

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 24 April 2023
7.30pm

The English Concert

Harry Bicket director

Olga Kulchynska soprano, as

Ginevra

Emily D'Angelo mezzo-soprano,
as Ariodante

Oliver Wass harp

Tom Foster organ

Nadja Zwiener violin I
Jacek Kurzydło violin I
Jeffrey Girton violin I
Mark Seow violin I
Tuomo Suni violin II
Kinga Ujszászi violin II
Oliver Cave violin II
Simone Pirri violin II
Jordan Bowron viola

Alfonso Leal del Ojo viola
Joseph Crouch cello
Jonathan Byers cello
Youen Cadiou double bass
Clara Espinosa Encinas oboe
Bethan White oboe
Lisa Goldberg bassoon
Sergio Bucheli theorbo

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Overture from *Ariodante* HWV33 (1734)

Harp Concerto in B flat Op. 4 No. 6 (c.1736)

*I. Andante - Allegro • II. Larghetto •
III. Allegro moderato*

From *Ariodante* HWV33

Vezi, lusinghe, e brio • Volate, amori

Organ Concerto in B flat Op. 4 No. 2 (c.1735)

*I. A tempo ordinario e staccato • II. Allegro •
III. Adagio e staccato • IV. Allegro ma non presto*

Con l'ali di costanza from *Ariodante* HWV33

Interval

From *Ariodante* HWV33

Scherza infida • Il mio crudel martoro •

Ballet music • Dopo notte, atra e funesta •

Bramo aver mille vite

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The opera season of 1733-4 was not a good one for **Handel**. The two decades he had spent creating Italian opera for London audiences were under threat from a new opera company set up by the Prince of Wales to provoke his estranged parents and compete for their audiences. Just to be clear in its intentions, the first season of the new 'Opera of the Nobility' opened with a work by its new musical director Nicola Porpora entitled *Arianna in Nasso* – a less-than-subtle provocation in the face of Handel's *Arianna in Creta* being staged at the King's own theatre at the same time. To make things worse, most of Prince Frederick's singers were disgruntled former employees of the King's Theatre, tired of their continual fallings-out with Handel and easily tempted by the promise of exciting new opportunities. Among them was the star castrato Senesino, whose long association with Handel and the King's Theatre had been a huge draw for audiences, and whose departure was particularly worrying for Handel.

Nevertheless, the relative success of Handel's version of *Arianna* showed there was still an appetite for Italian opera in London, and by the time the 1734 season began he appeared to be holding up against his new competition. A venue carousel had begun that year when the Opera of the Nobility took over the Lincoln's Inn Theatre from the impresario John Rich, departing to open a new 'royal' theatre in Covent Garden, and Handel had moved his company to Rich's more modestly sized venue for the new season. Despite an inaugural season that had been less successful than Handel's, the Opera of the Nobility took the bold step of relocating to the capacious King's Theatre after Handel's move to Covent Garden, anticipating increasingly sizeable audiences coming to see not only Senesino but also their new acquisition, Farinelli.

These changes meant Handel was now working with singers with whom he was unfamiliar and in a new venue, under pressure to produce work and competing for audiences with the big names at the King's Theatre. But rather than choose a complicated philosophical story for his inaugural production of this first, high stakes season at Covent Garden, Handel set to music the anonymous reworking of a libretto by Antonio Salvi entitled *Ginevra, Principessa di Scozia*, based on three *canti* from Ludovico Ariosto's famous poem *Orlando Furioso*. The new opera that resulted, *Ariodante*, was one of the most straightforward Handel had ever written, with a narrative so simple that he was able to concentrate all the drama around the music itself. At the opening, Prince Ariodante is happily betrothed to Princess Ginevra of Scotland. Ginevra sings of her joy at their requited love in her three virtuosic arias of Act 1, 'Vezzi, lusinghe, e brio', 'Volate, amori' and 'Con l'ali di costanza', but a jealous Duke Polinesso tries to destroy her happiness by telling her father, the King, that she has been unfaithful. A heartbroken Ariodante tries to commit suicide before his brother exposes Polinesso's motives, and the couple reconcile in the short, phosphorescent duet 'Bramo aver mille vite'.

In the first production of *Ariodante*, the role of Ginevra was taken by Anna Maria Strada, the only lead singer not to have abandoned the company for the Opera of the Nobility the previous year. She had sung many of Handel's lead roles and was a reliable and known quantity, with a voice well suited to the demands of the vocal spectacular he had planned for his newest production. For the other female lead, Handel had engaged a young soprano called Cecilia Young, lauded by the diarist and musicologist Charles Burney as 'the finest soprano of her day'. The question of how to replace such a force of nature as Senesino, however, was not so easily answered, but Handel was eventually able to secure the young castrato Giovanni Carestini to sing opposite Anna Maria Strada in both *Ariodante* and *Arianna in Creta*. Handel took advantage of Carestini's voice, described by JJ Quantz as 'extraordinary... conforming to the manner of Farinelli', to write two of his most masterful arias, 'Scherza infida' and 'Dopo notte, atra e funesta' – to showcase his notorious range and virtuosity at the same time as sending the clear message to Senesino that even he was ultimately expendable.

Ariodante enjoyed a respectable 11 full performances at Covent Garden. These were followed by a series of concert performances over the following two years, after which it remained unperformed until its revival in Stuttgart in 1928. The reasons for such a long exile are not to be found in the quality of its music or accessibility of its story, but more in its length (three long acts), the masterful facility required of the singers and consequent need for high-quality cast, and also in its proliferation of ballet music, written for dance interludes that were performed by Rameau's choreographer Marie Sallé and her company, visiting that season from the Paris Opera. Together, these elements made for a spectacular piece of Baroque theatre, but in practical terms it was an enormous artistic undertaking.

If all this was not enough, though, it is likely that *Ariodante's* concert performances would have included further interludes to accommodate Handel's Organ Concertos Op. 4. This collection of six concertos was written specifically to be played on the theatre's chamber organ, during performances of Handel's oratorios. That this instrument had only one manual and no pedalboard meant the collection was remarkably adaptable (we hear No. 6 in its version for harp tonight), and although its first official publication was only made in 1738, the pair formed by Op. 4 No. 2 and Op. 4 No. 6 had enjoyed their first proper outings in the important seasons of 1735 and 1736. The former appeared in a performance of the revised version of *Esther* that appeared in the March after *Ariodante's* première. No. 6, however, enjoyed a much higher profile first performance as an interlude to *Alexander's Feast*, Handel's ode to the patron saint of music. As such, that occasion would have demanded such musical excess that it is not hard to imagine it finding a natural place next to the rich and bountiful sounds of *Ariodante*.

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George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Overture from *Ariodante* HWV33 (1734)

Harp Concerto in B flat Op. 4 No. 6 (c.1736)

I. Andante - Allegro

II. Larghetto

III. Allegro moderato

From *Ariodante* HWV33

Anonymous, after Antonio Salvi after Ludovico Ariosto

Vezi, lusinghe, e brio **Charms, blandishments and vivacity**

Vezi, lusinghe, e brio Rendano il volto mio Più vago al mio tesor.	Charms, blandishments and vivacity make my face more beautiful for my beloved.
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Volate, amori **Fly, Cupids**

Volate, amori Di due bei cori La gioia immensa a celebrar! Il gaudio è tanto, Che come e quanto Dir non saprei debba esultar.	Fly, Cupids, to celebrate the great joy of two fair hearts! My happiness is so great that I don't know how to express how, or how much, I should rejoice!
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Organ Concerto in B flat Op. 4 No. 2 (c.1735)

I. A tempo ordinario e staccato

II. Allegro

III. Adagio e staccato

IV. Allegro ma non presto

Con l'ali di costanza **With the wings of faithfulness**
from *Ariodante* HWV33

Con l'ali di costanza Alza il suo volo Amor, Fa trionfar nel cor, Fede, e speranza.	With the wings of faithfulness love takes its flight, and faith and hope triumph in my heart.
--	--

Non devo più temere Di sorte il rio tenor, Ma col mio bel tesor, Sempre godere.	I need no longer fear the cruel ways of fate, but with my fair sweetheart always rejoice!
--	--

Interval

From *Ariodante* HWV33

Scherza infida **The faithless one jests**

<i>Recitativo</i> E vivo ancora? E senza il ferro? Oh Dei! Che faró? Che mi dite,	<i>Recitative</i> And I'm still alive? And without my sword? O gods! What shall I do? What do you say, my sorrows?
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<i>Aria</i> Scherza infida in grembo al drudo. Lo tradito a morte in braccio Per tuo colpa ora men vo. Ma a spezzar l'indegno laccio, Ombra mesta e spirto ignudo, Per tua pena io torneró.	<i>Aria</i> The faithless one jests in her lover's arms, I, betrayed by your crime, go to death's embrace. But to break your shameful bond, as a sad shade, and disembodied spirit, I will return to torment you.
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Il mio crudel martoro **My cruel torment**

Il mio crudel martoro Crescer non può di più; Morte, dove sei tu, Che ancor non moro?	My cruel torment could not get worse; death, where are you, since I still do not die.
--	--

Vieni, de' mali miei, No, che il peggior non sei, Ma sei ristoro.	Come. Of my ills, no, you are not the worst, but you are my comfort.
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Please do not turn the page until the song and its accompaniment have ended.

Ballet music

Dopo notte, atra e funesta

Dopo notte, atra e funesta,
Splende in Ciel più vago il sole,
E di gioja empie la terra;

Mentre in orrida tempesta
Il mio legno è quasi assorto,
Giunge in porto, e'l lido afferra.

After night, black and dismal

After night, black and dismal,
the sun shines more lovely in the sky,
and joy fills the earth.

While in the horrid storm
my ship was almost sunk,
it gained the harbour, and reached the shore.

Bramo aver mille vite

Ariodante
Bramo aver mille vite, per consacrarle a te.

Ginevra
Bramo aver mille cori, per consacrarli a te.

A Due
Ma in questo che ti dono,
Più ch'in mille, vi sono
Amor, costanza e fè.

I long to have a thousand lives

Ariodante
I long to have a thousand lives to dedicate to you.

Ginevra
I long to have a thousand lives to dedicate to you.

Both
But in this, which I give you,
more than in a thousand,
there are
love, constancy and faith.