

Rinaldo by Händel, the Orpheus of our century

In 1710 Händel was 25 years old, he had a discreet experience as an opera composer (he had already staged six works for the theatre) and had just returned from a long trip to Italy. Starting in 1706, his stay in the Bel Paese had allowed him to form his own musical taste and style thanks to his meeting with the major Italian musicians of the time, such as Corelli, Scarlatti, Lotti and Gasparini.

Now he was in Hanover and had been appointed chapel master in February by the Prince Elector Georg Ludwig, with a good salary of 1000 thalers. The young Händel, however, was not the type to stop permanently at the court in Hanover and after little more than a month he had already moved to Düsseldorf, and then continued on to Holland in September and arrived, at the end of November, in London, England, which would later become his new home.

The organisation of London's theatres at the time was quite different from that of any other European city. The many theatres that had flourished in Shakespeare's time were now only a memory, after the Puritans had ordered their closure in 1642. The restoration of King Charles II brought some theatrical concessions, but neither he nor his successors were able to create a court theatre. Therefore, at the beginning of the 18th century, London's theatres were commercial enterprises entirely dependent on ticket sales. When Händel arrived, two were active: Drury Lane (opened in 1674) and the Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket (opened in 1705, which would later change its name to King's Theatre). The latter was designed and built by John Vanbrugh and had a de facto monopoly on opera performances. The Queen's Theatre allowed to make elaborate scenic changes thanks to the use of backdrops, rotating wings and numerous stage machines. Each act required two or three important changes that took place on sight, with both manual and mechanical manoeuvres. The curtain remained open for the entire duration of the performance and the composers included in the music moments suitable for the operations, which often coincided with sudden changes of tone or similar expedients. Most of the space was reserved to the stage and the machinery for stage manoeuvres, which in special cases could also make use of an additional room at the back of the stage.

It's not easy to determine the exact capacity of the theatre, because the audience didn't have a properly assigned seat, except in the boxes. In the stalls area the audience sat on benches and the capacity of the theatre depended on the distance between the stalls and how close people sat. The Queen's Theatre records help us, showing that it could fit about 670 comfortably seated people and almost 950 in sold out shows.

In this scene came the young and enterprising Händel, called to set to music a new libretto devised by Aaron Hill, the dynamic impresario of the Queen's Theatre, and written in verse by

the poet Giacomo Rossi. It was at the Queen's Theatre, on 24 February 1711, that *Rinaldo* was performed.

Hill took his cue from episodes taken from Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, but the link with the original was tenuous; the industrious impresario introduced, for example, Goffredo's daughter Almirena, a wholly new character that was functional to the plot of the drama.

It was the first Italian opera entirely composed for the English theatre, on a brand new libretto never before set to music. The Italian opera style had already been known in London for some years, but the performances included mostly pastiches and adaptations of known operas, mixing Italian verses with English translations and adapting to the occasion recitatives taken here and there.

For such an important event, Händel was entrusted with an all-Italian company of singers, among whom shone the star of Nicolò Grimaldi (castrated alto), known as Nicolini, in the leading role.

Giuseppe Maria Boschi (bass) was Argante, King of Jerusalem; Goffredo was played by Francesca Vanini-Boschi (alto), his wife. The role of Armida went to Elisabetta Pilotti Schiavonetti (soprano), Isabella Girardeau (soprano) was Almirena and Giuseppe Cassati (castrated alto) was assigned the role of the Christian Magician. The complete cast included Two Sirens, a Herald and the small role of Eustazio, Goffredo's brother, a character that was dropped from the cast in the following years.

Händel did not have much time to compose *Rinaldo's* music, nor did Giacomo Rossi to write the libretto, whose print edition at the time reads:

"Mr. Händel, Orpheus of our century, barely gave me time to write and then I saw, to my amazement, that in only two weeks a full opera had been harmonized by that sublime genius, to the greatest degree of perfection."

With only two weeks' time, Händel was forced to reuse some of the material he had already composed during his stay in Italy, drawing among others on the *Aci, Galatea and Polyphemus* serenade, the oratorio *Il Trionfo del Tempo e del Disganno* and *Agrippina*, works written a few years earlier and still unknown to the London public.

Aaron Hill had in mind an astonishing show with astonishing scenic effects: he used any device that enchanted the audience of the time, like fire-breathing dragons, dancing sirens in pools of water, flying machines, real birds that were let loose to fly on stage, gushing fountains, ghosts and furies. It was a sensation.

Only Richard Steele and Joseph Addison timidly tried to scale down *Rinaldo's* enormous success via the columns of a new magazine, *The Spectator*. Both playwrights had their reasons: Steele, in addition to working for Drury Lane, owned a concert hall, and Händel's triumphs resulted in huge losses of income. Addison, on the other hand, had not yet recovered from the disaster of the opera *Rosamond*, staged at Drury Lane in 1707 and cancelled after only three evenings. Addison had written the verses, but the disappointment was such that he no longer wrote librettos for the theatre.

The Queen's Theatre's box office, on the other hand, sold an enormous amount of tickets every night, attracting spectators from all over the place.

On May 9 the thirteenth and final performance was announced, but the audience was so enthusiastic that it was decided to add two more, bringing the total number to fifteen before the end of the season. Händel himself played the harpsichord, enchanting the audience with improvised pyrotechnics in the final aria of the Second Act *Vo far guerra e vincer voglio* (Armida) and contributing greatly to the success.

Rinaldo's popularity lasted so long that, as long as Händel was alive, 53 encore performances were given in London, making it his most encored work. There were new performances abroad, as well, sometimes with the addition of new arias, as was the case in Naples in 1718 and Hamburg in 1715 and 1723.

After 1711, it came back in London's theatres every year for the next three years, then in 1717 and finally in 1731. The cast alternated singers with different voices, making necessary changes to adapt the roles to the new voices.

The most drastic revision to the score was the one required by the last encore, in 1731. Händel made substantial changes, due to an entirely new cast centred on Francesco Bernardi, known as the Senesino, in the role of Rinaldo. The Senesino was an alto like Nicolini, but he preferred a lower range, forcing the composer to lower the whole role by one tone.

Francesca Bertolli (alto) was assigned the character of Argante, Antonia Merighi (alto) was Armida and Annibale Pio Fabbri (tenor) was Goffredo. The cast was completed by the soprano Anna Strada (Almirena) and the bass Giovanni Giuseppe Commano (the Magician). The role of Eustazio was cut (it had already been suppressed in 1717) and his short recitatives were transferred to Goffredo, as was one of his arias. Händel had to put a heavy hand on the score and made numerous cuts and transpositions, as four characters changed voices.

Here is a summary of the most important changes in the vocal ranges:

	1711	1731
Rinaldo	Alto (Nicolini)	Alto (Senesino)
Armida	Soprano	Alto
Goffredo	Alto	Tenore
Eustazio	Alto	Ruolo soppresso
Mago	Alto	Basso
Argante	Basso	Alto

What Händel did at the time was common practice. In fact the score was frequently reworked by the composer to adapt it to new performances, even years after the premiere. Transpositions were also usually made during rehearsals and it is not uncommon to find in the manuscripts notations of *un tono sopra* or *un tono sotto*. It was also non at all uncommon to include arias from other operas that

were dear to the performer: there was indeed a certain freedom in modifying the score, especially when this was done to satisfy the singers, the real stars around whom the opera world revolved.

After the premiere of *Rinaldo* in 1711, Händel's reputation grew rapidly, so much so that the city literally opened the doors of its theatres to him. England had finally found a new, albeit adopted, national composer who was on the road to great and lasting success.

What was probably striking at the time, and certainly astonishing when performing *Rinaldo* today, is the extraordinary variety of music. The remarkable skills of the orchestras of eighteenth-century London, many of whom were Italian, were certainly a stimulus to broaden the palette of instrumentation. The entire score is a concentrate of different colours, obtained through the use of wind instruments with a soloist function, lively arias full of fury and intense, dramatic and pathetic arias.

Trumpets and timpani introduce the character of Argante and then reappear in the third act for the march of the Christians, in the aria of Rinaldo *Or la tromba in suon festante* and in the assault at the battle of Jerusalem. Great inventiveness and descriptive skill emerges from Almirena's aria *Augelletti che cantate*, in which two recorder flutes and a piccolo imitate the song of the birds (the chronicles of the time tell that at that point some sparrows were left free to flutter above the audience, making the effect even more real).

The bassoon is also used as a solo, as in the aria with oboe obbligato *Ah crudel* (Armida, third act), whose timbre perfectly underlines the mood of the Queen of Damascus. The harpsichord improvisation in the final aria of the second act, the violin solo in Rinaldo's aria of *Venti turbini prestate* and in the Symphony, the oboe as a soloist in Armida's aria *Molto voglio, molto spero* contribute to making the score fresh and sparkling, so that *Rinaldo* still enchants the audience today, with its fascinating timeless magic.

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