WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 1 June 2026
7.30pm

Wigmore Hall 125th Anniversary Festival

The Anniversary Festival is supported by the 1901 Patrons' Circle and
Cockayne Grants for the Arts, a Donor Advised Fund, held at The Prism Charitable Trust

William Christie director, harpsichord, organ
Rachel Redmond soprano (as Galatea)
James Way tenor (as Acis)
Richard Pittsinger tenor (as Damon)
Padraic Rowan bass-baritone (as Polyphemus)
Les Arts Florissants

Eugénie de Padirac soprano
Michael Loughlin Smith tenor
Benoit Descamps bass

Emmanuel Resche-Caserta leader and musical assistant, violin
Tami Troman violin
David Simpson cello, basso continuo
Hugo Abraham double bass, basso continuo

Sébastien Marq recorder
Tiam Goudarzi recorder
Pier Luigi Fabretti oboe
Yanina Yacubsohn oboe
Evolène Kiener bassoon
Sergio Bucheli theorbo, basso continuo

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) Acis and Galatea HWV49 (1718)

Interval after 'Happy we'

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'Murm'ring still thy gentle love': Handel's English serenata

Summer evenings in Italian courts were filled with music, and in particular with the dramatic, pastoral serenatas, often designed for performance in palace courtyards or, in Naples, on the water. Little wonder that James Brydges, self-styled Maecenas of the arts, with wealth aplenty thanks to his lucrative role as paymaster-general of the British forces abroad, and with classical tastes instilled thanks to his stints at Oxford and at the Akademie Rudolph-Antoniana in Wolfenbüttel, should seek to create such an entertainment for his own palace. Cannons, near Edgware in Middlesex, was built over the period 1713-24 for c.£200,000 (in modern terms, over £30 million), as a monument to classical taste and the arts. The young Handel was just one of a number of celebrated artists of the period to be patronised by Brydges. He wrote several anthems for Cannons's chapel, but also two dramatic works, *Esther* and *Acis and Galatea* (1718), both of which were to receive significant later attention, when Handel turned from Italian opera to English oratorio in the 1730s.

Partly because of that history, *Acis* has presented a generic riddle. Described variously as a 'masque', an 'entertainment', a 'pastoral', a 'little opera' (as it was termed when first written), and even an 'oratorio', as well as a serenata, the story that it was performed outdoors on terraces overlooking the garden, with a fountain providing a suitable setting for the final scene, seems to confirm the association with the Italian tradition. Indeed, Handel's earlier *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo* (1708), a three-voice serenata written while in Rome, would have provided a model. Handel's 1718 *Acis* sat in a tradition of English as well as Italian pastoral works, associated with the theatrical experiments of the 1700s to 1710s by a handful of native poets (John Eccles and John Hughes) and non-native composers (Peter Anthony Motteux, Johann Christoph Pepusch, John Ernest Galliard). Like those, it was modest in scale: John Gay's libretto seems originally to have been designed for three performers (like Handel's Italian setting of the story), but was first staged with five, though one, Coridon, was given only one air. The relatively modest instrumental forces required (possibly as few as seven instrumentalists) may help to explain why it was subsequently popular with performing societies across the country. Indeed, the first performance outside Cannons took place just a few months later, in February 1719 in Somerset, while the music was published in 1722.

The first public London performances, in 1731 and then in 1732, were given without Handel's involvement. The second, directed by Thomas Arne and advertised as 'the first Time it ever was performed in a Theatrical Way', inspired Handel to respond. Because Arne's production had claimed it was to be presented 'with all the Grand Chorus's, Scenes, Machines, and other Decorations' (presumably not used in the 1718 original!), Handel went one better, extending the work to fill three acts – using material from the Italian *Aci* and other cantatas, to suit his Italian cast. His production was given in the manner of an oratorio: 'There will be no Action on the Stage, but the Scene will represent, in a Picturesque Manner, a rural Prospect, with Rocks, Groves, Fountains and Grotto's; amongst which will be disposed a Chorus of Nymphs and Shepherds, Habits, and every other Decoration suited to the Subject.' It was mounted around the same time as the oratorio *Esther*, his other Cannons work. (Taken together, these points may explain why the title 'oratorio' was later given to *Acis and Galatea*.) Handel continued to mount this version in adapted form up to 1741, but also offered a two-act English version (with an English cast) in 1739. Gradually this English version (and variants on it) took over.

Today's performance is given in the 1715-32 autograph version as a 'masque' for four singers and chorus. After the opening chorus, Galatea invokes the pastoral mode in her *da capo* aria 'Hush, ye pretty warbling quire!', while seeking Acis. As she leaves, Acis enters in similar vein with 'Where shall I seek the charming fair?' Damon admonishes Acis not to neglect his flocks or his friends while pining, in the aria 'Shepherd, what art thou pursuing?' with its ominous second line 'Heedless running to thy ruin'. They are reunited with an aria apiece, Acis's popular 'Love in her eyes sits playing' and Galatea's 'As when the dove', and their lovely duet 'Happy we!' The bucolic bliss is swiftly shattered, however, as the chorus announces 'the monster Polypheme', abjuring 'Wretched lovers! Fate has past / This sad decree: no joy shall last.'

Polyphemus brings much-needed shape and direction to the story, announcing his unrequited passion for Galatea in a grand accompagnato 'I rage — I melt — I burn!' and then the delightfully bathetic 'O ruddier than the cherry'. Galatea gives as good as she gets in the ensuing argument, but Polyphemus ends with the menacing aria 'Cease to beauty to be suing', while Damon counsels him in Machiavellian fashion, 'Would you gain the tender creature'. An angry Acis reappears with the militant aria 'Love sounds th'alarm'. Damon appears again to offer the cynic's counsel against love with 'Consider, fond shepherd, / How fleeting's the pleasure'. But as Galatea reappears and the couple affirm their love in 'The flocks shall leave the mountains', Polyphemus interjects his fury, concluding 'Fly swift, thou massy ruin, fly! / Die, presumptuous Acis, die!' as he throws the boulder that crushes Acis. Acis expires in a swift accompagnato, leaving the chorus and Galatea to mourn him at length, during which she transforms him into a fountain, allowing the chorus to conclude by celebrating his transformation into an eternal water course, 'Murm'ring still thy gentle love'.

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George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Acis and Galatea HWV49 (1718)

John Gay and others, after Ovid

1. Sinfonia

2. Chorus

O, the pleasure of the plains!
Happy nymphs and happy swains,
Harmless, merry, free and gay,
Dance and sport the hours away.
For us the zephyr blows,
For us distills the dew,
For us unfolds the rose,
And flow'rs display their hue.
For us the Winters rain,
For us the Summers shine,
Spring swells for us the grain,
And Autumn bleeds the vine.
O, the pleasure ...

3. Accompagnato

Galatea

Ye verdant plains and woody mountains,
Purling streams and bubbling fountains,
Ye painted glories of the field,
Vain are the pleasures which ye yield;
Too thin the shadow of the grove,
Too faint the gales, to cool my love.

4. Air

Galatea

Hush, ye pretty warbling quire!
Your thrilling strains
Awake my pains,
And kindle fierce desire.
Cease your song, and take your flight,
Bring back my Acis to my sight!
Hush ...

5. Air

Acis

Where shall I seek the charming fair?
Direct the way, kind genius of the mountains!
O tell me, if you saw my dear!
Seeks she the groves, or bathes in crystal fountains?
Where ...

6. Recitative

Damon

Stay, shepherd, stay!
See, how thy flocks in yonder valley stray!
What means this melancholy air?
No more thy tuneful pipe we hear.

7. Air

Damon

Shepherd, what art thou pursuing?
Heedless running to thy ruin;
Share our joy, our pleasure share.
Leave thy passion till tomorrow,
Let the day be free from sorrow,
Free from love, and free from care!
Shepherd ...

8. Recitative

Acis

Lo, here my love, turn, Galatea, hither turn thy eyes!
See, at thy feet the longing Acis lies.

9. Air

Acis

Love in her eyes sits playing,
And sheds delicious death;
Love on her lips is straying,
And warbling in her breath!
Love on her breast sits panting,
And swells with soft desire;
No grace, no charm is wanting,
To set the heart on fire.
Love in her eyes ...

10. Recitative

Galatea

Oh, didst thou know the pains of absent love,
Acis would ne'er from Galatea rove.

11. Air

Galatea

As when the dove
Laments her love,
All on the naked spray;
When he returns,
No more she mourns,
But loves the live-long day.
Billing, cooing,
Panting, wooing,
Melting murmurs fill the grove,
Melting murmurs, lasting love.
As when ...

12. Duet and Chorus

Galatea and Acis

Happy we!
What joys I feel!
What charms I see
Of all youths/nymphs thou dearest boy/brightest fair!
Thou all my bliss, thou all my joy!
What joys ...

Interval

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13. Chorus
Wretched lovers! Fate has past
This sad decree: no joy shall last.
Wretched lovers, quit your dream!
Behold the monster Polypheme!
See what ample strides he takes!
The mountain nods, the forest shakes;
The waves run frighten'd to the shores:
Hark, how the thund'ring giant roars!

14. Accompagnato
Polyphemus
I rage – I melt – I burn!
The feeble god has stabb'd me to the heart.
Thou trusty pine,
Prop of my God-like steps, I lay thee by!
Bring me a hundred reeds of decent growth
To make a pipe for my capacious mouth;
In soft enchanting accents let me breathe
Sweet Galatea's beauty, and my love.

15. Air
Polyphemus
O ruddier than the cherry,
O sweeter than the berry,
O nymph more bright
Than moonshine night,
Like kidlings blithe and merry!
Ripe as the melting cluster,
No lily has such lustre;
Yet hard to tame
As raging flame,
And fierce as storms that bluster!
O ruddier …

16. Recitative
Polyphemus
Whither, fairest, art thou running,
Still my warm embraces shunning?

Galatea
The lion calls not to his prey,
Nor bids the wolf the lambkin stay.

Polyphemus
Thee, Polyphemus, great as Jove,
Calls to empire and to love,
To his palace in the rock,
To his dairy, to his flock,
To the grape of purple hue,
To the plum of glossy blue,
Wildings, which expecting stand,
Proud to be gather'd by thy hand.

Galatea
Of infant limbs to make my food,
And swill full draughts of human blood!
Go, monster, bid some other guest!
I loathe the host, I loathe the feast.

17. Air
Polyphemus
Cease to beauty to be suing,
Ever whining love disdaining.
Let the brave their aims pursuing,
Still be conqu'ring not complaining.
Cease …

18. Air
Damon
Would you gain the tender creature,
Softly, gently, kindly treat her:
Suff'ring is the lover's part.
Beauty by constraint possessing
You enjoy but half the blessing,
Lifeless charms without the heart.
Would you …

19. Recitative
Acis
His hideous love provokes my rage.
Weak as I am, I must engage!
Inspir'd with thy victorious charms,
The god of love will lend his arms.

20. Air
Acis
Love sounds th'alarm,
And fear is a-flying!
When beauty's the prize,
What mortal fears dying?
In defence of my treasure,
I'd bleed at each vein;
Without her no pleasure,
For life is a pain.
Love sounds …

21. Air
Damon
Consider, fond shepherd,
How fleeting's the pleasure,
That flatters our hopes
In pursuit of the fair!
The joys that attend it,
By moments we measure,
But life is too little
To measure our care.
Consider …

22. Recitative
Galatea
Cease, oh cease, thou gentle youth,
Trust my constancy and truth,
Trust my truth and pow'rs above,
The pow'rs propitious still to love!

23. Trio
Galatea and Acis
The flocks shall leave the mountains,
The woods the turtle dove,
The nymphs forsake the fountains,
Ere I forsake my love!

Polyphemus
Torture! fury! rage! despair!
I cannot, cannot bear!

Galatea and Acis
Not show'rs to larks so pleasing,
Nor sunshine to the bee,
Not sleep to toil so easing,
As these dear smiles to me.

Polyphemus
Fly swift, thou massy ruin, fly!
Die, presumptuous Acis, die!

24. Accompagnato
Acis
Help, Galatea! Help, ye parent gods!
And take me dying to your deep abodes.

25. Chorus
Mourn, all ye muses! Weep, all ye swains!
Tune, tune your reeds to doleful strains!
Groans, cries and howlings fill the neighb'ring shore:
Ah, the gentle Acis is no more!

26. Solo and Chorus
Galatea
Must I my Acis still bemoan,
Inglorious crush'd beneath that stone?

Chorus
Cease, Galatea, cease to grieve!
Bewail not whom thou canst relieve.

Galatea
Must the lovely charming youth
Die for his constancy and truth?

Chorus
Cease, Galatea, cease to grieve!
Bewail not whom thou canst relieve;
Call forth thy pow'r, employ thy art,
The goddess soon can heal the smart.

Galatea
Say what comfort can you find?
For dark despair o'erclouds my mind.

Chorus
To kindred gods the youth return,
Through verdant plains to roll his urn.

27. Recitative
Galatea
'Tis done! Thus I exert my pow'r divine;
Be thou immortal, though thou art not mine!

28. Air
Galatea
Heart, the seat of soft delight,
Be thou now a fountain bright!
Purple be no more thy blood,
Glide thou like a crystal flood.
Rock, thy hollow womb disclose!
The bubbling fountain, lo! it flows;
Through the plains he joys to rove,
Murm'ring still his gentle love.

29. Chorus
Galatea, dry thy tears,
Acis now a god appears!
See how he rears him from his bed,
See the wreath that binds his head.
Hail! thou gentle murm'ring stream,
Shepherds' pleasure, muses' theme!
Through the plains still joy to rove,
Murm'ring still thy gentle love.