



# presents its first fully staged Handel Opera



In more than 25 years of producing high class fully staged opera delighting its Bath audiences, Handel is a composer who has so far not had an opera produced by this company. The omission is now to be corrected by an innovative new production of Semele.

A poster for the opera Semele. On the left is a line drawing of a woman in classical dress holding a tablet. The background is a marble texture. Text on the right includes the title "Semele" in a large pink font, the composer "Georg Friedrich Handel", the time "7.30pm", dates "February 15th, 16th, 17th 2024", venue "Roper Theatre, Bath", and ticket prices "£20 to £30". A box at the bottom contains contact information: "Available from 01225 463362" and "www.bathboxoffice.org.uk". The website "www.bathopera.com" is at the bottom center. The Bath Opera logo is in the top left corner of the poster.

**BATH OPERA**

# Semele

Georg Friedrich Handel

7.30pm  
February 15th, 16th, 17th 2024  
Roper Theatre, Bath  
Tickets £20 to £30

Available from 01225 463362  
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## Why Handel?

What is it about Handel which makes his music fit the British psyche like a much-loved sweater? Is it that we are all so familiar with Handel being part of our major events?

You can't have Christmas without a Messiah and you certainly can't have a Coronation without 'Zadok the Priest' - and that's before you start counting Firework Music or Water Music - there is hardly a communal festive occasion we don't share with Handel. His music is part of the warp and weft of our life...almost in our DNA.

You simply know you can go to any Handel performance and love the music.

In addition to his ceremonial music however, Handel wrote 49 operas and 27 oratorios....a prodigious output. All share Handel's brilliant composition which often appears on the surface to be very simple, making it very easy to listen to, but which is structurally very complex, giving it never ending interest.

In recent decades opera companies have discovered another facet of Handel's operas, which is that his seemingly innate understanding of the human condition and emotions make his operas timeless and eminently suitable vehicles for updating. This has given them a tremendous renewal and they are now a regular staple of all the opera houses in the world.

Another reason Directors are so enthusiastic about Handel's operas today is the flexibility and gender fluidity they offer in casting. In Handel's day many leading roles were written for castrati. Vatican choirs were all male and so promising choir boys were castrated to keep their voices high - a rather extreme sacrifice for their art! - but many of these singers such as Farinelli went on to find fame and considerable fortune in the world of opera.



Handel's Giulio Cesare for example had four castrati roles. Thankfully there are no castrati today and so those roles can either be taken by a counter tenor or a mezzo. This allows for a lot of variety in productions and is perhaps also a contributor to the many 'playful' interpretations audiences now enjoy. In this production of Semele most roles are of the gender you would expect except one ...Prince Athamus is sung by the mezzo Gill Clark.

## **Singing a Handel Opera**

Many of us will have sung the Messiah ...and the 9 big choruses in Semele are very much in the same mould. However, now imagine singing the Messiah without the score clutched firmly between your hands and whilst running round acting your part

with strictly choreographed movements. That's what the chorus of Bath Opera has been busily practising in rehearsals. This has required a completely different rehearsal technique from say a big Verdi Opera. The music moves so fast, often with long runs and equally often with the same words presented in a bewildering variety of orders .

Most of the chorus would say that although it may not be quite the most difficult thing we have done musically, (that accolade probably goes to the award- winning Peter Grimes in 2015) overall it has more dangers for the chorus than anything we have done before.

*As one chorus member said " It's like hurtling at full speed downhill. Just one minor stumble over the start of a word is enough to bring you and everyone else crashing down!"*



Luckily every member of the chorus would also say it is one of the most exciting and satisfying sings we have ever done and so the audience can be assured that everyone will be working their socks off to avoid any stumbles.

The Stage Director Dave Key-Pugh adds:-

*"This will be a dynamic production of an early operatic gem, generally regarded as containing some of Handel's most glorious writing for single chorus. The chorus themselves are a key element and will be integrated into all aspects of the production, which I hope will be fun, challenging and memorable."*

## Principals

Semele has quite a large cast of 10 principals all of whom have significant parts but undoubtedly the key roles are Semele and Jupiter.



### Jupiter

In his first major role for a Bath Opera main production, young tenor Alex Pinkstone follows up his impressive performance as Don Curzio (seen here) in the touring Opera production of Marriage of Figaro.



### Semele

In the title role Bath Opera welcomes back Hannah Drury. Hannah is very well known to the company having sung many lead roles including Cunegonde in Bernstein's Candide, Adina in Donizetti's l'Elisir d'Amore, Malliela in Wolf-Ferrari's Jewels of The Madonna, Violetta in Verdi's La Traviata and most recently as Marguerite in Gounod's Faust.

*"As Semele is hardly ever off stage, having such a reliable, experienced and musical singer in the role is not only a great pleasure but a huge relief to me !"*  
said MD Peter Blackwood.

## **The Baroque orchestra**

Musical style has moved on a lot since Handel wrote Semele. Some performances try to faithfully recreate the sound that Handel would have known by using period instruments which are radically different in sound and performance from modern instruments. Whilst it would require too many specialists to perfectly replicate this, Bath Opera's MD Peter Blackwood has ensured authentic baroque styling in the orchestra which will be led by two well known baroque players Alison Townsend who will lead the orchestra and Steven Hollas will play the continuo on the harpsichord .

## **Semele the Opera**

Semele was actually written as an oratorio but its storyline and action are so dramatic that it lends itself to the full operatic treatment - both Covent Garden and Glyndebourne have staged it in the last year.

Semele was written as a 'musical drama after the manner of an oratorio' to be presented in the Lent season at Covent Garden in 1744. However, instead of an improving Biblical text a la Messiah, Handel instead set an adaptation of a William Congreve libretto based on a licentious tale of adultery from Ovid's Metamorphoses. Congreve was one the leading writers of Restoration Comedies which took satirical swipes at the antics, particularly the immoral ones, of the elite of the day. This sharp wit is clearly visible in his libretto for Semele.

It may have only been performed four times in the composer's lifetime – and in concert form at that – but it has only gained in reputation and popularity as the centuries pass and contains some of Handel's finest polyphonic operatic choruses.

Musically, the most well-known arias are Jupiter's "Where'er you walk" and Semele's " Endless pleasure" and the hilarious " Myself I shall admire"

When written, and even now, it is capable of causing outrage because the plot is rather racey in character - it is little wonder that it fell out of favour during the Victorian period ! This plot means that in addition to moments of true pathos there are many more of humour and downright comedy.

## Precis

Jupiter takes the mortal Princess Semele to be his mistress (on her wedding day !). When Jupiter's wife, Juno, hears of her husband's adultery, she is enraged, and plots to ensure Semele's downfall. In disguise, Juno appeals to the girl's vanity and persuades her to insist on seeing her lover in his divine form. Jupiter reluctantly agrees but the magnificence of his true form burns and consumes Semele. From her ashes, though, arises her unborn child by Jupiter—Bacchus, god of wine and ecstasy.

## The production

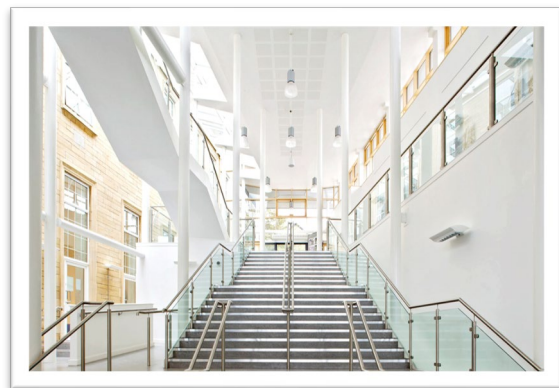
Bath Opera's production will be set in a modern fantasy world . The drab reality of the populace is enlivened by the new Gods of the internet, their grey lives brightened by living vicariously through following or worshipping the 'influencers', instagrammers and social media stars such as Jupiter, Juno and so on. Semele will be swept off, less to a mountain top, and instead to a luxury spa and retreat by her paramour. Her ultimate destruction, however, the culmination of the jealous machinations of Juno, does in the end prove a blessing in disguise for everyone else, as her sad demise does lead to the creation of Bacchus, the new 'God' of wine and the chorus end by celebrating their new form of relief and escape – inordinate intoxication!



Carved 'Maenad' found on a precious gemstone at the bottom of the Roman Baths in Bath.

*"...maenad..a female follower of Bacchus traditionally associated with divine possession and frenzied rites".....just like the ladies of Bath Opera chorus!*

## Venue - **The Roper Theatre**



For those who haven't yet experienced it **The Roper Theatre** is an exciting, and comfortable theatre adding a valuable new resource to the cultural life of Bath.

Huge, airy public spaces and an effective forced air ventilation system make the Roper Theatre one of the most Covid safe and comfortable venues in Bath....and there is free on street parking !

**Bath Opera's production of SEMELE is on February**

**15th, 16th and 17th at 7.30pm**

**Ticket prices as follows:**

**Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> February - £20, £10 for ages 16 and under.**

**Friday 16<sup>th</sup> February, Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> February - £30**

**If you buy 8 tickets in one order you get the 9<sup>th</sup> ticket free!**

**at**

**The Roper Theatre, Hayesfield School**

**Upper Oldfield Park BATH BA2 3LA**

**Tickets [www.bathboxoffice.org.uk](http://www.bathboxoffice.org.uk) 01225 463362**

**or click on the link below:**

[Bath Opera – Handel's Semele | What's On | Bath Box Office](#)