

ALCINA

Composed by George Frederic Handel

First Performed : London 1735

Action takes place on the enchanted isle of Alcina

Background

Handel's Alcina is based on the romantic epic, the Orlando Furioso of Ludovico Ariosto (1474--1533). It is the last of three operas the great master chose to base on the poem. Ruggiero and his lover, Bradamante are major characters in the epic; the incident on Alcina's isle, while well developed and splendidly drawn in the poem, is but another vehicle to aid the characterization of the pagan hero and his faithful Christian lover. Which love eventually wins Ruggiero to the Christian side, and to conversion.

His early life was spent in the tutelage of the sorcerer, Atlante, in the mountains of No. Africa. When he divined the hero's eventual betrayal and death, the sorcerer transported him to Alcina's domain, where he might escape his fate at her court. Bradamante and Melisso (the latter--a magician consort of Merlin and descendant of King Arthur--is the feminine, Melissa, in the epic) come to the enchanted island to rescue Ruggiero.

In Handel's opera conflicting love affairs and their twists provide vehicle for the numerous closed pieces (da capo arias) of the opera seria form. As the drama unfolds, Alcina loves her Ruggiero who, as noted, is loved by Bradamante who comes to the isle disguised as a man (Riccardo) for whom Morgana (beloved by Oronte, Alcina's captain) falls. That should do it for interactive love-triangulation! These relationship dynamics are directly inspired by Ariosto's poem and seem also to suggest tribute to Shakespeare's canon: As You Like It, Much Ado, are works evoked by the dramatic action.

The closed form of the Baroque opera seria work may not be immediately accessible to ears attuned to the modern repertory. The progression from recitative, to da capo aria (inclusive of orchestral ritornello), to entrance of new character, to new recitative, to dance number, to simple choral scoring--all, in fairly unbroken consistency--and all accompanied by basso continuo (cellos, bass viol, cembalo, etc.) may seem stunted to modern ears. But, owing to composition that always propels the drama and never detours or obscures it, one's guard is properly let down for the enchantment. And this is Handel at his best: the smoothing of the edges, orchestration that melds with textual characterizations, sublimity in the arias' emotional forces. Forever after one is a da capo aria adherent!

Synopsis

Act I

Ruggiero, drunk on Alcina's magic idles his time away on her enchanted isle. Bradamante (disguised as her own brother, Riccardo) and Melisso, trusted tutor of Ruggiero's youth, land on the island to persuade Ruggiero to take up his knight errant chores once again. Morgan (the fay) sister to Alcina, falls in love with Bradamante (on first sight, of course) and conducts the wanderers to her sister's palace. There they find Ruggiero who does not recognize his former friends. Alcina sings the lovely aria Di cor mio in which she invites the guests and asks her lover to show them what the marvels of their love (but mostly her witchcraft) have built.

When Melisso and Bradamante try forceful persuasion on him, Ruggiero declaims himself a warrior only for Cupid, and will countenance no other cause: Sieguo Cupido, amo un bel volto / I

follow Cupid now, and love a beautiful visage, not a knightly one...Though not a particularly high tessitura (excepting some ornaments to a few da capo numbers), the role of Ruggiero suggests an original scoring for alto castrato or male soprano. In today's repertory the role is performed by mezzo.

Enter Oberto (soprano trouser role) who mourns the absence of his father, Astolfo. Alcina has transformed this knight, among several other transmogrified humans, into beasts, shrubbery, etc. After he is placated by Alcina and goes off, Morgana now entices Bradamante, making Oronte furious, and Bradamante sings in lively deference to her hosts, but also to deflect loving attention. In her aria she addresses ironic lines to both the former lovers, and wittily, for the nonce, avoids a scene. The next set piece is the powerful *Bramo di trionfar* / I long to triumph, a testimonial by Ruggiero to his passion for Alcina. As a da capo piece it has the slight variation of a release verse of similar tempi to the 'A' section which, when enjoined again, contains more in the way of embellishment: trills, appoggiaturas, etc.

Oronte enters after this declaration and tries to sow the seeds of discord. His ploy: make Ruggiero think Alcina sees a new potential lover in the stranger Riccardo. This will force the sorceress's hand into ousting the newcomer. His *Simplicetto*, *a donna credi*/ Fool! Don't you know better than to believe a woman! is a lighthearted ironic look at the male psyche at war with feminine wiles.

Ruggiero confronts his lover; she maintains her faithfulness in a gently compelling, *Si, son quella* / Yes, I am true. She exits, Bradamante enters to confront Ruggiero and to jar his memory of their love. He shirks her off as an interloper, confirmed now of his lover's constancy. Alcina ends the act (short of a few dance movements) with the powerful and brilliantly scored aria: *Tornami a vagheggiar* / Look upon me tenderly again. This last is a true coloratura soprano vehicle, and interestingly enough, was originally scored for the seconda donna in this opera (Morgana). Artists' demands being of the currency they were in Handel's day, it was given to the prima donna and remains scored for that role in current revivals.

Act I

Finally, the truth will out. Melisso confronts Ruggiero and produces the magic ring (late of the Persian sorceress, Angelica)--It's all in the *Orlando Furioso*, and you would need a scorecard to correctly identify all the characters without it! Which powers restore him from the spell: *Qual portento mi richiama!* / What miracle restores my mind (the latter, a declarative cavatina, with exciting cello/viola sforzando accompaniment. To strengthen his resolve Bradamante reveals herself and her masculine disguise. Ruggiero is incredulous. She sings the allegro vivace aria, *Vorrei vendicarmi* / I would be avenged! with its breakneck velocity 'A' section and contrasting slow 'B' section. It is another mezzo gem, allowing for much adornment in the reprise of the 'A' and ending with a convincing ritornello flourish. The classic Handelian strains!

Speaking of Handelian strains, Ruggiero's subsequent acquiescence to his lover's revelation is a gentle pastoral, *Mi lusinga il dolce affetto* / I am imbued with sweet affection.

In the penultimate scene of Act 2 the powerful sorceress is ensconced in her stronghold (complete with statue of Circe, the fury who transfigured men into beasts) preparing to visit the same fate upon the newcomers. Morgana (prompted by personal motive) counsels delay. Enter the newly restored Ruggiero, who pretends his blood lust (for proof from Alcina's hand against the strangers) is abated. Their efforts succeed in dissuading the sorceress from working her magic.

The trio prepares to escape, but Oronte informs Alcina that they are plotting to overthrow her island and her power.

Alcina sings the aria, Ah! mio cor! schernito sei! / Ah, my heart you are scorned! an expression of her anguish at learning of Ruggiero's deception and turn of heart. Ruggiero, in his remove and a moment of reflection, sings an aria superba, among so many gems of the whole. It is the Verdi prati / Green fields, sylvan woods... An aria evoking the masterpiece from Handel's earlier opera, Xerxes, Ombra mai fu. The hero digresses on the mournful loss it will be once the beautiful surrounds of the enchanted isle are returned to their former state: rocky enclaves, desert and wasteland.

The act closes in Alcina's quarter with dramatic recitative leading to rousing aria (Ombre pallide / Pallid shades). Handel's inspired scoring here does much to heighten the conflicting emotions of the protagonist. It also serves notice on contemporary and predecessor works: that the definitive example for this genre, of sorceresses encumbered by ambiguity, lust for revenge, even heartfelt compassion has now been achieved! Within its cascading rhythms and arched melodies is the invocation to all the Armidas, Alcinas, Orlandos, Rinaldos and Crusaders--tutti innamorati, of the high renaissance and its poets.

Act I

After a brief sinfonia, a Shakespearean interlude unfolds for Morgana and Oronte, now rejoining one another after jealous temptations have perforce dissipated. This time, Oronte can now evince the male side in the struggle with jealousy and betrayal in a love affair. Now, Morgana is suppliant, and he does not lose the opportunity to play "hard to get" before finally acquiescing. In all, a most human exchange, worthy of the Bard is drawn by Handel's music, a lovely aria of proposed reconciliation by the soprano Credete al mio dolore / Believe in my anguish, and an answering compassionate turn by the tenor in Un momento di contento, in which he adjudges that: a single moment of affirmed love is enough to placate the jealous or indignant heart. This is followed by a more serious exchange between the principal characters as Ruggiero takes his leave of Alcina. She has a final scene and aria which announces that only tears remain to her, but she essentially knows that doom is forthcoming. She has tasted defeat at her lover's breaking of her chains, and his resumption of battle regalia.

What remains for the forces of good is to smash the power source: freeing the denizens of the island from their enchanted shapes, and overthrowing Alcina's rule. This they do and is expressed in the opera's only concerted music for the principal voices before a bright choral exultation brings down the curtain.