

# Caffarelli and Handel

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GAETANO MAJORANO

Comme son le nom de Caffarelli  
*Da una pittura*

Celebre chanteur né à Bari  
Né à Naples le 16 avril 1743 Mort  
le 1<sup>er</sup> février 1783 à Naples

Gaetano Majorano, known as Caffarelli, was born in Naples in 1703 and educated by Caffaro, who recognized his talent and sent him to become an *evirato*.<sup>1</sup> Majorano “may have been one of the few who chose to be castrated voluntarily for the sake of his voice,”<sup>2</sup> and he took on the name Caffarelli in honor of his protector.<sup>3</sup> Caffarelli studied with the famed Nicola Porpora, and, according to legend, was “kept [...] for five or six years to the uninterrupted and unvaried study of one page of exercises; and [...] at the end of this time he was dismissed with these words, ‘Go my son: I have nothing more to teach you. You are the greatest singer in Europe.’”<sup>4</sup> Caffarelli was immediately successful in Italy, and arrived in London at the end of 1737, where he briefly worked with G.F. Handel, making his first appearance at the King's Theatre on Jan 7, 1738, in the titular role of Handel's *Faramondo*. He also sang Handel's *Serse* in April, and it was not particularly triumphant, achieving only five performances.<sup>5</sup> Caffarelli's performance was not met with much excitement, as “it is said that during all his stay in London he was never in good health or voice.”<sup>6</sup> After his work with Handel, he returned to Italy, where he continued his otherwise exemplary career. Caffarelli's influence on the composer is clear in both the music and the theatrical traits of the two characters he premiered.

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall, Julian. "Caffarelli." In *Grove's dictionary of music and musicians*. 1904. Reprint, (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1911), 443.

<sup>2</sup> Marek, Dan. "Some famous singers of the age of Bel Canto." In *Singing: the first art* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall, Julian. "Caffarelli." In *Grove's dictionary of music and musicians*. 1904. Reprint, (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1911), 443.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Meynell, Hugo Anthony. *The art of Handel's operas*. (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 1986), 225.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall, Julian. "Caffarelli." In *Grove's dictionary of music and musicians*. 1904. Reprint, (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1911), 443.

As both a vocalist and a performer, Caffarelli was believed by many experts in the matter to be superior to the most famous of Porpora's pupils, Farinelli. However, Caffarelli's personality was completely different from his rival's: "Whereas Farinelli was generous, unassuming, and maintained the highest artistic standards, Caffarelli was vain, quarrelsome, arrogant, and often performed badly and in poor taste."<sup>7</sup> Despite this, "Porpora always felt that Caffarelli was the greater singer, probably because, in contrast to Farinelli's placid temperament, he sang with great fire and was capable of wonderful bursts of inspiration."<sup>8</sup> By all accounts, "Caffarelli's insolence and conceit caused him to be as heartily disliked as Farinelli was beloved for his amiability."<sup>9</sup> Something of this aspect of Caffarelli's personality has a direct parallel to the character Handel wrote for him in *Serse*.

It is perhaps for this reason that Caffarelli was not successful in London, where audiences were culturally uninclined to accept such a personality. R.A. Streatfield argues that, in addition to his bad health during his stay in London, the castrato "came at an unfortunate time -- when society had been sated with Italian opera, and was weary of the endless quarrels and rivalries which seemed to be its inevitable accompaniment."<sup>10</sup> Caffarelli's notorious temper and unpredictable behavior was precisely the epitome of the antics of which the London audience had grown tired. Despite the singer's talents and the composer's masterful writing, Italian opera was no longer in vogue; *Serse* is Handel's final opera.

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<sup>7</sup> Marek, Dan. "Some famous singers of the age of Bel Canto." In *Singing: the first art* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Streatfield, Richard Alexander. *Handel*. 1910. Reprint (London: Methuen, 1964), 148.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

His lack of success in London did not hinder Caffarelli's career in the least. He "retained his voice almost to the last,"<sup>11</sup> and was wildly popular until his death in 1783. Handel's friend and historian Charles Burney heard Caffarelli perform "at Naples in 1770, when he was sixty-seven. 'Though his voice was thin,' he remarks, 'it was easy to imagine, from what he was still able to do, that his voice and talents had been of the very first class.' He was then living in a sumptuous house of his own building, over the door of which was inscribed the legend, 'Amphion Thebas, ego dominum.'"<sup>12</sup> This translates to "Amphion [built] Thebes, I a house." In Greek mythology, Amphion, a son of Zeus, built the walls of Thebes by moving the stones into place with the sound of his magical lyre. This speaks to Caffarelli's incredible self-assurance and iconoclasm, which he put to good use off and, more importantly, on the stage, and which Handel explicitly harnessed for the characters he created for the castrato.

In the preface to the 2006 Bärenreiter edition of the score of *Serse*, editor Terence Best explains the circumstances of Caffarelli's work with Handel thus: "The Opera of the Nobility collapsed in June 1737, and in October a new season began at the King's Theatre, probably managed by the impresario Heidegger, who added [...] Caffarelli to the company and brought Handel to supply two new operas, which were *Faramondo* and *Serse*."<sup>13</sup> It is safe to assume that Handel was aware of Caffarelli's reputation as a gifted singer and actor, and that, as was the general custom, wrote to suit his protagonist.

Vocally, Caffarelli was known to excel "in slow and pathetic airs, as well as in the bravura style; and was unapproached both in beauty of voice and in the perfection of his shake

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Handel, George Frideric, and Niccolò Minato. *Serse: opera in tre atti, HWV 40 = Xerxes*. (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2006), IX.

and chromatic scales. He is said to have been the first to introduce the latter embellishment in quick movements.”<sup>14</sup> In both *Faramondo* and *Serse*, Handel provides the castrato with ample opportunities to show off all of these qualities, with multiple *bravura* arias, and plenty of slow ones, not the least of which is the opening aria of *Serse*, “Ombra mai fu.”

In the context of the opera, “Ombra mai fu” is an anomaly. In it, the Persian king admires a plane tree for its beauty and gentleness. For much of the work, *Serse* is presented as a tyrannical ruler who makes harmful decisions based on his own whims and frustrations, mirroring the notorious caprices of Caffarelli himself. His other slow passages consist entirely of meditations on the perceived injustice of his circumstances; and suspensions, which figure prominently in his arias, generally have a harsher tone. In “Ombra mai fu,” however, the suspensions offer nothing but sweetness, giving the singer the opportunity to truly show off the beauty of his voice. The lower strings provide a steady stream of sound in a 3/4 *Larghetto*, as *Serse*’s line is simultaneously in and out of time, gradually building to a subtly climactic held F (measure 44), before a peaceful resolution. Historian Winton Dean argues for the existence of this contrast thus: “Handel could not withhold all sympathy from brutal and uncouth figures, provided they were capable of passion.”<sup>15</sup> This speaks in equal measure to the singer himself.

Certainly, *Serse* does not lack in passion. Over the course of the opera, his arias only build in strength. At the middle point comes “Più che penso,” a *siciliana* in duple meter that lasts a full seven minutes when performed at the fastest possible *Andante*, and has a disproportionately long A-section, which features opportunities for at least two extended

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<sup>14</sup> Marshall, Julian. “Caffarelli.” In *Grove’s dictionary of music and musicians*. 1904. Reprint, (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1911), 444.

<sup>15</sup> Dean, Winton. *Handel’s operas, 1726-1741*. (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2006), 427.

improvised cadences. Caffarelli, a master of embellishment, was certainly able to take full advantage of this. The aria is full of explicit text painting; the words of the A-section, “Più che penso alle fiamme del core, più l'ardore crescendo sen va” are illustrated with particular emphasis on “crescendo” and “più,” with melismatic passages of the sort at which Caffarelli excelled. The affect builds in the king’s excitement over his desired, as he essentially creates his own “ardore” during the piece, allowing the singer to demonstrate the range of his acting abilities to the fullest extent.

Serse’s final aria, “Crude furie degli orridi abissi,” bursts forth at the peak of his frustrations. The piece is “a pseudo-heroic expression of wrath in a 6/8 G-major *allegro*, [sic.] where he invokes the furies of the abyss with jabbing quavers and whirling descending demisemiquavers in the accompaniment...”<sup>16</sup> In the present time, it is notoriously difficult, but the piece doubtless provided no challenge to the singer noted by Porpora as the greatest in Europe. Winton Dean describes the music as “leaping arpeggios and octaves and strings buzzing like an angry swarm of bees,” calling it “a brilliant send-up of all operatic invocations of the furies.”<sup>17</sup> The text is translated as follows: “Cruel furies of the horrid abysses, pour unto me your black poison. Let it come in the world, and the sun be eclipsed at this anger that breathes forth (from) my breast.”<sup>18</sup> Most of the runs come on the word *aspergetemi* (pour unto me), which is repeated five times, such that this word alone takes up a full half of the piece. This hyperbole renders the A-section somewhat ridiculous, and allows for a greater suspension of disbelief as, in the B-section, Serse literally orders the sun to be eclipsed. Musically, “[t]here is no mistaking the

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<sup>16</sup> Meynell, Hugo Anthony. *The art of Handel's operas*. (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 1986), 226.

<sup>17</sup> Dean, Winton. *Handel's operas, 1726-1741*. (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2006), 419.

<sup>18</sup> Castel, Nico, Hemdi Kfir, and Marcie Stapp. *Handel opera libretti*. (Geneseo, N.Y.: Leyerle, 2005-2007), 140.

note of parody, underlined by the major tonality and the swooping downward scales [...]. These frantic expostulations, at once indignant and hilarious, strike the exact chord of impotent rage.”<sup>19</sup> In its form, “Crude furie” is a typical *Aria di bravura*, which John Walter Hill defines as having a “rapid tempo, fast rhythms, long, difficult melismas, possibly wide leaps; suitable for expressions of [...] rage,” and being generally placed at the end of Act II.<sup>20</sup> The *Aria di bravura* that does come at the end of the second act of *Serse* is Romilda’s “Chi cede al furore di stelle rubelle,” which has a few melismatic similarities to “Crude furie,” but is more steadfast in its affect. The placement of *Serse*’s outburst, then, adds to the ridiculousness of its nature.

To quote Hugo Anthony Meynell, “[t]hough Xerxes himself is fundamentally ridiculous, Handel draws him with a good deal of sympathy, and of course gives him some ravishing music.”<sup>21</sup> The latter can absolutely be said of Faramondo as well, while the former is the polar opposite. Faramondo, the king of the Franks, is a heroic, benevolent ruler, who happens to be in love with the daughter of his sworn enemy.

Faramondo’s final aria in Act I, “Se ben mi lusinga l’infida speranza,” is in a raucous G major, and in a very high tessitura for a Mezzo-Soprano, in contrast to the titular character’s other arias, which generally sit in the middle range. Caffarelli’s particular abilities were of great use here, giving a different color to really emphasize the passion felt by the character.

Faramondo, who, despite the danger to his life, is going to profess his love, sings of a false hope which is nonetheless extremely enjoyable. In the ritornello, the strings establish an excited pace, which is then matched by the voice in intensity. The long vocal lines are perfectly suited to the

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<sup>19</sup> Dean, Winton. *Handel's operas, 1726-1741*. (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2006), 429.

<sup>20</sup> Hill, John Walter. *Baroque music: music in Western Europe, 1580-1750*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 405.

<sup>21</sup> Meynell, Hugo Anthony. *The art of Handel's operas*. (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 1986), 225.

long chromatic scales for which Caffarelli was famous, especially in the bars leading up to the Adagio at the end of the B-section (measures 71-80). Melodically, wide leaps -- mostly octaves -- break up the scalar texture. Judging by the music written for Caffarelli by other composers, most notably Johann Adolf Hasse,<sup>22</sup> octave leaps with appended scales were a favorite figure of the castrato.

Although neither opera was successful at the time of their premieres, *Serse* has gone on to a lasting appreciation, if not popularity. *Faramondo*, alas, has not. Regardless, the original performer of the titular characters of both has remained a legend, exemplifying the stereotype of castrati, in his vocal and theatrical prowess as well as in his obnoxious personality. Throughout his career, Caffarelli's skill inspired every composer with whom he came into contact. It is unfortunate that his interaction with Handel was limited by both Caffarelli's health and the timing of their collaboration. However, the music written for the protagonists of Handel's final two operas was shaped by the incredible abilities and personal characteristics of the man who premiered them.

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<sup>22</sup> Fagioli, Franco, *Arias for Caffarelli*, With Il Pomo D'Oro and Riccardo Minasi, © 2013 by naïve classique, B00DVDUCDS, Compact disc.

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