

JULIUS CAESAR by George Frederick Handel

ACT I

Julius Caesar is pursuing his rival Pompey, whom he has recently defeated in battle, and arrives in Egypt in search of him. The Egyptians welcome him and praise his victory. Cornelia, Pompey's wife, and Sesto, their son, come before Caesar to beg for mercy. But it is too late: the Egyptian King Tolomeo, in order to gain favour with Caesar, has made Caesar a gift of Pompey's severed head. Caesar is displeased, and warns the Egyptian General Achilla, who has delivered the head, that Tolomeo will be punished. Cornelia tries to kill herself, but is stopped by the Roman tribune Curio, who offers to marry her. Cornelia rejects him, and laments her fate. Sesto vows to avenge Pompey's murder.

Meanwhile, at the Egyptian court, Cleopatra, who rules Egypt by her brother Tolomeo's side, learns of Tolomeo's clumsy attempt to gain Caesar's favour. Cleopatra, who thinks she could rule Egypt more effectively without her incompetent brother, makes her own plan to gain Caesar's favour by seducing him. The Egyptian General Achilla breaks the news to Tolomeo that the gift of Pompey's severed head has angered Caesar. Achilla promises to assassinate Caesar if Tolomeo will reward Achilla with Cornelia's hand in marriage.

Caesar is in his camp, contemplating Pompey's funeral urn, when Cleopatra enters in disguise. All goes according to plan, and Caesar is enchanted by the great beauty of Cleopatra, who introduces herself as Lydia, a noblewoman oppressed by Tolomeo. Cleopatra is jubilant at Caesar's obvious attraction to her, but hides as she sees Cornelia approaching. Cornelia once again attempts suicide before her husband's funeral urn, but is stopped by Sesto, who promises to ease his mother's grief by killing Tolomeo. Cleopatra emerges from her hiding place, and, still in the guise of Lydia, introduces herself to Cornelia and Sesto. She enlists their help in Cleopatra's struggle to oust Tolomeo.

Caesar arrives at the Egyptian court, where he is welcomed enthusiastically by Tolomeo. Caesar is led away for a tour of the palace, and when Achilla points out Cornelia to Tolomeo, Tolomeo is also attracted to her. Sesto approaches Tolomeo to challenge him to a duel, but Tolomeo reacts by throwing Sesto into prison and relegating his mother to the palace harem. Achilla proposes marriage to Cornelia, but she refuses.

ACT II

Nireno, Cleopatra's confidant, leads Caesar to a palace garden with a view of Mount Parnassus, where Cleopatra plans to continue her seduction of Caesar. Cleopatra is revealed, disguised as Lydia and costumed as the goddess Virtue. She appears to be enthroned on Mount Parnassus. Caesar, overcome with passion, runs towards her, only to find that she has vanished. Nireno promises Caesar that Lydia will meet him later on.

In the harem gardens, Cornelia laments her fate. She thwarts the seduction attempts of first Achilla, then Tolomeo. Sesto, who has been released from prison by Nireno, greets his mother. Nireno offers to help Sesto to assassinate Tolomeo.

Cleopatra, still disguised as Lydia, waits in her apartments for the arrival of Caesar. Cleopatra has fallen in love with Caesar, and he with her, but before they have a chance to tell one another, the Roman tribune Curio bursts onto the scene with the news that Tolomeo's soldiers are after Caesar. Cleopatra quickly explains to Caesar who she really is, then offers to take charge of the situation. When it is suggested that it would be better for him to make a run for it, Caesar scorns that option as unworthy, and goes off to fight the conspirators.

In the harem, Tolomeo announces to Cornelia that she will be sleeping with him that night. Sesto rushes in and tries to stab Tolomeo, but Achilla stops him. Achilla tells Tolomeo that Caesar tried to escape his would-be assassins by jumping out a window into the harbour, and that he has very likely drowned. Achilla also brings the news that Cleopatra, furious that Caesar has been killed, is raising her troops against her brother. Achilla asks for the reward that has been promised him, namely Cornelia's hand, but Tolomeo refuses. Achilla is angered at this refusal and reconsiders his allegiance to Tolomeo. Sesto, gravely disappointed by his botched assassination attempt, tries to kill himself, but is dissuaded by Cornelia. Sesto and Tolomeo both swear vengeance!

ACT III

At the Port of Alexandria, Achilla decides to support Cleopatra in her fight against Tolomeo. But Tolomeo's forces win the battle, and Cleopatra is imprisoned. Caesar, who has managed to swim to shore, comes upon Sesto and Achilla. Achilla has been badly wounded and is about to die, but he explains to Sesto that although he did follow Tolomeo's orders to kill Pompey, he fought on Cleopatra's side in the battle. He hands Sesto a signet ring which will give him command of the Egyptian troops. Caesar steps in and takes over, resolving to rescue both Cleopatra and Cornelia from captivity.

In the palace, Cleopatra is disconsolate until Caesar arrives to rescue her. Caesar drives Tolomeo's guards away, and Cleopatra exults in the prospect of victory.

Meanwhile, Cornelia is fending off Tolomeo with a dagger when Sesto rushes in and slays the Egyptian King.

Caesar and Cleopatra declare their love and celebrate their triumph over Tolomeo at Alexandria's harbor.