

# Giulio Cesare in Egitto (ii) [*Giulio Cesare*] (‘Julius Caesar in Egypt’).

Opera in three acts by [GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL](#) to a libretto by [NICOLA FRANCESCO HAYM](#) adapted from [GIACOMO FRANCESCO BUSSANI](#)’s *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* (1677, Venice) and a later version of the same libretto (1685, Milan); London, King’s Theatre, 20 February 1724.

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## ROMANS

Giulio Cesare [Julius Caesar]	alto castrato
Curio [Curius] <i>tribune</i>	bass
Cornelia <i>widow of Pompey</i>	contralto
Sesto [Sextus] <i>son of Pompey</i>	soprano

## EGYPTIANS

Cleopatra <i>Queen of Egypt</i>	soprano
Tolomeo [Ptolemy] <i>her brother, King of Egypt</i>	alto castrato
Achilla [Achillas] <i>general, Ptolemy’s adviser</i>	bass
Nireno [Nireus] <i>confidant of Ptolemy and Cleopatra</i>	alto castrato
Caesar’s soldiers, Egyptians	
<i>Setting</i> Egypt, 48–47 BC	

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*Giulio Cesare* was Handel’s fifth full-length opera for the Royal Academy of Music and received 13 performances on its first run. The unusually splendid cast consisted of the castratos Senesino, Gaetano Berenstadt and Giuseppe Bigonzi (Caesar, Ptolemy and Nireus), Francesca Cuzzoni (Cleopatra), Margherita Durastanti (Sextus), Anastasia Robinson (Cornelia), Giuseppe Boschi (Achillas) and John Lagarde or Laguerre (Curius). Handel revived it three times at the King’s Theatre: on 2 January 1725, 17 January 1730 and 1 February 1732. There were revisions for all of these performances, notably in 1725 when Sextus was recast as a tenor and received three new arias; there was also a new aria for Ptolemy. Two further arias were added during the 1725 run for the soprano Benedetta Sorosina as Nerina – the role of Nireus converted into Cleopatra’s lady-in-waiting. On 21 March 1730 two new arias were added for the benefit performance of Anna Strada del Pò, who took over the role of Cleopatra that season. The popularity of *Giulio Cesare* was also reflected in numerous productions at Hamburg and Brunswick over the period 1725–37, and a concert version was given in Paris in the summer of 1724.

Oskar Hagen's production at Göttingen in 1922 was the first in the 20th century, though using a heavily transformed version of the score which was also followed in the many subsequent revivals. In various versions – though hardly ever any of Handel's own – *Giulio Cesare* has found a place in the repertory of several modern opera houses; it was given at the New York City Opera in 1966 and by the ENO in 1980. Handel's complete score of 1724, with all voices at their correct pitch, was given its first modern revival at the Barber Institute, Birmingham, on 20 January 1977, a precedent that has rarely been followed. Chrysander's edition provides a reasonably accurate view of the 1724 version, but gives inadequate guidance to the later variants. The role of Cleopatra has attracted such singers as Lisa della Casa, Joan Sutherland, Evelyn Lear, Beverly Sills and Montserrat Caballé.

The action is founded on Julius Caesar's visit to Egypt in 48–47 BC; most of the characters are historical, but the details of plot are largely fictional and the character of Caesar seems to be much younger than his historical counterpart (who was 54 when he met Cleopatra). Egypt is under the joint rule of Cleopatra and her younger brother Ptolemy. (See also [JULIUS CAESAR](#).)

ACT 1 Caesar enters Egypt in pursuit of his rival Pompey, whom he has defeated at Pharsalia. Attended by the tribune Curius, he crosses the Nile and is acclaimed by the Egyptians. Pompey's wife Cornelia (whom Curius once loved) and her son Sextus beg for a reconciliation. Caesar agrees to embrace Pompey, but at that moment the Egyptian general Achillas appears with a message of welcome from Ptolemy; he presents Caesar with a gift of friendship which, to the horror of the Romans, is revealed to be Pompey's severed head. Caesar warns Achillas that he will punish Ptolemy for this act. Cornelia attempts to kill herself, but Curius intervenes. His offer to marry Cornelia is rejected. Sextus vows to avenge his father's murder.

At the Egyptian court, Cleopatra learns from her attendant Nireus that Pompey has been murdered on Ptolemy's orders. She resolves to seduce Caesar in a bid to be sole ruler of Egypt, while dismissing Ptolemy as fit only for sexual conquests. Achillas tells Ptolemy that the plan to appease Caesar with Pompey's head was counter-productive; he offers to kill Caesar and win Ptolemy the crown of Egypt if he can have Cornelia as his reward.

At his camp, Caesar reflects on human mortality as he contemplates Pompey's funeral urn. Cleopatra presents herself in disguise: she claims to be Lydia, a noble lady deprived of her fortune by Ptolemy. Caesar and Curius are captivated. Cleopatra and Nireus observe a further attempt at suicide by Cornelia, this time prevented by Sextus. 'Lydia' tells Cornelia that she serves Cleopatra and engages her help and Sextus's against Ptolemy. Caesar arrives at Ptolemy's palace and warily accepts an offer to be shown the royal apartments. Cornelia and

Sextus appear and rail at Ptolemy: Sextus is imprisoned, Cornelia put to tending the seraglio gardens. Achilles makes advances to Cornelia and is rebuffed, leaving mother and son to mourn their fate.

ACT 2 Caesar is led by Nireus into a garden of cedars leading to a view of the Palace of Pleasure on Mount Parnassus. An instrumental symphony is heard and the scene opens to reveal Cleopatra (still disguised as Lydia) on the throne of Virtue with the Muses as her companions. She takes up the melody of the symphony in a ravishing aria, accompanied by instruments on stage. Caesar runs towards her, but the scene closes and Nireus assures him that 'Lydia' will welcome him later. In the seraglio garden Cornelia is doing menial tasks. She rejects Achilles's advances. Ptolemy tells Achilles to perform what he promised, but reveals in an aside that Achilles will not get his expected reward. Ptolemy himself then accosts Cornelia, but also gets rebuffed. She again contemplates suicide and is again forestalled by Sextus, who has been released by Nireus. Cornelia is to appear before Ptolemy, and Nireus advises Sextus it will be a good opportunity to take his revenge. Cleopatra, in her apartments, feigns sleep as Caesar arrives. Curio arrives with news of a group of conspirators demanding Caesar's death. Cleopatra reveals her true identity and says she will put down the riot, but after assessing the situation advises Caesar to escape. He determines to face the conspirators and leaves the grief-stricken Cleopatra. In the seraglio Ptolemy indicates that Cornelia is to share his bed. Sextus attempts to kill him, but is prevented by Achilles. The latter tells Ptolemy that Caesar has fled and has apparently been drowned; meanwhile Cleopatra is raising troops against Ptolemy. Achilles demands the hand of Cornelia for his pains, but Ptolemy refuses, leaving Achilles to hint at a change of allegiance. Sextus, remorseful at his failure, attempts to kill himself, but Cornelia gives him courage for a further assault on Ptolemy.

ACT 3 Achilles, at the port of Alexandria, resolves to support Cleopatra. Ptolemy's forces defeat Cleopatra's and Cleopatra is taken prisoner. Caesar emerges from the sea, washed ashore by the waves. He watches as Sextus and Nireus come upon Achilles, wounded in the battle. He confesses to the murder of Pompey and passes to Sextus a seal which gives command of a troop of warriors. Caesar intervenes, taking the seal and promising to rescue Cornelia and Cleopatra. In the palace Cleopatra is taking leave of her handmaidens, but her sorrow turns to joy as Caesar arrives and drives out Ptolemy's guards. Elsewhere in the palace Cornelia is defending herself with a dagger against Ptolemy's renewed advances. Sextus appears with drawn sword, challenges Ptolemy and kills him. At the harbour Caesar and Cleopatra appear in triumph, and prepare to reward Nireus and Curio. Cornelia and Sextus bring the news of Ptolemy's death. Cleopatra offers Caesar Ptolemy's crown and sceptre. Caesar returns them to Cleopatra, and she accepts them as 'a tributary queen to Rome's great

emperor'. They declare their love, and all look forward to peace and liberty under Rome's protection.

The score of *Giulio Cesare* was by far Handel's most sumptuous to date, not only in its stylistic variety and melodic richness but more specifically in its use of the orchestra, which included two pairs of horns crooked in different keys and a stage band with harp, theorbo and viola da gamba. It is also one of his most dramatically compelling operas, despite the over-frequent suicide attempts and assaults on Cornelia's virtue. The character of Cleopatra in all her 'infinite variety' is painted with special insight and understanding – a tease in Act 1, turning from seduction to despair in Act 2 and returning to triumph in Act 3. Her two arias of grief, 'Se pietà' and 'Piangerò la sorte mia', are among Handel's finest in that vein, while 'V'adoro, pupille', with its ravishing instrumental sonorities, is surely unsurpassed as an exemplar of seductive song. Caesar's role includes some fine accompanied recitative (notably the moving 'Alma del gran Pompeo') and the remarkable aria with solo horn, 'Va tacito'. Ptolemy's viperish character is well caught in his three arias. Cornelia and Sextus may seem to have more music than their position in the drama merits – a consequence of the need to reflect the distinction of the original singers – but this will not be seen to be a defect if the roles are cast from strength. The use of choral ensembles in the opening scene and offstage for the conspirators in Act 2 is effective and original for its time.

**Anthony Hicks**