



COMMUNICATION: REPORT

## Johann Christian Bach: Operas and Dramatic Works

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Johann Christian Bach (1735–1782), youngest son of Johann Sebastian Bach, was one of the most gifted composers of his time. Unlike his father and brothers, J. C. Bach travelled widely, starting in Italy, where he studied with Padre Martini in Bologna and learned how to compose opera in the galant style. After making his debut with *Artaserse* for Turin and writing two operas for Naples, he was called to London by Colomba Mattei to be music director of the King's Theatre in 1762, and eventually became music master to Queen Charlotte. While in London he wrote new operas and arranged pasticcios for the King's Theatre, and he befriended the young Wolfgang Amadeus during the Mozart family's visit to London. In the 1770s, J. C. Bach was commissioned to provide two operas for the Mannheim court and one French opera for Paris.

Bach had a varied career as a composer, performer and impresario – in London he ran the famous Bach–Abel concert series and published much of his own solo and accompanied keyboard music, symphonies and concertos – but his main accomplishment was in opera. Bach's career took him to some of the most important centres for opera (Naples, London, Paris), meaning that he interacted with leading composers (Antonio Sacchini, Niccolò Piccinni and Mozart) and singers (Anton Raaff, Caterina Gabrielli, Anna Lucia de Amicis, Gaetano Guadagni, Ferdinando Tenducci, Francesca Danzi-Lebrun and Valentin Adamberger). His output of Italian operas includes settings of librettos by Metastasio (adapted for London by Giovanni Gualberto Bottarelli and for Mannheim by Mattia Verazi), and his only French opera is based on an old libretto by Quinault (updated for late eighteenth-century Paris, like Gluck's *Armide* and Piccinni's *Roland*). He also wrote some works that lie outside the norm: *Caratacco*, an opera based on ancient British history; *Gioas, re di Giuda*, an Italian oratorio with extensive choruses in the manner of Handel's English oratorios; and a pasticcio arrangement of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, expanded with new roles and music.

Charles Burney wrote of J. C. Bach's first opera for London, *Orione*:

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 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 Period*, four volumes, volume 4 (London: author, 1789), 481)

In a subsequent, oft-quoted passage, Burney singled out the particular qualities of Bach's operas:

There are many admirable airs in the operas he composed for our stage that long remained in favour. The richness of the accompaniments perhaps deserve[s] more praise than the originality of the melodies; which, however, are always natural, elegant, and in the best taste of Italy at the time he came over. The Neapolitan school, where he studied, is manifest in his cantilena,

and the science of his father and brother in his harmony. The operas of this master are the first in which *Da Capos* disappeared, and which, about this time, began to be generally discontinued: the second part being incorporated with the first, to which, after modulating into the fifth of the key, the singer generally returns.

Bach seems to have been the first composer who observed the law of *contrast*, as a *principle*. Before his time, contrast there frequently was, in the works of others; but it seems to have been accidental. Bach in his symphonies and other instrumental pieces, as well as his songs, seldom failed, after a rapid and noisy passage to introduce one that was slow and soothing. (*A General History of Music*, volume 4, 483)

The music of Bach's operas sounds remarkably like that found in some of Mozart's early Italian operas, and both composers set Giovanni de Gamerra's libretto *Lucio Silla* (Mozart first in 1772, later adapted by Verazi for J. C. Bach in 1775). Mozart heard one of Bach's operas (*Adriano in Siria*) in London, and later studied the two works for Mannheim (*Temistocle* and *Lucio Silla*). Finally, Mozart met Bach and the castrato Tenducci outside Paris in September 1778, by which time Bach had received a commission to write *Amadis* for the Opéra. When Mozart learned of Bach's death in early 1782, he wrote to his father: 'What a loss to the musical world!' ('schade für die Musikalische Welt!'; letter of 10 April 1782, *Digitale Mozart-Edition Briefe und Dokumente*, <https://dme.mozarteum.at/DME/briefe/> (27 February 2024)).

Given the importance of Bach's operas in their time, it is surprising that none of them has been published in a modern critical edition. One work, *Temistocle*, was published in a piano-vocal score in 1965, edited by H. C. Robbins Landon and Edward Downes (Vienna: Universal), but this is in fact a modern pasticcio. *The Collected Works of Johann Christian Bach*, edited by Ernest Warburton and others, published mostly in the 1980s by Garland, includes the operas in facsimiles of eighteenth-century scores with a few late twentieth-century transcriptions. Some of the reproductions are poor, and the facsimiles do not always present the best texts, but rather whatever manuscript was readily available. In short, the edition is not sufficient for scholarly study or performance.

To rectify the situation, The Packard Humanities Institute is pleased to announce a new edition: *Johann Christian Bach: Operas and Dramatic Works*. Our goal is to make available, in both printed and digital formats, a critical edition of the composer's operas, an oratorio and several cantatas. The fifteen volumes will include:

- 1 *Artaserse* (Turin, 1760)
- 2 *Catone in Utica* (Naples, 1761)
- 3 *Alessandro nell'Indie* (Naples, 1762)
- 4 *Orione, ossia Diana vendicata* (London, 1763)
- 5 *Zanaida* (London, 1763)
- 6 *Adriano in Siria* (London, 1765)
- 7 *Carattaco* (London, 1767)
- 8 *Endimione* (London, 1772)
- 9 *Temistocle* (Mannheim, 1772)
- 10 *Amor vincitore* (London, 1774)
- 11 *Lucio Silla* (Mannheim, 1775)
- 12 *La clemenza di Scipione* (London, 1778)
- 13 *Amadis de Gaule* (Paris, 1779)
- 14 *Gioas, re di Giuda* (oratorio; London, 1770)
- 15 Cantatas: *Cantata a tre voci* (Naples, 1762); *La tempesta* (London, 1773?); *Cefalo e Procris* (London, 1776).

Each volume contains a critical report that includes a brief description and evaluation of the sources used for the edition. An introduction provides background on the opera's first production, along with a brief summary of its plot, and the opera's reception to the present day. Most of these introductory essays have already been published in *The Operas of Johann Christian Bach: An Introduction*, ed. Jason B. Grant (Los Altos: The Packard Humanities Institute, 2023). In addition, a modern version of the libretto is included, reflecting the music underlay in Italian or French, as well as an English translation. The editorial board includes Margaret R. Butler, Ulrich Leisinger, David W. Packard, Annette Richards, Stephen Roe, Christoph Wolff and Peter Wollny. The editors are Laura Buch, Jason B. Grant and me (Paul Corneilson, managing editor). Further information can be found at [jcbach.org](http://jcbach.org).

**Paul Corneilson** is managing editor of *Johann Christian Bach: Operas and Dramatic Works* and also the recently completed edition *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: The Complete Works*, both published by The Packard Humanities Institute. He has published numerous articles on Mozart and eighteenth-century opera singers.