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SAN FRANCISCO CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Baroque Ensemble

George Frideric Handel

Giulio Cesare in Egitto

HWV 17

Opera in 3 acts

Libretto: Nicola Francesco Haym
after Giacomo Francesco Bussani

First performance: King's Theatre, Haymarket, London,
February 20, 1724

Corey Jamason, **Elisabeth Reed**,
and **Marcie Stapp**, *directors*

Corey Jamason, *conductor*

Saturday, April 9, 2022, 7:30 PM
Sunday, April 10, 2022, 2:00 PM
Caroline H. Hume Concert Hall

Act I

Intermission

Act II

Intermission

Act III

Cast

The Characters:

THE ROMANS
Giulio Cesare (Julius Caesar): First Roman emperor
Cornelia: Widow of Pompey
Sesto (Sextus): Son of Pompey and Cornelia
Curio (Curius): A Roman tribune

THE EGYPTIANS
Cleopatra: Queen of Egypt, sister of Tolomeo
Tolomeo (Ptolemy): King of Egypt, brother of Cleopatra
Achilla (Achillas): General of the army and counsel to Tolomeo
Nireno (Nirenus): A confidante of Tolomeo and Cleopatra

Role	Saturday, April 9	Sunday, April 10
Cesare	Lindsay Martin	Kyle Tingzon
Cleopatra	Chea Kang	Taylor See
Tolomeo	Megan Mateosky	Luke Elmer
Cornelia	Gabriela Linares	Stella Hannock
Sesto	Alexa Rosenberg	Hope Nelson
Achilla	Will O'Brien	Will O'Brien
Curio	Dante Mireles	Dante Mireles
Nireno	Nina Jones	Nina Jones

SFCM Baroque Ensemble

Corey Jamason and **Elisabeth Reed**, *directors*

Italian Diction and *Giulio Cesare* co-direction: **Marcie Stapp**
Baroque Ensemble assistant: **Pauline Kempf**
Supertitles: **MonaLisa Pomarleanu**
Harpsichord tuning and preparation: **Kathy Roberts Perl**

Violin I
Pauline Kempf, *concertmaster*
Annemarie Schubert
Alexandra Santon
Luke Chiang

Violin II
Ryan Cheng, *principal*
Jessica Folson
Mingyue Xia

Viola
Caitlin Kean*

Cello
Rocío López, *principal*
Octavio Mujica

Double Bass
Farley Pearce*

Harpsichord
Corey Jamason

Theorbo
Mario To

Flute
Jolie Fitch

Oboe and Recorder
Matthew Hudgens*
Aki Nishiguchi*

Bassoon
David Wells*

Natural Horn
Sadie Glass*

* Denotes guest artist

Synopsis

Prior to the action of the opera, Julius Caesar and Pompey were rival consuls in the Roman Republic. Pompey was defeated by Caesar and fled to Egypt, hoping to gain support from the young Ptolemy, joint ruler of Egypt along with his older sister Cleopatra. This turned out to be a fatal mistake, as Ptolemy ordered him to be murdered upon his arrival.

ACT I

At the opening of the opera, Caesar has pursued his rival to Egypt and makes a triumphant entrance, uttering his famous "Veni, vidi, vici" ("I came, I saw, I conquered"), accompanied by his tribune Curius. Cornelia and Sextus, Pompey's widow and son, beg Caesar to end the rivalry, which he agrees to do. But the reconciliation is undone by the arrival of Ptolemy's general Achillas, who presents Caesar with the severed head of Pompey as tribute. Caesar is horrified by the gift, Cornelia is overcome with grief, and Sextus swears immediate revenge.

Cleopatra has vowed to wrest the throne from her ineffectual brother. When her attendant Nirenus brings the report of Caesar's contempt for Ptolemy's actions, she sees the opportunity to enlist Caesar (whom she has never met) as her ally. While mercilessly taunting her brother, she sets forth a plan to seduce Caesar. In the meantime, Achillas has become smitten with Cornelia, and offers to murder Caesar himself if Ptolemy will grant him Pompey's widow as his reward.

The ashes of Pompey's head have been entombed in an urn. As Caesar beholds it, he muses on the mutability of life and human achievements. Cleopatra initiates her plan by disguising herself as one of her own handmaidens and appealing to Caesar for aid. Captivated by her beauty, he agrees to assist her. Cornelia once more expresses her grief, and Sextus renews his pledge of vengeance.

Ptolemy ostensibly offers Caesar hospitality, but the latter immediately sees through the plan and realizes he must proceed in the manner of a wary hunter. When Cornelia and Sextus are presented to Ptolemy, their contemptuous remarks earn them respectively a place in Ptolemy's harem and in prison. The lovelorn Achillas offers to free them both if Cornelia will accept him, but is again met with contempt. Mother and son

Synopsis

lament their seemingly hopeless predicament.

ACT II

Cleopatra has made elegant preparations to receive Caesar, still in the guise of her handmaiden. He finds her seductive singing irresistible and agrees to meet her in her apartments. In the meantime Cornelia suffers the repeated advances of both Achillas and Ptolemy himself. But Nirenus has devised a plan for Sextus to rescue his mother from the harem, bringing hope to Cornelia and renewed vigor to Sextus.

When Caesar arrives for his assignation he finds the object of his affection pretending to be asleep (all the better to seduce him). But just as she awakens, Curius rushes in with the news that an angry mob of betrayers is close at hand prepared to murder Caesar. Cleopatra is forced to abandon her charade and reveal her identity in order to protect him. When she urges him to flee, he runs off to confront the attackers himself. By now Cleopatra is truly in love with Caesar, and prays for his protection.

ACT III

Achillas has learned that Ptolemy's promise of Cornelia's hand was only a ruse to enlist his aid, and has now sided with Cleopatra's forces against him. But the actual battle has gone in favor of the young tyrant, who gloats over his victory. Cleopatra has been given reports that Caesar has drowned while trying to escape, and now languishes in prison. Caesar however has managed to survive by swimming ashore, where he now lies helpless. Achillas has been mortally wounded but agrees to help Caesar's cause by providing him with a seal that will guarantee him military assistance.

After a final battle with Ptolemy's forces, Caesar emerges victorious and rescues Cleopatra, while Cornelia and Sextus finally manage to kill their foe. Caesar offers the crown of Egypt to Cleopatra. She accepts it only as a "tributary queen," while vowing love and obedience to Caesar.

- Synopsis by Marcie Stapp

Program Notes

Baroque operas are sometimes described as formulaic and lacking spontaneity, as a never-ending repeating pattern of recitatives and arias. While the structure of recitatives followed by arias *is* repetitive, *opera seria* offers a world of creative opportunities, both in its composition and its performance. *Giulio Cesare* is a portrayal of *real* people experiencing *real* emotions. What may appear formulaic in Handel's operas is actually a springboard for the most sincere expression of genuine feelings. Handel's operas are a never-ending source of wonder, variety, and experimentation. Each aria in *Giulio Cesare* serves the characters and the dramatic situation perfectly.

Recitative, a fascinating style allowing for the free delivery of dialogue as well as the internal thoughts of the characters, had by the premiere of *Giulio Cesare* developed for more than one hundred years beginning with the initial experiments of musicians, poets, and theorists in Florence, Mantua, Venice and Rome, among other places. In this compositional style, the word has primacy over the music, allowing for a wonderful tension and energy between measured arias and fantasia-like, unmeasured, free recitatives. Most of all, a finely constructed recitative with a meaningful text offered enormous dramatic opportunities for the singing actor.

Baroque musicians were fascinated by connections between musical composition and performance and classical rhetoric. The A-B-A structure of the *da capo* aria mirrors the rhetorical structure of an oratory as described by many writers: *exordium* or introduction (opening ritornello); *propositio* or statement of the content of the argument (main body of the 'A' section); *confutatio* or refutation or rebuttal (similar in many cases to a 'B' section of the aria); *confirmatio* or reaffirmation of the *propositio* (the da capo, a reinforced, intensified return to the 'A' section generally performed with greater intensity through improvisation and other means); and the *peroratio* or conclusion (concluding ritornello).

Seen in this light, a single *da capo* aria allows the performer the opportunity to display their gifts of rhetoric and drama. A sense of the dramatic arc of the aria, the exploration of rhythmic freedom and *rubato*, and perhaps most importantly, improvisation, all played a great part in a tradition in which the great performers of the era considered themselves very much

co-creators, rather than *re-creators*, a view of the role of performers more commonly held today.

We are fortunate to have first-hand accounts of the performances of several of the cast members who introduced roles in the original production of *Giulio Cesare*. Among the cast were two of Handel's greatest and most frequent collaborators: the astonishing soprano Francesca Cuzzoni (c. 1698–1770), who introduced the role of Cleopatra, and the great castrato Francesco Bernardi (1686–1758), known as 'Senesino,' who created the title role in *Giulio Cesare*.

Reading descriptions of their performances offers a fascinating window into their astonishing power as performers. About Cuzzoni, Quantz recalled that her style of singing was "innocent and affecting" and that her ornaments "took possession of the soul of every auditor, by her tender and touching expression." Mancini echoes Quantz' enthusiasm, writing that it is "difficult to decide whether she excels more in slow or in rapid airs. A native warble enabled her to execute divisions with such facility as to conceal every appearance of difficulty; and so grateful and touching was her natural tone that she rendered pathetic whatever she sang, when she had the opportunity to unfold the whole volume of her voice. Her power of conducting, sustaining, increasing, and diminishing her notes by minute degrees acquired for her the credit of being a complete mistress of her art. In a cantabile air, though the notes she added were few, she never lost a favorable opportunity of enriching the cantilena with all the refinements and embellishments of the time. Her trill was perfect, she had a creative fancy, and the power of occasionally accelerating and retarding the measure in the most artificial and able manner, by what the Italians call *tempo rubato*. Her high notes were unrivaled in clearness and sweetness, and her intonation was so absolutely true that it seemed not in her power to sing out of tune."

Descriptions of Senesino's performances are no less intriguing. A student of Bernacchi of the famous Bolognese school of singing (where the great castrato Carestini was also trained), Senesino played a major part in over a dozen of Handel's operas. Quantz heard him in Dresden in 1719 and later reported to Charles Burney that Senesino "had a powerful, clear, equal

Program Notes

and sweet contralto voice with perfect intonation and an excellent trill. His manner of singing was masterly and his elocution unrivaled. He never loaded adagios with too many ornaments, but he delivered the original and essential notes with the utmost refinement. He sang allegros with great fire, and marked rapid division from the chest in an articulate and pleasing manner. His countenance was well adapted to the stage, and his action was natural and noble. To these qualities he joined a majestic figure; but his aspect and deportment were more suited to the part of a hero than a lover."

Giulio Cesare was a crowning triumph during a remarkable period of creativity for Handel. This was a particularly fertile period, with the composer introducing one masterpiece after another to the public in the space of a one-year period: *Giulio Cesare* (February 20, 1724), *Tamerlano* (October 31, 1724), and *Rodelinda* (February 13, 1725). The opera was first performed at the King's Theatre with Handel leading the initial performances from the harpsichord.

- Program notes by Corey Jamason ©

For further reading:
A wonderful discussion of the compositional history of the music and libretto of *Giulio Cesare* may be found in Winton Dean and John Merril Knapp's *Handel's Operas 1704–1726*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987. For an extremely fine general biography of Handel, see Donald Burrows' *Handel*, Schirmer Books, New York, 1994.

Acknowledgements:
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