Handel and Late Baroque Opera

Opera in the late Baroque was dominated by George Frideric Handel (1685–1759), a German by birth, who was in every sense an international figure (see Chapter 24 for a discussion of his life and music). After training in Germany and Italy, he won over the London aristocracy with his opera Rinaldo, in 1711. This was the first Italian opera written expressly for the London stage, and the first of many that Handel wrote for London audiences. The English critics Addison and Steele, unaccustomed to castrato singers and dazzling scenic devices, mocked the work. But the passionate music, spectacular stage effects, and superb soloists enthralled the public: Rinaldo was the most performed opera during Handel’s lifetime.

The opera is based on the epic Jerusalem Liberated (Gerusalemme liberata), an idealized story of the First Crusade (1096–99) by Torquato Tasso in which the nobleman Godfrey de Bouillon captures Jerusalem. In the opera, Godfrey (Goffredo), captain of the Christian armies, promises his daughter Almirena in marriage to the crusader Rinaldo, if he and the other knights can free the city from the Muslims. The sorceress Armida conspires with the enemies by seducing Rinaldo away from his soldiers and abducting Almirena. He rejects her advances, and the conquering army, helped by some magical incantations, successfully rescues Almirena. In the end, the Christian forces are triumphant, and Rinaldo and Almirena are reunited.

This opera presents some of Handel’s most impressive vocal and orchestral writing. There are tender, heartrending laments and florid, bravura arias, accompanied by brilliant coloring with wind instruments. In the aria Molto voglio, molto spero (I have great desire and great hopes), from Act I, the sorceress (Queen Armida) has just arrived in a chariot drawn by two dragons and is planning how to seduce Rinaldo. She is clearly a formidable character, confident in her commanding powers. Her vocal style is forceful and marked, casting aside any doubts through the repeated statements of her desire. Several melismas emphasize her passion, including a rising line on the word conquer (“assoggettar”). This is a fine example of a da capo aria (A-B-A’), performed with rich ornamentation on the return of A by both the instruments and voice.

Listening Guide

Handel: Molto voglio, molto spero (I have great desires and great hopes), Armida’s aria from Rinaldo, Act I

DATE OF WORK: 1711; rev. 1731

GENRE: Italian opera seria

BASIS: Libretto adapted from Gerusalemme liberata, by Torquato Tasso

FORM: Da capo aria (A-B-A’)

Listening Guide continues
CHARACTERS:  
Goffredo, Captain of the Christian armies (castrato role)  
Rinaldo, Christian knight (castrato role)  
Almirena, daughter of Goffredo, betrothed to Rinaldo (soprano)  
Armida, Sorceress and Queen of Damascus (soprano)  
Eustazio, Goffredo’s brother (castrato role)

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:  
Oboe/bassoon duet in ritornello; presents opening vocal theme.  
Dramatic, forceful quality and strong dotted rhythms, depicting dangerous character (Armida).  
Text repetition for emphasis.  
Mostly syllabic singing style, contrasted by several long melismas.  
Clear 3-part da capo structure (A-B-A), sections separated by orchestral ritornelli.  
Vocal and instrumental elaborations on repeat of A (da capo).

SECTION | TEXT | TRANSLATION
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A | Orchestral ritornello  
Molto voglio, molto spero, nulla devo dubitar  
(repeated text) | I have great desires and great hopes,  
I must doubt nothing.  
B | Orchestral ritornello  
Di mia forza all’alto impero  
Saprai il mondo assoggettar. | With the strength of my imperil power,  
I will conquer the world.  
A | Orchestral ritornello  
Molto voglio . . .  
Closing ritornello

Opening of A section, with voice in marked, syllabic style:

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Mol·to vo·glio, mol·to spe·ra·no, null·a de·vo du·bi·tar.
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Rising melismatic line on “assoggettar” (conquer), in B section:

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sa·prel mo·no·di·as·so·gi·tet·tar.
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