

# *Amadis de Gaule*, the culmination of an operatic career

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Unlike any other member of his illustrious family before him, Johann Christian Bach (who was to marry the soprano Cecilia Grassi) maintained a lifelong connection with the world of opera. He was, incidentally, also the only member who converted from Lutheranism to Catholicism.

He first really came into contact with opera during the years he spent in Berlin (1750-1754), where he went to stay – and train – with his half-brother, Carl Philipp Emmanuel, after their father's death. At that time he frequently had the opportunity to attend performances at the Royal Berlin Opera House, founded by the musical king Frederick II (who was noted as a flautist). There he heard fine works composed in the Italian style by Carl Heinrich Graun (Kappellmeister to Frederick II), Johann Adolf Hasse or Niccolò Jommelli. But it was in Italy, where he went next, that he really learned how to compose operas. As a student of the famous Padre Martini in Bologna, he began by composing religious music. But there was only a very fine dividing line between church and stage music in Italy at that time. Take, for example, the 'Tuba mirum' for soprano and orchestra from his *Dies Irae* of 1757: with other words, it could be a perfectly convincing anger aria in an opera. Bach's operatic career took over more or less from his career as a church musician. In all, during his lifetime, he produced eleven operas, sometimes in quick succession: *Artaserse* (1760), *Catone in Utica* (1761), *Alessandro nell'Indie* (1762), *Orione* (1763), *Zanàida* (1763), *Adriano in Siria* (1765), *Carattaco* (1767), *Temistocle* (1772), *Lucio Silla* (1775), *La Clemenza di Scipione* (1778), *Amadis de Gaule* (1779).

His operatic output may be divided into three parts: those written while he was in Italy, those composed in England, where he settled for good, and those commissioned from elsewhere while he was in London:

¶ It was in Italy that he composed his earliest works, all of them to librettos by the great Metastasio and in accordance with the canons of the *opera seria*, characterised by the alternation of *da capo* arias (in A-B-A form, the first section repeated at the end with ornamentation and elaboration of the music by the singer) and recitatives with continuo accompaniment: *Artaserse* (Turin, 1760), *Catone in Utica* (Naples, 1761) and *Alessandro nell'Indie* (Naples, 1762). The success of these three works attracted attention and he received an invitation from London's King's Theatre in the Haymarket. At that time the competition between the opera theatres in London was fierce, with all of them vying to engage the best Italian singers and composers, or ones who had been trained in Italy.

¶ In London, of course, he continued to compose in the Italian style. It was in the quality of his instrumentation, immediately noticed by the connoisseurs, that he overshadowed his rivals. His use of the wind instruments, in particular, was hailed as original and inventive. In *Orione* of 1763, he was apparently the first to use the English horn and the clarinet in a London theatre. The music historian Charles Burney wrote of that opera, 'Every judge of Music perceived the emanations of genius throughout the whole performance, but were chiefly struck with the richness of the harmony, the ingenious texture of the parts, and, above all, with the new and happy use he had made of the wind-instruments: this being the first time that *clarinets* had admission in our opera orchestra.' (*A general history of music: from the earliest ages to the present...*, vol. 4, p. 481.) Johann Christian Bach also developed and expanded the role of the chorus in *Carattaco* of 1767. In all, for London, he wrote five Italian operas between 1763 and 1778, plus ten or so opera pasticcios (works, very popular at that time, composed of music, old or new, by various composers). The most ambitious example of the latter is undoubtedly his acclaimed version of

Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, to which he added, for the London première of the work in 1770, seven new arias and a scene for the chorus.

¶ The existence of the third group of operas by Bach was a direct consequence of his popularity, which spread far beyond London music circles. Likewise, a few years later, Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), seen as the greatest living composer in the years 1780-1800, received commissions and invitations from Paris (the 'Paris' Symphonies), London (the 'London' Symphonies) and even Cádiz (the original version for orchestra of *The Seven Last Words of our Saviour on the Cross*). Johann Christian Bach received three commissions from abroad, leading to *Temistocle* (1772) and *Lucio Silla* (1775, to the libretto Mozart had used three years previously in Milan) for the Prince-Elector Palatine in Mannheim, and *Amadis de Gaule* (1779) for the Paris Opéra – Académie Royale de Musique. These three works represent the pinnacle of his operatic output, the finest of his eleven operas. *Temistocle* is a brilliant work, orchestrally very rich (virtuosic *obbligato* bassoon part at the end of Act I, presence of three *clarinettes d'amour*, as in *Lucio Silla*) and introducing, in a most innovative way for the time, a very elaborate final act based on a series of contrasting episodes. *Lucio Silla*, which gives up the large brass and timpani forces, is perhaps the most refined of all his operas. The overture, subsequently published as the Sinfonia in B flat major, op. 18, no. 2, and performed and recorded regularly throughout the twentieth century, is a masterpiece in its constantly inventive use of the wind instruments, which is also a feature of *Amadis*. There is fine use of the choruses in *Lucio Silla*, as in *Amadis*. As for the arias, Mozart, after reading the score of *Lucio* in 1777, described 'Pupille amate' as 'beautiful' (letter to his father, 13 November). Earlier he had similarly praised 'Non so d'onde viene' from *Alessandro nell'Indie*, which he had heard in London in 1764 included in the pasticcio *Ezio*, describing it as having been 'set so beautifully'; he later set the same text himself for Aloysia Weber (for whom he had already written challenging ornamentation for the aria 'Cara la dolce fiamma' from Johann Christian's *Adriano in Siria*).

*Amadis* is the most ambitious of Bach's operas. It owes its great unity to the fact that it was thought out 'as a whole'. For a start, richly orchestrated, it has a constant flow; the arias generally merge into the recitatives (all with orchestral accompaniment) or choruses by means of a simple harmonic transition: one scene thus moves smoothly into the next, the opera is *durchkomponiert*, through-composed. Then the keys and key progressions have been carefully worked out. Arcabonne, for instance, enters at the beginning of Act I and exits at the end of Act III (when she commits suicide) to exactly the same G-minor chords. Finally, the composer does not hesitate to use 'difficult' keys – ones rarely employed at that time that considerably darken the music – for all the tragic scenes (B flat minor for the first chorus sung by the captives, E flat minor for the following solo for Amadis, when he is about to fight Arcaläus).



After that *Amadis* was not staged again until the 1980s. Its overture was sometimes played, having been published – along with those of *Lucio Silla*, *Endimione* (a serenade of 1772) and *Temistocle* (slow movement with revised orchestration) – by William Forster in London in 1781 (or 1782) as op. 18, no. 6, and under the title of *Grand Overture*. But it was no doubt an arrangement, probably by Forster himself. Indeed, whereas in the original overture the third movement is a shortened and slightly modified repeat of the first, the Forster edition (and the modern edition derived from it in 1956) ends with the gigue that closes Act II of the opera (taken down a tone to be consistent with the rest of the music) and inserts, as an extra movement in third position, the gavotte from Act I. The fact that it is in four movements (making op. 18, no. 6, the composer's only four-movement work, if he wrote it) confirms the hypothesis of an arrangement made by a publisher, like the 'collage work' that Walsh had carried out some decades earlier, when he made Handel's 6 Concerti Grossi op. 3 available to the public. The first public revival took place in 1977, when Radio France presented a concert version, conducted by Guy Condette.

In the early 1980s *Amadis* was recorded quite confidentially (with the Dutch Radio Chamber Orchestra and Chorus conducted by Kenneth Montgomery), before being staged at the Hamburg Opera House (in German, and conducted by Helmuth Rilling; a production that was later recorded). It was then performed at the Heidelberg Opera House in 1997, the Wakefield Opera House in 2001 (in an English translation), the Mannheim Opera (in French) in 2009, before being given in a concert version at the Prague State Opera and the Bratislava Opera House in 2010.

This recording, made following the concert in Bratislava in 2010, restores both the original language and the original colours of a score that marked the culmination for Johann Christian Bach of almost twenty years of operatic production. The splendid choruses for two, three, four, five, or even eight voices (Chorus of the Demons – CD I: 10) owe much to his work with Padre Martini (we are reminded of the double choruses in his *Dies Irae* of 1757 and his unfinished *Te Deum* of 1762). The luxuriance of the orchestra (independent trombone parts, four horns instead of the usual two in the chorus heralding the arrival of Urgande – CD II: 23; refinement of the woodwinds, solo for the timpani at the end of the *tambourin* that brings Act II to a close – CD II: 10) and the constant quest for new colours (dark and disturbing, as in the chorus sung by the captives at the beginning of Act II – CD I: 24; heroic, as in the airs and duets for Arcabonne and Arcalaüs) remind us that the composer had been in Mannheim a few years earlier. And the setting of Arcabonne's different 'tomb scenes' (CD I: 29 and 30; CD II: 20) directly prefigures the atmosphere of the graveyard scene in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787) – no small compliment for the youngest son of the great Johann Sebastian Bach!

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Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Lully, composer of the first version of *Amadis*, which Johann Christian Bach took as a model. Collection of the Geneva Conservatoire.

Portrait de Jean-Baptiste Lully, l'auteur de l'*Amadis* qui servit de modèle à Johann Christian Bach. Collection Conservatoire de Genève.