

Richard the Lionheart

(*Riccardo Primo, Rè d'Inghilterra*)

Music by George Frideric Handel • Libretto by Paolo Antonio Rolli

Study Guide to the Opera

Tim Mead gives Richard a powerful voice and virile presence at the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in 2015. Photo by Ken Howard.



King of the Crusaders

by Jill Leahy

German-born composer George Frideric Handel wrote over 40 Italian operas, the majority for staging at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where he was the Master of the Orchestra. However, strict operatic conventions, both in subject matter and form—for example, castrato singers were widely used in the principal male roles—eventually led to the demise of Italian opera in London. As a result, many of Handel's operas have been neglected and he is mostly known for his famous oratorio *Messiah*. The 2015 Opera Theatre of Saint Louis production of *Richard the Lionheart* was the first American staging of *Riccardo Primo, Rè d'Inghilterra*. Pittsburgh Opera's production is the "Pennsylvania" premiere, the first to be sung in the U.S. in the original Italian.

Riccardo Primo, Rè d'Inghilterra was Handel's first major compositional project after his naturalization as a British citizen (February 1727) and his only opera to present a story based on a real English monarch, albeit with fictionalized events. Richard I, known as Richard the Lionheart, was famous for his exploits in the Third Crusade. The premiere of the opera about his life was given at King's Theatre (London) on November 11, 1727, where it played for 11 performances. After the demise of the Royal Academy of Music in 1728, Handel never revived the opera.

Even the great Ludwig van Beethoven praised Handel:

- *Go to him to learn how to achieve great effects, by such simple means.*
- *I would bare my head and kneel at his grave.*

Surprisingly, *Richard the Lionheart* has had only 24 performances in six productions in recent years—at Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe (2), Händel-Festspiele Halle, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Ludwigsburger Schlossfestspiele, and Pittsburgh Opera.

Richard the Lionheart Synopsis

Setting: Cyprus, 1191

As in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a shipwreck figures prominently in the story. So do disguises. The year is 1191, and Richard, known as "The Lionheart" for his courage, is caught up in the Third Crusade—and in his marriage plans. After his bride-to-be Costanza, the daughter of the King of Navarre, is shipwrecked off Cyprus on her way to their wedding, Isacio, the governor, decides he wants her for himself. He decides to pretend that his daughter Pulcheria is Costanza, in hopes of gaining a king for a son-in-law as well as Costanza for his own pleasure. Richard, who has never met his betrothed, turns up on Cyprus in disguise. Told about the switch in fiancées, Richard (in disguise as the "Ambassador") offers Isacio war or peace. Isacio chooses war, with Costanza as the proposed prize.

Act 1 The walls of the Imperial City

On her sea journey to be married to Riccardo, Costanza and her party are shipwrecked off the coast of Cyprus. She finds shelter at the court of the local governor, Isacio. Upon seeing Costanza, Isacio makes aggressive advances towards her, and has the idea to send his daughter, Pulcheria, in place of Costanza to Riccardo, whilst keeping the real Costanza for himself. This, despite Pulcheria already being engaged to Isacio's ally Oronte, Prince of Syria. However, Pulcheria has noticed that Oronte is attracted to Costanza, and sees her father's duplicity as an opportunity to humble her fiancé.

Intermission

Act 2 In a pavilion

Riccardo arrives, disguised as his kingdom's ambassador, and asks after Costanza. Oronte has discovered Isacio's plot and stops it, which leads Pulcheria to forgive her fiancé. Riccardo is angry upon learning of Isacio's designs, but retains his disguise and plans to offer charity towards Isacio in spite of the ill plotting. Speaking "on behalf" of Riccardo, "the Ambassador" offers Isacio the choice of either peace or war. Isacio chooses war, with Costanza as the proposed prize. Pulcheria introduces Riccardo, still incognito, to Costanza, and Act 2 ends with a love duet for Costanza and Riccardo.

Intermission

Act 3 A pavilion in the palace gardens, at night

Having second thoughts about the conflict, Isacio says that he will kill Costanza if Riccardo does not call off the attack. Pulcheria has offered herself as a hostage to Riccardo's forces. She takes a sword from a soldier and prepares to stab herself, but Oronte prevents her. Riccardo's army eventually captures Isacio, and Riccardo dispenses justice as follows: Isacio must renounce his power, but is allowed to live. Pulcheria, with Oronte as her husband, shall reign in place of her father.



Characters

Riccardo

[ree-KAR-doh] *alto castrato*
King of England

Costanza

[coss-TAHN-tsah] *soprano*
Daughter of the King of Navarre

Pulcheria

[pool-KAY-ree-ah] *soprano*
Daughter of Isacio

Isacio

[ee-ZAH-choh] *bass*
Governor of Cyprus

Oronte

[oar-OHN-tay] *alto castrato*
Prince of Syria

Berardo

[bey-RAHR-doh] *bass*
Costanza's cousin



Meet the Composer

by Jill Leahy

George Frideric Handel (February 23, 1685 – April 14, 1759) was born in Halle, Germany in the same year as Johann Sebastian Bach. Even though they were born in towns about 50 miles apart, they never met. Handel's father, a barber-surgeon, wanted his son to become a lawyer, but the young Handel loved music. His father forbade him to touch any musical instruments but his mother smuggled a clavichord into the attic where George would practice when his father was out of the house. After his father died, Handel's propensity for music drove him to find ways to pursue his musical studies and career. In 1702 he went to Hamburg, where he played violin and harpsichord for the only opera company in Germany that existed outside the royal courts.

The *Classic FM Guide* describes Handel as “a bruiser whose robust personality and generous physique were as renowned as his music. His delight in intrigue and gossip was matched only by his insatiable appetite for food and liquor.” During a strange incident in 1704, Handel fought a duel with fellow composer Johann Mattheson, who almost killed Handel with his sword, except he hit a button on Handel's chest rather than the chest itself. In 1710, Handel accepted the position of Kapellmeister to George, Elector of Hanover, who was soon to be King George I of Great Britain. In 1712, Handel settled in England, where he began a time of incredible artistic output, writing music for every genre and even inventing English oratorio, such as *Messiah*.

Handel's life was not without tragedy. He had a stroke in 1737 that caused temporary paralysis in his right arm, was involved in a coach crash in 1750, had cataracts, and eventually went blind after a botched eye operation in 1751. He continued to compose despite his blindness, and died in London at age 74. Since he never married, his estate was passed on to his niece Johanna Floerken. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, as he requested, and his funeral was attended by 3,000 mourners.



Meet the Librettist

Paolo Antonio Rolli (June 13, 1687 – March 20, 1765) was a librettist, poet, and translator who, as Italian master to the English royal household, helped to Italianize 18th-century English taste. Carlo Vitale, in *Opera Today*, wrote that Rolli “arguably ranks among the top-three Italian librettists of the 18th century, next to Metastasio and Da Ponte.”

The son of an architect, Rolli studied with the major Italian literary critic of the day, Gian Vincenzo Gravina. In 1715 he went to England and became the Italian teacher in the family of the Prince of Wales (later George II). In 1719, Rolli was appointed as the Italian secretary and chief librettist of the Royal Academy of Music. He prepared most of the librettos during the company's first three seasons (1720–1722), including Handel's *Muzio Scevola* and *Floridante*, but he was dismissed following a dispute with the directors and Handel. Later, the two reconciled and Rolli revised another three librettos for Handel: *Scipione*, *Alessandro*, and *Riccardo primo, re d'Inghilterra*. Handel and Rolli based *Riccardo Primo* on *Isacio tiranno* by Italian librettist Francesco Briani and Italian Baroque composer Antonio Lotti. Rolli wrote or rewrote librettos for at least 34 opera productions in London between 1720 and his eventual departure for Italy in 1744.

Historical Background of King Richard I, The Lion Heart

Born:	September 6, 1157 at Beaumont Place, Oxford
Parents:	Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine
Related to Elizabeth II:	21st great-granduncle
House of:	Angevin
Ascended to throne:	July 6, 1189, at age 31
Crowned:	2/3 September, 1189 at Westminster Abbey
Married:	Berengaria, Daughter of Sancho V of Navarre
Children:	Two illegitimate sons
Died:	April 6, 1199 at Limousin, France, age 41
Buried at:	Fontevraud, France
Reigned for:	9 years, 8 months, and 30 days
Succeeded by:	His brother John



Richard was the third son of Henry II, and twice rebelled against his father before he became King of England in 1189. Richard based himself in his Duchy in Aquitaine, inherited from his mother Eleanor. He spent six months of his reign in England and spoke only French. During his absence, he appointed William Longchamp as Chancellor of England, who was overthrown by Richard's brother John in 1191.

Richard acquired a reputation as a leader and warrior and became known as Richard 'Coeur de Lion'. His experience in warfare came from controlling rebellions in Poitou in the 1170s and against his father, Henry II, in 1183. He took up Henry's plans to recover Jerusalem on his accession in 1189 and set out with Phillip of France on the Third Crusade to the Holy Land. Richard established bases for crusades in Sicily in 1190 and Cyprus, which he took in 1191. Engaging in the siege of Acre, which he brought to a swift conclusion, he set off down the coast to Jaffa, fighting against Saladin.

In the Third Crusade, he won victories at Cyprus, Acre, and Arsuf, but failed to recover Jerusalem. In 1191, he married Berengaria in Cyprus and she remained with him for part of the Third Crusade, and then returned to France. In 1192, while returning from the Holy Land, Richard was captured by the Duke of Austria, who handed him over to the emperor Henry VI. Richard was held prisoner until a ransom of 100,000 marks (about 2.5 billion dollars in today's money) was paid. On his release, he returned briefly to England, where his brother John had been ruling. His later years were spent in warfare in France, where he was killed by a crossbow bolt while besieging Châlus-Chabrol in 1199. He left no heir.

<http://www.britroyals.com/kings.asp?id=richard1>

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Marilyn Michalka Egan, Ph.D.
Director of Education
megan@pittsburghopera.org
412-281-0912 ext 242

Pittsburgh Opera
2425 Liberty Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
www.pittsburghopera.org