The program notes are written by the student performing, and are presented by the student in partial fulfilment of the requirements of their course.

Ces notes de programme sont écrites par l'étudiant-interprète et sont présentées en tant que réalisation partielle des critères de leur cours.
When the opera *Alcina* premiered at Covent Garden in 1735, its composer, George Frederic Handel, was an already prolific and important artistic pioneer, having brought Italian opera seria to the forefront in London. Due to his worldly European influences, Handel was able to impact classical music in a very individual and ever-lasting way. *Alcina* is one of three operas to be inspired by the Italian epic poem *Orlando Furioso*, and is thought to be a representation of Handel’s intriguing sense of romanticism, heard through the haunting arias. The opera tells the story of the climactic defeat of the powerful sorceress Alcina, who lives on an enchanted island with her younger sister Morgana. Alcina magically seduces men and then turns them into various inanimate objects at her liking. When she captures the knight Ruggiero, her and her sister become tangled in a despairing mess when Ruggiero’s betrothed Bradamante comes to save him disguised as her brother, a male knight named “Ricciardo”. Beyond its romance, *Alcina* has the capability to delve into much more; exoticism, heroism, magic and heartbreak. Most notably however, *Alcina* showcases vocal virtuosity and compelling female characters.

Handel used the libretto from L’Isola di Alcina (The Island of Alcina), an opera by Riccardo Brosschi, who took the story from *Orlando Furioso*. The opera begins with Bradamante, Ruggiero's betrothed, arriving at the island, disguised as her brother Ricciardo. With her companion, Melisso, Bradamante hopes to rescue Ruggiero and take him home. Immediately they meet Morgana, who falls for the “Ricciardo”, leaving her lover, Oronte, confused and heartbroken. While Bradamante tries to save Ruggiero, she is constantly distracted/thwarted by the lovesick Morgana. Alcina develops genuine feelings for Ruggiero, and threatened by the possibility of this new intruder ruining their relationship, decides she will turn
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Bradamante into a wild beast. Morgana, enamoured, saves Bradamante from Alcina, only to discover that “Ricciardo” is actually a woman and the lover of Ruggiero. Immediately she attempts to win back Oronte, who eventually forgives her once he sees her genuine remorse. At the end of the opera, Bradamante, Ruggiero and Melisso are able to destroy the source of Alcina and Morgana’s powers, and save the many men who were victims of Alcina’s sorcery, transforming them back into their human-selves.

Both Alcina and Morgana are barely human, and throughout the opera we can see their exaggerated actions and behaviours inspired from lust, desire, or magic. However we can find some humanistic characteristics in Morgana, as she at many times showcases the ultimate teenager. Her desires for attention and for romance, her hot-headedness and lack of patience as well as lack of self-control are classic characteristics of a bored 16-year-old girl. Handel notes these two extremes of her personality; a restless girl and a powerful witch, and interprets them through Morgana’s music. Although many aspects of Morgana may be animalistic, she still goes through a genuine journey throughout the opera. This character arc is perfectly exemplified in her four arias.

“O s’apre al riso...” (Either it opens to laughter...), begins the opera, after she is immediately enamoured with Ricciardo (Bradamante), and sings “Whether it’s laughing, speaking or remaining silent, there is something about your beautiful face that I like very much”. Throughout the aria, which is set in a cheerful A Major, there is continuous sixteenth notes and frequent trills, and we immediately sense Morgana’s naivety and flirtatiousness. At this point, Morgana has never been denied what she wants, and her sole desire at the beginning of the opera is to tempt the attractive stranger. Morgana’s second aria, the famous “Tornami a vagheggiar” (Return to me to languish), is the finale of Act 1. The aria contains a similar buoyant energy as
her first, as Morgana sings to Ricciardo, “you alone I want to love, dear, my great!” At this point in the opera, Morgana’s feelings for Bradamante have only increased, and Bradamante, as a tactic to protect herself from Alcina’s evil magic, has manipulated Morgana into believing that her love is reciprocated. This time, the fast tempo, intense coloratura and colourful text showcase Morgana’s heightened desperation for love.

In her third aria, “Ama, sospira” (Love, sighs), Morgana is able to convince Alcina that Ricciardo (Bradamante) is not a threat to Alcina and Ruggiero’s courtship, as she believes Ricciardo is in love with her. She sings, “He loves, sighs, but does not offend you. He burns for love but not for you...He suffers, but asks me for comfort and peace”. While trying to uphold her relationship with Ricciardo to Alcina and Ruggiero, Morgana is carried away by her love and desires for affection from Ricciardo. This aria in Act 2 is where we begin to see a change in Morgana. A melodic violin solo is highlighted throughout the aria, adding a sense of fragility to the musical character that has been Morgana up until this point. There is definitely a lost sense of excited declaration. Rather, Morgana is carrying us through her lustful mind.

However it is at the beginning of the third act when we see Morgana’s fragility, along with despair, at its most extreme. When Morgana’s heart is broken by Bradamante, she assumes she can easily win back her favour with Oronte, however when he initially denies her, she breaks down and sings to him her fourth and final aria, “Credete al mio dolore”, (Believe in my grief). This is her slowest aria, with no florid passages in the vocal melody. Handel sets up the declaration perfectly; with only a small amount of accompaniment from the continuo and strings, Morgana is carried along the larghetto aria with a violincello. The repetitive 32nd-note figure in the cello, which is then repeated in the vocal line, creates what feels like a frantic lament, that
only heightens as the aria goes on as she reaches the final line of the aria, “bramo da voi pietà, “I long for your pity”.

Out of Handel’s close to 50 composed musical dramas, *Alcina* has become one of the more frequently performed pieces. The role of Morgana was premiered by English soprano Cecilia Young. Cecilia Young was a renowned singer of her time, and premiered many soprano roles in Handel’s operas and oratorios. Since its premiere, *Alcina* has had multiple standout productions, most notably the 1962 production with Joan Sutherland in the titular role, which brought the opera to the forefront. However multiple notable sopranos since its premiere have also famously portrayed the role of Morgana, including Natalie Dessay (1999, Paris), Karina Gauvin (2009), Donna Brown (1990), and American soprano Anna Christy (2014).
Bibliography


