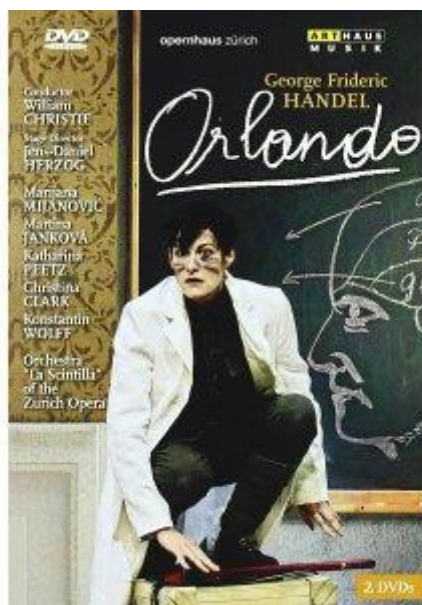


Like *Alcina* and *Ariodante*, *Orlando* is drawn, roughly speaking, from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. And in this case we get the title character himself, Orlando, who has come back from the wars – it doesn't really matter which one/s – in a bad way.



Orlando is in love with Angelica, who used to be in love with Orlando but now loves Medoro. Medoro likes Angelica well enough, but is happy to string along Dorinda, who loves Medoro – or is pretty sure she does – and this complicated situation unfolds under the watchful eye of Zoroastro, a Sarastro-like figure whose primary pleasure in life seems to be observing other people's follies and shaking his head.

The point of the story is that love has turned Orlando into a little bit of a loose cannon. When Angelica provokes Orlando's jealousy in Act I in order to buy herself some time to escape with Medoro, Orlando decides to rush off to war again to prove himself worthy; when in Act II it emerges that Angelica has betrayed him, he completely loses his shit; by Act III he is delirious and hallucinating, and ultimately he thinks he has killed Angelica in a fit of rage – but luckily it turns out he hasn't. He falls asleep, and by the time he wakes up, it's all sorted out. Angelica and Medoro get to remain together, Dorinda has pulled her socks up and resigned herself to a life without Medoro, and Orlando . . . well, Orlando gets to go back to the wars, I suppose.

The opera seems to be set up, on the surface of it, as a conflict between the dangers of disordered emotion on the one side and reason and/or self control on the other. Zoroastro is definitely the representative of the latter – after Angelica and Medoro resolve to flee Orlando's wrath in Act II, he gets to sing them a whole aria about self-control.

This production from Zurich, however, does something that undercuts Zoroastro's moral authority in a fairly interesting way. The war from which Orlando has returned is World War I. During the last section of the overture, we meet him at his arrival at what appears to be a hospital, or some kind of sanatorium. He hands over his duffle bag and his gun. The first person he meets is Zoroastro (Konstantin Wolff), a sinister-looking doctor with a shaved head, little wire-framed glasses, and a lab coat. Zoroaster has put up a diagram on the chalkboard, a picture of Orlando's mind, with sections devoted to love, reputation, glory, and reason – there are some question marks connected with the relationship between love and reason.

The hospital itself is not particularly creepy. It's not all tiled floors and greenish lighting as you might expect – rather, there is pretty wallpaper, a warm-colored wooden floor, glimpses

of natural light here and there through skylights, and, usefully I guess, there is also a Murphy bed that folds out from the wall and seems to belong to Angelica. However, one might ask what Angelica and Medoro are doing in this hospital setting. Dorinda's presence makes sense – she's a nurse. Orlando is definitely a patient. But Medoro and Angelica seem to be basically rattling around this institution in a series of very snazzy outfits. What gives?

This is where the undercutting of Zoroastro as the voice of reason comes in. As noted, this guy looks a little sinister. And not only does he look sinister, but he's got help. Zoroastro is the head doctor and Dorinda is a nurse; there are several other doctors and nurses, silent parts, who follow him around and attend to his every word, often jotting down notes. Orlando appears to be some kind of 'interesting case' or experiment as far as Zoroastro is concerned. He's always lurking, often with notepad in hand. In Act I, when Angelica is provoking Orlando's jealousy to buy herself and Medoro some time, it seems that Zoroastro has set up the encounter on purpose and is stage-managing it as it unfolds. He even chloroforms and drags away the unfortunate Medoro, who is about to burst in and interrupt at the wrong moment.

Angelica and Medoro, then, seem to be there perhaps in the capacity of fellow patients but primarily as props in the little psychological experiment Zoroastro is performing on Orlando. And it's even creepier than that. In the first part of Act I, as Orlando gets agitated thinking of love, Zoroastro gives him a shot in the neck to calm him down, and turns on a film of what appears to be footage of war, which Orlando – and all the assembled silent doctors and nurses – stare at. It's on the verge of *Clockwork Orange*. After Orlando falls asleep in Act III, he has an operation – he is hidden behind a screen, a bright light comes on, Zoroastro puts on his latex gloves (the nurse drops one, but picks it up and hands it to him and the show goes on – this is either an accident or deliberate, but either way: not sanitary!) and after the operation is complete Orlando emerges not in the nightshirt in which he fell asleep, or in his green soldier uniform as before, but in a magnificent officer's outfit, with fringed epaulettes and lots of medals. The opera ends with Orlando standing on a pillar marked "Orlando, hero," from which he begins to climb down as the lights go out.

Reason, in other words, is perhaps not to be trusted. The production's setting evokes World War I, where the 'reason' of the men in charge and all the associated rhetoric of war and glory ended up killing an awful lot of people. And there's an interesting little touch in Act III where Orlando, agitated and about ready to leap from his hospital bed, is recalling scenes of past glory – originally, his references to fantastical characters, and some later references to conquering witchcraft and monsters, would have been 'real' as far as Orlando is concerned, but the production's setting tweaks this: his recollections of war sound like madness. Possibly it's war, not love, that is causing Orlando's problems.

The fact that the staging is not sinister in any obvious way helps here – it gives the "Orlando's being experimented on" aspect of it a little bit of useful ambiguity, and it has the additional effect of not making Zoroastro seem "evil," which I think would be the wrong idea. Zoroastro genuinely thinks he is doing the right thing and that his little experiment is a good and useful idea. Also, I thought having the silent doctors with notepads was clever in more ways than one. They're always lurking and peering through half-open doors. Their sycophancy works as a little critique of Zoroastro, but one might also see them as standing in for the audience of the opera – after all, we're doing the same thing, sitting there, watching all the characters' inner torment, trying to figure out everyone's motives, right? (And some of us even have notebooks . . .)

This 'not quite sinister, but not quite not sinister' aspect of the staging fits with a quality of the overture that I hadn't noticed before – the first section of it has these little moments of

uneasiness that get resolved but keep coming back, and in the third section, as (on stage) two nurses take Orlando's gun and bag when he arrives, you get this really quiet, intense precision from the strings: the mood of the overture, both the music itself and as William Christie is conducting it, fits perfectly with the vibe of the production.

Orlando here is Marijana Mijanovic, who takes a little while to warm up, but once she's on, she is *on*. Orlando's long tormented recitatives/ariosos at the end of Act II and towards the end of Act III are wonderful – and those low notes sound fantastic! This performance in general seems to hit its stride toward the end of Act II.

It was toward the end of Act II, in fact, that I went from impressed with Martina Janková (Angelica) to slightly more impressed with Martina Janková. The last time I saw/heard her was as Despina on a DVD of *Così fan tutte*, also from Zurich, and she was wonderful in that role – but here she gets a chance to go for a little more depth. And it works. My favorite sopranos tend to be ones with a little more weight and color to their voices, and Janková's quick vibrato can occasionally verge into fluttery, but this is certainly some enjoyable Handel singing.

(And if Orlando's entrance with an axe and the word "perfida" on his lips has left you in suspense, [here](#) is the rest of the scene.)

Janková's voice sounds more hefty when heard alongside that of Christina Clark as Dorinda. Clark's got one of those lightish "younger sister of the queen" type voices, and in and of itself I wasn't gripped by the sound, but the [trio](#) (Dorina, Medoro and Angelica) that ends Act I is one of the best parts of this whole thing. Dorinda, a bit of a shrinking ingenue in Act I, also musters some significant force of personality by Act III, where she's figured out to her own satisfaction the meaning of love, and at one point gives Angelica a bloody nose for claiming that Orlando will eventually just get over it.

There are sections of this opera that reminded me of parts of *Alcina* and *Ariodante* – Medoro's "verdi allori" in Act II bears a certain resemblance to "verdi prati" and the music near the end of Act III where Orlando is asleep and being operated on reminded me of some of the instrumental parts of *Ariodante*. But given that it's Handel, and that all three operas are derived from roughly the same source material, I guess I shouldn't be too surprised. (I also had this weird déjà vu feeling at Orlando and Angelica's "finche prendi" duet in Act III – that repeated "cor"/"giusto rigor" rhyme was eating away at my brain – and it took me a while realize that this was because I'd heard DiDonato and Ciofi sing it on their Handel duets CD.)

Other highlights. Another baroque nightingale aria to add to the long list of those (Dorinda's first aria of Act II), some nice solo violin playing in the two sections of Act I where Angelica is wooing Medoro ("ritornava al suo bel viso") and Medoro is wooing Dorinda ("Se'l cor mai ti dirà"), and an interesting English subtitle moment: in Act III we learn that "love is like a wind in the head."

Maybe so.