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Handel's Operas

Gentil Pastorella: Dorinda as Heroic Pastoral Custodian in Handel's Orlando

Wiley Feinstein writes of Dorinda in his 1987 article "Dorinda as Ariostean Narrator in Handel's Orlando": "And so in her first appearance in the drama, Dorinda shows her two faces of idealized poet-shepherdess and realistic country-bumpkin girl in love." Wiley Feinstein's confusion over Dorinda's role in the opera points to a fundamentally modern cultural ambiguity towards feminine feeling and subjectivity, and overlooks any attempt to understand the history of the pastoral heroine in eighteenth-century England dramaturgy. His essay situates her character as two-faced, without seeking any evidence of a polarized or binary characterization in Handel's writing, claiming any revelation of her thwarted sexual desire and sensuous feeling self to be evidentiary of the rustic or the comic. This understanding of Dorinda—"very much two characters in one" (564)—fundamentally misunderstands the function of the pastoral heroine, overlooking a relatively unexplored yet historically justifiable and characteristic interpretation of her archetypal rhetorical and amorous journey with two problematically modern, static, and apparently polarized Freudian female roles of the idealized woman and the eroticized "realistic" simple girl in love. This essay explores the possibility that Handel was at least sensitive to Dorinda's potential representation of a feminine archetype that was active, available, and recognizable in the English cultural lexicon for at least a century prior to Handel's construction of Dorinda: the quest of the pastoral virgin heroine—custodian of the *locus amoenus*, skilled rhetorician, and the

nexus of sensual feminine feeling and penetrability. Her quest is a characteristically circular journey, beginning from protection of her virginal realm and traveling into her experiences of her own sexual desire before closing the loop to return to the virtues of chastity and reconstitute the *locus* through her virtuosic naturalistic rhetoric. My understanding of the pastoral virgin heroine is primarily drawn from Sue Starke's conception of the role, beautifully illustrated in her 2007 text "The Heroines of English Pastoral Romance", many parts of which could easily have been written specifically on Handel's *Dorinda*; my arguments will resonate with quotes from that text. Starke's generic framework is that of the "pastoral romance", a dramatic mode whose conventions emerged from the English Renaissance from its roots in the Italian romance, associated particularly with femininity and womanhood as it explored the feminine heroic journey: "...a border region between genres. It combines the features of the epic with the contrasting elements of pastoral. It mediates between the separate worlds of *otium* and *negotium*, nature and culture, solitude and society." (3). I draw evidence from each stage of *Dorinda*'s circular journey throughout *Orlando*, tracing her path from her opening to the close in which she reconstitutes her *locus amoenus* through Handel's final solo line.

Starke writes: The idealized fictional pastoral community (often a metaphor for the courtly circle) is frequently presided over by gentle shepherdesses... (2) She embodies the contradictions of an emerging ideology of gender relations... the romance foundling; her loop-shaped quest through the locus amoenus; the rhetorical challenge; the threat to chastity; the reconciliation of beauty to virtue via Neoplatonic ideas; the alienation/reunification of the foundling... (5-6)

As the drama of *Orlando* opens, *Dorinda* is a young pastoral heroine already a few steps along her quest. The caretaker of the conventionally idyllic pastoral realm in the opera, her chastity has

been tempted by her awakened desire for Medoro. This erotic self-discovery is the crucial first step in her characteristic quest; she has differentiated her self from her environment, individuated her sensual womanhood from her intimate connection with her natural world. Through the course of the opera, she must explore and rediscover these boundaries: she must resolve this newfound distance from her *locus amoenus* primarily through the characteristic tool of the pastoral romance heroine, a virtuosic command of rhetoric. An application of this characterization leads to deeper insight into Handel's sensitive writing for her throughout the opera: her continual struggle to resolve her sense of her custodial connection with her natural world as a shepherdess with her experience of herself as an erotic feeling being, the vivacity with which her entrances energize both the orchestral and vocal parts for striking rhetorical virtuosity in both orchestral and vocal parts, the teasingly enigmatic final solo statement he writes for her to close the circle of pastoral domesticity.

The young woman cannot leave the pastoral realm without damaging her own pastoral virginity. On the other hand, she cannot mature without testing her skill beyond the pastoral poetic conventions which structure her inscription. She therefore performs a delicate balancing act between perfecting her linguistic skill and throwing herself out of Eden outside of which there is no place, no locus. (15)

Dorinda's first arioso, "*Quanto diletto*"—the first female voice to be heard in the opera—opens in a grove with a clearly pastoral scoring, indistinguishable from an aria setting with its rippling call-and-response opening ritornello in compound quadruple time, its airy A major brightened further by simple chord progressions and arpeggios in the upper strings that suggest frequent open A- and E-strings. Textually, she is already permuting the Petrarchan form, giving herself an extra line to express her own subjectivity and therefore formally blurring the boundaries between the exultantly naturalistic pastoral mode and her sense of self. Handel's writing clearly reflects

this softening of the Petrarchan formalism almost immediately, unwinding the pastoral aria style as the running triplets gradually devolve into paired sighing duplets as the arioso progresses from compound time to simple time to *recitativo secco*. This first feminine aria constructs femininity as innately natural, connected to nature, *feeling*. Dorinda's metaphors for love are tactile and embodied: pleasure and pain, fire and ice, a "rapturous self-identification with nature" as Starke might say (12). At the premature *volta* ("Oh giorni") in which Dorinda expresses her insecurity at the dissonance that has formed between the natural happiness of her environment and her own internal upheaval, her formal virtuosity unfolds further: the key regions become flexible, their implied resolutions difficult to determine relative to the harmonically simple opening. Handel drops into her accompaniment into a sostenuto bass line, reinscribing the time signature in his autograph manuscript to indicate a full double bar before the *recitativo secco* that accompanies her expression of her innocent confusion about the meaning of her moving heart. She finally falls into the further flattened key of G minor as she realizes that those movements could signify love.

The presence of nature underscores her alienation from it as her Edenic innocence gives way to an awareness of the social implications of her sexuality.... Natural imagery belies her status as mediator between nature and culture in the locus amoenus; she is an agent of civil development and temporal progress... Because her sex limits her scope of action, she turns to language to make a difference. (10)

Dorinda's *recit* is interrupted by a glimpse of Orlando conducting the unnamed princess through the woods. In a seeming further reference to Classical style, Orlando's biggest military victory is framed as a mere side note, offstage on a scene that is still clearly Dorinda's. She reclaims the *recitativo* in its final lines and takes on the role of summarizing and moralizing the entire scene, musing that even the hero Orlando is affected by love. This ironically prescient conclusion—drawn from confused premises—spurs her on to her aria. The *da capo* aria, marked *andante*, is a

structurally conventional illustration of Dorinda's confused inner turmoil at this unfamiliar movement of her passions. Prepared by her concluding *recit* in A minor, the D-minor A section starts with a homophonic opening ritornello. Unison *tutti* melodic parts outline ever-widening intervals over a harmonically and rhythmically simple *continuo* line; Dorinda will reiterate these dramatic intervallic leaps almost literally at her entrance. This not only anticipates the intervallic drama of Dorinda's later arias but also speaks to the virtuosity of Celestine Reese/Gismondi (*la Celestina*). Though the chord progressions are stable and nothing unusual, her leaping line wanders and seeks to express her confusion. Her part weaves smoothly in and out of the violins; they punctuate, illustrate, and part as she completes their sentences. The wandering sixteenth note violin lines express her ellipsis, taking over and wandering away at the lines "*S'è al fine——Nol sò*". Dorinda travels further inward with the short but emotionally complex B section; alone and increasingly melismatic with a harmonically wandering bass line, she cannot determine whether she is experiencing pleasure or sadness, and notes that her soul conceals these feelings even from herself.

Dorinda next appears in dialogue with Medoro, in Act 1, Scene 6. She sees Angelica with him and correctly surmises that they are romantically involved. Critical to her point in this characterization, both she and Medoro address her heart as separate from her self. Her erotic, amorous self is referred in synecdoche as "*il Core*"—capitalized in the 1732 libretto—forming a critical, nameable distance. Her charming aria, *O care parollette*, ripples along in her characteristic 12/8 time, again with unison violins and oboes over a conventional bass line. Again she is in dialogue with the upper parts, her melody in close imitation and call-and-response. Rhetorically, she re-

flects the deep cognitive dissonance of her current unresolved condition. She recognizes the falsehood of Medoro's words and yet is soothed by them; she welcomes the deception of his "parollette". Her phrases dwindle away, evaporating into the high registers and the weakest beats as she accepts and enjoys Medoro's patently false promises in gentle romantic self-delusion.

She closes Act 1 in the fascinating trio aria, in which she is given not only the jewel that will incite the entire emotional drama of the following acts and drive Orlando into madness, but also the final line of the entire act as she finds herself bereft, lovelorn, and inconsolable.

The insularity and self-referentiality of the pastoral world serve to point up the drama of the internal transformation taking place in the feminine soul. Whatever her situation, the pastoral girl finds herself within a morally charged landscape that is responsive, for better or worse, to her animating influence. (8)

The air has barely cleared from Dorinda's pathos-laden final line in Act I as the curtain rises on Act II, forgoing a *sinfonia* to directly open upon Dorinda alone in a wood. This opening scene is perhaps the most musically pastoral of all Dorinda's arias, comprising the most representational collection of the pastoral elements: the opening ritornello is in a lilting 12/8, a sweet A major over an A pedal in the bassi, with the violins imitating the song of the nightingale in true Baroque ornithological literalism. These elements constitute a clear, almost campily heavy-handed evocation of the pastoral, recalling quite precisely the aesthetic of Vivaldi's nightingale in *La Primavera* and strengthening the Italianate effeminacy of Handel's writing for Dorinda with the "bucolic Italian strain" that Starke identifies (11). This deliberately constructed operatic Italianness and feminine naturalism—in *Orlando*, most clearly seen in Handel's Dorinda—points to Handel's greater goal of self-construction, evidencing a compositional response to his expatriate identity

as a German composer staging “Italian” opera in London. Michael P. Steinberg notes the deliberate, adopted femininity of Italianness of opera in Handel’s era: “The archive—acoustic and affective—of operatic heroic femininity is Italian. The association of the fiction of pure voice with Italy and femininity is a cultural artifact, not a natural fact. The operatic, Italian Handel is the rule here, not the exception. Thus, if the *New Groves Dictionary* describes Handel as an English composer of German birth, he is just as much an Italian composer... The mythic association of the voice of nature with the female voice (Odysseus’ sirens, or the nymph Echo, for example) belongs to the association, long dismantled by feminist theory, of femininity with nature and masculinity with culture.” (195-6) Emotionally, this through-composed arioso seems neither forward-moving nor developmental; rather, this is the lingering and languishing she planned for herself in the final lines of the Act I trio. However, even in emotional stasis she is the perfect representation of the pastoral heroine: Dorinda’s rhetorical challenge in this aria is to reconcile her amorous inner self with her complete penetrability to the natural environment, resolving the undefined space between the intensity of her emotions and the song of the nightingale. Here she discovers that her natural world simultaneously reflects and is distanced from her self. Handel’s manuscript reflects a fascinating alteration in her final line: where he originally wrote three uninterrupted iterations of “*parche canti e piangi allor*” in the last stanza, he scratched out the final iteration and instead wrote “*e accompagni il mio dolor*”. Handel’s reinforcing text edit—done twice in both statements of the final couplet—functions not only to strengthen the emotional rhetoric between Dorinda and her singing nightingale, but also to operatically interweave these characters with the singer and the *accompagnando* strings that are indeed singing as the nightingale.

*The pastoral matrix [is] an environment that is simultaneously beneficial and restrictive. **Desire, either her own or others', forces action.** Love remains the primary transformative experience for the romance virgin, not the epic feats which enable the young male pastoralist to transcend his initial attempts. (8)*

Dorinda's stasis is interrupted by Orlando's entrance. This long dialogue is the clearest example of the agency of her desire in action: she shows him the jewel that has already accrued so many representational meanings throughout the course of Act I, agitating him into the jealousy that will drive the plot through the rest of the opera. Handel's manuscript reflects many changes in this recit, including such dramatic Then, as she thinks again of Medoro, she sees him everywhere, projecting her image of him everywhere she looks. The stunning aria that follows expands upon this projection, tracing the ways in which Medoro appears to Dorinda in all the elements of her pastoral realm: she sees him in every flower, in the groves and streams, his image overwritten in the entirety of her green world. Attended to by Orlando, this formally conventional *da capo* aria functions as an elaboration of the pastoral reflexivity that she explored so languishingly in the previous aria. The upper parts open the A section with a sighing C-minor motive, and here where Dorinda sings the bass line is largely silent, adding imitative cadential commentaries to punctuate or reinforce her phrases. The B section starts to flow along in E-flat major as she hears Medoro in the murmuring of the water and plants; the strings and oboes are marked *pianissimo* in all parts in Handel's hand, as Dorinda's world whispers Medoro around her. A *da capo* encourages ornamentation in the repeated A section, especially with the mild metrical instability written into Dorinda's line: in both A1 and A2 entrances, she anticipates and then elides the downbeat, her "*Se—mi rivolgo al prato...*" breathlessly conditional and exposed.

The young woman in pastoral is often conceived as the custodian of the Edenic green world... Her role [is] the maintenance and recreation of that green world as it increasingly is envisioned as a "domestic heaven"... The gentlewoman is often responsible for maintaining the conditions of her own privileged seclusion. (6-7)

Dorinda does not appear again in the chaos that ensues in Act II, but appears in the opening recitativo of Act III. After the intense emotional rhetoric of Act II, she meets Medoro again as he returns to seek her protection once more at the instruction of Angelica. Her speech significantly dominates the recit, as she resolves to open her home to Medoro despite the lack of resolution in her heart. The recit and ritornello aurally prepares for an aria from Dorinda: she cadences at the end of the recit and the opening ritornello is in a flowingly melodic 12/8. Perhaps Medoro is at least attempting to speak her pastoral language in this *da capo* aria, as he appeals to Dorinda's heart and pleads his unavailability. The following scene opens with a brief but impactful solo recit from Dorinda, showing her to be convinced of Medoro's honesty, dedicated to thinking well of him, and still deeply in love despite her acceptance of his unavailability. In just a few cursory lines, Handel's framing shows that while the scene's aria belonged to Medoro, the scene is clearly Dorinda's.

The pastoral environment is a static, satisfied one. It does not encourage linear quest. What occurs instead of journey outside to the strange world is a journey inside the self. Newcomers to the pastoral retreat find themselves transformed, often in ways they are not willing to be... the romance retreat fractures the integrity [of the hero's identity], in ways social and sexual. (7-8)

The scene that follows is the incredible polymetrical dialogue between the mad Orlando and Dorinda, a fragmented attempt at a *da capo* aria in which Orlando attempts to worship Dorinda as Venus. Though much is made of the 5/8 in the depth of Orlando's Stygian pipe-dream, this recit is no less fascinating with its embedded fragments of a *da capo* aria and its treatment of Orlando and Dorinda as two utterly distinct levels, elided metric and temporal shifts marking these synchronous but never intersecting parallel lines. Completely discomfited by Orlando's madness, Dorinda is removed from the pastoral mode for the first time. These scenes are comprised almost entirely of *recitativo secco* though Orlando continually hints toward larger formal structures with his rhyming couplets in *Unisca amor...* which Dorinda continually interrupts, attempting to follow the course of his madness and parse his real intentions. This recit is the most fragmented she will ever be in the course of the opera and clearly points toward the meter, rhythm, and affect of her glorious aria to come, *Amor è qual vento*. This scene's incredible interest lies in the rhetorical closeness. Though this encounter is the point of greatest confusion—musically and rhetorically—in Dorinda's quest, there may be some method to Orlando's madness. His confusion of her for a figure of worship, a Venus descended from gods, may in fact shed some light on the heroic pastoral in early 18th-century England. In her chapter in *Femininity and Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century Art and Culture* on another famed London expatriate, "Anatomy is Destiny: Angelica Kauffmann", Wendy Wassyn Bosworth notes the connection between the figure of the shepherdess and the familiar erotic Callipygian Venus in sculpture, portraiture and etchings in England at the time: "The Callipygian Venus was also identified as a mortal woman, the Greek Shepherdess or 'Belle Victorieuse', from a bawdy Classical tale known through Renaissance sources... Whether goddess or mortal woman, the uninhibited eroticism of the Venus/shep-

herdess figure was unmistakable and its implications widely acknowledged.” (57) This connection indicates that to eighteenth-century eyes, Orlando’s misidentification of Dorinda—and her seeming readiness to at least envision, if not fully accept herself in this role—could have been understood as a near miss, an extrapolation taken one order of abstraction too far. This connection, explored much more deeply in Bosworth’s fine article, provides a reading of Dorinda’s confusion in this scene that is perhaps more charitable than Wiley Feinstein’s interpretation that her confusion is intentionally comic, a laughable farce that a shepherdess could even potentially consider herself a figure of erotic desire.

The pastoral definition of love as an artistic career allows the romance virgin to be a poet figure, a vital link between “rudenesse” and civility. (10)

Dorinda’s crowning aria is the simultaneously wise and ecstatic *Amor è qual vento*. This is her critical moment, her farthest point of departure both in musical complexity and on the course of her rhetorical journey to find herself, regain her sense of morality, and return to reconstitute her role at home. She is at her most heroic in this aria, skillfully wielding the masculine tool of rhetoric to express her reclamation of the virginal virtues of the pastoral romance heroine and triumphant in a stable 4/4 allegro and *da capo* form, cadencing conventionally in G major in the A section and in B minor in the B section. She is decidedly more powerful than pastoral in this aria, though she does retain her characteristic call-and-response with unison upper strings, pedals in the bassi, snappy dotted rhythms, and quadruple time. Her long melismas and uplifting gestures in both A and B sections encourage joyous virtuosity and ornamentations, especially in the return to the substantial A section. The orchestral writing invites enthusiasm, as Handel’s string parts idiomatically incorporate open strings, timbral brightness through string crossings, and en-

ergetic implied bowings. Dorinda's arias—and this one in particular—seem to bring the orchestra to life, especially compared to its framing arias from Angelica, whose orchestral parts are often more stately and accompanimental, and Zoroastro, equally powerful but decidedly square.

Rhetorically, Dorinda is at her most eloquent. In her delicate and beautiful *recitativo secco*, she constitutes her new understanding of love as a stormy sea, or still worse the river Cocytus—the river of lamentation. The aria is full of love's paradoxes and antitheses: its seemingly benign appearances and ultimate pain, its brief pleasures and enduring woes, its promise to unite two hearts and its division between them through anger and spite. The 1732 English libretto translates her verses elegantly as rhymed couplets, but the original Italian rhyme scheme is two stanzas of /ababccd/, or two sestets with an embedded couplet at the end of each. The /ababcc/ scheme is known as the heroic sestet, or sometimes as the Venus and Adonis sestet after Shakespeare's poem that shares this scheme. This analysis formally links Dorinda with both Classical poetic heroism and the English conception of female eroticism and desire that is so beautifully explored in Shakespeare's poem. This also could serve to further the English connection between the eroticism of Venus and the pastoralism of the shepherdess noted by Bosworth.

After her triumphant solo *scena* and the realization of the crucial step in her quest, there is one final stage in Dorinda's journey: the return to her home and reconstitution of the green world. Though she provides helpful commentary throughout several of the following recits, as in Act II she remains rather distant from the "main" action onstage. Rather, she fulfills her quest in her now-familiar role of framing the opening and closing of each act: Handel dedicates the final solo

voice of the entire opera to her ultimate heroic resolution. Singing with her characteristic unison upper strings, she leaves behind every pain to return to her hut and her role as pastoral custodian, inviting everyone to return with her and celebrate. The circularity of the journey is now clear: having flummoxed up the relations between Medoro and Angelica, Medoro and herself, and Orlando and Angelica—or at least having revealed their underlying deceptions—she returns to the home where the story began, again the wise and gracious host of the green world.

Dorinda's journey is unfailingly characteristic of the English pastoral heroine's question: a first experience of an occlusion in the clarity of her deep pastoral connection with nature through a challenge to understand herself as a sexual being, and her cyclic return to her home upon resolution of that challenge through virtuosic rhetorical explication. This archetypical interpretation of her character allows for a sensitive and informed analysis of her so-called "privileged" role in Handel's construction of *Orlando*, and introduces several new analytical approaches to the opera. Further questions opened by this interpretation include the significance of this pastoral romance heroine in Handel's other operas, the relevance of the role within the interplay of Torquato Tasso's three genres of epic, romance, and pastoral in both *Orlando* and more particularly Handel's operas based in Tasso's texts, and the potential connection between the femininity of Handel's pastoral romance heroine and his performative construction of madrigalistic Italianness in his English operas.

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