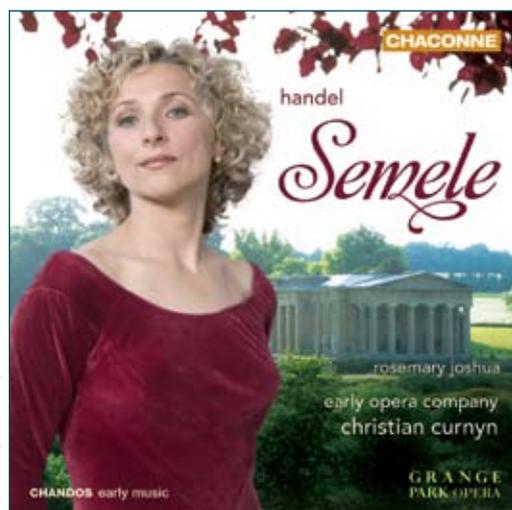


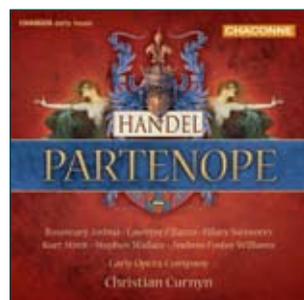
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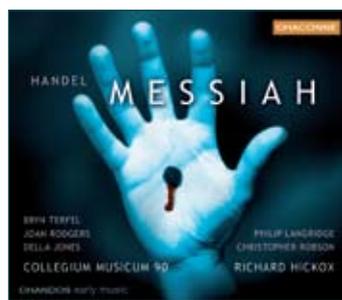
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# FLAVIO: SEMI-SERIOUS

In that bible for Handel scholars, *Handel's Operas 1704-1726*, Winton Dean describes *Flavio* as "an anti-heroic comedy with tragic undertones". Unpacking that a bit, he goes on to explain that the opera has been underrated because its genre has not been recognised:

"...the nearest parallel is Mozart, with whom Handel shared two rare gifts: an almost limitless insight into human character, and the ability to move with ease between tragic and comic situations."

In that extraordinarily rich group of operas that Handel wrote for performance at the King's Theatre in the mid 1720s, *Flavio's* semi-serious style is indeed unusual. It was preceded by two strong, serious operas, now rarely performed (*Floridante* and *Ottone*), and it was followed (just a few months later in 1724) by *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, and within a further few months by *Tamerlano* and *Rodelinda* – three of the greatest operas ever written. Although *Cesare* is often performed as a sort of comedy, it was certainly not written as one – and if *Rodelinda* is a darkly coloured, majestic depiction of great endurance, *Tamerlano* is probably Handel's most uniformly sombre, ascetic masterpiece.

Like *Rodelinda* (and several other of his operas), the story is set in 'dark ages' Lombardy. Indeed, Flavio himself seems to be the son of Rodelinda and Bertarido, the long suffering heroes of the opera bearing her name. They would hardly have recognised him, I think: as a king he is anything but grave, and as a husband he is plainly forgetful. His queen, Ernelinda, is nowhere evident, and his infatuation with a minor lady of the court, Teodata, is uninhibited.

This light-hearted characterisation of the king comes straight from Handel's source, Matteo Noris' 1682 libretto *Flavio Cuniberto*, which was

also set by G Partenio, A Scarlatti, and D Gabrielli, among others. Flavio is smitten, and thinks little of statecraft, let alone what we would now call personnel management. He does not see that his impulsive little manoeuvre to separate Teodata from her father by appointing him governor of Britain gives rise to indignation in his more worthy courtier, Lotario – indignation leading to insult, and setting off an entirely disproportionate chain of reactions, culminating in Lotario's death, and his daughter Emilia's pledge of revenge on his killer – and her lover – Guido.

Guido and Emilia are serious – even over-serious – characters, with complex, highly developed expression. Naturally, they were sung by the leading artists of the Royal Academy, Senesino and Cuzzoni. Though the king's young protégé, Vitige (a soprano role sung by the brilliant Durastanti), and the senior courtiers, Lotario and Ugone, are also very proud, and very concerned with their dignity and affections, their appealing music is less complex, and the depth of their feelings more suspect. It is as if the king (played by the company's second castrato that season, Berenstadt) and his crumpet Teodata (sung by Anastasia Robinson) really govern the temper of the piece: their dance-like music, as exciting as it is apparently simple, suggest that love and duty are best worn lightly, and opportunism is more fun than tradition.

This gives Handel a chance to point out the less appealing aspects of family loyalty – the sort of strangling loyalty with which parents may choose to manipulate their serious children – as both Guido and Emilia are manipulated by their fathers. It is wonderful that Handel casts a cool eye on fathers and daughters (and sons) in this opera, and then a few months later gives one of the greatest accounts of complex relations between fathers and daughters in *Tamerlano* (Bajazet's tortured attempts to dominate his resourceful daughter put even *Rigoletto* in the shade, I fear). Handel also chooses to be playful about notions of propriety in *Flavio*; one senses that Guido and Emilia, shy and formal, eager to begin their loving but not sure how to do so, would do well to learn something from Teodata and Vitige, whose luscious post coital duet, uncomplicated by any promises of marriage, opens the opera.

This lightness of tone, however, does not incline Handel to make fun of his characters. Each is entirely serious about being who they are, and getting what they want or need. It's up to the director, I guess, to view the characters with the some of the same sympathy that Handel does – taking Guido, Emilia and Vitige's great arias

of innocent love, devastating loss and revenge as deeply serious moments, and Ugone and Lotario's bitter complaints as derailing, even though the dominant mood of the piece is Flavio's infectious equanimity and good will.

In this group of operas in ETO's Handelfest, *Flavio* is perhaps closest in mood to *Teseo*. It's an important difference, though, that it sports no sorcery – no great, rejected woman at the centre resorting to the only kind of power conceivable in a woman. *Flavio* is much more a comedy, concerned with continuation. The joyous ending of *Flavio* is believable – as it really is not in *Ariodante* (or *Tamerlano*) where the good seem to be changed beyond recognition, or even *Tolomeo* (or *Rodelinda*) where the powerful characters have to lose their power for the good ones to regain theirs.

Handel's masterful semi-seria does indeed point to – and equal – Mozart. Even more, it makes me think of *Watteau*. It is a bright example of his versatility as an opera composer/musical dramatist. Charm is no small thing, in opera as in painting – and a foreground dalliance, detailed and sensuous, is made more vivid by brooding clouds behind.

JAMES CONWAY

# TESEO

