

Acis and Galatea

Acis and Galatea is Handel's most perfect work. It was written in 1718 for James Brydges, Earl of Carnarvon. Brydges amassed a fortune as Paymaster General of the army and used this to build 'Cannons', a stately home in Middlesex, where he kept a collection of musicians for his chapel and entertainments. One of these entertainments was *Acis & Galatea*, a pastoral drama based on an episode from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The libretto, based on Dryden's translation, was written by a distinguished committee of John Gay, John Arbuthnot, John Hughes and Alexander Pope. It was a chamber affair, with five singers - soprano, no alto but three tenors, and a bass - and an orchestra of one instrument per part - oboes/ recorders, violins and basso continuo. The Chandos, or Cannons, Anthems (Sunday 11th April) were also largely for the same forces, as was the original version of *Esther* (Thursday, 22nd March), with a libretto by Arbuthnot and possibly others of the Acis and Galatea circle.

Both *Acis and Galatea* and *Esther* started as private entertainments, but both in the 1730s were transformed into the forms that we are more familiar with now, performed by choral societies up and down the land. Bernard Gates turned *Esther* into a public phenomenon (see *Esther* programme notes) in 1732; that same year, Thomas Arne put on a pirate performance of *Acis and Galatea*. Handel immediately hit back with a souped-up entertainment – an amalgam of the Cannons version, his 1709 work on the same theme (*Acis, Galatea e Polifemo*), and various other Italian and English works. It was a curious affair, sung in both Italian and English. In 1739, he revised *Acis* yet again, returning to a wholly English version: the Cannons score with additional chorus. This was performed widely in Handel's own day (not by him, however), and is the more usual version performed now, although this version cannot improve on the 1718 one.

The plot focuses on the idyllic love of a nymph and a shepherd. Galatea the water nymph and Acis the shepherd boy are deeply in love with each other, and they spend most of the first half sighing for each other's presence. Another shepherd, Damon, attempts to give hot-headed Acis some wise counsel, but he is ignored. The lovers find each other and rejoice in 'Happy we.' The second half, however, ushers in tragedy in the form of the grotesque cyclops Polyphemus. He too is in love with Galatea, but she rebuffs his rough wooing. Like Acis, Polyphemus ignores Damon's wise words to seek calm from the tempests of love. Acis and Galatea continue their passion, but are happened upon by the furiously jealous giant, who picks up a massive rock and hurls it at Acis, squashing him flat. A distraught Galatea transforms the shepherd into a river, so that they may be, after all, together for eternity. The chorus exhorts Galatea to dry her tears, for 'Acis now a god appears.'

Handel's music is masterful. His opening pastoral scene is the sound of a Claude or a Watteau, with semiquavers to represent purling streams, and the warmth of B flat to settle us into bucolic bliss. Galatea quickly sets herself as the main protagonist (as often with Handel, it is the women who are the most important characters) by setting the scene, in a colourfully dramatic recitative. The following aria, 'Hush, ye pretty warbling quire', is the first of two arias using the sopranino recorder, here to represent the birdsong that is exciting Galatea to love. Acis cannot wait to deliver a recitative on his entrance - he rushes straight in with the air 'Where shall I seek the charming fair?', and has no time for a *da capo*. His hot-headedness is contrasted with the philosophic Damon, who changes the pace both here and after Acis' Act II martial, heroic aria, girding himself for battle against the giant ('Love sounds th'alarm'). Damon's role (originally split with another shepherd-type, Corydon) is to calm down the over-excited males, and remind them that moderation is needed for a happy life. His 'Shepherd, what art thou pursuing?' has a running bass-line, suggesting Acis' haste, and his 'Consider, fond shepherd' is an essay in frozen time (with some great word-painting on

'fleeing').

The innocence of Acis and Galatea's love is captured at the end of Act I by a rustic jig, 'Happy we.' It is all too good to be true, and sure enough, the comfort and safety of the rural landscape is destroyed in the opening of the second Act: the ground trembles under the cyclops' footsteps, and the semiquavers which represented soft water now become earthquakes and avalanches. Polyphemus' size is suggested in a number of ways. In 'Wretched Lovers', the extended semi-quavers on 'Behold the Monster Polypheme' and 'How the thund'ring Gyant roars' immediately connect the Cyclops with Mount Etna; the volcano finally erupts in the next recitative, 'I rage'. In this recitative, and in the following aria, 'O ruddier than the Cherry', Handel employs the trick he used in 'Fra l'ombre e gl'orrori' to suggest Polyphemus' vastness: in calling for 'a Pipe for my capacious mouth' the singer goes from d' to F within six notes. The capaciousness of his mouth (or his vocal chords, anyway) carries on in 'O ruddier than the Cherry', with its octave leaps. In this aria, Handel employs the sopranino recorder for the second time to become Polyphemus' 'hundred reeds of decent growth.' This, of course, is to delightful comic affect, but it must be said that Handel did not intend to send the giant up, nor exaggerate the comic side of his character - indeed, it seems that the original scoring called not for a sopranino, but a slightly larger recorder, which signified love. Polyphemus is a multi-faceted character and not a buffoon; after all, he does bring Acis and Galatea's affair to a violent end, and Damon hints at the cyclops' violence also in his line 'beauty by constraint possessing.' One more lovely bit of characterisation is in Polyphemus' 'Cease to beauty': love for Galatea has knocked him off balance and his off-beat entry becomes a hemiola, where duple time fights triple to give a syncopated effect.

After Damon's 'Consider, fond shepherd,' the drama is winched up. The lovers' beautiful duet 'The flocks shall leave the mountains' is violently interrupted by Polyphemus, who takes over completely and finishes Acis off in the 'death' key of C minor. Acis dies in an incredible piece of accompanied recitative, which starts on a diminished seventh (a keyless chord), and ends with a moving depiction of his fight for breath. This scene is capped by the chorus' 'Mourn all ye muses': a Purcellian plaint whose solemn sarabande reminds us that this drama is no shallow soap opera, but a deep exploration of emotions and psychology. From F minor chorus leads Galatea into the more hopeful F major and counsels her to turn Acis into a stream, which she does with one of the most gorgeous arias in the music of Handel, 'Heart, the seat of soft delight,' two recorders representing the 'crystal flood.' Equilibrium is restored in the final chorus, a delightful minuet. *Acis and Galatea* is a plum of a work; like *Messiah*, it has been performed continually since its first publication; like *Messiah*, its popularity is amply deserved.

Part I

Sinfonia

Chorus: Oh, the pleasure of the plains!

Happy nymphs and happy swains,

Harmless, merry, free and gay,

Dance and sport the hours away.

For us the zephyr blows,

For us distills the dew,

For us unfolds the rose,

And flow'rs display their hue.

For us the winters rain,

For us the summers shine,

Spring swells for us the grain,

And autumn bleeds the wine. *da capo*.

Galatea: Ye verdant plains and woody mountains,
Purling streams and bubbling fountains,
Ye painted glories of the field,
Vain are the pleasures which ye yield;
Too thin the shadow of the grove,
Too faint the gales, to cool my love.

Hush, ye pretty warbling quire!
Your thrilling strains
Awake my pains,
And kindle fierce desire.
Cease your song, and take your flight,
Bring back my Acis to my sight! *da capo*.

Acis: Where shall I seek the charming fair?
Direct the way, kind genius of the mountains!
O tell me, if you saw my dear!
Seeks she the grove, or bathes in crystal fountains? *da capo*.

Damon: Stay, shepherd, stay!
See, how thy flocks in yonder valley stray!
What means this melancholy air?
No more thy tuneful pipe we hear.

Shepherd, what art thou pursuing?
Heedless running to thy ruin;
Share our joy, our pleasure share,
Leave thy passion till tomorrow,
Let the day be free from sorrow,
Free from love, and free from care! *da capo*.

Acis: Lo, here my love, turn, Galatea, hither turn thy eyes!
See, at thy feet the longing Acis lies.

Love in her eyes sits playing,
And sheds delicious death;
Love on her lips is straying,
And warbling in her breath!
Love on her breast sits panting
And swells with soft desire;
No grace, no charm is wanting,
To set the heart on fire. *da capo*.

Galatea: Oh, didst thou know the pains of absent love,
Acis would ne'er from Galatea rove.

As when the dove
Laments her love,
All on the naked spray;
When he returns,

No more she mourns,
But loves the live-long day.
Billing, cooing,
Panting, wooing,
Melting murmurs fill the grove,
Melting murmurs, lasting love. *da capo.*

Acis & Galatea: Happy we!
What joys I feel!
What charms I see
Of all youths/nymphs thou dearest boy/brightest fair!
Thou all my bliss, thou all my joy! *da capo.*

Part II

Chorus: Wretched lovers! Fate has past
This sad decree: no joy shall last.
Wretched lovers, quit your dream!
Behold the monster Polypheme!
See what ample strides he takes!
The mountain nods, the forest shakes;
The waves run frighten'd to the shores:
Hark, how the thund'ring giant roars!

Polyphemus: I rage — I melt — I burn!
The feeble god has stabb'd me to the heart.
Thou trusty pine,
Prop of my godlike steps, I lay thee by!
Bring me a hundred reeds of decent growth
To make a pipe for my capacious mouth;
In soft enchanting accents let me breathe
Sweet Galatea's beauty, and my love.

O ruddier than the cherry,
O sweeter than the berry,
O nymph more bright
Than moonshine night,
Like kidlings blithe and merry.
Ripe as the melting cluster,
No lily has such lustre;
Yet hard to tame
As raging flame,
And fierce as storms that bluster! *da capo.*

Polyphemus: Whither, fairest, art thou running,
Still my warm embraces shunning?

Galatea: The lion calls not to his prey,
Nor bids the wolf the lambkin stay.

Polyphemus: Thee, Polyphemus, great as Jove,
Calls to empire and to love,
To his palace in the rock,
To his dairy, to his flock,

To the grape of purple hue,
To the plum of glossy blue,
Wildings, which expecting stand,
Proud to be gather'd by thy hand.

Galatea: Of infant limbs to make my food,
And swill full draughts of human blood!
Go, monster, bid some other guest!
I loathe the host, I loathe the feast.

Polyphemus: Cease to beauty to be suing,
Ever whining love disdainning.
Let the brave their aims pursuing,
Still be conqu'ring not complaining. *da capo.*

Damon: Would you gain the tender creature,
Softly, gently, kindly treat her:
Suff'ring is the lover's part.
Beauty by constraint possessing
You enjoy but half the blessing,
Lifeless charms without the heart. *da capo.*

Acis: His hideous love provokes my rage.
Weak as I am, I must engage!
Inspir'd with thy victorious charms,
The god of love will lend his arms.

Love sounds th'alarm,
And fear is a-flying!
When beauty's the prize,
What mortal fears dying?
In defence of my treasure,
I'd bleed at each vein;
Without her no pleasure,
For life is a pain. *da capo.*

Damon: Consider, fond shepherd,
How fleeting's the pleasure,
That flatters our hopes
In pursuit of the fair!
The joys that attend it,
By moments we measure,
But life is too little
To measure our care. *da capo.*

Galatea: Cease, oh cease, thou gentle youth,
Trust my constancy and truth,
Trust my truth and pow'rs above,
The pow'rs propitious still to love!

Acis & Galatea: The flocks shall leave the mountains,
The woods the turtle dove,
The nymphs forsake the fountains,

Ere I forsake my love!

Polyphemus: Torture! fury! rage! despair!

I cannot, cannot bear!

Acis & Galatea: Not show'rs to larks so pleasing,
Nor sunshine to the bee,
Not sleep to toil so easing,
As these dear smiles to me.

Polyphemus: Fly swift, thou massy ruin, fly!
Die, presumptuous Acis, die!

Acis: Help, Galatea! Help, ye parent gods!
And take me dying to your deep abodes.

Chorus: Mourn, all ye muses! Weep, all ye swains!
Tune, tune your reeds to doleful strains!
Groans, cries and howlings fill the neighb'ring shore:
Ah, the gentle Acis is no more!

Galatea: Must I my Acis still bemoan,
Inglorious crush'd beneath that stone?

Chorus: Cease, Galatea, cease to grieve!
Bewail not whom thou canst relieve.

Galatea: Must the lovely charming youth
Die for his constancy and truth?

Chorus: Cease, Galatea, cease to grieve!
Bewail not whom thou canst relieve;
Call forth thy pow'r, employ thy art,
The goddess soon can heal thy smart.

Galatea: Say what comfort can you find?
For dark despair o'erclouds my mind.

Chorus: To kindred gods the youth return,
Through verdant plains to roll his urn.

Galatea: 'Tis done! Thus I exert my pow'r divine;
Be thou immortal, though thou art not mine!

Heart, the seat of soft delight,
Be thou now a fountain bright!
Purple be no more thy blood,
Glide thou like a crystal flood.
Rock, thy hollow womb disclose!
The bubbling fountain, lo! it flows;
Through the plains he joys to rove,
Murm'ring still his gentle love.

Chorus: Galatea, dry thy tears,
Acis now a god appears!
See how he rears him from his bed,
See the wreath that binds his head.
Hail! thou gentle murm'ring stream,
Shepherds' pleasure, muses' theme!
Through the plains still joy to rove,

Murm'ring still thy gentle love.

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