Handel's *Partenope*

A headline in the Times, around the time I first delivered this lecture, declared that "The hottest new trend is towards opera older than Mozart". A worldly reader may have found this no surprise, but it was not always so; one of the biggest obstacles to the enjoyment of the music of Handel has been the librettos, the texts. Watching a Handel opera was rather like being shown a recording of a TV programme by a friend, who used a mixture of the 'Fast Forward' button and the 'Pause' button. The spectacle seemed to consist of rapid passages of unintelligible recitative, in which battles were won and people fell in and out of love with total strangers, interrupted by arias, where the singer expressed his or her feelings in response to the new situation, repeating the same words over and over again for four or five minutes while the action remained stationary.

Even in more times, when a Handel scholar like Winton Dean gave a talk on an opera like *Orlando*, he was implicitly apologising for the complex plots and the da capo arias, and praising the scenes or musical sequences in which Handel was looking forward to the 19th and 20th centuries.

My sole qualification I have for speaking on this subject—apart from loving Handel, having listened to his music for 45 years and his operas for a good 20—is that I can read Italian quite well, and look at a libretto as Handel would have done when he was casting around for a good subject in the difficult years after the collapse of his first company in London and the unexpected success of *The Beggar's Opera* in 1729.

Hence I will approach the music through the words, through the libretto, through all the maligned complexities of the plot and the all-too-static songs; and I will divide my talk into three sections: the first on the story, the second on the language of the arias, and the third, much shorter, on the ways in which the music can *transcend* the words. And it is more of a *talk* than a lecture, more of a *bozzetto* or rough sketch than a finished painting.

Much of what I say about the libretto of *Partenope*, and the spirit in which I approach it, is going to be valid *mutatis mutandis* for any of Handel's Italian operas; but if this lecture achieve nothing else, I hope it will compel you to buy the existing recording, recorded in 1979, but still available on CD.

So let us start thinking about the plot of *Partenope*. Most of Handel's plots seem pretty uniformly absurd to us, and we have to make an effort of imagination to understand why ticket-buying audiences, aristocratic patrons and the composers themselves kept turning to the *romans* of the day (we call them chivalrous 'romances'), as they would later turn to material drawn from *romans* of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (which we call Gothic 'novels' and Romantick 'novels').

At this point, I must add that I have one additional qualification as advocate or 'salesman' of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century opera plots, which you may not expect. About twenty years ago, I developed a mad passion for the plays of Corneille, especially the almost unknown and unperformed Corneille of the *second* half of his career, in the 1660s. I think I am probably the only person in the UK who has read all these later plays frequently in recent years. In making general

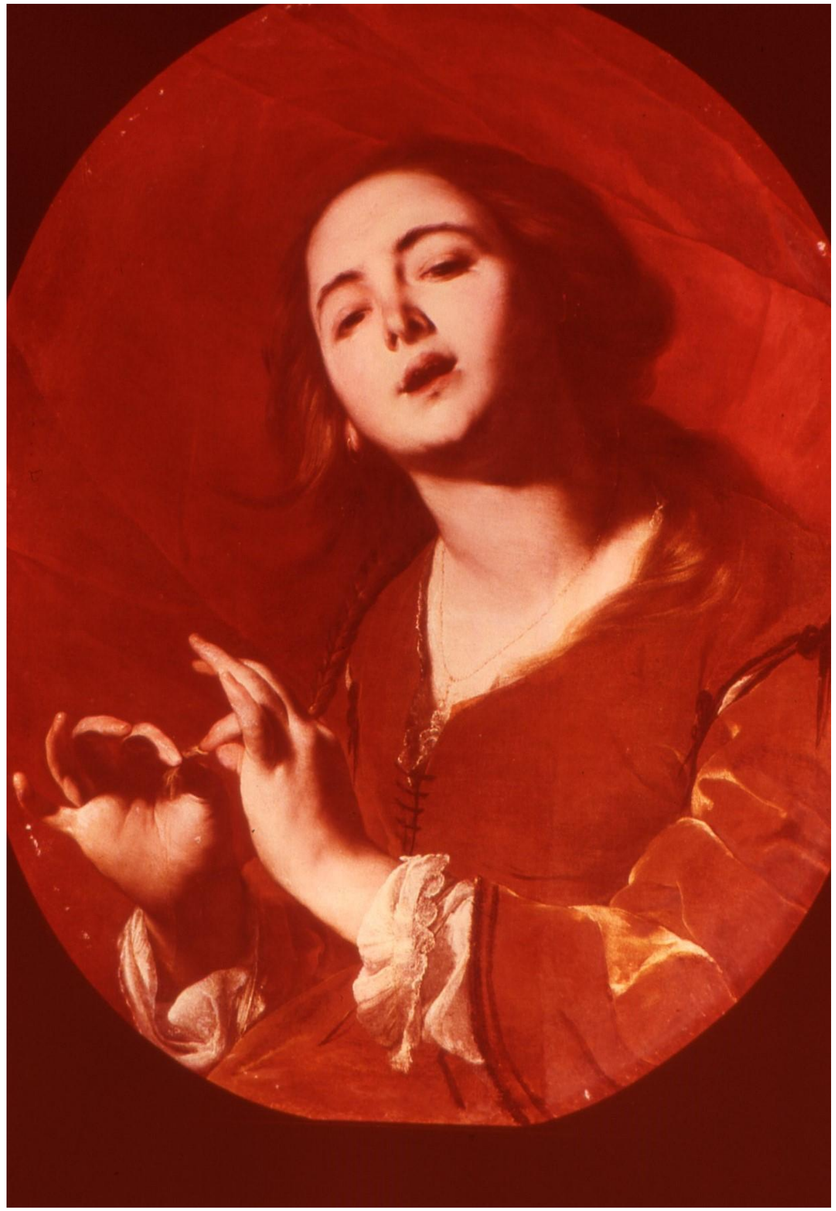

Figure 1: (O_Pa_1) ??? captions required with titles of paintings

The first is a singer, portrayed in the first half of the seventeenth century

by the Neapolitan artist, Cavallino. The second is the vision of Pharoah's lovely daughter by Handel's slightly younger contemporary, Tiepolo (a work now in Edinburgh); the third is an Eastern queen from the classical past, again as imagined by Tiepolo—Cleopatra, with Antony. You might like to imagine Partenope as looking somwhere between these two.

Figure 2: (O_Pa_2) ??? captions required with titles of paintings

Now, two history paintings from the period, with beautiful costumes and armour, and romantic attitudes, showing how classical subjects were visualised in the 1720s and 1730s. On the left is a ceiling fresco by the Venetian Amigoni, born ten years before Handel and very popular in England, showing the meeting between Dido and Aeneas (Partenope and her new city are modelled on Dido and Carthage). On the right is an oil painting by a Neapolitan, Solimena, done in the 1720s and now in our National Gallery, showing Dido and Aeneas again, with Cupid disguised as Ascanius.

They could not be more relevant to our opera, because Partenope's relations to her new city of Naples are modelled on Dido's relations to Carthage. Andrew Jones tells me that he saw a recent production of Partenope which was set on a modern building site; so let this kind of scene serve as a antidote.

At last we turn to the pleasures of the plot, and the reasons why Handel chose to set it to music. It is not easy to summarise, because—as anyone knows who has ever tried to do a synopsis of an early opera—the action is so complicated that the summary is almost as long as the text itself. But I have thought up an ingenious way of taking you through all three acts without muddling you, which I hope will help you to grasp the 'outline': I shall describe *only* those events in which Partenope herself takes part, I will not reveal anything in advance which she, our 'eponymous heroine', does not know at the time, even though the audience gets to know a lot of other facts which are revealed either through 'asides' (addressed directly to us) or through scenes where two of the other characters are on stage alone and say things which Partenope cannot hear.

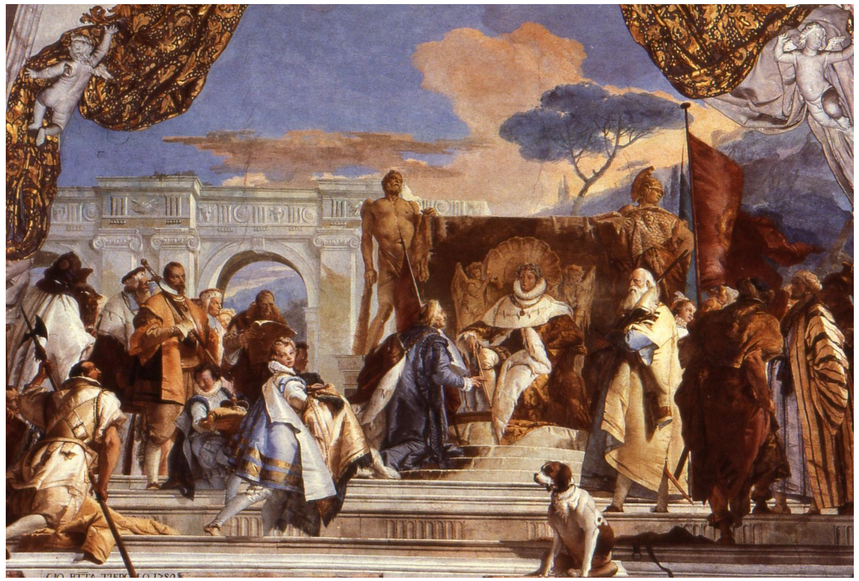

Figure 3: (O_Pa_3) ??? caption required with title of painting

As you would all expect, the characters are rather stereotyped, not much more than cardboard cutouts—'pasteboard', as we say—hardly more individualised than the kings and queens in a pack of playing cards. Let Partenope, then, be our 'queen of diamonds'.The first act introduces us to her at the 'topping out ceremony' for her new city, *nea-polis*, Naples; and we meet her in the company of her established lover, Arsace, who is a very attractive man—a 'king of hearts'.

Barely has she completed the ceremony when an Armenian prince appears on the shore, enterprising (as will appear), who shall be our 'jack of hearts', which in many card games is what is called a 'wild card'. His name is Eurimene, and in no time at all he will declare himself a rival to Arsace for the Queen's hand. The arrival of Eurimene is followed almost at once by an embassy from the local ruler, Emilio, the Italian prince of Cumae, well represented by the 'king of clubs'.

His subjects want him to drive out this new 'colonial power', but he is already in love with Partenope, and while he pretends he wants to win her by force of arms if necessary, he is really willing to throw himself at her feet. So now she has *three* lovers.

The first scene is grand and public, set on the shore of the bay of Naples, but the next is intimate, a room in the palace. Here we meet Armindo, young, 'pale and wan', well represented by the 'jack of diamonds' in our pack. He is secretly in love with the queen, as she knows perfectly well when she teases him, but although she is flattered, she takes the first opportunity to renew her protestation of love to Arsace, in a brief, enchanting duet. What they are really saying is 'Je t'aime moi non plus'.

Emilio first declares war, and then declares himself 'conquered'—but his declaration of war is accepted, and his declaration of love rejected. When Partenope announces that Arsace is to be commander in chief, there is a row between him and the other two local rivals, in which the newcomer Eurimene again charges Arsace with untrustworthiness. So Partenope assumes command of her army herself in the sprightly third aria.

Act two opens with some typically military battle music, while fights and rescues take place on stage. Emilio is taken prisoner, set free, but refuses his liberty. The rivals continue to quarrel, and the sequence ends with a lovely aria by Partenope,

addressed to the 'Dear Walls' of the city she has just completed. Again in a public place, there is more puzzling behaviour from the rivals—Eurimene seems to be taking Armindo's part, before starting another furious row with Arsace, in which Arsace again refuses to respond to his provocation, including a challenge to a duel. This scene ends with Partenope dismissing Eurimene under guard, while singing a splendid aria once again asserting on her love for Arsace, but *again* rather too insistently, as if only in order to annoy Eurimene.

Further baffling behaviour follows, when the injured Arsace now pleads on behalf of Eurimene, but when the Queen is left alone, Armindo enters, and *this* time her teasing makes him reveal that she is indeed the woman he loves. For the third and last time she sings of her unquenchable love for Arsace, in the aria *Qual farfalletta* –

like a butterfly, whirling round the flame.

Act three opens in the same garden in the palace. Partenope is now puzzled to find *Armindo* intervening on behalf of Eurimene. He is allowed back into her presence, renews the challenge to Arsace, and explains he is acting as champion for a lady called Rosmira, whom Arsace 'dumped' in order to court Partenope. Arsace admits the charge, and Partenope breaks off their engagement, speaking alternately words of love to Armindo, and of dismissal to Arsace.

The remainder of the act revolves around the arrangements for the public duel between Eurimene and Arsace. From Partenope's point of view—to which we have limited ourselves—the most important scene is one in which she witnesses Arsace, lying on the ground, apparently talking in his sleep, with Eurimene standing over him, whom he apparently mistakes for Rosmira, and goes on refusing to fight.

And so to the lists, in a great final scene which has to be staged and seen to have its fullest effect. It suffices to say here that the climax comes when Arsace, who has been refusing to take part, suddenly agrees on condition that both of them shall fight without breastplates, and at this point it is Eurimene's turn to show fear or reluctance, because he is none other than Rosmira herself in disguise. Partenope's final aria concerns the inseparability of the pains and pleasures of Love, while all ends happily—with marriages between the queen and her inferior, the jack of diamonds (the successful suitor had to be of the same suit), and between the king of hearts and his true queen, while Emilio is allowed to depart as a brotherly friend.

At this point, I must remind you that my synopsis is written entirely from the point of view of Partenope, and leaves a great deal out: Arsace knows who Rosmira is from the beginning, and so of course do the audience. His public humiliations are due to the fact that he promised not to reveal her identity, and *she*, not Partenope,