

PROGRAMME NOTES

For much of his life in England, George Frideric Handel's fortunes were closely tied to the ups and downs of London's opera scene. Although it had some wealthy promoters, the market for this exotic import was small, unstable and often competitive, and Handel's success depended not only on the quality of his music but also on the star power of his leading singers; one went to the theatre not merely to hear Handel but to hear Handel sung by Francesca Cuzzoni, Faustina Bordoni, or Senesino (all household names among English opera enthusiasts). Part of Handel's art, then, was showing off his singers' unique talents to best advantage, as well as keeping the peace (most of the time) between their strong personalities.

During the last years of Handel's involvement with Italian opera, his go-to soprano was a cosmopolitan singer who went by the name "La Francesina" ("the little Frenchwoman"). Francesina (c 1715–1778) was born Élisabeth Duparc, and acquired her stage name while training and performing in Italy in the early 1730s. She arrived on the London scene in 1736, and became Handel's preferred *prima donna* after singing his *Serse* and *Faramondo* the following season. During the next decade, Francesina created a number of great Handel roles for both (Italian) opera and (English) oratorio, which Handel tailored to her particular abilities as a performer.

Francesina was admired for her appealing beauty of tone and masterful delivery of coloratura. The musical traveller Charles Burney—often a harsh critic—praised her “lark-like execution” and considered the “natural warble” of her voice perfectly suited to music with a “light, airy, pleasing movement”; Handel's close friend Mary Delany remarked that “there is something in her running-divisions that is quite surprizing.” Francesina was also a painter of some accomplishment, and, judging by the opera roles Handel created for her, a skilled actor.

In Handel's *Faramondo*, Francesina portrayed Clotilde, sister of the Frankish king Faramondo. The opera has a tortuous plot that tests the competing loyalties of birth, love and nation: Clotilde enters the scene as a captive in the hands of her brother's sworn enemy, the Cimbrian king Gustavo, and amid the bewildering reversals of the story, she is moved both by anxiety for Faramondo's safety and by newfound love for Gustavo's son, Adolfo.

Deidamia (1741), Handel's very last opera for the London stage, featured Francesina in the title role. In this prequel to the events of the Trojan War, Deidamia falls in love with the youthful Achilles, who is hidden away on the island of Skyros, disguised as a girl, to be raised in anonymity. When the crafty Ulysses arrives to bring Achilles away to his destined death and glory before the walls of Troy, Deidamia is distraught; the aria “M'hai resa infelice” gives us an idea of Francesina's powers of contrasting characterisation, juxtaposing Deidamia's heart-breaking lament with her furious invective against Ulysses.

Semele (1743) and *Hercules* (1744), although their classical subject matter is sufficiently operatic, were written for performance as oratorios—sung, that is, in

English, with chorus, and without staging and acting. Semele, the mortal beloved by Jupiter, appears in the aria "O sleep, why dost thou leave me" in her new (short-lived) bliss, suspended between the pleasures of dreaming and waking. Whereas Semele vainly aspires to immortality, Iole (another captive princess, carried away by Hercules) wishes for the simpler life of a shepherdess, envisioning the pleasures of a "low" but "happy" state.

Rival pleasures also provide the theme of *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (1740), an adaptation of Milton's odes on the claims of the "happy" and "pensive" lives. (Handel later suppressed the un-Miltonic *Moderato* section, which praised the middle virtue of Moderation with easy-going Georgian verses like this: "Keep, as of old, the middle way, / Nor deeply sad, nor idly gay, / But still the same in look and gait, / Easy, cheerful and sedate.") The bird addressed by *Penseroso* is Philomel, the nightingale, whose "evensong" is associated (in contrast to *Allegro's* lark) with deep, mournful and religious themes. This is one of a number of birdsong arias that Handel wrote for Francesina (they must have suited her "lark-like execution") and combines the picturesque instrumental writing typical of such pieces with unusually poignant harmonies suited to the song of the nightingale.

More representative of the oratorio genre is *Joseph's* biblical drama, treating Joseph's rise to power in Egypt and his unexpected reunion with his brothers, who had sold him into slavery out of envy. Asenath, daughter of the high priest and now Joseph's wife, foretells a happy resolution to Joseph's troubles in a brilliant virtuoso aria that testifies to Francesina's command of the most demanding passagework.

To this celebration of the symbiosis between composer and performer, Handel and Francesina, Métis composer T. Patrick Carrabré adds a timely new collaboration with the visionary research of forest ecologist Suzanne Simard. Carrabré writes: "Over the past decade I've written a lot of music inspired by water. Since moving to Vancouver, I've also been inspired by the beauty of the forest. As I searched for inspiration, I was immediately drawn in by Suzanne Simard's *Finding the Mother Tree*. Her work is grounded in a lifelong love of the forest, overlaying scientific research with traditional indigenous knowledge and an ability to listen deeply to the land and our nonhuman kin. We desperately need stories like hers that provide opportunities for us to grapple with the complex questions facing us as inhabitants of this planet. I hope that this music provides space for you to engage with Suzanne's sense of beauty and wonder, through both challenges and discoveries, as she pulls us ever deeper into the amazing interconnectedness that is life."