

Synopsis

The action is set in Roman-occupied Antioch in the early 4th century, and opens with a decree given by the President and Governor, Valens. In honour of the Emperor Diocletian's birthday, all citizens shall offer sacrifice to the Roman goddesses Venus and Flora, or be severely punished. Valens gives his officer Septimius responsibility for ensuring general compliance. The chorus of Romans cheerfully endorses the decree, but a junior Roman officer, Didymus, asks that loyal citizens whose consciences prevent them from obeying may be spared punishment. Valens responds with yet fiercer threats of reprisal, and the chorus relishes the prospect of the recusants' suffering. Alone with Septimius, Didymus condemns persecution and speaks out for freedom of belief. Septimius, clearly suspecting Didymus' Christianity, affirms his own loyalty to Roman rule but appeals to the spirit of pity to instil universal tolerance.

The scene changes to a meeting of the persecuted Christian community. Theodora, Princess of Antioch, and her friend Irene lead their fellow believers in renouncing worldly ambition and greed and in sharing their gratitude for the strength of their belief. A messenger interrupts them with news of Valens' decree. The Christians are about to disperse in panic, but Irene rallies them with a magnificent statement of hope, and they re-affirm their faith. Septimius comes to arrest them, but tries first to warn them of the seriousness of their predicament. Theodora speaks out in defence of Christianity, knowing she is risking her life, but Septimius has to tell her that her punishment is not death but enforced prostitution until she recants. Praying to die rather than suffer this blow to her integrity, Theodora is led away. Irene is left to break the news to Didymus, who vows to rescue Theodora or die in the attempt. The Christians pray for the success of his mission.

The second part opens with the festival of Venus and Flora in full swing. Valens sends Septimius to tell Theodora that she will be subjected to violation by his soldiers unless she joins in the pagan worship before the end of the day. The chorus of Roman men chorus looks forward to the delights of the brothel. The scene changes to Theodora's place of confinement in the brothel, where she endures her Gethsemane. Initially frightened and near to despair, she regains strength in contemplation of the hope of a heavenly after-life. Didymus approaches Septimius, who is in charge of her guard, and appeals to their friendship as fellow soldiers. He reveals both his Christianity and his love for Theodora, and persuades Septimius to let him into Theodora's cell. Meanwhile Irene leads the Christians in prayer for Theodora's protection.

Didymus enters the cell - his identity concealed by his closed helmet - thinking how happy Theodora will be at the prospect of freedom. Theodora is initially terrified, assuming him to be her first ravisher, but Didymus reveals his identity and offers to exchange clothes with her to effect her escape. Steadfast in the principles of her faith, Theodora refuses to countenance such an idea and asks instead that Didymus kill her, to release her from the seemingly inevitable threats to her integrity. Horrified in his turn, Didymus eventually persuades her to trust that God will save them both, and to accept his plan. The action returns to the Christians, who recount the story of Christ's raising of the son of the widow of Nain, affirming God's power to save even the dead.

At the opening of the third part, the Christians' prayers appear to have been answered by Theodora's safe return. Together with the chorus she celebrates her freedom and prays for her deliverer, but she remains guilt-ridden at having endangered Didymus' life to secure her own safety. A messenger reports that Didymus has been captured and that Valens, enraged, has changed Theodora's sentence from prostitution to immediate death. Now the way is made clear for Theodora to match Didymus' generosity with her own and, despite Irene's protests, she gladly and unhesitatingly goes to offer herself in his place. Irene, in spite of her personal grief, recognises that Theodora has found a greater calling.

The final scenes open in the midst of Didymus' resolute defence of his disobedience. As Valens pronounces sentence Theodora enters, demanding that the judgement fall on her. Didymus and Theodora then both attempt to persuade Valens to let them die in place of each other. Septimius is so moved by their courage that he urges the awestruck Romans to join him in appealing for clemency. However, Valens, logically if vindictively, condemns both prisoners to death, which Theodora and Didymus, in a blissful duet, welcome as the door to a shared immortality. Led by Irene, their fellow Christians pray to be vouchsafed an equally transcendent faith.

‘As finished, beautiful and labour’d a composition, as ever Handel made’

Handel wrote *Theodora* in the summer of 1749, when he was 64. It is his penultimate dramatic oratorio and was first performed on 16 March 1750 at Covent Garden Theatre. At its first hearing *Theodora* was admired by Handel’s musical acquaintances, but played to very thin houses (perhaps, in part, because Londoners had been alarmed by minor earthquakes). Handel gave only two further performances in the same season and revived it only once, for a single performance in 1755. The librettist was the Reverend Thomas Morell, who had provided the texts for *Judas Maccabaeus* (1747) and *Alexander Balus* (1748), and who was also to provide the text for *Jephtha* (1752). From Morell’s account of their collaboration, a belief has grown up that *Theodora* was Handel’s favourite among his oratorios; whilst this might be argued from the power and beauty of the music, it has no foundation in testimony. Morell also stated, more certainly, that Handel thought the chorus at the end of Part 2 (‘He saw the lovely youth’) far superior to his ‘Hallelujah’ chorus in *Messiah*.

The Making of Theodora

Theodora is unique in Handel’s output. Unlike his other religious dramas it is not drawn from the Bible or Apocrypha, and it is his only oratorio set in Christian times. The martyrdom of Theodora and Didymus was first recounted by St Ambrose in his three-volume work about lives of admirable virgins, *De Virginibus* (AD377). In 1675 the legend of Theodora first appeared in the *Acta Sanctorum*, a 68-volume collection of saints’ lives compiled from records of the early church fathers. In England it was included in what was for many a companion volume to the Bible, John Foxe’s ‘Book of Martyrs’, the *Acts and Monuments of... the Church* (9th edition 1684), which also tells of Diocletian’s persecutions. Morell knew Pierre Corneille’s unsuccessful play about Theodora (1646), but his primary source was *The Martyrdom of Theodora and Didymus* (1687), a novel by Robert Boyle, scientist and man of letters. Morell was probably prompted by the reprint of the novel in the complete edition of Boyle’s works published in 1744.

Boyle – who founded a famous series of lectures in defence of Christian doctrine – stated that his aim in writing a novel, and writing it mainly in dialogue, was to improve upper-class youth with an inspirational story about attractive and virtuous young people; and to show that women can be heroines, as brave, constant, generous, rational, understanding and capable as men. Morell followed Boyle’s plot and characterisation, but made some crucial changes. As well as creating choruses of the Roman and Christian communities, he strengthened the personality of Irene and advanced the role of Septimius from a walk-on part to a central character. In Boyle’s work Didymus is a Syrian who had previously served in the Roman army, but Morell re-casts the role as a Roman soldier on active duty, creating a further strand of dramatic tension.

Morell used many of Boyle’s phrases verbatim, but stripped out dozens of pages of theological discussion. By condensing crucial, life-determining decisions (expounded at length by Boyle the scientist-theologian) into brief moments of recitative, and inventing emotive aria texts, Morell produced a libretto well suited to Handel’s oratorio style. It is a very different work from his source text, but Boyle’s novel, Morell’s libretto, and Handel’s oratorio, all belong to the same dramatic genre. *Theodora* epitomises ‘sentimental drama’.

Theodora as sentimental drama

Sentimental drama was a type of theatre much esteemed and much practised in 18th-century Britain. Many of its features recur in operas and oratorios by Handel, but nowhere so consistently and pervasively as in *Theodora*. Extensive, detailed expositions of motives, moral dilemmas and emotional situations; focus on tender emotions and domestic, intimate relationships; empathy with the feelings of others; heroic displays of self-denying generosity to a dearly-loved individual, a cause, or both; the leading characters vying with each other to be the more generous; a heroine who sets the higher standard of heroism and generosity, to the admiration of her male counterpart; a plot articulated by a series of dilemmas pressurising characters into making choices, often fatal, arising from clashes of loyalty: all these are defining features of sentimental drama, and central aspects of *Theodora*.

All the main characters are repeatedly confronted with choices which will crucially affect both their own lives and the lives of those close to them. Most of these testing moments occur in the recitative and so they are easy to miss, but once noticed, they emphasise that there is nothing ‘predestined’ about the action. It is not Theodora’s inevitable fate to be martyred, and while Theodora, Didymus and Irene are not transformed

by events, they are not automata: they could choose to behave differently. However, the action is predetermined insofar as Theodora's and Didymus' commitment to their religion is so strong that their decision about each choice is (almost) predictable – which makes the action all the more poignant and tragic.

Septimius, the 'ordinary' person, does hesitate, and his reactions illuminate the extraordinary certainty which the strength of their faith gives to Theodora, Didymus and Irene. They have already made their central choice – to adhere to Christianity – and events test their decision, whereas during the course of the action Septimius actually changes. Valens' right-hand man and agent of Roman repression becomes increasingly sympathetic to the Christians. The scenes in which Septimius appears, especially those with Didymus, explore the pain of moral dilemma: between commitment to belief and family ties; between belief and national identity; between loyalty to a friend and pledged allegiance to one's country. The Christians' religious commitment demands the choice between life and death. Septimius, torn by duty and sympathy, faces choices nearer to ordinary experience. His reactions form a bridge to the feelings of the audience. Morell's text ended with his conversion to Christianity, a scene which was not set by Handel but was printed in the first edition of the libretto. Especially as initially conceived, the character of Septimius encapsulates one of the main and, for its time, most surprising themes of *Theodora*: freedom of thought.

***Theodora* and religious belief**

Morell was a Church of England vicar but also a distinguished classical scholar. Through his characterisation of Septimius he preserves some of the laudable Roman rationalism and respect for tradition which Boyle, in his novel, set up as a serious opposition to Christian inspiration. One of Morell's friends, James Thomson, poet and author of several sentimental dramas, was an advocate of religious freethinking. His plays frequently encourage respect for other faiths, especially tolerant faiths, as opposed to persecution in the name of religion. *Theodora* is imbued with the same concern, and speaks persuasively for freedom of belief.

In the ten years preceding the composition of *Theodora* Britain had been at war with France and Spain, which were Catholic autocracies and also the dominant European nations. France had fostered the Jacobite Rebellion in Britain in 1745, when government propaganda warned the British public that a Jacobite victory would mean an Inquisition and forced conversions to Catholicism. The abhorrence for persecution voiced by Didymus and shared by Septimius would have been heard by establishment members of Handel's audience as a familiar condemnation of the Inquisition (the instruments of torment with which Valens threatens the Christians are those of the Inquisition rather than the Roman empire).

However, unlike the usual British anti-Catholic propaganda of his time, Morell does not in fact say that one form of Christianity is better than another. More remarkably, he calls for true freedom of religious thought, at a time when it was shocking for an English person not to subscribe to the doctrines of Christianity.

***Theodora* and the idea of the heroine**

Morell's characterisation of the heroine is both of its time and strikingly forward-looking. Theodora is one of several vulnerable, beleaguered oratorio heroines whose predicament brings out their strength of character, a line begun in Handel's first oratorio, *Esther*, returned to as a central theme in *Susanna* and continued with Iphis in *Jephtha*. Like her immediate oratorio precursor Susanna, Theodora is threatened with rape, and like her could say 'Fearless of death, as innocent, I triumph in my fall'.

Attempted rape specifically, and more generally female 'virtue in distress', are dominant motifs in English fictions of the mid-18th-century. Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*, and the first illustration of *The Harlot's Progress* by William Hogarth (a friend of Morell) are well known examples. The theme is also central to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-8), novels which won huge admiration at their first appearance. Pamela is abducted, imprisoned, and assaulted by her master before winning him to virtue by her courage and example. Like Theodora in the church fathers' accounts of her life, Clarissa refuses to marry, stating she prefers the single life. Like Theodora, she is subjected to mental and physical cruelty. Clarissa's story, again like Theodora's, is tragic: she too is confined in a brothel, where her abductor does rape her, and she declines rapidly into death.

For both Clarissa and Theodora, as for the audiences of their time, virginity is the essence of female integrity. There is nothing coy or insipid in their resistance to violation. On the contrary, for all their vulnerability to male oppression, Clarissa and Theodora are women of astonishing dignity and strength, showing an independence of mind and will that would now be called feminist. With their close female confidantes, they stand out above their male oppressors in spirit and spirituality. Clarissa's end is described as a triumph, and the nearer her life draws to its close, the greater her power over her persecutors. Like Morell's Theodora, she causes many to atone and change their ways.

Handel's audience would often buy the libretto to read in advance of the performance. From the text alone they might well have been dismayed by an apparent bleakness in Theodora's character and fate. In sharp contrast to other heroes and heroines in Handel's oratorios, she has no family, she is not in love with her hero-admirer, she spurns the society to which by birth she belongs and she breaks away even from her fellow-believers and her dearest friend in pursuit of her ideals; to the 18th-century public such strength could have seemed too devoid of feminine graces to make an attractive heroine.

This is to reckon without Handel. In no other of his oratorios is the text quite so transformed by the emotional expressiveness of the music, which constantly invests the characters with tenderness and selfless generosity, and – a particularly striking feature of the work – repeatedly evokes the happier state of being to which the characters aspire, rather than the cruelty, violence and death which form much of the drama.

Theodora was at least as thought-provoking in its own time as it appears today. Perhaps we should not be surprised if 18th-century audiences did not understand every aspect of this extraordinary work. Like all significant works of art, *Theodora* reflects and expands on the ideas of its time, and recognising the soil from which it grew can enhance its meaning for both performer and audience. But Handel's music has an emotional impact above and beyond historical fact. In *Theodora* its warmth, sweetness, and variety, informed by Handel's great dramatic sensitivity, bring to life these figures of early Christian legend with complete, overpowering vividness.

The versions of Theodora

Paul McCreesh

The first performance of *Theodora* was a conspicuous failure with Handel's audience, and, as often in such situations, Handel succumbed to what might be described as mild form of artistic paranoia, cutting the score to such a degree as to make little artistic sense. The shortened recitatives that Handel used for some later performances inevitably lessen the literary form, as much as aria cuts undermine the musical structure; both fundamentally damage the dramatic balance. Hopefully, in the 21st century we are at last beginning to recognise that baroque opera and oratorio dictate a very different pacing from that of later music dramas. Whatever pressures led Handel to make cuts, in a work as consistently inspired as *Theodora* it is difficult to believe that such cuts represent a genuine artistic improvement. This recording therefore restores the entire text, including the fullest versions of both recitatives and arias, as were most probably sung at the first 1750 performance.

The second scene of Part II has always presented serious editorial problems. Detailed analysis of both scores and wordbooks has not conclusively revealed Handel's intentions. It is most likely that Handel's original version of this scene included the *Symphony of Soft Music* for two flutes and bassoon. Also preserved in Handel's scores are two other interludes, for strings and flutes, probably relating to later performances. These are included in this recording in an alternative version of Part II scene 2, as an interesting example of a composer's second thoughts.

Extracts from letters to James Harris are quoted from the forthcoming collection of references to music and theatre from the papers of James Harris, edited by Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill (Clarendon Press, Oxford, forthcoming), quoted by courtesy of the Earl of Malmesbury

Letters to Handel's friend James Harris in Salisbury from his family in London

I was last Night to see, or rather hear, *Theodora* but I must forbear to mention my opinion of it till I have heard it at least once more. Mr Boyle has wrote a very pretty, I think I may call it *Divine Novel* on the same Subject and the best words in the Oratorio are taken Verbatim from him. I hope to compare Notes with my Cousin Harris tomorrow at Lady Shaftes[bury] at Dinner...

(from the Countess of Shaftesbury, 18 March 1750)

I was last night at *Theodora*, which does not please the generality of people, but I differ widely in my opinion, for I think it has many excellent songs, composed with great art and care, and such as I am sure you will highly approve. Dr Fawcett & Mr Granville whom I met there are entirely in the same sentiments as I am. Last night was the thinnest house he [Handel] has had at all; but they have hitherto been so good that I am certain he must be a considerable gainer at all events.

(from Thomas Harris, 22 March 1750)

I can't conclude a letter, and forget *Theodora*. I have heard it three times, and venture to pronounce it, as finished, beautiful and labour'd a composition, as ever Handel made. To my knowledge this took him up a great while in composing. The Town don't like it at all; but Mr Kellaway and several excellent musicians think as I do.

(from the Earl of Shaftesbury, 24 March 1750)

From Thomas Morell's account of his collaborations with Handel (undated, c 1764)

The 2nd night of *Theodora* was very thin indeed, tho' the Princess Amelia was there. I guessed it a losing night, so did not go to Mr Handel as usual; but seeing him smile, I ventured, when, "Will you be there next Friday night," says he, "and I will play it to you?" I told him I had just seen Sir T Hankey, "and he desired me to tell you, that if you would have it again, he would engage for all the Boxes." "*He is a fool; the Jews will not come to it (as to Judas) because it is a Christian story; and the Ladies will not, because it [is] a virtuous one.*"

From Charles Burney's 'Life of Handel' (1785)

In 1749 [*recte* 1750], *Theodora* was so very unfortunately abandoned, that he was glad if any professors, who did not perform, would accept of tickets or orders for admission. Two gentlemen of that description, now living, having applied to HANDEL, after the disgrace of *Theodora*, for an order to hear the MESSIAH, he cried out, 'Oh your sarvant, Mien-herren! You are tamnapple tainty! you would not co to TEODORA – der was room enough to tance dere, when dat was perform.'

Sometimes, however, I have heard him, as pleasantly as philosophically, console his friends, when, previous to the curtain being drawn up, they have lamented that the house was so empty, by saying, 'Nevre mind; de moosic vil sound de petter.'