

# CHARACTER OPERA – A DIRECTOR / TRANSLATOR’S NOTE ON AGRIPPINA

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At its first performance at the San Giovanni Grisostomo theatre in Venice on 23 December 1709, *Agrippina* was acclaimed a dazzling success. After 27 performances at Venice, it was revived (with customary faithlessness) in other great capitals of opera: Naples, Hamburg and Vienna. The musical invention and sharp characterization are always much praised – so that now *Agrippina* is one of Handel’s operas that is esteemed by many (not just Handel nuts like me), and often performed.

As a director, things I love about Handel’s operas – apart from the music, which drives everything – are the sure sense of characterization, the masterly pacing, the precise crystallization of those moments in which moral and political choices shape destiny. Rarely am I so convinced by love (between spouses, parents and children, siblings) and passion (especially unrequited) as in its musical and dramatic embodiment in his operas.

Something I also love in the Royal Academy operas – that extraordinary sequence of operas written for performance in London, unequalled in brilliance and profligacy in this country – is what I call their spaciousness. They are full of meaning and richness (something we might not associate with ‘commercial’ art now), but that is realized differently in every performance. Even better, the audience does not necessarily come to a show with very fixed expectations, limiting the outcome of the evening to a meeting of expectations, or a failure to do so – nothing is so lean and unrewarding!

*Agrippina* is particular, and particularly challenging. It is as near as you can get to perfectly shaped, dramatically. A first scene focuses on Agrippina and the men she enthalls,

culminating with her gleeful declaration of strategy; disappointed, she recoils in the second scene, and attention shifts to the blameless hero – her polar opposite in the piece – who has inconvenienced her.

Agrippina’s foil, Poppea, hosts the next scene. She manipulates men like Agrippina does, but she is in turn manipulated by Agrippina. Agrippina’s new strategy looks robust, although she is exposed on a number of fronts.

In the first half of the second act – in this production, the last scene of the first half – Ottone becomes the sort of negative image of Agrippina; just as her guileful promises won all to her, his innocent trust is rewarded by desertion from every friend. There is a perfect symmetry in the first half of the opera, which is then taken apart in the delicate bedroom farce hosted by Poppea in the second half.

This is Venetian Handel, accommodating carefully the taste of his patron – and librettist – the governor cardinal Grimani, who placed himself on the opposite side of the bloody War of Spanish Succession from his Pope, and reflecting the taste for demystification and light eroticism of the paying public. It is hard to imagine a more different context than Hanoverian London – and this seems to me reflected in his remarkably various, less ‘perfect’ operas, more spacious operas for London?

I don’t mean to say *Agrippina* is a sort of clean, well-made-opera. The title character may seem canny and blithe, but what a stroke of genius to show us her deep unease in the broken aria I have translated as ‘Foreboding’, and her ability to simulate simplicity in her last aria. In her rival, Poppea, who might be classed as a sensualist opportunist, Handel creates a woman who knows



Venus at her Mirror, Diego Velázquez

she is not deep, and who is used to trading in the currency of her charm – but who is genuinely, erotically receptive to the integrity and urgency of top-drawer (but only one drawer, sadly) Ottone. The supporting characters are drawn with wit and precision – Pallante, Narciso and Lesbo are as sharp and specific as can be. Being a hero is tough, but just as Monteverdi did, Handel creates in Ottone at once a moral compass and a breathing, suffering lover, bewildered by the degradation love brings to him. Even Claudio, who has his measure of Venetian buffoonery, has a lecher’s wisdom in the end.

In translating the sharp Italian original, I looked for inspiration to razor-like English writers for the theatre, Congreve and Wycherley, and to Millamant’s ‘natural, easy Suckling’. I set out (at least) to match the Italian, rhyme for rhyme, despite the preponderance of feminine endings. I also indulged in two exercises in reference, the respectful practice of Handel’s day: the Act 2

finale, ‘Sailing Homeward’, paraphrases Anne Ridler’s estimable translation for Kent Opera (a model company it makes much sense of us to quote!), and Narciso’s first aria, ‘Pleasure’s gentle zephyr playing’ quotes an air in one of Handel’s cantatas written by Thomas Morell.

Each of the three Venetian operas in this season matches literary and musical achievement (something later operas only irregularly manage), so it seemed a barren exercise to perform them in Italian to an English audience. Sometimes people complain to me that they cannot bear to hear opera in their own language, which seems sad; it was, after all, first written for Venetians!

It’s amazing good fortune to translate and direct a piece like *Agrippina* – and to find every day in rehearsing music and text good humour, good judgment, and instinctive psychology – the sure sign in his youthful work of the dedicated, profound composer of opera that was Handel.

James Conway