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Handel's opera seria *Orlando*, composed in 1732, is one of three operas he composed based on Ariosto's epic poem, *Orlando furioso*. With his penchant for dramatization, Handel created a musically innovative sound-world in the 18th century that examines themes of heroism, love, and insanity.

*Orlando* premiered at the King's Theatre in London in 1733. *Orlando* is also the final opera in which Handel's renowned castrato Senesino performed for him, signaling the end of Handel's opera company. Despite the importance of the premiere, the audience was smaller than one would think. Reasons for the poor reception could include Handel's disrupted conventions of opera seria as well as the declining popularity of Italian style opera for English audiences. Handel was a German musician creating Italian opera in England, and English audiences were becoming impatient listening to performances in a language they didn't understand sung by musicians whose values they didn't necessarily agree with. Despite this, Handel continued to compose operas until 1741, and as opera's popularity waned in England, oratorio became increasingly popular. *Orlando* had a ten-performance run, with additional performances cancelled due to the departure of Senesino and other performers to a different opera company. Once Handel re-established his opera company, he would never revive *Orlando* in his lifetime.

In both Handel's operas and oratorios, his music is intrinsically vocal. The unwritten Baroque performance practices of the time were heavily influenced by Handel's adventurous and theatrical reinvention of musical styles. There was ample room for improvisation on behalf of the musicians. Continuo-players would fill in the figured bass with sonorous harmonies while vocalists would add their own florid ornaments on the repeated section of da capo arias, and cadenza's gave opportunity for embellished vocal display and flexibility. With renewed

appreciation for Baroque music and historic performance practices, *Orlando* is making its way back into the modern operatic canon.

Opera McGill's concept for *Orlando* is not a traditional setting of Handel's composition. Instead, the audience is transported into the midst of World War One in the Austro-Hungarian empire. Orlando is a shell-shocked soldier who has stumbled into an insane asylum, and meets another patient there; Zoroastro. The doctor running the asylum is Medoro, with psychiatrist Angelica, and nurse Dorinda. Angelica and Medoro are in love, and are just about to leave the asylum when Orlando arrives. Angelica wants to stay and try to help Orlando, which displeases Medoro. Meanwhile, Dorina is hopelessly in love with Medoro, but Medoro is only concerned with Angelica. Zoroastro also tries to help Orlando, however, he leaves only confusion in his wake. Orlando's fractured mind contorts his perception of what is real -- his horrifying past and uncertain present become intertwined.

Angelica's first aria in Act 1, "Chi possessore," follows the *da capo* aria structure of A-B-A prime. In the *recitativo secco* preceding her aria, she tells Medoro to have hope, for soon they will be able to leave the asylum and be together forever. In the A section of the *da capo*, Angelica is reassuring Medoro that he alone is the one who has her heart: "Chi possessore è del mio core, può senza orgoglio chiamarsi re" (Who the possessor is of my heart, may without pride call himself a king). They are alone in his office as she sings to him, and the playful, bouncy nature of Handel's composition plays into the flirtatious sixteenth note patterns and coloratura.

In the B section, she says: "Io, ch'ho sprezzato più d'un impero, ho a te piegato l'animo altero, e più d'un soglio val la mia fè" (I, who have felt disdain for more than one empire, have now united my haughty soul to yours, and my faithfulness is worth more than any throne). Here, Handel continues the coloratura in descending patterns and allows room for the natural flow of the Italian text and stresses. This keeps the momentum going to the very end of the B, with an opportunity for a romantic, even sensual, cadenza on the word "fè" (faithfulness).

With the return of the A, and the same repeated text, the melodic structure has been shifted since Handel has given the performer an opportunity to play with ornaments and embellishments. This structure helps to reveal more of who Angelica is as a character, and why she is repeating the same text. The lighthearted emotion and flirtatious accentuation of the text

informs the vocal line, and ornaments are created to further express and characterize Angelica's feelings. Once Angelica has put her glasses back on, and has finished teasing Medoro, she turns and blows him a kiss goodbye, finalizing their love for one another.

One moment from Act 3 that is particularly interesting compositionally, is the duet "Finchè prendi ancora" between Angelica and Orlando. In Opera McGill's interpretation, Orlando has been through the wringer mentally, and therefore cannot distinguish Angelica, his psychiatrist, from an enemy of war. In the *recitativo secco* before the duet, Orlando is threatening Angelica with a gun as she pleads with him to realize that she is not the enemy. Orlando still sees her as an enemy, and flings her into a chair and looms over her. The duet begins, and Angelica sings: "Finchè prendi ancora il sangue godi intanto de' miei lumi al mesto umor" (Rejoice in my sad tears until you cut open my heart and pour out my blood). This text is extremely visceral, and Angelica is scared, frustrated, and heartbroken thinking of Medoro, and what she could have done better to help heal Orlando. Angelica's thoughts are depicted musically with sweeping legato lines and the moments of dotted rhythms that resemble weeping.

When Orlando chimes in, he says: "Sol ha sete di sangue il mio cor" (My heart thirsts for blood alone). Orlando's singing is furious, filled with short sixteenth-note patterns and coloratura, which contrast greatly to Angelica's weeping, legato phrases. In this duet, Handel demonstrates his incredible ability to join dramatization and music as one. Angelica and Orlando's alternating phrases interject and intertwine, creating an agonizing tangle of fear, fury, confusion, and despair.

Today, we are unfortunately familiar with the horrors of war and the effects it has on people across the globe. With Putin's invasion of Ukraine weighing heavily on our minds and hearts, I hope that with Opera McGill's production of Handel's *Orlando*, we can demonstrate through the power of music our human need for love, compassion, and connection.