

# Ariodante

Music by George Frideric Handel  
Libretto based on a work by Antonio Salvi

## Study Guide to the Opera



Ariodante at Drottningholms Slottsteater © Mats Backer

## Context for Handel's Scottish Opera

The history of opera includes long stretches of similar styles as well as several extraordinary turns to new, inventive forms. According to Jane Glover, “none of its achievements is as astonishing as that in England in the eighteenth century, when, as an essentially alien art form, opera dominated London theatres for approximately thirty years.” English audiences had not been enthusiastic about *dramma in musica* operas, but that changed almost overnight when Italian opera companies arrived in London early in 1710, presenting *opera seria* works sung by foreign singers in foreign languages. Suddenly audiences were streaming to performances, idolizing individual singers, and following composers as society heroes. Handel arrived in London one year later, entering an enthusiastic environment, and his first opera, *Rinaldo*, propelled him to prominence. Over the next 30 years, Handel composed 35 more operas.



George Frideric Handel  
(1685–1759)  
Portrait by Balthasar Denner

In addition to the strong audience interest in opera, there was a great pool of talented European performers, including the famous *castrati* of the day. The royalty and aristocracy financially backed Italian opera, and the art form enjoyed a measure of stability. But with great success came challenges. Too much talent prompted professional jealousies, rival companies were established to cater to split loyalties, and the opera world became a political arena. Handel became aware that Italian opera's future in London was waning, and he began to compose English oratorios in the 1730s. By the time Handel created *Ariodante* in 1735, he had to locate new singers because the Opera of the Nobility had taken most of his regulars, and his contract with the King's Theatre had been terminated. Handel turned to Covent Garden, with its resident chorus and ballet.

Like Handel's operas *Orlando* and *Alcina*, his *Ariodante* was based on Antonio Salvi's text, *Ginevra, principessa di scozia* (*Ginevra, Princess of Scotland*). Handel retained the Scottish location and presented a simple plot of basic human behavior motivated by jealousy. Fundamental to the story is Ariosto's belief that in medieval Scotland the death sentence was automatic for unfaithful women. The chivalric background to Ariosto's narrative also accounts for the tournament scene. The *Ariodante* libretto specifies nine different stage settings, and with Handel's masterful composition and love for the countryside, the contrasts between the scenes—internal to external, public and domestic, light and dark—complement the vivid contrasts of mood, between jubilation and anguish, as the plot develops.

# *Ariodante* Synopsis

Placed in Scotland in Medieval times.

Full-length opera running time: 3 hours, 55 minutes

Pittsburgh Opera production running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes

## Act I

*Royal cabinet in the palace, Royal gardens, A delightful valley*

Princess Ginevra is adorning herself to be beautiful for her wedding to her beloved Ariodante. Polinesso, Duke of Albany, bursts in and declares his love for her, thinking it would advance his prospects with her father, the King of Scotland. Ginevra indignantly rejects Polinesso and leaves. Dalinda, Ginevra's handmaid, is secretly in love with Polinesso and advises him to open his eyes to see someone else who loves him. Polinesso seizes the opportunity to manipulate Dalinda, and devises a plot to thwart his rival and win Ginevra for himself.

Ariodante sings of how nature speaks to him of love, and Ginevra joins him to pledge their love. The King blesses the couple and Ariodante swears to be faithful to Ginevra. Polinesso hatches his plot to manipulate Dalinda; he tells her that he will be hers if she dresses as Ginevra and invites him into her room that night. Lurcanio, Ariodante's brother, then declares his love for Dalinda, but she is in love with Polinesso.

## Act II

*Ancient ruins in the moonlight, Gallery in the palace*

In the moonlight, Ariodante is walking in the royal gardens when Polinesso approaches Ginevra's door. Ariodante watches his beloved Ginevra (Dalinda in disguise) permit another man to enter her bedroom in the night, and his heart is broken by the betrayal.

Lurcanio, who is hidden and has been observing the two men, comes from the shadows and advises Ariodante to live and seek revenge, but Ariodante runs to the cliffs and throws himself into the sea in despair. Polinesso's plan now comes into fruition and he gloats over the success of his ruse.

When the news of Ariodante's death reaches the King, Lurcanio comes forward to claim that Ginevra caused it by her unfaithfulness. Lurcanio demands justice for his brother's death and offers to fight anyone willing to champion Ginevra's cause. The King disowns Ginevra; she is bewildered at the charge of unchaste behavior and goes out of her mind.

INTERMISSION



1808 engraving of Covent Garden, London, where *Ariodante* was first performed on January 8, 1735

## Characters

**Ariodante** [ahr-yoh-DAH-neh]  
*mezzo-soprano* [PANTS ROLE]  
Vassal prince, who is in love with Ginevra and swears to be faithful

**Ginevra** [jee-NEH-vrah]  
*soprano*  
Princess who is the daughter of the King of Scotland; she is in love with and betrothed to Ariodante

**Polinesso** [pohl-eeen-EHS-soh]  
*countertenor*  
Duke of Albany, who makes amorous advances to Ginevra, and then cruelly tricks the King into believing that Ginevra has been unfaithful; Polinesso challenges Lurcanio to a duel

**Lurcanio** [luhr-KAHN-yoh]  
*tenor*  
Ariodante's brother, who is in love with Dalinda; Lurcanio fatally wounds Polinesso in a duel

**Rè di Scozia** [RAY dee SKOH-tsyah]  
*bass-baritone*  
King of Scotland, who supports his daughter's marriage to Ariodante, but disowns and condemns his daughter when he learns that "Ginevra" admitted Polinesso into her bedroom

**Dalinda** [dah-LEEN-dah]  
*soprano*  
Attendant to Ginevra, secretly in love with Polinesso; she agrees to dress as Ginevra and admit Polinesso into her bedroom

## Act III

Near the sea, Royal gardens, Dueling ground, Ginevra's prison room

Ariodante survived and bitterly rebukes the gods for condemning him to live. He hears cries from Dalinda. She is being held by Polinesso's henchmen, who have orders to kill her to quiet the only witness to Polinesso's plot. Ariodante drives the men away. Dalinda tells him the truth about her being disguised as Ginevra and her letting Polinesso into her bedroom. Ariodante rails against the treachery that led him to doubt his beloved.

The King refuses to see his daughter again unless a champion appears to defend her honor. Polinesso challenges Lurcanio to a duel; Polinesso is mortally wounded. The challenge is opened to anyone else willing to defend Ginevra's innocence, and Ariodante steps forward. To the surprise of all, he survived the fall and declares Ginevra innocent. Dalinda admits her part in the plot, and Polinesso admitted his guilt as he died. Ariodante and Ginevra are reunited and hail a bright new day.

Adapted from *Stage Agent* and Lionel Salter



**Giovanni Carestini** (1700–1760), an Italian castrato, sang the title role in the *Ariodante* premiere. He also sang in other operas and oratorios by George Frideric Handel, as well as works by Johann Adolph Hasse and Christoph Willibald Gluck. The most famous castrato of the time was Farinelli, but he had been engaged by a rival London opera company, the Opera of the Nobility. Today, castrato roles are usually sung by women and known as “pants roles”.

## Ariodante Story Lineage

*Orlando furioso* (*The Frenzy of Orlando*) is an Italian epic poem written by Ludovico Ariosto in 1532 that has exerted a wide influence on later culture.

The poem is divided into forty-six canti, each canto containing a variable number of eight-line stanzas in *ottava rima* (a rhyme scheme of abababcc). Ariosto's work is 38,736 lines long, making it one of the longest poems in European literature. The work is one of the most influential works in European literature, including Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*. Popular fiction authors have borrowed characters from the poem, artists have depicted scenes in paintings, and television series have adapted ideas. During the Baroque era, the poem was the basis of many operas by Caccini, Rossi, Steffani, Vivaldi, Lully, and Handel.

- 1495 Matteo Maria Boiardo publishes (posthumously) *Orlando innamorato*
- 1532 Ludovico Ariosto publishes his epic poem *Orlando furioso*, based on Boiardo's work
- 1708 Antonio Salvi publishes *Ginevra, principessa di scozia*, based on Ariosto's work
- 1733 George Frideric Handel composes *Orlando*, based on *Orlando furioso*
- 1735 George Frideric Handel composes *Ariodante*, with an anonymous Italian libretto based on a work by Antonio Salvi, which was adapted from Canti 4, 5, and 6 of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*
- 1735 George Frideric Handel composes *Alcina*, based on *Orlando furioso*

In its historical setting and characters, *Orlando furioso* shares some features with the Old French *Chanson de Roland* of the eleventh century. The story is also a chivalric romance that stemmed from a tradition beginning in the late Middle Ages.



Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533)  
Portrait by Cristofano dell'Altissimo



Memorial to George Frederick Handel, Esq. in Westminster Abbey



Handel & Hendrix Museum  
23 Brook Street, London  
[handelhendrix.org](http://handelhendrix.org)

## Handel and Hendrix: A London Connection

**George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759) was a Baroque organist and composer of nearly 50 operas, close to 30 oratorios, and numerous instrumental pieces. Born in Halle, Saxony, Germany as Georg Friedrich Händel, he showed early promise as a musician and was composing church cantatas and chamber music by the age of 17. Despite his dedication to music, at his father’s insistence, Handel agreed to study law for a short time. By age 18, he committed himself completely to music, playing violin for the Hamburg Opera, and composing operas. After moving to Italy, he composed more successful operas, and met people in Venice who expressed an interest in England’s music scene.

In 1711 in London, the King’s Theatre commissioned Handel to write an opera—*Rinaldo*, a critically-acclaimed work that brought him widespread recognition. Over the next years, he wrote and performed for English royalty and became the Master of the Orchestra at the Royal Academy of Music, the first Italian opera company in London. In 1726, Handel became a British citizen and made London his permanent home. He wrote more Italian operas and then oratorios in English, including *Messiah* (one of the most famous oratorios in history). Another well-known work is his orchestral suite “Water Music”.

**Handel House** For 36 years, Handel lived and composed in a Georgian house at 25 Brook Street in London. A museum on the site promotes knowledge, awareness, and enjoyment of Handel and his music to as wide an audience as possible, as well as the diverse musical and cultural heritage of the site through its association with Jimi Hendrix, who lived there in the late 20th century. An American guitarist, singer, and songwriter, Jimi Hendrix (1942–1970) is considered one of the most influential electric guitarists in the history of popular music—and noted for his left-handed guitar playing. Imagine what a Baroque opera by Handel would sound like with a band of electric guitars. If only the walls could talk and make music!

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*I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wish to make them better.*

*Genuine tragedy is a case not of right against wrong but of right against right—two equally justified ethical principles embodied in people of unchangeable will.*

**George Frideric Handel**

## For more information on Pittsburgh Opera's education programs, please contact:

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