

Theodora



Oratorio in three parts
Libretto by Thomas Morell
Premiere: Royal Opera House,
Covent Garden, 16th March 1750

Written by Glyndebourne Education Department
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Preparing for a workshop

This pack contains information about the basic storyline and characters of **Theodora** - it would be useful for your students to know something of this before the workshop. The entire pack will not take long to read.

Breaks and refreshments

There will be a break of approximately 30 minutes during the workshop, and about one hour and 45 minutes between workshop and performance at the theatre.

Please ensure that the students bring drinks, snacks and a packed meal as food and refreshments will not be available.

Parking

Please allow adequate time for parking before a workshop as workshops must start promptly (please make sure you check the start time of your workshop)

Information

Students below year 10 should not attend the workshop.

If you would like further information, please contact Glyndebourne Education on 01273 812321

What will happen in a workshop?

Many of the students who will attend our workshops have never been to see an opera before. The workshop will serve as an introduction to opera itself as well as the specific opera to be seen that evening.

The afternoon will consist of:

Warm up activities

Musical exercises

Dramatic exercises

Listening to singers from the GTO company

Discussing the opera

By the end of the workshop, the students will be ready to see and hear and enjoy the opera with genuine understanding.

Students should wear comfortable clothes suitable for physical activities (if you would like to please bring a change of clothes for the evening performance).

The Characters

President of Antioch (Roman)

Determined to destroy anyone who will not worship the Roman gods.

Bass

Didymus

Young Roman soldier

Secretly a Christian, but afraid to admit this even to his closest friend.

Counter-tenor

Septimius

Roman Officer, friend and former comrade-in-arms of Didymus

Hates the oppression of the Christians, but is afraid to speak out or act against it. A good, spiritual man, he still worships the Roman gods.

Tenor

Theodora

Young noblewoman of Antioch, (Christian)

Has a devout faith in God and is unafraid of death. She prizes her untainted reputation as a virgin.

Soprano

Irene

Leader of the Christians, friend and confidante of Theodora

Helps the Christians find the strength to carry on in a time of great danger and persecution.

Mezzo-soprano

Chorus of Romans

Chorus of Christians

Overview

Handel's oratorio *Theodora* is an exploration of the universal themes of love, devotion and sacrifice and asks the question "How far would you be willing to go for what you believe?"

The brave and unyielding young noblewoman *Theodora* is arrested by the Roman guard in a violent crack down on Christianity. Her captor President Valens tells her that if she will not worship the Roman gods, she will be raped daily by his Royal Guard. Disgusted by this punishment, the Roman Officer Septimius allows his friend and colleague Didymus access to the captive. Didymus, though a Roman soldier, is a Christian and bravely gives *Theodora* his uniform so that she can escape. As a result of this defiant gesture, Didymus will be executed. When *Theodora* hears that her punishment when captured will now be death, she leaves her Christian friends and gives herself up to the Romans. Septimius pleads with his commanding officer to be lenient, but Valens is resolute – nothing will sway him and the martyrs must die. In a heart-wrenching close, the couple are executed, inspiring the watching Roman hoards to reflect "How strange their Ends, And yet how glorious!"

Synopsis

Part One

Scene I

Valens, the Roman President of Antioch, announces that he will brutally punish all those who refuse to worship the Roman gods on the emperor's birthday. Didymus, one of Valens' guards, protests that faith cannot be forced and that a more tolerant approach might win friends to Valens' regime. The President demands a hard-line enforcement of the policy and lists the tortures to be inflicted on those who refuse the new edict. The idea of the agony of the persecuted gives pleasure to the Roman crowds.

Scene II

Didymus is one of those left with the task of enforcing these statues. He protests "Ought we not to leave the free-born Mind of Man still ever free?" His thoughts are voiced in the courageous aria "The captur'd soul defies the sword". His friend, former comrade-in-arms and superior officer, Septimius, against his better judgement, does not dare to defy Roman law and can only hope that others will feel pity in their hearts for those he is about to persecute.

Scenes III and IV

The Christians secretly meet. Theodora, a young woman of noble birth, stands before the assembly and rejects the world of money and privilege. Irene, one of the leaders of the movement, says that virtue can never come from material prosperity, saying that "True happiness is only found where Grace and Truth and Love abound". News arrives of the edict of persecution. Irene keeps the group calm saying that the Lord will protect them as He always does.

Scene V

The Romans break up the Christian meeting. Septimius is sickened by what he sees as the Christians' self-destructive folly in refusing to obey the Roman rites. Theodora defies him. Septimius says that she is to be sentenced to a life of prostitution so that her famous purity can be defiled every day. As she is led away, she asks that angels take her to Heaven rather than suffer this fate.

Scenes VI and VII

Didymus arrives too late but vows to rescue Theodora, declaring that he will save her or die in the attempt. The Christians pray for Didymus, saying that he will either have happiness with Theodora or will have eternal bliss in Heaven.

Part Two

Scene I

The Romans Celebrate the Emperor's birthday with choruses in praise of Flora, the Queen of summer, Venus, the Queen of Love and Jove, who controls the skies. President Valens praises Caesar's glory and offers Theodora one last chance to repent: she can worship the Roman gods or be raped by the Roman guards.

Scene II

Alone in her prison cell, Theodora prays for the night to hide her from view. She dreams of going to Heaven like a silver dove soaring through the air.

Scene III

Didymus finally confesses to Septimius that he is a Christian and loves Theodora. Septimius does not want to know, fearing for his own safety while knowing that the sentence passed on Theodora is unjust even by Roman standards. Didymus convinces Septimius to let him past the guards and into Theodora's cell. Septimius agrees. Didymus tells Septimius that he has done the right thing.

Scene IV

In the middle of the night, Irene prays for Theodora's safety: "Keep her from Vile Assaults secure".

Scene V

Didymus enters Theodora's cell. He wonders at her beauty as she lies entranced in prayer. His presence startles her but he reveals himself to be a friend. Theodora begs him to kill her and save her from Valens' sentence. Didymus refuses, proposing that she should don his Roman uniform and escape, leaving him in the cell. Before she leaves, they sing together of their shared love for each other and for God and their sadness at parting: "I hope again to meet on earth but sure shall meet in Heaven".

Scene VI

At this same moment, Irene Leads the Christians in a chorus telling the story of the New Testament miracle of the Widow of Nain. Jesus sees a funeral procession bearing a young man's dead body. Jesus raises the youth from the dead and the widow, the young man's mother, bows deeply in gratitude and takes her now-living son away.

Part Three

Scene I

All day and night, even through earthquakes and thunder, Irene and her followers' faith will remain unshaken: they "sing and pray".

Scenes II and III

Theodora returns in her disguise. Irene at first mistakes her for Didymus. Theodora now regrets leaving "the too gen'rous youth" to die for the sake of her purity and reputation. The Christians join her in praying for Didymus' safety. A message arrives, saying that Didymus is likely to be sentenced to death by Valens for his part in Theodora's escape. Valens has also decided to revoke the sentence of prostitution on Theodora: she is to die as well. Suddenly joyful since she has no fear of death, Theodora leaves to give herself up to the Romans and save Didymus. Irene gradually understands, "like mists the rising sun", the glory of Theodora's actions.

Scenes IV, V and VI

Didymus speaks with passion in his own defence, accusing Valens of cruelty. Valens condemns him to death. Theodora interrupts to offer her life in return for Didymus' release. Septimius finds the courage to protest publicly, demanding "Let justice for the Hero plead and Pity save the Fair". Valens shows no mercy. Theodora and Didymus are both willing to die for the other. The Roman public is shocked and moved by this: "How strange their ends and yet how glorious! Where Virtue it's own innocence denies and for the Vanquish'd the glad Victor dies". Valens condemns them both since they both plead guilty. As they are executed, Didymus and Theodora sing a rapturous duet of the joys that await them in Heaven: "golden thrones, starry crowns are the triumphs of the blest".

Scene VII

Irene and those left behind pry that equal fire may inflame their souls.

George Frederic Handel

(b. Halle an der Salle, Germany, February 23 1685; d. London, April 14,

He was in his person a large made and very portly man. His gait, which was ever sauntering, was rather ungraceful, as it has in somewhat of that rocking motion, which distinguishes those whose legs are bowed.

Sir John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, 1776

G.F. Handel was the consummate, 18th-century traveller, artiste, and entrepreneur. He was an independent and strong-willed individual, and although he was approached several times by royal patrons to become their court composer, Handel was hesitant to settle down professionally until he was offered a position he felt he deserved.

He suffered bouts of anxiety and depression and possibly strokes. During the later years of his life, he experienced progressively debilitating cataracts – the ensuing operations to restore his vision left him completely blind. However, despite this adversity, he maintained a keen sense of humour and was well known for his charitable disposition.

Born in Halle, Germany, Handel grew up under the watchful eyes of his parents; while his mother nurtured his musical gifts, Handel's father tried to dissuade him from pursuing such a dubious occupation. Following brief, unsuccessful studies at the local university, the young Handel travelled to Hamburg where he joined Hamburg Opera Orchestra and whilst there wrote four operas. In 1706 he left Hamburg and travelled to Italy. In 1707, *Rodrigo*, his first Italian opera, was produced in Florence. A year later, he wrote his first oratorio *La resurrezione*. He left the country a fully equipped dramatic composer and in 1710 took his skills north to London. Here he was met with a warm reception. Italian opera was becoming fashionable and his music had already been heard in a popular show at the Haymarket.

In 1719 he was named Master of the Orchestra by the Royal Academy of Music. In 1728 when the Academy collapsed, Handel took over management of the Second Academy. In 1733 a rival company, The Opera of the Nobility, was founded. For the next four years, the two companies went head to head forcing Handel to diversify: putting on varied seasons of opera, dance and oratorio.

Up until 1738, Handel had written just 5 oratorios but when repeated failures, complicated by a severe illness, compelled the abandonment of his operatic ventures Handel turned back to the composition of oratorio; between 1738-44, he wrote 10. In February 1741 he gave his final opera performance. In 1743 he began his regular Lent oratorio seasons at Covent Garden from. In 1745, Handel met Thomas Morell, who was to provide the text for *Theodora* and his remaining oratorios. *Theodora* was first performed in 1750, one year before his final oratorio, *Jeptha*, was premiered. By age 68, he was completely blind. He died aged 74 and was buried with high honours in Westminster Abbey.

Why the change to oratorio?

Handel's decision to turn his back on opera and focus on oratorio is multi-faceted. In order to better understand, it is important to point out the many similarities that exist between the two forms. Both afforded Handel the opportunity to write dramatic music for strong narratives and both used an orchestra, soloists and a chorus. However, it seems that the ways in which oratorio is different from opera made it more attractive to Handel

Oratorio is traditionally presented as a concert. By not staging the works, Handel was able to write many more choral interludes without worrying too much about their dramatic plausibility. He could also write more ambitious music for the chorus who did not have to memorise their parts but could sing from their scores. The religious and mythical themes of oratorio were of just as much interest to Handel as were the secular themes of opera. Aside from artistic concerns, oratorio was much cheaper to realise than opera. Firstly, there was no set or costume and the singers for oratorio charged more modest fees than the superstar singers of the opera of the 18th Century.

Oratorios greatest selling point for audiences was that they were sung in English. Italian opera had been the reserve of an elite, but the rise of the middle class had created a new audience. Stories taken from the Bible would have been well known by the Protestant middle classes, many of who were keen amateur choral singers.

Theodora

Theodora (and *The Messiah*) are Handel's only Christian oratorio. The librettist, Morell, was a cleric from Cambridge whose source for the text was *The Martyrdom of Theodora and of Didymus* (1687) by the physicist Robert Boyle.

Handel began work at the end of June 1749 and within a month had completed the score. The first performance was at Covent Garden in March 1750 but the run of three nights was very poorly attended. It seems that the spiritual qualities of the piece were far above the heads of an audience who revelled in the warlike din of Handel's other more popular oratorios *Judas Maccabaeus* and *Samson*. However, fellow musicians appreciated the greatness of the work, one said "the generality of the world have ears and hear not".

Handel's own explanation for the low turn out was "The Jews will not come because it is a Christian story and the Ladies will not come because it is a virtuous one." But he saw the benefits that the acoustics of an empty auditorium could offer, saying "Never mind; the music will sound the better".

The work had only one more revival in Handel's lifetime. It seems that this public failure did not diminish the work in Handel's eyes. According to Morell,

When I once asked [Handel], whether he did not look on the Grand Chorus in the *Messiah* as his Master Piece? 'No' says he 'I think the chorus at the end of the second part in *Theodora* far beyond it'".

Opera Glossary

aria A song for solo voice reflecting how the character feels (usually miserable) about what has just or is about to happen.

auditorium Space within the theatre occupied by the audience.

baritone Middle-range man's voice, lurking somewhere between bass and tenor.

bass Lowest male voice. Often plays characters with dubious moral fibre.

chorus A body of singers who (mostly) sing and act as a group to make the crowd scenes a bit more plausible. Also the term used for any musical number sung by this group.

conductor Hand-waving-head-honcho, positioned to obscure the view of the lady sitting in the centre of the front row. Makes sure everyone is performing the same piece.

contralto (or alto) Low-pitched woman's voice. Not to be confused with... counter tenor High-pitched man's voice. Nearest we have nowadays to a castrato (from the verb to castrate...ouch...)

ensemble From the French word for "together". When two or more soloists try to have their say at the same time (can get rather messy...). Ensemble for two is a duet, three is a trio, four a quartet and so on.

finale The final number of an act - sung by an ensemble (see above).

intermezzo A piece of music played between the acts of an opera (usually just long enough for the prima donna to put on her sixth frock of the show).

interval A (welcome) break between the acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around, catch up on what's been happening, join the chorus at the bar...

libretto The text of an opera. Written by a librettist.

mezzo-soprano Female singer who can't quite reach those top notes. Not much glass-shattering action here.

orchestra Group of musicians found in the pit.

overture Music at the start of the show. Sets the scene, warms up the orchestra and reminds the audience that the performance is about to begin.

prima donna The leading woman singer in an operatic cast. Not to be confused with Guy Ritchie's wife...

props Mobile pieces of the set which help to make it all a bit more believable.

proscenium arch Wall in front of the curtain, dividing the stage from the auditorium.

recitative The bits which aren't the songs. Closer to the rhythm of speech and often accompanied by just a harpsichord or piano. Used to further the action of the story (we'd never get home if the plot was told through the arias...).

repetiteur from the French for to repeat. This tortured soul sits in on rehearsals and pretends to be an orchestra at the piano.

score The full score contains all the sung and orchestral parts in the opera. The vocal score has the voice parts and a piano reduction of the orchestra (for rehearsals - see repetiteur).

soprano High female voice. Watch out for those delicate window panes...

synopsis Outline of the plot. Especially useful during the interval when it is once more light enough to find out what on earth is happening.

tenor A high male voice. The good guy, pure of heart and all that.