HANDEL’S EARLY LONDON OPERAS

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The Politics of Handel’s Early London Operas, 1711–1718

It was the winter of 1710, and, according to John Mainwaring, Handel’s earliest biographer, “scarce a mail arrived . . . which did not bring some fresh account of victories or advantages gained by the English hero [John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough] over the armies of a Monarch, but lately the terror of Europe [Louis XIV].” Yet England, victorious in war, was also a nation torn by partisan strife between Whigs and Tories. The former adhered to principles of resistance to tyranny, toleration for religious dissenters, and war with France; the latter advocated obedience to monarchy, Anglican hegemony, and peace abroad. What the divided polity needed, Mainwaring wrote, was music—specifically, Handel’s music. “Nothing indeed seemed wanting to compleat the national felicity, but a person capable of charming down, by the magic of his melody, that evil spirit of faction and party, which fortune seems, at this time, to have conjured up.” Unfortunately, the magic did not work. “Handel, great as he was, could not do for England, what David did for Saul,” although Mainwaring implies that he made a good try at it.

Mainwaring was not accurate about Marlborough’s great victories, which had ended over a year before, but he was correct about the intense party strife of this period. It had reached a peak in February 1710 with the decision of the Whig government to put on trial Henry Sacheverell, a Tory clergyman, for preaching a seditious sermon. The trial gave rise to violent riots in London. Seeking to quell these discontents, Queen Anne turned away from her Whig ministers and toward the Tories, led by Robert Harley. The Parliamentary elections of October–November 1710 returned a House of Commons brimming with fervent Tory High Churchmen, all of them wanting peace, some of them bent on restoring


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1 John Mainwaring, Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel (New York, 1980; orig. pub. 1760), 75.
the Stuart Pretender, James III, to the throne. Marlborough’s days as Allied military commander were now numbered. He was dismissed from his offices in December 1711, three months after the preliminary articles of peace with France were signed.²

The still un-Anglicized Georg Friedrich Händel, therefore, arrived in England at a time of acute political crisis and violent partisanship. Perhaps he saw this situation as an opportunity. His first London opera, *Rinaldo*, was presented at the Queen’s Theatre in the Haymarket in 1711. Over the next four years, Handel composed three more public operas: *Il Pastor Fido* (1712), *Teseo* (1713) and *Amadis* (1715). He also wrote a private opera for the French ambassador, *Lucio Cornelio Silla*, which was performed once, in 1713. Echoing Mainwaring, we can ask how these works affected, and how were they affected by, the politics of the period. Did Handel, the “Orpheus of our Century,” as he was titled in the preface to *Rinaldo*, really try to soothe with his music the angry beasts of faction? Or did he feed them?³

Many who know Handel’s life and music may find these questions to be tendentious, even irrelevant. After all, Handel apparently had no discernible political opinions. He did not even reply to the scurrilous attacks made on him by the opponents of the Walpole government in the 1730s. With one possible exception, none of his forty-two surviving operas relates directly to contemporary political conflicts. Scholars like Dean, Knapp, Strom, and Larue have analyzed Handel’s operatic works insightfully, without paying much attention to contemporary politics. Does the political dimension reveal anything worth knowing about his work? Conversely, can the operas of a composer as secretive as Handel reveal anything worth knowing about politics?⁴


⁴ The possible exception is *Floridante* (1721), which depicts a quarrel between the heir to
The answer to both questions is a qualified “yes.” Handel’s operas are not partisan works, although they contain veiled hints about politics. Neither the composer nor his librettists wanted to give offense to patrons. Their creations might lean in one direction or the other, but rarely so obviously as to excite comment. At best, scholars can only hazard an educated guess about the intentions behind an operatic reference or an audience’s interpretation of it. As for Handel’s own politics, they seem to be irrecoverable. He may have learned the value of silence at the University of Halle, or as a Protestant working in Roman Catholic Italy. Whatever the case, by the time Handel arrived in London, he was already well versed in the art of controlling his responses and disguising his opinions.\(^5\)

Handel’s London operas nonetheless impart valuable information about the pervasive influence of politics on the arts during the early 1700s. It was an age when private enterprise and voluntary associations were replacing the role of the court in the organization and propagation of English public culture. Although these newer forms of patronage might aspire to non-partisanship, they were inevitably tangled up in the politics of the day.\(^6\)

This essay concentrates on the role of politics in the production and consumption of Handel’s works, meaning the sponsorship, financing, publicizing, staging, performance, and reception of words as well as music. Handel’s operas were, in a sense, consumer goods. This fact does not imply that they were tantamount to sugared pastries or sweetened chocolate (both of them popular in early eighteenth-century England), or that their creation can be compared to that of a silk gown or a linen shirt. They were, how-

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\(^5\) This characteristic of Handel is a theme of Harris, Handel as Orpheus. For biographical information, see Christopher Hogwood, Handel (London, 1984); Jonathan Keates, Handel: The Man and his Music (London, 1985); H. C. Robbins Landon, Handel and His World (Boston, 1984); Donald Burrows, Handel (New York, 1994).

\(^6\) For the decline of the court, see Robert O. Bucholz, The Augustan Court: Queen Anne and the Decline of Court Culture (Stanford, 1993).
ever, theatrical pieces written to make money or gain fame, so they were subject to the inclinations of promoters, patrons, and audiences. They can be placed within an economic framework of general expansion in luxury consumption. They helped to establish social distinctions based on taste, wealth, and status, which made the opera an attractive venue for elite sociability and the display of patronage.\footnote{Ruth Smith, \textit{Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought} (New York, 1995). For commercialism and art, see John Brewer, \textit{The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century} (New York, 1997).}

A work of art is bound to take into account what an audience finds socially and morally acceptable, including the disposition of power, and questions of power, authority, or legitimacy have political implications, even if they do not directly concern the government of a state. Thus, politics becomes important to the interpretation of public works of art, although not necessarily centrally or exclusively. Because most theatrical pieces take the attitudes of the audience for granted, their political content is often monotonous and uninteresting. In his early operatic career, however, Handel could not just assume what his English audiences wanted to hear, because opera was a new and controversial form of theater. Handel and his librettists had to find strategies to impress willing listeners and convince those who were not necessarily predisposed to accept the value of what they were hearing.

In 1710, many influential critics disparaged Italian opera for its association with Roman Catholicism, arbitrary monarchy, and corruption. Some derided it as a sensational or merely sensual entertainment. Several prominent Whig writers shared these views, though many of the chief promoters of opera in the decade after 1710 were Whig aristocrats. The debate about the value of opera, therefore, took place primarily within the Whig party. It was influenced by different views about the direction—moral, cultural, and political—that the Whigs should take in the turbulent last years of Queen Anne. Issues in Whig ideology, such as patriotism, populism, and “politeness,” were played out in the conflict over \textit{opera seria}. Thus, Handel’s early operas became closely linked to issues of Whig self-definition, and to efforts to impose new standards on public art.\footnote{A different perspective can be found in David Hunter, “Handel Among the Jacobites,” \textit{Music and Letters}, LXXXII (2001), 543–556.}
the social setting  Handel’s first London opera, Rinaldo, was written for the Queen’s Theatre in the Haymarket, an opera house built in 1705 by Sir John Vanbrugh, the Whig playwright and architect. Vanbrugh raised capital from fellow members of the Whiggish Kit-Kat Club, for whom a section of the auditorium was reserved, free of charge. Holmes discovered that only four of the twenty-nine original subscribers to the theater were Tories. Although their presence shows that the Queen’s Theatre was not a purely partisan endeavor, the few Tories connected with it clearly had to accept the leadership of their political adversaries. The theater’s opera tickets were sold at Mrs. White’s, a chocolate house in the fashionable St. James’ Street, frequented so much by Whigs that it was known as a clubhouse for their party.9

If the Tories wanted to gain control of the opera, they might have done so through government intervention. Like all public entertainments, opera was kept under the authority of the Lord Chamberlain’s office. The Vice Chamberlain who dealt with theatrical matters during this period was Thomas Coke, a Tory courtier who happened to be “a great Lover of Musique and promoter of Operas.” In 1707, when the Whigs were ascendant in government, Vanbrugh obtained a monopoly over the production of operas from the Lord Chamberlain’s office, although his subsequent bankruptcy forced his assistant, Owen Swiney, to take over as manager. In November 1710, when the Tories replaced the Whigs in office, Vice Chamberlain Coke brokered a complicated deal by which Swiney and his partners leased the Haymarket to William Collier, a Tory Member of Parliament and theatrical impresario, to produce operas there. Collier appointed Aaron Hill, a young publicist and inventor, as manager. This strategy represented an attempt to break the Whig stranglehold on opera and widen its popularity. It was a daunting task, because it flew in the face of certain social and financial realities.10

Although the ownership and management of the Haymarket

opera changed hands repeatedly, the social composition of its patrons and audience apparently did not. The Haymarket could accommodate roughly 900 listeners, compared to less than 700 at Drury Lane, but it seems rarely to have been full. On three nights in 1710/11, the audience numbered 544, 399, and 472. Tickets for the opera, whether in the boxes, pit, or galleries, were exactly twice what they were for spoken plays, suggesting, as Milhous and Hume put it, that “[t]he opera could serve as a kind of club for the rich and powerful—a gathering place free of hoi polloi.” Cibber wrote that opera had the “power of drawing the whole body of nobility, as by enchantment, to their solemnities,” as if it were some sort of aristocratic ritual.11

The Haymarket audience was, by all accounts, highly aristocratic, but it must have included other wealthy Londoners as well, since the 167 English peers in 1710 were hardly enough to fill the pit and boxes at the Haymarket consistently, even if they brought their wives and valets with them. The entire upper tier of the elite (peers, baronets, and knights) amounted to only about 1,410 persons. A theater with 900 seats, no matter how exclusive, would have had to attract at least some untitled gentlemen, and perhaps some wealthy members of the middle classes. Its high prices, however, put regular attendance at the Haymarket opera beyond the reach of most Londoners. The well to do may have given tickets away to dependents or connections of lower status, but Hunter’s argument that few ordinary members of the middling sort could have been among the paying patrons of the opera is probably correct.12

Early opera audiences included a disproportionate number of residents of the emerging western suburbs of London (later the “West End”)—courtiers, officeholders, and gentlefolk in Westminster for “the season.” The location of the theater, not far from Whitehall but removed from the City of London, favored this cli-

entele. A report in the *Muses Mercury* for February 1708 alludes to the social significance of the Haymarket’s site: “Perhaps the Distance of the House in the *Hay-Market* from the Scene of Business in the City was to its Disadvantage: For ‘tis very certain, that a very good part of the Audience for *Plays* comes from that Part of the Town, where Mr. [Jeremy] Collier’s Arguments prevail’d most. As for *Opera’s*, the Expence of that Diversion is a little too great for such as declare for exact Oeconomy; and as the Great chiefly incourage them, they are now nearer than ever to their Protectors.”¹³ In other words, the merchants of the City preferred plays, whereas the aristocrats and gentry living in Westminster were the “Protectors” of opera. The writer’s sardonic comment that City merchants attended plays, despite the popularity in their “Part of the Town” of Jeremy Collier’s Tory arguments against the immorality of the theater, seems to imply that a large number of playgoers were Tories, and by extension, hypocrites. The accusation was exaggerated, since a large number of Whig merchants populated the City as well, but it was not baseless; the Tory party had been gaining ground steadily in London. By 1708, it controlled both the lord mayoralty and the Common Council.¹⁴

“The Great” in this extract can be identified with the Whigs, although the actual situation was more complicated than party polemics allowed. The aristocracy was more or less evenly divided between Whigs and Tories, but the former comprised a majority of active English members of the House of Lords (70 out of 133 in 1710), including the most dynamic figures among the peerage. The Whig leadership had tried to shift the party away from its former radicalism and toward cooperation with the monarch. The Whigs’ goal of moving their supporters aggressively into the offices of administration gave them the image of a professional ruling party. By contrast, Tory officeholders were often alienated from the mainstream of their party. On many issues, Tory councils were dominated by gentry back-benchers in the House of Commons, who were contemptuous of “time-serving placemen.” This division within Tory ranks, far more bitter than the differences among Whigs, helps to explain why Robert Harley’s ministry had

¹³ Milhous and Hume (eds.), *Vice Chamberlain Coke’s Papers*, 81.
so little control of the House of Lords, in spite of much cajoling, bribery, and the creation of new peers.15

Like Harley, Vice Chamberlain Coke faced an uphill battle in attracting a Tory audience to opera, if such was his intention. He had an intense dislike for the Whig Junto leaders; in fact, he had given Parliamentary speeches in favor of their impeachment. Yet the evidence suggests that the Whig lords and their supporters remained important patrons of opera throughout the later years of Queen Anne’s reign, as they had been at the foundation of the Haymarket Theatre. Mainwaring states that the Duke of Manchester, a Junto Whig, gave Handel “strong invitations to England” in 1710. The opera continued to attract ambitious men with Whig connections, like Francis Colman, a future diplomatic envoy whose famous opera diary began in 1712, during the period of Tory dominance at Westminster. Through his marriage into the wealthy Gunley family, Colman was brother-in-law to the rising Whig politician, William Pulteney. To give a further small example of Whig involvement, the Italian artist Marco Ricci painted around 1709 a number of delightful genre scenes depicting opera rehearsals. Only one can be traced to its original owner, Charles Howard, 3rd Earl of Carlisle, a “junior associate” of the Junto, whose house at Castle Howard was built by Vanbrugh.16

Conversely, the period of Harley’s ministry (1710–1714) does not show much evidence of Tory involvement in the opera. Although Queen Anne favored Tories at her court in these years, she did not attend the theater because of her poor health and difficulty in moving. Opera recitals were given at court on the Queen’s birthdays in 1711 and 1712 (perhaps at Coke’s initiative), but no attempt seems to have been made to muster support among courtiers for operatic productions. One new member of the Haymarket


audience, however, came from a well-connected Tory family—ten-year-old Mary Granville, who first met Handel, her future idol, early in 1711. She accompanied her uncle, John Stanley, a commissioner of customs and career “placeman” who served under Whig as well as Tory ministries. Perhaps Stanley saw attendance at the opera, and the personal contact with “the Great” that it afforded, as a necessary part of office holding.17

RINALDO AND THE DEBATE ABOUT OPERA Yet if Tory enthusiasm for the opera does not appear to have blossomed, the Whigs were by no means united in support of opera. The party contained radicals, populists, religious sectarians, and cultural reformers, some of whom hated the opera. If contemporary critical treatises were the only evidence, the impression might be that Italian opera was designed for the Tories and plays for the Whigs. The playwright John Dennis was the most ferocious of the opera haters. He was no admirer of Tory principles either, as can be deduced from the title of his bestselling anticlerical pamphlet of 1702, The Dangers of Priestcraft to Religion and Government. He despised the French and celebrated the victories of the Duke of Marlborough in an epic poem, The Battle of Ramillies. To him, Whiggism was patriotism pure and simple. In answer to the accusation that his play, Liberty Asserted, was a partisan piece, he claimed in the preface, “This was not a Whig but an English play,” thus slyly equating Whig principles with English ones. He was convinced that the stage was a force for moral improvement, “useful to Government, by having an Influence over those who are govern’d, in relation to the common Enemy [that is, the French]. For nothing more raises and exalts their Minds, and fires them with a noble Emulation.” He countered Collier’s complaints about the immorality of the theater with insinuations that Collier was a Jacobite, an admirer of “Popery” and “Arbitrary Power.”18

Dennis viewed Collier’s attack on the stage as a threat to English poetry and as tacit encouragement for two more vicious forms

of entertainment—gambling and opera. In a 1706 pamphlet, Dennis specifically targeted Italian opera for criticism, condemning any variety of theater that was “entirely Musical” rather than “Dramatical.” His disdain for words set to music was curious, given that he had composed the librettos for several musical entertainments. For Dennis, spoken poetry augmented public spirit, eliciting “Zeal and Affection, for the Honour and Interest of one’s Country, and Courage and Resolution to put any thing in practice that may promote its Service or Glory.” It went hand-in-hand with liberty. Opera, however, was a luxurious vice, “a mere sensual Pleasure, which says nothing either to enlighten our Understanding or to convert the Will.” The decline of poetry and the rise of opera would lead to the erosion of “Liberty and Empire,” culminating in “arbitrary Power.” Italian opera was “a Monster,” a “foreign Foppery”; its “soft and effeminate” strains would make the English contemptible to the world. Dennis saw it as the theatrical equivalent to Jacobitism.19

Dennis was a “Revolution Whig” who venerated the Reformation and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 as the two greatest events in national history. He denied being a republican, but he described the republican writer James Harrington as one of “the Great Men who have writ of the Art of Government.” Dennis was beginning to seem ideologically old-fashioned in the age of the Junto, which had largely discarded the Whig party’s revolutionary and republican origins. The Junto Whigs, however, were not the only voice within the party, and they were not necessarily the most appealing to the Whig merchants and tradesmen of London, who might not share aristocratic tastes and values. A vociferous, radical critic like Dennis still retained influence in the capital.20

Whether Handel ever read Dennis’ attack on opera is unknown, but it seems to have had an effect on his first London opera, most likely because Hill, the manager of the Haymarket Theatre, chose the subject of Rinaldo and wrote the English version of the libretto. Although he worked for Collier, Hill’s politics

during this period are slippery. Nonetheless, his experiences in newspaper writing had taught him how to use moral polemics for commercial advantage. He derived the subject of Rinaldo from Torquato Tasso’s poem, Gerusalemme liberata. It cannot have been a coincidence that Dennis had chosen the same theme for a musical drama, Rinaldo and Armida, performed in 1699. Hill’s protagonist was more like Tasso’s vacillating knight than Dennis’ hero, governed by “the Strength of his Reason” and “a Sense of Duty and Honour,” but Hill clearly imitated Dennis in one respect. He reshaped the story into a morally inspiring tragedy, so as, in Dennis’ words, “to make the Greatness of the Sentiments, and of the Images, answer to the Height of the Subject; and the Dignity of the Expression, to the Greatness of the Sentiments.”

By improving upon Dennis’ play, Hill was trying to undermine some of the objections to Italian opera, particularly that it betrayed foreign influence and tended toward “arbitrary power.” In the preface to Rinaldo, addressed to Queen Anne, he rolled out his own patriotic rhetoric: “This Opera is a Native of your Majesty’s Dominions, and was consequently born your Subject,” he informed the monarch, who was known to have declared at her accession that her own heart was entirely English. His whole purpose, was “to see the English OPERA more splendid than her MOTHER, the Italian.” Although the words to his opera were sung in Italian, the English text that was sold to playgoers was more fulsome and eloquent than Giacomo Rossi’s sparsely worded original. It more closely resembled the poetic declamations that Dennis favored. Rinaldo made every effort to appear English, short of being sung in the language.

The opera was also bellicose in ways that might have pleased Dennis, or any supporter of the Duke of Marlborough. The music featured vigorous martial elements. The association of Jerusalem with Paris, and of the victorious Christian host with Marlborough’s army, would not have required much imagination.

Goffredo is even described as the “General of the European Forces,” just as Marlborough commanded the Allied armies. The uplifting Christian theme, so important to Dennis, is unmistakable: Rinaldo and Goffredo are, after all, crusaders, whereas their enemies perform black magic and consort with devils. The opera even ends with the conversion of the wicked Armida through the power of divine grace. As for Dennis’ accusation that opera encouraged “arbitrary Power,” in Hill’s libretto the crusaders are clearly brothers in arms, whereas Armida is a “Tyrant,” and the forces of “Asia” answer to the despotic authority of Argantes.  

**Rinaldo** fought Dennis on his own ground, that of Whig ideology. The opera did not exalt kingship or obedience, and it associated patriotism with war. No doubt conscious of who was in his audience, Hill appealed to a Whiggish mind-set, while avoiding any direct offense to Tories. Hill’s customers must have been pleased with the result; *Rinaldo* became a rare financial success for the Queen’s Theatre. There were fifteen performances of *Rinaldo* in 1711, and it was revived no fewer than five times, in 1712, 1713, 1714/15, 1717, and 1731. Yet *Rinaldo* did not please the new arbiters of “polite” Whig taste, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, authors of a recently launched daily periodical, *The Spectator*. Their assault on the opera was more serious than that of Dennis because it was less radical and more congruent with the views of the Junto Whigs.

**MR. SPECTATOR VERSUS “THE EUNUCHS”: THE AESTHETICS OF ADDISON AND STEELE** Addison and Steele were moderate Whigs, whose aesthetic opinions derived from philosophical premises that cut across party lines. Human beings, they assumed, were sociable animals by nature, with an inclination toward virtue that should be cultivated by proper training and education, rather than subjected to strict moral guidelines. Thus, Addison and Steele cast off the vestiges of Puritanism, while simultaneously rejecting the religious dogmatism of the High Churchmen. However, only those who had leisure, easy circumstances, and good breeding could afford to devote themselves to a cultural education. By and large, such individuals were landed gentlemen, not men of the middling classes,

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22 Hill and Rossi, *Rinaldo*, 5–6, 21, 47, 75 [Dedication, 9, 35, 63]). The numbers in square brackets refer to the pages of the original edition. See also Dean and Knapp, *Handel’s Operas*, 206–233.
and it was to the gentry that The Spectator was chiefly directed. For Addison and Steele, the ideal type was the “clubbable” country gentleman, raised in a classically based civil culture that enhanced his natural virtue rather than warping it with unnatural rules or affected attitudes. He eagerly discussed cultural topics with his friends in a coffeehouse or tavern, but apparently never attended Italian opera.23

Addison’s position on opera was complicated by the failure in 1707 of Rosamund, an English-language musical drama for which he had written the libretto. The fifth number of The Spectator, issued in March 1711 and written by Addison, made no concession to any type of opera, English or Italian. It began with the damning statement that opera’s “only Design is to gratifie the Senses, and keep up an indolent Attention in the Audience.” Addison panned Rinaldo, which he had not yet seen, mocking its “painted Dragons spitting Wild-fire” and the sparrows that flitted about the stage during the garden scene. He condemned the Italian libretto of Rinaldo for its “florid Form of Words, and such tedious Circumlocutions, as are used by none but Pedants in our own Country.”24

Steele later gave his own negative assessment of Rinaldo, which he had attended. He made particular fun of the castratos (“by the Squeak of their Voices the Heroes . . . are Eunuchs”). How could virile gentlemen learn moral lessons from such effeminate performers? Addison soon launched into a second sustained attack on Italian opera as ridiculous, since few in England could understand what was being said on the stage. Again, he denigrated musical entertainment in general: “If it would take the entire Possession of our Ears, if it would make us incapable of hearing Sense, if it would exclude Arts that have a much greater Tendency to the Refinement of human Nature,” then, like Plato, he would banish music entirely “out of the commonwealth.”25

Because his threats may have offended some readers (including fellow members of the Kit-Kat Club), Addison retreated from

25 Ibid., no. 18, March 21, 1711, 55–58.
them quickly. In April 1711, The Spectator published a fourth number on the Italian opera, this time praising the use of recitative as “more natural, than the passing from a Song to plain and ordinary Speaking, which was the common Method in Purcell’s Operas.” Addison still thought that Italian music did not suit English words, but it might be adapted to them by “gentle Deviations.” “I would allow the Italian Opera to lend our English Musick as much as may grace and soften it, but never entirely to annihilate and destroy it.” Addison concluded by noting that the rules of art “are to deduce . . . from the general Sense and Taste of Mankind,” rather than from fixed laws of taste. One needed no special gifts in order to assess the appropriateness of music: “A Man of an ordinary Ear is a Judge whether a Passion is expressed in proper Sounds, and whether the Melody of those Sounds be more or less pleasing.”

Two days after Addison expressed this guarded praise for recitative, he published a satire on a fictitious opera promoter, or “Projector,” who planned to stage The Expedition of Alexander the Great—complete with monkeys, elephants, dromedaries, and a puppet show—to be acted in Greek, “which was a Tongue he was sure would wonderfully please the Ladies,” none of whom would understand a word of it. Female taste was always questionable for The Spectator. After this final comic sally, Addison was content to poke fun at Italian singing with occasional barbs rather than with full-scale arguments.

Addison’s opposition to opera was often strident, but he did not simply repeat Dennis’ moral strictures. The two Whig writers were not in fact friends. When he noticed aspersions in The Spectator about his literary theories, Dennis apparently went into a “deplorable frenzy,” ripping up a copy of the offensive periodical. Addison and Steele rejected Dennis’ rigid rules of aesthetics, along with his radical principles. To them, Italian music had little moral or aesthetic worth, but it did not corrupt virtue. It would not reduce its English admirers to willing slaves of arbitrary power, as Dennis maintained (although Steele’s comment on eunuchs may have pointed in that direction). Operas sung in English with their music altered to suit the language, their special effects toned down, and their plots made less absurd might even make a positive impact.

26 Ibid., I, no. 31, April 3, 1711, 87–89.
27 Ibid., I, no. 32, April 5, 1711, 92–94.
28 Ibid., I, note, 535–536.
Unfortunately, Handel’s second London opera, *Il Pastor Fido*, did not redeem the art; rather, it conformed perfectly to almost all of *The Spectator*’s complaints. *Il Pastor Fido*, written at short notice by Rossi, is a lightweight, though not lighthearted, entertainment, of which the “only Design [was] to gratifie the Senses.” Moreover, its message was unsettling: “It is not in the Power of Man to avoid the Decrees of Heaven, and in vain to endeavour to pry into her Counsels.” This fatalism sounds like an endorsement of religious authority—a pitch to Tory listeners, made at the height of the High Church reaction in English government. Much of the plot, however, can be read as a satire on the gullibility of the common people, whose pious beliefs are revealed as fraudulent. This muddled message did not work well on the audience. *Il Pastor Fido* was a failure that can only have confirmed the doubts about opera that had been sown by its enemies. It began to look as if the scorn of Whig critics would indeed manage to destroy the favorite diversion of Whig aristocrats.29

SHAFTESBURY AND BURLINGTON Opera survived in London, however, because its producers once again chose to listen to the critics—in particular, a group of aristocratic Whig aesthetes who shared the “polite” philosophy of *The Spectator* but were more favorably inclined toward Italian culture. Few of these men committed their ideas to paper, so their views can be reconstructed only indirectly. However, since one of them—Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, grandson of the first leader of the Whig party—became an important philosopher, he might be allowed to speak for the rest.

Although not an active politician, Shaftesbury was close to members of the Whig Junto. In 1711, he published an influential collection of essays, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, in which he imagined an ideal type of virtuous aristocrat, not a fawning courtier but an independent man of refined taste, who had learned self-control and was willing to strive for the good of society. He counseled those who “are provided with abundance of all things, by the Pains and Labours of Inferiors” that they should apply themselves “to any sort of Work, such as has a good and honest End in Society, (as Letters, Sciences, Arts, Husbandry,

publick Affairs, Oeconomy, or the like)” in order to balance their affections and prevent “a total Disorder of the Passions.” Significantly, Shaftesbury placed intellectual and artistic pursuits in the same list as economic and political ones. He was describing not the sociable clubman of The Spectator, but a privileged patron who spent his time and fortune in the promotion of the arts.30

Although Shaftesbury did not discuss opera in the first edition of his Characteristicks, his “Letter Concerning Design”—addressed in 1712 to the Junto leader, John, Lord Somers—had something to say about music. Unlike Addison, Shaftesbury openly admired Italy as the birthplace of the Renaissance, with its modern principles of art, which he saw as a reaction against the Catholic Church’s “Gothic” style, as well as its general cultural and political oppression. The Renaissance brought political and artistic liberty to great nobles and rulers, who became the patrons of great artists. As a native example of the effects of liberty in the arts, Shaftesbury pointed to the “Genius” of English music since the Glorious Revolution, recalling “the Time, when, in respect of MUSICK, our reigning Taste was in many degrees inferior to the French. . . . But when the Spirit of the Nation was grown more free, . . . we no sooner began to turn our-selves towards Musick, and enquire what ITALY in particular produc’d, than in an instant we . . . enter’d into a Genius far beyond [that of the French], and rais’s our-selves an Ear, and Judgment, not inferior to the best now in the World.”31

For largely political reasons, Shaftesbury felt that English music had improved since the Stuarts, whom the Whigs always anathematized. In reality, the evidence of any flowering of musical composition in England after the death of Henry Purcell is slim, apart from seven seasons of Italian operas. The unstated reference to opera would not have been lost on Somers or any other Whig lord.

Shaftesbury presented more detailed views on opera in a private letter to a French Protestant clergyman, Pierre Coste, in 1709.

30 Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, “An Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit,” in Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times (Indianapolis, 2001), II, 77. See also Klein, Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness, 27–47, 175–212.
Like Addison, Shaftesbury condemned “the Machine and Decorations of the Theater” as a “vulgar, miserable, barbarous.” The same luxurious excess had “corrupted the Roman Stage or rather made it impossible for ‘em to succeed in their Tragedy or Opera.” The Romans, once “free and popular,” fell from liberty into slavery through cultivating the eye rather than the ear, and embracing “the marvellous, the outrageous, the extremity of things.” Notwithstanding his apparent echo of Dennis’ denigration of opera as mere spectacle, Shaftesbury pursued a different political point. Tragedy, he wrote, “shews Us the Misfortunes and Miseries of the Great: by which the People are not only reveng’d, but comforted and encourag’d to endure their equal plain Rank.” The value of moral drama was to quiet the populace by convincing them that even great men might fall, not, as Dennis argued, to raise in them an active spirit of patriotism. Shaftesbury had taken a subtle but noticeable step away from “Revolution principles” toward an association of art with a kind of cultural control over the passions of “the People.”

Shaftesbury was aware that opera was not yet popular with the lower classes. He nonetheless stressed the simplicity of Italian opera as a means “of restoring the antient Tragedy (the true Opera) with its Chorus, and all the Charms depending on that antient Plan and Method.” Far from seeing musical drama as inimical to true drama, Shaftesbury prophesied “that as Countrys grow more polite, Opera will every day gain upon the other Theater, and our best Tragedy at last melt into Opera.” To its credit, Italian recitative was “plain and simple,” clearly separated from the arias and not made to sound like “regular Song.” Thus, it lent itself to the “more sedately passionate Parts of Places . . . of Reflection.” To Shaftesbury, French opera, with its machinery, its musical adornments, and, worst of all, its vulgar custom of allowing the audience to sing along with the chorus, was merely “ridiculous.”

As McGeary has suggested, Handel approved of the ideas expressed in this letter, but he may not have read it until it went into print, many years later. Whether it had a direct effect on his two public operas, Teseo and Amadigi, is unknown. Nevertheless, Shaftesbury’s ideas were shared by other “polite” Whig critics of

the period. His Characteristicks provided inspiration for a generation of Whig aristocrats who saw themselves as the arbiters of “polite” taste, based on Italian rather than French models. The most energetic of these cultural reformers was the young Richard Boyle, third Earl of Burlington, who became the chief patron of the opera after 1712, and to whom both Teseo and Amadigi were fawningly dedicated. Through Burlington, Handel’s operas began to reflect the aesthetic views of Lord Shaftesbury.

A great deal of confusion has surrounded the politics of the Earl of Burlington since the discovery that his name appears as “Mr. Buck” on a cipher list in the Stuart papers. Some scholars view this document as evidence that Burlington was a secret Jacobite, even the leading Jacobite in England, rather than a Hanoverian Whig. The cipher, however, may signify nothing more than the Stuart court’s interest in cultivating the young Earl. He may well have had Stuart sympathizers in his extensive household; indeed, one of his chaplains was later implicated in a Jacobite conspiracy. No convincing evidence, however, has come to light in the Stuart papers, or anywhere else, that Burlington was a Jacobite rather than the Hanoverian Whig that he always appeared to be. He did not make any recorded contact with the Jacobites on his Grand Tour in 1714/15, and his name never appears on the lists of those who gave money to the Stuart court. Burlington’s political career in England was impeccably Whig. He showed no mercy for Jacobite rebels in 1715 as Lord Lieutenant of Yorkshire and no sympathy for Jacobite conspirators during the treason trials of 1722/23.

Burlington never stated his goals as a patron of the arts in any detail, but he clearly owed something to Shaftesbury’s philosophy. Like Shaftesbury, Burlington derived his idea of good taste from Italian art, because of its association with ancient Rome. He may have believed, as Shaftesbury did, that opera was the descendant of ancient tragedy. Moreover, like Shaftesbury, Burlington and his circle labeled bad taste as “Gothic,” a pejorative term that appears to have included everything from medieval Church art to the baroque architecture of Christopher Wren. Whether or not Burlington shared Shaftesbury’s views on the moral purpose of art is difficult to judge, but he would certainly have agreed that the English aristocracy had a responsibility to promote good taste. For Handel, Burlington was both a public and a private patron. The composer lived at Burlington House in Piccadilly between 1712 and 1717, where, according to the poet John Gay, “Hendel strikes the Strings, the melting Strain / Transports the Soul, and thrills through ev’ry Vein.”

Burlington may have had a role in the choice of subjects for the two public operas, both based on French tragédies-lyriques, that Handel wrote for the Haymarket Theatre in 1712 and 1715. Teseo derived from a libretto by Philippe Quinault, set by the French court composer Jean-Baptiste Lully; Amadigi came from a Parisian opera by Antoine Houdar de La Motte and André Cardinal Destouches, which drew on an original by Quinault and Lully. Although these sources were unacknowledged, some members of the audience would have appreciated that Handel and his librettist, Nicola Haym, were showing the superiority of Italian over French opera by rewriting two works originally performed for England’s great enemy, Louis XIV. In the new English versions, moreover, Handel and Haym discarded the sing-song recitative and the sing-along chorus that Shaftesbury had scorned. In Amadigi, they even

ditched the five-act French format, replacing it with the more familiar three acts of Italian opera.\(^\text{36}\)

*Teseo* was politically topical. By the end of 1712, the main political issue in England was the succession to the throne. Georg Ludwig of Hanover had been affirmed by Parliamentary statute (“the will of the people”), but James Francis Stuart was nearest in blood to Queen Anne. The Tories could not make up their minds between the two; many of them were already plotting to bring back the Stuart claimant. The plot of *Teseo* leaves no doubt as to who had the best claim. The chorus of Athenians, “the will of the people,” applauds the eponymous hero of the opera as their true monarch. As a successful war leader who rises to the throne through popular approval, Teseo resembles William of Orange, and the flawed, misguided King Egeo is reminiscent of James II.\(^\text{37}\)

In the political atmosphere of 1712/13, to take a favorable view of the Glorious Revolution was to endorse the Hanoverian Succession. In the end, however, Teseo turns out to be the right heir by blood as well, just as William was to those who denied the legitimate birth of his Stuart rival. This providential stroke tones down the democratic implications of the acclamation scene, and may have placated some Tories in the audience. Nevertheless, King Egeo’s awkward recognition of Teseo as his lawful successor is clearly subordinate in dramatic terms to Teseo’s popular approval. The denouement would have satisfied a Hanoverian, but not a Jacobite, for whom strict hereditary right was primary.\(^\text{38}\)

The opera contains further political references, Whiggish in tone. In the first act, Teseo suppresses a rebellion, just as the Whigs had crushed a Jacobite rebellion in 1708. The librettist removed from Quinault’s original script a hymn for peace that followed the victory. It might have been seen as too favorable to the Harley ministry, which was then busy forging a peace treaty with France. King Egeo, whose throne has been saved by Teseo, does not show him any more gratitude than Anne had to Marlborough. The


\(^{37}\) [Haym], *Teseo* (London, 1713), in Harris (ed.), *Librettos of Handel’s Operas*, 159 [21].

king’s despotic impulses draw encouragement from the wicked Medea, who expresses Tory-like sentiments about monarchical authority: “A Kings Commands / Are Laws to Subjects.” Medea fails in the end. Egeo finally rejects her advice by refusing to put Teseo to death: “I ne’re was yet a Tyrant.” In stark contrast to James II, Egeo’s change of heart redeems his character.  

Handel’s music does little to enhance these political themes, which are found mainly in the recitative rather than in the arias. This style was no doubt exactly what Shaftesbury, and perhaps Burlington, would have wanted, since it was the recitative that gave Italian opera its resemblance to the simplicity of ancient tragedy. Based on a classical subject, Teseo goes a long way toward satisfying the expectations of the Whig cultural reformers.

Unlike Teseo, Amadigi was not a classical drama, although it was set in a mythical, pre-Christian era. The opera was produced in May 1715, shortly after Burlington’s return from his first Italian tour and ten months after George I’s accession to the throne. The transition to the Hanoverian dynasty had not been smooth. Recurring demonstrations had taken place in London, and coronation day was marked by riots in many parts of England. The extent to which these disturbances should be considered Jacobite is still debatable, but they certainly manifested a popular distrust of the new ruler and his Whig ministry.

The London riots began on Queen Anne’s accession day in March, intensified on her birthday in April, and reached a crescendo of violence on May 28–29 (King George’s birthday, followed by the anniversary of Charles II’s Restoration), only four days after the premiere of Amadigi. Although they took place in the City, far from the Haymarket Theatre and Burlington House, everyone in Handel’s audience would have known about them. Obviously, the popular acclamation of Teseo could then have been interpreted differently, from a Jacobite rather than Hanoverian point of view, which may be the reason why the opera was not revived after its thirteen performances in the 1713 season. Instead, Handel

39 Haym, Teseo, 175, 197 [37, 59].
and Haym offered a “magical” piece that had no direct bearing on contemporary politics.

*Amadigi* is not without political overtones, but they are muted. As in *Rinaldo* and *Teseo*, the source of evil in *Amadigi* is a female sorceress. Even in the reign of Queen Anne, female power (other than the respect that was due to mothers) was generally represented as illegitimate, based on deception and without divine blessing. Melissa in *Amadigi*, however, is a more subtle character than Handel’s earlier sorceresses. She expresses her love, her frustration, and her grief in deeply moving arias. Although fundamentally misguided, she is treated with some respect and sympathy. The hero, Amadigi, is not exactly a paragon either. He faints, he murders his friend the Prince of Thrace in a duel, and he too readily believes that his love has betrayed him. He is helpless in the face of Melissa’s enchantments. In the end, he is rescued only by a supernatural Providence.  

*Amadigi* exemplifies what Shaftesbury called “the Misfortunes and Miseries of the Great,” demonstrating heaven’s reward of a noble purpose even if tainted by human failings. A connection between the hapless hero and the beleaguered George I may lie in Amadigi’s providentially justified triumph, which recalls the terms that George I used in his first speech before Parliament: “It pleased Almighty God, of his good Providence, to call me to the throne of my ancestors.”

This is not to claim that *Amadigi* is a political allegory. On the contrary, it is first and foremost a “magical” entertainment, with splendid scenery and special effects, designed to shift the mind of a troubled audience away from the disturbing reality of a nation on the brink of civil war. Its themes, however, reflect the worldviews of the new regime’s elite supporters, who were more interested in keeping peace and consolidating their control than in continuing the patriotic crusade against France. Handel appears to have been eager to play up to their expectations. It is surely no coincidence that the music of Amadigi’s last aria so closely resembles the “wa-

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The music” performed before King George two years later. Amidigi’s victory is like that of the house of Hanover—a return to order, benign government, and national glory after the dark years of female domination.

Amadigi may have had a further resonance. It is essentially a drama of initiation, in which the hero endures a series of ordeals or tests. The first ordeal of fire he must brave alone. The second, in which he is tricked into believing that his paramour no longer loves him, he can overcome only with her help. The third test, Melissa’s plan to kill them both, requires divine intervention. Amadigi’s transformation from one who loves the night (“Ó notte, ó cara notte”) to one who feels the light of joy shining in his breast (“Sento la gioia/ Ch’in sen’ mi brilla”) mirrors the ritual initiation into enlightenment that was offered by Freemasonry. In fact, the plot of Amadigi is in several respects similar to that of Mozart’s Masonic opera, The Magic Flute.

There is no evidence that Handel was a Freemason. His patron Burlington, however, was highly praised in Masonic literature and was probably a Brother. The Grand Lodge of England, founded in 1717, was largely a Whig enterprise, and its early Grand Masters were invariably Whig aristocrats, several of them patrons of the opera. However, Burlington was not among the Grand Masters, and never held a prominent position in the Grand Lodge of England. If he was a Mason, he was probably initiated into the older Grand Lodge of York, a city in which his family had long been prominent. Whatever the case, many of Burlington’s fellow aristocrats would have recognized and approved of the Masonic overtones in Amadigi, whether the composer himself was aware of them or not. No doubt Handel’s main concern was that the opera should be a hit; to a certain extent it was, judging by its revival in 1716 and 1717. The financial problems that beset opera production, however, remained, and the Whig elite had to consider a new approach to them.43

THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC  Handel may not have considered himself a Whig. Before moving in with Burlington, he shared lodgings with Queen Anne’s Tory physician, John Arbuthnot. Nor was he unwilling to compose for an audience hostile to Whigs. Between Teseo and Amadigi, he collaborated with Rossi on Silla, a private opera performed only once, for the French Ambassador Extraordinary, Louis-Marie, Duc d’Aumont de Rochebaron, who negotiated the final stages of the Treaty of Utrecht. A number of scholars contend that the dictator Silla is meant to resemble the Duke of Marlborough, the Whig hero. No evidence indicates that Burlington had anything to do with this opera, although he must have known about it. The work is arguably one of Handel’s poorest, perhaps displaying a lack of enthusiasm on his part. Moreover, Handel was identified in the published libretto of Silla as “Maestro di Capella di S. A. E. d’Hannover,” which would have discouraged a Jacobite interpretation of the text. Nonetheless, the most convincing reading of Silla is as an anti-Whig piece. It demonstrates that Handel, like other commercial artists, was not politically consistent.  

Handel’s residence in the house of the Tory James Brydges, Earl of Carnarvon, at Cannons in Middlesex between 1717 and 1719 should not therefore be a shock. For Carnarvon, Handel wrote the famous Chandos anthems and a Biblical oratorio, Esther, music designed for the High Church temperament of his patron. Esther has been interpreted as having a hidden Jacobite meaning, which is not implausible. One of Carnarvon’s brothers was an ardent Jacobite, and the Earl himself arranged the finances of Lord Bolingbroke when he became chief minister to the Pretender in 1715. By the time Handel was living with him, however, Carnarvon was busy remodeling himself as a Hanoverian, which was how he obtained the Dukedom of Chandos in April 1719.

Meanwhile, the Haymarket opera was going through upheavals. After Swiney absconded suddenly to Italy in 1713, John James Heidegger, a Swiss impresario who was to make his name...
promoting masquerades, assumed management of the theater. The opera’s receipts were “truly dismal” in 1716/17, and it came to depend on “temporary Contributions” from “People of Quality.” Yet opera did not lack for elite, even royal, patronage. Although he was not renowned as a lover of the arts, George I was a tireless operagoer. Burrows and Hume show that the king attended more than one-half of the opera’s performances between 1714 and 1717. His presence must have enhanced the link between opera and support for the Hanoverians—which meant support for the Whigs, on whom the king poured all his favors.46

Handel’s career as a private composer to the aristocracy came to an end in 1719, with the founding of the Royal Academy of Music. For the next nine years, the Academy employed him to find singers for the Haymarket and compose eleven of his finest operas. The Academy was formed as a joint-stock company, on the instigation of the Lord Chamberlain, Thomas Holles, Duke of Newcastle, for the specific purpose of promoting operatic performances. Although Handel’s relationship with it lies outside the scope of this article, the Royal Academy’s political base is noteworthy. Forty of the fifty-seven men on the Academy’s charter were politically active Whigs. Three others (including Chandos) were “Court Tories” who held office after 1714. Only ten were Tory opponents of the government. The subscribers were all rich (they had to promise at least £200 each, although only 20 percent of the capital would be drawn upon), and thirty were peers of England, Scotland, or Ireland. All but one of the Tory subscribers were aristocrats, compared to nineteen of the Whigs. High social status could make a Tory into an acceptable subscriber; Whig recruits came from a wider elite circle. As might be expected, the Academy’s first Court of Directors was dominated by Whigs, the solitary Tory among them being Robert Benson, Lord Bingley. Over the next decade, of the fifty-eight directors identified by Gibson, only seven were Tories of any variety.47

46 Milhous and Hume, “Heidegger,” 81–82 (the last two quotations are from the Royal Academy prospectus); Burrows and Hume, “George I, the Haymarket Opera Company and Handel’s Water Music,” Early Music, XIX (1991), 323–341.
47 The names appear in Milhous and Hume, “The Charter for the Royal Academy of Music,” Music and Letters, LXVII (1986), 50–51. The name of the Whig M. P. Thomas Harrison appears twice by mistake. The politics of the subscribers have been identified from George Edward Cokayne and Vickery Gibbs (eds.), The Complete Peerage (Gloucester, 1987; orig. pub. 1887), and from Romney Sedgwick (ed.), The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1715–54 (London, 1970), 2 v. Brian Fairfax and John Arbuthnot are noted in DNB. Deutsch,
The Royal Academy promoted opera as an entertainment free from political controversy. According to the prospectus issued to the subscribers, operas “are the most harmless of all publick Diversions. They are an Encouragement and Support to an Art that has been cherished by all Polite Nations. They carry along with them some marks of Publick Magnificence and are the great Entertainments which Strangers share in.” (The most prominent “Strangers” in the kingdom at the time were the Germans at the court of George I.) This stated neutrality was a particularly pressing consideration, because the regular London theater had become a battleground between Whigs and Tories, Hanoverians and Jacobites. “The Rage of Party is so Predominant,” complained one playwright about the theater, “that ev’n publick Diversion is interrupted, and ‘tis impossible to sit out a Play with any Satisfaction, for the ridiculous Comments which a Man is oblig’d to hear from the Politicians in the Pit.” Although major rioting in London had come to an end, incidents of Jacobite protest had not, and they often involved actors. In 1717, disaffected actors from Drury Lane staged a free performance of Thomas Otway’s *The Orphan* to commemorate the Pretender’s birthday. The stars of the opera, most of whom were Italians, never caused such scenes, in spite of their notorious self-importance and personal jealousies.48

The government was eager to control dissident Whigs in the theatrical world who might support the opposition, among them the recently knighted Steele, who held an unusual license to produce plays at Drury Lane without first submitting them for censorship. Having rediscovered his radical Whig roots, Steele fell out with the administration, and with his old friend Addison, over the Peerage Bill of 1719, an abortive scheme to restrict the creation of new peers and ensure the Whigs a perpetual majority in the House of Lords. Steele saw the Academy as a similar attempt to establish ministerial absolutism by drawing financial support away from the regular theater. He pilloried the new society in his periodical, *The

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Theatre (1720): “Pleasures are of late Years improv’d to a most exquisitely Softness, and the Delight of Sound has prevail’d over the Pain of Sense.”

Opera, for Steele, was still merely a delightful sound, without sense, just as it had been for The Spectator nine years before. He lampooned the Academy directors as “the Council of Ten, who determine certain Deliberations, according to Rules and Methods imported by Sir Politick Wou’dbe, from the State of Venice, for the better Regulation of Trifles in this Kingdom.” Although the epithet was borrowed from Ben Jonson, the taste of Sir Politick Wou’dbe was that of the Earl of Burlington, whose alleged purpose was to establish despotic control over English culture, starting with the opera: “For all great Men know, that if you can command absolutely the Toys of little People, you will, by a Parity of Reason, come into the Possession and Direction of the Goods and Chattels of the Rest of the World.”

Behind Steele’s satirical flourishes lies a valid observation about how English culture had changed since the Glorious Revolution. Just as the Whig lords had made the court’s former administrative functions into the preserve of party patronage, so too had they adopted opera, an expensive form of theater that was associated with royal courts, as a preferred entertainment. They seemed to model themselves on the aristocratic oligarchy of Venice. Evidently, the debate over Italian opera continued to reflect strains within the Whig party between moderates and radicals, great lords and plain gentlemen. Opera’s defenders, however, were by now the undisputed masters of the kingdom. According to Steele, even their “harmless diversions” were the means to despotic cultural power.

For lovers of Handel, Steele’s argument may seem shrill and exaggerated, but it has to be understood against the wider political and cultural history of the period. The royal patronage of the Stuart age had given way after 1688 to the patronage of an aristocratic elite that set out to establish English culture on a new basis, more attuned to cosmopolitan tastes and to the demand for social dis-


50 Steele, The Theatre, no. 18, 79.
tinction. Its most energetic leaders were Whig lords—the Junto, Shaftesbury, Burlington—who wanted the arts to be brought under their guidance, not subjected to the whims of a popular audience. The Royal Academy was founded in part to achieve their aims. In the end, it failed, and its bankruptcy in 1728 impoverished English music. Yet the uncertain success of opera from 1705 to the 1730s was not a tragedy. It was indicative of the commercial and popular basis of the London theater, which gave it a peculiar freedom. The English stage was probably the most unfettered form of public culture anywhere in Europe. It may have been vulgar, smug, and chauvinist, but it was relatively free.

Opera, derived from the court entertainments of monarchs and great aristocrats, never fully adapted to this environment. It was kept alive, somewhat artificially, by the Whig aristocracy, the governors of England after 1714. Its eventual failure was due largely to their inability to establish full control over English culture, or more particularly, over the London stage. The history of early eighteenth-century opera, reveals both the nature and limits of aristocratic cultural hegemony in England. As a servant of that hegemony, Handel made every effort to give his audiences the “polite,” Italianate entertainments that they craved. That he produced some fine music in the process was the result, not of politics, but of genius.