

Julius Caesar in Egypt

“Giulio Cesare in Egitto”

Opera Seria in three acts

Music

by

George Frideric Handel

**Libretto in Italian by Nicolò Haym,
after an earlier libretto,
by Giacomo Francesco Bussani**

**Premiere at The Haymarket, London
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**Adapted from the
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by
Burton D. Fisher**

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Story Synopsis

Caesar is acclaimed by the Egyptians as their conqueror after defeating his rival, Pompey, who had fled Rome after his defeat and allied with the Egyptian king, Ptolemy. Caesar is begged by Pompey's wife and son, Cornelia and Sextus, to make peace.

Achillas, Ptolemy's general, presents the severed head of Pompey to Caesar as a present from the Egyptian king. Pompey's murder fills Caesar with horror: Pompey's widow Cornelia is overcome with grief; Pompey's son Sextus swears to avenge his father's murder.

Cleopatra, ruling Egypt with her despised brother, Ptolemy, resolves to become sole ruler and decides to approach Caesar to seek his support. At the same time, Ptolemy and Achillas plot to murder the conquering Caesar.

Cleopatra, in the disguise of a maidservant named Lydia, meets Caesar; the Roman conqueror immediately falls in love with her. Cornelia and Sextus are arrested by Ptolemy, and Cornelia is confined to a harem so that Achillas, who has been promised her hand as a reward if he kills Caesar, can have access to her.

Ptolemy's armies are en route to kill Caesar, and Cleopatra reveals her identity and implores him to flee for his safety.

Cleopatra is taken prisoner after her armies are defeated by Ptolemy. After Caesar escapes death in a battle with Ptolemy's armies, Achillas, mortally wounded in the battle, confesses his treachery. Caesar rushes off to rescue Cleopatra after he seizes Achillas's seal which gives him access to a hundred warriors.

Caesar and his soldiers rout the Egyptian guards at Ptolemy's palace and rescue Cleopatra. At the gates of Alexandria, Caesar and Cleopatra enter in a triumphal procession and Cleopatra is crowned Queen of all Egypt. Caesar acclaimes Sextus his friend for avenging Pompey's murder by killing Ptolemy. Caesar and Cleopatra affirm their love for each other and the crowd rejoices.

Principal Characters in the Opera

Romans:

Julius Caesar, Emperor of Rome

Countertenor, Bass, Baritone, or Soprano

Curius (Curio),

a Tribune and his aide-de-camp Tenor

Cornelia, widow of Pompey

Soprano

Sextus, son of Pompey and Cornelia

Countertenor or Soprano

Egyptians:

Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt

Soprano

Ptolemy, (Tolomeo), Cleopatra's brother,

King of Egypt Countertenor or Soprano

Achillas, (Achilla) an Egyptian general

Bass

Nireus, (Nireno) Cleopatra's adviser and
confidant Countertenor or Soprano

Citizens of Alexandria, Roman, and Egyptian
soldiers

TIME: 48 B.C.

PLACE: Egypt

Story Narrative with Music Highlights

ACT I: Outside Alexandria near a tributary of the Nile spanned by a bridge.

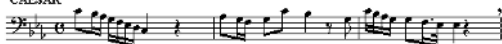
After an Overture, the curtain rises to a chorus of Egyptians who acclaim the Roman Emperor, Julius Caesar, and his victorious legions. Caesar has just defeated the forces of his political rival and former son-in-law, Pompey. Caesar pronounces his divine destiny: “Caesar came, saw, and conquered.”

Pompey’s wife and son, Cornelia and Sextus, come to plead to Caesar for clemency for Pompey, announcing that in lieu of peace, Pompey is ready to surrender. Caesar magnanimously accepts their offer to be reconciled with his rival, but only if Pompey will come to him in person.

Achillas, an Egyptian general, unveils a gift to Caesar from Ptolemy, the King of Egypt, who co-rules with his sister, Cleopatra: the gift is Pompey’s severed head. Ptolemy had sought to ingratiate himself with Caesar through this act of treachery, but Caesar is revolted and horrified by his political barbarism and denounces his impious act.

Caesar: Empio, dirò, tu sei, “I shall declare, that you are wicked”

CAESAR

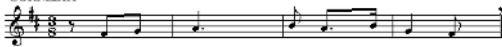


Em - pio, di-rò tu sei, togli-ti a gli occhi mei, sei tutto crude-lla,
I shall declare, that you are wicked,

Curius tries to console the grieving Cornelia with loving words and offers to help her avenge her husband’s murder, but she declares herself beyond consolation: her own death can be the only solace for her sorrows.

Cornelia: *Priva son d'ogni conforto*, “I am deprived of every consolation”

CORNELIA

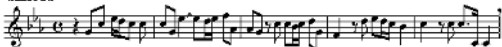


Pri - va son d' ogni con - for - to,
I am deprived of every consolation,

Sextus impetuously swears vengeance on his father's murderer.

Sextus: *Svegliatevi nel core*, “Rouse yourselves in my heart!”

SEXTUS



Svegliatevi nel core, furie d'un'alma offesa, a far d'un tradito aspra vendetta! Svegliatevi
Rouse yourselves in my heart!

Caesar vigorously denounces Ptolemy's crime and orders a noble funeral for Pompey. At the same time, Achilles becomes smitten with Cornelia's beauty.

Cleopatra's room:

Cleopatra dreams of the prospect of becoming Queen of Egypt. Her confidant Nireus brings news that her brother Ptolemy sent Pompey's head to the victorious Caesar. Cleopatra concludes that her brother's action was to curry favor with Caesar. She resolves to see the Roman emperor herself to secure his support against her brother.

Ptolemy enters and scoffs at Cleopatra, further emphasizing the rivalry between brother and sister for the throne of Egypt. Cleopatra asserts her own superior rights to the throne and denounces Ptolemy. Cleopatra sweeps grandly from the room, determined to try her charms on Caesar in order to enlist his aid against her brother. She expresses her determination: *Cleopatra: Non disperar, chi sa?*, “Do not despair, who knows?”

Achillas tells Ptolemy of Caesar's reaction to his gift of Pompey's severed head, and offers to kill Caesar, requesting that his reward should be Cornelia's hand. Ptolemy agrees to the terms and vows revenge on the Roman conquerors.

Ptolemy: Empio, sleale, indegno, “This disloyal, unworthy, wicked man!”

PTOLEMY



Caesar's camp. The ashes of Pompey's head in an urn.

Caesar broods over the ashes of his dead rival, Pompey, and recalls his greatness, somberly musing about life and fame.

Caesar: Alma del gran Pompeo, “Soul of the great Pompey”

CAESAR



Cleopatra, disguised as her maid and calling herself “Lydia,” arrives with Nirenus and pleads with Caesar to help Cleopatra overthrow Ptolemy.

After Caesar departs, Cleopatra and Nirenus hide as Cornelia and Sextus come to mourn the ashes of Pompey. Cornelia takes a sword from among the trophies beside the urn and vows to slay Ptolemy, but Sextus takes it from her, claiming revenge as his duty: *Cara speme, questo core*, “Dear hope, you begin to flatter my heart.”

Cleopatra comes forward, still in her disguise as “Lydia,” and swears revenge against Ptolemy, offering Caesar the assistance of her adviser Nireus who will lead the avengers to the treacherous Ptolemy. After all have departed, Cleopatra expresses her optimism that Caesar’s help will lead to her success: *Tu dei mia stella sei*, “You are my star.”

An antechamber hall in Ptolemy’s palace.

Caesar and Ptolemy meet with polite greetings, but in asides, enmity and mistrust are expressed by Caesar for Pompey’s brutal murder. Caesar suspects treachery, and expresses his caution metaphorically: “The successful hunter is he who goes silent and concealed.”

Cornelia and Sextus arrive. Ptolemy sees Cornelia for the first time and is immediately smitten by her beauty, though he pretends to Achilles that he may still hope to marry Pompey’s widow.

Sextus rashly challenges Ptolemy to a duel, but Ptolemy promptly orders the arrest of both mother and son, sending Sextus to prison, and Cornelia to a harem. Mother and son bid each other farewell.

ACT II: A cedar grove with Mount Parnassus in the background.

With the help of Nireus and handmaidens dressed as the nine muses, Cleopatra prepares to receive Caesar in the guise of the goddess of virtue. Attempting to seduce him with her charm and beauty, she appears as Virtue, enthroned upon Parnassus. Cleopatra sings exotically to Caesar, praising Cupid’s darts. Caesar is captivated, enchanted, and rushes to her.

Cleopatra: *V'adoro, pupille*, “Adored eyes...”

CLEOPATRA



A garden in Ptolemy's seraglio near a zoo of wild animals

Cornelia, extremely melancholy and sad, is tending flowers in the harem garden. She is approached first by the lecherous Achilles, who pleads for her love, but is scornfully refused: *Se a me non sei crudele*, “Don’t be so cruel to me.”

Ptolemy then arrives and also pleads with Cornelia for her love, but he is also spurned. Ptolemy threatens and insults her: *Sì, spietata il tuo rigore*, “Yes, pitiless woman, your harshness.”

Sextus appears and Cornelia encourages him to pursue his revenge and slay Ptolemy. Sextus vows his implacable resolve with an extravagant metaphor about an injured serpent who cannot rest: *L'angue offeso mai riposa*, “The offended serpent never rests.”

Cleopatra's Room

Cleopatra invokes Venus, goddess of Love as she awaits Caesar.

Cleopatra: *Venere bella*, “Beautiful Venus”

CLEOPATRA



After Caesar speaks affectionately to “Lydia,” she proposes marriage. Curius arrives to warn Caesar that he has been betrayed and Ptolemy’s armed men are pursuing him to murder him. Cleopatra discloses her true identity, and urges Caesar to flee, but he resolves to remain and fight his enemies.

Caesar: Al lampo dell’armi, “In the flash of arms”

CAESAR



Al lampo dell' armi quest'alma guerriera vendetta farò,
In the flash of arms..

Caesar goes off to face his enemies. Cleopatra, alone, expresses her deep despair, worrying about the fate of the man she now truly loves: *Se pietà di me non senti*, “If you do not feel pity for me.”

Ptolemy’s seraglio.

Ptolemy is brought news by Achilles of Caesar’s leap from a palace window into the sea and his apparent death by drowning.

Sextus arrives and Achilles immediately disarms him. Believing that Caesar is dead, Achilles demands Cornelia as his promised reward. Ptolemy refuses, and has now become Achilles’ bitter enemy: his rival for Cornelia.

ACT III: On the shore near Alexandria.

Achillas, because of Ptolemy’s betrayal of him over Cornelia, decides to transfer his allegiance to Cleopatra. The battle takes place, Ptolemy’s forces triumph, and the defeated Cleopatra becomes her brother’s prisoner.

Cleopatra: *Piangeró la sorte mia*, “I will cry over my fate”

CLEOPATRA



Caesar still lives, having escaped by jumping into the sea but not drowning. He is seen on the shore alone, wondering where his followers are, and whether Cleopatra is true to him.

He conceals himself as the mortally wounded Achilles arrives with Sextus. Before Achilles dies, to avenge himself on Ptolemy for betraying him, he gives Sextus a seal (ring), the symbol of his authority by which Sextus will become the leader of a hundred men in a nearby cave. These men will lead him to Ptolemy and gain entry into the palace. Thus, by Achilles' magnanimous act, both he and Sextus will be avenged, and Cornelia will be saved.

Caesar appears from hiding, takes the seal from Sextus and announces that he himself will lead the troops and save both Cleopatra and Cornelia: *Quel torrente che cade dal monte*, “That torrent that falls from the mountain.”

Cleopatra's apartments

Cleopatra mourns her fate and prepares for death at the hands of her brother. She fears that Caesar is dead and all her hopes have been shattered.

To her astonished delight, Caesar bursts in and the two lovers embrace. In her joy, Cleopatra compares herself to a storm-beaten ship that has found a haven: *Da tempeste il legno infranto*, “If a boat, broken by storms.”

Ptolemy's seraglio.

Once more Ptolemy tries to force his love on Cornelia. She threatens him with a dagger, but suddenly, Sextus arrives and kills him, finally avenging the death of his father.

The harbor of Alexandria.

Caesar and Cleopatra enter Alexandria in triumph. Nireus reports that Curio has been successful everywhere, and that Egypt now fully acknowledges Caesar as Emperor.

Sextus and Cornelia swear allegiance to Caesar as Cornelia presents the crown and sceptre of the slain Ptolemy. Caesar passes the symbols of power on to Cleopatra and proclaims Cleopatra Queen of all Egypt, vowing Rome's support for her rule. They both declare their love for each other and the people welcome the return of peace.

Handel.....and Julius Caesar

George Frideric Handel was born in Halle, Saxony, Germany, in 1685, and died in London in 1759 at the age of 74. Handel left a large musical legacy that includes his dramatic oratorios - both sacred and secular - and his prolific compositions of operas.

Handel began his career studying law, but soon realized his exceptional musical talents, eventually developing into an accomplished organist and violinist. At the age of 21, after a short assignment as the *kappellmeister* in Hanover, Handel visited London where he found a raging appetite for Italian opera. He decided to remain in London and proceeded to embark on a thirty-year career of writing operas, works that served to endear him to the English as their most celebrated musician; Queen Anne appointed him court composer, and later, artistic director of the newly founded Royal Academy of Music.

Nevertheless, controversy continually surrounded his eccentric character: he was resented as a foreigner; he had a reputation as a cruel musical tyrant; he was envied as a pet of the nobility, and in the end, was despised as a man of boorish manners. To counter his popularity and success, enemies gathered around the powerful figure of the Earl of Burlington and imported the celebrated opera composer, Giovanni Maria Bononcini. An enthusiastic rivalry ensued, but after the huge success of Handel's *Ottone*, the music war ended and his rival went into permanent retreat. Shortly thereafter, Handel became an English citizen.

Some of Handel's 40 plus operas are: *Almira* (1705), *Rodrigo* (1707), *Agrippina* (1709), *Rinaldo* (1711), *Radamisto* (1720), *Acis and Galatea* (1720), *Floridante* (1721), *Giulio Cesare* (1723), *Tamerlano* (1724),

Rodelinda (1725), *Scipione* (1726), *Admeto* (1727), *Siroe* (1728), *Partenope* (1730), *Poro* (1731), *Ezio* (1732), *Arianna* (1734), *Atalanta* (1736), *Berenice* (1737), *Faramondo* (1738), *Serse* (1738), *Imeneo* (1740), and *Deidemia* (1741).

The dramatic style of 18th century operas was called *opera seria*, in literal translation, “serious opera.” Those works were intended to be musico-dramatic recreations of Greek tragedy that presented myth and ancient history in noble, heroic, or tragic settings; the moral dilemmas of the protagonists generally resolved happily with due reward for rectitude.

As the mid-eighteenth century approached, the popularity of *opera seria* began to decline as theater-going audiences started to consider the form too stilted, too formal, and too lacking in dramatic interest to sustain appeal, some even considering *opera seria* to be an irrational form of theatrical entertainment. But contributing more importantly to its demise, was the high cost of mounting opera productions, and the exorbitant fees demanded by the castrato and prima donna singers.

At its worst moment, *opera seria* was frowned upon and became the object of scorn and derision. In 1728, John Christoph Pepusch wrote the then very popular satire and blatant lampoon of the genre: *The Beggar’s Opera*. Though the work had the air of a serious opera, its satirical purpose was to present the antithesis of the noble themes of the *opera seria*. Therefore, it presented a comedy about beggars in a setting in which its protagonists were thieves, prostitutes, and criminals whose loose language was laced with vulgarity, serving to poke fun at the Italian *opera seria* vogue in London by

skillfully adapting popular songs and pieces by other composers of the period.

Handel abandoned *opera seria* after his last operas - *Imeneo* (1740) and *Deidamia* (1741) - failed to excite the London public's imagination. The composer then reinvented himself and developed, innovated, and mastered the new genre of the English oratorio. He proceeded to write a series of masterpieces: oratorios that were strikingly different, yet equal in every respect, to the quality of any of his stage works: *Messiah*, *Samson*, and *Semele*.

Despite this shift to a new genre, Handel's works – both *opera seria* and oratorio – all contain highly charged dramatic situations, together with a profound psychological insight in his characterizations. He is considered the most instinctively theatrical opera composer falling into the period between Monteverdi and Mozart.

In the 17th century, Claudio Monteverdi - his most famous opera, *L'incorazione di Poppea* (1642) - had become one of opera's significant pioneers, among his contributions, endowing the prevailing opera style with a heretofore unknown expressiveness: Monteverdi introduced the aria as we know it today. Afterwards, innovations to the art-form began to progress at a rapid pace. In particular, Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* - about 1689 - became a landmark work that comes closest to our present-day conception of what musical drama should be: an integration of music and text fused into a single organic unity. Likewise, Christoph Willibald Gluck introduced transformations and reforms to further the establishment of music drama as the quintessential means to artistically express human emotions and passions: in Gluck's most famous operas, *Orfeo ed Euridice* and *Alceste*, he succeeded in expressing a more profound dramatic truth, lofty sentiments, and feelings.

Most of the Baroque operas – the *opera serias* - were written in the Italian style by foreigners. Handel was a Saxon who wrote Italian style opera for an English audience; Gluck was born in Bavaria and wrote in Venice before moving to Paris.

But perhaps the most significant figure of the era was the Italian dramatist, poet and librettist, Pietro Metastasio, (1698-1782), a prolific writer of opera texts whose many poetic dramas on classical and Biblical subjects were set to music by an entire generation of opera composers: Handel, Gluck, and later, Haydn and Mozart.

Metastasio's dramas were filled with intricate plots, flowery speeches, and grandiose climaxes, all appealing strongly to 18th century taste. Metastasio maintained the stylistic traditions of Italian opera by virtually establishing the rules, guidelines, and standards for 18th century *opera seria*. As such, within a story, noble behavior was indeed to be expected from the nobility; the aristocracy alone was permitted to mingle with the gods; inner personal conflict was considered virtuous; outward displays of excessive emotion was forbidden; reason and virtue were to triumph over inconstancy and evil; endings were to be happy, and comic elements as well as theatrical spectacle scenes were deemed irrelevant and frowned upon. In structure, there were to be three, tightly written acts in an opera; no classical mythology but only ancient history. His final requirement: the language was to be Italian.

Baroque is a term borrowed from architecture to describe a work that is elaborate, twisting, and heavy. Those 18th century *opera seria* works were indeed elaborate and ornate, their construction largely a series of arias for solo singers, very few concerted numbers, a limited use of chorus, and

in most cases, a requirement for intricate stage machinery.

Even though *opera seria* plots strove for more dramatic perfection and cohesion, their poetry and action still remained subservient to virtuoso aria singers showing off their wares. In the *opera seria*, Italian castrato singers had become the modern equivalent of film stars; they were the superstars who audiences came to hear, and no other element, either plot, chorus, or orchestra, could compete with their stature and popularity.

Recitative – dialogue either accompanied or unaccompanied - would carry the story line, but it was the aria that became the vehicle for introspection, the vehicle to express emotions and reactions. A perfect *opera seria* would seek to combine and blend a relatively strong dramatic story and would become a combination of the plot-carrying recitative, and a host of crowd-pleasing arias.

But in the end, it was the aria that became primary, and the story secondary. The ultimate result of the concentration on the arias themselves was the creation of fierce competition among the singing stars. Alessandro Scarlatti, the composer of sixty-six operas, created the *da capo* aria style, literally meaning “from the head,” a structure of A – B – A, the last A, often not written out but given to the singer with the instruction to go back to the beginning. Ultimately, operas were made up mostly of *da capo* arias, each aria illustrating a single mood; pathos, anger, heroic resolve, or tender love. Since one aria was to cover several emotions at once, a penetrating psychological portrayal of a complex character might demand five or more arias.

Handel’s most famous Italian *opera seria*, *Julius Caesar*, was the sixth of a series of

operas he wrote for the Royal Academy of Music in the King's Theatre, Haymarket, the organization that became the springboard for his theatrical genius. No other opera of Handel's has been more successful, either in his own day or in ours, than *Julius Caesar*.

The librettist for *Julius Caesar* was Nicolò Haym, the Royal Academy's official librettist at the time, who drew his plot partially from Plutarch, as well as from Francesco Bussana's libretto that had been set to music in 1677 by Antonio Sartorio. Nevertheless, Caesar's life was well documented by historians, as well as by his own books on his campaigns in Gaul, Italy, and Spain. Considering the eclectic nature of the story source, the opera text deals with characters and events rather fancifully; its plot at times was so extremely complicated and cumbersome that in its early performances the theater management provided the public with candles so they could follow the story in the printed libretto.

Caesar was engaged in a struggle with Pompey for the domination of Rome, defeating him in the battle at Pharsalia in 48 B.C. Pompey later fled to Egypt to seek help from its king, Ptolemy XII: Caesar pursued Pompey to Egypt.

Centuries earlier, after Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C., his empire was divided among his generals: Ptolemy asked for and was given Egypt, was named king, and created the dynasty that would endure for more than 300 years.

The Cleopatra of history, 69 to 30 B.C., was the last ruler of the house of Ptolemy. She died at the age of 39, and would have been 21 within the time-frame of Handel's opera. Nevertheless, Cleopatra remains one of the most charismatic figures of the ancient world, the ruler who above all, left a legacy of her determination to restore glory to her dynastic house.

As was the custom, she was married to her

younger brother Ptolemy with whom she ruled jointly, but later, she enlisted the support of the invading Roman emperor, Julius Caesar, in order to establish her sole rule of Egypt. She would later go to Rome as Caesar's mistress, and had not Caesar been assassinated, he would probably have put her on the throne with him. After she returned home to Egypt following his murder, with her throne secure, even though subject to Rome, she married her still younger brother, Ptolemy XIV. In the following years, she came close to ruling Rome a second time as a result of her liaison with Marc Antony.

Julius Caesar's vital and exciting story confirms that Handel was an amazing dramatist. The story's excessive dramatic action, and the continuing changing fortunes of its characters, represent an impressive theatrical construction. But more importantly, through his music, Handel breathed life, character, and individuality into each personage in the story.

Julius Caesar presents a magnificent tableau of human passions: Caesar's sentiment at the loss and murder of Pompey; Cleopatra and Ptolemy's rivalry for power; Cornelia and Sextus' revenge against Ptolemy; the rivalries for Cornelia's love of Achilles, Ptolemy, and Curius; Achilles's betrayal of Ptolemy, and the engine that drives the drama, Cleopatra's use of sex as a weapon to seduce Caesar and secure his aid.

Composer and poet, seeking more profound character development and expression, conspired to make their characters true to life. The image of Cleopatra is that of a powerful and determined woman, devious and seductive: the image of Caesar, a bold and resourceful leader, warlike but amorous.

Handel provided Caesar and Cleopatra each with a string of musical jewels – eight arias each.

These arias are among the finest solos Handel ever wrote, all self-contained masterpieces which also serve as multifaceted portraits of the Roman conquering hero and the entrancing Egyptian queen. In these arias, the sensual side of both Caesar and Cleopatra, an important facet of their characters, is particularly evident.

Cleopatra has been called Handel's "immortal sex-kitten." It is specifically in Cleopatra's rich and fascinatingly drawn music that Handel lavished his most enchanting resources. Her determination to occupy the throne of Egypt alone gives her music a forcefulness and spirit.

In Cleopatra's arias, each displays a different aspect of her character. She is introduced as a spirited, ambitious young woman in her first aria when she delivers ironic instructions to her hated brother, *Non disperar, chi sa?* "Do not despair, who knows?" She expresses deep-felt emotion and the nobility of her grief in her penultimate aria when she vows lifelong mourning for the cruelty of her fate, the loss of her pomp and grandeur, and the declaration that even when dead, she will return as a ghost to molest her tyrannical brother night and day: *Piangerò la sorte mia*, "I will cry over my fate." Her exquisite love-lorn aria, *Aure, deh per pietà*, "Breezes for pity's sake, and the aria *Tu la mia stella sei*, "You are my star," overflow with excitement, and the beautiful and seductive *V'adoro pupille*, "Adored eyes," is a heart rending lament. Her sequence of eight arias represent Handel's greatest achievement in terms of insight into human character and integrity.

Likewise, Caesar is provided with profound as well as heroic music: his bold denunciation of Ptolemy, *Empio dirò, tu sei*, "I shall declare you are wicked"; his smoothly menacing horn accompanied hunting aria, *Va tacito e nascosto*, "Go silently and secretly"; his lamentation on

the ashes of Pompey, *Alma del gran Pompeo*, “Soul of great Pompey,” and the bold resolution of the great warrior in *Al lampo dell’armi*, “In the flash of arms.”

But Handel also lavished grand music for the other characters in the opera: Cornelia’s stately, noble, and mournful music presents a moving portrait of an aristocratic Roman matron and grieving widow, a truly tragic figure for whom Handel designated most of her arias to the tempos of Largo and Andante; it is only her final aria, *Non ha più temere*, “My avenged soul has nothing to fear,” that she is allowed an Allegro. In contrast, her son Sextus’s music is mostly marked in Allegro, aptly fitting his one-dimensional obsession and youthful determination for revenge: *L’angue offeso mai riposa*, “The offended serpent never rests,” a profound expression of shame and recrimination.

On the Egyptian side, the music for Ptolemy and Achilles is shifty and energetic, surely befitting those treacherous and libidinous antagonists traditionally found in *opera seria*.

Musically, the *Julius Caesar* score makes a sensational effect through its sumptuous melodic richness and fine balancing. Handel called for a very full and varied orchestra, no doubt in deference to the exotic Egyptian setting. Most of the arias in Handel’s operas, like those of other composers of his time, are accompanied just by the string instruments: often the violins are in unison and are supported by a bass continuo line with the wind instruments sometimes called in to double the strings.

In addition to the usual strings, oboes, and bassoons, he uses both flutes and recorder, and surprisingly, four horns, (no valves in those

days), the horns used only at the very beginning and end of the opera. Oddly enough, in a work of such pronounced martial character, he does not use trumpets.

But it is in the Parnassus scene at the beginning of Act II, perhaps the most picturesque orchestral writing in Handel's entire output, that he spreads his orchestra resources lavishly; this is Cleopatra's entertainment designed to enchant and seduce Caesar, the score calling for a stage band consisting not only of strings, oboes and bassoons, but also asking for such "exotic" instruments as harp and viola da gamba.

The demanding coloratura style of *Julius Caesar* is challenging to modern singers, but the rewards in singing this music of exceptional quality and construction far outweigh the difficulties.

The greatest problem in presenting *Julius Caesar* today – paradoxically the principal attraction for its contemporary audiences, concerns the technical capabilities required of its singers. To sing 18th century Baroque opera, singers must be arduously trained in *bel canto*. *Opera seria* vocal music – particularly in *Julius Caesar* – contains abnormally long breath spans, the requirement for a singer to improvise elaborate cadenzas and ornamentation, and sometimes, the ability to sing two-octave ranges in one breath, or hold a note for several measures with an enormous crescendo and then diminuendo: what is termed *messa di voce*.

Handel beautifully judged his alternation between recitative and arias, and took great pains in fashioning the dialogue links to his arias; his *secco* (literally "dry" or unaccompanied) recitative are worked meticulously in terms of their melody and speech rhythm. These recitatives are important and serve to explain

many of the big dramatic moments in the drama: the presentation of Pompey's head, Cornelia's several suicide attempts, and Lydia's revelation that she is Cleopatra. Handel even provided an accompanied recitative as a self-contained number: Caesar's moving tribute to Pompey at the great Roman General's tomb: *Alma del gran Pompeo*, "Soul of the great Pompey."

In the tradition of Handel's time, the high vocal ranges were sung by castrati. The castrato was a eunich male singer whose sexual organs were "modified" before puberty to preserve and develop a soprano or contralto vocal range: hence the term male soprano and male alto.

The voice first appeared in the 17th century in church choirs when boys were regularly castrated to preserve their voices. The Roman Catholic Church condoned the practice on the grounds that in one of St. Paul's epistles, he had enjoined that women should remain silent in church. Castrati soon made their appearance in opera, and in the late Baroque period, they were perhaps the most important singers who had vocal instruments that were more powerful, richer, and more flexible than those of women.

These high voices "in orbit" have always excited and fascinated us – and they always will. The finest, like Farinelli (1705-1782), boasted unrivaled and superhuman techniques. As a result, castrati were idolized like our celebrated operatic tenors and coloratura sopranos, and like today's pop sex symbols, they inspired riots.

By the early 19th century, a more humane age had come to appreciate the barbarity of the surgical practice and it was finally made illegal. The last major composers to write roles for castrati were Rossini, and shortly thereafter,

Meyerbeer in the early 1820 s.

In later years, roles which had been written for castrati were either transposed for tenors or were taken by sopranos or mezzo sopranos: trouser roles. More recently, many of those roles have been sung by the new wave of countertenors, singers who produce a similar sound without recourse to the surgeon's knife.

The countertenor is a rare male voice – a vocal cousin of the castrato – with a range falling roughly between the tenor and soprano which naturally produces its tones almost exclusively through the head-register voice. Their technique has long been erroneously nicknamed *false alto*, a designation that is totally misleading. The countertenor voice has the range, flexibility, and brilliance of the female voice, but contains the muscularity of the male voice. Today, the field for countertenors has been getting crowded, the number of male altos suggesting that they are far from a rare-species.

The countertenor makes a thrilling effect. Prejudice fades fast, perhaps influenced partly by pop culture. Today people no longer regard countertenors as either a novelty or a “political statement” about dissolving stereotypical sexual roles. It is certain that with the powerful, convincing countertenors who have emerged in the last decade, permanency and legitimacy have been duly established by their extraordinary vocal capabilities.

The title role of Julius Caesar was originally created for the famous castrato, Senesino, (Francesco Bernardi), one of those high earning mega-stars of the Baroque period who is reputed to have been a singer with an incredible virtuosity. The music that Handel wrote for Senesino certainly demonstrates castrato qualities to the utmost; each of Caesar's arias, is a masterpiece not only of musical invention, but of characterization as well.

The role of Julius Caesar can be sung by a tenor, a baritone, a soprano, or a countertenor.

The role of Sextus was composed for a female soprano, but at revivals, Handel himself recast it for a tenor, a voice at that time rarely used for heroic roles. In essence, modernizing the roles of these Baroque operas has simply become a function of intelligent transposition, a practice Handel himself often resorted to. With the considerable revivals and new enthusiasm for Baroque music, there has naturally been a resurgence of countertenors.

In the recent Metropolitan Opera revival of *Julius Caesar*, the Peter Sellars production, a soprano is featured in the role of Julius Caesar, and countertenors in the roles of both Sextus and Nireus.

Julius Caesar is great opera spectacle that can set the pulse racing. Its story is packed with raging passions, shedding tears, lovers who swear undying love, and strong emotions of courage, joy, and sorrow – the latter, Handel’s strongest asset. Its choral rejoicing and battle music serve to spice the score.

The opera is continuously revived – often as the quintessential example of the Baroque period - and often performed in concert form. Modern audiences no longer look upon these Baroque works as dusty old museum pieces.

With a strong cast, good musicians and deft direction, Handel’s operas performed in the modern opera house tend to confound critics who seem to view the works as dim, performed in the wrong space, with wrong instruments, and in the wrong style. *Opera seria* obviously comes with difficulty to an audience bent on action, but in this genre, it is not what these characters necessarily do that is paramount, but what they think. With these built in disadvantages, the requirement is that modern audiences meet Handel, the Baroque, and *opera seria*, with a discreet sense of open-mindedness

and intelligence.

Hearing *Julius Caesar* over and over again, tends to captivate the listener. It is not an earful of the sumptuous orchestration of Wagner, but it is indeed magnificent music.

Giving in to Handel's subtle charm becomes a rewarding musical experience, to some, the beginning of a very special kind of obsession: what one could lovingly call the "Handel addiction."

