

# GOODNESS AND ITS SHORTCOMINGS



*Ariodante* was the first of the six great operas Handel wrote for the new Covent Garden Playhouse in London after his long association with the King's Theatre in Haymarket. The theatre in Covent Garden was the best in London, fitted out with the profits of *The Beggar's Opera* (ironically a parody of Handel's Italian opera!), and it opened with Congreve's magnificent comedy *The Way of The World*. The best theatre of the age was presented in the same space as the most refined opera.

At Covent Garden he contracted his faithful Anna Strada, a new line in British singers (no accident that he began to set his great works in English at Covent Garden), and the sensational castrato Carestini, who vied for devotees with the Haymarket's new idol, Farinelli. To Carestini he gave that astonishing gift, the role of Ariodante, and he rewarded Strada with Ginevra. Strada's plainness (poor Strada seems to have secured her husband, the Venetian manager Aurelio del Po, 'because he could find no other means of satisfying his debt to her'), not 'disposing the eye to augment the pleasures of the ear', was redeemed by Ginevra's ravishing arias. Carestini was described by Burney as 'tall, beautiful and majestic; a very animated and intelligent actor; with a lively and inventive imagination, he rendered everything he sung interesting by good taste, energy and judicious embellishments'.

Among the other singers were: the contralto Maria Caterina Negri (Polinesso), a singer whose extraordinary vocal flexibility in a difficult low register left its mark on eight Handel roles; Cecilia Young (later wife of Thomas Arne), equally flexible above the stave (Dalinda); Handel's cook Gustavus Waltz (Donald), whose long association

with Handel must be a testimony to his fine voice or his very fine cooking; John Beard, the enterprising young tenor who later created title roles in Handel's finest oratorios, and had the good sense to take on the role of Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera* (poking fun at his own bread and butter) and to marry the daughter of Covent Garden's manager, John Rich, before taking over the house himself. Another small role was taken by the colourful Irish ringside actor and character tenor Michael Stoppelaer – but I have taken the moderate liberty of excising the part.

At Covent Garden Handel had the services of the French ballerina Marie Salle, with dancers and a chorus; thus the original, more austere drafts of *Ariodante* were adapted to the new house with several ballets. ETO hasn't this particular splendour, driven as it is to tour UK theatres: all the tighter may be the drama. It is indeed one of the clearest, most Shakespearean dramas Handel set to music. His ingenious reworking of a libretto by Salvi, based on a small section of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, makes for a deeply felt, well constructed musical drama independent of any history, class association, or location. It is a straightforward story of sexual jealousy, as bitter and stimulating, as hot and cold as that always is. The musical treatment is anything but straightforward, and shows many new influences at work; one need but contrast the apparent simplicity and emotional directness of the opera's most famous aria, "Scherza infida" ('Love undying'), with the refined treatment of the Neapolitan craze for syncopation in two of *Ariodante*'s other arias, "Con l'ali di costanza" ('On fancy's wings I'm soaring') and "Dopo notte" ('Sorrow passes'). *Ariodante* is certainly the mature work of one of the greatest creators of lyric opera theatre.

I think *Ariodante* is an opera about goodness or about an idea of goodness which a society holds dear, and which excludes many. When the opera was written, it is reckoned that approximately 40% of the women of London were prostitutes, women were either rigidly virtuous or without reputation – either good or bad, in the eyes of some in society. It was terrifyingly easy to fall through the net, to fall out of acceptable society, to lose all comfort and companionship.

To be in society is to be marriageable, to be seen as good, to be rewarded with the presentation of a silver tray: to have fallen out of polite society is to be a whore, to be seen only in reflection, even so grotesquely as portrayed in paintings of the period, in which men view beneath women's skirts by looking at a reflection in a silver tray. The Eden we see at the beginning of the opera is an interior, fortified place, the wildness of nature is reflected in paintings; in embroidery, in books. Delight is the perfect reflection of God's will on earth. Ariodante and Ginevra feel that they are chosen by God to marry, that their union is a kind of reparation for the fall of Adam and Eve.

Within these sure confines, and above suppressed passions, all can be lovely. But Ginevra abhors Polinesso (who might have made her a passable consort, a passable bishop with the kind of cynical conversation people find amusing, and about average constancy), and rejects him violently, wounding his pride so deeply that his malicious potential is thoroughly realised. At the same time, Dalinda's sickly passion for Polinesso is given every opportunity to develop and Lurcanio's unrequited lust for Dalinda sets him on a course of sterile, vengeful righteousness.

Ariodante, who looked on his love for Ginevra as a guarantee of permanence and a sign of personal election, is willing to give up Ginevra and his faith on the evidence of a moment (a moment of play acting, as he will discover). Donald struggles to end his natural affection for his daughter because of an unfounded accusation by another man. It's far from lovely in this garden: to be chosen by God, it turns out, can mean chosen for special suffering as well as special favour. Each character is tempted, and each succumbs. Ginevra bravely resists despair, but her temptation is the fiercest and most prolonged. Abandoned by lover, father, by society, she eventually decides that she is abandoned by God. Each of the characters is then taken to a very rugged, lonely place: it seems that the wild, amoral, godless sea, hitherto held outside the walls, invades the very house. Yet the sea is no stranger, surprisingly: it is a surface reflecting something irrational and violent and purposeless in each of them. Now a mirror, now the colour of the passions to which they don't admit, something has come into the drawing room that forces painful reassessment of orderly creation.

Tested against the impossible standard of perfection and found wanting, there is left at the end of the opera some hope for most of these poor mortals (but not Polinesso, whose particular despair has caused him to set up like Lucifer a new god, self interest, before the alternatively loving and wrathful god of this little group). There is a sweet, not more than necessary hope in huddling together and forgiving bare mortality (hinted at in the hesitant duet of Lurcanio and Dalinda, in which the voices scarcely overlap), some delight still in the recognition of change (ecstatically expressed in Ariodante's last aria 'Dopo notte'), and some ease following the acceptance of imperfection (depicted in the pious duet of Ginevra and Ariodante, and the meek affirmation of the final chorus).

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