



## Handel: A Classical Icon OR Handel's 250th Anniversary

### *Handel's Divas*

#### **VOICE OVER**

A major part of Handel's professional life in the opera house was dealing with the singers. Now of course it was essential for the opera company to have extremely good singers, in the same way as a modern football team has to buy in the best players. In fact in terms of salaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century they talked about them in the same way as we would talk about the top football players now, so you bought in really expensive singers from Italy, some from Germany, but they were people who had been trained up 'specially for this, they were virtuoso singers, and also in the terms of the type of drama they could do the acting that went with the singing.

This meant that at the same time they were quite difficult to deal with, the phrase that we still use, 'prima donna', carries this thing of someone who's going to be temperamental; the more you pay them, the more difficult they are to work with, and there are many stories of the types of conflicts that went on within the opera company.

There is a story about him accompanying one singer, and the singer said if you play the harpsichord like that I shall come and dance on the harpsichord, and Handel said well, let's advertise it, more people will come to watch you do that than to hear you sing.

One of the things that was quite clear from all of the stories is that whereas if a singer had a real problem and came to Handel and said I can't do this, let's put it another key, or something like that, Handel was co-operative, but once he'd made up his mind how the music should go, he was very insistent that the singer should do as they were told. Now this led to various power struggles because, of course, the singers had public followings and could appeal to this matter in the London audience, and there were several tales of rows going on in the opera house.

One of the conventions of the type of Italian opera that Handel worked in was that the most powerful, top-ranked characters were the high voices. ...the leading men, the really most powerful men, the ones you had to deal with, were castrato singers, the artificially preserved high voice and, of course, these were very powerful voices, and also very powerful personalities to deal with.

But to match them you also had to have extremely good women soloists.

And, in fact, this is a very unusual situation, because this is one of the few careers that women made it right to the top in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We don't know that much about their training, or the way they came up to it, but by the time they arrived in London they were in the top league with the leading men. You had to have a good even cast of leading men and leading ladies.

Of course there is a problem there because within the company there was always someone who thought they were the prima donna idea of the diva, and, normally, it was quite clear who the leading man or the leading woman was going to be and, in fact, they talked about the company in terms of the first man, and the second man, and the first woman, and the second woman and, there would be trouble if there were two women who both thought that they were in the leading roles and this, in fact, broke up one of Handel's opera companies because in the mid-1720's Handel had got one singer in his company already, Francesca Cuzzoni, who was very greatly liked by the London audiences. She was matched with the castrato singer, Senesino, and these two were really the leading characters in the opera company over several years. But things became complicated when a second soprano, Faustina, was also hired for the London company. That meant there were two leading ladies.

But the real trouble came when in the London audience factions formed to support one leading lady or the other, and to pit one up against the other, even during performances. In fact it got so bad that at one stage the behaviour of the audience, and possibly on the stage, was such that the performance had to be called off, and actually the rest of the season was cancelled after that, something very much like a riot in the theatre, and the really serious problem that went with that is that a member of the royal family was present, and you didn't behave like that in the theatre, so it actually closed the opera company down for that season, when that happened in the theatre.

He gets into conflicts of different types, particularly later on; in the 1730's there's a rival opera company formed, partly because the singers go off and don't want to be dominated by Handel, and so there's a separate, second opera company

....So there's a lot of rivalry in London because really there isn't a large enough audience to support both companies, they're fighting for the audience, and every trick in the book is used to denigrate the other company, and this goes with the split in the royal family. The Prince of Wales supports one, and the king and queen go to the other, and it's a very difficult situation, and in fact this does take its toll on Handel's health. At the end of this period you find that just when the tension is breaking up the companies, such that neither of them can actually go on 'cos they don't have large enough audiences, he works really, really very hard in one particular season, writes and produces more operas than at any other time during his career, but it ends up with him having something which was called at the time a paralytic disorder. It's some sort of stroke, people have argued ever since about what the exact nature of the ailment was, but it stopped him playing the harpsichord in the theatre, the show still went on, led by someone else, but it did actually set up something where in later years people were always a little bit anxious about his health.

So in fact as well as writing the music and producing the shows on the stage, Handel was dealing with what we might call theatre politics all the time.