

OPERAS for APRIL 2025

2 April	Handel	Saul
9	Rossini	Barber of Seville
16	Verdi	La Traviata
23	Massenet	Manon
30	Rossini	Ricciardo e Zoraide

Stories of the Operas

Saul Handel

Background

By 1738, Handel was experiencing some difficulty in maintaining support for his Italian opera seasons in London and he collaborated for the first time with Charles Jennens, a wealthy landowner and lover of the arts, who also provided the texts for Messiah and other oratorios of Handel. Jennens wrote Saul, an original English text based on Biblical characters, especially designed to provide opportunities for the sort of music Handel composed.

Opera seria, the form of Italian opera that Handel composed for London, focused overwhelmingly on solo arias and recitatives for the star singers and contained very little else; they did not feature separate choruses. With the English oratorios Handel had the opportunity to mix operatic arias in English for the soloists with large choruses of the type that he used in the Coronation anthems. Jennens provided a text with well-rounded characters and dramatic effects. The collaboration with Jennens was not without tension; Jennens referred in a letter to the "maggots" in Handel's head and complained that Handel wanted to end the work with a chorus of "Hallelujahs" that the librettist did not feel was appropriate as at the end of the piece Israel has been defeated in battle and the King and Crown Prince both killed, whereas the Hallelujahs would be suited to the celebrations at the opening of the work when David has killed Goliath. Jennens got his way; in the completed version Saul does not end with a chorus of "Hallelujahs" but there is such a chorus where Jennens had wanted one.

Handel composed the music of Saul between July and September 1738. He conceived Saul on the grandest scale and included a large orchestra with many instrumental effects which were unusual for the time including a carillon (a keyboard instrument which makes a sound like chiming bells); a specially constructed organ for himself to play during the course of the work; trombones, not standard orchestral instruments at that time, giving the work a heavy brass component; large kettledrums specially borrowed from the Tower of London; extra woodwinds for the Witch of Endor scene; and a harp solo.

In the same letter in which Jennens complained that Handel wanted a chorus of "Hallelujahs" at a point of the drama the writer felt was inappropriate, he wrote of a meeting he had with Handel to discuss the work and the composer's delight in some of the unusual instruments he planned to use:

Mr. Handel's head is more full of Maggots than ever: I found yesterday in His room a very queer Instrument which He calls Carillon (Anglice a Bell) & says some call it a Tubal-cain, I suppose because it is in the make and tone like a Hammer striking upon Anvils. 'Tis played upon with Keys like a Harpsichord, & with this Cyclopean Instrument he designs to make poor Saul stark mad. His second Maggot is an Organ of 500£ price, which (because he is

overstock'd with Money) he has bespoke of one Moss of Barnet; this Organ, he says, is so contriv'd that as he sits at it he has a better command of his Performers than he us'd to have; & he is highly delighted to think with what exactness his Oratorio will be perform'd by the help of this Organ; so that for the future, instead of beating time at his Oratorio's, he is to sit as his Organ all the time with his back to the Audience ... I could tell you more of his Maggots: but it grows late, and I must defer the rest till I write next; by which time, I doubt not, more new ones will breed in his Brain.

Also of note in that letter is the fact that although Handel's London seasons of Italian opera had not been drawing the audiences they had in former years, Jennens makes an incidental remark that the composer was very wealthy ("overstock'd with money").

On 5 December 1738 Lady Katherine Knatchbull, a friend and patron of Handel's, wrote to her brother-in-law James Harris, who was a writer on music and other subjects, and also a friend of the composer, "(Handel) desired me to give his tres humble respects; and that you must come up in January, for he opens with *The Loves of Saul and Jonathan*, then follows another on the ten plagues of Egypt (to me an odd subject) ... He has had an instrument made after the manner of Tubal-cain's, the inventor of music." (referring to the specially-built carillon. Going on to an attempt to describe a trombone, an instrument she had obviously never seen, she writes:) "He has also introduced the sackbut, a kind of trumpet, with more variety of notes, & it is 7 or 8-foot long, & draws in like a perspective glass, so may be shortened to 3-foot as the player chuses, or thrown out to its full length; despise not this description for I write from his own words."

In the 1954 edition of Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, specialist in the history of musical instruments Anthony Baines wrote that *Saul* contains the finest music for trombones composed in the 18th century.

Reception and performance history

A report in the London press remarked on the favourable reception given to the work at its first performance, with members of the royal family in attendance. The architect William Kent wrote to Lord Burlington after the first performance, referring to the passage with the carillon, "There is a pretty concerto in the oratorio, there is some stops in the Harpsicord that are little bells, I had thought it had been some "squerrls" in a cage. *Saul* was given six performances in its first season, a mark of success at that time and was one of the works Handel most frequently revived in his subsequent seasons, being given in London in 1740, 1741, 1744, 1745 and 1750. *Saul* received a performance in Dublin under Handel's direction "by special request" in 1742.

Already in Handel's own lifetime, choral societies were formed in the English provinces with the aim of performing works of Handel and others, and *Saul* was performed with a fair degree of regularity by choral societies in London and elsewhere in Britain through the 19th century. Handel's major oratorios including *Saul* have been frequently performed, broadcast and recorded since the second half of the twentieth century. *Saul* is sometimes fully staged as an opera today.

In October 2023, Cambridge University's Opera Society cancelled their performance of *Saul* due to the "current sensitive political situation and unfortunate escalation of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and Israel."

The excellence of the libretto and the power of Handel's musical characterisation combine to make *Saul*, in the words of Handel scholar Winton Dean, "one of the supreme masterpieces of dramatic art, comparable with the *Oresteia* and *King Lear*".

Roles

Roles

Saul, King of Israel	bass	Gidon Saks,
Merab, Princess of Israel	soprano	Rosemary Joshua,
Michal, Princess of Israel	soprano	Emma Bell,
Jonathan, Prince of Israel	tenor	Jeremy Ovenden,
David, future King of Israel	counter-tenor	Lawrence Zazzo,
Ghost of Samuel	bass	Henry Waddington,
High Priest	tenor	Michael Slattery,
Witch of Endor	tenor	Michael Slattery,
Abner	tenor	Finnur Bjarnason,
Amalekite	tenor	Finnur Bjarnason,
Doeg	bass	Henry Waddington,
Chorus of Israelites		RIAS Chamber Choir
Concerto Cologne;		Rene Jacobs, conductor

Synopsis

The libretto is freely adapted from the First Book of Samuel, Chapters 16–31, with additional material from the epic poem, the *Davideis* by Abraham Cowley. The printed libretto of *Saul* from 1738 credits the *Davideis* as the source of the contemptuous treatment of David by Princess Merab.

Act 1: The Israelites raise their voices in magnificent thanksgiving to God, for the young warrior David has slain the Philistine giant Goliath. At the court of King Saul, once a mighty warrior himself, all the people celebrate the hero David. Saul's son, Jonathan swears eternal devotion to David, but Saul's two daughters experience contrasting emotions – Michal is in love with David, but Merab feels contempt for him as a social inferior, a feeling that only increases when Saul offers her in marriage to David. A group of Israelite young women offer further tributes to David. King Saul is enraged at the way David is praised. Unable to restrain his anger, he orders Jonathan to kill David.

Act 2: The people of Israel reflect on the destructive power of envy. Jonathan pleads David's case to Saul, who appears to relent. Saul asks Jonathan to bring David back to court and promises Michal as David's bride, though Saul anticipates David's death in battle. David and Michal express their mutual love, but David reports that Saul's rage has not diminished and that Saul threw a javelin close past his head in frustration. Saul summons David to court again as both Michal and Merab express their faith that God will protect David. Jonathan tries to explain to Saul why David has not responded to his summons. Saul rages against both David and Jonathan.

Act 3: In despair, and though aware it is unlawful, Saul asks the Witch of Endor to raise the ghost of Samuel the prophet. Asked for advice, the ghost of Samuel reminds Saul that he had once predicted his downfall for sparing the king of the Amalekites whom Samuel had ordered killed. He predicts that David will inherit the kingdom of Israel when Saul and his sons die in the next day's battle. David learns from an Amalekite soldier of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan at the hands of the Amalekites, and David orders the Amalekite killed. After a

funeral march for the Israelite dead, Merab, David, and Michal each in turn express their sorrow, particularly for the loss of Jonathan. A high priest predicts David will win future victories and the Israelites urge him to restore their kingdom

The Barber of Seville, or *The Useless Precaution* is an opera buffa in two acts by Gioachino Rossini with an Italian libretto by Cesare Sterbini. The libretto was based on Pierre Beaumarchais's French comedy *Le Barbier de Séville* (1775). The première took place on 20 February 1816 at the Teatro Argentina, Rome, with designs by Angelo Toselli.

Rossini's Barber has proven to be one of the greatest masterpieces of comedy within music, and has been described as the opera buffa of all "opere buffe". After two hundred years, it remains a popular work

Rossini's opera recounts the events of the first of the three plays by French playwright Pierre Beaumarchais that revolve around the clever and enterprising character named Figaro, the barber of the title. Mozart's opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, composed 30 years earlier in 1786, is based on the second part of the Beaumarchais trilogy. *The Barber* is the first play in a trilogy of which the other constituents are *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Guilty Mother*.

Roles

Figaro	baritone	Thomas Allen
Rosina	mezzo-soprano	Agnes Baltsa
Almaviva	tenor	Francesco Ariaza
Bartolo	baritone	Domenico Trimarchi
Basilio	bass	Robert Lloyd
Berta	mezzo-soprano	Sally Burgess
Fiorello	bass	Robert Lloyd
Officiale	bass	John Noble

Ambrosian Opera Chorus & Academy of St Martin's in the Fields

Conductor Sir Neville Marriner

Synopsis

Act I

Count Almaviva, a Spanish nobleman, is in love with Rosina, the rich ward of Dr Bartolo, an old physician, who plans to marry her himself. Almaviva has followed Rosina from Madrid to Seville, disguised as a poor student called Lindoro.

From the street outside Dr Bartolo's house, Almaviva serenades Rosina, assisted by a group of actors and musicians. Unfortunately, the serenade produces no response from Rosina, so Almaviva enlists the help of Figaro, a barber, who prides himself on his ability to manage the affairs of the city. They realise that they have, in fact, met before, and Almaviva explains why he is in Seville incognito. He is delighted to discover that Figaro is a general factotum to the Bartolo household, who enjoys easy access to the house and gardens. While they are talking, Rosina appears on the balcony with a note for the handsome young student who keeps visiting the house. Despite Bartolo stealing up behind her, she manages to drop the letter from the window and it floats down to Almaviva. Rumours of Almaviva's interest in Rosina have reached Bartolo's ears and he decides he must waste no time in marrying her himself. He gives strict instructions to the servants that while he is out no one should gain admittance to the house.

Figaro persuades Almaviva to answer Rosina's note with a further serenade, but she is interrupted before she can respond. Lured by the promise of money, Figaro devises a plan whereby Almaviva can gain access to the Bartolo household: he must pretend to be a drunken soldier billeted on Dr Bartolo.

Figaro has inveigled his way into Dr Bartolo's home and managed a brief meeting with Rosina before Bartolo appears and expresses his annoyance at Figaro's constant disrespect towards him. He questions Rosina about her meeting with Figaro, as well as interrogating the servants. When Rosina's singing teacher Don Basilio arrives, Bartolo brings him up to date on the situation with Rosina. Meanwhile, Figaro has overheard Bartolo and Basilio's conversation. He starts to prepare the ground for 'Lindoro', but soon realises that the wily Rosina is already ahead of him.

Bartolo suspects Rosina of writing a letter to 'Lindoro'; when she protests her innocence, he warns her not to trifle with him, advising her to find more plausible excuses for a man of his standing.

Almaviva, now disguised as a soldier, arrives to take up his 'billet' in Bartolo's house. Rosina is of course delighted when he reveals that he is really her secret admirer. Bartolo's annoyance at Almaviva's drunken behaviour causes such a row that the militia are called by the neighbours. The Count, however, narrowly escapes arrest, much to Bartolo's annoyance.

Act II

Assuming yet another disguise, Almaviva enters the house as Don Alonso, a music teacher who says he has come to give Rosina her music lesson in place of Don Basilio, who, he claims, has suddenly fallen ill. To gain Bartolo's trust, Don Alonso reveals that he has intercepted a note from Almaviva to Rosina. Bartolo fetches Rosina for her lesson. While Bartolo dozes, Rosina and 'Lindoro' express their love and make plans to elope that night.

Figaro arrives to shave Bartolo. He manages to steal the key to Rosina's balcony and lures Bartolo away from the music room by smashing a pile of crockery. All is going to plan until Don Basilio unexpectedly appears, but Figaro quickly pays him off and Basilio withdraws. Figaro resumes shaving Bartolo, and tells Rosina of his plan for the lovers to make their escape. Bartolo, however, has not been entirely duped, and penetrates Almaviva's disguise. The game is up for the lovers – albeit temporarily.

Berta, Bartolo's servant, ruefully comments on the foolishness of old men wanting to marry young wives. When Bartolo discovers that Basilio has never heard of Alonso, he decides to marry Rosina without delay. He confronts Rosina with a letter she addressed to Lindoro and catches her by surprise when he makes out that Lindoro is clearly acting on Almaviva's behalf.

Following a violent thunderstorm, Figaro and Almaviva climb into the house by way of a ladder and an open window. They are confronted by Rosina who is angry at being 'used' by Lindoro – until she learns that he is in fact Almaviva and falls willingly into his arms. Figaro is anxious for the lovers to be off, but they discover they are unable to make their escape because Bartolo has removed the ladder.

Basilio returns with the notary who is ready to marry Rosina to her guardian, but a bribe and threats easily persuades Basilio to witness instead the marriage of Rosina to Almaviva. Bartolo and the magistrate appear too late and he is obliged to acknowledge he has lost Rosina.

La traviata (The Fallen Woman) is an opera in three acts by Giuseppe Verdi set to an Italian libretto by Francesco Maria Piave. It is based on *La Dame aux camélias* (1852), a play adapted from the novel by Alexandre Dumas fils. The opera was originally titled *Violetta*, after the main character. It was first performed on 6 March 1853 at the La Fenice opera house in Venice.

Roles

Violetta Valéry, a courtesan	soprano	Ileana Cotrubas
Alfredo Germont, a young bourgeois from a provincial family	tenor	Plácido Domingo
Giorgio Germont, Alfredo's father	baritone	Sherrill Milnes
Flora Bervoix, Violetta's friend	mezzo-soprano	Stefania Malagù
Annina, Violetta's maid	soprano	Helena Jungwirth
Gastone de Letorières, Alfredo's friend	tenor	Walter Gullino
Dottore Grenvil	bass	Giovanni Foiani
Baron Doupol	baritone	Bruno Grella
Bayerischer Staatsoper Chorus & Orchestra	Conductor	Carlos Kleiber

Synopsis

Place: Paris and its vicinity.

Time: Beginning of the 19th century

Act 1: The salon in Violetta's house

Violetta Valéry, a famed courtesan, throws a lavish party at her Paris salon to celebrate her recovery from an illness. Gastone, a viscount, has brought with him a friend, Alfredo Germont, a young bourgeois from a provincial family who has long adored Violetta from afar. While walking to the salon, Gastone tells Violetta that Alfredo loves her, and that while she was ill, he came to her house every day. Alfredo joins them, admitting the truth of Gastone's remarks.

Baron Douphol, Violetta's current lover, waits nearby to escort her to the salon; once there, the Baron is asked to give a toast, but refuses, and the crowd turns to Alfredo, who agrees to sing a *brindisi* – a drinking song (Alfredo, Violetta, chorus: *Libiamo ne' lieti calici* – "Let's drink from the joyful cups").

From the next room, the sound of the orchestra is heard and the guests move there to dance. After a series of severe coughs and almost fainting, Violetta begins to feel dizzy and asks her guests to go ahead and to leave her to rest until she recovers. While the guests dance in the next room, Violetta looks at her pale face in her mirror. Alfredo enters and expresses his concern for her fragile health, later declaring his love for her (Alfredo, Violetta: *Un dì, felice, eterea* – "One day, happy and ethereal"). At first, she rejects him because his love means nothing to her, but there is something about Alfredo that touches her heart. He is about to leave when she gives him a flower, telling him to return it when it has wilted, which will be the very next day.

After the guests leave, Violetta wonders if Alfredo could actually be the one in her life (Violetta: *È strano! ... Ah, fors' è lui* – "Ah, perhaps he is the one"). But she concludes that she needs freedom to live her life (Violetta, Alfredo: *Sempre libera* – "Always free"). From off stage, Alfredo's voice is heard singing about love as he walks down the street.

Act 2 Scene 1: Violetta's country house outside Paris

Three months later, Alfredo and Violetta are living together in a peaceful country house outside Paris. Violetta has fallen in love with Alfredo and she has completely abandoned her

former life. Alfredo sings of their happy life together (Alfredo: *De' miei bollenti spiriti / Il giovanile ardore* – "The youthful ardour of my ebullient spirits"). Annina, the maid, arrives from Paris, and, when questioned by Alfredo, tells him that she went there to sell the horses, carriages and everything owned by Violetta to support their country lifestyle.

Alfredo is shocked to learn this and leaves for Paris immediately to settle matters himself. Violetta returns home and receives an invitation from her friend, Flora, to a party in Paris that evening. Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont, is announced and demands that she break off her relationship with his son for the sake of his family, since he reveals that Violetta's relationship with Alfredo has threatened his daughter's engagement (Giorgio: *Pura siccome un angelo, Iddio mi diè una figlia* – "Pure as an angel, God gave me a daughter") because of Violetta's reputation. Meanwhile, he reluctantly becomes impressed by Violetta's nobility, something which he did not expect from a courtesan. She responds that she cannot end the relationship because she loves him so much, but Giorgio pleads with her for the sake of his family. With growing remorse, she finally agrees (Violetta, Giorgio: *Dite alla giovine, sì bella e pura,* – "Tell the young girl, so beautiful and pure,") and says goodbye to Giorgio. In a gesture of gratitude for her kindness and sacrifice, Giorgio kisses her forehead before leaving her weeping alone.

Violetta gives a note to Annina to send to Flora accepting the party invitation and, as she is writing a farewell letter to Alfredo, he enters. She can barely control her sadness and tears; she tells him repeatedly of her unconditional love (Violetta: *Amami, Alfredo, amami quant'io t'amo* – "Love me, Alfredo, love me as I love you"). Before rushing out and setting off for Paris, she hands the farewell letter to her servant to give to Alfredo.

Soon, the servant brings the letter to Alfredo and, as soon as he has read it, Giorgio returns and attempts to comfort his son, reminding him of his family in Provence (Giorgio: *Di Provenza il mar, il suol chi dal cor ti cancellò?* – "Who erased the sea, the land of Provence from your heart?"). Alfredo suspects that the Baron is behind his separation with Violetta, and the party invitation, which he finds on the desk, strengthens his suspicions. He decides to confront Violetta at the party. Giorgio tries to stop Alfredo, but he rushes out.

Scene 2: Party at Flora's house

At the party, the Marquis tells Flora that Violetta and Alfredo have separated, much to the amazement of everyone who had previously seen the happy couple. She calls for the entertainers to perform for the guests (Chorus: *Noi siamo zingarelle venute da lontano* – "We are gypsy girls who have come from afar"; *Di Madride noi siam mattadori* – "We are matadors from Madrid"). Gastone and his friends join the matadors and sing (Gastone, chorus, dancers: *È Piquillo un bel gagliardo Biscaglino mattador* – "Piquillo is a bold and handsome matador from Biscay").

Violetta arrives with Baron Douphol. They see Alfredo at the gambling table. When he sees them, Alfredo loudly proclaims that he will take Violetta home with him. Feeling annoyed, the Baron goes to the gambling table and joins him in a game. As they bet, Alfredo wins some large sums until Flora announces that supper is ready. Alfredo leaves with handfuls of money.

As everyone is leaving the room, Violetta has asked Alfredo to see her. Fearing that the Baron's anger will lead him to challenge Alfredo to a duel, she gently asks Alfredo to leave. Alfredo misunderstands her apprehension and demands that she admit that she loves the Baron. In grief, she makes that admission and, furiously, Alfredo calls the guests to witness

what he has to say (Questa donna conoscete? – "You know this woman?"). He humiliates and denounces Violetta in front of the guests and then throws his winnings at her feet in payment for her services. She faints onto the floor. The guests reprimand Alfredo: Di donne ignobile insultatore, di qua allontanati, ne desti orror! ("Ignoble insulter of women, go away from here, you fill us with horror!").

In search of his son, Giorgio enters the hall and, knowing the real significance of the scene, denounces his son's behavior (Giorgio, Alfredo, Violetta, chorus: Di sprezzo degno sè stesso rende chi pur nell'ira la donna offende. – "A man, who even in anger, offends a woman renders himself deserving of contempt.").

Flora and the ladies attempt to persuade Violetta to leave the dining room, but Violetta turns to Alfredo: Alfredo, Alfredo, di questo core non puoi comprendere tutto l'amore... – "Alfredo, Alfredo, you can't understand all the love in this heart...".

Act 3: Violetta's bedroom

Dr. Grenvil tells Annina that Violetta will not live long since her tuberculosis has worsened. Alone in her room, Violetta reads a letter from Alfredo's father telling her that the Baron was only wounded in his duel with Alfredo. He has informed Alfredo of the sacrifice she has made for him and his sister; and that he is sending his son to see her as quickly as possible to ask for her forgiveness. But Violetta senses it is too late (Violetta: Addio, del passato bei sogni ridenti – "Farewell, lovely, happy dreams of the past").

Annina rushes in the room to tell Violetta of Alfredo's arrival. The lovers are reunited and Alfredo suggests that they leave Paris (Alfredo, Violetta: Parigi, o cara, noi lasceremo – "We will leave Paris, O beloved").

But it is too late: she knows her time is up (Alfredo, Violetta: Gran Dio!...morir sì giovane – "Great God!...to die so young"). Alfredo's father enters with the doctor, regretting what he has done. After singing a duet with Alfredo, Violetta suddenly revives, exclaiming that the pain and discomfort have left her. A moment later, she dies in Alfredo's arms.

Further information about the origin of the opera and its various real-life characters may be found here and by following the various links. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_traviata

Manon is an opéra comique in five acts by Jules Massenet to a French libretto by Henri Meilhac and Philippe Gille, based on the 1731 novel *L'histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* by the Abbé Prévost. It was first performed at the Opéra-Comique in Paris on 19 January 1884

Prior to Massenet's work, Halévy (*Manon Lescaut*, ballet, 1830) and Auber (*Manon Lescaut*, opéra comique, 1856) had used the subject for musical stage works. Massenet also wrote a one-act sequel to *Manon*, *Le portrait de Manon* (1894), involving the Chevalier des Grieux as an older man.

The composer worked at the score of *Manon* at his country home outside Paris and also at a house at The Hague once occupied by Prévost himself.

Manon is Massenet's most popular and enduring opera and, having "quickly conquered the world's stages", it has maintained an important place in the repertory since its creation. It is the quintessential example of the charm and vitality of the music and culture of the Parisian Belle Époque. In 1893 an opera by Giacomo Puccini entitled *Manon Lescaut*, and based on the same novel was premiered and has also become popular.

Roles

Manon Lescaut	soprano	Angela Gheorghiu,
Le Chevalier des Grieux	tenor	Roberto Alagna,
Lescaut, Manon's cousin	baritone	Earle Patriarco,
Le Comte des Grieux, the Chevalier's father	bass	Jose van Dam,
Guillot de Morfontaine	tenor	Gilles Ragon,
Monsieur de Brétigny	baritone	Nicolas Rivenq,
Poussette, an actress	soprano	Anna Maria Panzarella,
Javotte, an actress	soprano	Sophie Koch,
Rosette, an actress	mezzo-soprano	Susanne Schimmack,
Innkeeper	baritone	Nicolas Cavallier,
A porter	tenor	Julien Weisberger,
A sergeant	baritone	Bernard Villiers,
Orchestre Symphonique et Choeurs de la Monnaie;	conductor	Antonio Pappano,

Synopsis

Time: the reign of Louis XV

ACT I: The bustling courtyard of an inn at Amiens. De Brétigny, a nobleman, has just arrived, in the company of Guillot, an aging rake (he is the Minister of Finance), and three flirtatious young actresses, Poussette, Javotte and Rosette. While the obsequious innkeeper is serving this party with his best dinner, the townspeople collect to witness the arrival of the coach from Arras, among them Lescaut, a Guardsman, here, he informs his comrades, to meet a kinswoman. Shortly, the coach appears, and among the crowd he quickly identifies his pretty, fragile young cousin, Manon, who asks pardon for her bewilderment (*Je suis toujours tout étourdie*); this is, after all, her very first journey -- one which is taking her to the convent. Left alone for a moment, Manon is accosted by the opportunistic Guillot, who tells her he has a carriage waiting, in which they can leave together. His heavy-handed seduction, however, to derision from the three young actresses, is routed by the return of Lescaut, who then subjects his cousin to a lecture (*Regardez-moi bien dans les yeux*) on the behavior proper to a demure young member of the Lescaut family. Drawn by the prospect of some gambling with his friends, he nevertheless leaves her unattended once more. Alone, she reflects admiringly on the fashionably decked attractions of the three actresses, but reproaches herself (*Voyons, Manon*), unconvincingly vowing to rid herself of all worldly visions.

A romantically inclined young chevalier, des Grieux, on a journey home for reunion with his father, catches sight of Manon, and is instantly in love; when he approaches she is at once charmed by his chivalrous address (*Et je sais votre nom*), and their exchange rapidly becomes a mutual avowal of love. Both their projected journeys, hers to the convent, des Grieux's to his home, are swiftly abandoned, as they decide to flee together (*Nous vivrons à Paris*), but already there are hints of incompatible aspirations: while he returns, over and over, to "tous les deux" (together), the phrase she repeatedly fondles is "à Paris." Making good use of the carriage provided by the disappointed Guillot, the lovers escape.

ACT II: Paris, the apartment of Manon and des Grieux ; he, without much hope, is writing a letter to his father, imploring permission to marry her. There is a knock at the door, and Lescaut enters, intent on creating a scene. His concern for offended family honor is, however, only camouflage for his new and remunerative alliance with de Brétigny, who has

accompanied him, masquerading as a fellow-Guardsman. While, to prove his honorable intentions, des Grieux is showing Lescaut the letter to his father, . confidentially warns Manon that tonight des Grieux, on the orders of his father, will be seized and carried off, but points out that, protected by the de Brétigny position and wealth, she can move on to a glittering future.

After the two visitors depart, Manon appears to vacillate between the prospect and warning des Grieux, but when her lover goes out to post his letter, her touching farewell to the humble domesticity she has shared (Adieu, notre petite table) makes clear she has decided to go with de Brétigny. Returning, unaware of any change, des Grieux raptly conveys his more modest vision of their future happiness (En fermant les yeux, the once-famous `Dream Song'). Going outside to investigate an apparent disturbance, he is indeed seized and hustled away, leaving Manon to voice her regrets.

ACT III Scene One: Paris, the promenade of the Cours-la-Reine on a feast-day. Among the throng of holiday-makers and vendors of all kinds, Guillot appears, still frantically flirting with the young actresse, and Lescaut, hymning the pleasures of gambling (Pourquoi bon l'économie?). Shortly de Brétigny arrives, soon joined by Manon, now sumptuously dressed and with a retinue of admirers; she performs a little song about her new eminence (Je marche sur tous les chemins), followed by a sprightly gavotte (Obéissons quand leur voix appelle) on the joys of love and youth.

Des Grieux's father, the comte, greets de Brétigny, and Manon overhears that his former lover is ``Chevalier" no longer, but `Abbé," having entered the seminary of Saint-Sulpice. Approaching the comte, Manon confirms the news, and tries to discover whether his son still loves her. The ballet follows, but Manon, seized by the desire to see des Grieux once more, hurries off to Saint-Sulpice.

Scene Two: Saint-Sulpice. From the chapel, a fashionable congregation is dispersing, enthusiastic over the sermon of the new abbé (Quelle éloquence!). Des Grieux enters, in clerical garb, and his father adds his voice to the chorus of praise, but tries to dissuade his son from this new life, so that he can perpetuate the family name (Epouse quelque brave fille). Having failed to shake his son's resolve, he withdraws, and des Grieux, alone, wrestles against his tenacious memories of Manon (Ah! Fuyez, douce image). As he prays, Manon herself appears, to implore his forgiveness for her treachery. Furiously, he attempts to reject her, but when (in the deliciously serpentine N'est-ce plus ma main?) she recalls their past intimacies, his resistance is overcome, and their voices join in an impassioned avowal of love.

ACT IV: A gaming salon at the Hôtel de Transylvanie. Lescaut and Guillot are among the gamblers, and the three young actresses are prepared to attach themselves to any winner. Manon arrives with des Grieux; no longer with any illusions as to her character (Manon! Manon! Sphinx étonnant) he admits his helpless thralldom, and allows himself to be persuaded to gamble, in hopes of gaining the wealth she craves. He plays at cards with Guillot and wins, winning each time when Guillot doubles and redoubles the wager. As Manon exults, Guillot accuses des Grieux of cheating. Des Grieux hotly denies the charge; Guillot leaves, but shortly returns with the police, to whom he denounces des Grieux as a cheat and Manon as dissolute.

The elder des Grieux comes on the scene, and tells his son that while he will intercede in his behalf, he will do nothing to save Manon. In a big ensemble, with Guillot exulting over his

revenge, Manon lamenting the end of all joy, des Grieux swearing to defend her and the rest expressing consternation and horror, the arrested pair are led away.

ACT V: A desolate spot near the road to Le Havre. Des Grieux, freed by his father's intervention, and a penitent Lescaut, now his ally, wait to waylay the convoy in which Manon, with other convicts, is being marched to the port for transportation as a woman of ill-fame. A detachment of soldiers arrives with their prisoners; the would-be rescuers recognize the hopelessness of attacking so strong an escort, but Lescaut succeeds in bribing their sergeant to allow Manon to stay here till evening. The convoy moves on, and a sick and exhausted Manon falls to the ground at des Grieux's feet.

In his arms, near delirium, she recapitulates the scenes -- and the melodies -- of former happiness. Des Grieux tells her the past can yet be reborn, but Manon, calm now, knows it is too late; with the words ``Et c'est là l'histoire de Manon Lescaut," she dies.

Ricciardo e Zoriade. An opera by Rossini which had its first performance 3 December 1818, Teatro san Carlo; Naples

Cast

Agorante:- King of Naples and unrequited lover of Zoraide	tenor	Bruce Ford
Zoraide:- daughter of Ircano, in love with Ricciardo	soprano	Nelly Miricioiu
Ricciardo:- a paladin who in turn loves Zoraide	baritone	William Matteuzzi
Ircano:- the father of Zoraide and the powerful ruler of a region of Nubia.	bass	Alastair Miles
Zomira:- wife of Agorante and after the capture of Zoraide, rival of Zoraide	mezzo	Della Jones
Ernesto:- an envoy of the Christian camp and friend of Ricciardo.	tenor	Paul Nilon
Fatima:- confidante of Zoraide.	soprano	Carol Smith
Elmira:- confidante of Zomira.	mezzo	Alice Coote
Zamorre:- confidant of Agorante.	baritone	Toby Spemcer

Male guards of the harem, female servants of Zomira, noblemen of Agorante's court, followers of Ricciardo, Agorante's forces and populace.

Geoffrey Mitchell chorus, Academy of St Martin's in the Fields Conductor David Parry

THE STORY

Ircano, a prince of Asian origin, had, before the opera begins, established sway over a small part of Nubia, the kingdom of Agorante. Agorante had at first suffered his presence, but this tolerance had changed to hostility when, applying to Ircano for the hand of his daughter Zoraide in marriage, he had found himself refused. He had resorted to arms and driven Ircano from his states. In the carnage and confusion that followed, a fleeing Zoraide had encountered Ricciardo, the bravest of the Christian paladins warring in Africa, and had fallen in love with him. Swept away by her passion, she had abandoned her father to follow her lover. Ircano, bereft of both daughter and kingdom, had donned a suit of black armour, and, styling himself the Cavalier del Pianto (the Knight of the Tears), had set out upon a quest to recover Zoraide. But it was Agorante who had succeeded in overtaking the fugitive lovers: he had captured Zoraide and sent her back to his capital, Dongala, as his prisoner.

ACT I Scene 1 A square outside the citadel of Dongala.

The populace welcomes home a victorious Agorante. He reports that his capture of Zoraide has unleashed the wrath of the Christian paladins upon him, but sets his enemies at defiance and declares his intention of ruling for the welfare of his people.

A room in Agorante's palace. The women of his harem rejoice to hear the sounds of celebration that herald his return: only Zoraide and her confidante Fatima stand aloof in dismay and bewilderment. Ricciardo, it seems, has managed to send Zoraide a letter, promising to come to her aid, but warning her lest she exacerbate Agorante's animosity towards her father by scorning him, and also putting her on her guard against Zomira,

previously Agorante's favourite wife, but now neglected as a result of his new infatuation.

Scene 2: Zomira tries to worm her way into Zoraide's confidence, but cannot conceal her jealousy when she meets only with prevarication. The situation becomes even more tense when Agorante appears, telling Zomira with all the tact he can that he has no intention of repudiating her, but that henceforth she must be prepared to "share his glory" with Zoraide. He declares his passion to Zoraide, only to feel insulted and frustrated when she fails to respond.

Scene 3 Outside the walls of Dongala. The guards and Agorante's scouts have observed a small craft sailing up the river Nubio towards the city, but feel secure since there is no sign of any large-scale enemy activity.

The small boat comes to shore, and Ernesto, the ambassador of the Christian camp disembarks accompanied by an African guide who is really Ricciardo in disguise. Ernesto expresses his concern lest Ricciardo betray himself: both Agorante and Ircano are in pursuit of him, and he is too well - known to escape pursuit for long. Ricciardo is not to be deterred: accompanying Ernesto is his only way of penetrating Dongala and so finding and rescuing Zoraide. Together they enter the city.

Scene 4 A room in the palace. Zomira sets her confidante Elmira to spy upon Zoraide. Elmira assures her that all her followers will eagerly aid her cause.

Agorante receives Ernesto and Ricciardo. Ernesto demands the restitution of Zoraide and the soldiers who were captured with her. Agorante is willing enough to surrender the soldiers, but not Zoraide. He declares that Ernesto will receive a formal reply within moments, when Zoraide herself is present.

Scene 5 Agorante's throne room. Before his assembled court, Agorante again offers Zoraide his heart, hand and throne, though he follows his declaration with a threat of cruelty should she refuse. Zoraide continues to prevaricate, so Ernesto and Ricciardo, when they enter, ready to burst into open dissension.

Agorante formally refuses to hand over Zoraide, and Ernesto prepares to leave interpreting this refusal as a declaration of warfare. At this moment Zomira enters, hoping to assert her rights, but her intrusion serves only to exasperate Agorante even further, so that the act ends upon a scene of heightened confrontation.

Scene 6 An atrium in the palace: Zamorre; Agorante's right - hand man, reports that although Ernesto has left Dongala, his "African guide" has secretly remained behind and now craves an audience. Agorante receives him, and Ricciardo, still in his assumed role, declares that they have both been equally wronged: if Ricciardo stole Zoraide from Agorante, he also carried off his -- the African guide's -- wife. He therefore offers himself as the tool of Agorante's revenge. Agorante accepts his offer, and instructs him to begin by informing Zoraide of Ricciardo's duplicity.

Ricciardo thus finds himself admitted to Zoraide's presence. Far from promoting Agorante's interests, as he had promised, he reveals his true identity, and the two lovers are joyfully, if fearfully, reunited. They have, however, been observed by Elmira, who retires to tell her mistress what has transpired.

ACT II Scene 1, Upon Agorante's return, Ricciardo reverting to his role of African Guide, tells him that Zoraide now seems more disposed to listen to his suit --but advises him to humble her by pretending indifference. Agorante does his best to comply, but when he declares that he casts her off and sends her back to her Christian lover, he finds that he has gone too far. Zoraide accepts -- saying that her father's love requires her to do so. Agorante realises that he has fallen into a trap, and immediately changes his tune, threatening to cast her into prison. At this moment a knight, clad in black armour and with his visor lowered, appears unnoticed in the background.

As a last gesture of magnanimity Agorante refrains from putting Zoraide to death on the spot, and instead offers, if any knight should appear in her defence, to allow her fate to rest on the outcome of a single combat. The unknown knight -- who is, of course, Ircano, the father of

Zoraide, steps forward and accepts the challenge. All are taken aback. Agorante appoints the African guide (Ricciardo in disguise) as his own champion, and orders that Zoraide be imprisoned while the encounter takes place.

Zomira's spies inform her of these events. She finds it difficult to believe, as Elmira insists, that the African guide is really Ricciardo, but realises that, if so, it gives her an opportunity of destroying both the lovers at the same time.

Scene 2 Zoraide's prison. She is visited by Zomira, who offers to help her escape, assuring her that she has only one wish: to see her far from Dongala. Ricciardo she reveals, was victorious in the combat, but was promptly recognised, stripped of his disguise and arrested. She nevertheless has it in her power to save both him and Zoraide. Zoraide falls into Zomira's trap and hurries away, leaving a gloating Zomira to inform Agorante how his enemies have imposed upon him.

Scene 3 A great square. Ricciardo and Zoraide have been captured as they tried to escape, and are now being led to execution. Ircano appears, similarly condemned, and Zoraide begs his forgiveness.

Agorante comes to see his orders carried out. Zoraide pleads for her father's life, but Agorante's patience is at an end. He declares that Ricciardo will die first: if Zoraide still does not submit, her father's death will follow. Believing that she has no choice, Zoraide gives him her hand, but insists that he will never have her heart. Such a submission, quite as much defiance as compliance, is too much for Agorante, and he declares that she shall die.

At this moment Zomira comes running with news that the citadel is surprised and betrayed: Dongala has been attacked by Ernesto and his Christian knights. The square rapidly fills with fighting. Agorante's followers are put to flight, and Agorante himself is overcome and about to be slain by Ernesto, when Ricciardo intervenes to save him.

In a gesture of supreme generosity and chivalry, Ricciardo forgives Agorante and returns him his sword. All are suitably impressed. Ircano, convinced that Ricciardo has shown himself worthy of Zoraide, gives him her hand. Agorante also recognises his rival's magnanimity, repents of his tyranny, and joins in the rejoicing. Only Zomira is left to contemplate the wreck of all her jealous schemes.