

Semele

Music by George Frideric Handel • Libretto by William Congreve

Study Guide to the Opera



Roman (Greek) mythological characters: Jupiter (Zeus), Semele (Thyone), Bacchus (Dionysus)

G. F. Handel: Think German-English Baroque composer of early opera, oratorio, and orchestral works

The Baroque period of music started around 1600 and ended around 1750. During this era, Shakespeare created his great tragedies (*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*), the first real orchestras came into being (including recorders, lutes, and harpsichord), and, with the Church's loss of political control in Europe, new styles of music like the concerto, sonata, and opera flourished. Jacopo Peri composed the first opera, *Daphne* (1598); Monteverdi composed *L'Orfeo* (1607), the earliest opera that is still regularly performed.

George Frideric Handel, who composed nearly 50 operas during the Baroque period, was a larger-than-life character and his music was loved, especially by London audiences. When the manager of King's Theatre commissioned Handel to write an opera, *Rinaldo*, it became a critically-acclaimed work that brought him widespread recognition. Over the 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.

When, toward the end of his career, musical tastes moved away from the strict musical limitations of Italian opera, Handel turned instead to creating oratorios: large musical compositions for orchestra, choir, and soloists, generally with no costumes or props, and with mostly sacred texts. English oratorios by Handel include his 1741 *Messiah* (one of the most famous oratorios in history) and his 1744 *Semele*. The work fuses elements of opera, oratorio, and classical drama. *Semele* was presented during Lent, one of Handel's regular oratorio seasons, but the story was not what Londoners were expecting during that solemn season. *Semele* has a secular text with a story involving an adulterous sexual relationship. In contemporary productions, *Semele* typically is fully staged as an opera.

While Handel's orchestral works, such as *Water Music* and *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, have remained popular, his operas fell out of favor for more than 200 years, until they were increasingly revived in the 20th century.

Semele Synopsis

Adapted by Antony Walker
ACTS are indicated for original Handel composition

Act I Cadmus, a powerful patriarch, is preparing for the marriage of his daughter Semele to Athamas, scion of another rich family. Signs from Juno, the Goddess of Marriage, indicate she approves of the match (**Chorus: Lucky omens bless our rites**). However, the bride has been inventing one excuse after the other to put off the wedding and her father and would-be bridegroom urge her to hesitate no longer (**Duet: Daughter, hear! Hear and obey!**). To herself, Semele reflects on her dilemma—she does not wish to marry Athamas as she is in love with Jove (Jupiter) himself, the King of the Gods, and calls on him to assist her (**Accompanied recitative: Ah me! What refuge now is left me?**; **Arioso: O Jove! In pity teach me which to choose**). Ino, Semele's sister, expresses her own state of distress as she is in love with Athamas (**Quartet: Why dost thou thus untimely grieve?**). Jove has heard Semele's prayer and his thunderbolts interrupt the proceedings and alarm the observers (**Chorus: Cease, cease your vows**), which all do except for Athamas, in despair at his wedding being cancelled, and Ino, hopelessly in love with him (**Aria: Turn, hopeless lover**). Athamas is astonished when she tells him bluntly that she loves him (**Duet: You've undone me**). Cadmus interrupts their confusion and describes the extraordinary event he has just witnessed: as they fled the temple Semele was suddenly carried off by an eagle (**Accompanied recitative: Wing'd with our fears**). As the act ends, Semele is seen enjoying her role as Jove's new mistress (**Aria: Endless pleasure, endless love**).

Act II, Scene One Iris, Goddess of the Rainbow, arrives in a beautiful pastoral landscape and is soon joined by Juno, spurned wife of Jove and Queen of the Gods. Suspicious of her husband's conduct, Juno has sent Iris to find out what she can. Iris reports that Jove has installed Semele as his mistress in a palace atop a mountain (**Recitative: Iris, impatient of thy stay**). The outraged Juno swears to have revenge (**Accompanied recitative: Awake, Saturnia, from thy lethargy!**) and then decides that she and Iris will pay a visit to the god of sleep in his cave, in order to get magical assistance for her plan to win Jove back (**Aria: Hence, Iris, hence away**).

Act II, Scene Two, An apartment in the palace of Semele Semele awakes and regrets that the dream she was having of being with her lover has ended (**Aria: O sleep, why dost thou leave me?**). When Jove enters, in the form of a young man, she tells him how difficult it is for her when he is absent. He explains that she is a mortal, unlike him, and needs to rest from their love-making from time to time. He attempts to assure her of his fidelity (**Aria: Lay your doubts and fears aside**). Semele, however, is beginning to be unhappy that her lover is a god and she a mere mortal. This sign of an ambition to immortality in Semele worries Jove who decides he must distract her from such thoughts (**Aria: I must with speed amuse her**). Jove has arranged for Semele's sister Ino to be magically transported to the palace, to keep her company, and promises that the gardens and environs will be paradise (**Aria: Where'er you walk**). He leaves, and Ino appears, describing the wondrous experience of being flown there by winged zephyrs (**Aria: But hark! The heav'nly sphere turns round**). The sisters sing of the joy they are experiencing, hearing the music of the spheres (**Duet: Prepare then, ye immortal choir**) and a celestial choir declares that this part of the earth has become a heaven (**Chorus: Bless the glad earth**).

Act III, Scene One, The Cave of Sleep Somnus, the God of Sleep, is lying on his bed. Juno and Iris arrive and wake Somnus (**Accompanied recitative: Somnus, awake**), to his displeasure (**Aria: Leave me, loathsome light**). He only gets out of bed when he hears Juno mention the beautiful nymph Pasithea (**Aria: More sweet is that name**). Juno promises he will have the nymph if he will lend her his magical aid. She tells him to put to sleep the dragons that guard the palace where Semele is ensconced as her husband's mistress, and transform Juno herself into the likeness of Semele's sister Ino. Somnus agrees (**Duet: Obey my will**).

Act III, Scene Two, Semele's Apartment Juno, now in the form of Ino, enters and feigns astonishment at Semele's increased beauty. She exclaims that Semele must have become a goddess herself and gives her a mirror (**Recitative: Behold in this mirror**). Semele is enraptured by her own beauty (**Aria: Myself I shall adore**). "Ino" advises Semele to insist that Jove appear to her in his real, godlike form, and that will make her immortal herself (**Accompanied recitative: Conjure him by his oath**). "Ino" leaves and Jove enters, eager to enjoy Semele (**Aria: Come to my arms, my lovely fair**) but she puts him off (**Aria: I ever am granting**). He swears to give her whatever she desires (**Accompanied recitative: By that tremendous flood, I swear**) and she makes him promise to appear to her in his godlike form (**Accompanied recitative: Then cast off this human shape**). He is alarmed and says that would harm her (**Aria: Ah, take heed what you press**), but she insists he keep his oath (**Aria: No, no, I'll take no less**) and leaves. Jove knows this will mean her destruction and mourns her impending doom (**Accompanied recitative: Ah, whither is she gone!**). Juno triumphs in the success of her scheme (**Aria: Above measure is the pleasure**).

Act III, Scene Three Semele, granted her wish to see Jove in his true godlike form, is consumed by his thunderbolts, and as she dies she regrets her own foolishness and ambition (**Accompanied recitative: Ah me! Too late I now repent**). Watching this, her family express their amazement (**Chorus: Oh, terror and astonishment!**). Ino then reveals that she has been told by the gods that she should marry her beloved Athamus, who readily agrees to this proposition. All celebrate the fortunate outcome (**Chorus: Happy, happy shall we be**).

Characters

Jupiter (Jove) *tenor*

[JOO-pih-ter]
King of the Gods and husband of Juno

Juno *mezzo-soprano*

[JOO-no]
Jupiter's jealous wife

Semele *soprano*

[SEHM-eh-lee]
Daughter to Cadmus, in love with Jupiter

Ino *mezzo-soprano*

[EYE-no]
Sister to Semele, in love with Athamas

Athamas *baritone*

[ATH-ah-muss]
Prince in love with and planning to marry Semele

Cadmus/Somnus *bass*

[CAD-muss] [SOHM-nuss]
King of Thebes, father to Semele; God of sleep (One artist sings both roles)

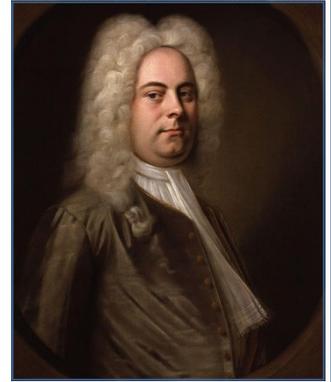
Iris *soprano*

[EYE-rihs]
Juno's messenger

Meet the Composer: G. F. Handel

George Frideric Handel (February 23, 1685–April 14, 1759) was born in Halle, Germany in the same year as Johann Sebastian Bach and Domenico Scarlatti. Though Handel and Bach were born in towns only about 50 miles apart, they never met. Handel's father, a barber-surgeon, wanted his son to become a lawyer, but the young Handel loved music. His father forbade him to touch any musical instruments but his mother smuggled a clavichord into the attic where George would practice when his father was out of the house. After his father died, Handel's propensity for music drove him to find ways to pursue his musical studies and career. In 1702 he went to Hamburg, where he played violin and harpsichord for the only opera company in Germany that existed outside the royal courts.

The *Classic FM Guide* describes Handel as "a bruiser whose robust personality and generous physique were as renowned as his music. His delight in intrigue and gossip was matched only by his insatiable appetite for food and liquor." During a strange incident in 1704, Handel fought a duel with fellow composer Johann Mattheson, who almost killed Handel with his sword, except he hit a button on Handel's chest rather than the chest itself. In 1710, Handel accepted the position of Kapellmeister to George, Elector of Hanover, who was soon to be King George I of Great Britain. In 1712, Handel settled in England, where he began a time of incredible artistic output, writing hundreds of pieces, including operas, oratorios, cantatas, instrumental works, and organ concertos.



Portrait of G. F. Handel by Balthasar Denner (c. 1726–1728)

Handel's life was not without tragedy. His 1737 stroke caused temporary paralysis in his right arm. He was involved in a coach crash, had cataracts, and eventually went blind after a botched eye operation in 1751. He continued to compose despite his blindness, and died in London at age 74. As he requested, he was buried in Westminster Abbey; his funeral was attended by 3,000 mourners. Handel was known for being a generous man. Having never married or fathered children, his will divided his assets among servants and charities, including the Foundling Hospital. He even paid for his own funeral so that no loved ones would bear the financial burden.



Congreve by Godfrey Kneller

Meet the Librettist: William Congreve

William Congreve (1670–1729) was an English playwright and poet of the Restoration period. He is known for his clever, satirical dialogue and influence on the *comedy of manners* style. He wrote the *Semele* libretto before Handel chose to adapt it. Several of Congreve's phrases from his plays have become famous, although sometimes misquoted or misattributed to William Shakespeare.

"Musick has charms to soothe a savage breast"
"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned"
"O fie, Miss, you must not kiss and tell"

Where did Handel find the stories for *Semele* and other operas?



Jupiter et Sémélé
1894–95 oil painting by Gustave Moreau

At its 1744 premiere during the Lenten season, Handel conducted the oratorio *Semele* in concert form at Covent Garden. Due to its unexpected story, the work was performed only four times during its original run, and twice again later in the year, but those were the only performances in Handel's lifetime.

The story comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, based in mythological times, and concerns Semele, mother of Bacchus. The poet's narrative poem (including 15 books and more than 250 myths) has influenced many authors in Western culture—Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare among them.

Numerous episodes from the poem have been depicted in works of sculpture, painting, and music. Handel's oratorio *Semele* has lots of company in a long list of creative works influenced by Ovid.

Pittsburgh Opera has performed other Handel operas, with a variety of source material:

Giulio Cesare (*Julius Caesar*)
Xerxes
Rinaldo
Richard the Lionheart
Alcina

Performed 2003–2004
Performed 2005–2006
Performed 2010–2011
Performed 2016–2017
Performed 2019–2020

A Handel Spelling Primer

Born in Halle, Germany, Handel's name in his native language is **Georg Friedrich Händel** (also written Haendel or Hendel without the umlaut.) Though christened with the middle name **Friederich**, he first signed his name as **Friedrich**.

Multiple spellings of his name reflect his cosmopolitan stature in 18th-century Europe:

- In German speaking countries: **Georg Friederich Händel**
- In Italy, where he received critical musical training:
Giorgio Federico Hendel
- In France: **Haendel**
- In his adopted homeland, England:
George Frideric (or Frederick) Handel

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

George Frideric Handel

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