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Handel the postmodernist

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1

I have a picture by Mondrian in front of me. It is made of up of a wide range of different, discrete rectangular shapes. The paint has been applied precisely. The colors are varied and striking and contribute to the overall impression of exactness in the detail and variety in the general. There are no people in the picture. It reminds me of a Handel opera. More or less any Handel opera.

The arguments behind this less than conventional view can be split into two general categories: form/genre and the status of the stage characters ''themselves.'' These categories spill into each other most significantly on the territory of *da capo* arias, which will serve below to get us from one to the other. First, then, the question of form/genre.

On broaching this subject we are immediately confronted by a contradiction. On the one hand scholars tell us that we must recognize and respect the ''convention'' of opera seria, which is seen as the exclusive royal road to a proper appreciation of the works and the basis for their recovery. On the other, we are assured that Handel, being a genius, is greater than those conventions. Often, the more thorough the research the more the first consideration gives ground to the second.

Winton Dean begins his 1969 study of Handel's operas by asserting the fundamental, determining factor of the ''convention'' – and the singular form suggests considerable confidence in its unproblematic character. Of course Dean is not so foolish as to argue for ''strict authenticity in the antiquarian sense . . .'' but he warns that ''to manhandle [the operas] . . . into conformity with later styles . . . attempts the impossible, since they . . . can only speak in terms of [opera seria] convention.''[1] By 1987, with the publication of Dean's co-authored study with John Merrill Knapp, greater stress is placed on variety within convention.[2] Additional research and the evidence of newly discovered (or rediscovered) manuscripts have begun to suggest that the exit aria is not so invariable, that there is more play with the placement and use of ritornellos, and that Handel often effected massive structural changes when his works were revived, including more radical shifts of vocal register than previously imagined. The notions of the authoritative text and the singular convention start to take on disturbingly large amounts of water, to the degree that one wonders how far this sort of thing can go before the generic model of opera seria ceases to illuminate Handel for us and becomes instead part of a greater and more interesting problem.

[1] Winton Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria* (Berkeley, 1969), 203.
[2] Winton Dean and John Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas 1704–1726* (Oxford, 1987).

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As always, the explanatory construct and the individual works to be evaluated within that construct exist in tension. Creative activity will usually violate aesthetic norms while still producing works that are judged successful, whether by progressive critics or the public. Innovative artists by definition spring the boundaries set for them by the critical apparatus of their time. Retrospective analysis can sometimes get away with the imposition of a superficially non-contradictory and stable notion of genre if the number of aesthetic objects remains fixed. This might be the case with classic Greek drama where the surviving works, even by the most renowned authors, are a tiny fraction of what was produced. Were these lost works to be found it seems more than likely that our present notion of the genre would be exploded. New pieces seldom fit the existing outlines of the jigsaw. Moreover, retrospective analysis in aesthetic matters is always particularly vulnerable when the productivity of the artist(s) is vast, the period under discussion, however distant, one of unusual flux, and the likelihood of further productive research high. This has proved to be the case with Handel and opera seria.

An additional and unavoidable factor complicates the analysis. The modern critic not only carries intellectual baggage foreign to the period he analyzes, but unavoidably projects back his notions of aesthetic propriety. He is prone to ''rescue" or favorably re-evaluate works on the basis of norms he deems virtuous. Thus Handel opera can be cursed by the very people most determined to recover it from undeserved neglect inasmuch as they discover behind the superficialities of the genre deeper, allegedly timeless qualities which are, in fact, the determining aesthetic values of the critic's own time and milieu. As we shall see, this is a marked feature of the pro Handel, pro opera seria school. Often enough, the much celebrated convention is granted respect because it embodies our own values on some level. This contradiction is clear in Dean's exasperated attack on today's wicked opera producers, who ''ignore the timeless quality of great art, which necessarily speaks in terms of its own period but also transcends them, dispensing universal truths to receptive listeners of any age."[3] ''Any age" here inevitably means – can only mean – those qualities which appeal to the scholar in his own age. Only wish-fulfillment and contemporary cultural arrogance make them ''timeless".

Nor can my own essay escape this bind. Although I will throw Handel into the framework of postmodernism, this amounts to the same privileged *ex post facto* procedure. My claim is not, of course, that Handel was a conscious postmodernist before ''his time," but that a postmodern interpretative stance could free us from the some of the limitations of the most traditional Handel scholarship. Since I will also argue that Handel's operatic output is more varied than is usually acknowledged, a loosely postmodernist approach is particularly fruitful. Jean-François Lyotard has suggested that the works of postmodern artists ''are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged . . . by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work;" rather ''the artist [is] working without

[3] Dean, ''Production Style in Handel's Operas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, ed. Donald Burrows (Cambridge, 1997), 262.

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rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*."[4] Handel was of course aware of rules and conventions, but Lyotard's formulation reminds us to keep the horse before the cart: in Handel's case, even more than most, we should regard the works as *productive of* convention, rather than approaching them as if they were "governed" by pre-established rules. But let us first of all return to the question of genre to get some idea of the problems it generates for the contemporary scholar.

One is immediately confronted by a new and striking contradiction. Opera seria convention is celebrated in such a fashion that a considerable number of its characteristics are explained away. The vulgarities of certain staged effects or the imagined silliness of simile arias are deemed "decadent," "notorious," "deplorable." Even an independent-minded commentator such as Peter Kivy shares the dismissive and embarrassed attitude to libretti and plot lines. And then there are those unforgivable *pasticci*: hybrid works (the word in Italian can mean "pie" or "mess") cobbled together by Handel out of bits and pieces of various operas.[5] Even in 1969 the language Dean adopted to dispense with these pieces was moral and lofty. They are "repulsive to modern ideas of what an opera – any opera of any age – ought to be."[6] So it seems that there is only one apparent solution to the problems of marrying genius to forms that once seemed unproblematically fixed and conventional, but are actually forever metamorphosing: the original creator takes precedence over the form(s) he employs. What was once tarred as an "antidramatic" "operatic convention" can a few decades later be perceived as shattered by a composer who "bursts right through the barriers of the opera seria convention."[7] But such a shift resolves little, for it is chiefly employed to keep the convention in play for those occasions when the critic finds it convenient (berating modern productions, say) while still affording maximum freedom in evaluating and interpreting the work of the atypical genius.

It is exactly those embarrassing elements that the traditional scholar – and quite possibly the typical opera lover – would prefer to overlook that I wish to celebrate as postmodern: stylistic variety, mixture of high and low forms, the constant violation of the parameters of the coherent, homogeneous work of art . . . and fun. Faced with the flagrant cornucopia that is Handel opera, the conventional scholar often sounds uneasy or defensive:

> *paradoxical* as it may sound, variety and not monotony is the most striking feature of Handel's finest operas.[8]

Or:

[4] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis, 1984), 81.
[5] Peter Kivy, *Osmin's Rage: Philosophical Reflections on Opera, Drama, and Text* (Princeton, 1988), 133–87.
[6] Dean (see n. 1), 13. For a more tolerant discussion of the pasticci, see Reinhard Strohm, *Essays on Handel and Italian Opera* (Cambridge, 1985), 164–212.
[7] The quoted phrases come from Dean's 1969 book, 19 (see n. 1) and Dean and Knapp (see n. 2), 11.
[8] Dean (see n. 1), 18; emphasis added.

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in Handel's greatest operas the structural stresses between the articulations of the plot and the development of the characters are perfectly reconciled.[9]

How much more agreeable to think of Handel at the beginning of the London period when *Rinaldo* was being produced at the Haymarket, learning from Aaron Hill the manager of the theatre, who engineered a spectacular theatrical pot-pourri of special effects including live birds in the auditorium. Or to imagine that Handel was influenced, as Kivy would like to believe, by the then fashionable notion "that variety is in all things most pleasing," as articulated in Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*.[10]

Once such pluralism is embraced, any notion of a singular convention disintegrates. The most we can say is that there is a beginning and a (usually) happy end, and in between a series of individually differentiated arias in ABA form, with perhaps some dancing, highly original orchestral passages, exciting stage effects including fountains, colored lights, fireworks etc. . . . the list is very long. To that we may add the outrageous cat-calling of "the Town," scuffles, if we're lucky, between the prima donnas (while that famous confrontation in 1727 between Faustina and Cuzzoni wasn't at a Handel evening, their respective fans had already behaved badly during performances of his operas), and a general sense of anticipation as to what could be realized on a stage whose production possibilities far outstripped in flexibility and variety those of its modern high tech "rival." On 9 June 1736 Thomas Gray writes to Horace Walpole about a performance of *Atalanta* that included a "fountain," "blue fires," "gold-color, silver and blue fiery rain."[11] Well, perhaps the poor fellow wasn't a true music lover, but he seems to have had a good time all the same.

Rather than any fixed set of musical conventions, we are dealing with something that would be better termed a mode of production, and one far removed from our post-Romantic notion of the solitary genius in his study. Handel was involved in a business and produced works at an astonishing rate (some opera scores allegedly knocked off in two weeks) and he was forever recycling, borrowing, dismantling, and reassembling. Works might be performed in mixed languages; recitatives in one, arias in another. Productivity – operatic carpentry – was everything. When he elected for London he gave up the relative risk-free advantages of the court composer. He found himself in the most advanced capitalist city of its day, where social life was fast and precarious, and political life equally vibrant and dangerous.[12] Fortunes (including Handel's own) were made and lost, subscribers wanted dividends, singers were mercenary, rivals ruthless. An anonymous pamphlet

[9] Dean and Knapp (see n. 2), 423.
[10] Kivy, *Osmin's Rage*, 118. See also n. 24 below.
[11] Quoted in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London, 1955), 410.
[12] One powerful critic of postmodernism is well aware of the heterogeneity of capitalism. In his *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford, 1996), Terry Eagleton acknowledges that "capitalism is the most pluralistic order history has ever known, relentlessly transgressing boundaries and dismantling oppositions, pitching together diverse life-forms and continually overflowing the measure . . . it helps to explain why some postmodernists look eagerly to a hybridized future while others are persuaded that is has already arrived" (133). The conditions described here are particularly applicable to the London of Handel's time.

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attacked Cuzzoni and Faustina as papist spies,[13] and Handel experienced the Jacobite rebellion. Jean-Louis Martinoty is right to talk of a Hogarthian ''multiple collision of ideological traffic."[14]

And nothing was stable. Innovations, new instruments, new effects were all seized upon. Above all new singers reveal how flexible and non-dogmatic the productive practice was. For the fourth production of *Radamisto* in January 1728 Handel made changes for Faustina and Cuzzoni. The end of *Tamerlano* was altered for the tenor Francesco Borosini, and the castrato Gioacchino Conti was permitted seven new arias not by Handel in a revival of *Ariodante* in 1736.[15] Although stars were indulged, when they became so uncooperative as to endanger the production they were threatened with defenestration, as famously happened to Cuzzoni. Under these conditions, conventions are important in that they speed up productivity. That the forms become ambivalent is indicated by new terminology (''semi-pasticcio") and by contemporary uncertainty as to how particular works are to be designated. (What, in fact, is *Semele*; ''a baudy opera" as Jennens said?) An apparently trivial consideration is of the utmost importance here. The lights were left on during the performance and the scene changes carried out in front of the audience, which could then admire the stage mechanics in play. This is a mode of production that in all aspects celebrates the artificiality of its own apparatus. It is not until Brecht that anything comparable comes along.

It is exactly when the traditional commentator shows himself most shocked at the vulgarities of Handel opera that we are probably closest to what makes it great. *Silla* has clearly too much variety for the true connoisseur: ''A repulsive subject . . ." ''It is the worst libretto Handel ever set . . . the characterization is incredible. Silla's villainy is as difficult to swallow as Metella's devotion to him." He commits ''no fewer than seven indecent assaults on the stage, all singularly fruitless . . . Contemporaries may have found a certain titillation in this constant harping on sex and violence, a conjunction worthy of the cinema or television screen; in a modern opera-house it would be ludicrous."[16] To which one can only reply: No it would *not*! What Dean and Knapp can't ''swallow" when it is thrown into the ''pie" sounds appetizing enough to me, although I haven't been served it – yet. *And* there's a dream sequence with a witch on a chariot drawn by dragons, and furies, a storm, a comet, a shipwreck, the god Mars and everything. In short here is something that sounds like Handel cornucopia at its best: a triumph of the postmodern. What fun. Bring it on . . . *all* of it!

However, there is one ingredient above all others which should encourage us, when we discuss opera seria, to forego our modern taste for coherence as a reflection of the aesthetic and moral weight of the perfectly structured ''play." In fact it is *the* critically determining ingredient of the production practice and has been

[13] William Weber, ''Handel's London – Social, Political and Intellectual Contexts," in *Cambridge Companion to Handel* (see n. 3), 51.
[14] Jean-Louis Martinoty, liner notes to Erato recording of *Semele* 4509-99759-2.
[15] See Strohm (n. 6), 50 and 197.
[16] Dean and Knapp (see n. 2), 263.

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rightly called "essentially, the opera seria itself."[17] This is the ABA structure of the conventional aria, above all the decorated *da capo* repeat. It is, however, intrinsically difficult to discuss.

2

The problem with the vocal *da capo*s is that they are not there; not written out. While there is some documentary evidence of the type of decorations employed by singers during Handel's time, the matter remains essentially one of inference. Thus the most remarkable and determining aspect of the vocal practice can be grasped only through conjecture.

The *da capo* aria is not a peripheral matter. We are not talking of something like the concerto cadenza where the soloist may be given a free hand at a particular point to show what he can do, but of nothing less than the climatic resolution of the individual aria, the quintessential unit of Handel opera. If opera seria has a crown jewel, a signifier that transcends and gives meaning to the others, this is it. Yet in textual terms it is – and will always be – stolen from us. Thus we are confronted by a gap at that point where we must lay the greatest weight. In being unstable, tied to the individual performer, the *da capo* is a measure not only of how live the praxis is, but also how artificial and multifarious. It is this most authentic and most anachronistic element that reveals how free from tradition the operas actually are. For the matter is not simply a question of what Handel or his singers did. Even if we knew the decorations employed by Cuzzoni as Cleopatra in 1724 (and they would have changed from performance to performance), it wouldn't be any guide as to what Valerie Masterson, say, "should" have done at the London Coliseum performances of *Giulio Cesare* in 1979.[18] Masterson is not Cuzzoni, and therefore the conductor Charles Mackerras was quite right to exploit her voice in a manner best suited to it, just as Richard Bonynge was right to exploit the more brilliant qualities of Joan Sutherland's voice with yet more extravagant decorations above the staff for their recording.[19] I remember all those performances in the Coliseum. The excitement and aesthetic satisfaction of the *da capo*s was tremendous. And what grounds are there for imagining that Handel wouldn't have been opportunistic: that if he could hear today's singers he would not only exploit their gifts, but also the

[17] Kivy (see n. 5), 141.

[18] I single out this particular production partly because Masterson's embellishments were criticized by Dean and Knapp (see n. 2, 30 n. 22) as inauthentic because they lay too far above the staff.

[19] Surely Cleopatra's brilliant "Da tempeste il legno infranto" would always have been one of those arias technically demanding to decorate. In the Chrysander score the semiquaver runs of the allegro section are peppered with a″s above the staff. There are groups of three staccato quavers on the a″, trills on dotted semiquavers, etc. Well, what would be appropriate here? I have listened to several recordings and while I have my favorite (Masterson), they all seem to work and it is a joy to move from one to the other. Persisting with the subjectivity of this and turning to Caesar's astonishing and seemingly simple "Va tacito," it seems to me that Janet Baker (and Mackerras) are gripping and that Jennifer Larmore (and René Jacobs) have got carried away and gilded the lily. Clearly you may not agree. It is a pity that we can't hear these artists night after night trying out other approaches.

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cultural climate and all the other expressive possibilities of ''our'' time? The *da capo* aria embodies the epistemological and the structural rationale for such freedoms. Far from obeying what can be deduced of authentic eighteenth-century practice, we should employ decorations in the *da capo*s that are contemporary to us and stylistically disturbing to the purist. We might take as precedents composers like Shostakovich and Stravinsky who re-scored or completed earlier Russian operas in their own styles.

No matter how far we are prepared to go, it is clear that the privileged ''convention'' with which we began – our royal road to understanding opera seria – performs a remarkable act of self-deconstruction. The convention of the *da capo* aria cannot be asserted without it simultaneously exploding: for built into the authoritative ''text'' of a *da capo* aria is the very musical DNA which floods that same text with an infinitude of alien signification. Textual authority is not simply questioned; it is made genetically impossible. Thus a paradox is unavoidable: artists must be inventive in order to be faithful. And consequently we, as punters in the theatre, are required constantly to revise our own aesthetic values, seeking out new pleasures in acts of continual artistic re-creation and enthusiastically adjusting our ears to the changing styles of live performance. The text colludes in its own ''collapse'' into postmodern heterogeneity.

The *da capo* is the unique signifier in the Handelian discourse because it is always absent as text, yet always present as praxis. All the other theatrical elements I have mentioned brazenly expose their own artificiality, liberating an exceptional range of effects and pleasures. The gaps between signifier and signified have not been elided in the conventional way (''The great actress really *became* Cleopatra,'' gushes the fan). However, the radical *da capo* also presents a reactionary opportunity. Not only does it declare that there exists an unmapped area to be colonized in performance; it does so on territory that offers the traditionalist his best chance of smuggling in the false aesthetic model, and thus permitting that gushing fan his conventional fix. The post-Leavisite can still rescue Handel from his ''anachronistic'' place in opera history. As the *da capo* is an utterly individual expression, he drags onto center stage not the singer, but that other ''person'' who can be praised as the site of true aesthetic and, thereby, normative weight: the fully realized, rounded character.

3

No aspect of modern sensibility is more inappropriate to Handel opera than that focused on the supposed aesthetic and psychological integrity of the operatic figures themselves, whether it is phrased in banal lit-crit terminology (''flesh and blood characters'') or in more extravagant formulations (''living, breathing people''). While the notion of characters as real people is always dubious, with Handel it is simply irrelevant, and Handelian production practice makes no attempt to delude us in this matter. And yet our post-twentieth-century mentality will not allow us to forego the notion. Worse, it is often accorded as the highest possible aesthetic accolade.

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Here extravagant verbal flourishes are *de rigueur*. The conductor Nicholas McGegan enthuses that Handel's characters are "absolutely human," and that he was particularly good at "depicting . . . living, breathing, real women."[20] Handel is compared to Mozart with whom "he shared an almost limitless insight into human nature . . ." Then the allegedly greatest creator of "real people" is enrolled for the clinching lit-crit shift: "so might Shakespeare, had he been a musician, have soliloquised . . ." re Caesar's recitative on the dead Pompeo, and Handel "perhaps more than any other composer . . ." had a "range of characterisation that rivals . . ." the Bard's.[21] However only a few Handelian characters (notably Alcina and Cleopatra) are seized on because, no matter how partisan the apologist, it is clear that the others are patently unsuited to his purpose. Yet even here there are dubious, mixed strategies. Alcina in her six arias, and Poppea (*Agrippina*) in her nine, are celebrated as consistent "persons" of "psychological subtlety." Yet Cleopatra in her eight arias is shown "in an infinite variety of moods . . ."[22]

Cleopatra is, understandably, most commentators' favorite because the magical adjective "Shakespearean" is overtly solicited. She is the "equal" of his creation and it is a remarkable commentator who does not succumb to the Enobarbus "infinite variety" quote. Worth particular consideration is Dean and Knapp's take on the character. She "begins as a tease and a scheming minx; and when she falls in love with Caesar she passes through passion, anxiety, and desolation before emerging as a mature woman." This is achieved "by building up the character facet by facet in the course of the arias until . . . she stands complete."[23] But what does this amount to? That when Cleopatra first steps onto the stage she is wholly Cuzzoni . . . or Valerie Masterson, or whoever. But then, when she has finished her first aria, she has become one-eighth Cleopatra and this goes on the whole evening until the eighth and final piece is in place and the human jigsaw complete? This is hardly a credible account of what even the traditionalist means by real Shakespearean people, where there is a range of interactive discourse that cannot in any way be accounted for in the explicitly mechanistic and linear "facet by facet" model.

Yet the terminology *is* valid. It is certainly true that each aria is a singular "facet" – an individual, discrete gem on a chain made up of discrete gems of varied quality and brilliance – and, furthermore, each aria is focused normally on one emotion, mood or dilemma.[24] This was dazzlingly realized by Harry Kupfer in his

[20] *The Guardian*, 8 February 2002.
[21] Dean and Knapp (see n. 2), 465, 494, 489.
[22] Dean (see n. 1), 47 and 68.
[23] Dean and Knapp (see n. 2), 7.
[24] Kivy (see n. 5), sees more clearly than most the discrete and singular character of the *da capo* arias, but this is because they fit his notion of precisely defined, well-nigh itemized, Cartesian passions: "I have argued that the Handelian opera seria – in particular . . . the *da capo* aria – is a realistic musical representation of the world of obsessive, Cartesian emotions" (185). Unfortunately this does not lead him to an appreciation of the heterogeneity of the genre. Quite the reverse. He is highly suspicious of all theatrical elements which stand in the way of his goal, which is something called drama-made-music

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1993 Komische Oper production of *Giulio Cesare* when each of Caesar's and Cleopatra's arias was staged (and costumed) separately – given a setting to itself – so that there was no suggestion of homogeneous characters. Cleopatra was presented as a series of stage figures: backstairs political manipulator, vamp, heroic fighter, etc. What one had was a spectrum of effects and a multiplicity of pleasures hung opportunistically on two stage figures who were and always remained Jochen Kowalski and Sabine Paßow, just as they would once have been only and ever Senesino and Cuzzoni – until, that is, there was a change of cast. So it is perfectly easy to say what in Cleopatra's case that so-called Shakespearean "infinite variety" of character comes down to. It comes down to the very finite number eight.

If we need further proof that Handel operatic practice had nothing to do with rounded characters of flesh and blood we can look at how the audiences responded. Far from being interested in the "character," they paid more attention to Cuzzoni's dress, which on one occasion became the style for the season. Furthermore, all the Grub Street raillery and vindictive gossip, all the demonstrations during the performances (the cat-calling of the favorite's rival, etc.) and – most significant – all the changes made to *da capo* arias from singer to singer and from performance to performance make it clear that no one gave a fig for Cleopatra or Caesar or Alcina as fictional creations. Many among them were too busy enjoying the vocal music in all *its* finite, but vastly varied, moods and effects.

Handel opera is quite possibly the most effective manifestation of the postmodern deconstruction of the unitary subject. His operas foreground the artificiality of the signifier not merely with regard to unstable or bizarre signifieds (Gods, lions, wild passions, etc.), but also with respect to a named "character" whose appearance is nominally promised and always postponed, even as the performing artist paints for us the feelings and desires of this absent Other. The *illusory* unity of the subject, which has been a feature of most postmodern thinking, is here manifest in operatic production, no matter whether one sees the subject as "split" in the Lacanian sense or forever postponed in unending Derridean strategies of difference and deferral. The result is a theatre unencumbered by the later constrictions of bourgeois naturalism which itself survived, intellectually, until Brecht, and remains potent even today. Opera fans still confirm their own validity as coherent subjects in that they empathize with, suffer and laugh with, and sink with Wagnerian abandon into the destinies of stage characters, and therewith overcome momentarily the contradictions of their own lives. In the intoxicating dissipated evening in the darkened

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and is exemplified in *Così fan tutte*. This is a move away from the fixed, discrete, "hard-wired" Cartesian "animal spirits," to greater emotional freedom, which Kivy, employing David Hartley, defines as "associationism." Its paradigm is – of all things – the sinfonia concertante. Characters are clearly secondary (essentially ersatz instrumental "voices") and libretti are lightly dismissed. In fairness to Kivy it should be admitted that he does not claim that his account of the evolution of opera is in any sense exclusive and readily admits that opera-as-drama and a range of other possibilities exist (you are entitled to prefer *Figaro* to *Così*, etc.) However his privileged account (which takes him from Monteverdi to Mozart) is designed to foreground an intellectual and aesthetic chronology whereby opera becomes drama-made-music.

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theatre a host of problems afflicting the subject are, briefly, deferred. But not in the clear well-lit world of Handel opera. The copious pleasures on offer there are too artificial, too flagrantly polymorphous to allow the subject his conventional abdication of the self. Instead he is confronted by a vicarious range of freedoms and invited to enjoy pleasures, in number and quality, well beyond the scope of later narcotic theatrical practices.

There is a further matter, absolutely intrinsic to early eighteenth-century Handelian operatic practice and yet significant in the context of postmodern theory, that should not pass unnoticed. Of the sixty-five Italian male singers who came to London in Handel's time two-thirds were ''eunuchs."[25] These castrati caused much comment in contemporary letters, a good deal of it tasteless. But it is clear that their chief effect was to underline how alien and incredible opera seria was, how lacking in common sense. And it was common sense that was very much the basis on which Addison and Steele first laid into the genre at the time of *Rinaldo*.

The castrati are the crowning declaration of the artificiality of opera seria and a warning to anyone determined to apply naturalistic notions retrospectively. Let us return to *Silla* which, as we have seen, drives the purist to exasperated incomprehension. The reason an eighteenth-century audience would have enjoyed those ''repulsive" goings-on is that for them the split between character and performer was self-evident and unbridgeable. No one imagined otherwise, for there were none of the narcotic strategies of modern theatre to encourage that suspension of disbelief so familiar to us. The upfront practices of the Handelian stage left no doubt as to the unreality of it all. To be ''repulsed" by such a jolly business is to capitulate to a notion of theatre that has nothing to do with Handel.

Moreover in Handel's day it would have been very clear why *Silla*'s ''no fewer than seven indecent assaults" were ''all singularly fruitless." Forget *Silla*. What was clear was that Valentini (almost certainly the singer) was not in a position to perform the sexual tasks to which he pretended. What he performed instead were the brilliant and variable arias. And this would have been just as true for Senesino/Caesar who, had he been a believable embodiment of the historic character, would have had to convince the audience he was in a position to father a bastard by Cuzzoni.[26] It was all self-evident nonsense and no pretence was made

[25] Lowell Lindgren, ''Handel's London – Italian Musicians and Librettists," in *Cambridge Companion to Handel* (see n. 3), 83. Also notable is the large number of Italian instrumentalists resident in London. This was a foreign and strange undertaking in so many respects.

[26] There might seem an obvious objection to this argument. To return to the Shakespearean parallel, the actor who first played Shakespeare's Cleopatra was not, for obvious reasons, in a position to have anyone's baby. Why then should the suspension of disbelief be valid with the male (female) actor in Shakespeare but not with the castrato (lover) in Handel? It is axiomatic that Elizabethan theatre involves us in the narrative and emotional ''lives" of the characters through a whole raft of aesthetic strategies, while in opera seria the presence of the performer is always foregrounded at the ''expense" of the character, who is little more than a convenience. The boy actor in Shakespeare did not betray the character every time he opened his mouth. The castrato did. Nonetheless, making rules for the suspension of disbelief is dangerous. It is fair to ask: if we are prepared to ''believe in" dragons in

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otherwise. And one should not too readily draw a parallel with ''authentic" Shakespearean practice. It is true that the first Cleopatra was also male, but his voice was unbroken. As soon as he lost his treble he changed his roles. But every time Senesino opened his mouth the customary notion of the suspension of disbelief evaporated. Yet no matter how flagrant this violation of the conventional notion of character, we have great difficulty in apprehending it. Handel still has to be married to our egocentric paradigm of theatrical virtue. Ironically, here is a place where respect for the convention might prove useful, but which unfortunately seems to lie outside our scope. The composer Gerald Barry complains because he wants Handel to be credible on the privileged level of character: ''I'm sick to death of seeing women and countertenors pretend to be strapping heroes or villains when they're clearly not. There are many good countertenors now, but the colour of the voice makes the proposition of countertenor tyrants challenging. Their fury is interesting and you know that if you were forced to accept their invitation to a dungeon, you'd have a good time."[27] Well exactly. A good time is what it is all about.

From the perspective of modern theory, the physiological details of whatever surgical procedures the castrati had to undergo matter little. Nor do I expect every reader to embrace the Lacanian belief in the over-riding semantic authority of the phallus. In any case, Lacan would be reluctant to link his privileged signifier unambiguously to the castrati because he made what was for him a crucial distinction between the phallus and the penis; a distinction that admittedly can sometimes seem a trifle disingenuous. Nonetheless, the privileged role of sexuality in respect of identity, the entry into the symbolic order, the character of that order – its instability and the strategies by which it can be imploded – are critical elements of postmodern thought that have hitherto been implicit in this essay. Now I want to propose outright that the absence of the penis/phallus had radical consequences for Handel's audiences that are perhaps difficult to recover today – consequences concerning the absence of customary notions of authority, of order, of epistemological certainty, of a master narrative. Phallocentrism is teleological: with the phallus – or better said, with what it represents – one is going somewhere. Could this be why the most famous and effective parody of Handel opera is a linear, unambiguously picaresque chronology about a randy highwayman who rushes from adventure to adventure, cheats the hangman and lives happily ever after with a saucy lass and a permanent erection? And that without a single dragon, shipwreck, or minor deity in the mix. Who did Gay and Rich think they were kidding?!

In conventional narrative, the Lacanian phallus as the signifier of wholeness, of plenitude, is always implied. But when in a Handel opera it, and its inferior substitute the penis, are either missing or present only in an ''audibly" wounded,

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Wagner, then why not in Handel? However, incredulity is not the product of how non-realistic the stage events are, but of the theatrical discourse employed. It is possible for a dramatist to fail to convince us that one female character is sincere in the most banal of things while having no problems with another who rides through the sky on a winged horse in order to collect the corpses of dead Teutonic heroes.

[27] *The Guardian*, 8 February 2002.

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bogus manner, a carnivalesque plurality of polymorphic and androgynous pleasures is waiting to colonize the stage. To put this another way, the brand of narrative found in opera seria is opportunistic, a mere construct, easily restructured to enable new and fleeting aesthetic effects. It does not impose a dominant authority. Particularly telling are the short final choruses. They are wonderfully, shamelessly vapid; closures which declare their own narrative and aesthetic short-comings. Often sung only by the principals, they are little more than cursory full-stops . . . signals to the stage hands to drop the curtain. A causal connection between the phallus and narrative teleology is perhaps also implied by the rare case when Handel allowed himself to compose a heavy, tragic end to *Tamerlano*, in his revision for Borosini, who gave the first performance in 1724. The high seriousness of Bajazet's suicide seems more ''modern" than almost anything else in Handel; and this highly authoritative narrative climax exerts a strong attraction on today's opera producers (although they have trouble making it fit the remainder of the opera). It is tempting to connect this unusual turn to narrative thrust and eschatology with the fact that Borosini was exceptional among Handel's heroes in being a full-blooded tenor. If the fictional Bajazet was merely a stage figure and thus a split subject, Borosini himself was a man of flesh and blood – unimpaired. Or, as was observed at the time, he ''was never cut out for a Singer."[28]

4

A crucial concern has run through all aspects of my discussion without ever being named. It is fun. Handel opera is fun. And fun is far from irrelevant to postmodernism. Handel opera has a special status in relation to fun because it admits a degree of plurality into operatic practice which violates the conventional boundaries of discourse. In departing from dominant narrative order, fun enables a riotous panoply of pleasures. Its signifiers set unequalled, oceanic horizons and encourage what would be subsequently deemed impermissible and indecent. Fun was at home in an age of capitalist adventurism, but as soon as industrial mass production was established, and discipline and regularity – especially with regard to the seemingly coherent and obedient worker/subject – were socially imposed, Handel opera would find its abundant virtues derided as silly.

It may be that the best way of evaluating fun lies in the feminist alternatives to Lacan. For the Lacanian notion of the subject is axiomatically inadequate: it celebrates not profusion, but lack. Yet it does so in order to make lack the ever-present site of imperfect and deferred meaning. Handel opera makes the phallic lack public, flagrant, and thereby challenges the conviction that linear, teleological narrative is the singular path of coherent meaning. Released into the theatre are not just shipwrecks and live birds, but much that is normally repressed by the symbolic order and imprisoned in the unconscious. As a consequence, all sorts of ''norms" take a hammering – standards of rationality, the realist ordering of cause and effect, the hierarchy of sexual difference, the structures of power holding

[28] See Dean and Knapp (n. 2), 556.

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in place individual identity and interactive behavior. And this is not because some specific alternative programme is in play, but because the concept of *an* alternative programme itself is under the cosh. In Handel opera the post-structuralist axiom that there are always covert discourses inscribed in and lying under the symbolic order which twist and betray that order is under threat from its most dangerous enemy: *overt* excess of signification.

Most of those feminists who studied with Lacan and then, to various degrees, broke with him have asserted that the text he foregrounded was masculine in character and functioned as a device that held true pleasure in check. Shatter that and they imagined they could flood discourse with everything that was otherwise repressed. Many drew on Roland Barthes's notion of the repressed ''pleasure of the text." Barthes called writing a ''hardened language," but celebrated speech for the ''disorder [that] flows through [it] . . . a self-devouring momentum which keeps it in a perpetually suspended state."[29] This disruptive invasion is the kernel of postmodernism. If Luce Irigaray is right that the phallus is ''the contemporary figure of a god jealous of his prerogatives," we might take comfort from the surfeit of Gods and spirits, whether castrated or not, who populate Handel's stage.[30] Above all one notes the key active force that feminists (including those like Julia Kristeva who are suspicious of ''feminine writing" fearing that it will simply become an alternative master discourse) celebrate when examining the irruption of all dominant semantic structures – which certainly includes theatre.[31] What they see as liberated are not fears, psychoses, perversions, but *jouissance* – a close cousin of fun.

There is another factor in Handel's case which underpins this. He was a polyglot and his natural mode of expression was heterogeneous, complete with both witty and violent violations of the codes. He mixed languages in his letters even when

[29] Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology* (Boston, 1967), 19.
[30] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, 1985), 67.
[31] See *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford, 1986). It should be acknowledged that Kristeva asserts a more complex interaction between the symbolic and what she terms the semiotic; a category which can only roughly be equated with the unconscious or the repressed. Furthermore, Kristeva does not give up the Freudian/Lacanian notion of castration. In fact the subject is ''posited" by castration, which is a theoretical necessity that enables a return to the semiotic (and its pleasures and desires) within the symbolic order of language. This is demonstrated in ''artistic practices, and notably poetic language . . ." (103) She could just as easily have said in the *da capo* aria. In this, and in many other respects, Kristeva's account has little to do with the extravagant claims made for the unproblematic and oceanic character of ''feminist writing" by Irigaray and Cixous *et al.* One should also note in the context of the postmodern argument, the degree to which semiotics (which Kristeva calls a meta-language) postulates ''heterogeneity," though ''as soon as it speaks about it, it homogenizes the phenomenon, links it with a system, loses hold of it" (30). Picking up on this, it can be maintained that Handel, at least in part, avoids this dilemma by (over)loading the ''system" with a plethora of signification. Certainly Kristeva's account of subjectivity in discourse and the manner in which she proceeds from this to ''fun" is very attractive, not least because it focuses on the unstable, but self-renewing subject: ''Identifying the semiotic disposition means in fact identifying the shift in the speaking subject, his capacity for renewing the order in which he is inescapably caught up; and that capacity is, for the *subject*, the capacity for enjoyment." (29) Ideally, this is something both the singer and the spectator do together in the unstable performance world of Handel opera.

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merely signing his name. When threatening to throw Cuzzoni out the window he resorted to French, but his natural mode of expression was a mix. Dr Quin recalled that he ''was possessed of a great stock of humour, no man ever told a story with more." But the listener needed ''a competent knowledge of at least four languages . . . for in his narratives he made use of them all."[32] What the linguist calls code-switching was his natural mode of expression and this probably also explains why he is so remarkably eclectic.

But whatever the reasons for his exceptional and radical fecundity, it is the resulting freedoms which make the live pleasure of Handel opera unique. It is a pleasure which once promised a wild mix of kitsch, special effects and deeply felt emotions of nearly every sort; which once set randy castrati allegedly intent on rape onto formidable divas capable of giving anyone a clip around the ear; which once made musical invention standard performance practice; and which still makes a lion that was once someone's father, or the love sick aria of a king for a plane tree absolutely right and proper.

It has to be admitted that to have begun with that Mondrian picture was in part a fraudulent rhetorical gesture. The painting is not truly postmodern, for it is nothing if not stable. But it does give some feeling for the freedom from convention (both classical and modern) that underpins the Handel mode of production. The brightly colored discrete shapes in Handel opera are not fixed. They can be dismantled and reassembled. Meanwhile continued revivals can only gain from the discipline and variety that would come from an appreciation of this postmodern streak in Handel. He is neither one of the dead greats, nor even our contemporary. He remains well out in front of us, and consequently the operas demand radical production practices which, at best, we are only just beginning to realize. Our mentality is still too correct, our theatrical norm too laden with an aura of darkened mystification. It is not only in the matter of establishing the ''correct texts" that we have to catch up.

[32] Terence Best, ''Handel and the Italian Language," in *Cambridge Companion to Handel* (see n. 3), 227.

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