sales both by appealing to the curious and by pandering to the increasing numbers of the nobility who were becoming involved in the society.²⁷ Handel did not have to look far to find patrons who were heavily involved in Freemasonry; in 1721, for example, the Duke of Montagu, a subscriber to the Royal Academy, was elected to the post of grand master.²⁸

It is even plausible that this appeal was directed to the king, or to those close to him. Shortly after taking the throne in 1727, George II, to whom Haym had dedicated the libretto for *Giulio Cesare*, appointed Dr. John Desaguliers to be a tutor to Frederick, Prince of Wales (Ridley, 44). Desaguliers was one of the most important figures in early English Freemasonry, serving as grand master in 1719 and deputy grand master in 1722–23 and 1726.²⁹ Furthermore, beginning in the 1710s Desaguliers was the chaplain to the Duke of Chandos, who was himself not only a subscriber to the Royal Academy, but one of Handel's chief patrons during the composer's early years in London. Evidently Desaguliers' Masonic proclivities

had a strong impact on Prince Frederick, who eventually became a master mason in the 1730s—the first time a member of the royal family was initiated (Hamill, 44). The prince, as is well known, had a complicated relationship with Handel, and went on to support Handel's competition, the Opera of the Nobility, in the 1730s.³⁰ If, as seems likely, the prince's Masonic leanings were evident before his official induction, a Masonic libretto at the Royal Academy might have been aimed at catching the attention, goodwill, and—critically for the failing enterprise—financial support of Frederick and his supporters.³¹ It is worth noting, as well, that Handel may have used Freemasonry as a topic earlier in his operas. Paul Monod has recently speculated that the composer's opera *Amadigi di Gaula* (1715) reflects many features normally ascribed to Freemasonry, including the hero undergoing a series of trials culminating in enlightenment.³² Significantly, as Monod explains, one of Handel's major patrons at this time was Richard Boyle, third Earl of Burlington, who was highly esteemed by the Freemasons and was in all likelihood himself a member of the order.

It is also possible that rather than purely celebrating the ideals of Freemasonry, *Orlando* parodies them. Reinhard Strohm has explored the comic implications of the character Dorinda in the opera, with her humorously “low” language and her decidedly un-operatic common sense—moreover, with these decidedly lower- and middle-class virtues, she stands in opposition to Zoroastro, who “has no power over Dorinda” (“Comic Traditions,” 253). Further, many operatic treatments of Orlando's madness were in some way comic, depicting him as either a love-struck fool or, to use Ellen Harris's term, a “satyr.”³³ In fact, as Harris points out, Capece's libretto is unusual in that it treats the subject seriously instead of mocking the hero in some way. But is the libretto as adapted for Handel equally serious? Strohm suggests not, arguing that the mad hero is rendered comically impotent by Zoroastro's interventions, and that the unbalanced measures of $\frac{5}{8}$ time (a highly unusual time signature for the eighteenth century), which reflect Orlando's madness and his waking dream of descending into the underworld in Charon's boat, are “so clearly a comedian's joke that modern interpretations which treat this as serious and ‘expressive’ music are in themselves worthy of laughter” (“Comic Traditions,” 261).

If one relates this comic character of *Orlando* to the Masonic elements themselves, then the argument takes a different turn. A number of satirical pamphlets appeared in the early eighteenth century attacking Freemasonry and the society's members, often quite lewdly. Take, as one example, a brief

passage from the anonymous pamphlet *The Free Masons: A Hudibrastick Poem* (1723):

But since, 'tis found, the Masons-Free,
Which in our modern Times we see,
Workmen are of *another kind*,
To Sport they're more than Toil inclined;
They have no Trowels, nor yet Lines,
But still retain their Marks and Signs;
And Tools they've always got that fit,
A Lady, Duchess, or a Cit.³⁴

This parody, and much worse, of the principles of Masonry continues for pages, lampooning nearly every aspect of the society, but without citing any specific knowledge of its secrets, despite the author's claim to be a former Mason. Some parodies of Masonry emerged more clearly from disaffected members of the order, as one can see from the creation of the Gormogons, a "rival" secret society that appeared briefly in the 1720s, possibly started by former grand master Philip, Duke of Wharton.³⁵ This society is chiefly known today from its parodic treatment in the drawing by William Hogarth (himself a Mason) entitled *The Mystery of Masonry brought to Light by the Gormogons* (1724), which illustrates a fictional procession.

Given the lampooning of Freemasonry in the 1720s and the numerous comic interpretations of Ariosto during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Masonic elements of Handel's *Orlando* may plausibly be read comically as well. But such a reading of the opera would depend on its performance: there is nothing directly in the libretto that indicates such an interpretation, and so any such possibility must remain purely speculative. As Dean puts it, "*Orlando* seems to have made little impression on contemporaries"; to my knowledge, critics were entirely silent on the subject, and the very few commentaries available focus largely on the music, which was deemed to be excellent, rather than on the opera's subject matter (*Handel's Operas, 1726–1741*, 252). Also, the tone and character of the parodies of Freemasonry suggest that they were largely for the enjoyment of the middle class, who were, at best, unlikely opera patrons. Given the prominence of Masonic thought and involvement among the nobility, who *were* opera-goers, parodying the society too much would likely have been bad business. Though the idea of parody adds the possibility of a "comic" interpretation to the more likely "straight" reading that supports the enlightenment val-

ues of Freemasonry, either version depends on the audience's knowledge of Masonry and its principles. It is also worth noting that these two interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive; if the Masonic elements were presented in an ambiguous enough fashion, then the audience would be able to project either serious or comic qualities onto the opera.

If we accept the idea that aspects of *Orlando* were logical, calculated attempts to appeal to a Masonic or Masonic-curious section of the opera-going public, we are presented with another question: why did Handel not write more works featuring Masonic elements? Several possibilities suggest themselves. The first and most obvious is that Nicola Haym, the probable adapter of the libretto, died before *Orlando* was produced, and could not follow up on its themes. This explanation only works, of course, if we assume Handel had no influence in shaping the Masonic elements. Another possibility is that the opera was a failure in its attempt to bring a new noble audience to Handel's theatre; by 1733–34, it was clear that the Prince of Wales and his cohort were backing the new Opera of the Nobility, and that any efforts to win them to the Handelian side were most likely in vain. A final possibility for the lack of other Masonic operas by Handel is that by the time *Orlando* was staged, the novelty of Freemasonry was wearing thin on Londoners. Perhaps Handel felt that the general cultural curiosity into which the libretto tapped was beginning to wane. However, it is also possible that further investigation of Handel's operas from a Masonic perspective will reveal more Masonic works.

I am not suggesting with the preceding analysis that either Handel or his librettist for *Orlando* were necessarily Freemasons, or even that they had direct ties to the society, though neither would I rule out such a possibility. Nonetheless, Freemasonry was such a prominent force in eighteenth-century London that even those without such connections were aware of the general ideals and symbols of the movement. Creating an opera that tied into these socially prevalent ideals would have been a sound business decision; not only were many Masons members of the nobility, but many others among the upper and middle classes were curious enough about the society to read the endless stream of exposés and, presumably, to see an opera with Masonic elements. Examining *Orlando* through the lens of Freemasonry provides a new way to understand the complex and problematic character of *Zoroastro*, and demonstrates the extent to which the creators of early eighteenth-century operas were aware of and influenced by their cultural surroundings.

Notes

I am very grateful to Tim Carter, Ellen Harris, and my anonymous readers for their helpful comments on versions of this essay.

1. Winton Dean, *Handel's Operas, 1726–1741* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 238.
2. For a history of Freemasonry in England, covering the eighteenth century, see Jasper Ridley, *The Freemasons* (London: Constable, 1999), chapter 4, “The Grand Lodge.” Another valuable source is John Hamill, *The Craft: A History of English Freemasonry* (London: Crucible, 1986), chapter 3, “The Grand Lodge System.”
3. These three pamphlets, and others from the period, are reprinted in *The Early Masonic Catechisms*, ed. Douglas Knoop, G. P. Jones, and Douglas Hamer (Manchester: Manchester Univ., 1943).
4. The original singers are as follows: Senesino (Orlando), Anna Maria Strada del Pò (Angelica), Francesca Bertolli (Medoro), Celeste Gismondi (Dorinda), and Alberto Montagnana (Zoroastro). The opera was not revived in Handel's lifetime.
5. Reinhard Strohm, “Comic Traditions in Handel's *Orlando*,” in *Essays on Handel and Italian opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1985), 266. Winton Dean, in *Handel's Operas, 1726–1741*, finds Strohm's arguments for Haym's authorship unconvincing, largely on the basis of chronology. Moreover, according to Dean, “The part of Zoroastro was clearly conceived for a powerful bass, such as Montagnana, who created it, and who did not reach London till autumn 1731, whereas in both the 1729/30 and 1730/31 seasons Handel had only mediocre singers for the bass parts” (239). Though I still find the evidence for Haym's authorship compelling, perhaps the lack of a suitable bass voice was further incentive for Handel to wait until the 1730s to put on *Orlando*.
6. Winton Dean and John Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas, 1704–1726*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 329; Andrew V. Jones, “The Composer as Dramatist: Handel's Contribution to the Libretto of *Rodelinda*,” *Music and Letters* 88 (2007): 49–77.
7. Strohm, in “Handel and His Italian Opera Texts,” from *Essays on Handel*, makes a claim for Handel being the driving force behind Zoroaster, but his hypothesis rests on the assumption that the libretto was written in the 1730s.
8. For a more thorough synopsis of the plot of *Orlando*, see Dean, *Handel's Operas, 1726–1741*, 235–38.
9. Dean, in *Handel and the Opera Seria* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1969), explained as early as 1969 that *Orlando* has “a kinship with *The Magic Flute*. Both operas have a similar theme in the trials of a heroic lover, and the magician who imposes them and pulls the strings is much the same; Sarastro is of course a variant of the name Zoroastro. It is even possible to detect musical parallels [both roles are written for very low bass], for Handel wrote the part of Zoroastro for [Alberto] Montagnana, who had a compass of two octaves down to bottom F and was renowned for his performance of cantabile arias with wide leaps in the melody” (91).
10. Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria*, 89. The character of Melisso in *Alcina* does exhibit magician-like qualities, and his character is derived from Melissa in the

furioso. However, Melisso's power comes from the use of an enchanted object, a ring, rather than from any magic powers he wields directly, a significant difference from Zoroastro.

11. Jenny Rose, *The Image of Zoroaster: The Persian Mage Through European Eyes* (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 2000), 41.

12. John R. Hinnells, *Zoroastrians in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 76–79.

13. "Zoroaster," in *Dictionarium sacrum seu religiosum*, 2nd ed. (London: James Knapton, 1723).

14. George David Henderson, *Chevalier Ramsay* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1952), 121, 125.

15. Quoted in Henderson, *Chevalier Ramsay*, 169.

16. Chevalier [Andrew Michael] Ramsey, *The Travels of Cyrus* [1727], 4th ed., (London, 1730), 65. All subsequent references to *Travels* use this edition.

17. Significantly, Ruth Smith, in "The Achievements of Charles Jennens (1700–1773)," *Music and Letters* 70 (1989), has pointed out that *The Travels of Cyrus* was likely a major influence of Charles Jennens's libretto for Handel's oratorio *Belsazzar* (1744) (185–86).

18. A few examples from the subscribers to the 1730 English edition of *The Travels of Cyrus* include: the Duke of Argyll, the Duke of Gordon, the Duke of Montrose, the Earl of Arran, the Earl of Oxford, the Earl of Ilay, and the Earl of Shaftesbury. Henderson, *Chevalier Ramsay*, 138.

19. James Anderson, *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (London: William Hunter, 1723), 4–5.

20. As Strohm, in "Comic Traditions," argues, the character of Zoroaster had appeared in operas before *Orlando*. In these works, which are "all of the Mesopotamian variety, with Semiramis and her son/lover Ninus as protagonists. Zoroastro is usually a rival king who courts Semiramis or fights Ninus, using his magical powers in his most personal interest. . . . Only in one branch of this tradition does the sorcerer-king seem to receive a sympathetic treatment, making him almost a 'wise man' (as Handel's libretto preface calls him): these are several 'Ninus und Semiramis' operas performed between c. 1700 and 1730 in Hamburg and Brunswick" (263). While it is possible that Handel was familiar with one or more of these works, I do not think that in any way alters the importance of the decision, whoever made it, to include Zoroastro in *Orlando*, since the character was not familiar to English audiences, and Handel's Zoroaster has little in common with other representations of the magus. The name does appear, as "Zoroaster, King of Bactria," in the argument to the libretto for Handel's 1733 pasticcio version of Metastasio's *Semiramide riconosciuta* (London: T. Wood, 1733), although the character does not appear in the opera.

21. Strohm, in "Comic Traditions," also finds in the image of Atlas, Atlante in Italian, to be a reference to the sorcerer Atlante in *Orlando furioso*, who keeps Ruggiero trapped in a magic tower apart from the mundane world. Strohm regards Zoroaster as a kind of anti-Atlante, who actually keeps Orlando rooted in the real world, away from the temptations of love (264).

22. James Stevens Curl, *The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry* (1991; rep. Woodstock: Overlook, 2002), 238.
23. "Somnio autem vidit Nubem, quae tanta era tut, sicut Aquila volans, ejus aedes circumambiens, Solis ardorem cohibuit & lumen obscuravit, eum in modum, ut dies, alias ludicissima, sicut nox rederetur obscura." Thomas Hyde, *Veterum Persarum et Parthorum et Medorum religionis historia*, 2nd ed. (London, 1760), 333.
24. This translation is taken from *Orlando furioso* (*The Frenzy of Orlando: A Romantic Epic by Ludovico Ariosto*, trans. Barbara Reynolds, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1977), 2:224.
25. The exact rites of initiation during this part of Freemasonry's past are unfortunately unknown to us today, and likely varied significantly between lodges.
26. Donald Burrows, *Handel* (New York: Schirmer, 1994), 125–26.
27. The idea that one of Handel's operas might have allegorical social content is not entirely new. *Floridante* (1721) was evidently interpreted by some audience members as a political allegory. See Ellen Harris, "With Eyes on the East and Ears in the West: Handel's Orientalist Operas," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36 (2006): 434–35. Also, in *The Universal Spectator* (5 July 1735), one critic of *Alcina* (1735), another opera with a libretto based on *Orlando furioso*, attempted to interpret the work as a moral allegory. More recently, Suzanne Aspden, in "Ariadne's Clew: Politics, Allegory, and Opera in London (1734)," *Musical Quarterly* 85 (2001): 735–70, has explored the possibility that elements of *Arianna in Creta* (1734) may refer to the conflict between Handel and the Opera of the Nobility. Harris has likewise offered political readings of several of Handel's operas in her *Handel as Orpheus: Voice and Desire in the Chamber Cantatas* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 2001).
28. Here I use the list of subscribers found in Elizabeth Gibson, *The Royal Academy of Music, 1719–1728: The Institution and Its Directors* (New York: Garland, 1989), 346–47. Montagu was a subscriber in both years for which we have records, 1719 and 1723/24.
29. One might also note that Desaguliers was well acquainted with Chevalier Ramsay, since they were both members of the Gentlemen's Society of Spalding, a prominent Freemasonic organization (Ramsay was inducted during his visit to England in 1729–30), as well as the Royal Society. See Henderson, *Chevalier Ramsay*, 167–68.
30. The issue of the Prince of Wales's support, or lack thereof, of Handel's operas is complex and has been dealt with extensively by scholars. Winton Dean, in *Handel's Operas, 1726–1741*, sums up the situation by saying that "in 1731/32 and 1732/33 when there was no serious rival in the field [the Prince] had subsidised Handel. In 1733/34 he gave equal support to both companies. . . . in the next two seasons, however, he supported only the Nobility and attended none of Handel's performances" (134). See also Robert Hume, "Handel and Opera Management in London in the 1730s," *Music and Letters* 67 (1986): 347–62, and Thomas Nelson McGeary, "Handel, Prince Frederick, and the Opera of the Nobility Reconsidered," *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge* 7 (1998): 156–78.

31. The prince did attend two performances of *Orlando*, on 6 February and 24 April. Members of the royal family attended seven performances in total.

32. Paul Monod, "The Politics of Handel's Early London Operas, 1711–1718," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36 (2006): 467. Though the founding of the United Grand Lodge of England occurred in 1717, Freemasonry was nonetheless a formidable (albeit less organized) presence in London beginning decades earlier.

33. Ellen Harris, "Eighteenth-Century Orlando: Hero, Satyr, and Fool," in *Opera and Vivaldi*, ed. Michael Collins and Elise K. Kirk (Austin: Univ. of Texas, 1984): 105–128.

34. "Hudibrastic" poems, named for Samuel Butler's *Hubridas* (1672), are mock-heroic in nature and feature the heroic rhyme scheme (i.e., couplets), but are written in iambic tetrameter rather than the standard iambic pentameter. The Hudibrastic style was used extensively in eighteenth-century satire, notably by Jonathan Swift.

35. Somewhat confusingly, it would appear that Chevalier Ramsay was at one point a leader of the Gormogons, likely before becoming a Mason. This overlap suggests that, although the two organizations may have had their differences, they shared significant goals and values. For more on the Gormogons, see J. L. Carr, "Gorgons, Gormogons, Medusists, and Masons," *The Modern Language Review* 58 (1963): 73–78.

