

Handel's Path to Covent Garden

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Introduction

George Frideric Handel's career as an Italian opera composer in England was fraught with many adversities and he was frequently forced to confront countless difficulties and irritations. The first manifestations of these problems emerged when Italians influenced by the Arcadian Academy in Italy attempted to usurp the English cultural scene and supplant their own ideals of reformed Italian opera in London during the early 1700s. When the Royal Academy was established in 1719, Handel encountered a myriad of challenges with this particular circle, which had been reinforced by the arrival of additional influential Arcadians, notably the difficulties with the castrato Francesco Bernardi ("Senesino"), the competition from the composer Giovanni Bononcini, and most importantly, the antagonism of the librettist Paolo Rolli who had previously arrived in 1715. A conflict in ideals escalated and permeated the entire Academy, thereby creating numerous altercations between the directors, composers, singers, subscribers, and their supporters.

Handel's greatest challenges were yet to emerge when the Royal Academy collapsed in 1728 as the popularity for Italian opera in London waned and the desire for an English style of opera waxed stronger. During this time, Handel remained undaunted by this unorthodox chain of events and entered into a partnership with John Jacob Heidegger, the manager of the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, for the next four to five years, whereby he persisted with his personal ambitions for the production of Italian opera. In 1733, the nobility formed a rival opera company with Rolli and Senesino in competition with Handel, recognised today as the Opera of the Nobility. In 1734, when their business obligation concluded, Heidegger leased the King's Theatre to the new opera company; as a result of Heidegger's action, Handel entered into a venture with John Rich at Covent Garden and remained there until 1737 struggling with the competition from the Opera of the Nobility company. Finally, both ventures collapsed as the public's support

splintered between the two rival theatres.

We may regard the 1730s as the most trying decade of Handel's career; unfortunately, this period became obscured through time and speculation, therefore many questions have remained unanswered. To enable us to comprehend this era, it is necessary for us to explore the important issues and subsequent circumstances that effected his transfer to Covent Garden in 1734. We may question what initially prompted Handel to relocate to Covent Garden. Did his past experiences at the Royal Academy set the pattern for future obstacles and confrontations that he was compelled to contend with during the 1730s? Perhaps many of the difficulties Handel encountered with Rolli and his Italian circle of friends and supporters perpetuated similar disturbances later in Handel's career. This may be the key to answer many of the questions relating to Handel's relocation, and may explain his progressive and creative innovations displayed within his operas from this period.

My primary objectives of this study are: to determine what initiated these difficulties, establish how and when the problems and related issues presented themselves, and attempt to interpret the influences they exerted on Handel's opera career during the 1730s, in particular, his first Covent Garden term from 1734–1737. Apparently, these problems gradually emerged and progressed as time and events unfolded. My philosophical research and observations pertaining to this current study have presented themselves sequentially. Therefore, the logical procedure is to examine and present all the major issues and related facts in chronological order, concluding with a brief review of Handel's career in Covent Garden. I hope by using this method of deduction, the challenges encountered by Handel during the 1720s and 1730s may be effectively illustrated, thereby clarifying the circumstances concerning his relocation to Covent Garden.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Ellen T. Harris and Dr. Reinhard Strohm. Throughout the course of my research, they graciously corresponded and offered assistance.

I am also indebted to the Handelian scholars whose work and previous research contributed significantly to this philosophical study of Handel's path to Covent Garden.

Editorial Policy:

The format of the various quotes, i.e. punctuation, spellings and italics, have been preserved unless otherwise stated. For the sake of clarity, quotes from John Mainwaring's biography of Handel containing the letter 's' spelled as 'ſ' in Old English have been altered. Where no translations of foreign language texts have been offered, I have taken the liberty of translating them as accurately as possible myself; these passages will be indicated. Italics that I have inserted have been indicated, and/or should be clear from the context. Ellipses, including those within brackets, [...], or parentheses, (...), have been inserted by other authors, e.g. if ellipses form part of a quote taken from a secondary source. Ellipses or observations inserted within braces, e.g. {...}, indicate my own observations and editing. Dates have been given as they stand in the sources, English primary sources are in the Old Style. Dates given after the title of an opera or similar work generally refer to a premiere, unless reference to a specific production is intended, which should be clear from the context.

Chapter 1

The Demand for Italian Opera in London and the Creation of the Rival Factions

John Mainwaring in his important biography of Handel lauds the days of the Royal Academy as “a period of musical glory” — not many would argue with this description.¹ In 1719, the Royal Academy was founded by members of the British aristocracy to provide London with Italian opera on a permanent basis with a secure financial foundation; previously, Italian opera had floundered in England, as this form of entertainment was an expensive novelty to maintain and did not enjoy assured financial protection. With the advent of these new “secure” days, London became one of the greatest opera centres of Europe and could boast of having the most renowned composers and singers in the world at its disposal. During this time, Handel’s operas achieved phenomenal success; undoubtedly it was a period of musical glory for Handel where Italian opera was concerned.

However, Mainwaring paints a cloud upon this description in his next paragraph; he declares in so many words, the Academy was doomed from the very beginning like all finite objects in that the seeds of its dissolution were carried within from its very inception.² Mainwaring asserted the timing of the eventual closure of such a venture depends on those who impede the inevitable, or further its outcome. This is a rather dramatic and philosophical perception of the Academy’s demise, yet it is one perception that obviously

¹ John Mainwaring, *Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel* (London: R. And J. Dodsley, in *Pall Mall*, 1760). Reprint, (New York: Da Capo Press Music Reprint Series, 1980), p.106.

² *Ibid.* pp. 106–107.

requires further exploration. Did Handel unwittingly contribute to the demise of the Royal Academy or was he attempting to delay the inevitable? Could Handel have prevented the closure of the Royal Academy and thereby avert the forthcoming problems that resulted with his relocation to Covent Garden?

In an attempt to address these questions, it is important to ascertain if the Academy was truly doomed from its inception as Mainwaring suggests. Noticeably, Mainwaring concentrates on the *personal* factors behind the scenes that caused the friction, i.e. the quarrels between the directors, singers, and composers. True, the financial management and the day-to-day administration of the company created its own consequences, yet other circumstances could have determined the closure of such an enterprise. What exactly were the motivations of the administrators or regulators who worked or participated within the Academy? Different viewpoints vigorously defended whether they are correct or incorrect have often resulted with the termination of lifelong friendships and business partnerships.

A similar observation may be applied to the various factions that developed within the Academy. In Otto Erich Deutsch's documentary biography a hostile party opposing Handel within the Academy is apparent; particularly within the various surviving letters of the Italian librettist Paolo Rolli.³ Subsequently in his book, Mainwaring, in describing the rival group in opposition to Handel during the 1730s, i.e. the Opera of the Nobility, relates that it was an Italian orientated clique.⁴ Mainwaring was obviously fascinated

³ These letters are reprinted in Otto Erich Deutsch's book, *Handel; a Documentary Biography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974). Reprint of the 1955 edition, (New York: W.W. Norton).

⁴ Mainwaring offers this comment concerning the formation of the Opera of the Nobility and the skill of one of their composers, Hasse; "He is remarkable for his fine elevated air, with hardly so much as the shew of harmony to support it. And this may serve not only for a character of Hasse — in particular, but of the Italians in general, at the time we are

with the idea that a hostile party besieged Handel; however, there may be some grain of truth to his observation. Handel's friend, Johann Mattheson, wrote this account relating Handel's difficulties of the 1730s:

Once a report had it that, on account of the Italian spite and persecution, he was at the end of his tether. That was shortly before the time when, as mentioned before, *he instanced me of his unfortunate circumstances*.⁵

This quote raises additional questions requiring further investigation. Did this Italian faction facilitate the downfall of the Royal Academy and consequently precipitate Handel's difficulties of the 1730s? Why were they resistant to Handel who was partial to Italian *opera seria* in the first instance? What actions did Handel take to have provoked such irritation? Perhaps Handel resisted them for a particular reason. What instigated such aggravation in this noble organisation? Who sowed the "seeds of dissolution" within the Academy?

We observe it is important to determine when and why these factions materialised, and to accomplish this we need to understand the circumstances that initiated this rivalry. Generally, it may be stated that a new group or society is founded to provide a necessary service or to carry out an objective, and in order to secure a viable organisation, it would be necessary for the members to reach an agreement whereby they would comply with a focused agenda. In

speaking of. The opposition in which they were engaged against Handel, made him look upon that merit in his antagonists with much indifference, and upon this defect with still more contempt." Mainwaring, pp. 117–118.

⁵ Johann Mattheson, "Grundlage Einer Ehren-Pforte," (Hamburg, 1740.) Quoted in Deutsch, p. 505. The letter of Handel that Mattheson was referring to was written in July, 1735.

this instance, the Royal Academy was established to produce opera; however, it is possible that a clash of ideals was the main cause of discord if the various members of the Royal Academy developed their own singular plans for the organisation and they failed to comply with a definite agenda or policy.

Surprisingly, it would seem these factions emerged very early, i.e. before and during the time of Handel's arrival in 1710. While it may appear futile to examine the series of events dating from the pre-Academy days, Handel's future problems had their foundations set during the years 1705–1719. When Italian opera was initially introduced to England, the Italians present in London endeavoured to subdue English attempts at developing their own style of opera. The ideology encompassing opera culture in London fluctuated as these developments took effect; therefore, many opera enthusiasts entertained varying and conflicting opinions on what they anticipated of opera. This public perception would affect the foundation of the Royal Academy in 1719; therefore, it is essential to review the major highlights of this early period.

In 1705, Italian opera was introduced to London audiences through the work *Arsinoe* that was originally set by Petronio Franceschini and produced in 1677.⁶ This London version featured a text entirely in English and the music was composed with the collaboration of three different composers: Thomas Clayton, Nicolino Haym, and Charles Dieupart.⁷ Eric Walter White states that the production of operatic genres was inevitable, as there were many superb foreign and domestic singers present in London at that time.⁸ White surmised they may have desired the opportunity to

⁶ Eric Walter White, *A History of English Opera* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., BAS Printers Ltd., 1983), p. 140.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 140.

⁸ These singers were Signora Maria Lindelheim, who had learned to sing in Italy, Francesca Margarita de l'Epine, and her sister Maria Margarita Gallia. There was also Mrs. Catherine Tofts, an English singer known for performing Italian and English songs who was in direct

perform in an opera as their principal performances consisted of singing songs for concerts in the various theatres; naturally, Italian opera proved to be the obvious model for this undertaking.⁹

However, evidence suggests the opera *Arsinoe* was initially intended to serve as an example of what could be accomplished to further the progress of *English* music. Primarily, the cast was English, also, Clayton in his preface to the libretto of *Arsinoe* wrote:

The design of this entertainment being to introduce the Italian manner of musick on the English stage, which has not been before attempted; I was oblig'd to have an Italian opera translated; In which the words, however mean in several places, suited much better with that manner of musick, than others more poetical would do. The stile of this music is to express the passions, which is the soul of the musick; And though the voices are not equal to the Italian, yet I have engag'd the best that were to be found in England, and I have not been wanting, to the utmost of my diligence, in the instructing of them. The musick being recitative, may not, at first, meet with that general acceptance as is hop'd for from the audience's being better acquainted with it; But if this attempt shall, by pleasing the nobility and gentry, *be a means of bringing this manner of music to be use'd by in my native country,** I shall think all my study and pains very well employ'd.¹⁰

Obviously, the primary goal of this endeavour was to introduce only the *manner* of Italian music into England. It was the introduction of recitative that Clayton hoped would prove

competition with Margarita de l'Epine. Ibid. pp. 138–139.

⁹ Ibid. p. 140.

* Italics added.

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 140–141.

successful, adding that all his work would have been rewarded if the English were willing to adopt the convention of recitative upon hearing *Arsinoe*. Therefore, we may venture that although this work is regarded as the first introduction of Italian opera to London audiences, it was intended to serve an alternative purpose. Perhaps *Arsinoe* was designed as an example of what the English could accomplish with respect to their native dramatic genres and develop what Henry Purcell had achieved with his semi-operas?

There are other examples that may prove the Italian operas introduced were intended to further the cause for English opera. The following operas also featured English texts adapted from the original Italian sources: *The Loves of Ergasto* (April 1705), *The Temple of Love* (March 1706), and *Camilla* (March 1706).¹¹ An additional attempt to improve English opera occurred with the production of *Rosamond* (March 1707). It was predominately English and composed “after the Italian Manner”; Joseph Addison wrote the libretto and the music was composed by Clayton.¹² Apparently, Clayton was following his own council from his prologue of *Arsinoe* by attempting to continue the introduction of the Italian style he had initiated through *Rosamond*. Sadly, this venture was a failure and lasted for only three performances; had this work succeeded, the history of English opera may have been changed.¹³

Unfortunately, it would appear the design to introduce Italian opera as a medium to reform English genres had backfired. One of the primary reasons for this failure was the increasing number of Italian singers arriving in London; obviously, audiences began to appreciate the Italian style of singing when heard with the

¹¹ Ibid. p. 141.

¹² Ibid. p. 142.

¹³ Merrill Knapp attributes the failure of this work to the lack of quality in Clayton’s music and the weak English adaptation of the plot. See Merrill Knapp, ‘A Forgotten Chapter in English Eighteenth-Century Opera,’ *Music and Letters* Vol. XLII (1961): p. 5.

original Italian language.¹⁴ When the castrato Valentini Urbano arrived from Italy in December of 1707, producers altered the text of *Camilla*, thereby making it possible for him to perform his verses in Italian.¹⁵ Apparently, this change secured the success of *Camilla*, although this motley half-bred result in the dialogue created confusion. Valentini sang in a similar fashion in other English-translated operas such as *Thomyris, Queen of Scythia* (April, 1707) and *Love's Triumph* (1708).¹⁶ Valentini would be joined later by the celebrated castrato Nicolo Grimaldi, ('Nicolini'), in 1708. Nicolini's first London appearance was in *Pyrrhus and Demetrius* (December, 1708); he performed in Italian with Valentini while Mrs. Tofts and the other ladies sang in English.¹⁷ Nicolini was a phenomenal success, and audiences acclaimed his skills as an actor.

Having experienced these singers perform in their native language, English audiences now wished to hear Italian opera as it was originally composed featuring the Italian language and musical style. They evidently misunderstood the intentions concerning the translation of Italian operas into English, and the endeavor to reform and produce English operas using the Italian format as Cibber's comment illustrates:

{...} the *Italian Opera* began first to steal into *England*, but in a rude disguise, and unlike itself as possible; in a lame, hobbling Translation into our own Language, with false Quantities, or Metre out of Measure to its original Notes, sung by our own unskilled Voices, with Graces misapply'd to almost every Sentiment, and with Action lifeless and unmeaning through every Character, {...}¹⁸

¹⁴ See f. 8, regarding the Italian singers already present in London.

¹⁵ White, *English Opera*, p. 142.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 143.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 145.

¹⁸ Ed. Robert W. Low, "An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley

Other circumstances may have facilitated this misunderstanding with the public. For instance, there were additional attempts at introducing Italian opera to further the cause of English opera development, as we observe with Aaron Hill's intentions concerning Handel's opera *Rinaldo* of 1711:

Nor shall I then be longer doubtful of succeeding in my Endeavour, to see the *English OPERA* more splendid than her MOTHER the Italian.

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However, they undermined their own efforts by creating operas with greater emphasis on the Italianate style. In hindsight, we may perceive they inadvertently erred; alternatively, they could have perfected the flaws experienced in the past as with *Rosamond* by producing new operas emphasising a distinctive Anglican style. Hill's preface in the wordbook for *Rinaldo* clearly illustrates his well-intentioned miscalculations. (See Appendix One.) Hill's solution to the awkward Anglican endeavours was to improve the Italian model and thereby construct a satisfactory example for the English. *However, he may have created a demand for authentic Italian opera.* True, the English translated operas may not appear as skillfully composed when compared with their Italian originals, yet again we can argue that an authentic reproduction of Italian opera may not have been intended. Notwithstanding the commendable endeavours to improve English opera, they continued to highlight the deficiencies perceived with the English translated operas by perpetuating this method of adopting the Italian model for reformatory purposes. Hill had provided for the lack of a complete Italian text through his collaboration with Rossi and thereby had

Cibber," (London: 1889), in Merrill Knapp; 'A Forgotten Chapter,' p. 5.

¹⁹ From Hill's dedication to Queen Anne in the wordbook of *Rinaldo*, in Deutsch, p. 32.

rectified the “hobbling Translation” stated by Cibber with “Words so sounding and rich in Sense” as Hill himself described. Elaborate stage machinery had also been employed which enhanced the novelty of the production. Of paramount significance, Handel composed the music incorporating the skills he had recently absorbed in Italy; to the aural perception of the London audiences, this musical experience must have been astounding, and as a result, the earlier English attempts of setting music to the Italian model were revealed as pale shadows in comparison. Under these circumstances, the public’s enthusiasm to embrace Italian opera is comprehensible.

However, other composers endeavoured to amend the misunderstandings that resulted from adopting the Italian format, ironically, by producing additional English operas based on the Italian model. For instance, one particularly important attempt at composing an English opera should be mentioned. The opera in question is *Calypso and Telemachus*; it was produced in May 1712 with text by John Huges and music by John Erst Galliard.²⁰ (Incidentally, Handel had returned to Germany at this point.) We notice they contrived this opera to rectify the misconceptions entertained by the English when observing a section of Huges’ preface to the printed libretto; notice in particular the first and last paragraphs of the quoted example:

The following OPERA is an Essay for the Improvement of Theatrical Music in the *English* Language, after the Model of the *Italians*.

It is certain, that this Art has for a considerable time flourish’d in *Italy* in greater Perfection than in any other Country. As the *Grecians* were formerly the Masters in Architecture, Sculpture, Painting and Musick, whose Rules and Examples were follow’d by

²⁰ Knapp, ‘A Forgotten Chapter,’ p. 7.

other Nations, the *Italians* are generally allow'd to be so now. It is some Years that Musick of our Theatre has been almost wholly supply'd by them. Their most celebrated *Opera's* have been introduc'd among us, and a generous Encouragement has been given to such as came over, and perform'd Parts in them on the *English* Stage. By this means the Entertainments of *Italy* are become familiar to us, and our Audiences have heard the finest Compositions and Performances of *Rome* and *Venice*, without trouble of travelling to those Places.

I am not of the Opinion of those who impute this Encouragement given to *Italian* Musick, to an Affectation of every thing that is Foreign.

I wou'd rather ascribe it to the ingenuous Temper of the *British* Nation, that they are willing to be instructed in so elegant an Art by the best Examples. But after this Justice done to others, there is likewise a Justice due to our selves. It cou'd never have been the Intention of those, who first promoted the *Italian* Opera, that it shou'd take the intire [*sic*] Possession of our Stage, to the Exclusion of every thing of the like kind, which might be produc'd here. This wou'd be to suppress that Genius which Foreigners so commonly applaud in the *English*, who if they are not always the Inventors of Arts, are yet allow'd to be no ill Learners, and are often observ'd to improve that Knowledge, which they first receiv'd from others. {...}²¹

Calypso and Telemachus, like *Rosamond*, would be ill fated to have a short life; it had four performances with three more revivals in 1717.²² Obviously, this opera was produced too late as *Rinaldo* had already swept the public away; perhaps if they had

²¹ Ibid. pp. 10–11.

²² Ibid. p. 7.

produced *Calypso* before *Rinaldo*, the message contained in the libretto preface may have been acted upon at an earlier date.

This attempt to correct the “Italian opera controversy” did not create the desired result, however, the English refused to retreat from the operatic scene. The obvious short-term solution until this issue could be resolved was to return to the English masters of the past; the reopening of the Lincoln’s-Inn-Fields theatre in November 1714 ushered in a revival of Purcell’s works.²³ There was a concert performance of *Dioclesian* in 1712, and was produced again from 1715 to 1718.²⁴ In 1715 and 1716, *The Island Princess* and select excerpts of music from *King Arthur* were performed, while in 1715 *The Indian Queen* and *Bonduca* were also revived.²⁵ In addition, other early English operas were produced such as *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*.²⁶ Concurrently, a renewed interest for theatrical masque developed while several of the earlier attempts figuring bilingual operas were revived such as *Camilla*, *Thomyris*, and *Calypso and Telemachus* as mentioned previously, in 1717. The quest to establish a national opera style had not vanished completely.

However, these attempts would not avert what had already been initiated; a rival faction had rallied in opposition to the English cause resulting in the embryonic formation of future conflicting factions. As we have observed, the English had planned to use the influential Italian singers who were present and their style of opera to further their own ambitions, however, it would appear the Italian performers and those affiliated with them developed their own agenda. This group, the “Italian circle” as George Dorris refers to them,²⁷ were apprehensive that these experiments with English opera

²³ For more information concerning which theatres produced the revivals, see White, *English Opera*, pp. 170–171.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 171.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ George E. Dorris, *Paolo Rolli and the Italian Circle in London* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1967), *op. cit.*

would be in direct competition with the fledgling Italian opera in England; they may also have been annoyed with the “mutilation” of their operas.

Strikingly, the English production of *Calypso and Telemachus* had more to contend with than the misfortune of its production occurring after *Rinaldo*. Apparently, this clique devised a despicable plot to foil *Calypso*, for it was reported they had approached the Lord Chamberlain, the Duke of Shrewsbury, to remove the subscription for this opera and to have the theatre opened at the lowest prices if he could not close it down completely.²⁸ The Italian circle was closely associated with the nobility, and with these powerful patrons and their support, they could promote the cause for their own opera; this is one example of how they could exert their influence.

The Gathering of the Italian Circle in London:

The Arcadian Academy and its Influential Members

Subsequent to the formation of the Italian circle an “invasion” had been launched which would prove troublesome to the operatic scene in England for future decades. Surprisingly, this artistic revolution was concerned with the cause of literature rather than music aesthetics; many influential members of the Italian clique in London were part of, or were in connection with the Arcadian Academy, a society that had been established in Rome to reform Italian literature.²⁹ It is important for us to understand this movement and how it affected the opera culture of London as consequently it influenced Handel’s work.

The Academy first developed with the *letterati* who

²⁸ Knapp, ‘A Forgotten Chapter,’ p. 7.

²⁹ Dorris, *Italian Circle*, pp. 27–30.