

AGRIPPINA

Music by George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)
Libretto attributed to Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani (c1655–1710)
First performed in Venice, December 26, 1709

CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

Agrippina	a royal Roman, married to Emperor Claudius
Nerone (Nero)	Agrippina's son from a previous marriage
Pallante (Pallas)	freedman of the imperial household
Narciso (Narcissus)	freedman of the imperial household
Lesbo (Lesbus)	Claudius's servant
Ottone (Otho)	a noble officer in the imperial army
Poppea (Poppæa)	a beautiful and ambitious young woman
Claudio (Claudius)	Emperor of Rome

SYNOPSIS

Handel's *Agrippina* opens with the first of many lies: Agrippina reports to her son Nerone that Emperor Claudio has drowned at sea. She wastes no time taking advantage of this bit of "fake news," flirting shamelessly with Pallante and Narciso individually, inducing them each to back her son's bid for the throne. A quick coronation is arranged, and Nerone magnanimously tosses coins to the needy before being proclaimed emperor by his mother and her henchmen. His reign proves short-lived: Claudio's servant Lesbo interrupts this scene with the news that Claudio is alive, thanks to Ottone, and that the real Emperor is on his way home. A grateful Claudio has decreed that Ottone will be his successor, but foolishly, Ottone reveals to Agrippina that he would rather marry Poppea than take the throne. Agrippina considers a new course of action.

The object of desire for at least three powerful men (Ottone, Claudio and Nerone), beautiful Poppea is only just learning the ways of deception. Agrippina visits her bedroom, telling her that Ottone has betrayed her love for the throne. She must use Claudio's affections against him: when love-struck Claudio appears in her bedroom, she makes him promise to punish Ottone in exchange for her favors. Agrippina and Poppea congratulate each other and plot their next move. As the coronation begins, Pallante and Narciso have begun to suspect they've been had. Entering with great bluster, Claudio winks at Poppea while accusing Ottone of treason. Suitably outraged, everyone turns against Ottone, who is left quite alone to lament his cruel fate.

Wandering in the garden, Poppea wishes she could believe Ottone innocent, when she sees him approach. They are quickly reconciled but realize that they must continue the game to expose Agrippina. Poppea therefore accepts Lesbo's request for a visit to her bedroom from Claudio and, for good measure, also agrees to entertain Nerone. Agrippina, by contrast, has grown

nervous about her tenuous house of cards; she approaches Claudio with all guns blazing. Securing his promise to name Nerone as successor, she rejoices as her husband goes to Poppea.

The next few moments in Poppea's bedroom are a dizzying series of events: Poppea welcomes and then hides in turn both Ottone and Nerone. When Claudio arrives, she exposes Nerone, whose promised throne is yanked away for the second time. Left alone at last, Poppea and Ottone celebrate their love.

The final scene pits Agrippina's deceptions against those of her husband. Calling everyone together, Claudio offers a test to see where their true ambitions lie. Learning that Nerone prizes the throne, while Ottone seeks only the love of Poppea, Claudio agrees to let the matter rest. Poppea will marry Ottone, Agrippina will remain with Claudio, and Nerone will one day be crowned.

ABOUT THE OPERA

Among other things, *Agrippina* is a satire of a scheming woman, her arrogant and lazy Emperor spouse, her smarmy son, and a pair of affecting lovebirds, only one of whom seems to have a moral core. For its initial Venetian audience, Handel's opera also may have served as an ironic broadside against Pope Clement XI, whose politics during the War of the Spanish Succession were opposed to those of the Serene Republic and the likely librettist. Like Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, which features many of the same historical characters, *Agrippina* is an "anti-heroic comedy," a work that blends deception, humor, and pathos as it illuminates common human foibles. All its characters save one are drawn from Roman history, as recorded in Tacitus's *Annals* and in Suetonius's *Life of Claudius*, though the sparkling libretto attributed to Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani twists them into a timeless allegory.

Given his long career in the church, Grimani's fondness for intrigue and sympathy for shady characters is hardly surprising. His plumb diplomatic and political positions (including stints as Imperial Ambassador to Rome and as Viceroy of Naples from 1708 until his death in 1710) doubtless gave Grimani even more juicy material for the occasional opera libretto. His *Agrippina*, as set to music by a twenty-four-year-old Saxon *Wunderkind*, premiered on December 26, 1709, in Venice's *Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo*, which the Grimani family owned. A sensation from opening night onwards, it ran for 27 performances during the 1709–10 carnival season and established Handel's international reputation as an opera composer.

John Mainwaring, in an early biography of Handel, described the first performance of *Agrippina* in glowing terms: "The theatre at almost every pause resounded with shouts of *Viva il caro Sassone!* ("Long live the beloved Saxon!") and other expressions of approbation too extravagant to be mentioned. They were thunderstruck with the grandeur and sublimity of his style: for they had never known till then all the powers of harmony and modulation so closely arrayed and so forcibly combined." The cast of this initial production included soprano Margherita Durastanti (one of Handel's regulars) as Agrippina, soprano castrato Valeriano Pellegrini as Nerone, soprano Diamante Maria Scarabelli as Poppea, bass Antonio Francesco Carli as Claudio, and contralto Francesca Vanini-Boschi as Ottone.

Handel probably received the commission for *Agrippina* from Grimani in Rome in 1707 or early 1708, though composition likely happened a month or two before the opening, as was Handel's custom. Subsequent productions of the work took place in Naples (1713), Hamburg (1718) and Vienna (1719), but curiously, Handel never revived *Agrippina* during his decades in London, though he borrowed a few items for other works. Like most of Handel's operas, *Agrippina* fell out of the repertory by the middle of the 18th century. Its modern revival took place in Halle (Handel's birthplace) in 1943, during the Second World War. More recently, productions by New York City Opera, English National Opera, and the Göttingen Handel Festival (among others) have played to enthusiastic audiences around the world.

Handel and his contemporaries typically composed operatic recitatives first, so that the cast could commit this text-heavy material to memory early in the rehearsal process. The arias came later and were just as often borrowed as newly composed, enabling the efficient completion of new theatrical works each season. One of the borrowed bits in *Agrippina*, the title character's "Ho un non so ch  nel cor," was taken directly (without alteration to either text or music) from Handel's 1708 oratorio *La Resurrezione*. Durastanti, who sang this aria as Mary Magdalene in the oratorio, apparently liked it so much that she repeated it verbatim in Venice, this time as *Agrippina*! Handel's Venetian audience couldn't have cared less: in classic *opera buffa* fashion, *Agrippina* invites us not to judge but instead to enjoy.

Less a history lesson than a sendup of ancient Rome, this opera transforms historical archetypes into warm-blooded people with powerful emotions, shifting alliances, and strong survival instincts, thanks to the felicitous marriage of arch libretto to brilliant score. The two female roles, *Agrippina* and *Poppea*, make the strongest impression. The "Argument" to the 1707 libretto makes clear that *Agrippina*—described as "eager to reign and as ambitious as she was powerful"—wants one thing out of her marriage to Claudio: to ensure Nerone's succession to the throne, even at the cost of her own life. At once fearless and wily, *Agrippina* resembles Cleopatra, who fired Handel's imagination some fifteen years later in *Giulio Cesare*. In both cases Handel reserved his most sumptuous music for these domineering women—the antithesis of the vulnerable soprano of later Italian opera. The "strong women" of his English oratorios, by contrast, are all paragons of virtue: *Esther*, *Susanna*, or *Theodora*, for example.

Not to say that Handel took less interest in the male roles, which are just as colorfully drawn. Claudio enters with great pomp, though it's quickly apparent that he'd rather pursue *Poppea* than rule Rome. Ottone, who serves as the lone voice of honesty throughout, sings the most deeply felt aria in the opera, after being cruelly rejected by everyone. (Here the libretto takes considerable liberty with history, for the real Otho was hardly immune to the allure of power. His long quest to become emperor resulted in a chaotic three-month reign, which ended with his suicide after a humiliating defeat.) Though today Nero epitomizes vanity and self-absorption, Handel's Nerone is a gifted if callow youth, one who under different circumstances might have turned out better. Pallante and Narciso, who suffer *Agrippina*'s multiple deceptions, provide comic relief, while Lesbo attends to Claudio with appropriate ceremony and discretion.