

KINGS PLACE LONDON UNWRAPPED



Thu 24 Jun | 6pm; 8.30pm
Kings Place Hall One

Handel's London Altos

The English Concert
with Iestyn Davies

Iestyn Davies countertenor
Kings Place London Unwrapped Artist-in-Residence

The English Concert

DIRECTOR
Peter Whelan

VIOLIN
Nadja Zwiener (leader)
Kinga Ujszaszi
Sijie Chen

Tuomo Suni
Elizabeth MacCarthy

VIOLA
Alfonso Leal del Ojo

CELLO
Joseph Crouch
George Ross

DOUBLE BASS
Carina Cosgrave

OBOE
Katharina Spreckelsen
Sarah Humphrys

THEORBO
Sergio Bucheli

This performance will last approx. 80 mins with no interval.

Programme

George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)

Concerto from *Ottone* (Act I)

Aria: 'Presti omai l'Egizia terra' from *Giulio Cesare*

Recitative & Aria: 'Pompe vane di morte... Dove sei, amato bene?' from *Rodelinda*

Entrée des songes agréables;

Entrée des songes funestes;

Entrée des songes agréables effrayés

Le combat des songes funestes et agréables
from *Alcina*

Aria: 'Sorge nel petto' from *Rinaldo*

Sinfonia from *Partenope* (Act III)

Aria–Recitative–Aria: 'Splenda l'alba in oriente... Tu, armonica Cecilia... La virtute è un vero nume', HW 166

Sonata in G, Op. 5 No. 4 (HWV 399)

i. Allegro ii. A tempo ordinario iii. Passacaille iv. Gigue – Menuet

Sinfonia from *Ariodante* (Act II)

Aria: 'Se in fiorito ameno prato' from *Giulio Cesare*

Sinfonia (Act III) from *Serse*

Aria: 'I will magnify thee', HWV 250b



Programme Notes

Handel's London altos were a mixed bag – male, female and specially engineered. At a time when composers routinely tailored their music to the strengths of their singers, Handel probably took more interest than most in the potential of the voices at his disposal. The most famous of these was the alto castrato Senesino, for whom Handel created seventeen major roles in his operas between 1721 and 1734. He was said to have had 'a powerful, clear, equal and sweet contralto voice with a perfect intonation and an excellent trill', but Handel mistrusted his arrogance and earned the singer's lasting resentment by calling him 'a damned fool'.

Even so, Senesino's performance as Julius Caesar was unanimously praised as 'beyond all criticism', deftly contrasting Caesar's soldierly character (in the brief 'Presti Omai' at the beginning of Act 1), and his softer side heard in 'Se in fiorito' – his *al fresco* love song to Cleopatra in a garden full of birds. Emotionally, Senesino's greatest talent was for 'pathetic' arias, and most of Handel's parts for him are weighted towards sentiment and suffering. The meltingly beautiful 'Dove sei' expresses Bertarido's longing for Rodelinda: only in her presence, he says, will he find consolation for his sorrow. Senesino also got a good press for his dramatic recitatives, especially the one which introduces 'Dove sei', where Bertarido reads the inscription on his own tomb and muses on the hollow splendour of man's ambitions.

We know less about Francesca Vanini, for whom Handel wrote the part of the army captain, Goffredo, in his first London opera *Rinaldo* (1711). She seems to have made her name as a deep contralto specialising in male roles, and Handel clearly found her useful for depicting their more sensitive side. Goffredo's 'Sorge nel petto' is a touchingly intimate expression of relief at the defeat of the sorceress Armida and the return of his daughter.

Handel's little cantata 'Splenda l'alba in oriente' was written in London at around the time of *Rinaldo* and was clearly designed for an Italian singer of operatic experience – possibly Vanini herself, since it fits her range. The two arias extoll the value of virtue, the first with rich instrumentation and coloratura, the second with a wayward violin line which warns that 'whoever turns away from Virtue's light, wanders in deepest shadows'.

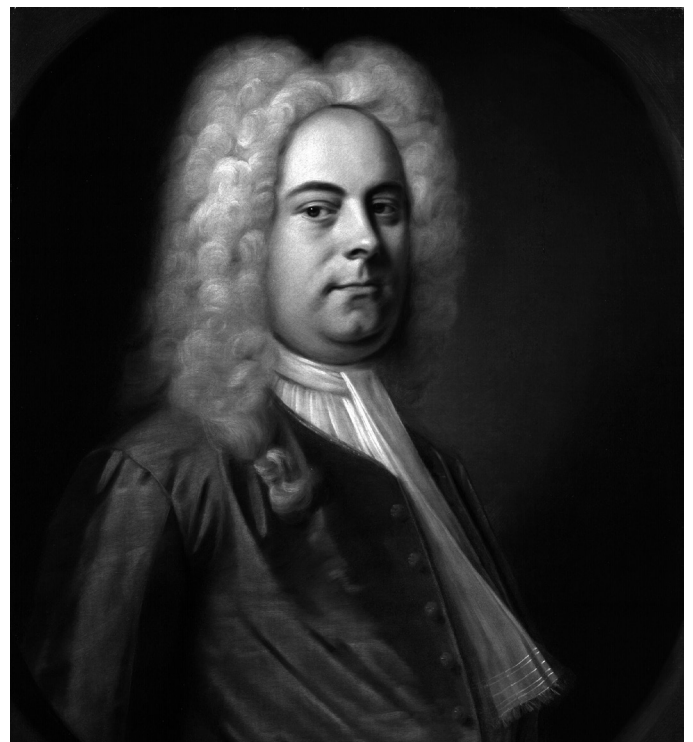
Contraltos and castrati beat countertenors to most of Handel's best alto music, though the rise of the oratorio in the 1730s and his ceremonial church music helped a bit. 'I will magnify thee', which began life around 1718 as a chorus in one of Handel's 'Chandos' anthems, was transformed six years later into the opening alto aria of one of Handel's finest Chapel Royal

anthems. The vocal line relies on simple melodic beauty rather than technical sparkle, reflecting the more modest training of homegrown countertenors.

Interspersed between the arias there's a colourful array of instrumental scene setters, ballets and mini-overtures drawn from Handel's London operas. The short Sinfonia from *Partenope* (1730) is ripe with expectation, while the Act 2 Sinfonia from *Ariodante* (1735) depicts a moonlight meeting – the first violin line rising steadily to the sky. Handel's ballet music for his magic opera *Alcina* (1735) is much meatier. At the close of Act 2, the enchantress Alcina laments the loss of her powers, and after she finishes singing, her thoughts are invaded by ever more ominous dreams portrayed in a sequence of dances dramatically choreographed by the French dancer Marie Sallé and her company – the sensation of Handel's 1735 season at Covent Garden.

The rip-roaring movement which launches tonight's concert appears mid-way through the first act of *Ottone* (1723). Its rushing strings and oboe fanfares announce the arrival of Ottone – King of Germany. Impersonated by an evil imposter in the previous scene, Handel was determined to make the entrance of the real Ottone as regal and convincing as possible. The music struck a chord with the public, becoming widely-known known as the 'The Concerto in Ottone' – despite lasting less than 3 minutes. A decade later, Handel did the decent thing and used this bustling opening to kick off his Concerto grosso, Op. 3 No. 6. The Sonata Op. 5 No. 4 in G major also fits this mould: seamlessly combining the overtures to Handel's first purpose-written oratorio (*Athalia*, 1733) and his swaggering royal serenata, *Parnasso in festa* (1734).

Simon Heighes 2021



Text & Translations

Giulio Cesare (1724) Act I: scene i

A plain in Egypt with an ancient bridge across a branch of the Nile. Caesar and Curio cross the bridge with their followers.

Aria (Giulio Cesare)

Presti omai l'egizia terra,
le sue palme al vincitor.

*Now the land of Egypt shall bestow,
Its palms upon the victor!*

Rodelinda (1725) Act I: scene vi

A cypress grove, in which can be seen the tombs of the Lombardic kings, among them the newly erected monument to Bertarido. Bertarido (in Hunnish dress) sings:

Accompanied Recitative (Bertarido)

Pompe vane di morte,
menzogne di dolor, che riserbate
il mio volto e 'l mio nome, ed adulate
del vincitor superbo il genio altiero,
voi dite ch'io son morto,
ma risponde il mio duol che non è vero.

(Legge l'iscrizione)

"Bertarido fu re;
da Grimoaldo
vinto fuggì, presso degli Unni giace.
Abbia l'anima riposo e 'l cener pace."
Pace al cenere mio? Astri tiranni!
Dunque finch'avrò vita
guerra avrò con gli stenti,
e con gli affanni?

Aria (Bertarido)

Dove sei, amato bene?
Vieni l'anima a consolar;
sono oppresso da tormenti,
ed i crudi miei lamenti
sol con te posso bear.

*Hollow splendour of death,
sham of grief, which bears
my face and my name, and flatters
the pride of the vain victor:
you say that I am dead,
but my sorrow replies that it is not true.*

*(He reads the inscription)
'Bertarido was king;
defeated by Grimoaldo,
he fled, now he lies with the Huns.
May his soul have rest, his ashes peace'.
Peace for my ashes? Cruel stars!
So, must I, to my life's end,
battle against hardship
and distress?*

*Where are you, my beloved?
Come to console my soul.*

*I am oppressed by torments,
and only by your side
can my cruel lamenting be soothed.*

Rinaldo (1711) Act III: scene iii

Aria (Goffredo)

Sorge nel petto
certo diletto
che bella calma
promette al cor.
Sarà il contento,
dopo gran stento
coglier la palma
del nostro ardor.

*A feeling of gladness
within me
assures my heart
of peace.
After these ordeals,
happiness will be
gaining the reward
for our passion.*

Splenda l'alba in oriente (c.1711)

Aria

Splenda l'alba in oriente,
cada il sole in occidente,
virtù sempre esalterò.

Sia la lingua più canora,
sia la cetra più sonora,
oltre il ciel, oltre le stelle,
le sue belle
alte glorie innalzerò.

*Whether the dawn shines in the east,
or the sun sinks in the west,
I shall always extol virtue.*

*Let my voice be more melodious,
let my lyre be more harmonious,
beyond heaven and beyond the stars
I shall exalt
her high and beautiful glories.*

Recitativo

Tu, armonica Cecilia,
che rapisti col canto,
che incantasti col suono,
fa pur che sia concesso
a questo stuol de' tuoi seguaci egregi
imitarne i tuoi pregi,
perché un nobil natale
si rende oscur senza virtute uguale.

Aria

La virtute è un vero nume
del mortal nel basso mondo.

Chi si scosta dal suo lume
va dell'ombre nel profondo.

Giulio Cesare (1724) Act II: scene ii

Aria (Giulio Cesare)

Se in fiorito ameno prato
l'augellin tra fiori e fronde
si nasconde,
fa più grato
il suo cantar.

Se così Lidia vezzosa
spiega ancor note canore,
più graziosa
fa ogni core
innamorar.

I will Magnify Thee (c.1724)

I will magnify Thee, O God my King,
and I will praise thy name for ever and ever.
(Psalm 144)

*You, harmonious Cecilia,
who ravished with your singing,
who enchanted with your playing,
let it be granted to this gathering
of your worthy followers
that they may imitate your merits,
for a noble birth becomes obscure
without virtue to match.*

*Virtue is a true god
of mortals in this world below.*

*Whoever turns away from her light
wanders in deepest shadows.*

*If, in the pleasant, flowery meadow,
the bird, among flowers and leaves,
hides itself,
it only makes
its song more delightful.*

*Similarly, the fair Lydia
utters her song in the night,
even more delightful,
she makes every heart
enamoured.*

KINGS PLACE LONDON UNWRAPPED

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Biographies

Iestyn Davies MBE

After graduating in Archaeology & Anthropology from St John's College, Cambridge, **Iestyn Davies** studied singing at the Royal Academy of Music, London.

An esteemed Handelian, he has delighted audiences globally with his vocal agility in roles such as *Orlando*, *Rinaldo*, *Ottone/Agrippina* and *David/Saul*. His intelligent and considered interpretations have led to fruitful collaborations with Thomas Adés, George Benjamin and Nico Muhly.

Iestyn received an Olivier Award nomination for singing the role of Farinelli in *Farinelli and the King* opposite Mark Rylance at the Globe Theatre. The production was subsequently performed in the West End and on New York's Broadway.

On the opera stage he has appeared at the Royal Opera House, Glyndebourne Festival Opera, English National Opera, La Scala Milan, the Met Opera, New York, the Chicago Lyric Opera, the Salzburg Festival, and in Munich, Vienna and Zurich. In concert, his appearances have included La Scala Milan, Zurich Tonhalle, the Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, the Barbican, London, Lincoln Centre New York and the BBC Proms.

An acclaimed recitalist, with repertoire ranging from Dowland to Clapton, he is a regular guest at Carnegie Hall, New York and has curated residencies at both the Wigmore Hall and Saffron Hall.

Among his accolades are a Grammy Award, three Gramophone Awards for solo recital recordings, the Royal Philharmonic Society Young Artist of the Year, and the 2013 Critics' Circle Awards for Exceptional Young Talent (Singer). In 2017 he was awarded an MBE by the Queen for his services to music.

Peter Whelan

Peter Whelan is among the most exciting and versatile exponents of historical performance of his generation, with a remarkable career as a conductor, keyboardist and solo bassoonist. He is Artistic Director of the Irish Baroque Orchestra and founding Artistic Director of Ensemble Marsyas. Recent engagements have included appearances with the Stavanger



Symphony Orchestra, Academy of Ancient Music, Portland Baroque Orchestra, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the English Concert, Irish Chamber Orchestra, Netherlands Chamber Orchestra and Beethoven Orchester Bonn.

As conductor, Peter has a particular passion for exploring and championing neglected music from the Baroque era. Recent projects funded by The Arts Council Ireland and Creative Scotland involved recreating and staging live performances of choral and symphonic music from 18th-century Dublin and Edinburgh. This led to his award-winning disc *Edinburgh 1742* for Linn Records, and his 2017 reconstruction of the 'Irish State Musick' in its original venue of Dublin Castle.

The English Concert

The English Concert is an outstanding orchestra: exceptional, in the world-renowned quality, ambition and variety of its live and recorded output; unique, in the zeal of its players for working and performing together; unwavering, in its desire to connect with its audience throughout the world. Under the artistic direction of Harry Bicket and principal guest Kristian Bezuidenhout, the orchestra has earned a reputation for combining urgency, passion and fire with precision, delicacy and beauty.

The artistic partners we collaborate with reflect and enhance our pursuit for new ways to bring our music to life. Joyce DiDonato, Dame Sarah Connolly, Iestyn Davies, Alison Balsom, Trevor Pinnock, Dominic Dromgoole, Tom Morris and many more have not only brought their extraordinary skills to individual projects but continue to help us to shape the way we perform.

One cornerstone of the orchestra's annual cycle is its international Handel Opera tour. Blossoming from an ongoing relationship with Carnegie Hall, the itinerary now regularly takes in the Theater an der Wien, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the Elbphilharmonie and the Barbican. Meanwhile, our regular London series allows us to explore a radically different path, presenting programmes to our home audience that challenge and inspire us. We launched our partnership with Garsington Opera in 2019 with performances of Monteverdi's *Vespers (1610)* and look forward to our first season in residence with a production of Handel's *Amadigi* this summer.