

PROBLEM OPERAS SOLVED



3. GENDER POLITICS

3 October, 2023

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HANDEL'S *ALCINA* PREMIERED IN LONDON IN 1735, the same year as Rameau's *Indes galantes*, but they could hardly be more different. Compared to Rameau, Handel has a smaller cast, less spectacle, no ballet, almost no choruses, and few ensembles. Works like *Alcina* in the *opera seria* (serious opera) style consist almost entirely of solo arias with orchestra, alternating with harpsichord-accompanied recitatives. These arias generally follow a convention whereby the long opening section would be repeated in its entirety (*da capo*, from the top) after a short bridge, leaving the singers free to add ornaments to show off their virtuosity. This shone the spotlight on the star artists, including especially the *castrati* (surgically altered male sopranos) who took the heroic roles.

The *opera seria* esthetic is so foreign to modern taste that you might think Handel would be seldom performed today. Yet this is not the case. Fine singers can make the *da capo* arias into mini-dramas, with an emotional journey between the opening and the altered repeats. Fine directors can emphasize the action *between* characters even while only one is singing, and place the whole into a dramatic context to tell a compelling story.

British director Katie Mitchell is one such artist. Her 2015 production at Aix-en-Provence reimagines the sisters Alcina and Morgana of Ludovico Ariosto's original myth as aging women who can restore their youth only by seducing young men and turning them into animals for their collection. Not a setting you would find every day, admittedly, but one that grips us from curtain-rise for its sheer strangeness and unsettling use of sexual power. *rb.*

A. ACT ONE OPENING

We shall watch the opening 35 minutes of **Katie Mitchell's** 2015 Aix production, conducted by **Andrea Marcon**. The cast is as follows:

ALCINA, *a sorceress*..... Patricia Petitbon (*soprano*)
MORGANA, *her sister*..... Anna Prohaska (*soprano*)
RUGGIERO, *a knight*..... Philippe Jaroussky (*countertenor*)
BRADAMANTE, *his fiancée*..... Katarina Bradic (*mezzo-soprano*)
OBERTO, *a young boy* Elias Mädler (*boy soprano*)
ORONTE, *Alcina's chamberlain* Anthony Gregory (*tenor*)
MELISSO, *Bradamante's escort*..... Krzysztof Baczyk (*bass*)

After an overture that (in this production) establishes the setting, Bradamante appears with her escort Melisso. She is looking for her fiancé Ruggiero, and has disguised herself as a man to do so; but in this guise, however, s/he immediately becomes Morgana's sexual prey.

1. Aria (Morgana), "O s'apre al riso"

Following an offstage chorus of the men she has enchanted, Alcina enters with Ruggiero, and proceeds to make love to him.

2. Aria (Alcina), "Di, cor mio, quanto t'amai"

We then hear a young boy, **Oberto**, who is looking for his father, who it is clear has become one of Alcina's victims.

3. Aria (Oberto), "Chi m'insegna il caro padre?"

Ruggiero does not recognize Bradamante as his fiancée, though sees a resemblance to her brother, Ricciardo. But when Bradamante and Melisso try to bring him to his senses, he just mocks them.

4. Aria (Ruggiero), "Di te mi rido"

Bradamante, still in disguise as a man, finds herself caught between the amorous Morgana and the jealous Oronte, who is in love with Morgana himself.

5. Aria (Bradamante), "E gelosia"

B. ARIAS FROM ACT TWO

In the second hour, we shall look at five individual arias, mostly from Handel's second act, that take us to the emotional climax of the opera. They are in order, but not connected.

Oronte's aria (still in Act I) follows immediately from the sequence we have just heard. It is a conventional diatribe against the fickleness of women, but Mitchell makes it the first stage in Ruggiero's recovery.

6. Aria (Oronte), "Semplicetto! A donna credi?"

A further stage in that recovery is provided by Melisso, who gives Ruggiero a magic key that enables him to see the truth. He responds in two mini-arias that deepen the emotional content of the score so far.

10. Ariosi (Ruggiero), "Col celarvi" and "Qual portentoso!"

Bradamante reveals herself to Ruggiero. But he has not recovered sufficiently to be sure that this is not another trick of Alcina's. Stung by his rejection, Bradamante is finally roused to fury.

12. Aria (Bradamante), "Vorrei vendicarmi"

Ruggiero realizes that he can only leave Alcina by stealth; so he needs her permission to go out hunting. But as she appears to be falling genuinely in love with him, he must first convince her that the feeling is mutual.

15. Aria (Ruggiero), "Mio bel tesoro"

Told that Ruggiero has escaped, Alcina is devastated by the intensity of her grief.

17. Aria (Alcina), "Ah, mio cor, schernito sei!"

In the last act of the opera, Alcina's power will decline and she will no longer be able to keep Ruggiero, who is reunited with Bradamante. Alcina's palace will crumble to dust, and the men she has entranced will be restored to life.

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/problem-operas/>

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