

Handel's *Tolomeo*.

Act I

Tolomeo, eldest son of Cleopatra, is in exile on the island of Cyprus, disguised as a shepherd called "Osmin." His mother has usurped him and put his younger brother, Alessandro, on the throne. To add to his woes, Tolomeo believes that his beloved wife Seleuce has been drowned in a shipwreck. In despair, he prepares to throw himself into the sea, but is halted by a cry of distress. He sees a figure battling the rough seas and wades in to rescue him. The man collapses unconscious at his feet, and Tolomeo is astonished to see that it is his brother, Alessandro. On the point of killing him in revenge, Tolomeo halts and decides to let him live so that Alessandro will be twice beholden to him.

Elisa, the sister of Araspe, the king of Cyprus, now enters. She finds the sleeping Alessandro and wakes him. On waking, Alessandro instantly falls in love with Elisa, and agrees to retire to her villa to revive. Elisa reveals her love for the shepherd "Osmin."

Seleuce, who has *not* been killed at sea, is searching for her exiled husband in disguise as a shepherdess, "Delia." She is pursued by Araspe, who loves her. But she rejects him, and he leaves to welcome Alessandro. Seleuce declares her undying love for Tolomeo.

Elisa arrives at "Osmin's" hut and tries to persuade him to forgo his pastoral idyll for life at court. He resists, so she invites him instead to her villa. Recognising Elisa's love for him, Tolomeo confirms his desire to

revenge his wife's supposed death. Finding comfort in his anger, he falls asleep.

Seleuce enters, still searching for her husband. Seeing the sleeping shepherd, she thinks she recognises him as Tolomeo, and draws closer to confirm her hopes. Araspe enters and watches her approach the shepherd, uttering words of love. In a jealous rage, Araspe rushes forward with sword drawn and threatens to kill his apparent rival. Seleuce runs away in alarm, calling back to the shepherd to wake and save himself. Tolomeo wakes, thinking he hears his wife's voice in his dreams. Seeing Araspe with sword raised, Tolomeo begs for death. Araspe accuses him of being "Delia's" lover, but Tolomeo denies this. Unconvinced, Araspe lets the shepherd live but tells him to depart immediately. Left alone, Tolomeo prays to hear his wife's voice again, for with her return all his sorrows will be at an end.

Act II

Elisa is searching for "Osmin" when Tolomeo enters. He reveals his identity to her, but they are interrupted by Araspe, who is furious to see the banished "Osmin" still on the island. Elisa persuades Araspe to entrust the shepherd to her care, and she offers to help Tolomeo.

Seleuce longs for her lost husband. Elisa enters with Tolomeo, who instantly recognises Seleuce. But, in order to protect him, she pretends not to know who he is. Elisa now has

confirmation of her suspicions. She offers to help Tolomeo regain his throne if he will declare his love for her. But he refuses, declaring that only Seleuce is worthy of his love. Alone, Elisa's thoughts turn to revenge.

She is joined by Alessandro, who has won Araspe's agreement to his union with Elisa. But she cannot consider his affection until he has strengthened his claim to his throne by killing his brother, Tolomeo. Alessandro now faces a dilemma, as he has decided to restore Tolomeo to his rightful place as Prince of Egypt. He is at once attracted by Elisa's beauty and repelled by her harshness.

Tolomeo and Seleuce continue to search for their lost love, echoing each other's words. Araspe appears and attempts to embrace "Delia." Tolomeo leaps to her defense, and reveals his true identity to Araspe. Inspired by her husband, Seleuce too reveals who she is and begs Araspe to spare them. But the King is resolute, and has the couple bound and taken away as they bid each other a despairing farewell.

Act III

In Araspe's palace, Alessandro has received news of the death of his mother, Cleopatra, and mourns her. Araspe arrives and tells Alessandro that he has arrested Tolomeo, advising him to execute his brother. Alessandro pretends to want his brother returned to Egypt in chains, though he plans secretly to restore him to the throne. Araspe believes that Alessandro does not want the death of his brother on his own hands, and decides to kill Tolomeo himself.

Elisa is holding Seleuce captive. She tells Seleuce that to save Tolomeo's life, she must convince him to marry Elisa. When Tolomeo arrives, Seleuce tries to persuade him to accept Elisa's hand, but he is steadfast. He would rather die than submit. In her anger, Elisa anticipates executing the devoted couple.

In the woods near the palace, Alessandro rescues Seleuce from Elisa's guards. She is afraid of him, believing he has already killed Tolomeo. But he assures her that he will return his brother to the throne, and begs forgiveness of her. Seleuce begins to believe that there might be a happy ending to her misery.

Tolomeo has been given poison by Elisa and, bidding farewell to his beloved Seleuce, he willingly drinks it. He falls to the ground.

Araspe leads Alessandro to his brother's body; he is horrified and warns Araspe that he will pay for this murder. But all Araspe can think about is Seleuce, who is now free to marry him. Elisa announces that she has had Seleuce put to death, and confides to Alessandro that she has given Tolomeo a sleeping draught rather than poison. Tolomeo now begins to wake, and as he does Alessandro leads in the rescued Seleuce. The couple are finally reunited in freedom, and Alessandro is reconciled with his brother. Tolomeo forgives all and prepares to reclaim the throne of Egypt.

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