Alcina:
Directors Notes

Historical Note
In 1734 Handel and his manager Heidegger lost the lease on the King s Theatre in London, ending a rich period in British opera and the existence of what was known as the Royal Academy of Music. When John Rich offered Handel the use of his new theatre at Covent Garden, the stakes were high.

Handel answered his rivals with a magnificent season in 1735, including two revivals, a pastiche opera with hit arias, and two new operas: *Ariodante* (which ETO produced and toured in 2003 and revived in 2005) and *Alcina*, as well as three oratorios. This achievement compares to peaks he had reached a decade earlier at the King s Theatre, with *Giulio Cesare*, *Rodelinda* and *Tamerlano*; arguably these two seasons were the most remarkable ever created in Britain. *Alcina* was a particular success, sustaining 18 performances.

Though inspired by a story from Ariosto s epic poem *Orlando Furioso*, Handel s libretto is a very free adaptation. The sorceress Alcina, who shares centre stage with her mortal lover Ruggiero, is a deeply drawn character, taking the simple story in new directions. Her splendid arias, a reward to the faithful soprano Anna Strada del Po, surprise and enthral the listener just as she enslaves her lovers. Beside her, the ardent lover and errant husband Ruggiero, written for Carestini, a leading castrato, can at first seem passive; indeed, the singer famously sent back to Handel one deceptively simple aria, Verdi prati , but Handel ordered him to sing it as written. His role is full of elegant, subtle touches, crowned by the brilliance of his Act 3 aria with horns, Sta nell Ircana. The other characters are not stinted wonderful music: even the bass Gustavus Waltz, who seems to have doubled as Handel s cook, gets a spacious, stirring aria. Alcina s sister Morgana (first played by Cecilia Young) has a terrific expression of joy at the end of Act 1, as well as a pair of heartfelt arias with violin and cello obbligato; her rejected suitor Oronte, originally sung by the young British tenor John Beard, has three light arias of great charm, utterly distinct in style. The fascinating part of the rejected wife Bradamante has distinctive music, too, low lying and solid but with brilliant coloratura display. For reasons of length we excised the charming boy soprano role of Oberto (a youth who is looking for his father), which Handel had added to his opera only after its completion for the young William Savage.

Production Note
I came to know *Alcina* in the splendid EMI recording of the production at Spitalfields by The Opera Stage in the mid 1980 s. So vivid was the recording that I came to have a false memory that I had seen the production itself, though I am sure it was the excellent production of Monteverdi s *L'incoronazione di Poppaea* that I saw there the following year Charming, unreliable memories are strangely in keeping with this opera about love and the memory of it.

The opera made a terrific impression on me. One of the arias haunted me during a 6 month stay abroad, and played a part there in my impressions of the role of memory - and forgetfulness - in morality, in love, in the sense of self. Later, when I had the fortune to direct a production of *Amadigi*, another enchantment opera, I was made aware of comparisons between that opera s wistful enchantress, Melissa, and Alcina - in the end, though, I find them very different. They share with Medea in Handel s *Teseo*, and with a hundred other goddesses and witches, the unhappy fate of lost power when they fall (literally) in love with a mortal: feelings familiar to all who have loved and lost!

I have been shy of trying to produce *Alcina*. Since that early experience - which of course I did not have, but I adhere to testimonies of its perfection - I have not been aware of a production (or recording!) that has succeeded, for me, in portraying the moral seriousness and emotional directness of the piece. It is not that it is too magical for a modest touring company: there are many kinds of magic, and most of them have nothing to do with imitating cinematic effects in the theatre. Modern stage lighting is far more spectacular than anything recorded in the baroque theatre. Magic, if there be any on stage, is in the expressiveness achieved between performers and their audience. I think the real difficulties in producing *Alcina* are associated with its profound and painful vivisection of love.

Alcina has had lovers, but she seems to have forgotten them. No one else sees them. When they are restored to human form, having passed years as a leafy branch, a wave, a lion, a stone on the shore, it doesn t seem a significant improvement of their lot. Rehearsing the piece, I have wondered what lover in the first throes of passion would not choose to remain forever with the beloved, denying love s inevitable decay, and have much taxed my collaborators with observations like You desire nothing more than to be forever a flea on the neck of Alcina! These former lovers are revived when the symbol of her power is destroyed by Ruggiero - the one lover whose love she has returned, to her great cost.

Rehearsals - *Alcina*

Though Ruggiero rejects and enfeebles her, and seems set to return to duty, plainness, valour, and his doughty bride, it is clear that he leaves with Alcina much of himself. His wife and tutor have struggled successfully to open his eyes to reawaken his memory, and to shame him into responsibility; it is poignant that he comes to remember his wife, and stirring that he can still fight, but there is no doubt that his most authentic emotion in the opera is nostalgia. It is nostalgia for heedless, memory-less, shameless love, and all the keen sensations it aroused. Beside it, one feels, the hard won fruits of the skilfully tilled garden, the issue of painful childbirth, the long struggled for respect of peers are all a little pallid.

No doubt Alcina s love can be poisonous. During her winning laments, like Mi restano le lagrime (My tears alone remain with me), there is a danger we will reject all sound counsel on stage and love her ourselves; when we see, however, that she scarcely remembers all these former loves imprisoned - however willingly - on her island, we withdraw from the brink. It becomes clear that she lives in the adoring gaze of her lovers, and her audience, and that nothing could be worse for her than to be alone, except perhaps to be alone with her own reflection.

To make it work, I felt we had to depict on stage two opposed, but equally serious compelling forces to suggest on the one hand, passionate love and its attendant selflessness, theoretical heroism, the appeal of god-like authority, art, the moment, and on the other hand memory, individual responsibility, the subjugation of desire, self examination, work, prudent reckoning, contracts between equals. The clash of these ideologies in the mid-seventeenth century, one of the great dramas of English history, seemed right for our study. As we prepared the production we talked more and more in reference to the religious and political clashes of that period. So in our production Alcina is an artistic Stuart beauty long after that party s decline, just about remembered, and Bradamante and Melisso quit their plain - but uncomfortably depopulated - meeting house to claim back the heroes who have been distracted by Alcina s sensuality, and their own latent sensualism. It serves to remember that those chilly crusaders on whom Tasso based Ruggiero went looking for booty as much as the true cross, and that generally they were easy converts to what they saw as the sensual ways of the Middle East. They lost no time, losing themselves. The monsters that Ruggiero slays as he sings his warlike, final aria are all in his mind: they are the parts of himself that Alcina awakened when conscience slept, and kill them he must to return to family, garden, and usefulness.

The amoral have a wonderful innocence. Thus Alcina s mouldy hall, with virginals that do not play, flowers that do not smell, a mirror that does not reflect and a crashed chandelier that scarcely lights, all dimly sinking beneath the waves, is as attractive as it is repellent. The triumphant individuals who shatter her power are an unlovely alternative, as is their clean, quiet home. Their *tamburino* chorus of celebration at the end of the opera is rousing, but one cannot help but feel short-changed as Alcina sinks into oblivion.

Our ambivalent response to the foes of the enchantress is inspired by Handel s exquisite musical and dramatic depiction of her - so the visual depiction needs to reflect that. Through whose eyes should we see the setting? Should it be beautiful, as Alcina, Morgana and the enthralled see it? Or should it be hideous, or at least dangerous, as the sturdy Puritans see it? Should it all fade at the moment Ruggiero is disenchanted, and then stay that way? In the end we felt that we had to let the audience deal with the enchantment in their own way, at their own pace, and we situated her objectified lovers among you. After all, Alcina s magic meets only the willing soul: enchantment, like art, is a two way experience!