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Opera McGill

Ariodante: Questions of Morality and Fake News

Imagine the following characters onstage together: Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde*, Iago from Shakespeare's *Othello*, the early medieval warrior Beowulf, Susanna from Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and Liam Neeson in the film *Taken*. In theory, these personalities could coexist within an optimal situation; however, in the context of Handel's *Ariodante*, emotional equilibrium is fleeting. The catalyst of discord in this analogy and in *Othello* is that of Iago, the lying misfit attempting to climb the ladder of social hierarchy. If we continue with the analogy, then Elle Woods (Ginevra) and Beowulf (Ariodante) are betrothed; today is their wedding day. While incorporating Elle's father, Liam Neeson (the King), and Elle's maid, Susanna (Dalinda) into the wedding party, doubt is planted in the minds of every virtuous character by Iago (Polinesso).

Understanding the distinct character personalities in *Ariodante* is integral for a satisfying audience experience. In fact, such engaging characters and corresponding arias may have been the spark *Ariodante*'s popularity in 1734 London. Loosely based off of Ludovico Ariosto's epic poem, *Orlando Furioso* (1516), Handel wrote his final three operas: *Orlando*, *Ariodante*, and *Alcina*.¹ Antonio Salvi, a court physician to the Florentine Medici family and frequent librettist, deftly adapted two sections of *Orlando Furioso* for Handel's *Ariodante* adding moments of humor, romance, and intense pathos.² According to Charles Burney, on "January 8th,

¹ Johnson-Haddad, Miranda. "Englishing Ariosto: "Orlando Furioso" at the Court of Elizabeth I." *Comparative Literature Studies* 31, no. 4 (1994): 323-50.

<http://www.jstor.org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/stable/40246959>.

² Chisholm, Duncan. *Early Music* 10, no. 1 (1982): 101-05.

<http://www.jstor.org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/stable/3126747>.

ARIODANTE was first performed. This opera continued in run, and always by his Majesty's command, till March 5th.³ Although popular, Handel's success was often fleeting; a rival company, The Opera of the Nobility, was established in 1733⁴ and most of Handel's singers defected to the rival company by 1734. Until the collapse of the rival Opera of the Nobility in 1737, Handel lived an intense and stressful compositional life composing and reviving new works to entice audiences. By 1735 Handel's lack of spectators and patrons seemed dire; with the performance of his final and most popular opera, *Alcina*, he once again asserted himself as the dominant opera and oratorio composer in London.

Although not as prominent as *Alcina*, *Ariodante* was successful because of the high-quality arias Handel created for the original cast. Indeed, in rehearsals for Opera McGill's *Ariodante*, conductor Hank Knox has frequently praised the beauty and musical integrity of each aria. Several moments in *Ariodante* are noteworthy for Handel's creativity as a composer, especially several of Ariodante's famous arias, namely "Con l'ali di costanza," "Scherza infida," and "Dopo notte." Written for the virtuoso male alto Giovanni Carestini, "Dopo notte" and "Con l'ali di costanza" dazzle with vocal leaps while the singer executes minutes of fast notes with few places to breathe. Another creative moment is Ginevra's mad scene in Act II after she has been notified of her husband's death and disowned by her father. Ginevra flashes between moments of intense sadness, anger, frustration, confusion, and loss; Handel demonstrates these quick changes with fast harmony shifts and a furious instrumental passage imitating the howls of Hell's furies.

³ Burney, Charles, and Frank Mercer. *A general history of music from the earliest ages to the present period* (1789). (New York: Dover, 1957), 791, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015007939377>.

⁴ Ellen T. Harris. "Handel: 'A necromancer in the midst of his own enchantments'." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (2003): 832-849. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed October 26, 2017).

Handel created a treasure trove of beautiful and compelling arias that correspond to each character's current emotional state.

Another essential detail in *Ariodante* is Handel's inclusion of the Scottish law that states a woman will be burned at the stake in a month if suspected of infidelity and if no champion will fight for her honor in a duel. Incorporating this detail into the opera provides multiple distinct viewpoints, such as the role of morality, the Almighty, and the church in 18th-century Scottish justice. With the inclusion of such a law raising the stakes amid situations of extreme doubt, *Ariodante* turns into a battle for personal morals and honor. If viewed within a modern sense, this Scottish infidelity law could certainly be scrutinized as barbaric and imbued with gender bias designed to shame and silence women like Ginevra. Refreshingly, *Ariodante* in *Orlando Furioso* and Handel's opera later realizes this breach of morality and therefore lack of justice on behalf of the princess (Elle Woods) he loves. Morality is shown to be as fleeting as personal equilibrium in some situations in *Ariodante*.

As an 18th-century London audience member, seeing Handel's operas fully-staged and with new music based on fashionable texts must have been exciting. While the movie and opera characters described in the beginning were of personal choice, the average 18th-century concert goer most likely would have used her past opera knowledge of characters and her favorite singers to describe the marvels of a new opera to another interested person. A royal success, Handel's *Ariodante* incorporated elements of morality, law, and justice within a specific personality set of characters with sparkling arias to match. Although Iago (Polinesso) may be the first instigator of doubt, his demise is also the reconciliatory agent for peace that confirms the narrative's ending. The remaining characters each learn valuable lessons in trust, fake news, and communication. The finale ends with a double wedding and new beginnings.

