

The music

Dearest Love
George Friderich Handel *Sorge nell'alma mia (Imeneo)*
Handel *Sorge nel petto (Rinaldo)*

INSTRUMENTAL
Couperin (arr. De Visée):
Les Sylvains

Sweet Pain
Henry Purcell *Music for a While*
The cares of lovers
Claudio Monteverdi *Si dolce è'l tormento*

INSTRUMENTAL
Handel:
Overture from Giulio Cesare

Delicious Revenge
Handel *Svegliatevi nel core (Giulio Cesare)*
Cara Sposa (Rinaldo)

INTERVAL

Gentle Hope
Handel *Cara Speme (Giulio Cesare)*

The Price of Love
Purcell *Ah, Belinda, I am pressed with torment (Dido and Aeneas)*
Handel *Scenes of horror (Jephtha)*
Marc-Antoine Charpentier *Quel prix de mon amour (Médée)*

INSTRUMENTAL
Handel:
Passacaille from Trio Sonata op5 no4 in G major HWV399

Love Restored
Handel *As with rosy steps (Theodora)*
Al lampo dell'armi (Giulio Cesare)

George Friderich Handel (1685-1759)

Handel had already written a handful of operas – first in Hamburg and later in Italy – before he arrived in England in late 1710. His first opera for the London stage, **Rinaldo**, was put on early the following year at the Queen's Theatre, Haymarket. Hugely successful, with an Italian libretto telling

the story of the first Crusade, it remained Handel's most-performed opera during his lifetime. The famous castrato Nicolò Grimaldi played the part of the title character, and the aria *Cara Sposa* comes at the end of the First Act, after his wife-to-be Almirena has been abducted by a sorceress. *Sorge nel petto* comes towards the end of the opera as Goffredo celebrates his victory in the battle for Jerusalem.

Several operas followed over the next decade and in 1719 Handel was appointed Musical Director of the newly-established – but, as it turned out, extremely short-lived – Royal Academy of Music. Perhaps his greatest operatic hit – and not only with modern audiences – came in 1724 with **Giulio Cesare**. Pocket-sized vocal scores were soon available and songbooks with selected arias brought the opera into the home. The title role was first sung by the castrato Senesino, but now normally falls to a mezzo, as does that of Sesto (originally a soprano *en travesti*), son of the murdered Pompeo whom he swears to revenge.

Helen will be singing two of Sesto's arias, the first (*Svegliatevi nel core*) summoning up his courage to seek revenge and the second (*Cara Speme*) when he glimpses signs of hope. Cesare's *Al lampo dell'armi* comes later, after his seduction by Cleopatra when he vows to fight on her side.

Imeneo was Handel's penultimate opera, first performed in 1740 at Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre and memorably categorized by Charles Jennens (he of *Messiah's* libretto) as “the worst of all Handel's Compositions”, but thankfully then adding “yet half the Songs are good”. *Sorge nell'alma mia* is a beautiful love aria sung by Tirinto while he waits to see if he will win out over his rival for the heroine's affections [spoiler: he doesn't].

In the 1740s Handel gave up on opera completely and concentrated on the oratorios which English audiences had come to find far more to their taste. By the time he'd become permanently blind in 1752 he'd written 26 – the majority in his last ten compositional years. **Theodora** (1750) and **Jephtha** (1752) were among the last.

As with rosy steps is sung (with dramatic irony) by Theodora's companion, Irene, just before guards arrive to arrest all the Christians in Antioch who refuse to worship at the altar of Venus. In *Scenes of horror* Storgé (Jephtha's wife), still unaware of her husband's rash vow to sacrifice the first living thing he sees if he returns victorious from battle, describes a nightmare in which she senses tragedy ahead.

Pieces by three earlier composers also figure in tonight's programme. **Monteverdi's** (1567-1643) *Si dolce è'l tormento* was published in 1624 and tells the familiar tale of a lover pining hopelessly for an indifferent other. **Charpentier's** (1643-1704) *Quel prix de mon amour* comes from his tragic opera *Médée*, written in 1693 for Louis XIV's court. The heroine sings of her resentment of Jason for loving another, given all she's done for him.

We'll also hear three examples of **Purcell's** vocal art. His life was short (1659-1695) but musically highly productive, nowhere more so than in his songs, many of which were printed in his lifetime and republished frequently thereafter. In his 1698 introduction to Volume I of *Orpheus Britannicus* – the first of the many collections published after the composer's death – Henry Playford commented specifically on Purcell's genius in melding the English language with his music: “...having a peculiar Genius to express the Energy of English Words, whereby he moved the Passions as well as caused Admiration in all his Auditors.”

Music for a While is one of Purcell's best-known songs, written for a 1692 revival of Dryden's version of *Oedipus* and published in 1702 in Volume II of *Orpheus Britannicus*. It sings the praises of music as an unailing cure for all one's troubles.

The cares of lovers was part of the incidental music Purcell wrote for Thomas Shadwell's 1694 version of *Timon of Athens*. As part of the play's masque-like entertainment, Cupid sings of his masochistic delight in the pleasurable pain of love.

The aria *Ah, Belinda, I am pressed with torment*, comes right at the beginning of Purcell's only opera *Dido and Aeneas* (1687?). Dido is in mental agony but dare not make the reason public. Belinda, however, is well aware that her mistress's misery comes from her as yet unacknowledged love for Aeneas and goes on to advise Dido to embrace it. Therein will lie the tragedy.

Notes by Dick Ware

Visit www.little-missenden.org

The artists

Helen Charlston *mezzo-soprano*
Magdalena Loth-Hill, Gabriella Jones *violins*
Elitsa Bogdanova *viola* **Jonathan Byers** *cello*
Jonatan Bougt *theorbo* **Satoko Doi-Luck** *harpsichord*

“These characters come alive in Charlston’s flexible mezzo, surely one of the most exciting voices in the new generation of British singers...” *Gramophone*

Helen Charlston began singing as a chorister and then head chorister of the St Albans Abbey Girls Choir. She went on to study music at Trinity College, Cambridge where she held a choral scholarship for four years, and was a scholar on the Pembroke College Lieder Scheme, led by Joseph Middleton.

Winner of the 2023 *BBC Music Magazine* Vocal Awards, she won first prize in the 2018 London Handel Singing Competition, was a finalist in the 2019 Grange Festival International Singing Competition, won the Ferrier Loveday Song Prize in the 2021 Kathleen Ferrier Awards and has been a BBC New Generation Artist. Helen was a founder participant of the Rising Star of the Enlightenment programme, working alongside the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment; a member of Les Arts Florissants Young Artist Programme (Jardin des Voix) for 2021/22; and is a 2018 City Music Foundation Artist.

This coming season Helen makes her debut in San Francisco with the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra singing Irene in Handel’s *Theodora*; joins the Dunedin Consort for the first time; and makes her debuts with Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, RIAS Kammerchor and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. Helen returns to join Les Arts Florissants singing the title role in Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* at The Royal Opera of Versailles and will perform the role of the Sorceress in the same opera for Grange Festival Opera.

She is regularly heard on the concert platform with some of the UK’s most prominent collaborative pianists. In recent years she has performed at the Oxford Lieder Festival, Leeds Lieder and the Ryedale Festival, as well as giving recitals at Wigmore Hall and the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam.

“She is one of the finest young singers on the ‘early music’ circuit, with a clarity of tone and generally excellent control of a minimal natural vibrato.” *Andrew Benson-Wilson*

helencharlston.com

Festival Patron: David Matthews

Grateful acknowledgements

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Next year’s Festival

The 2025 Little Missenden Festival will run from Friday 3rd to Sunday 12th October.

Festival website little-missenden.org

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- Email: tickets@little-missenden.org
- Phone: 01494 958148 between 11am and 8pm

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- Email: contact@little-missenden.org

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Programme Notes

HELEN CHARLSTON

The Cares of Love



8pm, Friday October 4th, 2024
Little Missenden Church

64th Little Missenden Festival