



Christopher Purves sings Handel

Sunday 7 January 2018 7.30pm, Milton Court
Concert Hall

Handel

Rinaldo – 'Sibilar gli angui d'Aletto'

Siroe, re di Persia – 'Gelido in ogni vena'

Agrippina – Overture

Belshazzar – 'Opprest with never ceasing grief'

Concerto grosso in D major, Op 6 No 5

Athalia – 'Ah, canst thou but prove me'

interval 20 minutes

Acis and Galatea – 'I rage, I melt, I burn ...

O ruddier than the cherry'

Aci, Galatea e Polifemo – 'Fra l'ombre e gl'orrori'

Theodora – Overture

Theodora – 'Racks, gibbets, sword and fire'

Concerto grosso in F major, Op 3 No 4

Esther – 'How art thou fall'n'

Esther – 'Turn not, O Queen'

Christopher Purves baritone

Arcangelo

Jonathan Cohen conductor/harpsichord

Part of Barbican Presents 2017–18

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Welcome

Tonight we welcome one of the most distinctive baritones of today – Christopher Purves, a musician equally at home creating new roles in contemporary opera as he is in the concert hall. This evening he explores the music of a single composer, but arguably one of the greatest dramatists of all time – George Frideric Handel.

The sheer variety of characters that we will hear brought to life attests to the brilliantly inventive way in which Handel wrote for bass and baritone voices, conjuring power-obsessed tyrants one moment and lovestruck monsters the next. The music is by turns dark, dramatic, virtuosic and full of humour.

Christopher Purves has already explored these characters on disc, with his acclaimed Hyperion release with Arcangelo, *Handel's Finest Arias for Base Voice*, which will be followed up by a second volume later this year.

He couldn't wish for finer companions on his Handelian journey than Arcangelo under its founder and multi-talented Artistic Director Jonathan Cohen.

It promises to be a thrilling evening. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

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George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)

All the world's a stage

For texts, please see page 6

No other composer of the early 18th century was as expert as Handel at drawing together eclectic musical elements and styles to create the wide range of complex personalities with which his dramatic works abound. Tonight's concert features a varied assortment from Handel's operas, oratorios and other works that illustrates how the composer responded imaginatively and engagingly to diverse characters and their predicaments, with qualities ranging from humour, affection, tenderness and joy to nastiness, lust, violence and grief (and a single character is capable of shifting from one mood to another in an instant).

Many bass roles in Handel's music dramas are political tyrants whose lust for power – or a woman, or both – turns them into menacing bullies for whom we may feel a mix of disgust and empathy; but the bass voice was also usually the composer's preference for anxious old fathers worrying about their children, and sometimes several of these stereotypes can be mixed into one character. These theatrical personalities are more fascinating than they are sometimes credited to be; much of their best music is compelling and directly comparable in quality with the composer's most popular arias for higher voices. Indeed, this concert takes the listener on a rollercoaster journey through works created throughout Handel's long career, and the various Italian arias and English airs serve to explode the unfair yet all-too-common notion that his bass arias are one-dimensional.

A native of Halle, Handel spent a few years becoming closely acquainted with opera in Hamburg, and then toured Italy for just over three years; his grand tour culminated triumphantly

in Venice with the opera *Agrippina*, at which members of the audience reputedly shouted 'viva il caro Sassone!' (the magnificent overture, with its fiendish virtuoso oboe solo part, affords us a glimpse of Handel's mastery of theatrical tension in his orchestral writing). Within a few months he had become Kapellmeister at the court of the Elector of Hanover (who would soon become George I of Great Britain), but straightaway Handel travelled to England.

Soon after his arrival in late 1710 he was commissioned to compose *Rinaldo* (first performed 1711) – the first all-Italian opera to be created especially for the London stage. 'Sibilar gli angui d'Aletto' is the roaring first entrance of the villainous Argante, infidel King of Jerusalem, who disturbs the contemplative reverie of the Christian crusader heroes. The calm Eustazio has only just finished singing a wise text about the wheel of fortune spinning and the importance of virtuous constancy, when Argante bursts in to parley with the enemy in gloriously bellicose music that features four trumpets and drums. His manic declaration that he seems to hear 'the hissing of Alecto's serpents and the howling of voracious Scylla' makes little sense because the text and musical essence of the aria are borrowed from the brutish Polifemo's arrival in *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo* (Naples, 1708), but notwithstanding the text's peculiar irrelevance in *Rinaldo*, the musical impact offers a subtext that fits: Argante is a cocky bully who wants to intimidate his besiegers, but in the event he appears ridiculous, akin to a strutting peacock preening his feathers.

In 1712 Handel settled permanently in the British capital city, and in 1727 he became a naturalised British citizen. By this time he was the principal artistic director (to use modern parlance) of the Royal Academy of Music – a company founded

by Royal Charter to establish more effective governance of regular high-quality seasons of Italian operas at the King's Theatre on the Haymarket. All of the Royal Academy's annual seasons between 1720 and 1728 featured Giuseppe Maria Boschi, who had sung Argante in the original production of *Rinaldo*. The bass seems to have been particularly good at playing implacable tyrants. Towards the dramatic climax of the final act of *Siroe* (1728), the guilty remorse of the selfish and paranoid Persian king Cosroe is depicted in 'Gelido in ogni vena' (a Larghetto in the extraordinary key of F sharp minor, with a restless bass line, contrapuntal strings and an anguished voice part); the tyrant feels icy pangs of a belated moral conscience when he believes it is too late to revoke his own order to execute his innocent son Siroe.

Some of Handel's later dramatic oratorios present the insoluble mourning of grieving fathers. The debauched titular libertine in *Belshazzar* (1745) has – in a fit of jealousy – murdered the son of the Assyrian lord Gobrias. This has motivated Gobrias to become an ally of the Persian invader Cyrus, whose army is camped outside the seemingly impregnable walls of Babylon. Before we witness the musical depiction of Belshazzar hedonistically feasting from sacred vessels stolen from the temple of Jerusalem, and the ominous judgment of God's writing on the wall, Gobrias has confided to the virtuous hero Cyrus that he is continually 'Opprest with never ceasing grief'. (Handel's touching lament expresses the character's hope that revenge will provide succour, but, even after Belshazzar's ignominious defeat, it transpires that no victory can truly compensate Gobrias for his loss.)

The notion of morally upright treachery against a wicked monarch is also explored in *Athalia* (Oxford, 1733). Fed up with the idolatry and evils

perpetrated upon Judah by Queen Athalia – the daughter of Jezebel – Abner reacts with hearty enthusiasm to the High Priest Joad's carefully worded question about whether the captain would support a *coup d'état* if a suitable true descendant of David had survived (Athalia thinks she has killed them all, even including her own grandchildren). Handel's assertive 'Ah, canst thou but prove me' makes Abner's allegiances abundantly clear, and is a key moment that persuades Joad to unveil the rightful heir Joas (a boy who does not yet know his true identity, and has been kept safely and secretly at the temple).

At the other end of the spectrum, Handel's bass characters can mingle absurd comedy and touching pathos. In *Acis and Galatea* (Cannons, 1718), the monstrous Polyphemus cannot control his raging lust for the sea nymph Galatea (who is in love with the shepherd Acis) – and his initial attempt to be seductive is as implausible as it is amusing. His accompanied recitative 'I rage, I melt, I burn' veers between fury and a hint of melancholy with which any unrequited lover can identify; calling for a wind instrument to be made for him from 'a hundred reeds of decent growth', he intends to serenade Galatea, but Handel's humour pokes affectionate fun at the disturbed Cyclops by making the supposedly huge 'pipe' into a tiny sopranino recorder, ideal for the witty caricature of clumsy attempts at love poetry ('O ruddier than the cherry, O sweeter than the berry').

Handel's earlier setting of the same story for an aristocratic Neapolitan wedding (*Acis, Galatea e Polifemo*, 1708) is dissimilar musically and structurally. Halfway through the serenata, Galatea eludes Polifemo's unwanted advances by escaping into the sea, at which point the sorrowful monster sings 'Fra l'ombre e gl'orrori'; rather than the hurly-burly of his Cannons counterpart, the Italian incarnation of Polifemo sings astonishingly

wide leaps, stretching two-and-a-half octaves, that convey his grotesque nature more subtly. In this beautiful aria Polifemo compares himself to a moth confused in the dark after a torch has been extinguished; the use of quiet strings and lyrical colour from recorder is utterly different from the humour evoked by similar scoring in the Cannons scene.

Even in unrelentingly serious tragedies such as the story of early Christian martyrs in *Theodora* (1750), the superficially unruly tyrannical bass character is subtly portrayed. Valens, the Roman governor of Antioch, vows that anyone resisting the compulsory decree to worship Jove will suffer 'Racks, gibbets, sword and fire' (language that Handel's audience might well have associated with the instruments of torture used in the Roman Inquisition). However menacing Valens is in such scenes, later on his incredulity at Theodora and Didymus's eagerness to volunteer to die in the place of each other, and his insistence that the laws of the state 'are not to be trifled with', show that he is arguably as much a figure of political authority baffled by the peculiarly obstinate dissidence of Christians as he is cruelly punitive.

In contrast, there is a deservedly miserable fate for the unrighteous persecutor of an entirely blameless religious community in Handel's first English oratorio *Esther* (originally performed for the Earl of Carnarvon in about 1718 and later revised by the composer for public performances in 1732). Haman is the proud and spiteful counsellor of the Persian king Ahasuerus, and gleefully plots the genocide of the Jews, who are exiled from their homeland. His cruel treachery is exposed by the king's new, courageous and secretly Jewish queen Esther. Upon being sentenced to death by the indignant king, the shaken Haman implores Esther to forgive him and intercede on his behalf (the hushed 'Turn

not, O Queen'). The wily politician's beseeching would be enough to persuade most of us to show clemency, but Esther firmly rejects his honey-tongued petition – forcing him to confront the dire consequences of the worldly ambition that has led him to his doom ('How art thou fall'n').

Handel's status as the inventor of English oratorio has never been in doubt, his church music (both Roman Catholic and Anglican) is the staple diet of choirs everywhere, and his stock as an opera composer has risen to the highest rank in the last half century. Perhaps today's audiences are less quick than their forbears to remember the composer's renown as a virtuoso harpsichordist and organist, his masterful chamber sonatas, pioneering keyboard concertos and his magnificent *concerti grossi* for strings (some of them including other instruments). In 1734 the London music-seller John Walsh printed six concertos cobbled together haphazardly from various pieces Handel had written for different occasions, and called it Op 3; the fourth of these, in F major, includes in addition to strings a pair of oboes and had been performed by Handel at the King's Theatre on 20 June 1716. It seems that he was not involved in Walsh's compilation, nor did he give it his blessing, but a few years later their business dealings had improved. In 1739 Handel composed a coherent set of 12 superb *Concerti grossi* for Walsh to produce as an edition sold by subscription. By the time these were printed as Op 6 (1740), Handel had already performed most of them in concerts at Lincoln's Inn Fields; some of the Fifth Concerto had served as the overture to the new *Ode for St Cecilia's Day* (first performed on 22 November 1739), and its juxtaposition of fizzy charm, buoyancy and dance-like gracefulness is testament to Handel's excellence as an orchestral composer.

Programme note © David Vickers

Texts

Rinaldo – ‘Sibilar gli angui d’Aletto’ Argante

Sibilar gli angui d’Aletto
E latrar vorace Scilla
Par mi udir d’intorno a me.

Rio velen mi serpe in petto,
Né ancor languida favilla
Di timor, pena mi diè.

*Giacomo Rossi (fl 1710–31)
after Aaron Hill (1685–1750)*

I seem to hear around me
The hissing of Alecto’s serpents
And the howling of voracious Scylla.

An evil poison creeps into my breast
And a spark of fear, still faint,
Makes me suffer.

*Translation by Charles Johnston © Hyperion
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Siroe, re di Persia – ‘Gelido in ogni vena’ Cosroe

Gelido in ogni vena
Scorrer mi sento il sangue:
L’ombra del figlio esangue
M’ingombra di terror.

E per maggior mia pena
Veggio che fui crudele
A un’anima fedele,
A un innocente cor.

*Nicola Francesco Haym (1678–1729),
after Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782)*

In every vein I feel
my blood turn to ice;
the shade of my dead son
fills me with terror.

And to add to my sorrows,
I see now that I meted out
my cruelty to a loyal soul,
an innocent heart.

Translation © Susannah Howe

Belshazzar – ‘Opprest with never ceasing grief’ Gobrias

Opprest with never ceasing grief,
I drag a painful, weary life;
Of all that made life sweet bereft,
No hope, but in revenge, is left.

Charles Jennens (1700–73)

Athalie – ‘Ah, canst thou but prove me’

Abner

Ah, canst thou but prove me!
To vengeance I spring.
No terrors shall move me,
I’ll fall for my king.
But whilst you relieve me
Awhile from my pain,
I fear you deceive me
With joys that are vain.

*Samuel Humphreys (c 1697–1738), after ‘Athalie’ by
Jean Racine (1639–99)*

interval 20 minutes

Acis and Galatea – ‘I rage, I melt, I burn...

O ruddier than the cherry’

Polyphemus

I rage, I melt, I burn!
The feeble god has stabb’d me to the heart.
Thou trusty pine,
Prop of my godlike steps, I lay thee by!
Bring me a hundred reeds of decent growth,
To make a pipe for my capacious mouth.
In soft enchanting accents let me breathe
Sweet Galatea’s beauty, and my love.

O ruddier than the cherry,
O sweeter than the berry,
O nymph more bright
Than moonshine night,
Like kidlings blithe and merry!

Ripe as the melting cluster,
No lily has such lustre;
Yet hard to tame
As raging flame,
And fierce as storms that bluster!

John Gay (1685–1732)

**Aci, Galatea e Polifemo — 'Fra l'ombre
e gl'orrori'
Polifemo**

Fra l'ombre e gl'orrori
Farfalla confusa
Già spenta la face
Non sa mai goder.

Così fra timori
Quest'alma delusa
Non trova mai pace,
Né spera piacer.

Nicola Giuvo (c1680–1748 or after)

Amid shadows and horrors
The dazed moth,
When the flame is extinguished,
Can never play.

Likewise, amid its fears,
This deluded soul
Can never find peace,
Nor hope for pleasure.

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**Theodora — 'Racks, gibbets, sword and fire'
Valens**

Racks, gibbets, sword and fire,
Shall speak my vengeful ire,
Against the stubborn knee.

Nor gushing tears,
Nor ardent pray'rs,
Shall shake our firm decree.

*Thomas Morell (1703–84),
after 'The martyrdom of Theodora and Didymus'
by Robert Boyle (1627–91)*

**Esther — 'How art thou fall'n'
Haman**

How art thou fall'n from thy height!
Tremble, ambition, at the sight!
In power let mercy sway.
When adverse fortune is thy lot,
Lest thou by mercy be forgot,
And perish in that day.

**Esther — 'Turn not, O Queen'
Haman**

Turn not, O Queen, thy face away,
Behold me prostrate on the ground!
O speak, his growing fury stay,
Let mercy in thy sight be found!

Samuel Humphreys, after Jean Racine

About the performers

Chris Gloag



Christopher Purves

Christopher Purves baritone

Christopher Purves has established himself as one of the leading British baritones of his generation. Celebrated for his interpretations of an eclectic range of roles and repertoire, he is in great demand with theatres around the world, working with leading orchestras, conductors and directors. He started his musical life as a choral scholar at King's College, Cambridge, and went on to become a member of the experimental rock group Harvey and the Wallbangers.

Operatic highlights this season include Golaud (*Pelléas et Mélisande*) in Hong Kong and at Glyndebourne in Stefan Herheim's new production under Robin Ticciati; and Trinity Moses (Weill's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*) for Zurich Opera House under Fabio Luisi. In concert recent highlights include Balstrode (*Peter Grimes*) at the 2017 Edinburgh Festival under Edward Gardner; Peasant (*Gurrelieder*) under Sir Simon Rattle at the BBC Proms; Creon (Enescu's *Oedipe*) under Vladimir Jurowski at the Royal Festival Hall and Enescu Festival; Berlioz's *L'enfance du Christ* under Ticciati; and Bach's *St Matthew Passion* under Richard Egarr.

Recent operatic highlights include the title-role in *Don Giovanni* for English National Opera; the title-role in Handel's *Saul* for Glyndebourne

Festival Opera and the Adelaide Festival; Alberich (*Götterdämmerung*) for Houston Grand Opera and the Bavarian State Opera; Alberich (*Siegfried*) for Houston Grand Opera and the Canadian Opera Company; Gamekeeper (*The Cunning Little Vixen*) for Glyndebourne Festival Opera; his debut at the Opéra de Paris (Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*); the title-role in *Gianni Schicchi* at Opera North, Sharpless (*Madama Butterfly*) for his debut with Chicago Lyric Opera; Balstrode at La Scala and Nono's *Al gran sole carico d'amore* at the Salzburg Festival.

On the concert platform, recent highlights include *Acis and Galatea* with La Nuova Musica, Mozart's *Requiem* with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Bach's *St John Passion* at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw and *St Matthew Passion* with the Academy of Ancient Music, Elgar's *The Kingdom* at the First Night of the BBC Proms under Sir Andrew Davis and Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* under Masaaki Suzuki. He is also a keen recitalist and works regularly with pianist Simon Lepper, and has appeared at the Aldeburgh Festival, Opera North and Kettle's Yard in Cambridge.

He has a particular affinity for contemporary repertoire and has created a number of roles, most recently Walt Disney in the world premiere of Philip Glass's *The Perfect American*. Other major successes include the Protector (George Benjamin's *Written on Skin*) for the Royal Opera House, and roles in Sir James MacMillan's *The Sacrifice* at Welsh National Opera, *Inés de Castro* at Scottish Opera and *Parthenogenesis* at the Edinburgh Festival.

Christopher Purves's extensive discography includes works by Handel, Mozart, Donizetti, Ricci and Benjamin. In 2012 his debut solo CD, *Handel's Finest Arias for Base Voice*, was released on Hyperion with Arcangelo and Jonathan Cohen, to great critical acclaim. A second disc will be released in early summer.



Jonathan Cohen

Jonathan Cohen conductor/harpsichord

Jonathan Cohen is one of Britain's finest young musicians and has forged a remarkable career as a conductor, cellist and keyboard player. He is well known for his passion for chamber music and is equally at home in Baroque opera and the Classical symphonic repertoire. He is Artistic Director of Arcangelo, Associate Conductor of Les Arts Florissants, Artistic Director of Tetbury Festival and Artistic Partner of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. Next season he becomes Music Director of Les Violons du Roy, of which he is currently Music Director Designate.

Highlights this season include return visits to Les Violons du Roy, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Budapest Festival Orchestra and Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and *Giulio Cesare* at Glyndebourne Festival Opera. He makes his debut with Konzerthausorchester Berlin, the Iceland Symphony Orchestra and Orchestre Philharmonique de Liège. He also performs with his ensemble Arcangelo, which he founded in 2010 and which has already gained an enviable reputation. He has toured with the ensemble to leading halls and festivals, including the Wigmore Hall, Berlin Philharmonie, Cologne Philharmonie, Vienna Musikverein, Salzburg Festival and New York's Carnegie Hall. Other recent highlights include a European tour with Vilde Frang with concerts at Oslo Opera House and the Zurich Tonhalle. In 2016, he conducted Arcangelo in their BBC Proms debut at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse.

Arcangelo is also much in demand in the recording studio, partnering with fine soloists such as countertenor Iestyn Davies (their disc *Arias for Guadagni* won the Recital Category at the 2012

Gramophone Awards, while their recording of Bach cantatas was voted best Baroque Vocal recording in the 2017 Gramophone Awards), Anna Prohaska, and Christopher Purves on Hyperion. Their Mozart disc with Vilde Frang for Warner (2015) received an ECHO Klassik Award. Both *Scene!* with Christiane Karg and *Arias for Benucci* with Matthew Rose were nominated for an International Opera Award in 2016. Arcangelo's recording of C P E Bach cello concertos with Nicolas Altstaedt (Hyperion) won BBC Music Magazine's Concerto Award in 2017 and their most recent recording – of Bach Magnificats – is also attracting critical acclaim.

Arcangelo

Arcangelo has become known for performances combining energy and spirit, resulting in acclaim from critics and audiences and invitations to perform at the world's leading venues and festivals. The ensemble, which has taken the musical world by storm since its creation in 2010, comprises outstanding musicians under the dynamic leadership of its Artistic Director and founder Jonathan Cohen. Its ethos is ruled by a determination to apply the deep listening skills and artistry of chamber music-making to every piece in its repertoire, from intimate ensemble pieces to works for chamber orchestra. Eight years on, it has become one of the world's leading ensembles, excelling on both historical and modern instruments.

Recent successes on disc include an album of C P E Bach cello concertos with Nicolas Altstaedt, which received a 2017 BBC Music Magazine Award, and Bach alto cantatas with Iestyn Davies, which won a 2017 Gramophone Award. Its recording of Buxtehude's Trio Sonatas, Op 1 on Alpha Classics has been nominated for a 2018 Grammy Award. Arcangelo's latest disc is of Bach Magnificats for Hyperion. Christopher Purves's second album of Handel arias with Arcangelo, a follow-up to the Gramophone-Award nominated disc of 2012, is due out on Hyperion in early summer.

In addition to regular appearance at the Wigmore Hall, where it had a residency last season, Arcangelo has performed at major venues from New York's Carnegie Hall to the Salzburg Festival.

Arcangelo

**Artistic Director/
Harpsichord**

Jonathan Cohen

Violin

Cecilia Bernardini
leader

Michael Gurevich*

Jane Gordon

Tim Crawford

Iona Davies

Florence Cooke

Beatrice Philips

James Toll

Viola

John Crockett*

Jane Rogers

Cello

Jonathan Manson*

Andrew Skidmore

Double Bass

Timothy Amherst

Oboe

Katharina Spreckelsen

Leo Duarte

Recorder

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