

Georg Friedrich Haendel, Serse/Xerxes, *Ombra mai fu*

Adrian ROȘU¹

Abstract: *The content of this paper is based on information of great interest about Georg Friedrich Haendel - a German composer and organist, with frequent and long professional incursions into Italy, a naturalized Englishman –, and about the compositional style of one of his fundamental creations, the Serse opera (the name given by the author), in time also named Xerxes. Haendel's choice was mainly based on the fact that through his vast creation he consolidated the foundations for the future classical forms of musical art, but also on the fact that the virtues of his art are, in our country, largely unknown, his works - especially the large ones - being very rarely or not at all present in the programs of the large concert halls or opera houses. The name of the composer can be written in three ways, depending on the three major areas in which he worked: Georg Friederich Händel, Georg Friedrich Haendel, and in the English version George Frideric Handel, all three being considered correct, universally recognized and used.*

Key-words: *musical genre; character; performance*

1. Georg Friedrich Haendel (1685 – 1759). Life and work

Georg Friedrich Haendel (1685 - 1759) is, along with Johann Sebastian Bach, one of the pillars of the European baroque music. His list of opuses includes masterpieces in a variety of musical genres, from chamber music, concertos for various instruments and orchestra (including eight organ concertos) to extensive vocal-symphonic pages - 32 oratorios of which the most known are *Messiah, Saul, Acis and Galatea, Judas Maccabaeus...* - and great lyrical scores - 45 works, including *Admeto, Agrippina, Alceste, Alcina, Amadigi, Ariodante, Berenice, Deidamia, Ezio, Giustino, Il pastor fido, Imeneo, Julius Caesar, Orlando, Rinaldo, Tamerlano, Xerxes/Serse....*

In terms of his training period, he began his studies in his hometown, Halle, and he continued them, for a time, in Hamburg. Haendel would travel a lot to Italy - 3 years - where he would meet Corelli, Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti.

In 1712 he settled in London and began writing operas. Due to financial difficulties, as well as public adversity, the composer turned his attention to the oratorio, giving up, in 1738, to deal with opera performances. He would write until the year 1751 when he lost his sight. His presence, creation and activity in London would strongly influence the entire further development of Britain's music history. Although he encountered many obstacles, the composer soon became the **director of the Royal Academy**, contributing essentially to the development of good taste and refinement in the field of opera performance. He brought the best soloists from Germany and Italy.

Thus, the Royal Opera House in London became in less than a decade, famous for its activity and value of its performances.

Speaking of Händel, Bach said: "He is the only person I would wish to see before I die, and the only person I would wish to be, were I not Bach".

¹ Faculty of Arts, "Ovidius" University of Constanța, andu0679@gmail.com.

For a long time, Haendel's operas were forgotten. The personality and success of Johann Sebastian Bach, the fact that Haendel left Germany, the extremely tangled librettos he used in his lyrical scores – the librettos featuring dozens of characters involved in complicated and implausible intrigues, in which both people and supernatural beings took part - the particularly complex and long arias (da capo arias) are just as many reasons why Haendel's operas have for a long time disappeared from the posters of European lyric theatres.

However, the second half of the twentieth century brought the creator back to the public's attention through the Göttingen, Halle and Karlsruhe festivals. In the modern vision and in extraordinary performances, the Haendelian pages, of authentic beauty and unparalleled expressiveness, can once again be applauded by the public who is in love with the lyrical genre.

2. Serse / Xerxes opera

Serse (Xerxes) – *dramma per musica* in three acts on a libretto drafted by an unknown author (according to the writings of Nicolò Minato and Silvio Stampiglia). Duration - 170 minutes of music. The premiere was on April 26, 1738, in London. The lead role was written by Haendel for a castrato singer.

The action of the opera takes place in Persia, approx. 2500 years before, during the reign of Serse, the son of Darius.

2.1. Act 1

In the gardens of the royal palace of Persepolis, Serse, in the shadow of his favorite plane tree, sings his love for the beauty of nature, being impressed by its great tranquility (The famous *Ombra mai fu* aria).

Romilda, the daughter of Ariodate, the commander of the army, comes to the garden to meet Arsamene, the king's brother. The song of Romilda who is waiting for her lover conquers Serse, causing him to forget Princess Amastre, his fiancée. Arsamene, who, accompanied by his slave, came to meet his lover, hopelessly witnesses the marriage proposals that Serse makes to Romilda. However, she refuses the love of the king and the throne. Excessively angry, Serse drives Arsamene away. However, Romilda remains relentless in her refusal.

Amastre, Serse's fiancée, appears. She is dressed in men's clothes and tries to make sure that the king's love for her is sincere. Finding out that Serse wants to marry another woman, she withdraws, being in pain.

Preparing to go into exile, Arsamene gives Elviro, his slave, a letter for Romilda. Arsamene's song, of heartbreaking sadness, penetrates to the depths of the heart of Atalanta, Romilda's sister.

Atalanta decides to use her charms and all the cunning of women to become the wife of Prince Arsamene, knowing that Romilda is loved by Serse.

The trumpets announce the return of the Persian armies from the war with rich booty and slaves.

Serse welcomes his soldiers with joy. As a reward for the victory, the king promises Ariodate, the commander of his troops, a royal son-in-law, as a husband for his daughter Romilda.

2.2. Act 2

In the lively and picturesque bustle of a Persian market, Elviro, disguised as a flower seller, tries to meet Romilda in a crowd to hand her his master's farewell letter. Elviro's speech

catches the attention of Amastre, who, with a broken heart, wanders through the city. From Elviro she finds out who is now her fiancé's lover.

Seeing Atalanta, Elviro asks her to give Arsamene's letter to her sister. Being sly, Atalanta uses the created situation in favor of her intrigues. She will make Arsamene believe that Romilda is inclined to obey the king's will. At the same time, she asks Serse for mercy for Arsamene, whom she loves and who, she says, has begun to love her, but he does not want to admit it yet. As proof, she shows the letter written by Arsamene for Romilda.

Acknowledging his brother's handwriting, Serse takes the letter and shows it to Romilda as proof of the infidelity of the one she continues to love. Despite all the pain she is experiencing, Romilda continues to refuse Serse.

In front of the Dardanelles strait, Serse's army encamped to build a bridge over the sea so that it could invade Europe. On the eve of a hard fight, Serse tries to reconcile with his brother to whom he offers Atalanta's hand. However, just like Romilda, Prince Arsamene does not give up his love.

Searching for his lost master, Elviro descends from the ship, feeling the storm approaching. His drinking song attracts the soldiers who are also on the shore.

2.3. Act 3

In an inner courtyard of the Persepolis palace, Romilda, surrounded by friends and slaves, tries to forget her pain.

Returning from the battle camp, Serse comes to insist on his love.

Amastre who, disguised as a man, follows the king like a shadow, intervenes. Serse orders the badly behaved stranger to be arrested. Impressed by the courage of the stranger, however, Romilda manages to restore her freedom.

Serse orders Ariodate to make the necessary preparations for Romilda's marriage on the same day, while asking him to use his parental rights to demand obedience from his daughter. Knowing Romilda's love for the king's brother, Ariodate believes that Arsamene is the noble husband promised by Serse.

Despite the king's ban, Arsamene returns to Persepolis to meet his lover.

The two young people meet and accuse each other of being unfaithful. With the help of Elviro and Atalanta, the misunderstandings are clarified, the truth emerges, as well as the force of the pure love that binds the two.

In the temple, in front of the sacred fire, convinced that he is fulfilling the king's command, Ariodate crowns Romilda and Prince Arsamene. At the end of the ceremony, the King appears. Considering himself betrayed, he orders Romilda to be killed. But Amastre intervenes decisively. The one who truly betrayed love is Serse, her fiancé. Remorseful, he gives up his reckless gesture and gives his hand to his faithful fiancée Amastre, to whom he will fulfill his vow.

3. Ombra mai fu

Haendel began *Serse* opera the day after he finished *Faramondo* opera, that is, on December 26, 1737. The score was written in about three months, during which time Haendel also composed other works.

The premiere took place at King's Theater in London on April 15, 1738, starring a great singer of the time, the castrato Gaetano Caffarelli, who possessed an amazing vocal technique, unmatched in ornaments and especially in the difficult chromatic passages.

Serse is actually Haendel's first attempt at comic opera. The composer was inspired by many themes noted in his youth notebooks in Hamburg. The most famous page of the opera is the so-called *Largo* transcribed in various variations for instrumentalists and voices, the famous *Ombra mai fu* (Never was a shade) with which actually the action of the *Serse* opera begins, one of the most beautiful pages written by Georg Friedrich Haendel, although the composer bypasses the traditional form of the baroque aria, the *da capo A B A*. The *Ombra mai fu* aria is actually a slow-moving, even heavy *arioso*, accompanied by the orchestra in dense harmonies.

The aria is preceded by a typical Haendelian recitativo.

The image shows a musical score for a recitativo. It consists of two systems. The first system is labeled 'Recitativo' and features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics 'Fron - di te - ne - re e bel - le del mio' and a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The second system is labeled 'S.' and features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics 'pla - ta - no a - ma - to, per vo - i ri - splen - de il fa - to' and a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The piano part includes a triplet of notes in the right hand.

Ex. 1

Afterwards, an orchestral prelude of a few measures creates the atmosphere.

The image shows an orchestral prelude in 3/4 time, marked 'Adagio'. It features a piano accompaniment in bass clef with a melody in the right hand. The music is in a minor key and includes a triplet of notes in the right hand.

Ex. 2

The singer starts with a *longa* in a particularly expressive, yet technically difficult to achieve *crescendo*.

The image shows the beginning of the aria 'Ombra mai fu'. It features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics 'Om - - bra mai... fu di ve - ge - ta - bi - le,' and a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The music is in a minor key and includes a triplet of notes in the right hand. Dynamics include *p*, *mf*, and *f*.

Ex. 3

It is a short aria, only three minutes long, with an A and B division and two identical stanzas. For the performer, it is very difficult to sustain long sentences loaded with dramatic tension.

We present in the ANNEX the whole aria through the corresponding musical examples, in order to notice the less common metrical structure (measures with a different number of beats if the analytical approach is classical), the complex solo melodic, the predominantly harmonic type of backup, so as to more easily understand the originality of this Haendelian creation.

4. Conclusions

"The opera of Georg Friedrich Haendel represents, together with the creations of Johann Sebastian Bach, the highlights of the Baroque music. Haendel's operatic style evolved from the use of conventional models to the dramatic treatment of recitativos, arias, and choral parts. His great operas are characterized by a masterful combination of pathos, dramatic scenes, and orchestral interludes, by using harmonic modulations, colorful instrumentalization, strong rhythm and the intervention of instrumental or vocal soloists. He influenced the next generations of composers, such as Joseph Haydn, Ludwig van Beethoven or Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy"².

It is interesting to note that the legendary figure of the Persian king inspired many composers who lived before and after Georg Friedrich Haendel. We mention among them Pietro Francesco Cavalli (1602 - 1676) with his *Serse*, an opera with a prologue and three acts, with a duration of 240 min., which premiered in 1654; Francesco Provenzale (1627? - 1704), with *Serse*, an opera in three acts, which premiered in 1655; Giuseppe Felice Tosi, with *L'incoronazione di Serse*, an opera in three acts, which premiered in 1691; Giovanni Battista Bononcini (1670 - 1747) with *Serse*, an opera, which premiered in 1694; Niccolò Antonio Zingarelli (1752 - 1837) with *Il ritorno di Serse*, a series of operas, which premiered in 1808; Marie François Maurice Emmanuel, with *Salamine*, a lyrical tragedy in three acts after the play by Aeschylus *The Persians*, which premiered in 1929; Dieter Einfeldt (b.1935) with the opera *Xerxes*.

References

Book

Ruiza, M., Fernández, T. y Tamaro, E. 2004. *Biografía de Georg Friedrich Haendel [Biography of Georg Friedrich Haendel]*. In *Biografías y Vidas. La enciclopedia biográfica en línea*. Barcelona.

Webography

https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Friedrich_H%C3%A4ndel

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serse>

<https://handelhendrix.org/learn/about-handel/opera-synopses/serse/>

https://www.pdf.freegigmusic.com/pn-vcl_xerxes--largo_es-dur.pdf (score)

² https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Friedrich_H%C3%A4ndel

ANNEX

Recitativo

Ex. 1 – recitativo – measure (meas.) 1-5:

Recitativo

Fron - di te - ne - re e bel - le del mio

S. ³
pla - ta - no a - ma - to, per vo - i ri - splen - de il fa - to

Pno.

Ex. 2 – recitativo – meas. 6-11:

Tuo - ni, lam - pie pro - cel - le non v'oi - trag - gi - no mai la ca - ra pa - ce, ne giun - ga a pro - fa nar - vi au - stro ra - pa - ce!

Adagio – Aria introduction

Ex. 3 – introduction – meas. 1-5:

Adagio

p

³

Ex. 4 – introduction – meas. 6-9:

mf

Ex. 5 – introduction – meas. 10-14 + debut chord from meas. 15:

f

p

Aria

Ex. 6 – aria – entire meas. 15 + meas. 16-22:

Om - - bra mai_ fu di ve - ge - ta - bi - le,

Ex. 7 – aria – meas. 23-26 (beats 1- 2):

ca ra ed a - ma - bi - le so - a - ve piu.

Ex. 8 – aria – meas. 26 (beat 3) -30:

Om - bra mai_ fu di ve - ge - ta - bi - le

Ex. 9 – aria – meas. 31-34 beat 1:

ca - ra ed a - ma - bi - le, so - a - ve piu,

Ex. 10 – aria – meas. 34 (beats 2-3) – 38:

ca - ra ed a - ma - bi - le, om - bra mai_ fu

Ex. 11 – aria – meas. 39-42:

di ve - ge - ta - bi - le, ca - ra ed a - ma - bi - le,

Ex. 12 – aria – meas. 43-46 – concluding sentence:

so - a - ve piu, so - a - ve piu!

Finale

Ex. 13 – finale (piano solo) – meas. 47-52: