For the average music-lover today the history of Italian Baroque opera is framed by the works of Monteverdi and Handel. Monteverdi’s first opera dates from 1607, Handel’s last from 1741. The period between these giants is virtually terra incognita: although the names of some important composers—Cavalli, Alessandro Scarlatti—are known, their operas, by and large, are not. Agostino Steffani (1654–1728) is one of this number, but recent opera productions, concert performances, and recordings have shown him to be an outstandingly gifted composer and an exceptional musical dramatist whose operas deserve to be seen and heard.

Steffani’s talent for music was displayed early on through his singing. Born in Castelfranco, not far from Venice, he became a chorister at the Basilica del Santo in nearby Padua and sang on stage at the ages of eleven and twelve in operas by his older colleague Carlo Pallavicino. In 1667 he was taken to the court of Munich, capital of the Catholic electorate of Bavaria in south Germany, where he was taught by the director of music, Johann Caspar Kerll, an organist and composer. He made such good progress that in 1672 he was sent to Rome to study with Ercole Bernabei, director of the Cappella Giulia at St Peter’s. On returning to Munich in 1674, he was appointed court organist, and when he visited Paris and Turin as a musician and courtier in 1678–1679, his harpsichord playing impressed both King Louis XIV of France and the regent of Savoy. In all, he served the Bavarian court for twenty-one years, ultimately as Director of Chamber Music.

Steffani’s output as a composer is entirely vocal and was undoubtedly influenced by his personal experience. Most of his sacred works date from his Munich years. The first of his two publications, Psalmodia vespertina (Rome, 1674), is a collection of psalm settings (with a Magnificat) for two antiphonal choirs, with organ. Other sacred pieces that were written in Rome, but which survive only in manuscript, are more varied and adventurous in scoring, texture, and style. His second publication, Sacer Ianus quadrifrons (Munich, 1685), is a set of motets for three voices and basso continuo, all of which can be performed in four ways by omitting any one of the voices.

By the mid-1680s, however, Steffani had also written many secular chamber cantatas and duets and made his début as a composer of opera. He wrote six operas for the carnivals at Munich in 1681–1688, of which the second (Solone) is lost and the last was Niobe, regina di Tebe (staged in Boston in 2011). A few months after Niobe had opened, Steffani left Munich for the Protestant duchy of Hanover in north Germany, where the cultivation of opera was his main responsibility. There had been only six Italian opera productions in Hanover before his arrival, but since the reigning duke, Ernst August, had made regular visits to carnival in Venice, he was thoroughly familiar with this form of entertainment. The duke saw opera as a means of enhancing the profile and reputation of his court and thus of achieving his political ambition—the elevation of his duchy to an electorate. He already had an Italian poet, Ortensio Mauro, who would write librettos, and an orchestra recently strengthened by new players from France and the Low Countries. Having ordered the construction of a new theater, he appointed Steffani to compose and direct Italian opera.

In Hanover, Steffani put on a new full-length carnival opera every year from 1689 to 1695 (except 1694) and also a couple of one-act works. The duke’s calculation paid off. Opera was not the only factor, of course, but in 1692 Emperor Leopold I approved “in principle” the elevation of Hanover to an electorate. Steffani played a part as both a musician and a negotiator. Having experience of diplomacy from his Munich years, at Hanover he took on much more responsibility of this kind. As the 1690s progressed, his periods of absence grew longer and more frequent, so that by 1696 he was unable to put on an opera. When Ernst August died, in January 1697, his son and heir Georg Ludwig, later King George I of Great Britain, closed the theater, and when King Carlos II of Spain died in 1700, Steffani became deeply involved in the Europe-wide negotiations about the succession. In 1701 and 1702 he did everything in his power to persuade the young Elector Maxmillian II Emanuel of Bavaria, his former employer, to side with the Emperor rather than Louis XIV, but he failed to win him around and consequently suffered a nervous breakdown. For therapy he threw himself into the revision and recopying of his eighty-odd chamber duets, which had been composed over several decades and given to a variety of patrons. His new collection ran to at least thirteen volumes, of which eight survive.

The winter of 1702–1703 was the watershed in Steffani’s career. Alongside his activities as a musician he had also pursued an interest in the Roman Catholic church. In Munich he became a priest and an “abbate” in the early 1680s, and by 1695 he was an Apostolic Protonotary, a title conferred by the pope. In 1703, after the failure of his negotiations with Max II Emanuel, he moved to the Catholic court of Düsseldorf, where he was installed as President of the Spiritual Council for the Palatinate. In 1706 he was nominated Bishop of Spiga (Asia Minor), and three years later Apostolic Vicar of North Germany. During his Düsseldorf years (1703–1709), three “Steffani” operas were performed at the court, including a pasticcio of movements from his existing works and an opera that had
been composed (but not performed) at Hanover; only the last of the three, *Tassilone* (1709), was new. As Apostolic Vicar, Steffani resided in Hanover and spent the last third of his life in the service of the church. During this period, he composed little music and performed even less. In the mid-1720s, however, encouraged by friends in London, he took an interest in the fledgling Academy of Ancient Music. Having sent the academy a madrigal and a motet, he was elected president and offered to send them his *Stabat Mater*, a heartfelt setting that was completed in the last months of his life.

The music of Steffani’s operas is redolent of late seventeenth-century Italian opera in general but distinguished by what the critic and composer Johann Mattheson (1681–1764) called a “mixed” style—that is, a mixture of Italian and French styles. The basis of Steffani’s musical language was, of course, Italian—the recitative and aria of Venetian opera as he had known it as a boy. However, his recitative is never perfunctory and often highly expressive. A solo recitative may include substantial passages of lyrical or floridly passionate writing, and in an extended soliloquy a key word or phrase may be repeated for rhetorical or structural effect. A recitative for two characters often culminates in a cavata a due, in which the final words are set as a duet in aria style. Duets and other ensembles are more numerous in Steffani than in the operas of his Italian contemporaries.

His arias range from simple dance-like songs in two-part form, supported only by continuo, to large-scale “da capo” structures (two sections, the first being repeated after the second), accompanied by orchestra. The major roles call for singers with a wide range, large lungs and impeccable breath control, exceptional vocal agility, and the ability to sing long runs at speed. Unlike most Italian opera composers (of all periods), Steffani wrote out much of the ornamentation that he wanted, and some of it makes heavy demands on vocal technique. His writing for bass differs slightly from that for other voices, because the bass sometimes doubles the lowest line in the texture; nevertheless, even a bass must be vocally nimble and able to deliver a pleasing cantabile line.

Orchestral instruments are more prominent in Steffani than in contemporary Italian opera. The orchestra may be employed throughout an aria, in the first section of a “da capo” aria, or in an instrumental section before and/or after an aria in which the singer is accompanied by continuo alone. In some arias the orchestral texture is enriched with solo instruments; in others the orchestra is silent while accompaniment is provided by one or two violins, oboes, or recorders, or by a mixture of string and wind instruments. Steffani’s solos for oboe and bassoon predate the earliest examples in operas written for Italy and are among the most difficult by any composer before Bach. In arias with such parts the instrument(s) and voice usually share the melodic material and form imitative duets or trios; the interplay that characterizes the upper parts may also be found in the relationship between singer and bass.

The French elements in Steffani’s operas derive from the fact that he spent over nine months in Paris in 1678–1679 and the orchestras at Munich and Hanover included players with experience of French music. In Paris he probably saw and heard Lully’s opera *Bellérophon* and clearly studied music by Marc-Antoine Charpentier. These influences are most apparent in his Hanover operas, in which he makes prominent use of woodwind instruments, writes for the *basse de viole* or possibly the *basse de violon*, and occasionally specifies *bautecontre* and *taille* (different sizes of viola). Although these operas are introduced by a so-called “sinfonia,” this is actually a bipartite French “ouverture,” comprising a stately preamble to a lively section with contrapuntal textures and in some cases, including *Orlando*, trios for two oboes and bassoon. Each act concludes with a ballet comprising French dances such as the bourrée, passepied, gavotte, and minuet; elsewhere dance movements are sung—that is, arias are set to tunes in dance metre. Dotted rhythms abound, there are opportunities for *notes inégales* (“swing”), and Steffani even asks for trills that begin part-way through a note—a Charpentier specialty. Mattheson was probably right to regard his style as “mixed,” for while some of the French ingredients are thoroughly fused with the Italian, others are simply juxtaposed.

In other respects, too, Steffani’s operas stand apart from those composed in Italy. All of them were intended for German courts—none for a public theater—and like all court art of the period, they tend to reflect the preoccupations of their surroundings. His five Munich operas were designed to advise, flatter, and admonish Max Emanuel and his consort, Maria Antonia of Austria. His first opera for Hanover, *Henrico Leone* (1689), trumpeted the pedigree and prestige of the house of Brunswick-Lüneburg by celebrating the quincentenary of a famous victory of the twelfth-century Saxon duke Henry the Lion, and his second three-act work, *La superbia d’Alessandro* (1690), likened Ernst August to Alexander the Great. All but one of Steffani’s operas are based, however loosely, on ancient Greek or Roman subjects, or on figures from German history; the exception is *Orlando generoso* (1691), which draws on a literary source.

Steffani’s Hanover operas make constructive and entertaining use of the opportunities for spectacular effects.
that were offered by the elaborate scenes and machines in the new opera house. Like Henrico Leone and La superbia d’Alessandro, *Orlando* starts with unexpected action on stage. Soon after it has begun, the sorcerer Atlante flies in on a hippogriff and fights with Bradamante, after which the scene quickly changes from a valley to a desert. By means of surprising spectacle the librettist and composer sought to catch the audience’s attention early on, in the hope of retaining it thereafter. Unlike his Munich operas, Steffani’s Hanover operas were also revived on a public stage and thus reached a wider audience. In 1695–1699 they were produced in German translation at the Gänsemarkt theatre in Hamburg. *Orlando* enjoyed the greatest success, as is indicated by the publication, at Lübeck in 1699, of a selection of arias and duets from the Hamburg version of the work (*Roland*); that it also became the best known of his Hanover operas is suggested by the fact that, when their instrumental movements were published at Amsterdam in 1706, Estienne Roger placed those from *Orlando* at the head of his edition.

The story of this opera is taken from the monumental epic poem *Orlando furioso* by the Italian Renaissance poet Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533), which had already provided material for generations of madrigal composers and musical dramatists. The success of Steffani’s *Orlando* may have been due partly to the universal nature of its subject matter and the fact that Ariosto’s poem was still well known. True, Orlando was a medieval knight, but it cannot have been difficult for an audience to identify with a young man driven mad by love for—or infatuation with—the beautiful but unattainable Princess Angelica. In addition, Mauro drew on the relationship between King Ruggiero and the female warrior Bradamante, whose union, according to Ariosto’s sorceress Melissa, was destined to give rise to the house of Este. The inclusion of Ruggiero and Bradamante enabled Mauro to refer to the fact that Ernst August, a Guelf, was related to the Estensi via a common medieval ancestor and to also create opportunities for mistaken identity and doubt.

Steffani responded tellingly to every nuance of the fast-moving libretto, often abandoning musical convention or molding it to his purpose. Examples abound in the title role. Orlando is the last character to appear on stage, and his entrance aria (“In quest’alma”) is the most imposing. A battle is raging within him between “la Gloria e l’Amor”—(public, military) Glory and (private) Love—a dilemma, rooted in antiquity, that afflicted many opera heroes. Steffani conveys Orlando’s status by means of a pervasive orchestral accompaniment, and his state of mind by contrasted musical material—rapid coloratura in the major mode for Glory and lyrical phrases in the minor for Love. In the second half of Act I, aided by other characters, Orlando begins to doubt the evidence of his own eyes, and vents his consternation in an anguished solo scene in which he explores the recesses of his heart and mind. Technically speaking, the opening section (“Pupille sfortunate”) is recitative, but the vocal line is exceptionally expressive and carefully structured. For example, the first two words are set to a tortuous melody (a semitone followed by a pregnant pause and chromatic harmony), and their effect is reinforced by subsequent repetitions of the phrase, like a thought that will not go away. The ensuing aria (“La mia bella, ó fìngi ó nò”) begins with the same semitone. Here and in the next aria (“Per saper ciò che hó da credere”) the orchestra merely supplies an introductory ritornello, while in the aria that follows (“Penso, ne sò risolvere”) it plays no part at all. By gradually reducing the role of the orchestra in these arias Steffani subtly portrays the weakening of Orlando’s character and status.

Early in Act II, Orlando overhears Angelica and Ruggiero lamenting the loss of their respective beloved in the strophes of a richly scored and intensely poignant aria (“Se l’eclissi”); when she joins Ruggiero in his “da capo” repeat, the resulting duet suggests she is falling for him and rouses Orlando to jealousy. He subsequently plans to take revenge on her (“Armi, stragi”) but is interrupted by Bradamante, who unwittingly launches a thrilling sequence in which recitative, aria, duet, and arioso follow each other in quick succession. Mistaking Bradamante for Angelica, Orlando tries to ingratiate himself with her and even asks her for a kiss; she realizes that he is delirious, takes pity on him, but is overheard by Ruggiero. He misunderstands the situation and accuses her of infidelity; she reminds him of his dalliance with Angelica, and they grow increasingly angry with each other. Finally, Bradamante berates Ruggiero at breakneck speed in an aria of feral directness (“Spiriti ardenti del’honor’); his reply (“Non ha’l mar calma sincera”) is a courtly minuet sung through gritted teeth, an ironic expression of his anger and contempt. The juxtaposition of these arias is a masterstroke of musical characterization.

Orlando’s main appearances in Act III are extended soliloquies—a “mad” scene and a prison scene. Both include intensely expressive recitative and unorthodox structures in aria style. In the first (“Eumenidi, lasciatemi”) he gives vent to his pain and despair: Angelica’s beauty has no equal in Heaven, his torment no equal in Hell. The lashes of the underworld deities are represented in the orchestra by incisive, repeated chords. In the second soliloquy Orlando lacks both weapons and liberty (“Io dunque senz’armi”). Taking stock of his situation (adagio), he resolves to rebel (presto) but eventually realizes that resistance is fruitless and begs for release (placato). In the ensuing recitative he recognizes that he alone is the cause of his downfall, because he became infatuated with
Angelica, and in the closing aria (“Miserie fortunate”) he begs for the continuation of the misery that has led him to this conclusion. This is Orlando’s lowest point. The key is minor, the tempo slow, and the compass of the vocal line restricted. Steffani chooses a bleak downward leap for the word “miserie” but manages a radiant melisma for “beate avversità” (blessed adversities); once again, the orchestra accompanies—or rather, punctuates—the vocal line with repeated chords, but now they are slow and heavy, laden with grief. In the final dénouement, Orlando recovers his equilibrium, responds positively to an appeal from Angelica and is reconciled with both her and Galafro, her father. He thus ceases to be “furioso” and becomes “generoso”—a word that comes from Ariosto. As Angelica explains to Orlando, after so many earlier victories all he had needed to do, to crown his generous heart, was to conquer himself and triumph over love:

Doppo tanti trofei sol ti mancava
per coronar quel generoso core
vincer se stesso e trionfar d’amore.

Her words recall the battle within Orlando between Gloria and Amor, a battle that is now at an end.

By way of conclusion it is worth repeating that Steffani occupies an important historical position. Raised as a composer in the Italian style, he assimilated the influence of French music and, in his Hanover operas, perfected a mixed style; he was one of the earliest composers to do so. Through the public performance and partial publication of these operas he bridged the gap between the court and the wider public, influenced such composers as Kusser, Keiser, Mattheson, Telemann, Handel, and Bach, and thus helped shape the language of late Baroque music in north Germany.

But his significance is not merely historical: Steffani was also an exceptionally fine composer in his own right and an outstanding musical dramatist. His operas demonstrate conclusively that he possessed an uncanny ability to pinpoint the mood of the moment and capture it perfectly in music of clarity and power. He was clearly an astute observer and judge of human nature. These are the qualities that enabled him to create convincing characters and compelling musical drama. Interest in Steffani has risen sharply in the last ten years, and it is hoped that this trend will continue. If it does, he will come to be seen as a wonderful composer who has much to say to an audience today.

—Colin Timms