

Synopsis

George Frideric Handel's *Ottone*

Synopsis by Marcie Stapp

ACT I

The German King Ottone is on his way to Rome to marry Teofane, Princess of the Eastern Empire, in a peace settlement designed to unite the various kingdoms. Although they have never met, Teofane carries a small portrait of her betrothed. Their plans however are threatened by Gismonda, widow of the Italian usurper Berengario, and her son Adelberto. When they learn that Ottone's ship has been delayed due to a battle with the pirate Emireno, they launch an ingenious plan whereby Adelberto will pretend to be Ottone, then marry Teofane and assume the throne before the real king reaches the city. At their first meeting, Adelberto lavishly praises her beauty, while she wonders to her dismay why he bears so little resemblance to the portrait.

When Ottone arrives with the defeated Emireno in tow, he consigns the pirate to prison. He also learns of Gismonda's plot from his cousin Matilda, who is already betrothed to Adelberto and outraged at his treachery. To further support her son's deception, Gismonda poses as Ottone's mother and has a somewhat contentious meeting with Teofane. As the wedding is about to proceed, Gismonda brings news that the real Ottone has arrived, throwing Teofane into utter confusion about the identity of her bridegroom. Gismonda orders her son to abandon his amorous activities and take up arms immediately. But Ottone's troops overpower those of Adelberto, and the defiant impostor is sent to prison along with Emireno.

ACT II

On his way to prison, Adelberto is rebuked by Matilda for his infidelity. But she and Gismonda both love him despite his shortcomings, and secretly ponder ways to save him. Just as Ottone and Teofane are about to meet face to face, Matilda engages him in a heartfelt conversation that Teofane misinterprets as romantic in nature. When Ottone and the jealous Teofane finally speak, she suggests that perhaps he finds her too unattractive to marry. Although he is perplexed as to the reason for her accusation, Ottone is confident that all will be resolved. Left alone, Teofane appeals to nature for solace and longs to reveal her true feelings to Ottone.

Matilda and Gismonda have managed to free Adelberto and Emireno from prison, and arranged for a boat to be waiting nearby to carry them away. As the prisoners escape, they encounter Teofane and seize her as hostage, upon which she faints. The two women rejoice in the success of their plan, although Matilda is still torn between her love for Adelberto and her anger at his betrayal.

ACT III

Ottone laments the disappearance of Teofane, while Gismonda gloats over her success in outwitting him. Unknown to either of them, a storm has forced the refugees' boat to cut their escape short and disembark. When Adelberto goes off to seek shelter, Emireno questions Teofane and is stunned to realize that she is in fact his sister; the two had been separated years earlier when he was banished from his homeland and forced to become a pirate. Teofane recognizes her precarious situation, but swears to remain faithful to Ottone and scorn the unwanted affections of Adelberto. With reassurances from her brother, she foresees a happy ending in sight.

Matilda has overcome her affection for Adelberto and reaffirms her pledge of vengeance. All are surprised when it is Emireno who returns his fellow escapee to Ottone, and Matilda asks to be allowed to kill him herself. But when the moment comes, she lets the dagger fall, only to watch Gismonda retrieve it and attempt to kill herself now that her plan has finally failed. It is Teofane who prevents this, then stuns everyone with the revelation that Emireno is her brother and the wish that all be reconciled.

Text and Translations

Teofane: Falsa immagine (Act 1, Scene 3)

Kathryn Rupp, soprano

Falsa immagine, m'ingannasti,
mi mostrasti un volto amabile,
E quel volto m'allettò.

Or cessato il dolce inganno,
trovo orrore, trovo affanno
ove gioie il cor sperò.

False picture, you deceived me,
you showed me a lovely face,
and that face captivated me.

Now the sweet deception is over,
and I find dread and distress
where my heart hoped for joy.

Emireno: Del minacciar (Act I, Scene 4)

Wilford Kelly, *baritone*

Del minacciar del vento
si ride quercia annosa,
che cento volte e cento
le scosse ne provò.

An ancient oak mocks
the threats of the wind,
when hundreds of times
it has withstood its gusts.

Gismonda: Pensa ad amare (Act 1, Scene 7)

Natalie Mitchell, *soprano*

Pensa ad amare, chè dal tuo cor
amor si chiede più che dover.

Dal solo amore consiglio tolse
allor che volse
il regio sposo a te il pensier.

Think of loving him, for love
is demanded more than duty from your heart.

Your royal husband
was prompted only by love
when he turned his thoughts to you.

Matilda: Ah! tu non sai (Act II, Scene 3)

Mahsheed Massarat, *mezzo-soprano*

Ah! tu non sai
quant' il mio cor
sospira, e sente per lui pietà.

Ah, you do not know
how much my heart longs
and feels pity for him.

Gismonda: Vieni, o figlio (Act II, Scene 4)

Alissa Goretsky, *soprano*

Vieni, o figlio, e mi consola,
che se il viver t'è vietato,
mori almen in questo sen.

Come, my son, and comfort me,
for if life is denied you,
at least die on my breast.

A penar non sarò sola
se il conceda amica stella,
perchè teco io verrò men.

I shall not be alone in my suffering
if a kindly star allows it,
because I shall die with you.

Ottone: Dopo l'orrore (Act II, Scene 7)

Matheus Coura, *countertenor*

Dopo l'orrore d'un ciel turbato
più vago e bello
appare il dì;
è tale amore
se a un cor sdegnato
rende la calma
che gli rapì.

After the gloom
of a stormy sky,
the day appears more delightful and lovely;
So too does love,
if it gives back to a scorned heart
the calm
which it took away.

Emireno: Le profonde vie dell'onde (Act II, Scene 7)

Keaton Brown, *baritone*

Le profonde vie dell'onde
dammi, o ciel, di risolcar,
e il mio nome e l'ardimento
di spavento
empia ancora i liti e il mar.

Allow me, heaven, to sail again
the deep ways of the oceans,
and let my name and my daring
once more fill
the sea and the coasts with fear.

Teofane: Benché mi sia crudele (Act III, Scene 6)

Taylor See, *soprano*

Benchè mi sia crudele,
benchè infedel mi sia,
infida l'alma mia
no, non sarà così;
Senta le mie querele
il nume dio d'amore,
poi renda a questo core
il ben che lo tradì.

Although he is cruel to me,
although he is unfaithful to me,
my spirit
will not be so unfaithful;
May the god of love
hear my complaints
and bring back to my heart
the loved one who betrayed it.

Matilda: Nel suo sangue (Act III, Scene 7)

Cristina Lanz, *mezzo-soprano*

Nel suo sangue, e nel tuo pianto
laverò del cor la colpa,
e contenta allor sarò;
basterà per mio conforto
risarcir il grave torto
se l'infido io svenerò.

With his blood, and with your tears
I'll wash the guilt from my heart,
and then I shall be glad.
For my peace of mind, it will be
ample recompense for my wrongs
if I kill the traitor.

Program Notes

George Frideric Handel

Born: February 23, 1685; Halle.

Died: April 14, 1759; London.

Ottone, Re di Germania, HWV 15 (1722)

Librettist: Nicola Haym

Handel reached the pinnacle of his operatic career in London, however his prowess as a composer of music for the stage was rooted in experience gained in his native Germany, as well as Italy, the cradle of opera seria. After his early years in Halle, Handel moved to Hamburg where he obtained a position as second violinist in the opera company run by the prominent composer Reinhard Keiser (1674-1739). Keiser's departure from Hamburg soon thereafter yielded new opportunities for emerging composers. Thus in 1704 Handel was able to compose his first opera, *Almira*, based on F.C. Feustking's *Der in Krohnen erlangte Glücks-Wechsel, oder Almira, Königin von Castilien*. Keiser's return in 1705 interrupted Handel's progress, and by 1707 the young composer was seeking new endeavors in Italy. Reportedly, he refused an invitation by a Tuscan patron and instead went south on his own, ending up in Rome in 1707. His early compositional successes during his time in Italy explored a variety of vocal genres; his setting of the Vespers Psalm *Dixit Dominus* is one notable example. His international reputation grew significantly with the triumph of his opera seria *Agrippina*, composed and premiered in Venice in 1709. The following year he was appointed *Kapellmeister*, or head of music, at the Court of Hanover.

It was the particularly generous allowance for travel provided in his Hanover court position that supported Handel's first visit to England in 1710. The great popularity that Italian opera seria had obtained in London, since its introduction there in 1705, offered Handel favorable new ground for cultivating his operatic creativity. He soon responded with his acclaimed *Rinaldo* (1711), the first original opera seria written for performance in London. Handel returned to the British capital the following year and established himself as a major figure in its musical life. Having essentially abandoned his *Kapellmeister* position, the Hanover Court dismissed him in 1713. With the composition of *Teseo* (1713) and *Amadigi* (1715) for the Italian opera-loving English audience, Handel confirmed his musical standing in London. He then took a long hiatus from opera composition before writing *Ottone*, in 1722.

The libretto for *Ottone* is actually based on the libretto for the opera seria *Teofane*, composed in 1719 by Antonio Lotti (1667-1740) for the marriage celebrations of Crown Prince Friedrich Augustus of Saxony to Maria Josepha, Archduchess of Austria. The original libretto by Pallavicini is massive, having nearly 1,100 lines. Handel and his librettist, Haym, who would later go on to write the libretti for Handel's greatest operas, saw the necessity of trimming down Pallavicini's original text in order to better suit their London audience. By the time Haym was finished, the libretto had been trimmed down to fewer than 700 lines.

The resounding success of Handel's *Ottone* stemmed not only from opera seria's international prestige and London's appetite for new works in the genre. In the 1723 premiere of *Ottone*, Handel also satisfied his audience's desire to hear celebrated Italian performers. Its star-studded cast included, in the title role, the Italian castrato Senesino, who had sung the same role in Lotti's earlier opera. Such was also the case with Margherita Durastanti in the role of Gismonda, and Giuseppe Boschi in the role of Emireno. Additionally, Handel was able to enlist acclaimed soprano, Francesca Cuzzoni, who made her London premiere in the role of Teofane.

Teofane's first aria "Falsa immagine", or "False Picture", is extremely appealing with its simplicity of line and sweetness of character. Upon seeing Adelberto, who is attempting to pass himself off as Ottone, Teofane is confused and disappointed. After Adelberto exits the stage, she contemplates the portrait that has deceived her. The melody which, along with the accompaniment, alternates between dotted and even rhythms, shows the hesitation that

Teofane feels when her expectations are disappointed. The simplicity of the melodic material also highlights Teofane's innocence, as a young woman who has left her home in order to do her duty, yet has high hopes for her marriage.

Matilda is perhaps one of the most interesting characters, as she is constantly shifting back and forth between working to further the interests of her cousin, Ottone, and working to further the interests of her future husband. Because of this vacillating, she sometimes appears fickle. Her aria, "Diresti poi così?" appears to be Handel's attempt to remedy this by portraying her as a woman who cannot overcome her love for a man whose actions she despises. It begins quietly without ritornello, introducing the question, "Diresti poi così?" or "would you speak to him thus." This refers to Matilda's declaration, in the preceding recitative, that if given the opportunity, she would confront Adelberto and refuse to listen to his pleas for mercy. In the A section of the aria, this question is repeated multiple times without resolving to the home key, painting a picture of Matilda's indecision as she ponders whether she would punish her beloved for his treachery or plead for mercy on his behalf. In the B section, however, her anger overcomes her love. The pace changes entirely, moving forward in a much quicker, resolute tempo, and in a firm G Major, showing that Matilda has, for the moment, decided that her anger for Adelberto is stronger than her love. However, her doubt returns with the A section, leaving us with the impression that despite her anger she cannot overcome her love.

Ottone also has his moments of heartache. Perhaps the most heart-rending of these comes in Act III with his aria "Tanti affanni", in which Handel masterfully conveys Ottone's anguish upon learning that Teofane has been abducted. The aria and its preceding recitative, "Io son tradito" begin quietly, creating a sense of desolation from the very start, in strong contrast to Matilda's fiery G minor aria which immediately precedes it. Diminished chords become more and more present as the aria progresses, and dissonances become closer and closer, mirroring the despair that is closing in upon Ottone. After this expression of anguish, Ottone remains silent until the end of the opera when he sings a love duet with Teofane.

While much in this opera conforms to the conventions of opera seria in its time, there are also truly unique and innovative moments. The Act II duet with Matilda and Gismonda is one such example. The second act in operas of this period generally closes with a duet between two lovers who are usually parting in some kind of adversity which will come to a head in the next act. Instead, Handel presents a fanciful duet between the two scheming women, Gismonda and Matilda, who praise the night for aiding them in their scheme to assist Adelberto's escape. With its cheerful upbeat tempo and major tonality, this is clearly a duet of triumph rather than one of yearning, and the two women's voices intertwine with each other, just as their lives have become intertwined by their mutual love for Adelberto.

Handel's orchestration in *Ottone* also offers much to admire. While the instrumentation appears to be relatively simple, the composer employs and combines the woodwind, string, and continuo instruments in ways that sustain impressive spans of musical interest. Orchestral strategies support variety in the characters' arias. For example, both Ottone and Teofane have note-spinning arias with winding melodies that seem to never cease, while Emireno's melodies are almost always doubled by the orchestra in octaves. Handel's intricately-written parts and suspensions on dissonances create profoundly self-reflective moods, highlighting the in-depth soul searching that each main character experiences, as in Teofane's "Affanni del pensier" and

Ottone's "Tanti affanni."

The first performance of *Ottone* at King's Theatre in London on January 12, 1723 achieved immediate success, and the number of pieces from *Ottone* that became favorites is far greater than any other opera that had been performed in England. A contemporary account reported that "the surprise and admiration of the audience... was very numerous," and that by the second night of its premiere, tickets were being sold for an impressive price. The opera was revived 5 different times between 1723-1733, including a 1724 production in Paris. Indeed, during Handel's lifetime, only *Rinaldo* and *Giulio Cesare* received more revivals and performances. Sadly, after the 1724 revival, *Ottone* was not performed again for almost two hundred years until Oskar Hagen's revival in Germany in 1921. Since then, it has had several major revivals, and continues to captivate audiences, just as it did in Handel's own time.

Program notes by Erica Williams '20 and Katelyn Tan '20

For further reading:

A wonderful discussion about the music and libretto of *Ottone* may be found in Winton Dean and John Merrill Knapp's *Handel's Operas 1704-1726*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987. For an fine general biography of Handel, see Donald Burrows' *Handel*, Schirmer Books, New York, 1994.