

Sony Classical announces the rediscovery of *Germanico*, presumed to be an unpublished opera by Handel

Handel – True or False?

by Carlo Vitali

"Germanico del sig. Hendl". Since 1929 the printed catalogue of the Conservatorio Cherubini in Florence (section "Opere teatrali", p. 143) has contained a Handel title not mentioned in any other sources. In autumn 2009 a photocopy of the manuscript was circulated in London, where a Bond Street jeweller helped to contact top experts in the field with the aim of soliciting an authentication. On behalf of whom? The mystery has been partially solved with an official notice that appeared on 18 May on the website of Sony Classical, convening a press conference on 6 June at La Scala Shop in Milan.

Meanwhile, a taste has been offered to the media through a password-protected portal that presents 12 audio-streamed excerpts, the libretto, and a booklet note by the discoverer Ottaviano Tenerani, whose ensemble "Il Rossignolo" and a vocal cast featuring top-notch specialists (Mingardo, Fagioli, Foresti) have already recorded a CD. Tenerani simultaneously announces his in-house edition of the score.

A secret operation and a skilful marketing ploy, nevertheless it does not convince everyone. Maestro Tenerani says of it: "We are dealing with a serenata for six voices, written certainly for a private occasion involving the House of Habsburg or one of its supporters. The work is on a large scale (45 numbers including sinfonia, arias and recitatives), complete in one act. The watermarks allow us to assert that its provenance is Venetian, between 1706 and 1709. It is possibly the first dramatic work Handel composed in Italy".

The chronology of Handel's Italian trip remains disputed, but its extent is assumed to be between 1706 and February 1710. The original sung text, on the other hand, unequivocally identifies the personality who is being celebrated: the Habsburg archduke Joseph, King of the Romans and future Emperor Joseph I, who is described as a handsome young prince with blue eyes and blond hair; these were from his mother, Eleonore Magdalene of Pfalz-Neuburg, whilst his brother and successor Charles VI was brown-haired and rather ugly like their father Leopold. The anonymous poet eruditely overlaps the vicissitudes of the War of the Spanish Succession and the narrative of Tacitus (*Annals*, II/14, 26 and 41) about the triumphant return of Germanicus to Rome in 16 AD after the Rhine campaign, which suggests a dating of either 1702 or 1704 – the victorious returns of Joseph from the two sieges of the fortress of Landau in the Palatinate. In May 1705 he

became emperor, after which time the allegorical representation of Germanico's submission to his father ("Cesare", i.e. Tiberius) would have seemed out of place.

Therefore *Germanico* is no opera but a celebratory court serenata, consistent in subject, form and style with other musical scores preserved in the Austrian National Library in Vienna: "Cetre amiche, a un cor che langue" by an anonymous composer (1702), *Il ritorno di Giulio Cesare vincitore della Mauritania* by Giovanni Bononcini (1704), and Attilio Ariosti's *I gloriosi presagi di Scipione Africano* (1704). Listening to the excerpts from the recording suggests a tentative attribution to either of the above composers, whilst the librettist might be the Neapolitan Donato Cupeda, the *poeta cesareo* (imperial poet) until 1705, or his vice Pietro Andrea Bernardoni. And what about the attribution on the opening page? Even the tiny facsimile provided by Sony raises doubts. Is it possible that a manuscript so formally written by such a careful copyist should lack a normal title-page? The hand that inscribed the attribution to "Hendl" is apparently not the same that has written "Andante" three times over the first bar of the sinfonia. Was the attribution a later guess or an attempt to allure a collector?

We must await further scholarly investigation to answer these and sundry questions. Meanwhile the music remains with us: full of educatedly languid melodies, intriguing ensembles and all the rich instrumentation that the Viennese *Hofkapelle* could afford. It doesn't sound like Handel but it is definitely worth hearing.

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Translation by David Vickers and Terence Best, courtesy of Classic Voice magazine, Milan
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