Orlando (ii)

Opera in three acts by **GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL** to an anonymous libretto adapted from **CARLO SIGISMONDO CAPECE**'s *L' Orlando* (1711, Rome), after **LUDOVICO ARIOSTO**' *Orlando furioso*; London, King's Theatre, 27 January 1733.

Orlando *a knight*	alto castrato
Angelica *Queen of Cathay, in love with Medoro*	soprano
Medoro *an African prince, in love with Angelica*	alto
Dorinda *a shepherdess*	soprano
Zoroastro *a magician*	bass
Isabella *a princess*	silent

Orlando was the only new opera of Handel's season of 1732– 3. He wrote it during the first weeks of the season (which opened on 4 November with an adaptation of Leo's *Catone in Utica*) and completed the score on 20 November. The libretto is considerably changed from Capece's original, most notably in the introduction of the character of the magician Zoroastro, who becomes the presiding genius of the opera; the role was created for the distinguished bass Antonio Montagnana. There are only four other singing roles, originally taken by the alto castrato Senesino (Orlando), Anna Maria Strada del Pò (Angelica), the contralto Francesca Bertolli (Medoro) and Celeste Gismondi (Dorinda) – the last probably identical with the Neapolitan *buffa* soprano Celeste Resse. The princess Isabella, important in Capece's libretto, appears briefly in Act 1 of the opera as a silent role. *Orlando* is the first of the three Handel operas with a text deriving from Ariosto's epic poem (the others being *Ariodante* and *Alcina*) and, despite the extensive variations, remains closest to the spirit of the original. There are a number of fleeting references to other characters and incidents in the poem and its predecessor, Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*, but as they mostly appear inOrlando's ravings it does not matter if they are not recognized. (*See also* **ANGELICA E MEDORO**.)

The opera achieved ten performances, six before a Lenten run of oratorios and four afterwards. Further performances were reported to have been deferred because of the indisposition of a singer. It seems likely that this was a hint of Handel's breach with Senesino, which came to a head in June 1733 with the defection of that singer and most of Handel's company to the newly formed 'Opera of the Nobility'. Sir John Clerk of Penicuik (a wealthy Scottish landowner who was also a skilled amateur musician) saw the last performance of *Orlando* on 5 May and recorded the contrast between the excellence of the opera and the poor attendance, the latter no doubt depleted by hostile machinations against Handel:I never in all my life heard

a better piece of musick nor better perform'd – the famous Castrato, Senesino made the principal Actor the rest were all Italians who sung with very good grace and action, however, the Audience was very thin so that I believe they get not enough to pay the Instruments of the Orchestra … One Siginor Montagnania sung the bass with a noise like a Canon … amongst the violins were 2 brothers of the name Castrucci who play'd with great dexterity.

Handel never revived the opera and it remained unheard until the production at Halle on 28 May 1922, in an arrangement by H. J. Moser. The first British revival was at the Unicorn Theatre, Abingdon, on 6 May 1959, in which year it was also given in Florence; it has had numerous revivals since, particularly in the 1980s, when it was heard in Britain, Germany and the Low Countries and in Venice, Paris, Chicago and San Francisco.

ACT 1 The time and place of the action are undefined, the scenes ranging from conventional pastoral landscapes to symbolic tableaux created by Zoroastro's magic. (In Ariosto Orlando is attached to the court of Charlemagne, implying a period around AD 800.) The opening scene is the countryside at night, with a view of a mountain on which Atlas is seen supporting the heavens. Zoroastro contemplates the constellations, obscure in meaning to ordinary mortals, but which tell him that Orlando will one day return to noble deeds. Orlando himself appears, torn between conflicting desires for love and glory. Zoroastro rebukes him for his devotion to love, and illustrates the dangers of that emotion by causing the distant mountain to change to the Palace of Love, where heroes of antiquity appear asleep at Cupid's feet. He urges Orlando to follow Mars, the god of war.Orlando, at first shamed by the vision, decides that glory can be obtained in pursuit of love.

The scene changes to a wood with shepherds' huts, Dorinda's domain. Her thoughts, troubled by love, are interrupted as Orlando rushes past with a princess (later identified as Isabella), whom he has rescued. Angelica appears: despite Orlando's attentions to her she has fallen for Medoro, whose wounds she healed while he was being looked after by Dorinda. Medoro overhears and enters with a declaration of his love for Angelical Dorinda returns, it is clear that she loves Medoro. To avoid hurting her he pretends that Angelica is a relation of his; Dorinda knows he is lying but his words still enchant her. Zoroastro tells Angelica he knows of her love for Medoro, and warns her ofOrlando's likely revenge. When Orlando appears, Angelica cannot tell him what has happened but pretends to be jealous and taunts him about the princess he has rescued. Zoroastro prevents Medoro's untimely approach by causing him to be concealed by a fountain as the scene is transformed into a garden. Angelica tells Orlando he must prove his faith by never seeing the princess again. Orlando agrees; he will fight the most terrible monsters to show his love. Medoro asks Angelica who she has been talking to; she tells him and persuades him not to fight such a rival. Their embrace is seen by Dorinda, who forces Angelica to explain that Medoro is her betrothed. Angelica thanks

Dorinda for her kindness and gives her a piece of jewellery, but Dorinda would sooner have had a gift from Medoro. He begs her to forgive him, but she says she has been hurt and remains inconsolable.

ACT 2 In a wood, Dorinda's melancholy reflections on the song of the nightingale are interrupted byOrlando, who learns of Angelica's love for Medoro. Dorinda shows him the jewel, saying it came from Medoro. Orlando recognizes it as a bracelet he once gave to Angelica. Believing himself betrayed, he threatens to kill himself and pursue Angelica into hell.

In a grove of laurels, near a grotto, Zoroastro rebukes Angelica and Medoro for arousing Orlando's anger; mortal minds wander in darkness when led by the blind god of love. Medoro carves his name and Angelica's on the laurel trees to declare their love, and Angelica resolves to return with him to Cathay. Orlando, entering, is enraged at the sight of the names on the trees and rushes into the grotto in pursuit of Angelica. She, however, appears from the opposite side and bids a sad farewell to the trees and the streams. Orlando emerges and pursues her, Medoro following. Zoroastro's magic now intervenes: Angelica is engulfed by a large cloud which bears her away in the company of four genii. Orlando loses his reason. He believes that shades from the underworld have taken Angelica from him; he will follow them, becoming a shade himself, and imagines himself crossing the Styx in Charon's boat and entering Pluto's kingdom. There he sees a Fury in the form of Medoro, who runs into the arms of Proserpina; her weeping rouses his pity, but finally his heart is hardened. As he runs back into the grotto it bursts open to reveal Zoroastro on his chariot. The magician gathers Orlando up in his arms and flies off with him.

ACT 3 Medoro explains to Dorinda that Angelica has sent him to her for refuge; she is glad he is no longer deceiving her. Orlando appears and declares his love for Dorinda. She is at first flattered, but as Orlando becomes more ardent and addresses her as Venus it becomes obvious he is still raving; and in a fit of delusion he squares up for unarmed combat with an imagined enemy and leaves. Dorinda, telling Angelica of Orlando's madness, delivers her thoughts on love as a wind that sets the brain spinning, bringing as much pain as joy. Zoroastro appears and orders his genii to change the scene to a dark cavern, he promises to restore Orlando's former glory. Dorinda tells Angelica that Orlando has destroyed her house and buried Medoro in the ruins. Orlando appears, addresses Angelica as the sorceress Falerina and threatens to kill her; griefstricken at the news of Medoro's death, she defies him. As Orlando throws her into the cavern, it changes into a beautiful temple of Mars. Orlando claims he has rid the world of its monsters, sleep overcomes him. Zoroastro declares that the time has come to restore Orlando's senses. He pours liquid over the face of Orlando, who awakens, his senses restored. Dorinda tells him he has murdered Medoro in his frenzy. Full of remorse, he decides

to kill himself, but Angelica begs him to live on. Medoro was saved by Zoroastro, who now implores Orlando to accept the lovers' betrothal. A statue of Mars, with fire burning on an altar, rises as Orlando proclaims victory over himself. He wishes joy to Angelica and Medoro, who promise to be true to each other. Dorinda, inviting them to her cottage, says she will forget her sorrows. All join in praise of love and glory.

Though *Orlando* shares characteristics with both earlier and later Handel operas involving supernatural effects it is unique in its mix of characters and in its flouting of Baroque operatic conventions to depict the deranged state of the hero's mind. Angelica and Medoro are on the whole conventional lovers, their best music being in their slower numbers (notably Medoro's exquisite 'Verdi allori') and in the moving trio at the close of Act 1 when they vainly try to console the distraught Dorinda. The shepherdess herself never becomes the comic role that her status might have suggested, despite the quirky rhythms of her arias. The gentle pathos of her unrequited love is always present, and there is a slightly manic ring to her solo in the final ensemble as she invites the company to the home she previously declared to be destroyed. Zoroastro, a striking figure, has three magnificent arias, of which the last ('Sorge infausta una procella') is well known (and long held a place in 19th-century versions of *Israel in Egypt* as 'Wave on wave congeal'd with wonder').Orlando is a highly original creation, and a role which makes few concessions to the expectations of an operatic primo uomo. (Its unusual features – notably the limited opportunities for improvised display – may have contributed to Senesino's break with the composer.) There are only three regular da capo arias, two in Act 1 and the impassioned 'Cielo! se tu il consenti' in Act 2. Irregular forms then predominate, including the astonishing Mad Scene ('Ah! stigie larve') at the close of Act 2, in which a mixture of accompanied recitative and measured passages in various tempos depictOrlando's imaginary journey to the underworld, taking in a lament over a chromatic ground bass and ending with a haunting rondo in gavotte rhythm. In this scene occur the notorious bars of 5/8 time, but they appeal only briefly between sections of unmeasured recitative and their impact on the ear is slight. Orlando's final aria of slumber ('Giá l'ebro mio ciglio'), through-composed and accompanied by the veiled tones of two solo *violette marine* over a pizzicato bass, is both moving and mysterious.*Orlando* makes a special appeal to modern sensibility with its concentration on the psychological states of characters in a fantasy world lending itself to reinterpretation; it is also a splendid exemplar of what the Baroque theatre could achieve in allying stage-craft to drama expressed through music.

Anthony Hicks