

PART II

The music

8 Handel and the aria

C. Steven LaRue

While in our own time Handel's choruses (particularly those in *Messiah*) are perhaps his best known vocal music, throughout much of his career it was his arias that generated the most public enthusiasm.¹ Partially owing to the relative neglect of the works in which arias are the most prominent element (the operas and cantatas) in the two centuries following Handel's death, and partially owing to rapidly changing tastes in the genres to which those works belong (both then and now), our appreciation of Handel's aria composition has suffered. Arias are the most important structural element in all of Handel's vocal works, however, and consequently they occupied more of his creative energy than any other form. As a result, Handel's arias provide us with a clear picture of his compositional development and also with insights into his aesthetic aims throughout his career.

Certainly part of our neglect of Handel's arias is the result of the fact that the vast majority of them are in da capo form, a form most commonly associated with *opera seria*.² Until quite recently, *opera seria* as a genre has been relentlessly criticised by both contemporary commentators and modern scholars alike; moreover, quite often the focus of the criticism has been the da capo aria itself. Essentially an expanded ternary form, the grand da capo aria (or five-part da capo, the type most commonly found in Handel's arias) takes the form A1 A2 B (B) A1 A2, in which A1 is the first stanza of text, A2 is a repetition of the first stanza, and B is the second stanza of text. Although the grand da capo represents one of the most sophisticated musical forms of the eighteenth century, the fourfold statement of the first half of the text in particular (involving the complete restatement of A1 A2 after B) has been the focus of a number of criticisms; because of the repetitiveness of the text, the da capo aria has often been seen as simply a vehicle for vocal improvisation and a shameless showcase for brilliant virtuoso singing rather than a form suitable for musical or dramatic expression.³

The importance of opera and the da capo aria to Handel's compositional development, however, cannot be overestimated. At the age of eighteen, Handel went to Hamburg to begin his long association with the Hamburg opera at the Theater am Gänsemarkt, first as orchestra member

(violin and then harpsichord) and subsequently as composer. Years later, in his biographical sketch of Handel's life, Johann Mattheson described Handel's arrival at Hamburg in 1703 and his compositional skills at that time:⁴

He composed at that time long, long arias, and almost endless cantatas, which still had not yet the right skill or the right taste, albeit a perfect harmony; he was, however, soon fashioned in quite another form by the high school of opera.

He was a skilful organist: more skilful than *Kuhnau* in fugue and counterpoint, particularly *ex tempore*; but he knew very little about melodic writing before he got to the Hamburg Opera.

While Mattheson suggests that writing opera arias was fundamental to Handel's early compositional experience, there can be no doubt that Handel's experience in this genre continued to affect his compositional choices long after he abandoned opera composition altogether.

In *Almira*, Handel's only surviving opera score for Hamburg,⁵ the wide range of formal aria types and musical styles, as well as the two languages used in the arias (German and Italian), reflect the diversity of stylistic influences that characterised German opera at that time. Even in Handel's score of *Almira*, however, the association of the da capo aria with opera, and particularly Italian opera, is clear. Of the German-texted arias, nearly half are in da capo form, and of these, one is in a shortened version of the form,⁶ whereas almost all of the Italian-texted arias are in da capo form. The structure of the *Almira* libretto, particularly in terms of the placement of arias within scenes and the nature of the dramatic contexts in which arias appear,⁷ also had a significant impact on Handel's early approach to opera composition. Although quite different in a number of ways from his practice in later Italian operas, Handel's arias for *Almira* exhibit both the conventions of the libretto and the dramatic characterisation that distinguish his aria writing throughout his career.⁸

By the time Handel wrote *Agrippina* for Venice late in 1709,⁹ his extensive experience with the da capo aria and his cosmopolitan musical training made it possible for him to treat the form with a variety of musical styles. More significantly, the arias of *Agrippina* begin to show a differentiation from one another based not just on varied musical style in response to the immediate dramatic context, but on the relation of individual character to that context and the larger context of the opera as a whole. In the first four arias, for example, musical portraits of the characters Nerone, Pallante, Narciso and Agrippina are painted that define those characters throughout the opera.

Nerone's 'Con saggio tuo consiglio' makes it clear that his interest in

becoming Emperor is solely due to his desire to please his mother; while the text could be set in any number of ways, the combination of siciliano features (compound time, minor mode) commonly associated with melancholy, and the ironic use of word painting for the phrase 'il trono ascenderò' ('I will ascend the throne'), in which 'ascenderò' is set to a descending-scale figure,¹⁰ musically characterise Nerone as the weak character he proves to be throughout the opera. By contrast, Pallante's aria 'La mia sorte fortunata' (common time, G minor) establishes his strength and his self-confidence; in response to Agrippina's promise that if Nerone ascends the throne Pallante will receive her love, Pallante boldly exclaims that his fortune is great in a wide-leaping melodic phrase that enters immediately with the orchestra in a motto-like gesture. While Pallante is by no means an entirely heroic figure, his conventional heroic characteristics contrast sharply with his rival/collaborator Narciso, whose response to Agrippina's proposal (the same she made to Pallante) is a delicate F major aria in 3/8 time accompanied by recorders ('Volo pronto; e lieto il core'), in which Narciso sings of the happiness of his heart. Finally, after convincing Nerone, Narciso and Pallante to comply with her wishes, Agrippina sings of her power and of her initial triumphs in a mock-military aria in C major and common time ('L'alma mia frà le tempeste') that is particularly notable for its syncopated phrasing. While the march-like quality of the aria establishes Agrippina's mood, the phrasing lends a twist to it that makes it uniquely her own; far from being a stock military piece, her aria establishes her emotional state and her singular character.

All four arias from *Agrippina* described above are da capo or dal segno arias (dal segno is a variant of the da capo form in which the opening ritornello is abbreviated, or even sometimes elided completely, at the repeat of the A section), but all four differ from one another in terms of musical style. Handel's acceptance of Italian *opera seria* and its conventions made this aspect of aria composition enormously important; although the formal features of the aria were restricted, the musical content of the aria could be varied in terms of metre, mode, melody, rhythm, accompaniment, texture and word setting.

From the premiere of *Agrippina* until the 1730s, Handel's compositional attention was almost entirely devoted to Italian opera. With the huge success of his *Rinaldo* in 1711, Handel began what was to become a long career in writing Italian *opera seria* for the London stage. The height of this career fell in the period from 1720 to 1728, during which Handel wrote fourteen operas for the Royal Academy of Music, a publicly held company devoted to the presentation of authentic Italian opera in England. Within the scores that Handel wrote for the Royal Academy, his

treatment of the da capo aria reveals a number of important aspects of both his technical skill in aria composition in particular, and his approach to the aesthetics of lyric expression in general.

By the time Handel wrote *Radamisto* for the Royal Academy in the spring of 1720, he had mastered the art of Italian opera and had developed his own personal operatic style. During its eight years of production, the Royal Academy company enlisted some of the finest opera singers to be found anywhere in Europe, giving Handel access to extended working relationships with his cast that he was to enjoy at no other time during his life. The results of this circumstance are evident in many aspects of Handel's operas from this period, and it is in the arias that many of the most subtle and most profound results can be found.

Handel's opera composition for the Royal Academy reflects a number of distinct and important changes of compositional approach. Intimately connected to these changes are the singers themselves; the relation between singer and aria type is closely associated with the relation between arias and the drama as a whole. Thus Handel's early Royal Academy operas have a musico-dramatic style that is distinct from his later Royal Academy works, on account of changes in the cast of soloists.

Changes in Handel's compositional approach to the Royal Academy operas particularly coincided with changes in personnel in the company's prima donna position. Margherita Durastanti, the Royal Academy's first leading lady (she had also been the creator of the role of Agrippina at Venice) was a thoroughly competent and experienced Italian singer who was capable of considerable vocal virtuosity and dramatic expression. Durastanti's versatility inspired Handel to cast her in a wide variety of roles, including a number of 'trouser' roles, and her arias reflect the dramatic range of her parts. When she took the title role in *Radamisto*, Durastanti could thus sing intimate love songs (such as 'Cara sposa'), heroic arias (such as 'Ferite, uccidete'), and melancholy arias (such as 'Ombra cara' or 'Dolce bene'). Handel's settings of these different types of texts reflect both Durastanti's versatility and his own ability to write in a number of different musical styles. The four arias mentioned above vary enormously in style, from a continuo-accompanied aria ('Cara sposa'), an old-fashioned type found in Handel's first opera, *Almira*,¹¹ to a heroic bravura aria ('Ferite, uccidete', described by Charles Burney as 'A spirited song in the style of the times'),¹² to a highly original melancholy aria ('Ombra cara'), to a siciliano aria ('Dolce bene'); nevertheless, all of these are, of course, da capo arias, and have in common the basic da capo formal structure.

Because of her ability to command a wide range of aria types and styles, the roles Handel wrote for Durastanti differ significantly from

those he wrote for her successor, Francesca Cuzzoni. The German composer and theorist Johann Joachim Quantz describes Cuzzoni in the following terms, based on hearing her in Handel's *Admeto* in 1727:¹³

Cuzzoni had a very agreeable and clear soprano voice, a pure intonation and beautiful *trillo*. Her range extended from middle c to the c above the staff. Her ornamentation did not seem to be artificial due to her nice, pleasant, and light style of delivery, and with its tenderness she won the hearts of her listeners. The *passagien* [melismas] in the allegros were not done with the greatest facility, but she sang them very fully and pleasantly. Her acting was somewhat cold, and her figure was not too favourable for the theatre.

Because the arias that Handel wrote for Cuzzoni within a given opera tend to be less varied in style than those found in Durastanti's roles, musical style becomes in itself a defining characteristic of Cuzzoni's roles. The *siciliano*, for example, was only one from a number of aria types which Handel employed for Durastanti, whereas in Cuzzoni's roles it became a regular musico-dramatic characteristic. Ironically, the first two Handel arias that Cuzzoni sang in London ('Falsa imagine' and 'Affanni del pensier' in *Ottone*, 1723) may have been written for Durastanti,¹⁴ and, in spite of the fact that Cuzzoni is said initially to have refused to sing them, it was these two songs that, according to Burney, established her London career as 'an expressive and pathetic singer'.¹⁵ With her very first London opera, therefore, Cuzzoni's stylistic strengths were established, and Handel began a long series of roles for her in which the *siciliano* became a symbol for the pathos inherent in her part, and came to reflect her particular abilities.

This is demonstrated by a comparison of Teofane's 'Affanni del pensier' in *Ottone* with Emilia's 'Mà chi punir desio' in *Flavio*, which was written specially for Cuzzoni later in 1723. Although these arias are found in quite similar dramatic circumstances (in *Ottone*, Teofane expresses her confusion about the identity of *Ottone*; in *Flavio*, Emilia is confused about whether her loyalties should be with her father or her lover), they display very different musical characteristics. Where 'Affanni del pensier' contains a complex contrapuntal accompaniment to Teofane's vocal line, 'Mà chi punir desio' is largely homophonic, giving primacy to the vocal line. In general, the *sicilianos* that Handel wrote for Durastanti ('Dolce bene' in the April 1720 premiere of *Radamisto*, 'Fatemi o Cieli' in the December 1720 revival of *Radamisto*, 'Oh dolce mia speranza' in the 1722 revival of *Floridante*) differ in kind from those he wrote for Cuzzoni ('Mà chi punir desio', 'Se non mi vuol amar' in *Flavio*), in that Durastanti's arias have independent accompaniments, often responding to the vocal

phrases and/or creating an active counterpart to the voice, whereas in Cuzzoni's arias the orchestra simply accompanies the voice, harmonically supporting the vocal line and creating the context for numerous vocal appoggiaturas and suspensions. The concerto-like sicilianos written for Durastanti, therefore, gave way to the accompanied-song style of sicilianos written for Cuzzoni.

Here I have taken only one type of aria as an example, but the association of specific aria type with specific singer reflects a broader change in Handel's approach to opera composition in general, the results of which can be found in the operas written between 1726 and 1728. During this period another international star, Faustina Bordoni, joined the Royal Academy, and the introduction of her fiery virtuoso style into the company resulted in two new developments. First, she possessed a number of unique virtuoso abilities that had to be incorporated into her arias if Handel was to maximise her musico-dramatic potential. Quantz describes her singing as follows:¹⁶

Her way of singing was expressive and brilliant (*un cantar granito*), and she had a light tongue, being able to pronounce words rapidly but plainly in succession. She had a facile throat and a beautiful and very polished *trillo* which she could apply with the greatest of ease wherever and whenever she pleased. The *passagien* could be either running or leaping, or could consist of many fast notes in succession on one tone. She knew how to thrust these out skilfully, with the greatest possible rapidity, as they can be performed only on an instrument.

Writing for Faustina therefore involved dealing with a new type of singer in a leading role and a new set of vocal techniques. Secondly, the nature of Faustina's vocal style and complementary dramatic style further codified Cuzzoni's role, in contrast, as a 'pathetic' heroine. Writing for Cuzzoni increasingly became a task of fully utilising her pathetic qualities.

This musico-dramatic distinction between Cuzzoni and Faustina is immediately apparent in *Alessandro*, the first Royal Academy opera in which the two stars shared the stage. The source for Handel's opera is Ortensio Mauro's *La superbia d'Alessandro*, a libretto which was set by Agostino Steffani for Hanover in 1690.¹⁷ In the Hanover version the roles of Rossane and Lisaura were treated equally, even to the point of having their first arias consist of different verses to two virtually identical da capo arias,¹⁸ but Handel's librettist (Paolo Rolli) gave them contrasted aria texts in the equivalent scene. As a result, Lisaura (Cuzzoni) dwells upon the thought that jealousy destroys the joys of love ('Quanto dolce amor saria') and Rossane (Faustina) sings of love's allurements and resultant anxieties ('Lusinghe più care').

This distinction between Lisaura and Rossane by means of separate aria texts resulted in very different musical treatments in which metre (3/8 / common time), tempo (andante / allegro ma non troppo), vocal style (lyrical, essentially conjunct melodic line with a number of suspensions and few melismas / comparatively disjunct melodic line with numerous complex vocal divisions), and the relationship between text and music (ironic / straightforward) are contrasted. Throughout the opera, Handel and Rolli portray Lisaura as a brooding, melancholy character whose emotional state climaxes in Act II Scene 2 with the aria 'Che tirannia d'Amore', in which she laments Alessandro's love for Rossane and Love's tyranny over herself in a siciliano aria loaded with expressive appoggiaturas and suspensions. By contrast, Rossane is portrayed as an outwardly coy but inwardly scheming woman of considerable spirit whose character is most clearly demonstrated in her aria 'Alla sua gabbia d'oro' later in the second act, in which she addresses Alessandro in a thinly veiled simile aria replete with staggeringly difficult vocal figuration.

By developing characters around the vocal and dramatic strengths of his two leading ladies, Handel demonstrates a distinct compositional approach that differs from that of the Durastanti years. In short, Handel developed two techniques in the Royal Academy operas. For singers with sufficient versatility, Handel could vary aria styles to suit specific dramatic contexts, as demonstrated in many of the arias written for Durastanti. Alternatively, Handel could suit the style to the specific singer, as can be found in many of the arias written for Cuzzoni and Faustina. Interestingly, these two approaches to aria composition could and did exist side by side: in the Royal Academy operas written for Cuzzoni and Faustina, there were also more musically varied roles for Senesino.¹⁹

While the preceding discussion has been largely concerned with musical style and its functions in the arias Handel wrote during the Royal Academy years, other aspects of his aria composition during this period are also significant. Throughout, Handel's arias demonstrate his sensitivity to text setting both in terms of overall *Affekt* and in terms of the musical treatment of individual words and phrases. Concerning overall *Affekt*, there are a number of instances in which the implications of the text are purposely ignored in the musical setting (Nerone's 'Con saggio tuo consiglio' from *Agrippina*, for example, or Lisaura's 'Quanto dolce' from *Alessandro*), often to provide ironic comment or to further an aspect of character development that is clearly being drawn by Handel in response to the dramatic situation, singer, or both. In other instances, individual lines within aria texts are moved around or repeated in order to suit Handel's desired musical expression ('Dolce bene' from *Radamisto*

provides one example). In virtually all of his arias, however, Handel's care with the setting of individual words or phrases is apparent. By means of word repetition, the association of specific words with specific musical ideas, the emphasis on a particular word or phrase by means of extensive melismas, and the use of musical word painting, Handel could both manipulate and clarify the musico-dramatic meaning of his aria texts.

Form is another element of the aria that Handel manipulated in his scores for the Royal Academy operas, although significant deviations from the da capo form are used somewhat sparingly. On one hand, there are shortenings of the full-blown five-part da capo, such as the *dal segno* aria (see p. 113) and the *cavatina* (which consists of only the A section), that are not unique to specific operas or to Handel. On the other hand, there are alterations of form that are highly specific to the arias and scenes in which they occur, and one example serves to illustrate the astonishing impact that a change of form could have on the musico-dramatic effectiveness of an aria.

In *Tolomeo* (1728), Handel's last Royal Academy opera, the title-role character (played by Senesino) is the self-exiled son of Cleopatra who has disguised himself as a shepherd on the island of Cyprus. Seleuce, his wife, comes in search of him disguised as a shepherdess, but the King of Cyprus, Araspes, falls in love with her, and the King's sister, Elisa, becomes infatuated with Tolomeo. These circumstances result in husband and wife being separated until the very end of the opera. In the penultimate scene, Tolomeo appears in a soliloquy with a cup of poison. Given the choice between Elisa and death, Tolomeo has chosen death; but instead of poison, Elisa has given him a sleeping potion. In his recitative, Tolomeo contemplates his life and his impending death, and drinks the 'poison'; in his aria, 'Stille amare', he sings of the effects of the 'poison' and falls asleep. It is ostensibly a *dal segno* aria in the score, but Handel wrote out the repetition of the A section so that he could disrupt it before it was complete: after repeating the first eight bars of the vocal A section, Handel breaks away from the original, and Tolomeo, unable to complete his aria due to the effects of the sleeping potion, collapses on the stage four bars later.²⁰

Handel's increased emphasis on the English oratorio from the 1730s onwards did not involve a complete break from his operatic past, and continuity is especially apparent in his attention to the aria. The full da capo form survived even in his later oratorios, and all of the important techniques that Handel developed in his opera arias during the Royal Academy period can be found in his later operas and oratorios. Throughout the repertory of the later period, Handel's attention to word setting, both in the treatment of individual words and the setting of entire

aria texts, reflects his sense of the relation of music to drama, a sense that was perfected in his opera composition for the Academy. The arias in *Messiah* (1741–2), for example, display a sensitivity to the dramatic situations inherent in the texts (in spite of the works ‘non-dramatic’ libretto) that can only be described as operatic. From simple but effective word painting in the tenor aria ‘Every Valley’ (in which the word ‘exalted’ is consistently associated with a rising sequence, the first occurrence of the phrase ‘and ev’ry mountain and hill made low’ contrasts the high F on ‘mountain’ with the low F on ‘low’, and the phrase ‘the crooked straight and the rough places plain’ juxtaposes oscillating conjunct motion with a held note) to the choice of compound time, extensive passages in parallel thirds and the use of sustained bass pedals in ‘He shall feed His flock’ – evocations of the pastoral arias that are found in both his operas and oratorios – it is clear that Handel’s experience as an opera composer had continued to influence his approach to aria composition.

Handel also continued to explore the possibilities of varying the standard da capo form in his operas of the 1730s and in his oratorios. There are numerous examples of the substitution of modified da capo and non da capo forms (such as Orlando’s famous rondo ‘Vaghe pupille’ at the end of Act II of *Orlando*, 1732–3) in the later operas where convention (and, in the case of ‘Vaghe pupille’, the source libretto²¹) suggested a straightforward da capo. On the other hand, while the modification of da capo forms, such as that in ‘Stille amare’ described above, can be attributed to Handel’s desire to create a unique *Affekt* by bending convention in unusual dramatic contexts, he also used the da capo form as a starting-point for a very different type of formal manipulation. David Hurley describes a number of examples in which a movement that began as a da capo was modified during composition, in his study of Handel’s compositional process in the oratorios.²² Although the aria modifications that Hurley describes are largely devoted to shortening the full-blown da capo form, Handel’s starting-point for many of his other arias in the oratorios was in fact the da capo scheme.

As in his most effective opera arias, however, Handel’s most poignant oratorio arias combine an abstract musical symbolism with an intense dramatic situation. One of the most powerful dramatic situations for Handel seems to have been that in which a father is confronted by the death or impending death of his daughter. From the two most famous instances of arias relating to this situation, a number of interesting parallels can be observed. In the aria ‘Su la sponda del pigro Lete’ from Act III of *Tamerlano* (1724), Bajazet addresses his daughter with instructions to drink poison and wait for him on the banks of the river Lethe, the river of the underworld in classical mythology where thoughts of the past life on

Example 8.1 *Jephtha* (HWV 70/32)

Andante larghetto

Waft her, an - gels, through the skies, waft her, an - gels, through the
skies, far a - bove yon a - zure plain, far a - bove yon a - zure plain;

earth are purged by drinking from it. Handel's concern with the aria was such that he set it twice, the second time giving it both an undulating quality in the opening arpeggios (perhaps symbolic of the waters of the river Lethe) and a continuity (there are no times at which voice and orchestra rest together – as there were in the previous version – perhaps signifying the continuity between life and death) that create a musical sub-text to Bajazet's solemn words to his daughter.²³

In *Jephtha* (1751), Handel's last oratorio, once again a father is confronted by the impending death of his daughter. Reflecting on the prospect of his daughter's sacrifice (the result of his own vow), Jephtha sings of her ascent to heaven in his aria 'Waft her angels through the skies'. The arpeggiation of Jephtha's first phrase and the rising melodic line of much of his vocal part in general is clearly symbolic on one level of Iphis's ascent to heaven. On another level, however, the angular nature of much of Jephtha's melody (see Example 8.1) and the alternation of rising and falling melodic phrases suggest both Jephtha's anguish and his welling of emotion (particularly for the repetition of the phrase 'glorious there like you to rise' in the B section) at the thought of his daughter's sacrifice. Like 'Su la sponda', 'Waft her angels' is a full da capo aria and, also like 'Su la sponda', 'Waft her angels' was extensively altered before Handel was satisfied with it.²⁴ Even more significant, however, is the fact that in spite of the nearly thirty years that separated the composition of these two arias and the fact that they were written for different genres, similar techniques are used by Handel to convey the complexity and intensity of the emotion being expressed.

While there can be no doubt that oratorio offered Handel considerable freedom from the strict five-part da capo form of the *opera seria*, it is equally clear that the da capo continued to exert a powerful influence on Handel's aria composition throughout his career. His continued use and modification of the da capo aria is certainly most evident in the 'dramatic' oratorios, where the parallels with opera are clear. Even in a non-dramatic oratorio such as *Messiah*, however, in which the reflective nature of

the libretto and the lack of a continuous plot sharply differentiate it from Handel's operas, it is interesting to note that for the description of Christ's rejection by the Jews in the aria 'He was despised', Handel used the five-part da capo form, and that his first version of 'Rejoice greatly' was also cast in da capo form.²⁵ Thus in two of the most emotionally intense arias of the work, Handel continued to employ the da capo form.

From the standpoint of musical construction, the da capo aria quite clearly provided the foundation for Handel's career in aria composition. From an aesthetic standpoint, however, the da capo aria's association with opera is evident in all of Handel's compositions: even when he was no longer bound by convention to write da capos, Handel employed the form at moments of intense drama and/or emotion. Far from being a restrictive form that catered to the performer rather than the composer, the da capo aria appears to have been for Handel a symbol of drama and of the strongest individual expression of emotion. Although it was not suitable to every type of musico-dramatic expression, the personal, individual emotions that characterised opera in Handel's day were expressed almost exclusively in terms of the da capo aria. For Handel, therefore, the form was associated with a type of musical expression to which he devoted the majority of his creative life.

Given Handel's career and the importance of the aria to his compositions, it is somewhat ironic that he is best remembered today for the 'Hallelujah' chorus from *Messiah*. While there is no denying the significance of the choruses in many of his vocal works, for Handel the aria formed the foundation of his stylistic development and his compositional career. It is appropriate, therefore, that the Handel monument at his grave in Westminster Abbey represents the composer at work not on one of his famous choruses, but on the aria 'I know that my Redeemer liveth'.