

Serse: Back to the Future

Three days after the first performance of the opera *Serse*, staged at the King's Theatre in London on April 15, 1738, these words appeared in the columns of the *London Daily Post*:

“We are informed from very good Authority; that there is now near finished a Statue of the justly celebrated Mr. Handel, exquisitely done by the ingenious Mr. Raubillac [...] out of one entire Block of white Marble, which is to be placed in a grand Nich, erected on Purpose in the great Grove at Vaux-hall-Gardens, at the sole Expence of Mr. Tyers, Undertaker of the Entertainment there; who in Consideration of the real Merit of that inimitable Master, thought it proper, that his Effigies should preside there, where his Harmony has so often charm'd even the greatest Crouds into the profoundest Calm and most decent Behaviour”

In fact, the opera *Serse* was not an overnight success, but Händel's fame and popularity were stronger than ever, so much so that a marble statue was even erected for him (the sculpture has survived to this day and is housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London).

That this is an unusual opera is also evident from the controversial history of its libretto. The author is anonymous, but refers to Niccolò Minato's *Xerse*, which was set to music by Cavalli in 1654. Forty years later, Silvio Stampiglia adapted Minato's libretto for Giovanni Bononcini's *Xerxe*, the composer's first opera (Rome, 1694.) Adapting librettos from the past was a common practice, and these three different interpretations of *Serse* shed light on the rapidly changing tastes and conventions of the theatre at that time. Minato's libretto for Cavalli had to cater to Venetian audiences, who loved complex storylines. The numerous characters gave rise to convoluted developments, in a variety of moods. The audience enjoyed the comedic element, so many humorous situations were inserted into the already intricate plot.

The characters in Cavalli's opera are exactly twice the number we find in Händel's score. *Serse*, Romilda and Amastre each have a servant, with whom they interact and add further impetus to the intrigue. Thus Xerxes is flanked by Eumene, his favourite eunuch, Romilda confides in the page Clito and Amastre is assisted by the old officer Aristone. These are joined by the ambassador Periarco, the two Magi Sesostre and Scitalce and the Captain of *Serse*' guard. The chorus takes on the role of soldiers, damsels, Persians, pages, guardian spirits of the plane tree, sailors, Indians and Greeks, in keeping with the well-established tradition of 17th-century Venetian theatre. Cavalli is a disciple of Monteverdi and the freshness of his music, the chromaticism and the contrasts in rhythm and moods reveal the deep connection between the two composers.

When Stampiglia began working on Minato's libretto, at the end of the 17th century, he decided to streamline it by eliminating four characters. Periarco, the Captain of the Guard and the two Magi were removed from the story. Because of the papal decree that forbade women to perform in theatres in Rome, Bononcini was forced to write a score for an all-male cast. Many scenes were deleted or shortened, notably reducing the closing dialogues in Act III, when the story had already come to an end. At the turn of the century musical taste was changing: the aria with *Da Capo* began to be the centre around which the structure of the

drama for music gravitated and was the ideal means by which singers expressed their virtuosity.

When Händel set to work on the libretto of *Serse*, more than eighty years had already passed since Cavalli's opera of the same title. It may well have been the composer himself who reworked Stampiglia's libretto: this was a common practice and while we have no record of Händel being the author of the lyrics, there is no evidence to the contrary. The streamlining operation was even greater: the three characters/confidants Clito, Eumene and Aristone were removed altogether, and all roles dropped a few arias. Stampiglia's libretto included eight duets, of which five were removed in the new version of the libretto. If we compare the total number of arias, duets and accompagnati in Händel's libretto with Bononcini's earlier version, we see that Händel retained 46 out of 50 numbers. The only new additions were Elviro's aria *Del mio caro Bacco amabile*, and three of the four choruses. Bononcini's opera did not feature choral numbers, not at the end of the play, which closed with the aria *Cara voi siete*. Despite all these changes to streamline the typical plot of seventeenth-century dramas, the opera did not follow the canonical patterns of Metastasio's work, which at that time were well established and used by virtually all composers for the theatre. Metastasio would frequently have the character exit the stage after an impressive aria that would wow the audience with the singer's extraordinary virtuoso skills. These skills were especially evident in the *Da Capo* of the arias, which were an opportunity to reprise the first part of the aria by inserting variations and bold coloraturas. In Händel's *Serse*, less than half of the arias have a tripartite structure with the *Da Capo*, and three of these do not involve the character leaving the stage. On the other hand, there are numerous ariettinas, cavatinas and ariosi that fit into the narrative structure of the recitatives. The insertion of a comedic character was very unusual at the time of the Metastasian reform, and in Händel's production it is an absolute novelty, if we exclude the acerbic example of his first opera, *Almira* (1705). The audience did not expect such a change from the widespread models, so it is not surprising that the opera was received coldly and with a certain suspicion.

Händel had just finished working on the opera *Faramondo*: it was Christmas Eve, 1737. The composer took just one day off and started writing *Serse* on the 26th of December. He frequently noted in his manuscripts the beginning and end dates of the composition: the *Serse* manuscript reads that the first act was completed on January the 9th, the second on the 25th and the third on February 6. It then took a week for the final touches and corrections, so that the score was complete on February 14, 1738. The cast of the performances at the King's Theatre in London was, as always, outstanding:

SERSE	Gaetano Majorano, detto Caffarelli
ARSAMENE	Maria Antonia Marchesini, detta la Lucchesina
AMASTRE	Antonia Merighi
ARIODATE	Antonio Montagnana
ROMILDA	Elisabeth Duparc, detta la Francesina
ATALANTA	Margherita Chimenti, detta la Droghierina
ELVIRO	Antonio Lottini

The chronicles of the time report that the orchestra was small, as was the chorus. Lord Shaftesbury, a friend of Händel's, attended the opera and in a letter to his mutual friend James Harris found *Serse* to be a good piece of work. However, he felt that the singers interpreted it in a somewhat detached manner, and believed that the inclusion of short arias was an attempt to reduce the overall length of the performance, which would have been unacceptably long if the arias had all been in the conventional tripartite form. Although not explicitly, it transpires that Lord Shaftesbury was a little disappointed or at least puzzled, as were most of the audience in attendance. *Serse* was performed for a further four nights and after the last performance (May 2, 1738) it would remain off the stages and theatres of the world for almost two centuries.

With *Serse*, Händel deliberately nods to the theatre of the past, even more so than in his earlier dramas, such as *Agrippina* (1710). Händel had reached the height of his stylistic growth and only a full maturity could justify and enable a deliberate return to the musical tradition of the previous century. Much has been written about the influence that Bononcini's score had on Händel's *Serse*. There is no doubt that the connection between the two operas does not end with their sharing the libretto: the dear Saxon held Bononcini's manuscript in his hands and may also have known the opera during his stay in Rome (1707-1709) or through Nicola Francesco Haym, Händel's frequent collaborator and librettist, who was a cellist in Rome in 1694. Traces of Bononcini's *Serse* also surface in the operas *Giustino*, *Berenice* and *Faramondo*, evidence that Händel must have had access to the score even before 1738. In order to determine its true artistic value, it is of little consequence to note the ties with 17 arias from Bononcini's *Serse*. Quotations and references to works by Scarlatti, Pistocchi, Keiser and Steffani can also be found in the score. This was absolutely common practice at the time, as was the reuse of one's own compositions or parts of them (in *Serse* itself, Händel recycles some passages written for earlier cantatas and oratorios). We are a long way from the concept of copyright, plagiarism and copying. Composers would incorporate arias from fellow composers into their own operas, perhaps at the suggestion of singers who had just enjoyed success singing them and wished to replicate the triumphs, sometimes by replacing the original text to better adapt the music to the situation. Consider then the pasticcis, performances made up of arias by different composers, connected by recitatives that were written on the spot or partially recycled.

After *Serse*, Händel was to write only two more operas for the theatre: *Imeneo and Deidamia* (1740 and 1741), and then usher in the season of the great oratorios. It is as if Händel wanted to bid farewell to the theatre world with a glance at the past. Having reached the end of his stylistic maturation, the composer had all the means to look back to 17th-century theatre, even at the risk of failure. Perhaps deep down he knew that time would prove him right: today we look upon *Serse* as an authentic masterpiece.

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