



SERSE

by G. F. Händel



SYNOPSIS

King Serse of Persia becomes obsessed with the beautiful Romilda, a woman who is already deeply in love with his brother, Arsamene. Determined to make her his queen, Serse completely ignores his own engagement to Princess Amastre. Furious at Romilda's resistance, Serse banishes his brother and tries to force her into marriage. The court quickly dissolves into a web of romantic deception. Romilda's jealous sister, Atalanta, plots to steal Arsamene for herself by intercepting letters, while the abandoned Princess Amastre disguises herself as a male soldier to spy on the unfaithful king.

Amidst this chaos stands Ariodate, Romilda's father and Serse's loyal captain. Returning home victorious from battle, Ariodate becomes the accidental catalyst for the opera's climax. Furious at Romilda's resistance, Serse attempts to force the match by promising Ariodate that his daughter will marry a man "equal in royal blood" to the king. Ariodate joyfully assumes this refers to Arsamene. When Serse later sends a vague command to proceed with the wedding immediately, the literal-minded captain assumes it is a royal blessing for the young lovers and swiftly marries Romilda and Arsamene.

Discovering the trick, Serse flies into a murderous rage. Before he can execute the newlyweds, the disguised Amastre intercepts his orders, draws her sword, and reveals her identity. Faced with his own cruelty and faithlessness, Serse repents. He forgives Ariodate's mistake, blesses the new marriage, and reunites with Amastre, restoring peace to the Persian court.



CONDUCTOR'S MESSAGE



Throughout his lifetime, George Frideric Händel (1685–1759) operated at a time when opera seria reigned supreme as Europe's most prestigious form of musical theatre. Rooted in heroic, classical, and historical tales, the genre explored the grand conflicts between duty and passion. Yet, it was a highly formulaic world. It relied heavily on standardised librettos—often penned by poets like Metastasio—and the star power of legendary castrati like Farinelli and Senesino, who commanded astronomical salaries. But by the 1730s, London audiences were growing tired of the rigid Italian conventions, expensive foreign stars, and lack of genuine dramatic realism.

In response, Händel began pushing boundaries. Throughout the 1730s, he infused the rigid structures of opera seria with unprecedented dramatic continuity, emotional depth, and structural experimentation. He introduced fluid scene progressions and expanded the orchestra's role, using complex *accompagnato* recitatives to heighten moments of terror, grief, or suspense. He even mixed tragic plots with comedic elements. Ironically, it was this bold experimentation that baffled traditionalists, leading them to reject his 1738 opera, *Serse*. However, these very same dramatic innovations would soon make Händel incredibly popular as he transitioned to English-language oratorios—most notably, *Messiah* in 1742.

The score of *Serse* contains some of Händel's most beautiful and captivating music, where even the most memorable tunes sometimes last fewer than 30 bars. Within these pages, you can hear the early seeds of his future oratorios. Given its stunning quality, it is astonishing that the original production closed after just five performances and was lost to history until its revival in 1926.

It gives me great pleasure to present this production, featuring some of Melbourne's finest singers—many of them winners and finalists of the Herald Sun Aria—alongside Sally-Anne Russell, one of Australia's premier Händel performers. Thank you for your vital support, and we hope you enjoy a performance that adds to the rich tapestry of opera right here in Melbourne.

– Patrick Burns

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE



Serse (1738) is among the last operas composed by Händel. It was followed by *Imeneo* (1740) and *Deidamia* (1741), after which time he abandoned Italian opera and turned his attention entirely to oratorios, with the *Messiah* premiering in 1742.

As far as we know the libretto was adapted by Händel himself, who based it on Silvio Stampiglia's libretto for Bononcini's *Xerse* (1694), which in turn was drawn from Nicolò Minato's for Cavalli's *Il Xerse* (1654). Händel's adaptation, however, was more than a simple shortening and tightening of Stampiglia's, it was formally inventive and experimental. It's an opera that's Shakespearean in scope, with a mix of high and low characters, one-part arias that advance the plot and full three-part da capo arias that excavate the emotions of the characters, and stunning music. By 2018 it was the second-most performed Händel opera in the world after *Giulio Cesare* (1724).

The challenge in staging *Serse* was maintaining that mix of high and low, of comedy and deep emotions, as well as the power structures depicted, where all the characters are in pursuit of love and happiness, but under the tyrannical rule of an absolute monarchy and patriarchy. Working closely with my designer, Christina Logan-Bell, we both became fascinated with the exploits of the Prince Regent, the future George IV, and his scandal-filled life and reign. Thus it is that we arrive at the court of King Xerxes and find ourselves in the Regency era, or *Bridgerton* if you prefer, the better to bring to life this opera of extreme confusion, mistaken identities, waylaid letters, painful love and happy endings.

– Beng Oh



BIOGRAPHIES



Sally-Anne Russell
Seerse, King of Persia

Adelaide-born Sally-Anne Russell is a multi-award-winning mezzo-soprano, a graduate of the University of Adelaide and has performed on the concert platform and operatic stage in twenty-five countries.

Sally-Anne has over 80 operatic roles in her repertoire, working with more than 20 orchestras and ensembles across Australia and internationally. A prolific exponent of early and Baroque repertoire, she has over 15 Handel operas and oratorios in her repertoire.

Recent projects include Hermia in Britten's A Midsummer Night's Dream for Adelaide Festival, Wagner's Ring Cycle for Melbourne Opera in Bendigo, and Strauss's Elektra for Victorian Opera, several productions of Dido and Aeneas in Sydney and Melbourne and concerts of Mahler Das Lied von der Erde for Canberra International Festival, Bachs St John and Matthew Passions for Melbourne Bach Choir, Handel's Messiah with Melbourne Symphony,



Naomi Flatman
Arsamene, brother of Seerse

Praised with "spinning out long phrases with the most luscious tone" (Classic Melbourne 2022) Swiss – Australian mezzo-soprano Naomi Flatman grew up in a musical home first studying the flute, playing in the youth orchestra and then singing quickly became her focus.

From 2024 Naomi has been living in Austria where she has been a member of the Tiroler Landestheater Innsbruck performing small roles and covers and chorus work, she sang Rosina (The Barber of Seville), and Die Aufsehrerin & Vertraute (Elektra) at The Festival of the Aegean (Greece).

Naomi has sung in numerous international competitions including Aria D'oro, Italy, Lirico Concorso Giancarlo Aliverto hosted by the Friends of Teatro La Scala, Magda Olivera International Competition, Italy, Hans Gabour Belvedere International singing competition. In 2021 she won the 97th Herald Sun Aria and Australian Liederfest, and in 2018 was winner of the Australian Concerto and Vocal competition.



Olivia Federow-Yemm
**Amastre, betrothed
to Serse:**

Mezzo-soprano Olivia Federow-Yemm completed her Master of Opera Performance at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music in 2022, following studies at the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School. She later joined Melbourne Opera's Richard Divall Emerging Artists Program and performed at the Bayreuth Young Artists Festival through the Rotary International/Melbourne Opera NGSE scholarship to Germany.

Olivia has performed with Victorian Opera, Opera Australia, Melbourne Opera, BK Opera, and Lyric Opera of Melbourne. In 2024, she appeared in Victorian Opera's Sweeney Todd, touring to Dubai Opera, and sang her first major role as Julia in Jonathan Dove's Mansfield Park. In 2025 she made her Lyric Opera debut as Isabelle Eberhardt in Missy Mazzoli's *Song from the Uproar*.



Kate Amos
**Romilda, Daughter
of Ariodate**

Kate Amos is fast becoming one of Australia's most artistically versatile and highly sought-after young sopranos.

Born in Melbourne, Kate holds a Bachelor of Music (Performance) with Honours, Diploma in Languages (Italian) and Masters of Music (Opera Performance) from The University of Melbourne. She also holds an Advanced Masters in Opera from the Welsh International Academy of Voice, Cardiff studying under the tutelage of renowned international tenor Dennis O'Neill.

Kate was selected to join the Young Artist Program with Victorian Opera in 2014 performing leading and supporting roles and has gone on to become an artist who showcases unique vocal versatility in a wide range of musical styles, her repertoire spanning the varying genres of opera, operetta, music theatre and song.



Rebecca Rashleigh
**Atalanta, Daughter of
Ariodate**

A graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts, Rebecca has performed many various roles with several opera companies within Australia and Asia such as Parrwang (Parrwang lifts the sky), Woglinde (Das Rheingold), Marzelline (Fidelio), Blonde (The Abduction from the Seraglio), Susanna (Le Nozze di Figaro), Pamina (Die Zauberflöte), Liu (Turandot), Lauretta (Gianni Schicchi), Gretel (Hansel and Gretel) and Poppea (L'incoronazione di Poppea).

Rebecca has also received several awards one being the much prestigious Herald Sun Aria in 2018 and this year she was nominated for a Greenroom Award in her portrayal of Marzelline in Fidelio (2020).



Christopher Hillier
**Ariodate, General of
the Armies**

Christopher Hillier is one of Australia's finest singers, equally at home in opera and concert. His performances are acclaimed for both dramatic and vocal power. Following his debut as Zurga in Bizet's Pearl Fishers for Opera Australia, he made his international debut in Tokyo in 2013 as Malatesta in Donizetti's Don Pasquale. Other roles performed at Opera Australia included Count Almaviva in Mozart's Le nozze di Figaro, Germont in Verdi's La Traviata, Belcore in Donizetti's L'elisir d'amore and many more.

Since then he has built a prolific concert and operatic career working with Opera Australia, Melbourne Opera, Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Melbourne Symphony, Melbourne Bach Choir and many others. His career has also taken him to China, Singapore, New Zealand, Germany and the UK.

christopherhillier.com



Luke Belle
**Elviro, servant to
Arsamene**

Luke Belle (baritone) is a Naarm-based performer who has spent the past few years touring the fringe festival circuit – Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne – with their acclaimed cabaret persona Adore Händel, also a familiar MC and host at Speakeasy and The 86. Adore’s accolades include a Best Cabaret nomination and Judges’ Pick at Melbourne Fringe, and weekly award wins for Best Cabaret at both Adelaide Fringe (2025 and 2026) and Fringe World Perth. This October, Adore returns to Melbourne Fringe with their third solo show, Adore Händel’s Birthday Party, alongside the Melbourne Fringe debut of group show CHOOKAS. On the operatic stage, Luke’s most recent role was Alidoro in Lyster Opera’s La Cenerentola. Serse marks Luke’s Lyric Opera Melbourne debut, playing Elviro.





Beng Oh
Director

Beng is a critically regarded director and theatre maker who has staged a wide range of productions. He's passionate about diversity, new work and queer theatre. He trained at the Victorian College of the Arts and is a member of the Lincoln Center Theatre Directors Lab in New York. He is co-artistic director, with playwright Jane Miller, of 15 Minutes from Anywhere Inc.

Notable productions include the Australian Premiere of Missy Mazzoli's *Song from the Uproar: the Lives and Deaths of Isabelle Eberhardt* (Lyric Opera of Melbourne), *Soul of Possum* by Brodie Murray (Fortyfivedownstairs), *Mr Big: aka Tatay, A Transwoman and That Tiring Tune!* by Dax Carnay-Hanrahan (Tayotayo Collective), *Soldier Boy* by Anthony Hill (Theatre Works), *This Rough Magic* by Helen Machalias (The Street Theatre, Canberra) and *Fuel* by Robert Reid (Motley Bauhaus). Upcoming productions include *Fall* by Michele Lee (Wit Incorporated).

bengoh.com





Patrick Burns
**Conductor & Artistic
Director**

Patrick Burns is Artistic Director of Lyric Opera of Melbourne, as well as chief conductor and music director of the Ipswich City Orchestra and XL Arts Inc.

In 2018 and 2019 Patrick was the Hephzibah Tintner Conducting Fellow with The Australian Ballet, Opera Australia, and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, and the Robert and Elizabeth Albert Conducting Fellow with The Australian Ballet. He has conducted performances for The Australian Ballet with Orchestra Victoria, the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and the Australian Opera Orchestra. He has also conducted Orchestra Victoria and worked as Assistant Conductor to Simone Young with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Andrea Molino for Opera Australia's Wozzeck.

Internationally he has made guest appearances with the National Theater of Serbia (Otello), State Opera of Bulgaria Ruse (Rigoletto, Nabucco, Turandot) and the Pazardzhik Symphony Orchestra in Bulgaria. He won the Jury's Prize at the 2015 Blue Danube International Opera Conducting Competition in Bulgaria and the Orchestra's Prize in the 2016 Black Sea Opera Conducting Competition in Romania.

Patrick holds a Master of Music in Conducting from the University of Melbourne, where he studied under Professor John Hopkins, and is an alumnus of the Symphony Australia conductor development program.





Liane Keegan
Creative Consultant

Liane Keegan is an Australian-born opera singer who has gained recognition for her performances in various roles in opera productions around the world. Keegan has performed in various roles such as Azucena in *Il Trovatore*, Ulrica in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, Mistress Quickly in *Falstaff*, Suzuki in *Madame Butterfly*, and Klytemnestra in *Elektra*, among others. She has also made appearances as an alto soloist in concert productions such as Mozart's *Requiem* and Mahler's *2nd Symphony*.

Since returning to Australia permanently in 2012, Liane has appeared in operatic productions with Opera Australia, Victorian Opera and Melbourne Opera. Guest soloist for The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Queensland Symphony Orchestra, Australian Symphony Orchestra, The Royal Melbourne Philharmonic, The Zelman Symphony Orchestra, Ludovico's Band and Heidelberg Choral Society.

Over the devastating COVID period, Liane has appeared in concerts for the Australian Digital Concert Hall with Pianist Stefan Cassomenos performing Judy Garland songs written by women from the American Songbook and a concert with Plexus, featuring Brahms, Schumann and Strauss songs. Liane also appeared as Judy in the Cabaret show "Judy 1964" at the Athenaeum Theatre. In February of 2022, Liane appeared as Begbick in *The rise and fall of the City of Mahagonny* for Melbourne Opera/ I Opera at the Athenaeum theatre.

Liane is the Artistic Director of XL Arts inc. and the newly formed Ensemble Creatus in Melbourne. Along with teaching singing, Liane is a fully qualified Arts Therapist and Visual Artist who also has a passion for Directing Opera.

PRODUCTION

Christina Logan-Bell
Set and Costume Design

Shane Grant
Lighting Design

Emily Barraclough
Stage Manager

Liane Keegan
Creative Consultant

Kevin Tamanini
Surtitles

Jodie Lockyer, Janis Cooks,
Rosa Hwang, Dr. David Kram,
Stefanie-Jane Lewendon-Lowe
Rehearsal Repetiteurs

ORCHESTRA

Edwina Kayser
Violin 1

Dorata Swarts
Violin 2

Lalita Wright
Violin 3

Ely Ruttico
Viola

Julia Cianci
Cello

Alexandra Giller
Double Bass

Kailen Cresp
Oboe 1, Recorder 1

Benjamin Roe
Oboe 2, Recorder 2

Joshua Elrom
Bassoon

Joy Lee
Harpsichord



ABOUT LYRIC OPERA OF MELBOURNE

Established in 2003, Lyric Opera of Melbourne is a bold, creative opera company committed to developing operatic artists, building new audiences and enriching the operatic repertoire by creating a forum for the production of lesser-known works. Lyric's work is focused on producing innovative and exploratory music-based theatre, using contemporary practices that challenge, engage and inspire artists and audiences alike.

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Patrick Burns

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MUSIC FOR VERSAILLES: LULLY and DE LALANDE MOTETS with the MELBOURNE BAROQUE ORCHESTRA and POLYPHONIC VOICES

Directed by Michael Fulcher

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