

Observations: Thomas Arne is due a revival after 166 years

By Jessica Duchon

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"Rule, Britannia!" is one of the most familiar tunes in Britain, but whatever happened to its composer? This season marks the tricentenary of Thomas Arne, the compositional superstar of 18th-century Britain, yet now virtually forgotten beyond that one aria. To celebrate, the Royal Opera House is presenting his opera *Artaxerxes* which was premiered in the same spot in 1762, but has not been heard there (or in many other places) since 1843.

A tale of intrigue and lust set in ancient Persia, *Artaxerxes* was not only Arne's greatest hit, but it was also the first opera seria written in English; a deliberate challenge to the supremacy of Handel both Arne's strongest influence and his greatest rival who composed his operas in Italian. By just 1790 it had notched up 111 performances.

So why was it forgotten? Partly, perhaps, because Arne fell out of public favour. He was an outsider a Catholic, which meant he could not enjoy the court appointments held by his musical peers. He was a notorious womaniser, too, and was very publicly fleeced and bad-mouthed by his litigious ex-wife, whom he left for the soprano Charlotte Brent who inspired the magnificent role of Princess Mandane in *Artaxerxes*.

But essentially the opera vanished because it was too famous. Jane Austen declared in 1814 that she was "very tired" of it. After more than a century, it's time to try it anew. With a cast of stunning young singers including Elizabeth Watts as Mandane, accompanied by the Orchestra of the Classical Opera Company conducted by Ian Page and directed by Martin Duncan, Arne's masterpiece is coming home at last.

To 14 Nov, Royal Opera House Linbury Studio, London WC2 (020 7304 4000;
www.roh.org.uk)