



## *Agrippina*

G F Handel

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### **Serious about opera**

George Frederick Handel is famous for writing *The Messiah*, an oratorio on the life of Jesus Christ which is still sung round the country at Christmas and Easter. However Handel's great passion was for writing opera. He started early (he was 24 when he wrote *Agrippina*) and only gave up when tastes changed and people wanted oratorios instead. By then he'd written 39 operas. *Agrippina*, like all Handel's operas, is an *opera seria*, a serious opera. That doesn't mean it's solemn (*Agrippina* is actually a comedy) but that its characters are aristocratic and the music is written to a particular pattern.

### **Serious music**

Professional opera singers were still a novelty in the 18th Century and audiences liked to hear them sing difficult, thrilling, solos - so practically all the musical numbers in opera seria are solos. They are called *da capo arias*. 'Aria' is Italian for song, and 'da capo' Italian for 'go back to the top'. This instruction always appears two thirds of the way through one of Handel's arias. He arranges them in three sections: the first, the A section, is the main tune, this is followed by the B section, another tune in a related key, and then the third section. At the third section the singer is told to *da capo*, go back to the top. To do so he sings the A section again – and adds decorations, runs, scales, cadenzas, anything to make it sound expressive and exciting. Singers usually enjoy themselves in the da capo: you'll often see the conductor put his baton down as he waits for them to finish their improvisation and get back to the written notes.

### **Leaving the stage**

After a da capo aria the singer *exits*. This is very important; it means he or she can get a round of applause, and it leaves the stage free for another singer to have a go. Opera seria is full of people entering and exiting – which has a very peculiar effect on the plot. Just when a character is about to be killed, or raped, or thrown into dungeon, their attacker sings an aria and exits; leaving him or her completely unharmed.

### **High voices, low voices and castrati**

Another oddity of opera seria is the vocal range: 18th century audiences liked high unbroken voices, so all the lovers in an opera (both men and women) were sung by sopranos and altos. Older men, villains and emperors, were sung by basses, and tenors were hardly used at all. The male romantic lead was usually sung by a *castrato*, a man who had been castrated before puberty. Castration preserved a boy's unbroken voice though, as he acquired the vocal muscles of a man, it came to sound rather weird: the voice became piercing, like a bell. Audiences loved it and the castrati were the pop stars of their age.

## Cross Dressing

Even so, only first class castrati sounded good, second rate castrati were terrible and shoved in the back rows of church choirs. If Handel couldn't get a world class castrato, he'd write the hero's part for a woman. That way the audiences still heard an unbroken voice *and* had all the fun of gender confusion and cross dressing. In the original *Agrippina* the male lead, Ottone, was sung by a woman, and the second male lead, Nerone, by a castrato.

## ENO Casting

There are no castrati in opera nowadays but some male singers can produce an unbroken sound, right at the top of their voice, when they sing *falsetto*. Barry Humphries speaks in a falsetto when he plays Dame Edna, and you'll often hear pop and soul singers zip up into the falsetto range when they sing high notes. Opera singers who sing like this are called countertenors and, in the current production of *Agrippina*, ENO has given the part of Ottone to a countertenor and Nerone to a woman singer, a soprano.

## Agrippina

Opera seria was normally paid for by the upper classes and composers made sure their plots revolved round a set of beautifully behaved noble characters. However *Agrippina* was written for the republic of Venice: the Venetian audience couldn't care less about the feelings of aristocrats so this opera is full of Roman noblemen (and women) behaving very badly indeed. If you've ever seen repeats of the BBC series *I Claudius*, you'll probably recognise some of the characters, even though they have Italian names. Claudius is called Claudio in the opera, and Nero (the emperor who will one day reduce Rome to ashes) appears as the ghastly teenager, Nerone. In spite of the 1st century setting, the ENO production is in modern dress and the collision of styles is great fun, especially when you begin to work out the connections: Agrippina is a Joan Collins figure, Claudio a Bill Clinton, and Nerone a Leonardo DiCaprio look-alike.

## The Characters

**Claudio** (bass), the Roman Emperor, is away from home on the Conquest of Britain. He has left Rome in the care of his wife, the Empress **Agrippina** (mezzo soprano), his step-son **Nerone** (soprano) and two trusted advisors **Pallas** (bass) and **Narciso** (countertenor). Claudio himself relies on the heroic **Ottone** (countertenor) to help him beat up the British and everything in the Roman Empire seems very ordered and businesslike – were it not for the fact that its upper classes are seething with ambition and lust. Agrippina, Pallas and Narciso are (independently) plotting to depose the Emperor. Nerone has his eye both on the throne and **Poppea** (soprano), a young noblewoman with whom Claudio and Ottone are also in love. Poppea, distracted by three suitors, falls an easy victim to Agrippina, who manipulates the girl for her own ends while Ottone (the only honourable character in the opera) hasn't a clue what's going on and wanders through the whole show, bewildered and forlorn.

## **Plots**

Act I begins in Agrippina's private apartment. She is reading a letter in which she learns that Claudio has met with bad weather (presumably in the English Channel) and been drowned. Delighted with the news, she tells her son Nerone that if he moves fast he could become Emperor. To pave the way she suggests he organises a well advertised charity stunt and Nerone rushes off to find some spare cash, a few paupers – and a TV crew. Meanwhile Agrippina summons Pallas to her presence. She knows Pallas wants to marry her (more because it would further his political ambitions, than because he's actually in love) and offers him her hand, on condition he supports Nerone. Pallas agrees at once and leaves – to make room for Narciso. Narciso is also anxious to marry Agrippina, he gets the same offer and makes the same promise. Having packed him off, Agrippina feels she's done a good day's work and breaks into a cheerful aria: little realising that it's only Act One...

## **Bad News**

We move to the Capitol (the centre of Rome). Nerone is already dishing out money to the poor and Pallas and Narciso hover round him, praising his generosity. Agrippina enters, sits on the Emperor's throne, and tells the assembled Romans that Claudio is dead. Rising to her feet, she indicates the throne is empty and asks the citizens to choose another Emperor: right on cue, Pallas and Narciso start to shout for Nerone. The boy begins to ascend the throne when a fanfare breaks out and Lesbo, servant to Claudio, rushes on stage. "Joyful news!" he cries, "Claudio is safe after all! Ottone saved him from the waves." There is a stricken silence as everybody re-groups, and Agrippina hastily removes her son from the throne. With magnificent aplomb she greets the glad tidings and prepares to receive Ottone, the saviour of Rome.

## **Asides**

From this moment onwards practically everybody on stage says one thing – and thinks another. We know what they are really thinking when they come forward to sing their feelings in an 'aside'. Pallas, Narciso and Nerone tell us how furious they are at Claudio's escape, and Agrippina glares at Ottone as he appears: "Here comes the man who has ruined my plans" she mutters. Worse is to come. Ottone tells the assembly that, in gratitude for saving his life, Claudio intends to make him joint Emperor, equal in rank with himself. Everybody leaves in disgust but Ottone (quite oblivious of the sensation he has caused) stays behind, to chat to Agrippina. He tells her that the throne means nothing to him, all he wants is the love of Poppea.

## **A Cunning Plan**

Armed with this news, Agrippina goes off to see Poppea. The girl is trying on jewels (which sums her up really) but, as she talks to the Empress, it becomes obvious that she prefers Ottone to all her other suitors. Agrippina strikes: she tells Poppea that Ottone has offered to hand her over to Claudio, on condition he is crowned Emperor. Poppea is furious, and Agrippina suggests she takes her revenge by telling Claudio that Ottone is using his new position to blackmail her into loving him. With any luck, Claudio will be so jealous that he will demote Ottone at once. Poppea is desperate and goes

along with all this, her only worry being the danger she runs in seeing Claudio alone in her apartments. “Don’t worry” says Agrippina, “I’ll be here, behind that screen” – and sings an aria to reassure her. The plan works brilliantly. Claudio arrives, hears about Ottone’s bad behaviour and immediately decides to disgrace him. There is a tricky moment when the Emperor becomes amorous, but Agrippina appears (just in time) and the act ends with a triumphant aria from Poppea.

### **Disgrace**

Act II starts at the Capitol. Pallas and Narciso compare notes and realise they’ve been tricked by Agrippina; they decide to work together in future. Claudio enters, acclaimed by the crowd, and Ottone approaches with all the confidence of a favourite. He is astonished when Claudio brutally dismisses him and even more startled when he is repulsed by everybody he has so far considered his friend. Each character has a jaunty little aria as they gibe the unfortunate Ottone, and the young man is left alone on stage, in despair. The aria that follows is the one moment of total sincerity in the whole opera: a mournful oboe accompanies Ottone as he describes his sorrow and Poppea, listening upstage, begins to wonder whether he *has* betrayed her after all. She decides to find out in a thoroughly Handelian manner. She finds a fountain and falls asleep by its rim. It was a stage convention in Handel’s day that anything a character muttered in his sleep was the truth and many Handel characters drop off in this manner whenever they have any crucial, but embarrassing, information to convey. In this case Ottone wanders into the garden, listens to the fountain (described by two recorders in the pit) and nearly steps on Poppea’s sleeping form. She pretends to be having a nightmare and cries out, “Ottone has betrayed me!” Ottone hastily wakes her up and, between them, the lovers discover that Agrippina has deceived them

### **More Plots**

Agrippina begins to spin out of control. She tries to get Pallas to kill Ottone and Narciso, urges Narciso to kill Pallas and Ottone and (probably sensing that neither henchmen is as willing as he used to be) tells Claudio that Ottone is trying to kill *him*. Claudio, impatient to visit Poppea again, is barely listening: however he agrees to spike Ottone’s ambitions by allowing Nerone to share the throne and the act ends with another triumphant aria, this time from Agrippina.

### **Total Confusion**

Act III is the nearest thing to farce that Handel ever wrote and, like all good farces, is set in a bedroom with lots of doors. The bedroom of course is Poppea’s. She enters with Ottone and hides him behind a door, telling him to stay hidden, no matter what happens. Nerone bursts in, but his lovemaking is checked by the news that his mother is coming. He too hides, as Claudio enters. The Emperor tells Poppea that he has punished Ottone and rather expects her to fall into his arms, but Poppea looks aghast. “Ottone!” she says, , “I meant Nerone!” “What?” says Claudio, “I can’t have misheard you” “Just watch this” says Poppea and hides the Emperor behind another door. Then she calls Nerone. The boy (thinking his step-father has gone) tumbles out and makes straight for Poppea – to be confronted by Claudio. He’s booted out of

the room but even then Claudio doesn't get the girl: she pretends that she's frightened of Agrippina and begs the Emperor to go and calm her down. Left alone (at last) Poppea and Ottone swear undying love.

### **Treachery**

Meanwhile Agrippina is in deep trouble. Pallas and Narciso have both told Claudio that, just before his return, she'd placed Nerone on the throne. Confronted with this accusation Agrippina thinks quickly and decides to confess. "It is quite true I put Nerone forward, " she says, "But I did it for you. How else could we have kept the throne in the family?" Claudio doesn't believe a word of it but, as he can't prove it's a lie, has to accept Agrippina's version of events.

### **A Happy Ending**

At this point everybody starts to talk at once but Claudio, who's had enough, cuts them short, "OK," he says, "Nerone can marry Poppea and Ottone can be joint Emperor with me." Nerone is appalled, Ottone and Poppea are devastated – and the noise gets louder. The Emperor ascends his throne. "Silence!" he says, "this is my last word, *Ottone* can marry Poppea and *Nerone* can become joint Emperor." He calls on the goddess Juno to bless the marriage and the opera ends with the Romans citizens singing the praises of their city and Emperor.

(**Footnote:** Agrippina and Claudius were eventually murdered by Nerone, who wound up as one of the ghastliest emperors Rome had ever seen: he married Poppea anyway)

**Sarah Lenton © 2006**

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