Giulio Cesare in Egitto

Premiere: King’s Theatre, London, 1724

Handel’s most popular opera—both in his own lifetime and today—depicts the momentous meeting of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt. This grand and ancient subject might suggest a vast, Cecil B. DeMille-style epic, but Handel’s operatic masterpiece takes the opposite approach. The opera explores the inner lives of larger-than-life characters with insight and elegance in a score full of arresting subtleties, dreamy trance-like melodies, and vocal heroics. Handel worked within (and helped define) the conventions of opera seria, a structurally formal and decorous genre built primarily around a series of solo arias. He wrote the role of Cesare for the singer Senesino, one of the most celebrated of the castrati—men whose unique, high vocal range was the result of surgery performed before puberty combined with the projection power of an adult male. But Handel’s operas—and Giulio Cesare in particular—are much more than stylized opportunities for showing off vocal pyrotechnics. The composer managed to transform the opera seria format from a constraining dramatic framework into a compelling means to examine thoughts and feelings through magnificent music.

The Creators

George Frideric Handel (1685–1759) was born in Germany, trained extensively in the music capitals of Italy, and spent most of his brilliant career in London. While his great choral and orchestral works—most notably Messiah and the Music for the Royal Fireworks—have remained extraordinarily popular up to the present day, his theatrical creations, which were instrumental in introducing Italian opera to the British public, disappeared from the world’s stages for almost two centuries. The modern Handel revival began in the 1920s in Germany. During the later decades of the 20th century, a widespread reassessment of his operas brought these works to the attention of contemporary audiences. The libretto for Giulio Cesare—adapted from earlier texts that had served as the basis of successful operas in Italy—was created by Nicola Francesco Haym (1678–1729), a writer, theater manager, cellist, and composer in his own right. He wrote the librettos for several of Handel’s greatest operas, including Tamerlano (1724) and Rodelinda (1725).

The Setting

The story of the opera is loosely based on the encounter of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra in 48 BC in cosmopolitan Alexandria, then the capital of Egypt. This
defining historical moment has captured the artistic imaginations of everyone from Shakespeare to Hollywood filmmakers, and the legend of a leader who was superhuman in intelligence and skill has persisted through the ages. Cleopatra is another figure who straddles the worlds of history and legend: smart, beautiful, and ultimately doomed. The opera focuses on the first meeting of these towering figures, just after Caesar had defeated his rival Pompey the Great at the battle of Pharsalus to establish himself as the sole ruler of the Roman world. At this time, Cleopatra was co-ruler of Egypt with her brother, the pharaoh Ptolemy XIII (Tolomeo in the opera). With a nod to the British Colonial period, the new Met production transfers the action to a more modern environment, without placing it in a specific time setting.

**The Music**
The orchestra in *Giulio Cesare* is smaller than those of later Baroque operas, and the musical and dramatic messages are conveyed with more economy than later composers used—but with no loss of richness or emotion. The remarkable solo horn accompaniment in Caesar's marvelous Act I aria “Va, tacito,” for example, recalls the sound of a hunter's horns as he moves in on his prey while simultaneously suggesting the maneuvers of the characters impressive intellect. Cleopatra is as seductive as she is intelligent: the onstage band (strings, winds, a harp, and a theorbo, or large lute) softly accompanies her ravishing Act II aria “V’adoro, pupille,” creating a radiant aura around her vocal line to help convince us of her irresistible charms. However fascinating the orchestral details may be, though, the drama and beauty of Handel's score are conveyed chiefly by the singers. Dialogue and action are generally confined to the recitatives. The solo arias that make up the majority of the score, then, are commentaries on the action, deliberately stopping dramatic time in order to explore a given moment, idea, or feeling in great depth and from every possible artistic and emotional angle.

**Giulio Cesare at the Met**
The opera had its Met premiere in 1988 in a production by John Copley. The cast included Tatiana Troyanos in the title role, Kathleen Battle as Cleopatra, and Sarah Walker as Cornelia, with Trevor Pinnock conducting. Jeffrey Gall, as Tolomeo, and Derek Lee Ragin as Nireno, were the Met’s first countertenors. A 1999 revival featured Jennifer Larmore as Cesare and the impressive pairing of mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe and countertenor David Daniels (in his Met debut) as Cornelia and Sesto. This staging was last seen during the 2006–07 season with Daniels and Lawrence Zazzo sharing the role of Cesare, marking the first time a man sang the title role at the Met. David McVicar’s new production opened on April 4, 2013, with Harry Bicket conducting Daniels opposite Natalie Dessay as Cleopatra.