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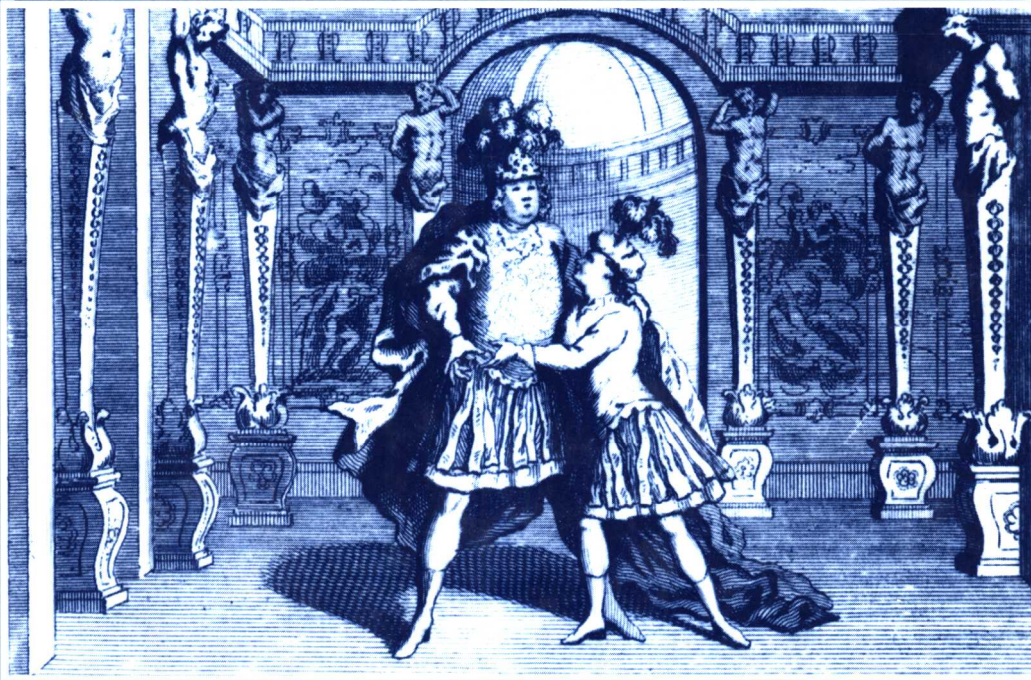
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# FADEL AND HIS SINGERS

*The Creation of the Royal  
Academy Operas, 1720–1728*



C. STEVEN LARUE



Royal Academy Op

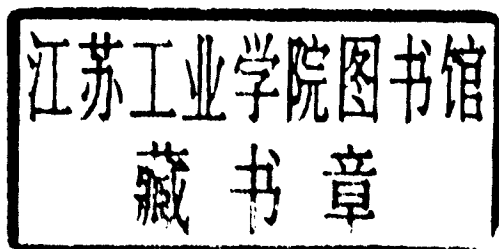
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C.S.L.

*Middleton, Wisconsin*

## *Abbreviations*

### *Libraries:*

A-Wn	Austria: Vienna, Oesterreichische Nationalbibliothek
D-Hs	Germany: Hamburg Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek
GB-Cfm	Great Britain: Cambridge Fitzwilliam Museum
GB-Lbl	Great Britain: London British Library

### *Publications:*

Burrows and Ronish	Donald Burrows and Martha Ronish, <i>A Catalogue of Handel's Musical Autographs</i> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
Dean and Knapp	Winton Dean and John Merrill Knapp, <i>Handel's Operas: 1704–1726</i> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).
Deutsch	Otto Erich Deutsch, <i>Handel: A Documentary Biography</i> (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1955; repr. New York: Da Capo, 1974).
Gibson	Elizabeth Gibson, <i>The Royal Academy of Music 1719–1728: The Institution and its Directors</i> (Outstanding Dissertations in Music from British Universities, ed. John Caldwell, New York: Garland, 1989).
HG	Friedrich W. Chrysander, (ed.), <i>G. F. Händels Werke: Ausgabe der Deutschen Händelgesellschaft</i> (Leipzig and Bergedorf bei Hamburg, 1858–94, 1902).
HWV	Händels Werke Verzeichnis; see Bernd. Baselt, <i>Händel-Handbuch</i> i–iii (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1978, 1984, 1986).

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## Cast, Librettist, Composer

ALTHOUGH in modern times we most often think of the composer as being the central figure in the creation of an opera, in the first half of the eighteenth century the opera-composer's artistic choices were often considered to be so limited as to be insignificant. 'Before he actually starts to write the music', wrote Benedetto Marcello in 1720, 'the composer should pay calls to all the female singers in the company and offer to include anything they would care to have, such as arias without a bass in the accompaniment, *furlanette*, rigadoons, etc., all with the violins, the bear, and the extras accompanying in unison.'<sup>1</sup> Sarcastic comments such as these eventually gave way to serious attacks on the artistic integrity of opera, the culmination of which was Gluck's dedicatory essay for the first published edition of his *Alceste* in 1769:

When I undertook to write the music for *Alceste*, I resolved to divest it entirely of all those abuses, introduced into it either by the mistaken vanity of singers or by the too great complaisance of composers, which have so long disfigured Italian opera and made of the most splendid and most beautiful of spectacles the most ridiculous and wearisome.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that singers appeared to be dominating the operatic world from the time of Marcello's pamphlet to Gluck's dedication<sup>3</sup> was largely due to the conventions of the form that had developed in the early decades of the century. As Winton Dean and J. Merrill Knapp have noted, '*opera seria* was geared to the solo voice; audience and singers alike expected and appreciated this'.<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that it was neither the focus on the soloist that the genre entailed nor the popularity of the virtuosi that the opposition seems to have found most objectionable; instead, the power of the singers to influence or rather interfere with the creative

<sup>1</sup> *Il teatro alla moda* (Venice, 1720), trans. by Reinhard G. Pauly in *Musical Quarterly*, 34 (1948): 382.

<sup>2</sup> A. Einstein, *Gluck*, trans. by Eric Blom (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1936), 98–100; repr. in O. Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History: The Classic Era* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965), 99–100.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, singers' domination of opera began as early as the second half of the seventeenth century, and their influence on its creation is evident even in Monteverdi's works; see E. Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991), 221–44.

<sup>4</sup> Dean and Knapp, 12.

process of the composer and the librettist,<sup>5</sup> and the willingness (or the financial necessity) of the opera's creators to bow to the wishes of the singers was for a number of obvious reasons increasingly considered a corruption of the aesthetics of *opera seria*. Gluck does not, therefore, deride *opera seria* on principle (indeed, he himself contributed numerous examples to the repertoire); instead, he speaks of 'divesting it (*spogliarla*)' of 'abuses (*abusi*)' introduced by the 'mistaken vanity (*malintesa vanità*)' of singers and the 'complaisance (*compiacenza*)' of composers. Such careful wording implies a loss of understanding of the ideal of *opera seria* by composers and performers rather than a lack of merit in the form itself.

While the critics may have been overreacting to what they saw as the singers' position of artistic authority in the opera-house, their realization that the singers had considerable influence on the artistic aspects of opera composition was entirely accurate. Our knowledge of the process of opera composition at that time makes it clear that the first consideration of composer and librettist was the cast available and their individual abilities;<sup>6</sup> only after the cast had been determined could the process of choosing, adapting, and setting a libretto begin. As a result of this process, the underlying aesthetic of eighteenth-century *opera seria* was not based on its lasting value, but on its ability to utilize the musico-dramatic potential of a particular cast for a particular performance, and it is in fact this aspect of the genre that has been most universally criticized from Marcello's day to the present.

Certainly the most widely accepted critical view of eighteenth-century *opera seria* from the beginning of that century until the present is that at that time the opera was characterized by the singers' interference with and domination of the composers' and librettists' aesthetic integrity.<sup>7</sup> Marcello's pamphlet summarizes the view still held by many of *opera seria* as a shameless commercial enterprise in which the composers were victims of the monetary considerations of impresarios and the vain whims of singers. That the aesthetic aspects of *opera seria* production were not entirely controlled by those who stood to gain the most financially was recognized as early as 1726, however, by the German traveller Johann Christoph Nemeitz. In his *Nachlese besonderer Nachrichten von Italien*, published only six years after Marcello's *Teatro alla moda*, Nemeitz related the following about his impression of Faustina Bordoni and about the influence of the opera-singer on composers in general:

<sup>5</sup> For the most recent argument along these lines, see J. P. Larsen, 'The Turning Point in Handel's Career', *American Choral Review* (summer/fall 1989): 55-62.

<sup>6</sup> R. Strohm, *Essays on Handel and Italian Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 97.

<sup>7</sup> For a survey of writings concerning *opera seria* and its 'reform' from the 17th cent. until the 1970s, see R. Freeman, *Opera without Drama* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1981).

I heard at the theatre of San [Giovanni] Grisostomo in Venice among others the celebrated Faustina, who always sang the first part of an aria exactly as the composer had written it but at the da capo repeat introduced all kinds of *douplements* and *maniere* without taking the smallest liberties with the rhythm of the accompaniment; so that a composer sometimes finds his arias, in the mouths of their singers, far more beautiful and pleasing than in his own original conception.<sup>8</sup>

Although Nemeitz's comment clearly refers to ornamentation, it is particularly interesting for the larger implications it carries concerning the artistic relationship between singer and composer. The very fact that Nemeitz's comment does not represent the opinion of a professional musician, theorist, partisan society member, or modern scholar suggests that the audience for early eighteenth-century *opera seria* was not unaware of the role of the singer in the best (as well as the more commonly documented worst) aspects of the composer's craft. Furthermore, the importance of vocal ornamentation (an element of opera performance entirely controlled by the singer) to the aesthetic impact of the music is plainly stated.

While the significance of the cast to the creation of *opera seria* has only in recent years been seriously examined by modern scholars,<sup>9</sup> the importance of the cast to the production of successful operas was certainly not lost on the directors of the Royal Academy of Music, who in 1719 began to lay the foundation for an opera company that was soon to rival the most prestigious houses on the Continent.<sup>10</sup> As the following document makes clear, their first task toward actually producing an opera was to establish a company of singers, the choice of which was entrusted to the 'Master of Musick', George Frideric Handel:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> (Leipzig, 1726), trans. Kees Vlaardingerbroek, as 'Faustina Bordoni Applauds Jan Alensoon: A Dutch Music-Lover in Italy and France in 1723-4', *Music & Letters*, 72 (1991): 547.

<sup>9</sup> See esp. D. J. Grout, *Alessandro Scarlatti: An Introduction to His Operas* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1979); J. W. Hill, 'Vivaldi's *Griselda*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 31 (1978): 53; R. Strohm, *Die italienischen Oper im 18. Jahrhundert* (Wilhelmshaven: Heinrich-Schofen, 1979), and *Essays*; Dean and Knapp; for an examination of 17th-cent. opera and its conventions that is particularly sensitive to the thoughts and influences of all parties concerned in the creation of opera in the first century of its existence, see Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*.

<sup>10</sup> For information about the founding and establishment of the Royal Academy of Music, see J. Milhous and R. D. Hume, 'New Light on Handel and the Royal Academy of Music', *Theatre Journal*, 35 (1983): 149, and 'The Charter for the Royal Academy of Music', *Music & Letters*, 67 (1986): 50; Dean and Knapp; J. M. Knapp, 'Handel, the Royal Academy of Music, and its First Opera Season in London (1720)', *Musical Quarterly*, 45 (1959): 145; Gibson. Gibson's work also examines the directors of the academy in terms of their educations, musical interests, knowledge of opera, and other factors that influenced their direction of the Royal Academy.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout this book, Handel will be referred to by the spelling of his name that he ultimately used in England, his adoptive country from 1727 until the end of his life: see W. Dean, and A. Hicks, *The New Grove Handel* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 1, and Deutsch, 202-5.

Warrant to M<sup>r</sup> Hendel to procure Singers for the English Stage,

Whereas His Majesty has been graciously Pleas'd to Grant Letters Patents to the Severall Lords and Gent. mention'd in the Annex't List for the Encouragement of Operas for and during the Space of Twenty one Years, . . . I do by his Majestys Command Authorize and direct You forthwith to repair to Italy Germany or such other Place or Places as you shall think proper, there to make Contracts with such Singer or Singers as you shall judge fit to perform on the English Stage. And for so doing this shall be your Warrant Given under my hand and Seal this 14<sup>th</sup> day of May 1719 in the Fifth Year of his Ma<sup>ty</sup> Reign.

To M<sup>r</sup> Hendel Master  
of Musick. . . .

Holles Newcastle.

Instructions to M<sup>r</sup> Hendel.

That M<sup>r</sup> Hendel either by himself or such Correspondenc<sup>s</sup> as he shall think fit procure proper Voices to Sing in the Opera.

The said M<sup>r</sup> Hendel is impower'd to contract in the Name of the Patentees with those Voices to Sing in the Opera for one Year and no more.

That M<sup>r</sup> Hendel engage Senezino as soon as possible to Serve the said Company and for as many Years as may be.

That in case M<sup>r</sup> Hendel meet with an excellent Voice of the first rate he is to Acquaint the Gov<sup>r</sup> and Company forthwith of it and upon what Terms he or She may be had.

That M<sup>r</sup> Hendel from time to time Acquaint the Governor and Company with his proceedings, Send Copys of the Agreem<sup>ts</sup> which he makes with these Singers and obey such further Instructions as the Governor and Company shall from time to time transmit unto him.

Holles Newcastle.<sup>12</sup>

Although there is little question that the directors of the Royal Academy placed Handel in a unique position compared to his Continental colleagues, the directors' understanding of the necessity of establishing a cast before any other aspect of production could take place is significant for a number of reasons. First, the desire on the part of the Academy to create authentic Italian opera in London is evident from their instructions to Handel to procure singers from the Continent, most of whom were Italian themselves, and all of whom were professional opera-singers well versed in the Italian conventions and style; although English singers were engaged at various times in the Academy's eight-year history, their employment was in most (not all) cases a compromise. Second, the primary importance of establishing a cast makes clear that the directors of the Academy were committed to producing newly created operas, and that they realized the necessity of determining who their singers were before the composers and librettists could begin their work; their desire to send Handel to the Continent in search of a cast as the first step in the produc-

<sup>12</sup> Deutsch, 89-90.

tion process implies both an understanding of and an acceptance of the aesthetic and practical conventions of the *opera seria* of the time. Clearly one of the directors' desires, therefore, was to create Italian opera in London as it was created in Italy and the various other European opera centres of the day, a statement that is supported by the educations and backgrounds of most of the directors, many of whom had been on the grand tour.<sup>13</sup>

What was the nature of the relationship between the cast, the librettist, and the composer, and why was it so significant to the creation of *opera seria*? Once a cast had been chosen, an appropriate libretto could be written anew or an earlier libretto could be adapted based on considerations of the musical and dramatic capabilities of individual cast members. Certainly there were many instances in which the choice of libretto was made by a royal patron, and the librettist's task became much more one of fitting an existing libretto to the needs of the cast involved. In the numerous public opera-houses and companies that existed in the eighteenth century, however, the choice of libretto was most often that of librettist and impresario.

Most *opera seria* librettos throughout the eighteenth century were created by adapting, rearranging, and/or rewriting previously set librettos; the creative process for the librettist was therefore one of suiting an existing libretto to a given cast, a process that had to take literary, dramatic, and musical conventions into account, and that involved practical as well as aesthetic considerations. Depending upon the circumstances of production, the choice of libretto and its adaptation/writing was potentially influenced by a number of factors, including the sensitivity of the librettist to his cast, the available source-texts, the needs and/or limitations of the composer (if he was known), and the tastes and expectations of the audience and patrons. Once the cast was in place and the libretto topic or source chosen, a complex process began that involved a fragile balance between the wishes and abilities of the individuals involved in the creative process as well as the technical circumstances of the production.

The extent to which a composer had input into the shaping of the new libretto undoubtedly varied considerably, as did the nature of that input. Both a singer's musical abilities and his rank within the cast had to be carefully considered by both composer and librettist. Documented in more than one instance, however, are cases in which the composer was able to influence the librettist's creative process in order to comply with the composer's musico-dramatic plans for a particular role, particularly in terms of aria texts.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, a libretto might very well undergo alterations as the composer began to set it, due to unforeseen musical considerations.

<sup>13</sup> Gibson, 21-107.

<sup>14</sup> Hill, 'Vivaldi's *Griselda*'.



Both the extent and nature of the composer's influence on the libretto adaptation process, therefore, could vary enormously.

Certainly there were other factors that influenced the choice of a libretto and the extent to which it was altered; in the case of the Royal Academy, it is clear that the directors had a specific type of libretto in mind for their opera productions.<sup>15</sup> In other cases, awareness of the singers' individual dramatic strengths and weaknesses in terms of the types of parts chosen for them and their frequent rebellions against their parts once they were complete were clearly influential on the librettist's as well as the composer's work, as were the frequent demands by singers for substitutions of arias from other operas, often by other composers and occasionally requiring new texts.<sup>16</sup>

The composition of the score once the cast had been chosen and the libretto written was for obvious reasons an enormously complicated process, based as it was on a multitude of considerations. By the time the composer began his work, virtually every person involved in the project had had a hand in the opera's genesis, and many remained influential throughout the compositional process. To choose just one possible scenario, consider the circumstances in which a singer that formed part of the projected cast is for whatever reason unavailable for the first performance after the libretto has been written and the composer is at work on his score. In certain circumstances, a replacement singer might sing the part as written, although not written for him, without change. In other circumstances, the entire creative process might begin anew for that part, and the singer available might bring about a change in both the textual and musical part he was to sing based on the desires (of varying degrees) of everyone involved in the production, including himself. The alteration of one part might then lead to alterations in other, related parts, requiring various changes. Each of these considerations were potentially those of the composer, as were in some cases many others.

Because of the numerous parties involved in the production of opera and the potential complexities outlined above, the task of anyone interested in recreating the circumstances and considerations of *opera seria* composition in the eighteenth century must necessarily focus on particular institutions and individuals in order to limit the sphere of possible influences. Because my interest has been in analysing the composer's creative process, this book concerns itself with a single composer who left an extensive legacy of autograph manuscripts for our study and evaluation.

<sup>15</sup> Gibson, 286-7.

<sup>16</sup> R. Freeman, 'Farinello and his Repertory', in R. L. Marshall (ed.), *Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Music in Honor of Arthur Mendel*, (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1974), 301-30; and 'The Travels of Partenope', in H. Powers (ed.), *Studies in Music History: Essays for Oliver Strunk* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 356-85.