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BALANCED CONFLICT IN THE LOVE DUETS OF HANDEL'S OPERAS AND CANTATAS¹

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Literature on the *opera seria* of the first half of the eighteenth century usually stresses the rarity and — sometimes — also the uniformity of ensembles, since the musical and the semantic emphasis is on the arias. It is stated that they are most commonly love duets of the *primo uomo* and *prima donna*, and although usually occurring in strong emotional situations, they are often seen as non-dramatic. Contrary to this common belief, the examination of numerous ensembles in Handel's dramatic output (his operas, oratorios, and to a certain degree, his cantatas as well) shows much more musical and dramaturgical variety than one would expect. The starting point of this thesis was a systematic examination of this diversity, which led to singling out the duets' category of direct and balanced conflict as one of the most complex musical representatives of dramatic conflict in Handel's ensembles.

Preceded by a brief introduction, the second chapter of the thesis (»Starting Points«) consists of three sections. The first one attempts to construct a context for Handel's operas and cantatas with regard to some of the composer's tendencies, both stylistic (in particular his relation to the *style gallant*) and dramaturgical (in

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relation to the so-called »conventions of *opera seria*« and the opera reform of Zeno and Metastasio), as well as the reception of his work in England (and the lack of knowledge of the Italian language that explains the reduction of recitative). The second section states definitions of the terms »ensemble« and »duet« from secondary sources in terms of their structural traits, but also provides some commentary on the definitions. The importance of the category of the »dialogical«, subsequently developed in *opera buffa*, is termed inappropriate when dealing with Handel's ensembles that are often dramatic without their text being written in dialogue form.

The third section provides a theoretical framework for the dramaturgical approach to the research by examining certain categories of classical dramaturgy in relation to Handel, e. g., closed dramatic form, dramatic action, conception and characterisation of the *dramatis personae*, dramatic situation and dramatic conflict. Ensembles render it possible to »single out« and »fixate« a dramatic situation (a constellation of dramatic forces) through the simultaneous expression of characters. In accordance with the aforementioned preconceptions on *opera seria* of the eighteenth century, Handel's ensembles usually present a dramatic situation of unity between the characters (this unity is amorous in the majority of cases), as the dramatic conflict is more often developed in succession (in arias) rather than in simultaneity. Still, there is also a body of duets that incorporate, on a dramaturgical level, some aspects of dramatic conflict. This conflict may be amorous, political or a combination of the two (e. g. the conflict between love and duty) and it is rarely resolved in the confines of the ensembles themselves.

The third chapter of the thesis (»Dramatic Conflict in Handel's Duets«) offers an extensive classification of Handel's operas and oratorios as well as of the duets of dramatic conflict that we find in them. Drawing from the classification of the librettos of Handel's operas by W. Dean, E. Harris and R. Hume, a simpler classification on the basis of the provenance of the librettos is provided. An overview of the dominant form of the epoch, the *da capo* form, is also given in order to serve as a background for the formal analysis of the duets. The main focus of the chapter is on a body of 18 duets that incorporate, on a dramaturgical level, some aspects of dramatic conflict. They are classified according to the criteria of the aforementioned provenance of the libretto, their positioning in the overall dramatic structure, the types of voices they are written for, their affective content, according to whether the text of the two vocal parts is identical (monotextuality) or different (politextuality), whether they are dialogical, whether the two parts are differentiated in terms of thematic material and compositional treatment, according to certain types of compositional procedures they use, as well as according to basic structural traits such as tonality, tempo, meter, form and elements of dance rhythms.

The following conclusions are drawn from this systematisation: Handel's duets of conflict are more frequent in antiheroic and pastoral operas (presumably because amorous conflict is less suitable to historical and heroic librettos), they

are usually placed in a central area of the overall dramaturgical design (in the second act), in most cases they are written for high voices (the combination of soprano and alto being the most common) and their affective content is most often anger or rage. The two vocal parts are rarely differentiated in terms of treatment or thematic material, which can be interpreted on the musical level by claiming that the characters are not individualised. Their text is often dialogical regardless of whether the parts have the same text, partially similar texts or completely different texts. Besides the prevalence of faster tempi, the results of the classification provide no conclusive evidence for generalisation on the rest of the mentioned criteria.

The division of the 18 duets into amorous and non-amorous shows itself to be unproductive because of the paucity of non-amorous duets. It is much more important whether the conflict is direct or indirect (that is, if the characters are in conflict with each other or someone else) and whether it is balanced (or symmetrical) or imbalanced (asymmetrical). The latter criterion depends on whether the parts or characters have equal shares in the texture and the dramaturgy of the duet. A typical example of an asymmetrical duet in the later *opera buffa* is the *aria con pertichini*, an aria with (aside) interjections by another character. Some of Handel's duets of imbalanced conflict show an adherence to this model: they produce the illusion that an angry female character does not allow the male character to express himself by constantly interrupting him.

Duets of direct and balanced conflict dominate among duets of conflict in Handel's operas and cantatas. These 10 duets are also amorous duets. The duets »Deh! Lascia addolcire / Più tasto morire« from the cantata *Apollo e Dafne* and »Gran pena è gelosia / Lo sà il mio cor« from the opera *Serse* do not correspond to any of the described categories as they are parallel monologues. For purposes of comparison, they have also been included in the central, fourth chapter of the dissertation (»Analysis of Handel's Duets of Direct and Balanced Amorous Conflict«), divided into eighth sections according to the duet or pair of duets that they analyse, in a predominantly chronological order.

The first section analyses the duet »Ich will gar von nichtes wissen« from Handel's first opera *Almira* (1705). It is written for the secondary couple Edilia and Osman and contributes to the complex web of amorous relationships in the opera. As Handel's first attempt to write a duet of conflict, its structuring foreshadows some of his later invention. It follows the sequence of three types of compositional procedures (successive exposition of material in the two parts, contrapuntal combining, and parallel motion) typical of the duet as defined in Chapter Two, only on a smaller scale. Considered outside of the dramaturgic context, it seems like a duet mimetic of a verbal argument, but it is in fact a juxtaposition of two inner monologues and therefore atypical of Handel's subsequent duets of direct and imbalanced conflict. The duet »Si, lasciami ingrata / Su, restate in pace« from the cantata *Il duello amoroso* (1708) is even simpler in its structural design and its conflict is even less elaborate than the one from *Almira*.

Nevertheless, its edginess is strongly conveyed in the third section by rapid exchanges of phrases between the parts that are never in parallel motion, and this will remain Handel's main compositional means to convey the dynamics of a verbal argument.

The third section of the chapter deals with the duets »Fermati! Son Clori e son fedel / No, crudel! Sei Clori infida« from the cantata *Clori, Tirsi e Fileno* (1707) and »Fermati! Armida son, fedel / No, crudel!« from the opera *Rinaldo* (1711), examples of Handel's practice of borrowing. By making minor alterations, the composer has adapted the duet from the cantata to a similar dramatic situation in the opera. In both cases, women (Clori, the two-timing nymph and the sorceress Armida) unsuccessfully pursue resisting men (the deceived shepherd Tirsi and the knight Rinaldo), producing a comical rather than a tragic situation. Similarly to the duet from *Il duello amoroso*, parallel movement of the vocal parts is entirely absent, since one of the characters is trying to avoid contact. This is Handel's first overtly dialogical duet, as his added exclamations »Si!« and »No!« and their contrapuntal setting play a crucial part. Its monothematicism (the derivation of all the material from a single source) gives it a special coherence. The duet »Una guerra ho dentro il seno« from the cantata *Apollo e Dafne* (1709) is monological and unites its undifferentiated characters with both the same text and a similar affective content. Still, it is also one of Handel's first concerted duets of conflict in that its initial *ritornello* presents the thematic material in its entirety, only for it to be developed in the following vocal and orchestral entries. The contrapuntal combining of parts comprises imitation, chains of suspensions and double counterpoint, features also found in Handel's later duets of conflict. Despite the fact that it is atypical in that it contains a bass part — very rare in duets of conflict and that because of its brisk tempo and the character of a *gigue* — it could be easily mistaken for a duet of unity; on the structural and formal level this duet is the prototype of the more complex duet of direct and balanced conflict in Handel's operas and cantatas.

After an examination of the mythological background, the characterisation of Medea and the dramaturgical context of the duet »Sì ti lascio / sprezzo« from the opera *Teseo* (1713), a detailed analysis establishes that the cycle of gradual intertwining of the parts (exposition, counterpoint, parallel motion) is carried out twice in the course of the A Section of the *da capo* duet. Whereas in the first cycle the parts are differentiated by means of contrasting thematic material, in the second they become indistinguishable as the intertwining intensifies. Despite the blunt mutual rejection uttered by Medea and Egeo, the setting of the duet — especially its minuet rhythm — seems to suggest that there are still unresolved issues in their ambivalent relationship. Although it shares some structural traits and the strong female character of a sorceress with the duet from *Teseo*, the dramatic situation of the duet »Crudel, tu non farai« from the opera *Amadigi* (1715) is far from ambivalent. Moreover, a comparison with Destouches' setting of de la Motte's libretto *Amadis de Grèce* shows that Handel and his librettist sought to avoid a

gradual elaboration of the conflict between the sorceress Melissa and her coveted love, Amadigi. Still, this is one of Handel's formally most complex duets of conflict so far, with its pseudo-counterpoint and, despite the duet's monotextuality, a heightened sense of dialogue accomplished by different meanings assigned to the words »crudel« and »constanza«, which are highlighted by an exceedingly melismatic treatment. The duet shows how Handel can compose an elaborate duet on a point of absolute dramaturgical *stasis*, as the duet does not advance the action or in any way contribute to the resolution of the tension between the characters.

Since Handel took Bononcini's eponymous opera as a starting point when he composed *Serse* (1738), it is significant that the duet »Troppo oltraggi la mia fede« is his original contribution, without an equivalent in Bononcini. It is also the most overtly comical of Handel's duets, and it owes its humour only partially to the absurdity of Arsamene's jealousy over Romilda in a potentially perilous dramatic situation. Its dramaturgic essence is the rapid exchange between the parts (characters), already present in the duets from *Il duello amoroso*, *Clori, Tirsi e Fileno*, *Rinaldo*, *Teseo* and *Amadigi*, but elevated here to the status of the main structural principle of the duet. Apart from the brevity of the singular exchanges, the mimetic impact owes much to the irregular and, therefore, more homogenous tripartite form of the duet. It is also another example of a heightened sense of dialogue in spite of monotextuality and of a consistent application of *concertante* techniques, as the thematic material — although only seemingly improvisational — is wholly derived from the initial *ritornello*.

The seventh section of the chapter deals with the first of Handel's two most original duets of conflict, »Se mai turbo il tuo riposo / Se mai più sarò geloso« from the opera *Poro* (1731). Its specificity owes to the fact that Poro and Cleofide sarcastically quote the arias in which they had pledged their fidelity to each other earlier in the act. The libretto is by Metastasio, which opens up a vast field of comparative research carried out by G. Cummings. The thesis adopts his conclusion that Handel's setting is more complex than Vinci's and Hasse's on both the compositional and the dramaturgical plain — as it contrasts the characters to the maximum — and analyses the duet with the same methodology, combining structural and dramaturgical criteria. In spite of its specificity, the duet is similar to the ones examined in the previous sections of the chapter in that it repeats the cycle of the gradual intertwining of parts several times, and in that it presents some complex derivations of the thematic material, attaining a high degree of inner coherence in spite of its intertextuality.

Despite the fact that instead of expressing it, it attempts to stifle the conflict between Atalanta and Meleagro (a pair of lovers who, by adopting pastoral disguises, experience a major identity crisis), the duet »Amarilli? / Oh, dei! Che vuoi?« from the opera *Atalanta* (1736) is one of Handel's most dramatic duets of conflict. After examining the mythological background of Atalanta and Meleager, their operatic treatment and the dramaturgical context of the duet, the final, eighth section of the chapter extensively analyses Handel's treatment of tension and

ambivalence. Atalanta's characterisation is especially complex: her conflict is not only between two loves (for Meleagro and his *alter ego*, the shepherd Tirsi), but between her own two identities, too (the princess Atalanta and the nymph Amarilli). The duet follows in the footsteps of previously analysed duets by repeating the cycle of the gradual intertwining of parts several times, but differs from some of them by its setting for two soprano voices, which produces a very narrow texture marked by voice-crossing. Of importance are also the gestural thematic material that, besides producing a mimetic effect, serves as demarcation points for the duet's subsections, and the accompanimental figure in the strings that periodically penetrates the vocal texture, generating additional rhythmic and harmonic tension. All of this seems to suggest that despite Amarilli's emotional repression, the *destini* (fates) of the protagonists mentioned in the text is very much interlinked.

The final chapter («Conclusion») attempts to show the interdependence of certain specific compositional procedures and the expression of conflict, as well as to outline the development of this dependence in the analysed duets. The duets apply the three following compositional techniques, most often in the following order: successive exposition of thematic material (often producing a mimetic effect of a verbal argument), simultaneous contrapuntal combining of parts (imitation, sequential movement), and blending or parallel motion. These techniques are used in different ratios, but always to suggest a progression of a gradual intertwining of parts (or interaction of characters), and in the lengthier and more complex, also usually the more mature duets, this cycle is repeated several times. The duets are very convincing in suggesting the difficulties that the conflicted characters have in communicating with each other. In the ones composed from 1708 onwards, one can notice a tendency towards a broader scope and a use of *concertante* techniques.

Finally, a periodization of Handel's duets of direct and balanced conflict is suggested according to the outlined tendencies, as there seems to be a development from his early simple and unambiguous duets to a growing degree of complexity and ambivalence in the expression of conflict in the later ones. In the duets written in 1705-1709, mostly in cantatas, Handel had created a specific type of a duet of amorous conflict, only to develop it on a somewhat larger scale in his first London operas (*Rinaldo*, *Teseo*, *Amadigi*) in 1711-1715. After a period of unproductiveness, Handel returned to the duet of direct and balanced conflict in 1731, developing it in the direction of growing structural and dramaturgical complexity in the operas *Poro* and *Atalanta*.