

= Agrippina (opera) =

Agrippina (HWV 6) is an opera seria in three acts by George Frideric Handel with a libretto by Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani . Composed for the 1709 ? 10 Venice Carnevale season , the opera tells the story of Agrippina , the mother of Nero , as she plots the downfall of the Roman Emperor Claudius and the installation of her son as emperor . Grimani 's libretto , considered one of the best that Handel set , is an " anti @-@ heroic satirical comedy " , full of topical political allusions . Some analysts believe that it reflects Grimani 's political and diplomatic rivalry with Pope Clement XI .

Handel composed Agrippina at the end of a three @-@ year sojourn in Italy . It premiered in Venice at the Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo on 26 December 1709 . It proved an immediate success and an unprecedented series of 27 consecutive performances followed . Observers praised the quality of the music ? much of which , in keeping with the contemporary custom , had been borrowed and adapted from other works , including the works of other composers . Despite the evident public enthusiasm for the work , Handel did not promote further stagings . There were occasional productions in the years following its premiere but Handel 's operas , including Agrippina , fell out of fashion in the mid @-@ 18th century .

In the 20th century Agrippina was revived in Germany and premiered in Britain and America . Performances of the work have become more ever common , with innovative stagings at the New York City Opera and the London Coliseum in 2007 . Modern critical opinion is that Agrippina is Handel 's first operatic masterpiece , full of freshness and musical invention which have made it one of the most popular operas of the ongoing Handel revival .

= = Background = =

Handel 's earliest opera compositions , in the German style , date from his Hamburg years , 1704 ? 06 , under the influence of Johann Mattheson . In 1706 he traveled to Italy where he remained for three years , developing his compositional skills . He first settled in Florence where he was introduced to Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti . His first opera composed in Italy , though still reflecting the influence of Hamburg and Mattheson , was Rodrigo (1707 , original title *Vincer se stesso è la maggior vittoria*) , was presented there . It was not particularly successful , but was part of Handel 's process of learning to compose opera in the Italian style and to set Italian words to music .

Handel then spent time in Rome , where the performance of opera was forbidden by Papal decree , and in Naples . He applied himself to the composition of cantatas and oratorios ; at that time there was little difference (apart from increasing length) between cantata , oratorio and opera , all based on the alternation of secco recitative and aria da capo . Works from this period include *Dixit Dominus* and the dramatic cantata *Aci , Galatea e Polifemo* , written in Naples . While in Rome , probably through Alessandro Scarlatti , Handel had become acquainted with Cardinal Grimani , a distinguished diplomat who wrote libretti in his spare time , and acted as an unofficial theatrical agent for the Italian royal courts . He was evidently impressed by Handel and asked him to set his new libretto , Agrippina . Grimani intended to present this opera at his family @-@ owned theatre in Venice , the Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo , as part of the 1709 ? 10 Carnevale season .

= = Writing history = =

= = = Libretto = = =

Grimani 's libretto is based on much the same story used as the subject of Monteverdi 's 1642 opera *L 'incoronazione di Poppea* . Grimani 's libretto centres on Agrippina , a character who does not appear in Monteverdi 's darker version . Grimani avoids the " moralizing " tone of the later opera seria libretti written by such acknowledged masters as Metastasio and Zeno . According to the critic Donald Jay Grout , " irony , deception and intrigue pervade the humorous escapades of its well

@-@ defined characters . " All the main characters , with the sole exception of Claudius 's servant Lesbus , are historical , and the broad outline of the libretto draws heavily upon Tacitus 's Annals and Suetonius ' Life of Claudius . It has been suggested that the comical , amatory character of the Emperor Claudius is a caricature of Pope Clement XI , to whom Grimani was politically opposed . Certain aspects of this conflict are also reflected in the plot : the rivalry between Nero and Otho mirror aspects of the debate over the War of the Spanish Succession , in which Grimani supported the Habsburgs and Pope Clement XI France and Spain .

= = = Composition = = =

According to John Mainwaring , Handel 's first biographer , Agrippina was composed in the three weeks following Handel 's arrival in Venice in November 1709 , a theory supported by the autograph manuscript 's Venetian paper . In composing the opera Handel borrowed extensively from his earlier oratorios and cantatas , and from other composers including Reinhard Keiser , Arcangelo Corelli and Jean @-@ Baptiste Lully . This practice of adapting and borrowing was common at the time but is carried to greater lengths in Agrippina than in almost all of Handel 's other major dramatic works . The overture , which is a French @-@ style two @-@ part work with a " thrilling " allegro , and all but five of the vocal numbers , are based on earlier works , though subject in many cases to significant adaptation and reworking .

Examples of recycled material include Pallas 's " Col raggio placido " , which is based on Lucifer 's aria from La resurrezione (1708) , " O voi dell ' Erebo " , which was itself adapted from Reinhard Keiser 's 1705 opera Octavia . Agrippina 's aria " Non ho cor che per amarti " was taken , almost entirely unchanged , from " Se la morte non vorrà " in Handel 's earlier dramatic cantata Qual ti reveggio , oh Dio (1707) ; Narcissus 's " Spererò " is an adaptation of " Sai perchè " from another 1707 cantata , Clori , Tirsi e Fileno ; and parts of Nero 's Act 3 aria " Come nube che fugge dal vento " are borrowed Handel 's oratorio Il trionfo del tempo (all from 1707) . Later , some of Agrippina 's music was used by Handel in his London operas Rinaldo (1711) and the 1732 version of Acis and Galatea , in each case with little or no change . The first music by Handel presented in London may have been Agrippina 's " Non ho cor che " , transposed into Alessandro Scarlatti 's opera Pirro è Dimitrio which was performed in London on 6 December 1710 . The Agrippina overture and other arias from the opera appeared in pasticcios performed in London between 1710 and 1714 , with additional music provided by other composers . Echoes of " Ti vo ' giusta " (one of the few arias composed specifically for Agrippina) can be found in the air " He was despised " , from Handel 's Messiah (1742) .

Two of the main male roles , Nero and Narcissus , were written for castrati , the " superstars of their day " in Italian opera . The opera was revised significantly before and possibly during its run . One example is the Act III duet for Otho and Poppaea , " No , no , ch 'io non apprezzo " , replaced with two solo arias before the first performance . Another is Poppaea 's aria " Ingannata " , replaced during the run with another of extreme virtuosity , " Pur punir chi m 'ha ingannata " , either to emphasise Poppaea 's new @-@ found resolution at this juncture of the opera or , as is thought more likely , to flatter Scarabelli by giving her an additional opportunity to show off her vocal abilities .

The instrumentation for Handel 's score follows closely that of all his early operas : two recorders , two oboes , two trumpets , three violins , two cellos , viola , timpani , contrabassoon and harpsichord . By the standards of Handel 's later London operas this scoring is light , but there are nevertheless what Dean and Knapp describe as " moments of splendour when Handel applies the full concerto grosso treatment . " Agrippina , Handel 's second Italian opera , was probably his last composition in Italy .

= = Roles = =

= = Synopsis = =

== = Act 1 == =

On hearing that her husband , the Emperor Claudius , has died in a storm at sea , Agrippina plots to secure the throne for Nero , her son by a previous marriage . Nero is unenthusiastic about this project , but consents to his mother 's wishes (" Con saggio tuo consiglio ") . Agrippina obtains the support of her two freedmen , Pallas and Narcissus , who hail Nero as the new Emperor before the Senate .

With the Senate 's assent , Agrippina and Nero begin to ascend the throne , but the ceremony is interrupted by the entrance of Claudius 's servant Lesbus . He announces that his master is alive (" Allegrezza ! Claudio giunge ! ") , saved from death by Otho , the commander of the army . Otho himself confirms this and reveals that Claudius has promised him the throne as a mark of gratitude . Agrippina is frustrated , until Otho secretly confides to her that he loves the beautiful Poppaea more than he desires the throne . Agrippina , aware that Claudius also loves Poppaea , sees a new opportunity of furthering her ambitions for Nero . She goes to Poppaea and tells her , falsely , that Otho has struck a bargain with Claudius whereby he , Otho , gains the throne but gives Poppaea to Claudius . Agrippina advises Poppaea to turn the tables on Otho by telling the Emperor that Otho has ordered her to refuse Claudius 's attentions . This , Agrippina believes , will make Claudius revoke his promise to Otho of the throne .

Poppaea believes Agrippina . When Claudius arrives at Poppaea 's house she denounces what she believes is Otho 's treachery . Claudius departs in fury , while Agrippina cynically consoles Poppaea by declaring that their friendship will never be broken by deceit (" Non ho cor che per amarti ") .

== = Act 2 == =

Pallas and Narcissus realize that Agrippina has tricked them into supporting Nero and decide to have no more to do with her . Otho arrives , nervous about his forthcoming coronation (" Coronato il crin d 'alloro ") , followed by Agrippina , Nero and Poppaea , who have come to greet Claudius . All combine in a triumphal chorus (" Di timpani e trombe ") as Claudius enters . Each in turns pays tribute to the Emperor , but Otho is coldly rebuffed as Claudius denounces him as a traitor . Otho is devastated and appeals to Agrippina , Poppaea , and Nero for support , but they all reject him , leaving him in bewilderment and despair (" Otton , qual portentoso fulmine " followed by " Voi che udite il mio lamento ") .

However , Poppaea is touched by her former beloved 's grief , and wonders if he might not be innocent (" Bella pur nel mio diletto ") . She devises a plan and when Otho approaches her , she pretends to talk in her sleep recounting what Agrippina has told her earlier . Otho , as she intended , overhears her and fiercely protests his innocence . He convinces Poppaea that Agrippina has deceived her . Poppaea swears revenge (" Ingannata una sol volta " , alternate aria " Pur punir chi m 'ha ingannata ") but is distracted when Nero comes forward and declares his love for her . Meanwhile Agrippina , having lost the support of Pallas and Narcissus , manages to convince Claudius that Otho is still plotting to take the throne . She advises Claudius that he should end Otho 's ambitions once and for all by abdicating in favour of Nero . Claudius agrees , believing that this will enable him to win Poppaea .

== = Act 3 == =

Poppaea now plans some deceit of her own , in an effort to divert Claudius 's wrath from Otho with whom she has now reconciled . She hides Otho in her bedroom with instructions to listen carefully . Soon Nero arrives to press his love on her (" Coll 'ardor del tuo bel core ") , but she tricks him into hiding as well . Then Claudius enters ; Poppaea tells him that he had earlier misunderstood her : it was not Otho but Nero who had ordered her to reject Claudius . To prove her point she asks Claudius to pretend to leave , then she summons Nero who , thinking Claudius has gone , resumes

his passionate wooing of Poppaea . Claudius suddenly reappears and angrily dismisses the crestfallen Nero . After Claudius departs , Poppaea brings Otho out of hiding and the two express their everlasting love in separate arias .

At the palace , Nero tells Agrippina of his troubles and decides to renounce love for political ambition (" Come nube che fugge dal vento ") . But Pallas and Narcissus have by now revealed Agrippina 's original plot to Claudius , so that when Agrippina urges the Emperor to yield the throne to Nero , he accuses her of treachery . She then claims that her efforts to secure the throne for Nero had all along been a ruse to safeguard the throne for Claudius (" Se vuoi pace ") . Claudius believes her ; nevertheless , when Poppaea , Otho , and Nero arrive , Claudius announces that Nero and Poppaea will marry , and that Otho shall have the throne . No one is satisfied with this arrangement , as their desires have all changed , so Claudius in a spirit of reconciliation reverses his judgement , giving Poppaea to Otho and the throne to Nero . He then summons the goddess Juno , who descends to pronounce a general blessing (" V 'accendano le tede i raggi delle stelle ") .

= = Performance history = =

= = = Premiere = = =

The date of Agrippina 's first performance , about which there was at one time some uncertainty , has been confirmed by a manuscript newsletter as 26 December 1709 . The cast consisted of some of Northern Italy 's leading singers of the day , including Antonio Carli in the lead bass role ; Margherita Durastanti , who had recently sung the role of Mary Magdalene in Handel 's *La resurrezione* ; and Diamante Scarabelli , whose great success at Bologna in the 1697 pasticcio *Perseo* inspired the publication of a volume of eulogistic verse entitled *La miniera del Diamante* .

Agrippina proved extremely popular and established Handel 's international reputation . Its original run of 27 performances was extraordinary for that time . Handel 's biographer John Mainwaring wrote of the first performance : " The theatre at almost every pause resounded with shouts of *Viva il caro Sassone !* (' Long live the beloved Saxon ! ') They were thunderstruck with the grandeur and sublimity of his style , for they had never known till then all the powers of harmony and modulation so closely arranged and forcibly combined . " Many others recorded overwhelmingly positive responses to the work .

= = = Later performances = = =

Between 1713 and 1724 there were productions of Agrippina in Naples , Hamburg , and Vienna , although Handel himself never revived the opera after its initial run . The Naples production included additional music by Francesco Mancini . In the later 18th , and throughout the 19th centuries , Handel 's operas fell into obscurity , and none were staged between 1754 and 1920 . However , when interest in Handel 's operas awakened in the 20th century , Agrippina received several revivals , beginning with a 1943 production at Handel 's birthplace , Halle , under conductor Richard Kraus at the Halle Opera House . In this performance the alto role of Otho , composed for a woman , was changed into a bass accompanied by English horns , " with calamitous effects on the delicate balance and texture of the score " , according to Winton Dean . The Radio Audizioni Italiane produced a live radio broadcast of the opera on 25 October 1953 , the opera 's first presentation other than on stage . The cast included Magda László in the title role and Mario Petri as Claudius , and the performance was conducted by Antonio Pedrotti .

A 1958 performance in Leipzig , and several more stagings in Germany , preceded the British première of the opera at Abingdon , Oxfordshire , in 1963 . In 1983 the opera returned to Venice , for a performance under Christopher Hogwood at the Teatro Malibran . In the United States a concert performance had been given on 16 February 1972 at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia , but the opera 's first fully staged American performance was in Fort Worth , Texas , in 1985 . That same year it reached New York , with a concert performance at Alice Tully Hall , where the opera

was described as a " genuine rarity " . The Fort Worth performance was quickly followed by further American stagings in Iowa City and Boston . The historically informed performance movement inspired two period instrument productions of Agrippina in 1985 and 1991 respectively . Both were in Germany , the first was in the Schlosstheater Schwetzingen , the other at the Göttingen International Handel Festival .

= = = 21st century revivals = = =

There have been numerous productions in the 21st century , including a 2002 ultramodern staging by director Lillian Groag at the New York City Opera . This production , revived in 2007 , was described by the New York Times critic as " odd ... presented as broad satire , a Springtime for Hitler version of I , Claudius " , although the musical performances were generally praised . In Britain , the English National Opera (ENO) staged an English @-@ language version in February 2007 , directed by David McVicar , which received a broadly favourable critical response , although critic Fiona Maddocks identified features of the production that diminished the work : " Music so witty , inventive and humane requires no extra gilding " . Some of the later revivals used countertenors in the roles written for castrati .

= = Music = =

Agrippina is considered Handel 's first operatic masterpiece ; according to Winton Dean it has few rivals for its " sheer freshness of musical invention " . Grimaldi 's libretto has also been praised : The New Penguin Opera Guide describes it as one of the best Handel ever set , and praises the " light touch " with which the characters are vividly portrayed . Agrippina as a whole is , in the view of the scholar John E. Sawyer , " among the most convincing of all the composer 's dramatic works " .

= = = Style = = =

Stylistically , Agrippina follows the standard pattern of the era by alternating recitative and da capo arias . In accordance with 18th @-@ century opera convention the plot is mainly carried forward in the recitatives , while the musical interest and exploration of character takes place in the arias ? although on occasion Handel breaks this mould by using arias to advance the action . With one exception the recitative sections are secco (" dry ") , where a simple vocal line is accompanied by continuo only . The anomaly is Otho 's " Otton , qual portentoso fulmine " , where he finds himself robbed of the throne and deserted by his beloved Poppaea ; here the recitative is accompanied by the orchestra , as a means of highlighting the drama . Dean and Knapp describe this , and the Otho 's aria which follows , as " the peak of the opera " . The 19th @-@ century musical theorist Ebenezer Prout singles out Agrippina 's " Non ho cor che per amarti " for special praise . He points out the range of instruments used for special effects , and writes that " an examination of the score of this air would probably astonish some who think Handel 's orchestration is wanting in variety . "

Handel made more use than was then usual of orchestral accompaniment in arias , but in other respects Agrippina is broadly typical of an older operatic tradition . For the most part the arias are brief , there are only two short ensembles , and in the quartet and the trio the voices are not heard together . However , Handel 's style would change very little in the next 30 years , a point reflected in the reviews of the Tully Hall performance of Agrippina in 1985 , which refer to a " string of melodious aria and ensembles , any of which could be mistaken for the work of his mature London years " .

= = = Character = = =

Of the main characters , only Otho is not morally contemptible . Agrippina is an unscrupulous schemer ; Nero , while not yet the monster he would become , is pampered and hypocritical ; Claudius is pompous , complacent , and something of a buffoon , while Poppaea , the first of Handel

's sex kittens , is also a liar and a flirt . The freedmen Pallas and Narcissus are self @-@ serving and salacious . All , however , have some redeeming features , and all have arias that express genuine emotion . The situations in which they find themselves are sometimes comic , but never farcical ? like Mozart in the Da Ponte operas , Handel avoids laughing at his characters .

In Agrippina the da capo aria is the musical form used to illustrate character in the context of the opera . The first four arias of the work exemplify this : Nero 's " Con raggio " , in a minor key and with a descending figure on the key phrase " il trono ascenderò " (" I will ascend the throne ") characterises him as weak and irresolute . Pallas 's first aria " La mia sorte fortunata " , with its " wide @-@ leaping melodic phrasing " introduces him as a bold , heroic figure , contrasting with his rival Narcissus whose introspective nature is displayed in his delicate aria " Volo pronto " which immediately follows . Agrippina 's introductory aria " L 'alma mia " has a mock @-@ military form which reflects her outward power , while subtle musical phrasing establishes her real emotional state . Poppaea 's arias are uniformly light and rhythmic , while Claudius 's short love song " Vieni O cara " gives a glimpse of his inner feelings , and is considered one of the gems of the score .

= = = Irony = = =

Grimani 's libretto is full of irony , which Handel reflects in the music . His settings sometimes illustrate both the surface meaning , as characters attempt to deceive each other , and the hidden truth . For instance , in her Act I aria " Non ho cor che per amarti " Agrippina promises Poppaea that deceit will never mar their new friendship , while tricking her into ruining Otho 's chances for the throne . Handel 's music illuminates her deceit in the melody and minor modal key , while a simple , emphasised rhythmic accompaniment hints at clarity and openness . In Act III , Nero 's announcement that his passion is ended and that he will no longer be bound by it (in " Come nube che fugge dal vento ") is set to bitter @-@ sweet music which suggests that he is deceiving himself . In Otho 's " Coronato il crin " the agitated nature of the music is the opposite of what the " euphoric " tone of the libretto suggests . Contrasts between the force of the libretto and the emotional colour of the actual music would develop into a constant feature of Handel 's later London operas .

= = List of arias and musical numbers = =

The index of Chrysander 's edition (see below) lists the following numbers , excluding the secco recitatives . Variants from the libretto are also noted .