

# SEMELE NOTES

## BACKGROUND TO THE LIBRETTO

**William Congreve** was a celebrated English dramatist who, as well as writing plays (he is best remembered for his contribution to the Comedy of Manners form, one of which as just recently been performed by the Sydney Theatre Company directed by Gale Edwards) wrote texts for masques and other musical endeavours. Such contemporary composers as John Weldon, Daniel Purcell and John Eccles set his texts. It was for Eccles that Congreve originally conceived the libretto for *Semele*.

This libretto (in turn based on the story as told in the 'Metamorphosis' of the Roman poet Ovid) was written in 1705-6, near the end of his association with the newly constructed Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket. Congreve became a joint manager of the theatre in 1704, but his shy nature was hardly suited to the hurly-burly of theatre life and he resigned from the position soon after.

The Eccles/Congreve opera was intended to open the new building, but that plan was spoilt by the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, who introduced the first Italian operas on the London stage in 1705, before the Haymarket opened. John Eccles, who was a close friend of Congreve, probably finished the score of *Semele* in November or December 1706, but by that time the Lord Chamberlain had given Drury Lane a monopoly on opera. Encouraged by their patron the Earl of Halifax, Congreve and Eccles swallowed their pride and agreed that *Semele* should be produced at Drury Lane during the 1706-7 season. But the management, who preferred other works (read, 'Italian opera'!) shelved Eccles's work. Opera in English simply did not have a good track record and the disastrous failure of Thomas Clayton's *Rosamond* in March of 1707 confirmed that opera in English was just too big a risk for promoters.

Though their *Semele* was never performed, Congreve published the libretto in 1710, and Eccles's autograph full score survives (you can find it in our Conservatorium library. It is in the 'Musica Britannica' reference section – call number Ref M2.3.G7 M87 V 76).

**John Eccles** – *The English Musical Scene at Handel's arrival in London in 1711 wasn't exactly flush with local talent. Purcell had died in 1695. His contemporaries John Blow and William Turner were no longer active (one by death the other by self-retirement from composing.) Eccles, who was the leading English theatrical composer in London at the turn of the century, was also semi-retired to his estate in Hampton Wick where it is reported he spent most of his time fishing! Jeremiah Clarke, perhaps the most promising of the emerging generation had committed suicide, reportedly as the result of rejection in love!*

## BACKGROUND TO HANDEL'S OPERA

Since Handel didn't arrive in London until 1711, several years after the Drury Lane rejection, it is most unlikely to have ever seen the Eccles's score of *Semele*.

No one knows for sure who arranged Congreve's libretto for Handel. Most likely it was Newburgh Hamilton who had also tinkered with the texts of Dryden and Milton for Handel's musical realisations of *Alexander's Feast* and *Samson*. He makes some judicious cuts to Congreve's sometimes lengthy and wordy original. However there were additions as well as subtractions. The whole of Act II Sc iv for example, which includes the famous "Where e'er you walk", is not Congreve at all but Pope. There are additional contributions from a less celebrated author, the Reverend Daniel Prat, whose verses were taken specifically (and appropriately) from his *Ode to Mr Handel On his Playing of the Organ*.

Handel composed the music in June and July 1743 (in a matter of about five weeks, which one might argue was a little slack for the man who composed *Messiah* in less than three weeks!). The work has been interpreted as Handel's comment upon social advancement through sexual favours, and specific royal targets in Handel's times have been proposed. (see below) Although Congreve and Eccles had intended *Semele* to be performed on the stage, Handel designed and performed it 'in the Manner of an Oratorio' but was obviously undecided about this, as he wrote in a number of quite specific stage directions into the score.

## FIRST PERFORMANCES

The first performance took place at Covent Garden on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1744. It was not received with universal enthusiasm. Much of the adverse reaction was to do with the politics & rivalry of the day as with the somewhat racy subject of the opera. We get a picture of both the worth of the opera and the prevailing reception in a letter by one Mrs Delany

*Semele is charming; the more I hear it the better I like it, and as I am a subscriber, I shall not fail one night. But it being a profane story DD [ her husband, a Doctor of Divinity] does not think it proper for him to go; but when 'Joseph' or 'Samson' is performed I shall persuade him to go - you know how he delights in music ..... Semele has a strong party against it, viz. the fine ladies. petit maitres and ignoramus's. All the opera people are enraged at Handel.*

It seems that show business in 18th-century London was a political minefield: Handel's rival, Lord Middlesex, was so outraged at the racy and decadent *Semele* that he hired ruffians to loiter near Handel's Covent Garden theatre and harass audiences on their way home, turning a night at the opera into a dangerous business. Add to Handel's controversial choice of subject matter the gloom over the prospects of war in Europe and at home, and it was perhaps no surprise that people stayed away.

The only revival of *Semele* in Handel's lifetime was in December of that same year. He made many changes for these performances, some designed to mitigate the sexual suggestiveness and undignified language of the libretto and others to accommodate the demands of his singers. Even though its 'profane story' kept Handel's opera silent for the next 20 or so years, many of the individual arias found a life of their own from the outset. "Where e'er you walk", "O Sleep", "Leave me loathsome light" etc were immediate hits and have rightly remained so.

## **SOCIAL BACKGROUND TO HANDEL'S SEMELE.**

London society around the time of Handel's arrival was being shaped by many influences. They were on an economic and cultural roll, having eradicated the last of the great plagues and rebuilt a modern city sprung from the ashes of the Great Fire of 1666. The spectacular architecture of Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723) was the template for this re-build and as such was the envy of Europe. The Age of Enlightenment was dawning and the seeds of the Industrial Revolution were sown, with Great Britain making substantial contributions to science through the intellects of such giants as Edmond Halley (1656-1742), Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) and Robert Boyle (1627-91).

English theatre too underwent its share of revolution and controversy. During the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan Government (1649-1658) English theatre virtually came to a stand still, banned by the Puritans as endangering the morals of the population. Following the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, theatrical activities resumed with gusto and predictably the pendulum swung in the opposite direction as Londoners reacted strongly against the repressive reign of the Puritans. However, political aspects of the Puritan movement lived on in the policies of the Whig Party, they being supporters of the parliamentary form of rule as opposed to the Tories, who were essentially monarchists. Puritan religious ideals were also regenerated in the rise of the Methodist Church in the 1700's.

Those of the upper class who had remained in England during the Cromwell Protectorate had faced years of strict moral repression and were ready to react against it. Those who fled to France had acquired some of the decadence bred across the channel. In combination, these two forces created a nation of wealthy, witty, amoral hedonists and their theatre reflected their lifestyles. Thus was born the Restoration Tragedy and the Comedy of Manners. It is in the Restoration Comedy, however, that the audience got a true picture of themselves. They exist in a world of debauchery covered with a veneer of decorum. The language is sharp and witty, the story lines multiple and convoluted, combining to hilariously cynical effect. It is not surprising that it was soon to be condemned for its flagrant lack of morals by the conservative politicians of the right.

One of the most successful Restoration playwrights was the librettist of *Semele* William Congreve.

By 1700, the mainly upper class Restoration theatre began to shift into the eighteenth century mode, dominated by the middle class. Congreve's famous play *The Way of the World* reflects this movement, its characters upper class, but not gaudily so. Congreve keeps the immorality understated, with things implied but never acted upon. Although *The Way of the World* (1700) was coolly received when it was first acted at Lincoln's Inn Fields, it has since come to be considered one of the most intellectually accomplished of English comedies. Congreve's wit and his characters' sexual freedom and experimentation was at odds with the thinking of certain moralists of the day. Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698) was a direct attack on writers such as Congreve and Dryden. Collier succeeded in garnering public support for his cause by beginning with the accepted neoclassical doctrine that the purpose of drama is to teach and please and then pointing out the disparity between theory and practice. Congreve responded to Collier's accusations in *Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations* (1698), but the conservative middle class, determined to make its tastes felt, sided with Collier and the Society for the Reformation of Manners

(read 'morals'). It became increasingly difficult to get a play produced unless it conformed to Collier's doctrine. Realising that his protests were in vain, Congreve gave up playwriting altogether, resolving to "commit his quiet and his fame no more to the caprices of an audience." He was only thirty years of age.

Handel arrived in London in 1711. Three years later, the reign of King George I commenced, the first of the Hanoverian line. George I was a German and only 3<sup>rd</sup> in line to the English throne but because of the Act of Settlement of 1701, his Protestant background assured him of the British crown ahead of any Catholic candidates. He had little taste for England or things English and didn't even speak the language, so was happy for Parliament to run the country. He was however a great music lover and generously supported Handel. With his death in 1727, his son George II succeeded him and it was during his reign that Handel composed *Semele*. Like his father before him, he had little taste for things English and spent most of his time in Hanover. The swing of the moral pendulum was again felt during the reign of these monarchs, (although their abundant mistresses did little to set a moral example.) The Methodist Movement was growing strongly and a sweep of moral fervour akin to that which accompanied the reign of Victoria in the second half of the C19th was so influential that it brought about the formation of The Society for the Reformation of Manners (Morals). This Movement initiated close to 100,000 court cases in 1735 alone.

In the theatre, following the initiative of Jeremy Collier some decades earlier, James Miller, a dramatist and Methodist clergyman, led a movement that promoted the English stage as a vehicle for the propagation of Christian morality and fervour. Such was its influence that it spread to the royal court, which supported such Handelian works as *Esther* (his first oratorio) *Deborah* and *Athalia* all of which supported Miller's progress of theatrical morals. All this did nothing to prevent George II from behaving with the most complete disregard for public morals. The debauchery displayed by the German royals and their disregard for everything English served only to unite public opinion and the disparate political and artistic factions that proliferated the London cultural scene.

In this context, Handel's choice of the 'profane' story of Semele may seem a strange one. However if we review his stated philosophy that his works (particularly his oratorios) were "didactic moralities" it makes more sense, particularly if his didacticism was aimed squarely at the reigning monarch and his mistress.

George II's wife Caroline died in 1737, several years before Handel took up the Congreve libretto. Even though the royal pair was devoted to each other, it was common knowledge that they both took lovers. Following Queen Caroline's death, George became particularly fond of Madame de Walmoden, whom he installed at Kensington Palace in 1738 under the title of Lady Yarmouth. By all accounts she was most skillful in maneuvering herself socially, charming the Prime Minister (Walpole) and then moving up the ladder to the King where she was strategically placed around the time that Handel composed *Semele*. In the literature, plays and operas of the baroque, it was common practice that Jupiter/Jesus was equated with the reigning monarch and Hera/Juno with his Queen. If this is so, then in Handel's *Semele*, Jupiter has to stand for George II while the aspirations of Lady Yarmouth are equated with those of the ambitious but ultimately doomed Semele. So for all its 'profanity', Handel's opera/oratorio maintains his principle in these works primarily as 'didactic moralities'. In the case of Semele, as a warning/admonition to the royal mistress - and even to the King himself - to take care

that she should not attempt to seek a higher position - namely that of Queen. We may be a little more tolerant of such things today but certainly, C18th public opinion would not tolerate the marriage of its King to his mistress, particularly when that mistress was also German.

The contemporary relevance that seems implicit in Handel's opera is a timeless one and should also work for us today. So I have no problem in translating the idea of Semele's obsession with immortality to a contemporary setting. The all-powerful Jupiter, is easily interpreted as symbolic of the influential media moguls controlling the entertainment industry, who with a cast of a thunderbolt can make or break a promising career. Semele stands for the aspiring star, who in her vanity and desire for immortality (read 'fame') is not averse to using sexual favours as a way to realizing her ambition.

### HANDEL'S PERSONALITY & WIT

We think of George Frederic Handel as we do for most esteemed composers of the past, very serious and austere. This is particularly so for the composer responsible for such musical icons as *Messiah* and other great works of the repertory. While there was certainly a very serious side to this most diligent and productive of composers, the various chronicles from those who knew him personally, give us a more balanced insight into his character. He could be at once irascible, committed, generous, straight talking, honest, capable of biting satire and but suffused with genial good humour.

*“He was impetuous, rough and peremptory in his manners and conversation, but totally devoid of all ill-nature or malevolence. Indeed there was an original humour and pleasantry in his most lively sallies of anger or impatience, which, with his broken English, were extremely risible. His natural propensity to wit and humour and happy method of relating common occurrences in an uncommon way, enabled him to throw persons and things into very ridiculous attitudes.”* (Burney)

What do we know of him? First hand accounts such as those of Burney above give the following snapshots.

- It was known that he was scrupulous in matters of money and singers would gladly accept a promissory note from him having no doubt it would be paid.
- He was a devout Christian (he remained a Lutheran) a fact that did not seem to be at odds with his rather robust love of the good life, particularly those of food and drink. Neither was it incompatible with his habit of profuse swearing, usually in several languages! It did however inspire his seemingly endless generosity.
- He did not suffer fools gladly and his imperious manner made him his share of enemies especially among his singers. But if he was quick to anger, he was equally quick to admit himself in the wrong

*“He was a blunt and peremptory disciplinarian on these occasions but had a humour and wit in delivering his instructions and even in chiding and finding fault that was peculiar to himself and extremely diverting to all but those on whom his lash was laid.”* (Burney).

The famous story of his recital with the violinist Dubourg is one of many accounts revealing the personality of this most human of divine composers. Handel greeted the

violinist at the conclusion of a rather extended and rambling cadenza with the words (loud enough for all the audience to hear) "Welcome back, Mr Dubourg!"

## WHAT EVER BECAME OF....?

**What does mythology tell us about the various deities and characters found in the Semele story?**

### **Cadmus**

**Cadmus** and his daughters were both fortunate and unfortunate. He was a great and learned King, having invented the alphabet and other useful things, but on the other hand he spent his last years in exile and was also turned into a serpent, which is the punishment he received for having enjoyed the glory of killing one. He was sent to the Elysian Fields after his death.

### **Ino**

**Ino**, Cadmus' daughter married King Athamas, but being his second wife, she was jealous of his first wife's children and plotted against them. Ino could get rid of them, but afterwards, and because she and her husband took care of the child Dionysus, she was driven mad, killing herself and her little son Melicertes. Yet they were made immortal and became sea-deities.

### **Athamas**

**Athamas** was king first in Boeotia and then in Thessaly. As his second wife Ino plotted against the children of his first wife Nephele, he almost sacrificed his son Phrixus. Hermes entrusted Dionysus to Athamas and Ino, and persuaded them to rear him as a girl. But Hera drove them mad, and Athamas hunted his elder son Learchus as a deer, killing him. Athamas was then banished, and settled in the country he named Athamantia marrying Themisto and having other children by her.

### **Iris**

A standard attribute of **Iris**, Juno's handmaiden and favorite messenger, is the goddess of the Rainbow, a "maiden seen of none," as Virgil refers to her in *The Aeneid* (V, 609-610), she appears to mortals in many guises, her variegated colors symbolic of her eloquence. In view of this interpretive tradition, one can understand why Juno sends her on the reconnaissance mission to uncover the whereabouts of Semele. In the iconography, Iris was depicted as a young woman with golden wings and a herald's rod and/or a pitcher in her hand.

### **Jupiter**

**Jupiter** is the supreme god of the Roman pantheon. He is a god of light and sky, and protector of the state and its laws and the Romans worshipped him as ruler of the universe and also as his function as the god of the state who distributes laws, controls the realm and makes his will known through oracles. His English name is Jove.

His temple was not only the most important sanctuary in Rome; it was also the center of political life. Here official offerings were made, treaties were signed and wars were declared, and the triumphant generals of the Roman army came here to give their thanks. His attribute is the lightning bolt and the eagle is both his symbol and his messenger.

Jupiter is completely identical with the Greek Zeus

### **Juno**

Protector and special counselor of the Roman state and queen of the gods, **Juno** was married to Jupiter. Juno did not sit passively by while Jupiter engaged in his numerous affairs but took revenge on her husband's concubines and conquests, but rarely on her husband. Being patroness of the married state, the fashion of being a June bride is still in vogue as it is the month that bears her name. The peacock is her symbolic animal. Juno is also the protecting and guardian spirit of females.

