

## Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*

The year 1724-5 was an *annus mirabilis* for Handel, for whom it brought an incredible hat-trick of operas – *Rodelinda*, *Tamerlano*, and, of course, *Giulio Cesare*. Performed at the King's Theatre, Haymarket, for the Royal Academy, the cast for all three included several of the leading international singers of the time – the castrato Francesco Bernardi ('Senesino'), and the soprano Francesca Cuzzoni taking the lead roles.

*Giulio Cesare* was in many ways an ideal opera to choose. The plot provided the opportunity for both seriousness and comedy and for lavish spectacle. The Egypto-Roman subject matter followed the spirit of the 1723-4 season, which saw performances of Addison's *Cato*, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Dryden's *All for Love* (based on Anthony and Cleopatra). For these reasons, it was almost guaranteed to pack the house - vital, as, according to the poet and commentator Paolo Rolli, 'audiences are falling away fast.' Rolli himself had nothing to do with *Giulio Cesare*, having fallen out with the Royal Academy the previous year. Instead (perhaps with some relief), Handel turned to Nicola Haym to adapt the libretto. Haym, who worked for the Royal Academy as secretary and cellist, had a practical approach to libretti, squeezing in as much drama and as many show-stoppers as possible, and reducing the recitative to acceptable lengths (the British preferred a high aria-to-recitative ratio). Haym was, incidentally, also an expert on the period, having written several volumes on Graeco-Roman medals (including those of Caesar, Cleopatra and Pompey).

Baroque opera was highly stylised. The house lights (candles) were not dimmed for any of the performance, and so the pacing of the drama was based on the presence or absence of characters from the stage (as well, of course, as on the music). Each character would have a certain number of arias to sing, according to his or her importance (the main roles, like Caesar and Cleopatra, would typically sing 3 arias per act, lesser characters 2, and so on). After an aria, the singer would leave the stage, and exits would be engineered so that an act would end with just one character (an exception to this is the duet ending Act I). Dramatic developments happened in recitatives; the aria was a moment for its singer to reflect on his or her situation. Arias were in ABA (*da capo*) form, which allowed for an emotion (A), a contrasting emotion (B), and a return to the first emotion (A). This perhaps does not look like making for good drama, and many stage directors seem to want to apologise for the *da capo*, but the returning A section can enhance characterisation or situation. In Act III's 'Piangeró', Cleopatra weeps at her grievous fate (A), then stiffens her resolve to wreak revenge from the grave (B), but returns to the A section, overcome by her former despair. Indeed, the *da capo* aria is central to Handel's characterisation and dramatic pacing.

Dramatic pacing is achieved in two main ways: music within recitatives and the relationship of recitatives with arias (and even arias with arias). At the beginning of the first act, for example, the pace is quite fast – Caesar enters with a brilliant heroic aria ('Presti omai'); in the recitative following, in which Achilla presents him with Pompey's head, Handel makes great use of different note values (crochets, quavers) to winch up the drama (all too often ignored in performances). This is followed by a terrific aria in C minor from Caesar, a slow D major aria from Cornelia (compare with Caesar's D major one, before), and another terrific C minor aria, this time from Sesto. In Act II, scene viii, Curio rushes in, and exchanges hurried words with Caesar. The recitative's pace is broken by Cleopatra's surprise announcement of who she really is. Caesar whirls out to another brilliant aria ('Al lampo'), which ends with a chorus baying for blood, and the rushing here is halted immediately by Cleopatra's stunned (and stunning) accompanied recitative and aria. In Act III, Ptolemy and Cleopatra argue furiously, and Ptolemy continues this anger with his 'Domeró'; the pace is slowed afterwards by his sister's despair ('Piangeró'). In a fit of genius, Handel breaks this

tragic E major mood with Caesar emerging from the sea in F major – a real shock! Handel's most dramatic moments tend to happen in accompanied recitatives. These are midway between recitative (representing more than one emotion; not following ABA form) and aria (with orchestral accompaniment). Caesar's 'Aure, deh per pieta' is a curious mixture between accompanied recitative and aria – here, Handel has deliberately played around with the forms to achieve a superb representation of Caesar's rather confused state.

Although the opera is named after Caesar, it is in fact Cleopatra who is the real lead part. Handel loved women. His most interesting characters are women, and his best music is inspired by them. Partly this is because in order to be a heroine (or anti-heroine, like Alcina), a girl must shake off the traditional, subordinate weaker-vessel role. *Giulio Cesare's* sister operas, *Rodelinda* and *Tamerlano*, both have feisty heroines. Cleopatra is no less feisty, although a little less pure than Rodelinda or Asteria. Queen in her own right, she is manipulative, worldly, and rather selfish. She seeks to use the might of Rome to further her own ends, and will ruthlessly seduce Caesar. She is a complex character whose myriad characteristics are portrayed throughout the opera. First, she teases her brother in a bright, cheeky E major aria, showing off her quick wit and control, but also her femininity. Her arias 'Tutto puó' and 'Venere bella', in the skittish key of A major, are in a similar mood to each other (in fact, the music of the latter actually refers to the former) – all the self-confidence of a woman knowing she's got what a man wants! She determines to seduce Caesar utterly by singing from a mock-up of Mount Parnassus, and, accordingly, Handel gives her the most ravishing aria, in a pastoral F major. Key is important to characterisation; so is 'keylessness'. When assassins arrive to kill Caesar, Cleopatra, left alone, realises that she has fallen in love with him. Shocked out of tonality, she plunges into a diminished 7<sup>th</sup>. She follows this amazing accompanied recitative with a heart-breaking aria in Handel's tragic-heroine key, F sharp minor: Cleopatra's façade is removed, and her humanity revealed. Her 'Piangeró' in Act III uses E major, for a mood very different from her E major arrival on stage in Act I – a mood which recalls a description of the key by Johann Mattheson, a friend of Handel's: 'E major expresses incomparably well a despairing or wholly fatal sadness; it is most suited to the helpless or hopeless conditions.'

Caesar's heroism is apparent from the start (his get-up-and-go 'Presti omai', in martial D), and to the last: his final solo aria is in another belligerent key, C major. He has all the impatience of a hero-in-love in the scene from Mount Parnassus – he keeps interrupting the music. Yet he is a statesman too, and knowledgeable about diplomacy: in 'Va tacito', he compares it to hunting (accompanied, of course by a horn!) His final duet with Cleopatra, which skips along in gentle G, shows a lighter, and more innocent, side.

Cornelia's music at once sets her as a very different woman from Cleopatra: noble, perhaps a little solid, she has some beautiful arias, such as 'Priva son', and her duet with her son ('Son nata lagrimar') is profoundly and tragically beautiful – there could not be a more powerful finish to the first act. She ends in the same key in which she began (D major), but in a very different mood – the joyful 'Non ha piú' is a complete contrast to the sorrowful 'Priva son'. Sextus, whose seeking vengeance for the death of his father is an important sub-plot, gets four cracking angry-young-man arias. His fifth aria (in Act I) is, however, a beautiful largo, in E flat, a key which, said Mattheson, 'includes much pathos.'

The characterisation of Achilla is lovely – his blusteringly boorish and belligerent love-song to Cornelia ('Tu se il cor') is so terribly inappropriate. His arias are awkward and heavy-handed, and have none of the charm and guile of Ptolemy's; he is however more honest than his master: 'Tu se il cor' is in a sincere G minor. Ptolemy's effeminate sliminess comes through in all his arias. His petty wrath is clear in 'L'empio, sleale' and the spiky 'Domeró'. 'Belle dee' is supremely oily, and also very peculiar, in that it peters out at the B section. (Interestingly, the tune of this was originally set to Caesar's aria 'Presto omai': Handel seems to have had doubts about its masculinity!) 'Si spietata' is spiteful and slippery,

and shows quite a different reaction from Achilla to Cornelia's scorn; the aria's key (strong C major) implies that he feels he can dominate a woman better than he can a man (think of his reaction to Caesar, 'L'empio, sleale', in E flat).

Each character is dealt with carefully and expertly by the composer; on top of that, Handel consistently writes music of superb quality. This opera is, as Charles Burney wrote, 'abounding in beauties of various kinds.'

## **G. F. Handel: Giulio Cesare in Egitto: Synopsis**

The action is set in Egypt, 48/7 BC. Caesar has defeated his rival Roman commander, Pompey, and is now on a plain by the Nile.

### **Act I**

I. A chorus celebrates Caesar's triumph, declaring him the new Hercules. Caesar sings a victory aria, and proclaims that he has come, seen and conquered.

II. Cornelia, wife of Pompey, and her son Sextus approach Caesar to sue for peace; her entreaties are cut short by Achilla's entrance.

III. He seeks Caesar's favour on behalf of his master Ptolemy, and presents Caesar Pompey's head on a plate. Cornelia faints (attracting Achilla's attention); Caesar dispatches Achilla, and sings of his horror at the murder.

IV. Curius offers support to Cornelia by becoming her husband; all she wants, however, is death, as her hope and comfort has gone. Sextus swears revenge.

V. Cleopatra is told by Nireus of the grisly event; she sees that she might be able to use it to her advantage in securing Caesar's aid against her brother. The latter enters, and Cleopatra taunts him, calling him an effeminate lover, and, in a cheeky aria, tells him not bother trying to rule, as he's not cut out for it.

VI. Achilla warns Ptolemy that his gift didn't go down well, and asks for Cornelia as a reward for serving Ptolemy. Ptolemy is angered by Caesar's reaction, and looks forward to killing him and achieving total domination.

VII. In his camp, Caesar considers the urn containing Pompey's ashes, and muses on the transience of life. Nireus enters with Cleopatra, disguised as Lydia, a lady-in-waiting whose fortune was lost to Ptolemy. She kneels and weeps before Caesar, and bowls him over. After he has left, Cleopatra 'congratulates herself on her wiles'. She and Nireus hide when

VIII. Cornelia enters, mourning her late husband. She takes up a dagger with which to avenge herself on Ptolemy, but Sextus enters and swears to do it himself. Cleopatra interrupts, and says that Nireus will lead them to Ptolemy. She hopes to outwit her brother.

IX. Caesar and Ptolemy meet, the latter inviting the former to his apartments. Caesar is suspicious, and decides to tread warily; he knows that Ptolemy is hunting him.

X. Achilla brings Cornelia and Sextus to Ptolemy. Sextus challenges the tyrant to a duel, but Ptolemy has him arrested. He orders Cornelia to the seraglio, apparently for Achilla's pleasure, but really for his own.

XI. Achilla promises to help Cornelia escape with Sextus if she will marry him; she refuses, despite his proclamations of love. Cornelia and Sextus bid a tearful farewell to each other .

### **Act II.**

I. In a garden of cedars with a 'Prospect of Mount Parnassus on which is seated the Palace of Virtue', Cleopatra tells Nireus to bring Caesar to this delightful grotto, and say that Lydia will meet him there to discuss Ptolemy.

II. Caesar enters, and is greeted by a symphony, and by Lydia as Virtue. Caesar is transfixed.

III. In the seraglio garden, Cornelia is lamenting.

IV. Achilla and then Ptolemy make advances towards her. Ptolemy pulls Achilla aside, sends

him off to kill Caesar, promising him Cornelia; Achilla rejoices. Ptolemy gropes for Cornelia's breast; she leaves in disgust. He considers the use of force.

V. Cornelia tries to commit suicide by throwing herself into the wild beasts' den, but is stopped by Sextus.

VI. Nireus tells Cornelia that she is to go to Ptolemy's harem, and suggests that Sextus might follow and kill the tyrant. This gives hope both to Cornelia and Sextus.

VII. Cleopatra, still disguised as Lydia, awaits Caesar, and prays to Venus to lend her aid.

VIII. She feigns sleep to make her all the more irresistible to Caesar. He finds her rather too forward when she 'wakes', so she resumes her rest. Curius enters warning Caesar that he has been betrayed, and that assassins are approaching. Cleopatra, in panic, reveals who she really is, and says she will stop these murderers, but, on seeing them, changes her mind and bids him flee. He leaves, saying that he will go down fighting. She has realised that her prey has captured her heart, and prays for his safety. If Caesar is to die, then she must too.

IX. Meanwhile, back at the harem, Ptolemy is surrounded by his beauties. He throws his kerchief to Cornelia to indicate that she is to attend to him that night. Enter Sextus, who tries to kill Ptolemy.

X. Achilla comes in just in time to halt the action. He informs Ptolemy that Caesar and Curius have escaped, and that Cleopatra has defected, and recommends preparations for war. As reward for his loyalty he asks for Cornelia; Ptolemy gives him denunciation as a traitor.

XI. Sextus makes to stab himself, but is stopped by his mother. He fulminates against Ptolemy.

### **Act III.**

I. In a port near Alexandria, Achilla leads a force to join Cleopatra, since he has been alienated by Ptolemy.

II. A symphony ushers in Ptolemy with his sister, now his captive; it is Ptolemy's turn for some vicious taunting.

III. Cleopatra is left alone to weep at her fate; her vengeance can now only come from the grave.

IV. Caesar enters, and gives thanks for his deliverance from death, despite his being alone, separated from his allies. On the other side of the stage, Sextus and Nireus aid a wounded Achilla. Achilla gives Sextus a seal as a sign to his army to follow Roman leadership, and expires.

V. Caesar takes the seal from a surprised and delighted Sextus, and goes to battle.

VI. Sextus has vengeance in his sight.

VII. In Cleopatra's apartments, Cleopatra bids her attendants farewell, preparatory to being led off by guards. She hears fighting and fears the worst. But, it is a triumphant Caesar. Cleopatra is overjoyed.

VIII. Meanwhile, in the royal hall, Ptolemy attempts to rape Cornelia. She draws her dagger. Sextus bursts in, challenges Ptolemy and kills him. Cornelia is, to say the least, relieved.

IX. Caesar and Cleopatra, victorious, parade through Alexandria to a symphony. Nireus greets Caesar as world leader. Sextus and Cornelia kneel before the great man, who accepts them as friends. Cleopatra is content to be a tributary queen to 'Rome's great Emperor'; as well, of course, as his lover. The rulers proclaim their mutual affection. The chorus celebrates the return to peace and prosperity.

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