

Sektion IV

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The authority of madness: Staging Handel's Orlando

Handel's opera Orlando premiered in the 1732–33 season, one which also included Tolomeo, Floridante, and Griselda. Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, one of the few who commented on the first performance, noted "the famous Castrato, Senesino made the principal Actor, the rest were all Italians who sung with very good grace and action". Although his few comments are as much of a "review" as we are likely to get in the 1730s, it is notable that there is an emphasis on the acting skills of the Italians. One of the key scenes in the opera is, of course, the "Mad Scene", with its musical forms that represent Orlando's disordered mind, and since the opera's revival, it has offered opera companies a convenient vehicle for stagings of all kinds. For scholars, however, headlines of reviews such as this production of "Handel's Orlando has a lively update", or "[the production] has broken with tradition", or perhaps the worst of all, that the production "brought life to this ludicrously plotted opera", will lay a cold hand on the heart, and cause the imagining of an evening of unnecessarily re-invented opera. However, not all productions result in outlandish stagings and not all re-interpretations misunderstand the work. The aim of this paper is to return to these productions to see what re-interpretations have been attempted and what themes have been resulted. Productions discussed will include those from Scottish Opera, Les Arts Florissants, and the Academy of Ancient Music.