

CLASS 3 : GENDER POLITICS

A. SOME BACKGROUND

1. Class title 1 (*Alcina at Aix*)

George Frideric Handel (1685–1759) was already the toast of London when he wrote *Alcina* in 1735. Audiences at the time expected substantial works that would show off the star singers they had paid to hear; *Alcina* is no exception in weighing in at around four hours. So there is no way I can play it or, or even cover it all in excerpts. What I am going to do, therefore, is to play the first 35 minutes more or less complete, and then give you a series of shorter excerpts that will take the story to its first climax, at roughly the halfway point.

2. Section title A (Biel-Solothurn production and class menu)

But first I need to give you a little background: about the **story**, the **characters** in the opera, the **music** of the opera, and the **production** which we are going to watch—not the one shown in the picture, but something more radical, from the British director **Katie Mitchell** at Aix-en-Provence in 2015.

3. Titian's *Ariosto* and Tiepolo's *Armida*

STORY. The sorceress Alcina is a secondary character in *Orlando Furioso*, the 1516 epic by **Ludovico Ariosto** (1474–1533). Like a kind of Renaissance Circe, she lives on a magic island, seduces men, and when she has finished with them, turns them into animals for her private zoo. The Tiepolo painting here is not of Alcina but the rather similar figure of Armida, also from *Orlando Furioso*.

4. List of characters

CHARACTERS. Here are the characters in the opera: **Alcina** herself, his sister **Morgana**, the knight **Ruggiero** whom she has entranced and made her current lover, Ruggiero's fiancée **Bradamante** who has come to find him, Bradamante's escort **Melisso**, Alcina's chamberlain **Oronte**, and **Oberto**, a young boy who has lost his father. But look at the voice types: no less than five sopranos, plus a tenor and bass in minor roles.

5. List of characters, further defined

When we look at these sopranos, however, we find they are all different. **Alcina** and **Morgana** are both normal female sopranos, with Alcina being slightly the more dramatic of the two. **Ruggiero**, like all Handel's heroes, was originally a *castrato*, a boy castrated just before puberty to preserve a boy's voice with the power of a man's physique. The fact that Handel's leading men were all sopranos, makes **Bradamante's** situation that much more plausible; to gain access to Alcina's castle, she has disguised herself as her own brother, **Ricciardo**; for the whole of the first act, everyone believes that she is indeed

man. **Oberto** is a genuine boy soprano, put in for a touch of pathos; if we are short of time, though, I may have to skip over his aria.

6. Differences between Handel and Rameau

MUSIC. Both *Les Indes galantes* and *Alcina* were produced in the same year, 1735, yet they could hardly be more different. Compared to Rameau, Handel has less spectacle, no ballet, almost no choruses, almost no ensembles, and a clearer distinction between recitative, which is accompanied by only a few instruments and sung in the natural rhythm of the words, and arias, which are accompanied by the orchestra, and where every aspect is tightly controlled. But let me say a little more about that control. Here are the first few measures of the first aria you will hear, sung by Morgana. They are sung twice, but notated the same; what are the differences between them?

7. Morgana *da capo* demo 1

Did you hear that the tune was decorated the second time around, more florid? Almost all Handel arias are in what's called the ***da capo* form**. The singer goes through the aria once as written (let's call it A), then sings a short contrasting section (B), then returns to the A-section from the beginning; *da capo* means "from the top." This time, however, singer would be free to ornament the music in any way they thought effective; this is the one case in the orchestrally-accompanied music when the singers would retain some degree of control. In addition to these embellishments, they might add free **cadenzas** at the ends of sections. Let's here a slightly longer version of the opening of Morgana's aria. After a few moments, I'll cut to the B section, which I'll play complete. Listen how she inserts a cadenza before the orchestra returns to the original introduction, *da capo*, and she comes in with her ornaments.

8. Morgana *da capo* demo 2

PRODUCTION. Handel's singers would usually decorate to show off some aspect of their virtuosity and earn their high fees. But for modern audiences, this is not enough. A stage director needs to find some dramatic reason for these variations, and if possible to create a dramatic mini-scenario for each aria, so that the dramatic situation goes somewhere between the first statement of the music and its repeat. Almost all the arias in Handel's time would have been repeated in this way; modern productions often skip the *da capos*, and occasionally even the B-sections, of a few of them.

9. *Alcina* at Aix, 2015

And on the larger scale, the director needs to arrange this unbroken sequence of arias into a cogent narrative that drives the action forward as a coherent whole rather than a string of showpieces. This is especially challenging when the story is far removed from our own time. Katie Mitchell updates it to the present and sets it in a house that is in effect one giant taxidermy workshop surrounding a central salon.

10. *Alcina* in her workshop

And she adds the poignant touch of treating both *Alcina* and *Morgana* as aging women. It is only in that central salon—through the act of sex with men—that they temporarily regain their youth.

B. ACT ONE OPENING

11. Section title B (DVD cover)

Handel would never have done this, but Katie Mitchell stages the overture, to show the background to her concept: taxidermy studio and seduction salon. Then Bradmante and Melisso enter. Morgana comes in too and catches sight of Bradamante, which immediately triggers the aria we have just sampled.

[I should say at this point that Mitchell interprets the enchantment cast by Alcina and Morgana in terms of sex. Since Bradamante is actually a woman, and not a man as Morgana thinks, the possibilities are limited, but Mitchell comes up with a kinky solution that works perfectly with the music, and also creates the sense that something is not right here. Alcina's aria with Ruggiero that follows almost immediately after (there is an offstage chorus in between) is pretty explicit, but straight. I am cutting an even more kinky scene with Morgana later in the act, even though it is the most famous aria, because I think enough is enough. But I am leaving these first two arias in place—with apologies—because they set up everything that is to follow. You will also find it instructive to compare the Alcina/Ruggiero scene with another bed aria in the second hour, whose effect is entirely different.]

If we get short of time, I will cut the aria for the boy Oberto that follows these two numbers; he comes in looking for his father, who of course is one of Alcina's previous victims. Otherwise this entire sequence is continuous until we take our break.

12. Handel: *Alcina*, Act I, Morgana and Alcina arias

13. Handel: *Alcina*, Act I, Oberto aria

14. Handel: *Alcina*, Act I, Ruggiero and Bradamante arias

15. Class title 2 (still from the above)

How is this working for you so far? Does anyone have questions or comments?

C. ARIAS FROM ACT TWO

16. Section title C (DVD cover again)

In the second hour, I am taking us through to the point where the Aix production takes its intermission. But as there would be an hour and 20 minutes still to go, I am selecting five individual numbers that continue the story, filling in with short introductions. The first is for the bass **Oronte**, who has been displaced as Morgana's lover. His aria is a text that has been an operatic commonplace from day one: you must be a simpleton to put any trust in woman. I am playing it partly to give you a break from all those sopranos, and partly because Katie Mitchell makes it the first turning-point in the breaking of Ruggiero's enchantment, as Oronte takes him to the upstairs workshop and shows him what is what.

17. Handel: *Alcina*, Act I, Oronte aria

The second stage in Ruggiero's disenchantment is when Melisso gives him a magic key that enables him, at least partially, to see the truth. In this production, the scene again takes place in the spooky upstairs laboratory. But it is interesting for another reason: instead of one of more of the usual *da capo* arias, Handel gives Ruggiero two shorter back-to-back pieces he calls *ariosi*, in effect a single freely-shaped **dramatic scena** with portentous orchestral music. It is one of the things that makes me realize that Handel is indeed a great opera composer.

18. Handel: *Alcina*, Act II, Ruggiero scena

Although Ruggiero is beginning to see things more clearly, he is still confused by this world of illusion. So when **Bradamante** reveals her real identity, he thinks it is just another of Alcina's tricks. Having been forced to watch her fiancé being made love to by another woman, Bradamante is naturally incensed by this rejection, and launches into one of the most exciting numbers in the score, *Vorrei vendicarmi* ("I will be revenged").

19. Handel: *Alcina*, Act II, Bradamante aria

Ruggiero is now determined to leave Alcina, but realizes that he can only do this by stealth; so he needs her permission to go out hunting. But as she is already getting suspicious herself, he must first convince her that he really loves her. His aria, *Mio bel tesoro* ("my lovely treasure") may not be the richest aria in the score, but it is fascinating to compare it to their earlier love scene in this production. Now it is he taking the lead, and her responses suggest that she *really* loves him....

20. Handel: *Alcina*, Act II, Ruggiero aria

If any further proof were needed of Alcina's passion, it comes in the 14-minute aria, *Ah! mio cor, schernito sei!* ("Ah, my heart, you have been scorned!") she sings when Oronte tells her that Ruggiero has fled. Very slow, and propelled by an insistent rhythm in its bass, the aria has a scale and depth of emotion that is unlike anything except perhaps Ruggiero's music when he begins to suspect the truth, but this is far grander, even more personal. It would have been powerful with the 7-minute A-section alone, but no, it moves to a B-section in which her misery turns to rage. There is a long pause. Surely this production will end the aria there? But again no; the aria returns to its former slow tempo. **Patricia Petitbon**, the Alcina, decorates this *da capo* repeat as you would expect, but you do not hear it as a display of virtuosity; you are hardly even conscious of any added or altered notes. All you hear is an intensification of her feeling that is now so personal as to be almost unbearable to watch. This is great singing, and great acting.

21. Handel: *Alcina*, Act II, Alcina aria

22. Class title 3 (Patricia Petitbon)