

The University of Chicago Presents | Mandel Hall  
Friday, February 28, 2014, 7:30 PM

Venice Baroque Orchestra  
Philippe Jaroussky, counter-tenor

6:30 PM pre-concert talk with Martha Feldman, Mabel Greene Myers Professor

PORPORA            Overture to *Il Germanico*  
*Allegro; Minuetto; Allegro*

PORPORA            “Mira in cielo” from *Arianna e Teseo*  
“Si pietoso il tuo labbro” from *Semiramide riconosciuta*

HANDEL             Concerto Grosso in A Minor, Opus 6, No. 4  
*Larghetto affettuoso*  
*Allegro*  
*Largo e piano*  
*Allegro*

HANDEL             “Mi lusinga il dolce affetto” from *Alcina*  
“Sta nell’ircana” from *Alcina*

*Intermission*

HANDEL             “Agitato da fiere tempeste” from *Oreste*  
“Scherza infida” from *Ariodante*

HANDEL             Concerto Grosso in G Major, Opus 6, No. 1  
*A tempo giusto*  
*Allegro*  
*Adagio*  
*Allegro*  
*Allegro*

PORPORA            “Alto Giove” from *Polifemo*  
“Nell’attendere il mio bene” from *Polifemo*

## A LEGENDARY BATTLE

This concert takes us back to London in the 1730s, a particularly vibrant place and time. In those years George II was well into his long reign, and on the streets of London walked such figures as Daniel Defoe, Alexander Pope, Henry Fielding, Jonathan Swift, and Dr. Johnson. The musical scene in London during that decade was lively, particularly in the world of opera. The Covent Garden Opera House opened in 1732, and Handel's Royal Academy of Music was soon mounting such operas as *Orlando*, *Alcina*, and *Atalanta*. But opera is opera, and inevitably that means intrigue, rivalries, jealousy, fashions, stars, and competition. And so it was in London. A group of noblemen, dissatisfied with Handel's company and led by the Prince of Wales, sponsored one of their own, titled *Opera of the Nobility*. They imported their own composer, Nicola Porpora, who brought with him a collection of famous Italian singers. Porpora introduced his *Arianna in Nasso* in December 1733, and the battle was on: over the next several years the two companies struggled for operatic supremacy in London. It would be an intense fight, and it was relatively brief—by 1737 both companies had collapsed financially, and both composers tasted defeat: Porpora returned to Italy, and Handel suffered a stroke that left him briefly unable to use his right arm. When he recovered, he abandoned opera in favor of the oratorio.

Both Porpora and Handel imported star singers from Italy, and a word may be in order here about two of the finest of these, both castrati. Giovanni Carestini (born about 1704 and died about 1760) made his career in Italy and Munich, and in 1733 Handel brought him to London, where he sang the principal parts in Handel's *Arriana in Creta*, *Parnasso in Festa*, *Ariodante*, and *Alcina*. Carestini's singing was widely admired—the composer Johann Adolf Hasse noted: "He who has not heard Carestini is not acquainted with the most perfect style of singing." The star of the rival *Opera of the Nobility* was Carlo Broschi Farinelli (1705-1782), known generally just by his last name. As a young man, Farinelli had studied with Porpora, who brought him to London in October 1734. Paolo Rolli, who supplied librettos for both Handel and Porpora in London, said of him: "Farinelli was a revelation to me, for I realized that till I had heard him I had heard only a small part of what human song can achieve where I now conceive that I have heard all there is to hear." Farinelli appears to have been an extraordinary figure. With the collapse of *Opera of the Nobility* in 1737, he left the stage and went to Spain, where he lived for many years. There he not only produced opera, but trained horses, engineered the change of course of a river, and designed a new opera house. He eventually retired to a handsome estate in Italy, where in his old age he was visited by the 14-year-old Mozart.

### **Overture to *Il Germanico***

NICOLA PORPORA

b. August 17, 1686, Naples

d. March 3, 1768, Naples

Porpora's *Il Germanico* was first produced in 1732 at the Capranica Theater in Rome. Its brief but brilliant overture—scored for two oboes, two horns, and strings—is in the three-part form of the Italian opera overture. The overture begins in festive D major with music full of energy and ringing fanfares—it demands spirited playing from the entire orchestra. The slow central episode features some striking writing for the two horns before the rest of the orchestra returns to flesh out the textures and prepare for the return of the opening section.

**“Mira in cielo” from *Arianna e Teseo***

**“Si pietoso il tuo labbro” from *Semiramide riconosciuta***

NICOLA PORPORA

This portion of the concert offers arias from two operas that Porpora wrote in Italy before moving to London. Born in Naples, Porpora had made his early career in southern Italy, and only gradually did his fame expand northward. In 1726—at the age of 40—he was named maestro of the Ospedale degli Incurabili in Venice, where he would remain until his departure for London in 1733. Porpora's former student Farinelli, now famous throughout Europe, sang the premieres of many of his operas in Italy in these years. *Arianna e Teseo* (“Ariadne and Theseus”), premiered in Florence in 1728, tells a classic story of rescue, love, and betrayal that has haunted opera composers over the following centuries. The part of Teseo was written specifically for a castrato, and “Mira in cielo”—which evokes the powers of the gods—is a bravura aria, demanding speed, agility, and total control.

*Semiramide riconosciuta* (“Semiramis Recognized”) is based on the story of the Egyptian princess Semiramide, another tale that has haunted composers—both Gluck and Rossini would later write operas based on it. Porpora's opera, which uses a libretto by Metastasio, was first produced in Venice in December 1729, and on that occasion Farinelli sang the role of Mirteo, an Egyptian prince (and brother to Semiramide). In the soaring, heartfelt “Si pietoso il tuo labbro” Mirteo pours out his longing for Tamiri, princess of Bactria, whom he will eventually win. The aria is in da capo form, with a more animated central episode.

**Concerto Grosso in A Minor, Opus 6, No. 4**

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

b. February 23, 1685, Halle

d. April 14, 1759, London

The late 1730s found Handel at a difficult intersection in his career. His twenty-year effort to establish Italian opera in England had met with a final failure that had cost the composer his fortune and his health, and over the next few years he would turn to the oratorio as his principal mode of expression. But now Handel spent some time recovering his health, and in the fall of 1739 he turned to instrumental music. This music poured out of him: working at white heat, he composed the set of twelve

concerti grossi that make up his Opus 6 in the space of one month. There were probably two reasons behind the composition of this music. First, Handel needed instrumental music that he could perform during the intermissions of his operas and oratorios, and several of these concertos were introduced in this way. But—perhaps more to the point—he needed money, and the first edition of this music was underwritten by a subscription list that included not just many of London’s finest musicians but also members of the royal family.

Handel’s treatment of concerto grosso form in his Opus 6 is both traditional and wildly original. Throughout these concertos he preserves the expected set of soloists—two violins and a cello—yet he rejects the traditional Italian structure of three movements in a fast-slow-fast sequence in favor of his own individual sequence of movements, which varies from concerto to concerto. This music is full of grandeur, sweep, excitement, good tunes, and some terrific writing for strings: Handel was himself an accomplished violinist, and the writing here is graceful and idiomatic at every instant.

One of the most concise of the Opus 6 concertos, *No. 4 in A Minor* was completed on October 8, 1739 after only two days of work. It is in four brief movements. The marking to the first movement sets the mood: *affettuoso* literally means “affectionate,” but it implies “with tenderness,” and that is very much part of this music, with its dark and expressive atmosphere, full of chromatic shading. The *Allegro* is the expected fugue, here worked out in some detail and featuring rapid exchanges between the solo instruments and the main orchestra. The solemn *Largo e piano*, set in a 3/2 meter, interweaves its melodic lines above a steady walking accompaniment. Handel concludes with a vigorous *Allegro* in 3/4, full of spiky themes. There is some brilliant writing here as the music line leaps by the instant between different sections.

**“Mi lusinga il dolce affetto” from *Alcina***

**“Sta nell’ircana” from *Alcina***

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

Handel’s opera *Alcina*, based on an episode in Lucovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, tells of the sorceress Alcina, who transforms her suitors into various beasts. The plot revolves around the efforts to rescue those under her spell, and all of this is complicated by disguises and romantic intrigues. The premiere featured a distinguished cast, including Carestini as Ruggiero, a knight who is betrothed to the Princess Bradamante but who is put under Alcina’s spell early in the opera. Handel got the opera done only a few days before its premiere on April 16, 1735, at the Theatre Royal at Covent Garden, and it proved one of his greatest successes in London, running for eighteen performances and being revived over the next three seasons.

This set offers two arias from *Alcina*. The reflective (and lovely) “Mi lusinga” comes from Act II, while “Sta nell’ircana” comes from Act III, just after Ruggiero escapes

Alcina's spell. This is a heroic aria, full of racing strings, blazing horns, and the sort of virtuoso writing for voice that Handel knew that he could compose for Carestini.

**"Agitato da fiere tempeste" from *Oreste***

**"Scherza infida" from *Ariodante***

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

At the start of the 1734 season, the Opera of the Nobility took over the King's Theatre, and Handel moved his company to the new Theatre Royal at Covent Garden. For his new season in a new hall he composed *Ariodante*, which would be premiered in January 1735. At exactly the same time, he created another opera, conceived for the same singers who would appear in *Ariodante*. This was *Oreste*, based on Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* and premiered at Covent Garden on December 18, 1734. The reason Handel was able to come up with a new opera so quickly is that *Oreste* is a pastiche: Handel assembled it from music he had written for earlier operas. He fitted the new libretto to his "old" music and supplemented this with new recitatives and dances. *Oreste* was not a particular success: it was performed only three times, and then it vanished for over 250 years before being revived in Germany in 1988. Carestini sang the role of Oreste, who sails to the land of the Taurians, where deadly dangers await him. Oreste's brilliant "Agitato da fiere tempeste," full of energy and florid writing, tells of the dangers encountered at sea.

If *Oreste* was a comparative failure, *Ariodante* is today recognized as one of Handel's greatest operas. Set in Edinburgh, it tells of Ariodante's love for Ginevra, the plot that falsely convinces him of her infidelity, his despair, and the eventual happy ending. Carestini sang the role of Ariodante during the opera's first run. "Scherza infida"—a long and powerful aria—comes from Act II, just as Ariodante has been tricked into believing that Ginevra has betrayed him. Handel creates a particular sonority here, muting the strings and giving them a throbbing, pulsing accompaniment; the dark sound of a solo bassoon intensifies the mournful atmosphere. The aria is both grieving and angry at the same time, and over its ten-minute span the singer is asked to portray a range of emotion.

**Concerto Grosso in G Major, Opus 6, No. 1**

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

Part of the reason Handel was able to write the twelve concertos of Opus 6 so quickly was that he borrowed many of his themes from music that had already been composed. Often he borrowed from himself, but in many of these concertos he appropriated themes from other composers. There was nothing *wrong* with this (such "borrowing" was a common and accepted practice of that era), and Handel transformed his borrowed themes so subtly that their actual origin was in some cases not discovered until centuries later.

For the *Concerto Grosso in G Major*, completed on September 29, 1739, Handel adapted much of the first movement from the overture to his unfinished opera *Imeneo*, begun the year before. Here, and throughout this concerto, Handel treats the solo instruments with great care, sometimes having them play by themselves and then deftly weaving them into the full orchestral texture; the very opening section, with its brusque orchestral statements and wistful solo responses, demonstrates this beautifully. The graceful slow movement, which features the soloists prominently, leads directly into the wonderful fugue that makes up the third movement. Marked *Allegro*, it begins with the lonely sound of one violin laying out the fugue theme, and from this simple subject Handel builds a grand fugue, full of graceful energy, that even inverts the fugue subject along its joyous way; the very ending, where Handel concludes with just a quiet scrap of the fugue rhythm, is a stroke of genius. The finale is another *Allegro*, in binary form and set in a buoyant 6/8 meter. Once again, Handel contrasts solo voices with the full body of strings as this music dances its way to the firm cadence.

**“Alto giove” from *Polifemo***

**“Nell’attendere il mio bene” from *Polifemo***

NICOLA PORPORA

Exactly one month after the premiere of Handel’s *Ariodante*, Nicola Porpora premiered his *Polifemo* at the King’s Theatre. Paolo Rossi supplied the libretto, which is based on the classical myth of Acis, Galatea, and Polyphemus. As Porpora’s music is re-discovered today, *Polifemo* in particular has drawn strong interest—it has had a number of recent productions. Farinelli sang the role of Aci (Acis) at the premiere, and this concert concludes with two spectacular arias that Porpora wrote specifically for his former student. These arias show different sides of Farinelli’s art. In the third act Aci sings “Alto Giove,” a prayer to mighty Jove, thanking him for eternal life but in fact thanking him much more for love. Porpora’s beautiful lyric line arches gracefully over the orchestra’s steady accompaniment.

In complete contrast, “Nell’attendere il mio bene” is brilliant, a heroic aria full of ecstatic expectancy. The virtuosic opening section gives way to a more reflective central episode that sets the second verse before the return of the opening material. That return is not strictly literal, however, for the music drives to the splendid cadenza-like flourish that brings this aria to its close. These two arias—so unlike each other—offer some sense of how fine a singer Farinelli must have been.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger