

CONCERTS AT THE UNIVERSITY

Autumn - Winter 2016

Friday 14 October 2016

1.10pm

Playfair Library Hall, Old College

Anne Desler • mezzo-soprano

John Kitchen • harpsichord

'Of Ghosts and Monsters'

Arias from Operas by HANDEL, HASSE,

BROSCHI and PORPORA



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Edinburgh College of Art

'Of Ghosts and Monsters' Scenes and Arias from Baroque Operas

In keeping with the Enlightenment principle of the primacy of reason and virtue, the pre-eminent stage genre of the 18th century, the *dramma per musica* (Italian serious opera), most often draws on historical subject matter for its plots. Its protagonists offer the audience lessons in moral fortitude and generous renunciation of their personal interests for the sake of the common good. However, 18th-century audiences liked their share of frisson no less than modern audiences. And thus the mythical creatures that populate modern TV series such as *Atlantis* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* managed to sneak into the most enlightened of historical opera plots. Particularly popular were the ghosts or shades of the deceased as well as the inhabitants of the ancient underworld: Pluto and Proserpine, its king and queen; the boatman Charon, who ferried the souls of the departed across the dark rivers, Styx, Acheron and Lethe; Cerberus, the giant three-headed dog, who guarded the entrance to Hell; and the Furies, who persecuted and tortured both dead and living evil-doers. Yet the appearance of such characters was an important tool in singers', poets' and composers' arsenal to realise the educational aim of the *dramma per musica*, i.e., to touch their audiences emotionally: the thrill of the supernatural gave highly charged situations special poignancy. Today's programme explores such situations, ranging from the fierce remorse of the murderous villain Artabano and the raging madness of the mighty Orlando to the deeply-felt love of the generous-hearted Dario.

'Fammi combattere' From *Orlando* (act I, scene 9), HWV 31

Libretto: Carlo Sigismondo Capece (1652-1728)
Music: George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

First performed at the Haymarket Theatre in London in 1733, *Orlando* was the last collaboration between Handel and the star castrato, Francesco Bernardi, 'Senesino', who created most of Handel's heroic protagonists, including Richard I 'Lionheart' (*Riccardo I*, 1719), Julius Caesar (*Giulio Cesare*, 1724) and Alexander the Great (*Alessandro*, 1726). *Orlando* was based on the famous 16th-century epic poem, *Orlando furioso* (*Raging Roland*) by Ludovico Ariosto.

Orlando (Roland), nephew of Charlemagne and the mightiest among his knights, loves Angelica, the queen of Cathay. Angelica, who is secretly engaged to an ordinary soldier, Medoro, pretends to return Orlando's love. Trying to keep him at a distance, Angelica feigns that she believes Orlando to be unfaithful to her. The

latter protests his loyalty and offers to battle monsters and the creatures of hell in her honour to prove his love.

Orlando:

Fammi combattere
Mostri e tifei
Nuovi trofei
Se vuoi dal mio valor.

Tell me to fight
monsters and hellish creatures
if you would have my valour
earn new trophies for you.

Muraglie abbattere,
Disfare incanti,
Se vuoi ch'io vanti
Darti prove d'amor.

Tell me to tear down walls,
dispel enchantments,
if you want me
to prove my love.

'Eccomi al fine – Pallido il sole' From *Artaserse* (act II, scene 15)

Libretto: Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782)
Music: Johann Adolf Hasse (1699-1783)

Premiered at the most prestigious opera house in Venice, the Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo, in 1730, *Artaserse* (*Artaxerxes*) became one of the most widely performed operas of the 18th century. The production's tremendous success was ensured by the participation of two of the most famous singers of the 18th century, the castrati Carlo Broschi 'Farinelli' (as Arbace) and Nicola Grimaldi 'Nicolini' (as Artabano). By this time, the 57-year-old Nicolini 'spoke more than he sang', but he was internationally admired as the greatest actor of the period. Exerting great power as the production's director, Nicolini may well have written the text of the present scene as a showcase for his acting.

Artabano, captain of the royal guard of Persia, seeks to extinguish the royal family in order to crown his own son, Arbace, king. He has successfully murdered the king and incited the crown prince to execute his younger brother for the crime. However, suspicion falls on Arbace, and Artabano, who is appointed as his judge, has to sentence his own son to death by decapitation. In vain Artabano tries to free Arbace from prison – his virtuous son chooses death over participation in his father's evil plans.

At the end of act II Artabano, finally alone, crumbles under the pressure of the situation. He has a vision in which Arbace is executed and returns to haunt him as a ghost. The grizzly visual imagery would have been familiar to the audience at a time when public executions were commonplace.

Artabano:

Eccomi al fine in libertà del mio
Dolor. Che feci mai? Che dispietato
Padre! O misero Arbace! Io ti perdei!
Già spettacol funesto... agli occhi miei
Ti veggo: Odo gli accenti, odo i
singhiozzi Dell'innocente vittima... Deh!
ferma, Carnefice, la scurre! ... Ah! che
già piomba Il colpo, e il capo, o Dio!
reciso e tronco Sugli omeri sen cade...
Ah! ch'egli è morto!
Ahimè! Dove m'ascondo?
Qui la bipenne incontro
Qui trovo il feral palco, il manigoldo
Là mi spaventa, e là l'informe busto
M'inorridisce. Ah! che la pallid'ombra
Ver me s'affretta. Chi mi salva? Dove
Mi celo! O Dio, non posso
Sostener la sua vista. O caro figlio,
Perdona al mio rossor. Svenami, figlio!
Ma che... vaneggio? Al mio rimorso
ancora Il figlio vive, e se salvai me
stesso, Il caro Arbace mio non cada
oppresso.

Pallido il sole, torbido il cielo,
Pena minaccia, morte prepara.
Tutto mi spira rimorso, e orror.

Timor mi cinge di freddo gelo,
Dolor mi rende la vita amara,
Io stesso fremo contro il mio cor.

'Ombra fedele anch'io'
From *Idaspe* (act II, scene 11)

Libretto: Pietro Candi (fl.1700s)
Music: Riccardo Broschi (1698-1756)

Riccardo Broschi's setting of *Idaspe* preceded *Artaserse* in the 1730 season at the Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo. Nicolini had appeared in the title role in different settings of the libretto for 25 years; the 1710 London version, *Hydaspes*, was possibly the most successful production of an Italian opera in England in the 18th century due to Nicolini's celebrated amphitheatre battle with a lion. However, the

Here I am at last, free from my sorrow.
What have I done? What a merciless father
I am! Oh poor Arbaces! I have lost you!
The tragic spectacle...forms before my
eyes...I see you: I hear the sighs, I hear the
sobs of the innocent victim... Please! hold,
executioner, the blade! ... Ah! the blow is
coming down, and his head, oh God, cut off,
severed, falls from his shoulders...
Ah! He is dead!
Alas! Where shall I hide?
Here I meet with the double-edged blade,
over here the deadly scaffold, the headsman
over there frightens me, and the shapeless
body down there horrifies me. Ah! the pale
shade hurriedly advances towards me? Who
will save me? Where can I hide! Oh God, I
cannot bear his gaze. Oh my dear son,
forgive me in my shame! Kill me, my son!
But what is this? ... I am delirious. Whilst I
feel the pangs of remorse, my son is alive,
and, since I have saved myself, my dear
Arbaces shall not die, either.

Pale is the sun, turbulent the sky,
pain threatens, death looms.
It all inspires remorse in horror in me.

Fear girds me with a chain of ice,
sorrow renders my life bitter,
and I feel revolted by my own heart.

present aria was sung by Farinelli, renowned for his beautiful voice and decorous stage demeanour, in the role of Dario, the general of the Median army.

Dario loves princess Mandane and is loved by her in return. However, Mandane tests Dario's loyalty by telling him that she has decided to marry the king of Persia as she values power and glory more than Dario's love. Though deeply hurt and offended, Dario quells his initial anger. He professes his undying love for Mandane, vowing to follow her as a faithful shade even into the underworld.

Similar allusions to the Orpheus myth frequently appear in aria texts written specifically for (or possibly by) Farinelli at this time; they constituted a means of self-promotion in that Farinelli strategically created an association between himself and the greatest singer of ancient mythology.

Dario:

Ombra fedele anch'io
Sul margine di Lete
Seguir vuo all'idol mio
Che tanto adoro.

As a faithful shade I, too,
to the banks of the river Lethe
will follow my dearest beloved
whom I adore so very much.

Che bella pace è questa,
Che a consolar se n' resta
Il mio martoro.

This thought gives me gentle peace,
and it is all that is left to console me
in my torment.

'Ah, stiglie larve – Vaghe pupille'
From *Orlando* (act II, scene 11)

Libretto: Carlo Sigismondo Capece (1652-1728)
Music: George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Act II holds a rude awakening for Orlando: he finds a carving in a tree that commemorates Angelica's and Medoro's wedding. Desperately unhappy and unable to bear Angelica's duplicity, the honest, upright knight loses his sanity. Raging against humans and nature, he uproots trees, casts off his weapons and armour and goes in search of the deceitful couple. When he finds them, Orlando believes that his grief has killed him and his soul is traveling to the underworld. There he mistakes Angelica for Proserpine and Medoro for one of the furies.

This scene defies the conventional structure, i.e., a recitative followed by a da-capo aria. Instead it is a through-composed succession of recitative and arioso sections as well as a *gavotte* (dance) theme, illustrating Orlando's mental instability. At the same time it was conceived to make maximum use of Senesino's excellent abilities at expressive and heroic singing as well as acting.

Orlando:

Ah, stigie larve! Ah, scellerati spettri,
Che la perfida donna ora ascondete!
Perchè al mio amor offeso,
Al mio giusto furor, non la rendete?
Ah, misero e schernito,
L'ingrata già m'ha ucciso!
Sono lo spirito io da me diviso.
Sono un'ombra... e qual ombra adesso
io voglio
Varcar là giù ne' regni del cordoglio.
Ecco la stigia barca!
Di Caronte a dispetto
Già solco l'onde nere. Ecco di Pluto
Le affumicate soglie, e l'arso tetto.

Già latra Cerbero
E già dell'Erebo
Ogni terribile
Squallida furia
Se n' viene a me.

Ma la furia, che sol mi diè martoro
Dov'è? Questa è Medoro -
A Proserpina in braccio
Vedo che fugge. Or a strapparla io
corro.
Ah! Proserpina piange!
Vien meno il mio furore
Se si piange all'inferno anco d'amore.

Vaghe pupille, no, non piangete, no,
Che del pianto ancor nel regno
Può in ognun destar pietà.
Vaghe pupille, non piangete, no.

Ma sì, pupille, sì, sì, piangete sì,
Che sordo al vostro incanto
Ho un core d'adamanto,
Nè calma il mio furor,
Ma sì, pupille, sì, sì, piangete sì!

Ah, Stygian ghosts! Ah, wicked spectres
who now hide the perfidious woman from me!
Why will you not give her up to my
offended love and outrage?
Ah, miserable and rejected am I,
the ingrate has in fact killed me!
I am my soul severed from myself,
I am a shade... and as a shade I shall now
travel down there, to the kingdoms of
heartache.
There is the Stygian boat!
In spite of Charon I am already
traversing the dark waves. And here are
Pluto's smoky lands and burnt roof.

Cerberus is barking
and all the horrible,
pale furies
of Erebus
are rushing towards me.

But that one fury, the only one that gave me
pain, where is it? That one is Medoro -
I see it flee
into Proserpina's arms. I will run and tear it
away.
Ah! Proserpina is crying!
My rage abates
if even in hell she will still weep for love.

Pretty eyes, no, don't cry, no,
for even in this kingdom tears can
instil mercy in anyone.
Pretty eyes, no don't cry, no.

But yes, eyes, yes, do cry, yes,
for, deaf to your enchantments,
my heart is as hard as a diamond,
nor will my anger relent.
But yes, eyes, yes, do cry, yes!

Senti il fato' From *Polifemo* (act III, scene 6)

Libretto: Paolo Antonio Rolli (1687-1765)

Music: Nicola Porpora (1686-1768)

The vastly successful *Polifemo* (*Polyphemus*) was produced at the Haymarket Theatre in 1735 as part of the second season of the so-called 'Opera of the Nobility', which Senesino had co-founded in 1733 in opposition to Handel's opera company. Senesino appeared in the role of Ulisse (Ulysses), but the main attraction was Farinelli, who had made a sensational debut in London in 1734, as Aci (Acis).

All seems lost when the giant cyclops Polifemo murders his rival in love, the shepherd Aci, by crushing him with an enormous rock. But, angered by Polifemo's bragging that is more powerful than Jupiter himself, Jupiter decides to thwart the cyclops: he transforms Aci into a river that flows forth from the rock and makes him the river's deity. Meanwhile Ulisse blinds Polifemo. Aci is reunited with his beloved, the nymph Galatea, and Polifemo is cast into the underworld.

In the bravura aria 'Senti il fato' Aci rejoices in his good fortune and taunts Polifemo. Throughout the aria, contrasts between high and low passages serve not only to illustrate Aci's ascent to the heavens and Polifemo's descent into the underworld, but also to highlight Farinelli's wide vocal range.

Aci:

Senti il fato,
Ch'è già fisso:
Io beato,
Io giocondo,
Ho sede in ciel.
Te crudel
Il profondo
Cieco abbisso
Aspetterà.

Già Caronte
Per orrore
Nel naviglio
Per stupore
Del orrore
Inarcha il ciglio:
Mostro tale
Senza uguale
Archeronte
Varcherà.

Listen to what fate
has decreed:
Blessed I,
happy I
have a seat in the heavens.
Cruel you
the profound,
blind abyss
awaits.

Charon,
horror-stricken
in his boat,
in a daze of
horror
raises his eyebrows:
Such a monster
without equal
will traverse
the river Acheron!

Dr **Anne Desler** is a performer-scholar specialising in 18th-century Italian opera. She has published articles and book chapters on star singers' artistic profiles and their influence on dramatic and musical performance practice as well as on music historiography. Current research projects include monographs on the star castrati Farinelli and Nicolini.

As a singer, Anne has appeared in baroque opera productions and concerts in the US and Europe with Europa Galante, The Los Angeles Baroque Orchestra and Modo Antiquo, among others, in venues such as the Opéra de Paris, Sala Verdi (Milano), Teatro Massimo (Palermo), Philharmonie Köln (Cologne) and the Getty Centre (Los Angeles). Her rendition of the title role in the first complete recording of Vivaldi's *Orlando furioso* earned international critical acclaim.

Anne holds a DMA (Doctor of Musical Arts) in Historical Performance Practice from the University of Southern California and a PhD in Musicology from the University of Glasgow. She taught both music and drama at Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance and the University of Hull before joining the University of Edinburgh in 2014. Anne is Director of Performance for the Reid School of Music.

After 27 years as a Senior Lecturer in Music in the University of Edinburgh, **John Kitchen** has now retired from teaching, and is an Honorary Fellow in the Reid School of Music. He continues as University Organist, as Director of the Edinburgh University Singers, and he will continue to be involved with the Raymond Russell Collection of Early Keyboard Instruments at St Cecilia's Hall when the Hall reopens in spring 2017.

John is also Director of Music of Old Saint Paul's Episcopal Church and Edinburgh City Organist with duties at the Usher Hall. He gives many solo recitals both in the UK and further afield, and also plays regularly with several ensembles, covering a wide range of musical styles. In addition, he is much in demand as a continuo player, accompanist, lecturer, writer, adjudicator and reviewer.

John has recorded extensively for both Priory and for the Edinburgh-based label, Delphian Records (which was named Gramophone Label of the Year 2014). His most recent Delphian CD *Gaudeamus igitur*, released in June this year, was recorded on the recently-restored McEwan Hall organ in the University of Edinburgh. John was awarded an MBE 'for services to music' in the recent Queen's Birthday Honours.