

Handel on the Stage

Of all the great composers of the eighteenth century, Handel was the supreme cosmopolitan, an early and extraordinarily successful example of a freelance composer. For thirty years the opera house was the principal focus of his creative work and he composed more than forty operas over this period. In this book David Kimbell sets Handel's operas in their biographical and cultural contexts. He explores the circumstances in which they were composed and performed, the librettos that were prepared for Handel and what they tell us about his and his audience's values, and the music he composed for them. Remarkably no Handel operas were staged for a period of 170 years between 1754 and the 1920s. The final chapter in this book reveals the differences and similarities between how Handel's operas were performed in his time and ours.

DAVID KIMBELL is Emeritus Professor of Music at the University of Edinburgh. His publications include *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1981), *Italian Opera* (Cambridge, 1991) and *Vincenzo Bellini: Norma* (Cambridge, 1998). He has also contributed to *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia*, *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* and *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature*, and has edited volumes for the *Hallische Händel-Ausgabe* and for the *Works of Giuseppe Verdi*.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-81841-4 - Handel on the Stage
David Kimbell
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-81841-4 - Handel on the Stage
David Kimbell
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Handel on the Stage

DAVID KIMBELL



Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-81841-4 - Handel on the Stage
David Kimbell
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521818414

© Cambridge University Press 2016

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2016

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Names: Kimbell, David R. B., author.

Title: Handel on the stage / David Kimbell.

Description: New York : Cambridge University Press, 2016. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015042943 | ISBN 9780521818414 (hardback : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Handel, George Frideric, 1685–1759. Operas. | Opera–18th century.

Classification: LCC ML410.H13 K56 2016 | DDC 782.1092–dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015042943>

ISBN 978-0-521-81841-4 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-81841-4 - Handel on the Stage
David Kimbell
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

For Ingrid, fifty years on.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-81841-4 - Handel on the Stage
David Kimbell
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

Preface [page ix]
List of Abbreviations [xii]

1 Handel and opera: a biographical survey of the circumstances [1]
2 The libretto (1): argument – *dramatis personae* [48]
3 The libretto (2): words for music [73]
4 The music (1): mastering the medium [92]
5 The music (2): its role in the drama [127]
6 Aspects of the performance of Handelian opera in his time and ours [162]

Appendix: An overview of the repertory of the Royal Academy of Music [198]
Select bibliography [204]
Index [207]

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-81841-4 - Handel on the Stage
David Kimbell
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

This book is addressed to those who wish to know a little more about Handel's operas and to understand them a little better; and I hope it will be intelligible and helpful not just to professional musicians and musical scholars. Anyone writing on this topic in English does so in the shadow of two works (really the two parts of one single work) that have already covered the field with awe-inspiring comprehensiveness and mastery: *Handel's Operas 1704–1726* by Winton Dean and John Merrill Knapp, originally published by Oxford University Press in 1987, revised edition 1995, after Merrill Knapp's death; and *Handel's Operas 1726–1741* by Winton Dean, published by the Boydell Press in 2006. While deeply indebted to both these, my book is a quite different kind of undertaking. I have not attempted a systematic examination of all the operas; I have simply set out and reflected on some more general material about them – material of a kind I believe I should have found helpful and interesting when I first encountered the Handel operas myself: about the circumstances in which they were composed and performed; about the librettos that were prepared for Handel and what they tell us about his and his audience's values; about the music he composed for them, and the way it was (and is) performed. It is, in other words, in many ways a straightforward, traditional account of history, literary and musical achievement, and performance practice.

The ponderous title of the first chapter will alert the reader to the fact that it is something less than a balanced biography of Handel's opera-composing years – that it concerns itself only with those matters that have some real bearing on his work for the opera house. Even so, it is a long chapter, for fairly obvious reasons. Opera is a complex art form. To provide a useful context within which to understand it, political and social circumstances, evolving literary and musical tastes, the changing conditions in theatres and theatre companies all need to be considered – in Handel's case in three different countries. Some readers may be surprised, in this chapter and in the chapters about the music, that I have paid so much attention to his German years and to the one opera, *Almira* – very rarely performed – that survives from them. My response would be that, if we are to think sensibly about

how Handel became a composer of Italian opera, we need to understand all we can about his years in Italy. As soon as we try to do that, we come face to face with a record of quite prodigious achievement, particularly during the first six months he spent there, and particularly in the circumstances under which he was then working: a new land, a new language, a new religion, a new social hierarchy. I sometimes find myself wondering whether there has ever been anything quite to match it in the whole history of musical precocity. And (to return to *Almira*) with that Italian period in our sights, it is scarcely possible to know enough about the young German musician who had left his homeland only a few months before.

The logic of dividing the material on the librettos into two chapters should be clear. But some readers may like to know that they are, very generally, organised according to the hierarchy classically defined, half a century before Handel's time, by Pierre Corneille. (For Handelians Reinhard Strohm's article on 'Dramaturgy' in *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia* is a helpful guide.) In the musical chapters my main aim has been to shed some light on what seems to me the clear truth that Handel's operatic music was composed with a dramatic purpose, which performers should understand even if they choose to override it. Chapter 4 describes the evolution of this musical language in his early years, up to the point when it was mature and wide-ranging enough to give voice to well-nigh anything in human experience that was likely to find a place in eighteenth-century drama. Chapter 5 shows what he then did with it, using for illustration some of the operas that are relatively frequently performed.

The chapter on Handelian opera in performance may seem ill-balanced – as elegantly proportioned as a pantomime horse, one kind reader has suggested. My excuse must be the strange history of the topic. The operas had disappeared from the theatre well before Handel died, and they did not return to it for some 170 years; indeed more than two centuries had elapsed before they became anything like standard items in the operatic repertory. When they did come back, the world's understanding of what the function of an opera house was, and what the balance of responsibility was in deciding how a 'work' should be performed there, had been utterly transformed. To try to shed some light on how things were done in Handel's time, and juxtapose it with what is done in our time, is necessarily a curious exercise, but I hope it can be a worthwhile one too.

An earlier and more extended version of the section 'Resources for characterisation' in Chapter 5 was published in *Händel-Jahrbuch* 54 (2008) as 'Heldinnen aus Ariost: Einige Gedanken über Händels Kunst der Charakterdarstellung'.

Acknowledgements

During my work on the book I have been assisted by staff in the erstwhile Reid Music Library at Edinburgh University, and The University Library itself; The National Library of Scotland; The British Library; The University Library, Cambridge – I thank them all. For kindnesses and assistance of various kinds I am grateful to Graham Diss, Barry Nisbet, Jürgen Stenzel, Colin Timms. And I am particularly grateful to Steuart Bedford, Andrew Jones, Roger Savage and Ruth Smith, who have read some of the chapters and made helpful suggestions about them. They are not, it need hardly be said, responsible for such *sottises* as may remain. And I thank Dr Victoria Cooper at Cambridge University Press for her patience during the inordinate length of time it has taken me to finish.

The music typesetting is by Derek Williams.

During the Easter Vacation in 1964 I went to Hamburg for the first time, to study some Handel opera manuscripts in the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek. The Music Librarian who opened the door to me on that occasion and I are (D.V.) about to celebrate our Golden Wedding: to whom, then, but Ingrid could this little book be dedicated?

David Kimbell
Ely, Cambridgeshire

Abbreviations

CCH	<i>The Cambridge Companion to Handel</i> , D. Burrows (ed.) (Cambridge University Press, 1997)
CHE	<i>The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia</i> , A. Landgraf and D. Vickers (eds.) (Cambridge University Press, 2009)
CHIL	<i>The Cambridge History of Italian Literature</i> , P. Brand and L. Pertile (eds.) (Cambridge University Press, 1996)
COJ	<i>The Cambridge Opera Journal</i>
EM	<i>Early Music</i>
GHB	<i>Göttinger Händel Beiträge</i>
HHa	<i>Hallische Händel-Ausgabe</i>
HHB 1	<i>Händel-Handbuch Band 1, Thematisch-systematisches Verzeichnis: Bühnenwerke</i> , B. Baselt, (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1978)
HHB 4	<i>Händel-Handbuch Band 4, Dokumente zu Leben und Schaffen</i> (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1985)
HIN	<i>The Handel Institute Newsletter</i>
HJb	<i>Händel-Jahrbuch</i>
JM	<i>Journal of Musicology</i>
JRMA	<i>Journal of the Royal Musical Association</i>
ML	<i>Music and Letters</i>
MQ	<i>The Musical Quarterly</i>
MT	<i>The Musical Times</i>
OIHO	<i>The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera</i> , R. Parker (ed.) (Oxford University Press, 1994)
SIMG	<i>Sammelbände der Internationalen Musik-Gesellschaft</i>
VIHAK	<i>Veröffentlichungen der internationalen Händel-Akademie</i> , Karlsruhe