

CHAPTER ONE

George Frideric Handel, *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*

London, February 20, 1724, 6:00 P.M.





igh-Baroque serious opera (or *dramma per musica*, as it was called in the eighteenth century) is not much in vogue nowadays, even though Baroque music in general has never been more in fashion.

Perhaps listeners do not want music sung in another language; perhaps they tire of long successions of arias; perhaps

they don't want to follow complex plots. Even the perennially popular Handel does not attract as many listeners to his operas as to his instrumental music and oratorios. And yet Handel would have considered himself chiefly a composer of operas, I believe, even late in his life, after devoting much effort to his newer hybrid oratorios. Certainly in 1724 his job was in the opera house, and opera was all the rage.

Opera was an odd entertainment: a complex story told in a series of recitatives and arias sung entirely in Italian. Opera grew up in Italy and was sung in Italian throughout Europe (only the French avoided it) even where nobody could understand the language. The vogue for Italian opera among London aristocrats was linked with their desire for continental pictures, classical sculpture, and the culture of the Grand Tour. It was a style from Italy, the source of much highbrow culture, and its subjects were from classical antiquity, which appealed to those who had been taught to read Latin.

What attracted the audience to the opera house? Part of the appeal was social standing: everybody who was anybody was there—the whole town, all the world. The main attractions were the singers: the most famous stars of the day performing feats of virtuosity or touching the heart with their expressive singing. Plot, acting, costume, and scenery were important but secondary. It was a brilliant and exclusive entertainment.

George Frideric Handel, a German composer writing Italian opera in England, was one of three staff composers at the Royal Academy of Music, whose season in the King's Theatre was the musical entertainment of choice for the nobility and the wealthy classes. Handel's only new contribution to the 1723–24 opera season was *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*; it had a moderately successful run, it was well liked, and it was part of a series of seasons that made up the high point of Italian opera in England. Of all of Handel's Italian operas, *Giulio Cesare* is the one most often revived in modern times. It may be that Julius Caesar is better known to modern audiences than are many of Handel's other historical subjects (we are not brought up on the classics these days), or perhaps the role of Cleopatra, and the love interest that her presence provides, continue to fascinate, or maybe Handel's beautiful music is the reason for so many revivals. But there are treasures in his other operas, too.

Italian opera was sung all over Europe, and there were dozens of competent composers to supply the international need for works in the Italian style (Vivaldi, Scarlatti, Giovanni and Antonio Bononcini, Gasparini, Lotti, Porpora, and so on), and there were thousands of operas produced in the eighteenth century. Usually the production was new

(even if the libretto was old) and arranged on the spot by librettist and composer. Revivals were relatively rare, in part because operas were written with specific singers in mind. A new production of an older opera could require so much rewriting for the cast that a new composition might be more appropriate. And operas were generally supervised by their composers, so a revival would require the composer's presence. Why not produce something new? This novelty was what an audience sought, but novelty in the context of a well-understood convention.

Even though Handel's music resembles that of his contemporaries, it is uniquely his own. The eighteenth-century music historian Charles Burney wrote of Handel's *Ottone* (1723): "The passages in this and the other operas which Handel composed about this time, became the musical language of the nation, and in a manner proverbial, like the *bons mots* of a man of wit in society. So that long after this period all the musicians in the kingdom, whenever they attempted to compose what they called Music of their own, seem to have had no other stock of ideas, than these passages."

Background

LONDON IN THE 1720S

Geographically, London was not central to Europe, although it certainly seemed the center of society, culture, and commerce to those who frequented the opera. A work by a German composer set to an Italian libretto beginning with a French overture and played to an English audience was certainly cosmopolitan. The city was about the size of Paris, or of modern Toledo, Ohio. Its seven hundred thousand inhabitants made up about 20 percent of England's population. London Bridge was the only way to cross the Thames without a boat. The river was clogged with sewage, and the streets were littered with mud, night soil, and dead animals between cleansings by the frequent rains. But in the streets were also sedan chairs, carriages, street vendors crying their wares, hawkers of printed ballads, chimney sweeps, knife-grinders, old clothes men, and postmen ringing bells. In the absence of house numbers, street names combined with major intersections and shop signs to form addresses.

A French visitor described London's streets in 1725:

A number of them are dirty, narrow, and badly built; others again are wide and straight, bordered with fine houses. Most of the streets are wonderfully well lighted, for in front of each house hangs a lantern or a large globe of glass, inside of which is placed a lamp which burns all night. Large houses have two of these lamps suspended outside their doors by iron supports, and some have even four. The streets of London are unpleasantly full either of dust or of mud. This arises from the quantity of houses that are continually being built, and also from the large number of coaches and chariots rolling in the streets day and night. Carts are used for removing mud, and in the summer time the streets are wa-

tered by carts carrying barrels, or casks, pierced with holes, through which water flows.

Places of public assembly included taverns where gin and beer were cheap and plentiful; coffeehouses were places for talking, reading the newspapers, and finding out about the current opera at the King's Theatre. There were 550 coffeehouses by 1739 (including one called Lloyd's where insurance was brokered). There was one main meal each day, a dinner eaten in the afternoon; breakfast and supper were very light by comparison.

The difference between the upper classes and everybody else was enormous. Grand houses with grand rooms, excess and ostentation in dress, and enormously expensive

César de Saussure on the Dress of the English

I daresay it would interest you to hear of the style and the way Englishmen usually dress. They do not trouble themselves about dress, but leave that to their womenfolk. When the people see a well-dressed person in the streets, especially if he is wearing a braided coat, a plume in his hat, or his hair tied in a bow, he will, without doubt, be called "French dog" twenty times perhaps before he reaches his destination. . . . Englishmen are usually very plainly dressed, they scarcely ever wear gold on their clothes; they wear little coats called "frocks," without facings and without pleats, with a short cape above. Almost all wear small, round wigs, plain hats, and carry canes in their hands, but no swords. Their cloth and linen are of the best and finest. You will see rich merchants and gentlemen thus dressed, and sometimes even noblemen of high rank, especially in the morning, walking through the filthy and muddy streets. . . .

Most English women are fair and have pink and white complexions, soft though not expressive eyes, and slim, pretty figures, of which they are very proud and take great care, for in the morning as soon as they rise they don a sort of bodice which encircles their waists tightly. Their shoulders and throats are generally fine. They are fond of ornaments, and old and young alike wear four or five patches, and always two large ones on the forehead. Few women curl or powder their hair, and they seldom wear ribbons, feathers, or flowers, but little headdresses of cambric or of magnificent lace on their pretty, well-kept hair. They pride themselves on their neatly shod feet, on their fine linen, and on their gowns. . . . Gowns have enormous hoops, short and very wide sleeves, and it is the fashion to wear little mantles of scarlet or of black velvet, and small hats of straw that are vastly becoming.



This detail from a 1720 map of London shows the location of the King's Theatre, at the bottom of the Haymarket where it meets Pall Mall and Charing Cross Road.

opera tickets distinguished those few who had "breeding" and resources. In 1723 and 1724 the speculation in land (houses were being built at a furious rate) and stocks (despite recent difficulties with the South Sea Company) made the shareholders of the opera feel that they could only win. The anti-Catholic furor of 1722 under Prime Minister Robert Walpole had made life difficult for the many "papist" singers, instrumentalists, composers, and librettists who populated the Italian opera. Even so, opera continued to hold the attention of those who could afford it.

Operas competed with plays and other entertainments. The rage for ballad operas—plays with songs, mostly to familiar tunes, sparked by *The Beggar's Opera* in 1728—had not begun to challenge opera's dominance. The theaters of Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields had long had a competitive relationship, and they often produced musical plays—full of songs but with spoken text. The New Haymarket Theatre was featuring a company that called itself the New Company of English Comedians. All of these theaters had a complement of dancers and singers, and presumably a company of instrumentalists.

And there were concerts, pantomimes, and other entertainments as well. Lighter entertainment included harlequinades, which were whole plays or shorter afterpieces starring Harlequin and his commedia dell'arte companions. John Rich's elaborate pantomime harlequinades at Lincoln's Inn Fields were justly famous. Tony Aston's Medleys appeared in various inns throughout London, featuring song, dance, and often low comedy (a performance on November 6, 1723, featured the flatulent fluting of "A fine forced Wind-Instrument performed by an Anonymous Person").

There was much to choose from in the way of entertainment. Cockfights, skittles, cricket, and barely dressed women wrestling for money may not have distracted many operagoers, but there were exhibitions of a curious and educational nature: dwarves, giants, learned horses, North American "Savages" and elk, Bengal tigers and rhinoceros. A favorite entertainment, especially when Lent closed the theaters to opera, was masquerade balls. There were also occasional fireworks displays, hangings, and duels. There was little way of knowing more than a day or two in advance what was being performed in any of the theaters. Audiences had to rely on notices in the newspaper and on handbills.

The 1723–24 theatrical season included Shakespeare in many forms; Dryden and Lee's *Oedipus*; Ben Jonson's *Alchemist*; works by Congreve, Addison, Beaumont and Fletcher. Plays usually included dancing and singing between the acts, and often a comic afterpiece.

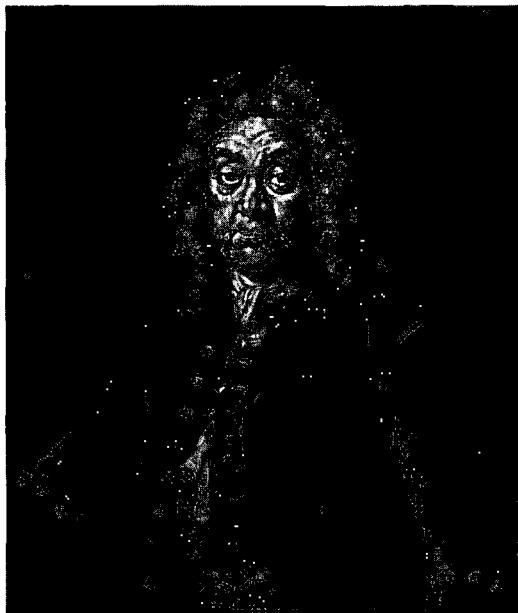
On February 20, those seeking an evening's theatrical entertainment might have chosen the opening of *Giulio Cesare* at the King's Theatre; but they might also have chosen from the following:

The Scornful Lady, by Beaumont and Fletcher, at Drury Lane, with dancing.

The Pilgrim, with singing and dancing; followed by *The Necromancer*,

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or Harlequin Doctor Faustus ("A New Dramatick Entertainment in Grotesque Characters") at Lincoln's Inn Fields.

The Royal Convert, with *The Adventures of Half an Hour*, followed



Johann Jakob Heidegger managed the operatic performances of the Royal Academy of Music, and he organized lucrative balls in the theater. This mezzotint, dated 1749, shows a much older Heidegger, but he was thought to be ugly even in his earlier years.

colleagues presented two new works (though Ariosti's *Calfurnia* lasted only four performances). Handel, though, had a preeminent position as Master of the Orchestra, and it was he who recruited the singers.

The opera was run by its manager, Johann Jakob Heidegger, the ugliest man in the city. (Heidegger won a bet with Lord Chesterfield that Chesterfield could not produce an uglier man in all of London.) The Swiss-born Heidegger had been in control, personally or jointly, for five years, and would continue to manage opera for another twenty. He was a skilled businessman who knew that the public wants spectacle and singing. He was regularly praised for the theater's sets and costumes, and he competed to recruit the finest singers in England and on the continent for his company. He also kept the opera afloat by using the house for masked balls. The Bishop of London, no friend of the opera or, especially, of masked balls, had been strongly opposing such infamous entertainments, which of course simply encouraged that segment of the public inclined to such festivities. The *Plain Dealer* of March 27, 1724, says that such masquerades are "always the Confusion, and very commonly, the Ruin of Ladies of the First Quality, and of all young Women whatsoever of good Condition and Fortune in the World."

Running an opera company has seldom worked well without the help of a great deal of private patronage. Despite the large sums pledged by the nobility, the Royal Academy continued to have money troubles. The house was relatively small, and despite the extremely high prices for opera tickets, even completely full houses—which seldom materialized—would scarcely meet the running expenses, which included the stupendous

salaries commanded by the star singers. This formula for gradual—or swift—ruin is familiar to opera managers today.

HANDEL

George Frideric Handel was a cosmopolitan composer operating in a relatively insular city. Born in Germany in 1685, he had produced operas in Hamburg and in Italy and now was bringing the tradition of Italian opera to England. Although he was a German he wrote in an international Italian style for Italian singers—which, at least for the moment, was just what the London audience for opera wanted.

Rinaldo, Handel's first opera for London, was one of his most spectacular, and in 1711 it made his name instantly. He continued to compose operas from time to time and was engaged as well in many related enterprises, including travels to Europe to recruit the finest singers. He had not yet embarked on the series of oratorio performances that would produce the pieces for which he is best known today.

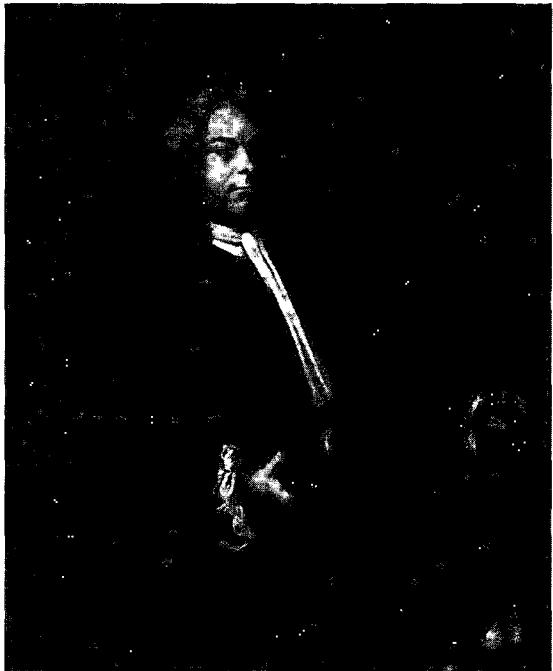
By 1724, Handel was established in London. The summer after *Giulio Cesare* opened he moved to a house in Brook Street (now no. 25), prompted by the speculative development that was engaging the British economy. His parish church (Handel was a Protestant, and his allegiance to the Church of England helped assure his citizenship) would be the nearby St. George's, Hanover Square (not yet built). He ultimately owned a few good pictures (a Rembrandt, a portrait of himself by Denner), but he never furnished the house elegantly.

Handel was a handsome man when he arrived in England at twenty-five, but his girth increased with age. Those who knew him remarked on his authority, his humor, and his size. William Coxe described his as follows:

He was large in person, and his natural corpulency, which increased as he advanced in life, rendered his whole appearance of that bulky proportion, as to give rise to Quin's inelegant, but forcible expression; that his hands were feet, and his fingers toes. From a sedentary life, he had contracted a stiffness in his joints, which in addition to his great weight and weakness of body, rendered his gait awkward; still his countenance was open, manly, and animated; expressive of all that grandeur and benevolence, which were the prominent features of his character. . . . In temper he was irascible, impatient of contradiction, but not vindictive; jealous of his musical pre-eminence, and tenacious in all points, which regarded his professional honour.

As a staff composer to the Royal Academy, Handel was presumably paid a substantial sum, not only for the composition of operas but for his regular services conducting his works, for trips abroad to recruit singers, for rehearsing, and so on. Unfortunately, we do not know what his salary was, though it may have been around £800—enough to live comfortably but far less than the star singers earned.

George Frideric Handel cut a large figure and was known to be an amusing conversationalist—with his German accent and generosity he could please almost anybody. A large white wig seems to have been a part of his public attire. Anonymous eighteenth-century portrait.



Preparations

The job of procuring, adapting, or composing libretti for the opera fell to the secretary of the Royal Academy of Music. In 1723 the secretary was the remarkably versatile Nicola Haym, cellist, dealer in books and artworks, composer, antiquarian, and author. (In addition to his surviving antiquarian and bibliographical works, he wrote a history of music, apparently lost.)

Haym had been a member of Cardinal Ottoboni's orchestra in Rome before coming to London as chamber musician to the Duke of Bedford in 1700. He had played a large part in establishing Italian opera in London, producing Bononcini's *Camilla* (first performed in 1706), the most popular Italian opera of eighteenth-century London. In 1707 all of London's theater-musicians had been required to form a single orchestra at the Queen's Theatre, and Haym arranged that he would "never be made second to any other Person of the Musick." Haym was engaged also in publishing: his two sets of trio sonatas were published in 1703 and 1704, and he had got himself into some trouble by selling his edition of Arcangelo Corelli's trio sonatas to two publishers.

Haym had spent many years playing *basso continuo* accompaniments with Handel, starting with *Rinaldo*, Handel's magnificent first opera for London in the 1710-11 season. Haym served also as manager for "The Baroness," a skilled Italian singer who for several years coached Anastasia Robinson—Cornelia in *Giulio Cesare*. The Baroness, who died in 1724, was probably the mother of Haym's child.

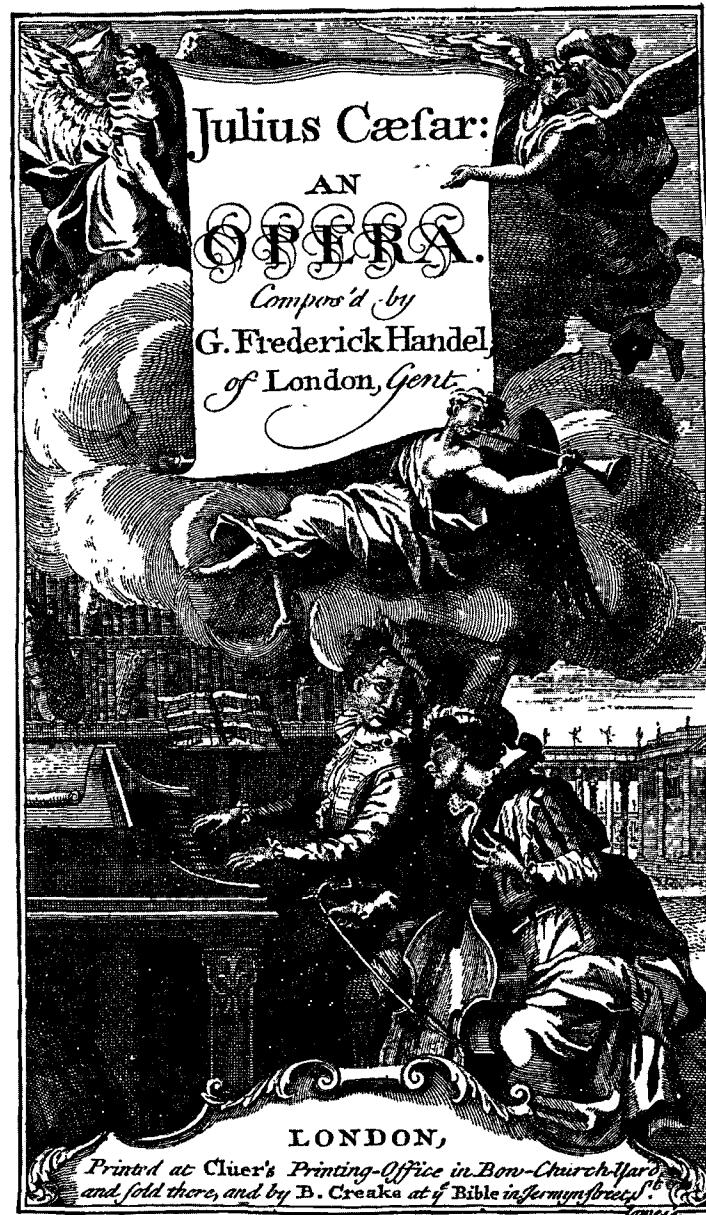
A major part of Haym's job as secretary of the Royal Academy of Music from 1722 to 1728 was adapting librettos for the company's use. He was, in fact, very skillful at this. He also composed overtures, additional songs and recitatives, and whatever new music was required to fit an older opera into new circumstances. As was usual with librettists, he undoubtedly served as stage director.

Haym had collaborated regularly with Handel, and his libretto for *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* is very well made, but it is not altogether new. Elderly patrons of the opera might have seen an earlier version, by Giacomo Francesco Bussani, in any number of Italian cities, by any number of composers, from 1677 to 1722, or any number of other operas on the subject of Caesar and Cleopatra.

The subject of Julius Caesar was well known on the London stage. Colley Cibber had produced the play *Caesar in Egypt* at Drury Lane on December 9: it had been only moderately successful. And a version of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, with music by John Ernest Galliard (and "an intire new Sett of Scenes representing Ancient Rome, Painted by Monsieur Devoto") played in London in 1723; it might have been seen by the theater-loving Handel, by his librettist, and by much of his audience. But Handel's Caesar is not the great ruler or the terrible tyrant but a young hero. Following classical story, Caesar arrives in Egypt to find rival claimants to the throne, the siblings Ptolemy and Cleopatra. Ptolemy offers Caesar the head of his rival Pompey while the wily Cleopatra, in an attempt to seduce Caesar, steps into her own trap and falls in love with him. (Subplots with Pompey's widow, Cornelia, and her son Sesto are not part of the classical tradition.)

Bussani's older libretto needed to be adapted to the modern conventions of serious opera, pruned of all its comic eunuchs and other characters, most of its travesties and disguises (although Cleopatra still disguises herself here as Lidia), and at least some of its romantic intrigues. Haym adjusted Bussani's libretto for Handel's purposes, keeping much of the dialogue and some of the best lyrics ("Alma del gran Pompeo," "V'adoro, pupille," etc.); he apparently contributed many of the aria texts, and he strengthened the plot by getting rid of a number of secondary characters and subplots. He also adjusted the number of arias to reflect the relative importance of the singers. It was important for the chief singers to have the largest number of arias, and for each of them to have a variety of songs in different moods. This permits each singer to display a range of skills, and it also allows for the development of character, one song at a time.

Handel's composition of *Giulio Cesare* involved a great deal of revision and what appears to be a close collaboration with Haym. The surviving score, bound years after Handel's death, has a variety of materials that became part of the opera as it appeared on the stage; it also contains material that ultimately found its way into other operas. Handel began composing the opera in 1723, evidently having a somewhat different cast in mind, and he later made adjustments for the 1724 singers. Texts were borrowed from Bussani and from a Milanese adaptation of Bussani's libretto and arias were moved from character to character and scene to scene to provide a clear and balanced libretto. Some characters were eliminated: Cleopatra's cousin—the descendant of the seventeenth-century comic



Title page of the score of *Giulio Cesare*. The publication by Cluer and Creake was announced in May 1725, and in June it was advertised as being "Curiously engrav'd on Copper Plates Corrected and Figur'd by Mr Handel's own Hands; there fore beware of incorrect pirated Editions done on large Pewter Plates."

nurse—eventually disappeared, giving up her best arias: “Tutto può donna vezzosa” to Cleopatra herself, and “Va tacito e nascosto” to Caesar.

Handel’s writing for the voice is so tailored to particular singers that scholars feel quite confident in recognizing the intended singer from the music. For example, Senesino, the famous castrato who plays Caesar, had a limited range, and most of his highly impressive and difficult passagework is limited to a constellation of six notes right where he liked them. There is telling emphasis in his music on breath control, on the *messa di voce* (the technique of making large crescendos and diminuendos on a single note), and on the expression of the words.

For natural men’s voices Handel tended to feature large ranges, big leaps, and arpeggios. The typical “rage” or “vengeance” aria of a bass is a characteristic *topos*. Generally, though, tenors and basses are subsidiary characters—old men, servants, tyrants. The leading men are always sopranos or altos. Castrati, famous for their power and clarity, were favored for the heroic roles. But sometimes, as in the role of Sesto, a woman’s voice was used for a heroic male part, either when no suitable castrato was available or when the role was a specialty of the woman involved (in this case Margherita Durastanti).

Not everybody was willing to suspend disbelief in order to be ravished by a castrato voice. William Popple wrote in *The Prompter*: “The introduction of eunuchs upon public theatres is only fit for nations of corrupt and dissolute morals, and that if operas cannot be performed without presenting such striking Figures to the eyes of my fair country-women, we had much better lose the pleasure we receive from that species of harmony, than have the eyes, ears, and thoughts of our ladies conversant with Figures they cannot well see, hear, nor think of, without a blush.” Other ladies, however, were so fond of Senesino that they presented him with gold snuffboxes, a tweezer-case set with diamonds, or deprived their children of sustenance in order to give presents to him.

Handel concerned himself with all aspects of the production. Because operas had no formally appointed stage director, Handel took on as much as he could of these duties. He was particularly interested in staging, and he was careful to include many stage directions in his score; the libretto is full of such details, and that is how we know as much as we do about the sets and the movement in *Giulio Cesare*. The traditions and customs of stage movement for individual actors were so well understood that staging was essentially a matter of coordinating entrances and exits and letting the singers rely on their own skill in the matter of addressing each other.

The actual stage direction generally fell to the librettist, or to the local poet. Somebody had to coordinate the shifting of scenery, the arrangement of the many supernumeraries who accompany the leading characters, and the presence, when needed, of the offstage chorus.

Rehearsal was apparently not a matter of strict coordination: Handel was sometimes able to mount a new opera with a week’s rehearsal. Most rehearsals were held informally in a room rented for the purpose, probably with very limited accompaniment, usually harpsichord and cello. Handel was known to have conducted rehearsals at his house with the singers, and his insistence on having his music performed as written (with

In a Letter of February 3, 1723, the Poet John Gay Reports
to Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin,
on Developments in London

As for the reigning amusements of the town, it is entirely music; real fiddles, base-viols, and hautboys, not poetical harps, lyres and reeds. There is nobody allowed to say "I sing," but an eunuch, or an Italian woman. Everybody is grown now as great a judge of music, as they were in your time of poetry, and folks, that could not distinguish one tune from another, now daily dispute about the different styles of Handel, Bononcini, and Attilio. People have now forgot Homer, and Virgil, and Caesar, or at least, they have lost their ranks; for, in London and Westminster, in all polite conversations, Senesino is daily voted to be the greatest man that ever lived.

the addition, of course, of the traditional ornaments) was famous. At least one final rehearsal was held "in form" (that is, a dress rehearsal), with the public admitted for a fee.

A scandal of the sort that fashionable society loves to keep alive through gossip was still in the air at the time of *Giulio Cesare*'s premiere. Back in January, Anastasia Robinson (the noble Cornelia in Handel's opera) had been offended by what she considered liberties taken by Senesino in a rehearsal of Handel's *Vespasiano*. On January 18 the *Weekly Journal* reported: "We hear there have been strange Commotions in the State of Musick in the Opera-House in the Hay-Market, and that a civil Broil arose among the Subscribers at the Practice of the new Opera of *Vespasian*, which turn'd all the Harmony into Discord." Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who described Robinson as both a prude and a kept mistress, said that Robinson took offense at the "too near approach of Senesino in the Opera." And for that approach, Burney was told by Horace Walpole, "Lord Peterborough publicly and violently caned him behind the scenes."

There were two scurrilous pamphlets in circulation, and the disputes in the press over the relative merits of Handel and Bononcini continued after the opening of *Giulio Cesare*. On March 7 an anonymous poem in support of Handel ("An Epistel to Mr. Handel, upon his Operas of Flavius and Julius Caesar") mocked his opponents as

a spurious Breed,
Who suck bad Air, and on thin Diet feed . . .
Supine in downy Indolence they doze . . .
And soothing whispers lull 'em to repose.

Friedrich Ernst von Fabrice wrote on March 10 that "the squabbles between the

Directors and the sides that everyone is taking between the singers and the composers, often provide the public with the most diverting scenes." Much of the fun of going to the opera had to do with keeping up with the scandals.

Performance

GOING TO THE THEATER

The King's Theatre in the Haymarket, particularly on opening nights, was populated by lovers of opera who had strong opinions, especially about singers. Those without private carriages arrived in hired hackney coaches and sedan chairs. Footmen waited in the top gallery. Performances generally began at six in the evening, and the house opened an hour before (sometimes, on days of premieres, it opened two or three hours early). Arriving at the theater in plenty of time, spectators would find a crowd gathered around the door to the pit. Seats were not reserved, so many patrons sent servants to occupy their places. Sometimes a couple of grenadiers were engaged to keep order. There was barely enough light to see who was who. In the pit were gentlemen, intellectuals, critics. In the boxes were the nobility, many of whom were season subscribers. The middle gallery held tradesmen and their wives, and the upper gallery had spaces for servants and anyone who could afford a ticket.

The Earl of Mount-Edgcumbe described the scene in the theater nostalgically in his reminiscences:

Both of these [pit and boxes] were filled exclusively with the highest classes of Society, all, without exception, in the full dress then universally worn. The audiences thus assembled were considered as indisputably presenting a finer spectacle than any other theatre in Europe, and absolutely astonished the foreign performers to whom such a sight was entirely new. At the end of the performance the company of the pit and boxes repaired to the coffee room, which was then the best assembly in London, private ones being rarely given on opera nights and all the first society was regularly to be seen there. Over the front box was the five shilling gallery, then resorted to by respectable persons not in full dress: and above that an upper gallery to which the admission was three shillings. Subsequently the house was encircled by private boxes, yet still the prices remained the same, and the pit preserved its respectability and even grandeur till the old house was burnt down in 1789.

The upper gallery was sometimes the site of irregular behavior. The *London Daily Post and General Advertiser* reported on February 11, 1735, that "a Disturbance happen'd at the opera House . . . occasion'd by the Footmen's coming into the Passages with their lighted Flambeaux, which gave Offence to the Ladies, &c. in the House; whereupon the Footmen were order'd out, but they refus'd to go, and attack'd the Centinels, but a stronger

Guard coming to their Assistance, with their Bayonets fix'd, drove them out; in the Fray one of the Footmen was stabbed in the Groin, and in the Body, and its thought will die of the Wounds."

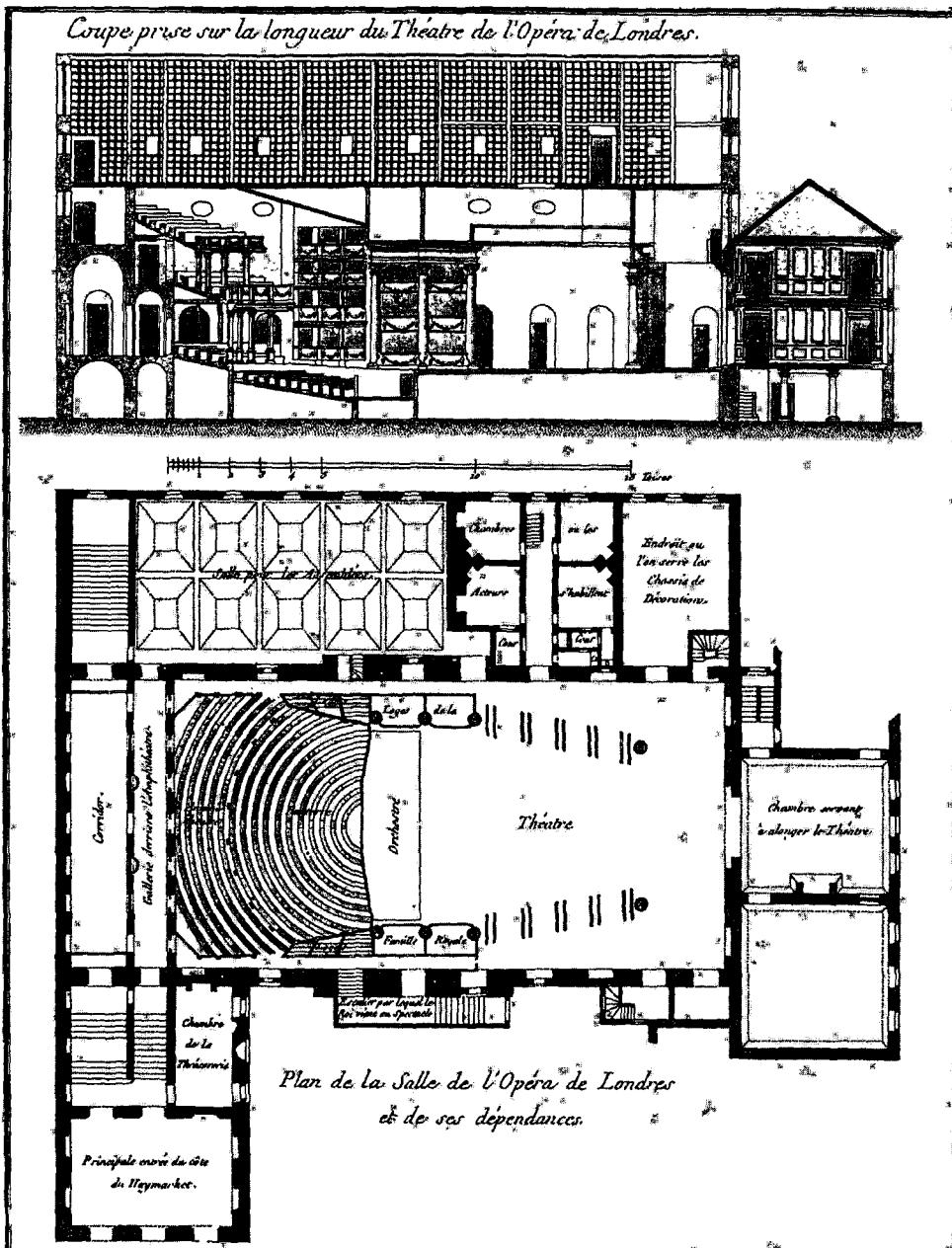
The stage boxes, reserved for the royal family, were occupied for the premiere of *Giulio Cesare*, as the newspaper reported: "Last Night His Majesty, the Prince and Princess, with great Numbers of the Nobility, went to see the new Opera."

The theater was magnificent to look at, with its semicircular seating and its superimposed columns. Designed as a playhouse by the playwright and amateur architect John Vanbrugh, the theater opened in 1705. It had acoustical problems from the beginning, being too resonant for some tastes. Various improvements were made over the years, and in 1714 it was renamed the King's Theatre in honor of George I. It remained the principal opera house until the conversion of the theater in Covent Garden in 1847.

Colley Cibber, the actor and playwright, described acoustics that, while disadvantageous for plays, must have given an admirable resonance to music:

For what could their vast columns, their gilded cornices, their immoderate high roofs avail, when scarce one word in ten could be distinctly heard in it? Nor had it then, the form, it now stands in, which necessity, two or three years after, reduced it to. At the first opening it, the flat ceiling, that is now over the orchestre, was then a semi-oval arch, that sprung fifteen feet higher from above the cornice; the ceiling over the pit too, was still more raised, being one level line from the highest back part of the upper gallery, to the front of the stage; the front-boxes were a continued semicircle, to the bare walls of the house on each side. This extraordinary and superfluous space occasion'd such an undulation, from the voice of every actor, that generally what they said sounded like the gabbling of so many people, in the lofty isles in a cathedral.—The tone of a trumpet, or the swell of an Eunuch's holding note, 'tis true, might be sweeten'd by it; but the articulate sounds of a speaking voice were drown'd by the hollow reverberations of one word upon another. To this inconvenience, why may we not add that of its situation; for at that time it had not the advantage of almost a large city, which has since been built, in its neighbourhood.

The theater had been redecorated the previous autumn "by some of the best Masters," and it was looking splendid. The 413 seats "below stairs" included those in the pit and those in the boxes. There were some 350 seats available in the galleries, though they were seldom all occupied. The rare full house might bring some £150 in revenue, but expenses far outstripped income. The success and continuing popularity of the opera depended on superstar performers and lavish productions. The prices were very high—about twice the cost of a theater ticket—but not high enough. For the two opening nights of a new production in 1719, seats in the pit and boxes cost 10s 6d, seats in the gallery 5s; these were reduced for later performances. Subscribers paid 20 guineas, which allowed



The plan of the Haymarket Theatre shows the five sets of wings, which could be expanded by an opening into an adjacent room. Along one side of the theater were a public assembly room, dressing rooms, and storage for sets. On the other side were the entrance and the king's private staircase.

Richard Steele Complains of Stage Seats in the *Spectator*,
March 16, 1711

Tho' the Gentlemen on the Stage had very much contributed to the Beauty of the Grove by walking up and down between the Trees, I must own I was not a little astonish'd to see a well-dress'd young Fellow in a full-bottom'd Wigg, appear in the Midst of the Sea, and without any visible Concern, taking Snuff.

entry to fifty performances. But for benefits—an important source of income for singers—tickets were sold at prices that varied with the fame of the performer. The *London Journal* reported in March 1723, “The new Opera Tickets are very high, and like to continue so as long as Mrs. Cotzani [Cuzzoni] is so much admired. They are traded in at the other End of the Town, as much as Lottery Tickets are in Exchange-Alley.”

Gallery seats were sold at the door on the day of the performance, all other seats in advance. Previously it was possible to enter without paying and to leave after the first act, but this was corrected in 1714. In the first season of the Royal Academy, seats on the stage itself could be had for one guinea. This practice was later abandoned, and there were probably no dandies among the scenery at *Giulio Cesare*, as there had been at many other operas. A 1715 announcement in the *Daily Courant* read: “And whereas there is a great many Scenes and Machines to be mov'd in this Opera, which cannot be done if Persons should stand upon the Stage (where they could not be without Danger), it is therefore hop'd No Body, even the Subscribers, will take it Ill that they must be Deny'd Entrance on the Stage.”

A certain Monsieur Fougeroux described the hall as he saw it in 1728:

The room is small and in very mediocre taste, the theatre is fairly large but with bad decorations (in scene-changes they use a little bell instead of a whistle). There is no amphitheatre, only a parterre, where there are large benches all the way to the orchestra where men and women are seated pell-mell. The loges are rented by the year. In the rear of the hall is raised a gallery held up by pillars which opens into the parterre and raised like our second loges. This is for the middle classes (*la petite bourgeoisie*), they nevertheless pay five shillings, which make five French francs. Places in the parterre are worth a half guinea, or 11 francs 10. The King has two boxes next to the stage, he comes there twice with the Queen. The princesses are facing him in another box. Everyone claps hands when the King arrives, and they are saluted when leaving; he only

had two halberdiers as a guard. The sides of the theatre are decorated with columns, along which are attached mirrors with sconces of several candles, which are also attached to the pilasters which support the rear gallery. Instead of chandeliers are ugly wooden candleholders, held up by ropes like those used by tight-rope dancers. Nothing could be uglier, but still there are candles everywhere.

Before the opera the stage is swept of orange peels, bottles, and debris of various kinds that accumulates during and after a performance. The house is lit with candles and oil lamps; they will necessarily remain lit throughout the performance. The curtain is down, dividing the forestage, on which almost all the acting and singing will take place, from the rear stage, where the sets and their illuminations are being prepared. The famous Haymarket orchestra is in the pit. It is not a sunken pit as in modern theaters but is on the floor of the opera house, with a low barrier dividing the players from the spectators at the same level. The orchestra is a large one for its day, and it is full of famous performers and accomplished composers. Johann Joachim Quantz, on hearing the orchestra in 1727, wrote, "The orchestra consisted for the greater part of Germans, several Italians, and a few Englishmen. Castrucci, an Italian violinist, was the leader. Altogether, under Händel's conducting, made an extremely good effect."

Handel himself, seated at one of the two harpsichords, begins the overture, and we are pleased to hear that it begins as an overture should: with the full orchestra of strings, oboes, bassoons, and harpsichords in stately dotted rhythms. There can be no doubt that this will be followed by a lively fugue, as almost always happens in a French-style "ouverture," and the curtain will rise on the first scene.

ORCHESTRA

The opera orchestra was large: though we cannot say exactly how many played in 1724, we know that an initial plan for the Royal Academy drawn up in February 1720 called for seventeen violins (in groups of eight, five, and four), two violas, four cellos, two double-basses, four oboes, three bassoons, a theorbo (or arch-lute), and a trumpet. Nothing is said about instruments that are usually present: harpsichords, an additional trumpet, kettledrums, pairs of horns, flutes. Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, after attending a performance of Handel's *Orlando* in May 1733, listed a very similar orchestra in his diary: "above 24 violins, four cello, 2 large basse violins each about 7 foot in length at least with strings proportionable that co'd not be less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch diameter," two oboes, four bassoons, a theorbo, and two harpsichords. (There is no mention of horns.) He notes that the violins "made a terrible noise & often drown'd the voices" but notes the Castrucci brothers, Pietro and Prospero, "who play'd with great dexterity."

~ Sir John was not the only observer to remark on the volume of sound in the orchestra. Fougeroux also described the orchestra, its size, the skill of the Castrucci brothers, and the loudness (though he didn't notice the violas and says nothing of horns):

The orchestra was composed of twenty-four violins, led by the two Castrucci brothers, two harpsichords, of which Indel [Handel] the German, a great player and composer played one, an archlute, three cellos, two contrebasses, three bassoons and sometimes flutes and clairons. *Cet orchestre fait un grand fracas.* As there are no middle parts, the twenty-four violins normally play only the first and second treble parts, which is extremely brilliant and performed well. The two harpsichords and the archlute play the chords and the middle parts. There are only one cello [who reads from a harpsichordist's part], the two harpsichords and the archlute for the recitative.

It was a distinguished orchestra full of expert players, many of whom are still well known for their skill as performers or composers. The composer Pietro Castrucci led the orchestra from the first violinist's chair. He was an expert performer, if somewhat unpredictable in behavior. Charles Burney said, "This violinist, who was more than half mad, is represented in one of Hogarth's prints as the enraged musician."

Despite the noise, the *fracas*, noted by some observers, the players did not always play all together, as they do in the overture. There was a variety of tonal combinations available from the band of strings and double reeds. For the full band, the violins play two parts (the first and second violins on the first part, the third violins on the second) with violas and cellos. All the oboes join in on the top line, and all the bassoons and double-basses on the bass.

But there are many other configurations. Sometimes Handel calls for five-part strings (three violin parts plus viola and bass), sometimes four (two violin parts), sometimes three (two violins plus bass, or violin-viola-bass), sometimes two (all the violins together, plus bass); sometimes, especially in arias for the bass voice, the orchestra consists only of bass instruments playing a single line. When accompanying arias, especially while the singer is singing, a smaller group of the better players—a "concertino"—performed, the full band joining in on the ritornellos.

To the basic sound is added a variety of instrumental colors for special effect. There are horns for military moments (the opening chorus, the march at the end) and to refer to hunting (the wonderful solo horn in Caesar's "Va tacito e nascosto," likening the stealthy hunter to Ptolemy's treachery). In this opera Handel uses two pairs of horns in two different keys to give more tonal flexibility to an instrument limited to the notes of the harmonic series; it is a very early example of what became a commonplace in symphonic music. There is a violin solo for Castrucci as Caesar is captivated by Cleopatra, as well as solos for a variety of other instruments (oboes often double the violins, and have occasional solos). There are recorders in pairs for Cornelia and transverse flute for plaintive moments, including Cleopatra's famous "Piangerò." (The recorders and flutes were doubtless played by the oboists.)



THE ENRAGED MUSICIAN.

The Enraged Musician, by Hogarth. According to Charles Burney, this engraving represents Pietro Castrucci, the "more than half mad" leader of the Haymarket orchestra.

SETS

The curtain goes up during wonderful music in minuet time; Handel's audience is used to overtures that conclude with a minuet, but in this one the minuet becomes the opening chorus of Egyptians and provides an elegant transition from the opera house to the Nile.

We recognize the setting for the first scene because it is described in the word-book sold in the theater; the book includes the Italian text to be sung, along with an English translation, and indications of which texts are sung as arias and which as recitatives. It also contains copious stage directions, which assist the spectators in knowing what, exactly, and who are being represented on stage. The libretto, printed by "Tomaso Wood," opens with Haym's flowery dedication to the Princess of Wales, and it contains an "argument," a background and summary of the plot, in both English and Italian. The first scene is described as "A plain in Egypt with an ancient bridge across a branch of the Nile." This

Handel's Giulio Cesare

GIULIO CESARE

In Egitto.

DRAMMA.

Da Rappresentarsi

Nel REGIO TEATRO
di HAY-MARKET,
P.E.R.
La Reale Accademia di Musica.



I-N-L-O-N-D-R-A:
Per Tomaso Wood nella Piccola Bretagna.
M.DCC.XXIV.

A printed libretto of *Giulio Cesare*, in Italian and English, was available for sale and undoubtedly was useful in the theater for those whose Italian was less than perfect.

is a splendid perspective: in the middle ground is a bridge over which Caesar and Curio and their followers walk while the Egyptians sing a chorus of praise. It is a splendid view, using most of the resources of the theater.

Sets were made not to provide realism but to delight the eyes. They were constructed, as were all sets in this period (and for a very long time before and after), of a series of painted wings on each side of the stage and a (usually) flat painted backcloth. The result for the audience was a continuous painted scene, each wing overlapping our view of the next, and each illuminated not only from above

but by the candles attached to the back of the next downstage flat. The raked stage and the receding wings permitted scene-painters to create an exaggerated perspective, allowing the viewer to imagine a scene of boundless depth.

The Haymarket Theatre had five sets of grooves on each side for sliding wings, which could be moved manually or by machine. The scene could be closed with a backcloth or with a "shutter," a pair of flats meeting in the center; or the vista could be lengthened to some sixty feet by using the space made available by an opening into an adjoining house. There was not enough fly space to allow scenes to be raised from sight, but there was room enough above the stage for cloud machines. There were evidently also trap doors in the stage.

Changing settings is simple in such a theater. At a signal (here, a bell was rung) all the wings are withdrawn at once and others are moved forward while the painted backcloth is removed to reveal another—all in the twinkling of an eye. It is a wonderful thing to see, and it is done in full view of the spectators; the front curtain does not come down until the end of the opera. (This is one reason that acts need to end by removing the last remaining character from the stage.)



This drawing is from a series of set designs by Filippo Juvarra for *Giulio Cesare nell'Egitto*, an opera by Antonio Ottoboni given in Rome in 1713. It appears to show a practicable bridge from a ship on the left, with figures standing along the shore into the distance.

As this would be a difficult effect to achieve in a typical theater, this is perhaps an imaginative rendering of a set.

Several scene painters working at the opera at about this time are known: Roberto Clerici was scenic artist and machinist to the Royal Academy from about 1716; Giovanni Niccolò Servandoni was scene-painter at the Haymarket from 1721 to 1723 (perhaps some of his settings were recycled in *Giulio Cesare*); the artists Joseph Goupy and Peter Tillemans were known to have decorated scenes about 1724–25, so perhaps they are responsible for the Nile, the bridge, and much else.

Sometimes, though, older scenery was reused; there are so many scenes set in a garden, or a “rural prospect,” or a room in the palace, and so on, that many settings were useful for more than one production. Handel’s operas had more new sets than anybody else’s, but this is not one of those that advertised new scenery.

Spectacular scenery and effects were not featured in this theater—most of the money was spent on expensive Italian singers. But Handel's magic opera *Rinaldo* (1711) had used all the trapdoors and flying machines, as well as live birds and fireworks. Even in *Giulio Cesare* there are magical effects, like the view of Parnassus that begins act 2, where the mountain opens and "Virtue appears setting on a throne, attended by the nine muses"; after some beautiful music, the mountain shuts again. This may have been a moment to use the room at the back of the stage to lengthen the perspective. Another piece of mime occurs for the battle in act 3, when Ptolemy's forces overpower those of Cleopatra to the sound of a martial Sinfonia; here back-flats surely opened to show the battle waged by supernumeraries and closed as the captive Cleopatra is led onstage by Ptolemy.

Sometimes a shallower scene masks a larger one. Especially when a scene in an act requires the use of a set piece (what the French would call a *praticable*), like the bridge in the opening scene, it needs to be preceded or followed by scenes using only a few of the wings so that the object can first be revealed, and then, in a successive scene, removed. Shallower scenes are needed, too, when, as in this opera, characters die on stage—a relatively rare occurrence in serious opera. Here the traitorous Achilla expires in the sight of all; and near the end of act 3, Sesto kills Tolomeo on stage. The actors can leave the stage only after a subsequent short set has masked them. Both deceased singers will be needed for the final chorus; presumably they sing offstage. The final scene, showing the port of Alexandria, is revealed by opening shallower sets to reveal the full depth of the stage. Joseph Addison, though he mocks some of the excesses and fripperies of sets and costumes, remarks that "Scenes affect ordinary Minds as much as Speeches; and our Actors are very sensible, that a well-dress'd Play has sometimes brought them as full Audiences, as a well-written one."

In act 1 there are ten scenes, according to the libretto, but four sets. A scene, of course, is the dramatist's way of marking a change of characters on stage: whenever somebody leaves or enters, a new scene begins. Since such an exit (usually after an aria) or arrival usually marks a change in the drama, this labeling makes dramatic sense. But several such scenes may take place in the same location.

The four sets in act 1 are labeled thus in the libretto:

A plain in Egypt with an old Bridge across a Branch of the Nile, scenes

1-4;

Cabinet (presumably in Cleopatra's palace), scenes 5-6;

Caesar's Camp, with an Urn in the middle, wherein the Ashes of Pompey's Head are inclos'd upon an eminent Pile of Trophies, scene 7-8;

A Court in Ptolomey's palace, scenes 9-10.

As experienced theatergoers we might have glanced ahead at the English translation and determined how the set changes would be accomplished. The first scene is a long set, using the full depth of the theater. (It may, indeed, use the real water effects for which the theater was famous.) The second set (a Cabinet) will be a short set, enabling the stage hands to remove the bridge and get Pompey's urn ready so that the third set,

Caesar's Camp, can be revealed. And then comes another short set, allowing for the removal of the urn and the preparation of the grandest set piece of all (the view of the mechanical mountain) at the beginning of act 2.

It is no wonder that Haym arranged for all the characters to have left the stage by the end of each of these groups. It would be odd to have the location change around one of the characters, though as spectators we enjoy watching these marvelous things happen before our eyes and being transported instantly to another place.

Lighting is done with candles and oil lamps. Chandeliers over the apron provide most of the light for the singers, along with the many lights in the hall that burn throughout the performance so that the audience members can read librettos and see one another. The set is lit by candles and lamps affixed to the backs of wings and flats. These "scene-ladders" were provided with hoods that could be raised or lowered for effect. (We cannot be certain that such a mechanism existed in the King's Theatre, but it was quite common.) Footlights were provided on a ramp that could be moved for greater or lesser amounts of light. Between acts candles were replaced and lamps trimmed, and the spectators sometimes applauded a particularly deft lamplighter.

COSTUMES

The opening song of praise is sung by an offstage chorus that the libretto assures us is made up of Egyptians but we know is those characters who are not now onstage.

Onto the stage during the chorus strides our hero, Julius Caesar, accompanied by the tribune Curio; he moves downstage to sing, and we are in the presence of one of the brightest stars of the age: the great Senesino. He is dressed in a version of classical military garb: breastplate, short tunic, helmet. He wears a wig—as does everybody—and his helmet is adorned with plumes to increase his stature. Caesar's dress sets him apart from the other military men: a touch of gold, a higher plume.

Except for some military equipment, costumes are essentially street clothes; actresses wore hooped gowns like those in the ballroom—or rather, in the opera house, as ballroom dress was often drawn from the opera house. The singers were expected to provide their own clothes. This was universally so in the theater and must have been true to some extent in the opera. Men's costumes were more stylized, borrowing from military and classical elements. We have no pictures of *Giulio Cesare* from 1724, but there are pictures of Senesino in military costume (see pages 43 and 48), and from these we can imagine the look. Such a costume would be useful in many an opera on classical subjects.

BAROQUE OPERA

Most operagoers went to hear the singers. They wanted to hear the stars: Senesino as Julius Caesar and Cuzzoni as Cleopatra—or perhaps just Senesino and Cuzzoni, regardless of what roles they were playing. The stars were castrati or women, high voices; the few natural-voice men played secondary roles. The opera was in Italian, of course, but the word-book was available, which gave a translation on facing pages for those who were



This mezzotint after a Thomas Hudson portrait shows Senesino (Francesco Bernardi) in his full glory. The open book is the score of *Giulio Cesare*, perhaps Senesino's finest role.

interested. But many spectators paid little attention to the recitative or the plot—often very complicated—and waited for the best songs.

The formal design of an Italian opera was entirely predictable, to the entire satisfaction of the audience. The plot, generally based on a well-known mythological or historical subject, was arranged in a series of acts, with the characters all singing in rhyming verse. The interest was not so much in what happens as in how this telling of a familiar story will provide us with insights into character and emotion, and will provide moments in which a

character's spirit can take flight in beautiful song.

The clear distinction between recitative and aria was well understood. In recitative, the characters recite—that is, they seem to speak. Although they are in fact singing, they proceed generally in the rhythms and at the speed of speech, with the simplest of chordal accompaniments from the harpsichord or theorbo. This style of musical recitation had worked well from the time of Monteverdi, and it still worked, only now the flexible arioso style of the seventeenth century had given way to a system in which a clear differentiation is made between speech and song, between real-time speaking out loud and the lyrical freeze-frame for the expression of emotional states in song.

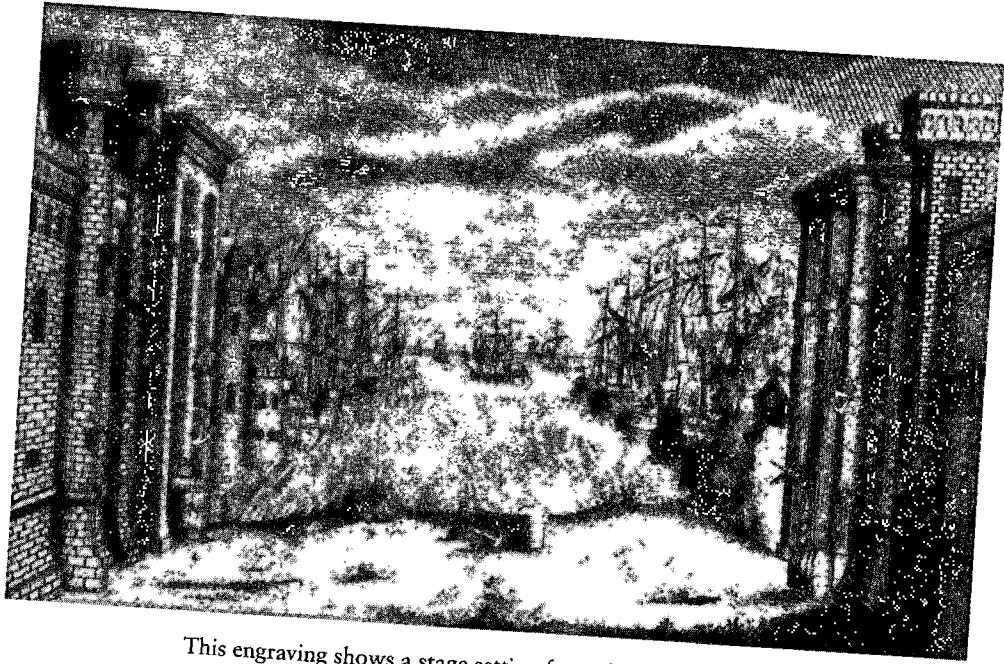
In Italy the opera was essentially a recitation of poetry, the verse being well understood and closely heard; in fact, it was the chief form of drama at the time. In England, however, audiences were well served with dramatic poetry on the various stages and did not see in the opera a particularly dramatic or poetic event—they paid much less attention to the words than did their Italian contemporaries. Despite their libretti, the English audiences did not much like long recitatives. They wanted songs, and Handel gave them songs, and indeed used the songs themselves to move the drama forward.

The song—or *aria* in Italian—is the place where the musical interest is concentrated, and the plot and the language of the opera are constructed to provide a splendid series of such moments. The song is the place where an individual expresses what is in the heart at the moment.

Joseph Addison Mocks Heroic Costume in the *Spectator*

The ordinary Method of making an Heroe, is to clap a huge plume of Feathers upon his Head, which rises so very high, that there is often a greater Length from his Chin to the Top of his Head, than to the Sole of his Foot. One would believe, that we thought a great Man and a tall Man the same thing. This very much embarrasses the Actor, who is forced to hold his Neck extremely stiff and steady all the whole he speaks; and notwithstanding any Anxieties which he pretends for his Mistress, his Country, or his Friends, one may see by his Action, that his greatest Care and Concern is to keep the Plume of Feathers from falling off his Head. For my own Part, when I see a Man uttering his Complaints under such a Mountain of Feathers, I am apt to look upon him rather as an unfortunate Lunatick, than a distress'd Heroe. As these superfluous Ornaments upon the Head make a great Man, a Princess generally receives her Grandeur from those additional Incumbrances that fall into her Tail: I mean the broad sweeping Train that follows her in all her Motions, and finds constant Employment for a Boy who stands behind her to open and spread it to Advantage. I do not know how others are affected at this Sight, but, I must confess, my Eyes are wholly taken up with the Page's Part; and as for the Queen, I am not so attentive to any thing she speaks, as to the right adjusting of her Train, lest it should chance to trip up her Heels, or incommoder her, as she walks to and fro upon the Stage. It is, in my Opinion, a very odd Spectacle, to see a Queen venting her Passion in a disordered Motion, and a little Boy taking Care all the while that they do not ruffle the Tail of her Gown. The Parts that the two Persons act on the Stage at the same Time, are very different: The Princess is afraid lest she should incur the Displeasure of the King her Father, or lose the Heroe her Lover, whilst her Attendant is only concern'd lest she should entangle her Feet in her Petticoat.

As an example, Caesar's first song after his opening entrance expresses his rage. Achilla, sent by Ptolemy, has obsequiously presented Caesar with the head of his enemy Pompey, hoping to gain Caesar's favor. But the lordly conqueror instead is enraged by the misdeed. Just before he sings he makes clear in his recitative whom he is addressing and how the plot will proceed. "Go!" he says to Achilla. "I will come to the palace [Ptolemy's] before sundown." And then he turns his rage on Achilla and Ptolemy, who thought to please him. The orchestra plays its introduction, Caesar strikes an appropriate pose, and sings:



This engraving shows a stage setting from the 1725 Hamburg production of *Giulio Cesare*—act 5, “A harbour near the city of Alexandria.” Successive wings show, first, towers and gates, and then rows of ships; the backcloth depicts the sea.

Empio dirò, tu sei;
Togliti agli occhi miei;
sei tutto crudeltà!

(I will call you a villain.
Quit my sight!
You are all cruelty.)

Having expressed this sentiment to Achilla in suitably outraged music, Caesar explains the nature of his anger at Ptolemy:

Non è di re quel cor,
che donasi al rigor,
che in sen non ha pietà.

(That heart is not royal
that gives itself to cruelty,
that has no pity in its breast.)

For this the music changes; the expressions of cruelty and pity are made clear. And the reasons for Caesar's anger are thus outlined. This makes the repetition of Caesar's

opening music and words ("Empio dirò") logical and interesting; when we hear the opening section again, we hear it anew, not only because it is now familiar musically but because the second, contrasting musical section has given further depth and clarity to the sentiment expressed at the beginning, so that we also feel it in a new way.

And that shape—exposition, explanation, reexposition—is the standard form for a song in this opera, and indeed it is the norm for every song in every opera in the earlier eighteenth century. It is amazing that poets could think of so many ways to make language and emotions correspond to this musical form, and that composers could devise so many brilliant or plaintive compositions within this framework without boring anybody.

The librettist most often provides a short text—usually three lines—for the opening portion and a corresponding amount for the contrasting section. The composer's challenge is to make a beautiful, expressive, and extended composition using these words.

Nowadays we call this a da capo aria, since after the contrasting section the opening music is repeated from the beginning, "da capo" in Italian. This three-part form, ABA, can be put to many uses. The contrasting section may explain, embellish, emphasize, or contrast with the sentiment expressed on the opening music. When Sesto thinks to avenge the murder of his father, Pompey, he sings a classical "revenge" aria, full of martial sentiments:

Svegliatevi nel core
furie d'un alma offesa,
a far d'un traditor
aspra vendetta!

(Awake in my heart,
ye furies of an offended soul,
to take upon a traitor
bitter revenge!)

And in the second section he explains what it is that motivates him and why he must gather his courage (which he does when he sings the opening section again).

L'ombra del genitore
accorre a mia difesa,
e dice: a te il rigor
figlio, aspetta!

(The shade of my father
hastens to my defense
and says: it is expected of you,
my son, to be merciless!)

The same arrangement works equally well for passionate, tender, lamenting, and rejoicing songs. It is a convention that admirably suits the chief objective of eighteenth-century opera, which was to express feelings in music.

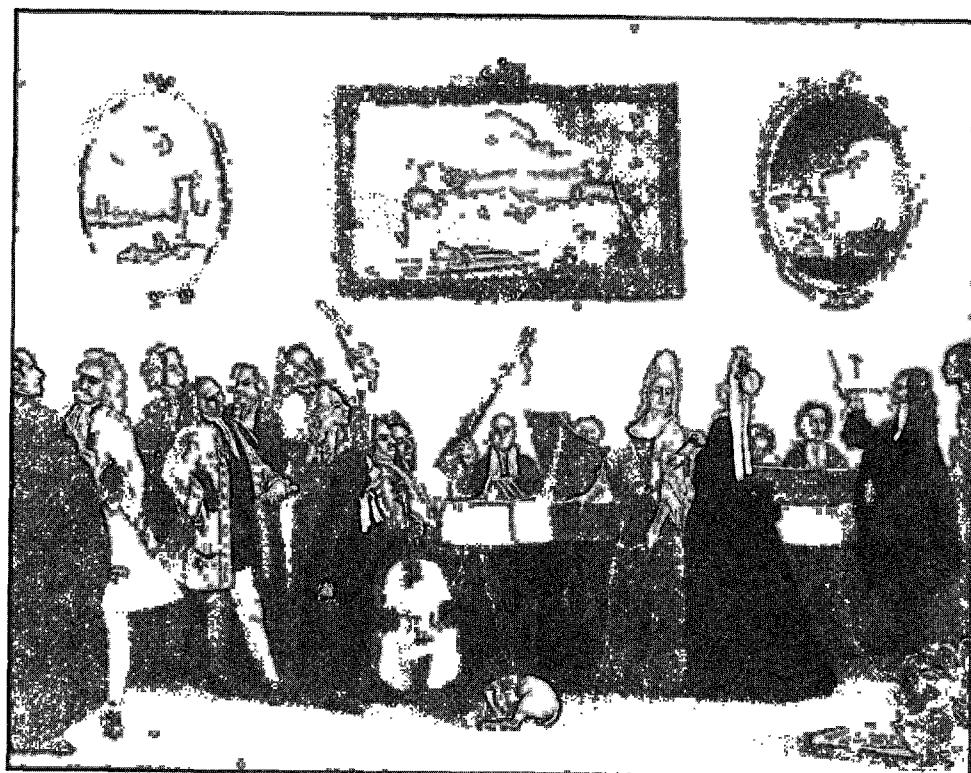
There are other aspects of the conventional aria that Handel's audience would have understood and expected. One is that the repetition of the opening section, the da capo, gives the singer a perfect opportunity to augment the original music with ornaments suited to the singer's voice and to the emotional state being portrayed. Everybody waited for these moments, and informed listeners, who remembered the unadorned opening section, could appreciate the artistry and virtuosity of the singer in embellishing the da capo. When the singer was brilliant, the listeners applauded, and this applause was milked for all it was worth by having the libretto arranged in such a way that the singer exits after the aria. In the examples above, Caesar rages at Achilla and then leaves (amid tumultuous applause) for the palace. Later Sesto vows revenge ("Svegliatevi!"), and exits to take that revenge. And so on. If the applause is loud, the singer may return to acknowledge the public; and if it is long, the singer might even return to sing the aria a second time (regardless of the effect this may have on the plot) and make a second exit. This is, after all, why we came to the opera: not to learn about Julius Caesar but to hear our favorite singers in arias of exquisite beauty or dazzling virtuosity.

Occasionally an aria is not of the da capo type. Usually such an aria (often called a cavatina) is used at the entrance of a character who will remain on stage, as for Caesar's entrance at the beginning of act I. Two further cavatinas are given to Cornelia, and in neither case does she exit.

Although the aria is the musical center of the opera, it is not the only thing that happens. There are, however, very few ensembles—duets, choruses, and the like. If there is a chorus, it is generally performed by members of the cast, not by a separate choral ensemble. In *Giulio Cesare* there are two choruses: the opening chorus of Egyptians acknowledging Caesar's victory (here surely sung offstage, since some of the singers, named in Handel's score, will very shortly need to appear as Cornelia, Sesto, and others) and a closing chorus of general rejoicing, this one sung by the principal characters. (Crowd scenes of this kind can really happen only at the very beginning of the opera, where they are revealed by the rising of the curtain, or at its end, when the curtain falls—the curtain remains up throughout the piece.) Choruses, when they are sung at all, are generally not very complicated and are far from being the great compositions that are the cornerstones of Handel's oratorios.

Occasionally there are duets. There are two in *Giulio Cesare*, beautifully placed to contrast with each other in emotion and to give each of the four principal characters a chance to participate. The first is a da capo duet of sorrow sung by Cornelia and her son Sesto to close the first act before they are led away to their separate punishments. And the third act is closed by a splendid love duet between Caesar and Cleopatra, just before the final chorus. The duets differ from arias only in that they show two characters simultaneously feeling the same emotions.

Only occasionally does anything interrupt the succession of recitatives followed by arias. These are generally moments of considerable intensity in which a single character may display more than one emotion. These moments occupy a middle ground between recitative and aria—they are more musical than recitative but not so structured and repeti-



This is one of several versions of a caricature painting, *Rehearsal of an Opera*, thought to be by Marco Ricci, a Venetian painter and set designer invited to London in 1708. Cello, double-bass, archlute, and harpsichord seem to be the instruments used for accompaniment. The scene may represent the practice room at the Haymarket Theatre shortly before Handel's arrival in England.

tive as an aria. Depending on their place on that middle ground, they may be labeled recitativo accompagnato (or simply accompagnato) when they are accompanied by the orchestra rather than the harpsichord, or arioso when they are more melodious. One such moment is Caesar's meditation on Pompey's urn. Opening a new scene in act 1, the wavering orchestral introduction, in the remote key of G-sharp minor, introduces a recitative, accompanied by strings, in which Caesar meditates on the changeability of human fortune (and goes as far afield musically as E-flat minor). It is one of the most remarkable moments of harmonic boldness in Handel. Charles Burney called this the "finest piece of accompanied Recitative, without intervening symphonies, with which I am acquainted. The modulation is learned, and so uncommon, that there is hardly a chord which the ear expects." Caesar has another such scene in the third act, when he has swum the harbor and saved himself but not, he thinks, his army and his love. And Cleopatra, too, has her scene of accompagnato followed

by aria when she hears of the conspiracy against Caesar and expresses horror, anger, sadness, and love.

Generally, though, we expect arias and lots of them, and we expect each to bring a scene to a close with the exit of its singer.

ACTING

Senesino comes downstage center, and so we know that he is about to sing. This is where the singer stands in almost all cases, even when an aria is addressed to another character. Where else should he stand? He is, after all, singing to the audience at least as much as to Curio, and we want to be able to see and hear him clearly.

The acting here is no more naturalistic than it is in most theatrical traditions, where actors always need to be seen and heard. But in the eighteenth century there was a highly stylized code of acting, clearly understood by the audience, that was part of a tradition stretching back at least to the sixteenth century and continuing well into the nineteenth.

Posture, gesture, and the relationship of actors to the audience and to each other told audience members everything they needed to know. Stage position relates the characters to each other; because the stage is raked, a position upstage places the character physically above the others—this is the place for kings and emperors; stage right is nobler than stage left. We can tell a great deal about relationships from the physical arrangements of actors, and knowing these conventions makes it easy for actors to know where to go and what to do.

The postures of the body were those of the dance. From the feet to the top of the head the body was held always in an appropriate posture. Feet were never parallel: one was always forward of the other; hips were not in line with the feet, nor shoulders with the hips; the head was not in line with the shoulders. Arranging feet, hips, shoulders, and head, provided for an enormous variety of curves, contrapposto, reverse curves, and other expressive positions. The arms, held at the sides when not speaking, were never at the same level; the hands were held with the middle and ring fingers together, the others somewhat spread; alternative positions for the hands included having each separated finger, starting with the extended thumb, progressively more curved; or—in the manner of preachers and lawyers and others making a point—the thumb and index finger making a circle, with the other fingers extended.

The head was turned toward the interlocutor but never more than a quarter turn away from the audience; a speaker was not to be seen in profile. The eyes looked toward the person addressed so that a curve from shoulders to head to eyes created a strong sense of direction, though the actor still faced the audience.

There was a repertory of conventional gestures that accompanied what was being said; gesture was especially used in recitative, whereas in an aria the singer generally struck a single expressive posture that could be altered for the singing of the second section of the aria or for the singer to address a second person.

Father Franciscus Lang's 1727 treatise on acting, *Dissertatio de actione scenica*, gives all sorts of specific advice, in Latin. In this illustration from the book we see an actor, in classical armor, obeying many rules: feet apart, one forward; weight on one leg; feet, hips, shoulders, and head never aligned but in some sort of curve; arms at different levels; hand held properly with thumb out and fingers progressively curved; face forward, never turned more than a quarter turn.

Gestures were delivered to emphasize and underscore important words and concepts as they were spoken (actually, an instant before they were spoken to give punctuation to the word as it arrived); they ranged from gestures relating to the self (heart, resolve, sadness, and so on) to those involving others to gestures involving third persons, objects, and concepts.

This was a heroic style of acting, befitting the noble characters in this and other operas. If it seems stiff and overstylized, it is perhaps because we are not fully aware of all its expressiveness (and because we seldom see it done well).

It was a style well known to Handel's contemporaries. Colley Cibber described the superb acting of the castrato Nicolo Grimaldi, known as Nicolini, who sang in London from 1708 to 1717, performing in Bononcini's *Camilla*, Handel's *Rinaldo* and *Amadigi*, and Mancini's *Idaspe fedele*: "Nicolini sets off the Character he bears in an Opera, by his Action, as much as he does the Words of it by his Voice; every limb and finger contributes to the part he acts, insomuch that a deaf Man might go along with him in the Sense of it. There is scarce a beautiful Posture, in an old Statue, which he does not plant himself in, as the different Circumstances of the story give occasion for it.—He performs the most ordinary Action, in a manner suitable to the Greatness of his Character, and shews the Prince, even in the giving of a Letter, or dispatching a Message, etc."



ORGANIZATION OF SCENES

Caesar has entered, along with Curio and "Attendants." There are plenty of supernumeraries in this opera and others: soldiers, "one of the guard," child attendants for noblewomen. They add grandeur, scope, and importance, though they sometimes are mocked; Joseph Addison commented in the *Spectator*, "Another mechanical method of making great Men, and adding Dignity to Kings and Queens, is to accompany them with Halberts and Battle-Axes. Two or three Shifters of Scenes, with the two Candle-Snuffers, make up a compleat Body of Guards upon the *English Stage*; and by the Addition of a few Porters dress'd in red Coats, can represent above a dozen legions."

Caesar is the great Senesino, a superb singer and one of the reigning stars of the opera. In fact, he is the star of every opera produced by the Royal Academy: he earns his very high salary. Born Francesco Bernardi in Siena (Senesino means "the little Sienese"), he is one of the great Italian castrati. He had been hired by Handel in Dresden for the 1720 season at the enormous salary of 3,000 guineas.

Senesino's vocal range was relatively narrow, and Handel accommodated this, along with his virtuosity in florid passages, in the seventeen roles that he wrote for him. Senesino was described in the newspaper as "beyond all criticism" for his performance in *Giulio Cesare*. The eighteenth-century music historian John Hawkins wrote that "in the pronunciation of recitative he had not his fellow in Europe." And Charles Burney reported that he was unsurpassed in the accompanied recitatives in *Giulio Cesare*, especially "Alma del gran Pompeo," which Burney said "had an effect, when recited on the stage by Senesino, which no Recitative, or even Air, had before, in this country." Johann Joachim Quantz, who heard Sensino at Dresden in 1719, described his voice:

Senesino had a well-carrying, clear, even, and pleasantly low soprano voice (mezzo soprano), a pure intonation and a beautiful trillo. He rarely sang above the fifth line "f." His way of singing was masterful, and his execution perfect. He did not overload the slow movements with arbitrary ornamentation, but brought out the essential ornaments with the greatest finesse. He sang an allegro with fire, and he knew how to thrust out the running passages with his chest with some speed. His figure was quite favorable for the theatre, and his acting was quite natural. The role of a hero suited him better than that of a lover.

Senesino was a star, and he took a star's prerogative to disagree with Handel. In 1733 he joined with a rival company, the Opera of the Nobility, making a decisive break with Handel after many years of collaboration. Horace Walpole in 1740 met the aging and wealthy Senesino in his chaise: "We thought it a fat old woman; but it spoke in a shrill little pipe, and proved itself to be Senesino."

But Senesino is now at the height of his power, and he comes downstage and sings "Presto omai," requiring Egypt to recognize its conqueror. The power is there in the



JULIUS CÆSAR.

A C T I

S C E N E I. A Plain in *Egypt*, with an old Bridge over a Branch of the *Nile*.

CÆSAR and CURIUS passing over the Bridge with Attendants.

CHORUS of *Egyptians*.

LI VE Great Alcides, let Nile rejoice
(this happy Day :
Each Shore appears to smile,
Our Troubles vanish,
And our Joys return.
Caf. Let Egypt's Laurels wreath the Conqueror's Brows.

Curius: *Ceser no sooner came, but saw and conquer'd : Pompey now subdu'd, in vain endeavours to support himself, by joining with the King of Egypt.*
Cur. You timely interpos'd to cross his Purpose ; but who comes toward us ?

S C E N E



GIULIO CESARE.

A T T O I.

S C E N A I. Campagna d' Egitto con antico Ponte sopra un Ramo del Nilo.

CESARE e CURIO, che passano il Ponte con seguito.

CORO di Egiziani.

VIVA viva il nostro Alcide,
Godà il Nilo in questo dì.
Ogni spiaggia per Lui ride,
Ogni affanno già sparì.
Ces. Prelli omái l'Egiziana Terra
Le sue palme al Vincitor.

Curio Cesare venne, e vide, e vinse:
Già sconfitto Pompeo, invan ricorre
Per rinforzar de' suoi Guerrier lo stuolo
D'Egitto al Re.
Cur. Tu qui Signor giungesti
A tempo appunto a prevenir le trame:
Ma ! Chi ver noi sen' viene ?

B 3

S C E N A

The libretto of *Giulio Cesare* offers English and Italian versions of the text. Generous stage directions help set the scene, and typography distinguishes recitatives from songs and choruses.

music, and in the voice. This song, unusually, is not a da capo aria but a staccato pronouncement of Caesar's order that Egypt should bow down. It provides Senesino with a trumpetlike opening; with elaborate ornaments in his relatively narrow range; with a very long note on which he can display his fabulous *messa di voce* (a swelling and lessening of volume on a single note); and with a moment for a cadenza. Handel's music is perfectly tailored to his skill.

From here on the standard Baroque theatrical arrangement leads us further into the plot. The opera is essentially a series of arias preceded by recitatives, but from a dramatic point of view it is a series of short scenes, each provoked by the arrival or departure of somebody, until at last the stage is empty, the scene shifts, and we begin again. When Caesar is finished with his triumphant song, there's not much to do. He turns to Curio and says his famous "veni, vidi, vici" ("Curio, Cesare venne e vide e vinse"). Curio points out that Caesar can foil the defeated Pompey's plan to appeal to King Ptolemy for help (information that helps us set the scene), and then, just in time to move the plot, he says, "But who is this I see coming?" and Caesar helpfully says, "It is Cornelia." Cornelia,

widow of Pompey, arrives with her son Sesto, and a new scene takes place. This will give rise to arias by both the newcomers, and everybody will have occasion to leave the stage.

One of the most tiresome things in writing and reading about opera is the summaries of the plot that seem always necessary—especially for Baroque opera—but are wearisome to the reader because the plot by itself, without the adjuncts of music, scenery, movement, very often seems hopelessly confused and silly. In this case we might dispense with the plot summary by considering the general shape of the first act in order to see that the plot is a beautifully crafted mechanism for providing entrances and exits, an alternation of settings, and a series of emotional crises that provoke beautiful arias. Each musical moment is a reaction to what has just happened; it is a sort of freeze-frame in the course of a movie. The emotion that an aria expresses usually provokes its character to leave on some mission or other. The characters who remain continue (sometimes with the arrival of fresh news) until a further emotion is discharged in an aria. And so on until nobody is left on stage.

Table 2 summarizes the sets, action, music, and entrances and exits in act 1. Sets alternate full-depth scenes with shallow ones behind which the next set can be prepared. The table allows us to see how carefully made each scene is; entrances are marked with arrows at the left, exits with arrows at the right. Counting arrows makes clear that each of the four settings provides occasion for various entrances, and that before the set-change everybody who entered has left, usually after singing an aria.

Note, too, that the characters are given music and placement in order of their importance—that is, the great singers have the great roles and the most arias. It's a matter of some complexity to produce a plot that gives the stars absolutely equal billing, exactly the same number of arias, and that gives the subsidiary characters enough so that they sing in each act and we remember who they are. The distribution of arias works as well to show off this star system within each act as it does in the opera as a whole.

Requirements for Librettists, from a Letter of September 7, 1724, by Giuseppe Riva

For this year and for the next two, there must be in operas two equal parts for Cuzzoni and Faustina. Senesino is the leading male character, and his part must be heroic. The other three male parts must go gradually one by one, one aria in each act. The duet should be at the end of the second act, between the two women. If the subject should have three women, it can be done, for there is a third.

Table 1. Arias in *Giulio Cesare*

	Act 1	Act 2	Act 3	Total
Caesar	4	2+duet	2+duet	8+duets
Cleopatra	3	3+duet	2+duet	8+duets
Cornelia	1+cav. +duet-	1+cav.	1	3+2cav. +duet
Sesto	1+duet	1	1	3+duet
Achilla	1	1	1	3
Tolomeo	1	1	1	3

The distribution of arias among the characters, and among the acts, is shown in Table 1. Note that Caesar and Cleopatra have the same number of arias and duets. Each also has a special moment: in act 2, Cleopatra as Lidia is revealed in a mountain, and, in act 3, Caesar has his spectacular combination of recitative and aria ("Dall ondoso periglio") when he recounts his escape by swimming the harbor. Everybody else sings one song in each act, with the role of Cornelia enriched with two cavatinas and a duet with Sesto.

The first act has provided all the characters and the main themes of the story. Cleopatra will seduce Caesar and will fall in love with him. This provides the occasion for a splendid series of songs on the subject of love. Cornelia and Sesto provide a subplot: various characters try to seduce the noble Cornelia, and Sesto is committed to avenging the death of his father. This provides occasions for noble lament and virile vengeance on the part of the young boy. Both plots come together neatly at the end.

THE PLAYERS

Senesino is the male lead and the highest-paid member of the company. But we may have come to hear La Cuzzoni as Cleopatra.

Francesca Cuzzoni was twenty-six years old in 1724, married to the composer and harpsichordist Pietro Giuseppe Sandoni. She began singing in London the previous year, and her début in Handel's *Ottone* was a sensation. The *British Journal*, anticipating her arrival, reported that "as 'tis said, she far excells Seigniora Durastante, already with us, and all those she leaves in Italy behind her, much Satisfaction may be expected by those who of later Years have contributed largely to Performances of this Kind, for the great Advantage of the Publick, and softening the Manners of a rude British people." Cuzzoni is the soprano whom Handel threatened to throw out the window if she refused to sing his arias his way. She was paid 2,000 pounds a season—not at Senesino's level, but still a star.

Cuzzoni had a large following among the audience; at first her supporters compared her favorably with Senesino. After 1726 a great rivalry grew up between Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni, which by 1727 culminated in a catfight on stage. "But who," wrote John Arbuthnot,

Table 2. Entrances, Arias, and Exits in Act 1 of *Giulio Cesare*

Set 1: The Bridge (long set)

→ Caesar

→ Curio

Aria (Caesar): "Presto omai"

Caesar has triumphed; Cornelia is identified; Curio once loved her.

→ Cornelia

→ Sesto

They sue for peace

→ Achilla

He brings gifts and invites Caesar to Ptolemy's palace. Pompey's head is shown. Caesar reacts:

Aria (Caesar): "Empio dirò"

→

(Achilla)

→

Cornelia, who has fainted, tries to kill herself; Curio restrains her, and leaves when his declaration of love is spurned.

(Curio)

→

Cornelia laments

→

Aria (Cornelia) "Priva son"

→

Sesto vows revenge

→

Aria (Sesto) "Svegliatevi"

→

Set 2: Gabinetto (short set)

→ Cleopatra

She extols her greatness.

→ Nireno

He reports that Ptolemy has sent Pompey's head to Caesar; she resolves to charm Caesar and gain the throne.

→ Tolomeo

He scorns her; she retorts with an aria.

Aria (Cleopatra) "Non disperar"

→

(Nireno)

→

→ Achilla

He reports Caesar's displeasure; he promises to deliver Caesar in return for the beautiful Cornelia. Ptolemy rages against Caesar.

Aria (Tolomeo) "L'empio, sleale"

→

(Achilla)

→

Set 3: Caesar's camp (long set)

→ Caesar

He reflects on Pompey's head.

Accomp. ("Alma")

→ Curio

He reports the arrival of Cleopatra (disguised as Lidia).

→ Cleopatra (disguised)

→ Nireno

Both Caesar and Curio are charmed by "Lidia," servant of Cleopatra.

Caesar sings her praises.

Aria (Caesar) "Non è si vago"

→

(Curio)

→

She exults in her deceit of Caesar.

Aria (Cleopatra) "Tutto può"

→(but "held back" by Nireno)

→ Cornelia

She laments over her husband's head, and vows vengeance:

Arioso (Cornelia) "Nel tuo seno"

→ Sesto

He stops her: vengeance if for him to accomplish. "Lidia" offers to take them to Caesar. Before they leave Sesto expresses his hope of prompt revenge.

Aria (Sesto) "Caro speme"

→

(Cornelia)

→

(Nireno)

→

Cleopatra, alone, sings of her own hope of the kingdom.

Aria (Cleopatra) "Tu la mia stella"

→

Set 4: Court in Ptolemy's palace (short set)

→ Caesar

→ Ptolemey

→ Achilla

Ptolemy welcomes a suspicious Caesar, who recognizes deceit and sings of it.

Aria (Caesar) "Va tacito"

→

→ Cornelia

→ Sesto

Cornelia and Sesto challenge Ptolemy; charmed with Cornelia, he sends Sesto to prison, her to the seraglio (where Achilla can admire her).

(Ptolemy)

→

Achilla offers liberty in exchange for marriage; Cornelia chooses prison.

Achilla sings his love.

Aria (Achilla) "Tu sei il cor"

→

They sing their sadness before being led away.

Duet (Cornelia, Sesto) "Son nato"

→



Francesca Cuzzoni, who played Cleopatra in *Giulio Cesare*, was the reigning female opera star until the arrival of Faustina Bordoni in 1726. She was renowned more for her singing than for her appearance or acting, but to succeed as Cleopatra, as she did, required voice, looks, and acting.

"would have thought the Infection should reach the Haymarket, and inspire two Singing Ladies to pull each other's coiffs? . . . It is certainly an apparent Shame that two such well bred Ladies should call Bitch and Whore, should scold and fight like Billingates."

But in 1724, Cuzzoni was peerless. She was especially admired for her expression and cantabile singing; she had good high notes, to judge from the part that Handel wrote for her, and there are plenty of opportunities to use her famous trill. The role of Cleopatra provides a great variety of expressions, from the sly, scheming politician to the seductive role of Lidia to the triumphant queen. It certainly provides an enormous range of emotional attitudes, and it must have contributed much to Cuzzoni's reputation.

Johann Joachim Quantz, the flutist, composer, and author, heard Cuzzoni in 1727: "Her style of singing was innocent and affecting; her graces did not seem artificial, from the easy and neat manner in which she executed them: however, they took possession of the soul of every auditor, by her tender and touching expression. She had no great rapidity of execution, in allegros; but there was a roundness and smoothness, which were neat and pleasing. Yet with all these advantages, it must be owned that she was rather cold in her action, and her figure was not advantageous for the stage."

Burney was at particular pains to describe Cuzzoni's technical mastery:

It was difficult for the hearer to determine whether she most excelled in slow or rapid airs. A native warble enabled her to execute divisions with such facility as to conceal every appearance of difficulty; and so grateful and touching was the natural tone of her voice, that she rendered pathetic whatever she sung, in which she had leisure to unfold its whole volume. The art of conducting, sustaining, increasing, and diminishing her tones by minute degrees, acquired her, among professors, the title of complete mistress of her art. In a cantabile air, though the notes she



Three of the singers of *Giulio Cesare* appear in this caricature in Handel's *Flavio* (1723), possibly by John Vanderbank. The towering Gaetano Berenstadt (*Tolomeo* in *Giulio Cesare*) and the imposing Senesino (*Caesar*) flank Francesca Cuzzoni (*Cleopatra*), who was described as "short and squat." This illustration gives a good idea of suitable costume for operas on classical Roman subjects.

added were few, she never lost a favourable opportunity of enriching the cantilena with all the refinements and embellishments of the time. Her shake was perfect, she had a creative fancy, and the power of occasionally accelerating and retarding the measure in the most artificial and able manner, by what the Italians call *tempo rubato*. Her high notes were unrivalled in clearness and sweetness; and her intonations were so just and fixed, that it seemed as if it was not in her power to sing out of tune.

Walpole described Cuzzoni in Handel's *Rodelinda*, making it clear that her appeal must have been in her music and not her acting: "She was short and squat, with a doughy cross face, but fine complexion; was not a good actress; dressed ill; and was silly and fantastical. And yet on her appearing in this opera, in a brown silk gown, trimmed with silver, with the vulgarity and indecorum of which all the old ladies were much scandalised, the young adopted it as a fashion, so universally, that it seemed a national uniform for youth and beauty." Gaetano Berenstadt, appearing here as Tolomeo, respected her singing

but not her character, according to his letter to a friend in Italy: "If Cuzzoni's behavior were as good as her singing, she would be a divine thing; but, unluckily for her and ruinous for any who associate with her, she is mad, unpredictable, and—what is worse—always without a halfpenny, even with a salary of 1,500 guineas a year."

The other roles in the opera are played by singers of professional competence but not of the star level of Senesino and Cuzzoni.

Cornelia, the noble and plaintive Roman matron, was played by the thirty-two-year-old Anastasia Robinson. She was the daughter of a painter and not originally a professional musician: she had sung in her father's house in Golden Square and elsewhere, turning professional when he lost his sight. She began as a soprano but by the 1720s was a contralto, perhaps as the result of an illness. Her salary is thought to have been about 1,000 pounds a year. Shortly after *Giulio Cesare* she retired from the stage, having secretly married the aged Earl of Peterborough two years earlier (she had long been his mistress). The arrival of Cuzzoni may have hastened her departure from the stage. Her range was not very wide, and she was not burdened with much coloratura. Her part here, as often elsewhere, is highly emotional, requiring a nobility of carriage and a pathos of expression.

Sesto, he of the many vengeance arias, was sung by the Italian soprano Margherita Durastanti. Now about thirty-five, she had worked with Handel for a long time; she had met him in Rome years earlier, where she had sung in Handel's early oratorio *La resurrezione* (until the pope objected and she was replaced with a male singer). Handel had hired her for the company in 1720; her salary in 1721 was 1,100 pounds (in the same year King George I stood godfather to her daughter). This was to be Durastanti's last season (although she did return briefly to the stage in 1733–34). In 1724 she was described as a "woman already old, whose voice is both mediocre and worn out." Burney said her "person was coarse and masculine"; the librettist Paolo Antonio Rolli described her as being an elephant. Her roles were usually dramatic, and sometimes, as here, those of men. She must have been a good actress, for she made a distinct impression on the stage.

Tolomeo was played by the alto castrato Gaetano Berenstadt, born in Italy of German parents. Berenstadt was titanically tall ("an evirato of a huge unwieldy figure," said Burney), and he is easily recognized in pictures. He had a substantial German and Italian career before singing two seasons with the Royal Academy as a second man to Senesino. By 1724, at the age of about twenty-five, his voice might already have been fading. Like most castrati, his range was not very wide, but his voice was flexible.

Achilla was the baritone Giuseppe Maria Boschi, about thirty years old. He had first sung in London in 1710–11. Handel had engaged him for the Royal Academy, and he sang in almost every opera produced there. He was evidently a very useful second-rank singer. Boschi seems to have specialized in agitated and warlike arias (as seems typical of bass roles)—he seldom sings tender or slow songs. A poet's line from the time reads: "and Boschi-like be always in a rage." Handel wrote arias for Achilla that feature big leaps, particularly suitable for agitation (but used too in his awkward courting of Cornelia) and also, apparently, for Boschi's voice.

Nireno, who gets no aria at all, was sung by the alto castrato Giuseppe Bigonzi,

Anastasia Robinson, who played Cornelia in *Giulio Cesare*, was secretly married to the Earl of Peterborough, who is said to have caned Senesino for coming a little too close to Robinson in a rehearsal.

who had been engaged for this season to replace the tenor Gordon. Nireno moves the plot along, but there is little evidence that Bigonzi impressed the world much with his musical talent.

Curio, a Roman tribune who is present mostly to give Caesar somebody to address, was sung by the bass Lagarde. He never gets to sing an aria, though he stirs the plot with his love for the beautiful Cornelia. The son of the painter and baritone Laguerre, the young Lagarde (probably about twenty-one) sang a few small roles in Italian opera; mostly he performed in lighter ballad operas, pantomimes, and afterpieces. In his later years he worked as a scene painter and published engravings on theatrical subjects.

Secondary roles were carefully kept secondary. As Burney put it, "There must be, in every drama, inferior characters, voices, and abilities; and to make a hero of every attendant, would be as injudicious as to degrade the real great personages of the piece to a level with their domestics. If all the airs of an opera were equally laboured and excellent, the Music would be monotonous, and all abilities confounded."

IN THE THEATER: HANDEL, SINGING, AND THE MUSIC

Handel, presiding at one of two harpsichords, was so lively in his playing and conducting that he attracted attention himself. At a premiere the audience was sure to be attentive during most of the evening, and to applaud at the end of every aria. The singer's exit provided the invitation, and the rivalries that existed between the supporters of one singer and another were enough to generate applause even when the performance itself might not have been Senesino's or Cuzzoni's best. Sometimes long and loud applause would stop the show, and the aria would be repeated. Management tried to suppress this practice: beginning in 1714 this appeared on opera bills: "Whereas by the frequent calling for



“A full & true Account of the proceedings
of the Royal Academy of Music anno 1723”

The matter thus happily brought to Conclusion,
Up Burlington started, & made new Confusion;
For in he brought Berenst—head, shoulders and all.
And swore he could sing well, because he was tall.

With submission, says Bruce, his height I admit,
And will have him sing, for his learning and wit:
At which the Lord Stair was provoked to Ire,
And said high notes did not high persons require.

As witness Cuzzoni, cry'd Peterbro's Earl,
Who sings high & sweet, tho' a very low Girl.
Now least the debate should grow languid & scanty,
Some nam'd Senesino, & some Durastanti.

But for what, I ha'nt heard. Then Pult'ney arose,
And he told us nothing, but sure Pult'ney knows.
And so they went on, about this debate,
Till they found they knew nothing, but that it grew late.

the songs again, the operas have been too tedious; therefore, the singers are forbidden to sing any song above once; and it is hoped nobody will call for 'em, or take it ill, when not obeyed.”

In later runs of an opera, subscribers and boxholders paid attention only part of the time; some attention was given to eating, talking, card playing, and other amusements. A nobleman might come to the front of his box to attend to a favorite aria or singer and then retire for other amusement. Generally the applause was for the aria; there was not applause for the work as a whole.

There was a great deal to notice in this opera, even for those who had ears only for Senesino or who were so familiar with the rituals of Italian serious opera that nothing could surprise them. For one thing, Handel's music stands out in its strength and passion. There is an energy and aptness in his music that outstrips that of his rivals. It is not that his music is overcomposed, that it has (perhaps like that of his contemporary Johann Sebastian Bach) more in it that the listener can possibly comprehend at a single hearing. Rather, it provides forward motion, a variety of accompanimental figuration, a wealth of

melody that none of Handel's contemporaries could match. But it is, at the same time, music for the theater. There is nothing that the listener can't hear and appreciate. Handel's listeners were used to the opera, and they knew a "rage" aria or a "simile" aria when they heard one. The listener, then, wanted to see how Handel could give yet another bass an opportunity to express raging passion for revenge with lively figuration and agitated melody in a way that was new but comparable with other examples of the genre. Likewise, when a singer says that she is like a river or a bird or a pilot in a storm, we listen to see how well Handel can give in music a picture of this simile. And we enjoy Caesar's aria in the third act, when he resolves to return to Ptolemy's palace and like an alpine torrent crush the conspiracy that almost cost him his life:

Quel torrente che cade dal monte
tutta atterra che incontro gli sta.
Tale anch'io, a chi oppone la fronte:
dal mio brando atterrato sarà.

(The torrent that falls from the mountain
sweeps away everything in its path;
So shall I, to whoever opposes me:
by my sword he shall fall to the ground.)

An aria typically begins with the orchestra (while the singer comes downstage), and a listener might well try to guess what the subject, the passion, of the song is to be. (It is always possible to cheat by looking ahead in the word-book.) How will this inventive music be related to the singing? Will the singer sing this tune? Or will this be an accompaniment to something yet to be announced by the singer? Sometimes the orchestra gives a picture of the image: the rushing torrent, the clangor of arms, the hidden bird. Often the orchestra begins with a tune that will be sung to the opening text of the song, and then it will return many, many times, in wonderful combinations of voice with instruments. And always it will set the mood, the emotional stance, of the song.

The orchestra itself, despite its "fracas," is one of the most varied and splendid ever used by Handel. It has grand instrumental movements (representing battles and triumphant fanfares) and arias with instrumental solos for horn (very rare in Handel), oboe, and violin. (The bird-song violin aria, Caesar's "Se in fiorito ameno prato," took on a life of its own, as did many others.) Three months after the premiere, on May 8, 1724, at the New Haymarket Theatre, the oboist Mr. Kitch, who liked to play the vocal parts of arias as instrumental solos, included "a solo Song out of the Opera of Julius Caesar, the Song Part by Mr Kitch, the Violin by the Youth [John Clegg, the beneficiary of the concert], as done by Sig. Castrucci in the Opera."

And there are other novelties. The opening chorus, which sings during the minuet of the overture, and the chorus of conspirators who begin before the close of Caesar's "Al lampo dell'armi" are elements of surprise. Most striking is the miraculous scene in act 2, in which Caesar hears an unearthly music made by an orchestra backstage including such



Senesino and Cuzzoni in the last scene of Handel's *Admeto* (1727). This anonymous engraving caricatures Cuzzoni's embrace of Senesino as she sings, "Yes, beloved, yes, finally I embrace you thus, on the beloved breast." The engraving is on the title page of a printed letter claiming to be from Senesino to Cuzzoni.

remarkable (and archaic) instruments as harp, theorbo, and viola da gamba. He takes it for the harmony of the spheres; as the pit orchestra joins in, the mountain is opened to reveal Cuzzoni as Cleopatra disguised as Lidia dressed as Virtue, surrounded by the nine muses (supernumeraries miming the music) as she sings "V'adoro, pupille," a song that was instantly famous. This is an attempt to seduce Caesar (and it works), but it is also a pretext for some unearthly and beautiful music. It is also a rare instance of singing upstage of the proscenium arch.

If we care anything about the plot and the drama we are surely pleased to have a story about historical characters we already know: Caesar and Cleopatra. There is much less confusion and intrigue in this libretto than in many others, and we are able to trace the growth of the love affair, as well as the complexities of character that Handel depicts. Cleopatra in particular becomes more and more human as we learn, aria by aria, about her character. The modern Handel scholar Winton Dean (who knows Handelian opera probably better than anyone did in Handel's day) describes the characterizations in *Giulio Cesare* like this:

Cleopatra has eight arias, besides two magnificent accompanied recitatives and a duet. They show her in an infinite variety of moods, teasing her brother Tolomeo about his love affairs, confident in the compelling power of her beauty, setting out to seduce Caesar with a tableau of the Muses on Mount Parnassus, praying to Venus to aid her amorous designs, uttering a more urgent prayer when Caesar is attacked by conspirators, lamenting her fate and threatening to haunt Tolomeo when he has captured her and she thinks Caesar is dead, and finally rejoicing in her conquest of the conqueror of the world. Unlike Cornelia she cannot be described as tragic or heroic, but she is one of the great characters of opera, an immortal sex-kitten whose emotions, if ephemeral, are obsessive while they last.

The other characters, too, emerge in the course of the opera. Sesto develops from a youth into a warrior who avenges his father's murder. The grieving widow Cornelia achieves tranquil resignation through the exploits of her son. And Caesar does survive his trials, military and amorous, to be reunited with a delighted Cleopatra. The final scene, preceded by a splendid sinfonia with grand horn solos, concludes with a beautiful jig of a duet for Caesar and Cleopatra, a grand chorus in dance tempo, and a further duet for the principals accompanied by oboes. The curtain closes on Senesino and Cuzzoni and the others, and the applause.

Reactions

Giulio Cesare was a success, to judge from the thirteen performances—more than any other opera of the season—and successive revivals; there were ten performances the next season and further revivals in 1730 and 1732. It was reported in the *Mercure de France* that even the Italians considered the opera a masterpiece. The poet John Byrom, who wrote the Bononcini jingle, saw *Giulio Cesare* on February 29 and was not so impressed: "I was engaged to dine at Mrs. de Vlieger's on Saturday, whence they all went to the opera of Julius Caesar, and I for one. Mr. Leycester sat by me in the front row of the gallery, for we both were there to get good places betimes; it was the first entertainment of this nature that I ever saw, and will I hope be the last, for of all the diversions of the town I least of all enter into this." A Monsieur de Fabrice reported in a letter of March 10 on the opera's success: "The opera is in full swing also, since Handell's new one, called *Jules César*—in which Cenesino and Cozzuna shine beyond all criticism—has been put on. The house was just as full at the seventh performance as at the first."

Those who liked opera seemed to think more about the singing than about the story, and they certainly spent little time considering whether opera itself was an art form different from and somehow greater than the combination of poetry, narrative, and music. Burney, who gives detailed discussions of all Handel's London operas, barely mentions story or plot; he refers to the singers by their names, not their characters; and describes what he thinks to be the best songs in each opera. His view is probably typical of most of Handel's audience.

While the opera was still running, music from *Giulio Cesare* began to appear in concerts and drawing rooms. On March 27 a concert at the Haymarket Theatre, for a Mr. Johnson, included "Three songs out of Julius Caesar, performed [on oboe] by Kytch." And a concert on May 8, mentioned above, included a song from the opera "as done by Sig. Castrucci in the Opera."

The music was printed almost immediately, in competing editions. A publication by Cluer and Creake was announced in May 1725, and in June it was advertised as being "Curiously engrav'd on Copper Plates Corrected and Figur'd by Mr Handel's own Hands; there fore beware of incorrect pirated Editions done on large Pewter Plates." The edition we are being warned of is the pirated edition by the prolific publisher John Walsh. Handel's operas were generally published, but usually only as collections of songs containing the arias only, without orchestrations and without the recitatives. They would not be useful for someone wishing to produce the opera, but they could have good sales to persons

*From Faustina: or the Roman Songstress, A Satyr,
on the Luxury and Effeminacy of the Age (1726)*

BRITONS! for shame, give all these Follies o'er,
The ancient British Nobleness restore: . . .
They talk not of our Army, or our Fleet,
But of the Warble of CUZZONI sweet,
Of the delicious Pipe of SENESINO,
And of the squalling Trill of HARLEQUINO,
Who, were they English, with united Rage,
Themselves would justly hiss from off the Stage:
With better Voice, and fifty times Her Skill,
Poor R[OBINSON] is always treated ill:
But, such is the good Nature of the Town,
'Tis now the Mode to cry the English down. . . .
I hate this Singing in an unknown Tongue,
It does our Reason and our Senses wrong;
When Words instruct, and Music chears the Mind:
Then is the Art of Service to Mankind;
But when a Foreign Ox, of monstrous Size!
Squeaks out at Treble, Shrill as Infants cries,
I curse the unintelligible Ass,
Who may, for aught I know, be singing Mass.



This drawing by Marco Ricci shows the plumed Senesino on stage with Faustina Bordoni, the soprano who rivaled Francesca Cuzzoni and set off enormous factional diatribes.

wishing to use them in concert or parlor performances of the songs. A flute arrangement of *Giulio Cesare* was published by Cluer in the summer of 1724, evidently for the use of amateurs; the second volume of Cluer's *Pocket Companion* (1725) included ten songs from the opera.

The musical world was finely attuned to what was going on in the international world of Italian opera. *Giulio Cesare* was immediately popular in Germany, being produced as early as 1725 in Braunschweig. It had later productions in Paris and Hamburg. But pamphleteers, favoring one singer or another, or objecting to opera or to Handel or to all these things, kept the popular press warm with operatic opinion. This would burst into flame a year later with the arrival of Faustina Bordoni and the warfare over leading parts. But that is another—and a very good—story.

At the revival of 1732, Senesino had just uttered the boast "Cesare non seppe mai, che sia timore" ("Caesar does not know what fear is") when "a Piece of the Machinery tumbled down from the Roof of the Theatre upon the Stage just as Senesino had chanted forth these words. . . . The poor Hero was so frightened, that he trembled, lost his Voice, and fell a-crying."