

# Artaxerxes (opera)

*Artaxerxes* is an opera in three acts composed by Thomas Arne set to an English adaptation (probably by Arne himself) of Metastasio's 1729 libretto *Artaserse*.<sup>[1]</sup> The first English *opera seria*, *Artaxerxes* premiered on 2 February 1762 at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden and continued to be regularly performed until the late 1830s. Its plot is loosely based on the historical figure, Artaxerxes I of Persia who succeeded his father Xerxes I after his assassination by Artabanus.

## Performance history



Riot over the abolition of half price admission fees at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden during a 1763 performance of *Artaxerxes*.

The opening night of *Artaxerxes* (2 February 1762) at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden proved very successful. The work was revived at the theatre the following year, although this second run was marred by a riot.<sup>[2]</sup> On 24 February 1763 a mob protesting the abolition of half-price admissions stormed the theatre in the middle of the performance. According to a contemporary account in *The Gentleman's Magazine*:

The mischief done was the greatest ever known on any occasion of the like kind: all the benches of the boxes and pit being entirely tore up, the glasses and

chandeliers broken, and the linings of the boxes cut to pieces. The rashness of the rioters was so great, that they cut away the wooden pillars between the boxes, so if the inside of them had not been iron, they would have brought down the galleries upon their heads.<sup>[3]</sup>

By 1790, *Artaxerxes* had received well over 100 performances, including 48 in Dublin alone between 1765 and 1767.<sup>[4]</sup> In the United States, the overture was played in Philadelphia as early as 1765, while arias from the opera were heard in New York City in 1767.<sup>[5]</sup> The US premiere of the complete opera came on 31 January 1828 at the Park Theatre in New York City with a cast that included Elizabeth Austin as Semira.<sup>[6]</sup> *Artaxerxes* remained in the London repertoire for over 70 years with regular revivals including those at the Drury Lane Theatre (1780, 1820, 1827, and 1828), Covent Garden (1813, 1827, and 1828), and the St James's Theatre (1836). The score for *Artaxerxes* had been published in 1762. However, it did not contain the recitatives or the final chorus. The original performing version of the score was lost in the fire that destroyed the Theatre Royal in 1808. After that date, performances of the work used a shortened version reconstructed by Henry Bishop and John Addison in 1813.<sup>[7]</sup>

Notable modern revivals of the work include a 1962 performance in London's St.Pancras Town Hall as part of the St. Pancras Festival, a BBC concert performance in 1979, and another concert performance in 2002 by the Classical Opera Company conducted by Ian Page at St John's, Smith Square.<sup>[8]</sup> In anticipation of Thomas Arne's 300th birthday, a staged production of *Artaxerxes* will be performed in October 2009 in the Linbury Studio of London's Royal Opera House. The production will use a new performing edition of the score by Ian Page with a reconstruction of the final chorus by Duncan Druce.<sup>[9]</sup>

Roles and casting

*Artaxerxes* was composed when the castrato singers were at their height. The title role (Artaxerxes) and that of Arbaces were written for the Italian castrati, Nicolò Peretti and Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci respectively. With the waning of the castrati, the title role was sung by women *en travesti* in the 19th century. In the 1827 and 1828 performances in London, Artaxerxes was sung by the contraltos Eliza Paton and Elizabeth Vestris. In modern performances the role is often taken by a counter-tenor. The more virtuosic role of Arbaces went through a considerable amount of casting instability in the 19th century.<sup>[10]</sup> It was sometimes sung by sopranos, and at other times transposed for tenors such as John Braham who sang the role 1827. Considered too high for a modern counter-tenor, Arbaces was sung by a mezzo-soprano, Patrica Spence, in the 1995 Hyperion recording.<sup>[11]</sup> The role will also be sung by a mezzo-soprano in the 2009 Royal Opera House revival.<sup>[12]</sup>



Elizabeth Vestris *en travesti* as Artaxerxes in  
1827

| Cast  | Voice type | Premiere, February 2,<br>1762<br>(Conductor: - ) |
|---|------------|--|
| Artaxerxes, <i>Xerxes' younger son, and Arbaces' friend</i> | castrato   | Nicolò Peretti <sup>[13]</sup>                   |
| Mandane, <i>Xerxes' daughter and lover of Arbaces</i>       | soprano    | Charlotte Brent                                  |
| Artabanes, <i>the general of Xerxes' army</i>               | tenor      | John Beard                                       |
| Arbaces, <i>son of Artabanes</i>                            | castrato   | Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci                       |
| Semira, <i>Artabanes' daughter and lover of Artaxerxes</i>  | soprano    | Miss Thomas                                      |
| Rimenes, <i>Artabanes' captain</i>                          | tenor      | George Mattocks                                  |

## Synopsis



Mary Anne Paton as Mandane (1827)

*Setting: Persia circa 465 BC*

The opera opens in a moonlit garden of Xerxes palace. Mandane, the daughter of King Xerxes, and Arbaces, the son of the King's general Artabanes, are in love. Xerxes has opposed their marriage and banished Arbaces from the palace. Arbaces climbs the wall into the garden. As the young lovers express their love for each other and their despair at Arbaces' banishment, Artabanes arrives carrying a bloody sword. His fury at Xerxes' treatment of his son and his desire for Arbaces to become King have led him to assassinate Xerxes. Artabanes confesses the murder to Arbaces and exchanges his bloody sword for that of Arbaces.

Artaxerxes, the King's younger son, arrives with his guards. Artabanes tells him of his father's death and accuses Artaxerxes's older brother Darius of the murder, "Who but he at dead of night could penetrate The palace? Who approach the royal bed? Nay, more, his royal ambition..." Artaxerxes commands Artabanes to avenge his father's death by killing Darius. Later in the garden, Artaxerxes expresses his love to Semira, the daughter of Artabanes and sister of Arbaces.

In the King's palace, the execution of Darius is announced. However, Rimenes (also in love with Semira) has Arbaces led into the chamber in chains, announcing that the bloody sword used to kill Xerxes had been found in his possession. Arbaces is now condemned to death. However, Artaxerxes, who had long been a friend of Arbaces, doubts his guilt. He releases Arbaces from prison and allows him to escape through a secret passage. Rimenes, encouraged by Artabanes, then goes off to lead a rebellion against Artaxerxes.

In the Temple of the Sun Artaxerxes, surrounded by his nobles, swears to maintain the rights, laws, and customs of his subjects and is about to pledge this by drinking from a sacred cup, unaware that Artabanes has poisoned the drink. Before Artaxerxes can drink from the cup, news arrives that Rimenes and his men are at the palace gates. The danger is averted when Arbaces kills the traitor, confirming to Artaxerxes that his friend is innocent. Artaxerxes then offers the sacred cup to Arbaces instead so that he may pledge his innocence.

Artabanes is now faced with seeing his son die or confessing the truth. He confesses to all that he has poisoned the cup, intending to kill Artaxerxes and that he had also assassinated Xerxes. Artabanes is led off in chains. Artaxerxes, out of his love for Semira and his gratitude to Arbaces, condemns their father to eternal exile rather than death. The opera ends with the two pairs of lovers reunited and the jubilation of all.<sup>[14]</sup>



## Notes and references

- [1] University of North Texas Libraries
- [2] A similar riot occurred the month before during a performance of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at the Drury Lane Theatre. For more about the London Half-Price Riots, see McPherson (2002)
- [3] quoted in Norton Topics Online
- [4] Hodgart and Bauerle (1997) p. 22
- [5] Sonneck (1907) pp. 67-68 and 172
- [6] Casaglia
- [7] Holman (1995)
- [8] Dunnett (11 December 2002)
- [9] Royal Opera House
- [10] D'Arcy Wood (2008)
- [11] Holman (1995)
- [12] Royal Opera House
- [13] Premiere cast from Casaglia
- [14] Synopsis adapted from the 1827 acting copy of the libretto, published in *British Theatre* ([http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=qRpAAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_v2\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=&f=false](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=qRpAAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_v2_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=&f=false)), Volume 19, J. Cumberland, 1828
- [15] Richard Grant White quoted in Lawrence (1995) p. 282.
- [16] See *Beverly Sills and Friends* (Deutsche Grammophon); *Joan Sutherland: The Art of the Prima Donna* (Decca)
- [17] e.g. "By wather parted from the say". See Hodgart and Bauerle (1997) p. 238 and *passim* for more.
- [18] Gridiron Gabble, *Green Room Gossip* (London, 1808), pp. 120-121 quoted in Burden (2008)
- [19] Heighes (1995) p. 242
- [20] Sonneck pp. 145, 168, 235
- [21] Johns Hopkins University. Filippo Trisobio was an Italian voice teacher and composer living in Philadelphia, where he died in 1798.
- [22] Hogarth (1835) p. 312
- [23] Camner (July 1996)

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## External links

- Metastasio's original Italian libretto: *Artaserse* (<http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/al.asp?al=CDD22073>)

# Article Sources and Contributors

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