

## Reviews & Insights

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### The Musical World of Armida's Garden

#### Abstract

Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* offers a prismatic array of characters and temperaments that have deeply influenced musical history, particularly the development of melodrama. This article focuses on the various musical interpretations of the story of the sorceress Armida: madrigals, *tragédies en musique*, *cantatas*, *serenatas*, *opera seria*, *opera buffa*, and more, spanning four centuries from the late sixteenth century to the early twentieth century. Special attention is given to the intriguing role of the violins in Handel's *cantata*. This story unfolds on two levels: it reflects the relationship between the Western and Eastern worlds across different phases of European history, while also revisiting the timeless motif of the valiant hero, Rinaldo, who loses sight of his duty after succumbing to the charm of a woman —Armida— only to awaken, leave behind the garden of pleasure, and resume his heroic journey.

#### Keywords

Armida | Madrigal | Melodramma | Opera Seria | Arcadia | Tasso

The 'G. B. Martini' Conservatoire of Bologna participates in the AFAM PNRR Project titled *Jerus-It-ArtS – Between Italy and Jerusalem: Retracing Music and Arts Networks, Enhancing Education and Promoting Cultural Heritage Preservation*, established under Ministerial Decree no. 124/2023 and funded by the European Union as part of the NextGenerationEU program (National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) – Mission 4 – Component 1 *Strengthening the provision of education services: from nursery schools to university* – Investment 3.4 *Advanced university teaching and skills*, sub-investment T5 *Strategic partnerships/initiatives to innovate the international dimension of the AFAM system* - CUP E33C24000160006). Its goal is to develop a range of innovative initiatives for the preservation and international promotion of Italy's artistic, musical, and dance heritage. Within this framework, the 'G. B. Martini' Conservatoire of Bologna explores and researches new approaches to music history and to musical exchanges between Italy and the Middle East, with particular attention to Jerusalem, Israel, and Palestine, drawing inspiration from the figure of Saint Francis and his presence and legacy in the Holy Land.



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Since its publication in the late sixteenth century, Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, with its prismatic variety of characters, has offered fertile ground for musical exploration and reinterpretation, inspiring countless works—some more faithful to the original than others.

Here we wish—albeit briefly—to unwind the thread of the musical history of Armida and Rinaldo:<sup>1</sup> their story revisits, with an unexpected happy ending, the timeless trope of the hero led astray from his duty by feminine allure, only to be 'saved' and set back onto his rightful path by an external intervention.

It's a tale as old as Adam and Eve: men always seem to blame women for their downfall. Like her illustrious predecessors—Circe, Calypso, and Dido—the Saracen enchantress lures the hero into a *locus amoenus*, a marvellous realm of suspended time. There he remains trapped until he is finally 'rescued', reinforcing the trope of the temptress leading men astray through her beauty, here strategically deployed for military purposes by the pagan army in an attempt to defeat the Christian forces.

Now, let us briefly recall the story of the two lovers, which weaves a *fil rouge* through several cantos of Tasso's epic poem, more specifically from the Fourth to the Twentieth.

Armida, the niece of Hidraotes, ruler of Damascus, having failed in her attempt to seduce Godfrey in the Crusader camp (IV, 33–64), succeeds in luring and imprisoning Rinaldo, whom she takes to her magnificent garden on one of the Fortunate Isles (X, 61–67). There, the two live an intense love story (XIV, 51–71). The crusaders Carlo and Ubaldo eventually find him and, using an enchanted shield as a mirror, reveal to him what he has become and recall him to his duty. Abandoned, Armida vainly attempts to summon the hero back; seized by rage and disillusionment, she ultimately destroys both the island and the palace that had embodied her happiness (XVI, 1–75).

But their story does not end there.

Seeking revenge, Armida decides to place herself at the head of the pagan army (XVII, 33–34), yet in the heat of battle she is unable to kill Rinaldo. After suffering a painful defeat, she attempts to take her own life; at that very moment, however, Rinaldo arrives, and she collapses unconscious in his arms, overwhelmed by emotion. When she regains consciousness, everything is unexpectedly resolved in a surprising *lieto fine*: he confesses his love for her, she converts to Christianity, and the two get married, happy to share both faith and life (XX, 61-67, 127-130, 130-136).

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The octaves from Tasso's poem, published in 1581, immediately inspired madrigal composers. In 1586, for instance, Jacques de Wert gave voice to Armida's despair after

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the various musical reinterpretations, see G. MORELLI and E. SURIAN, *Contagi d'Armida*, in M.A. BALSANO and T. WALKER (curated by), *Tasso, la musica, i musicisti*, Olschki, Florence 1988 and N. DI NINO, *La strega innamorata. Riprese della figura di Armida sulla scena teatrale*, «Italice», 95, 3, 2018, p. 21-50.

Rinaldo's abandonment in *Forsennata gridava*<sup>2</sup> (Canto XV), while Claudio Monteverdi later set the same canto to music in his *Vattene pur crudel*.<sup>3</sup>

In the early seventeenth century, it was the woman's despair and fury that captured the interest of composers, thanks to the emergence of accompanied monody. Among the many examples, we particularly wish to mention Sigismondo d'India's new setting of *Forsennata gridava*,<sup>4</sup> which abandons madrigal polyphony in favour of a solo voice, finally granting Armida a fully personified presence and unprecedented expressive force.

Attempting to account for all the madrigalists captivated by Tasso's verses would be impossible. However, we would be remiss not to mention the Ravennate composer Francesco Eredi, who in 1629 wove together episodes drawn from cantos XVI and XX into a sequence of twenty madrigals. The Printer's Note reads:

This is but one of many reasons why I present to Your Most Illustrious Lordship the most beautiful Armida, queen of Damascus—if not a chantress, then at the very least a powerful enchantress, and a chantress all the more charming for it; for music is nothing other than a song which, slithering into one's ears, becomes a most powerful spell within the heart.<sup>5</sup>

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With the advent of monody, Armida decisively entered the world of melodrama.<sup>6</sup> The poem was no longer adapted in its entirety; instead, it became a starting point for new librettos that reshaped and expanded parts of the story. Over time, the narrative was freely reworked, often enriched with episodes not found in Tasso's poem and, at times, radically altered by poets responding to shifting aesthetic tastes as well as changing social and political concerns.

During the first decade of the seventeenth century, the story attracted relatively little interest. This changed starting in the third decade of the century, with the flourishing of numerous Armida settings.

Our journey begins in Venice<sup>7</sup> in 1639 with Benedetto Ferrari, who wrote his own libretto, followed in 1707 by Giovanni Maria Ruggieri and Giuseppe Boniventi, who set

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<sup>2</sup> J. DE WERT, *Madrigali a cinque voci libro VIII*, Gardano, Venice 1586. It's the 17th madrigal.

<sup>3</sup> C. MONTEVERDI, *Terzo Libro de Madrigali a cinque voci*, Amadino, Venice 1592. It's the 8th madrigal in the anthology and it consists of 3 octaves.

<sup>4</sup> S. D'INDIA, *Musiche da cantar solo libro primo*, Simon Tini, & Filippo Lomazzo, Milan 1609. Piece No. 21.

<sup>5</sup> F. EREDI, *L'Armida del Tasso posta in musica a cinque voci col suo Basso per sonare [...] opera Terza*, Vincenti, Venice 1629, p. 2. For more information on Armida being depicted as a Siren or Medusa, see S. VOLTERRANI, *Tasso e il canto delle sirene*, «Studi Tassiani», XLV, 1997, n. 45, pp. 51-83 and T. TASSO, *Discorso della virtù femminile e donnesca*, in C. GUASTI (curated by), *Prose diverse*, X, Le Monnier, Florence 1875, II, pp. 203-215 but also L. DOLCE, *Dialogo della istituzione delle donne*, Giolito de' Ferrari, Venice 1553.

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see C. CAPPELLETTI, L. C. ROSSI, *Tasso in scena. La «Gerusalemme liberata» e il suo autore a teatro*, «Studi tassiani», LXVIII, 2020, pp. 137-156.

<sup>7</sup> See F. TANSINI, *Armida: da personaggio tassiano a motivo scenico per i teatri veneziani tra Sei e Settecento*, «Studi Tassiani», LXX, 2022, p. 169-188.

music to a libretto by Francesco Silvani. Grazio Braccioli's libretto for Giacomo Rampini, dated 1711, opens after Rinaldo has already abandoned the enchanted castle.

Particularly noteworthy is *Armida al campo d'Egitto*, set by Antonio Vivaldi<sup>8</sup> (1718) to a libretto weaving together deceitful love, rejection, betrayal, disguises, revenge, and sorcery. It was performed at Venice's Teatro San Moisè, which also staged *Il trionfo di Armida*, set by Tomaso Albinoni to a libretto by Collatelli.<sup>9</sup>

Armida was given a voice by many other composers outside Venice, like Antonio Chiochiolo (Padua, 1694) and Teofilo Orgiani (Verona, 1711), as well as Giuseppe Maria Buini (Bologna, 1716) and Domenico Sarro and Michele Falco (Naples, 1718 and 1719). The latter set music to the ever-popular libretto by Francesco Silvani: between 1707 and 1728,<sup>10</sup> this libretto alone inspired around twenty settings, all with a happy ending. Armida also reached European stages, with settings by Carlo Pallavicino (Hamburg, 1695), Antonio Bioni, and Giovanni Antonio Guerra (Prague, 1725 and 1728 respectively).<sup>11</sup>

At this point, the question naturally arises: what made this story so extraordinarily popular?

There are several reasons behind this success. First of all, audiences loved to see fabulous palaces, magic, and enchantments brought to life with stage machinery and dazzling visual effects—or at least Venetian audiences did, up to the end of the seventeenth century. Second, the role of Armida, a temptress and warrior-lover with an extraordinary emotional and expressive range, gave the era's celebrated *prima donnas* a chance to show off their vocal brilliance.

If we look at the historical context, another layer of meaning emerges. Between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Europe was engaged in its last major confrontation with the Ottoman Empire, which came to an end in 1718 with the Peace of Passarowitz. In this light, Armida's transformation—from enemy to the joyful bride of Rinaldo—can be read as a powerful symbol of reconciliation and renewed harmony.

Lastly, it is worth remembering that the episode's setting—an enchanted garden blending nature and fantasy—perfectly reflected the ideals of the Arcadian Academy, founded in the late seventeenth century. In this place of dreamlike beauty, inhabited by amorous characters, the two lovers get to live happily ever after in a reconciled world.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> G. PALAZZI, *Armida al campo d'Egitto. Drama per musica da rappresentarsi nel Teatro Giustiniano di San Moisè il carnevale dell'anno 1718*, Rossetti, Venice 1718.

<sup>9</sup> G. COLLATELLI, *Il trionfo d'Armida. Drama per musica da rappresentarsi nel Teatro Giustiniano a S. Moisè l'anno 1726*, Rossetti, Venice 1726.

<sup>10</sup> See F. TANSINI, *cit.*, note 2, which provides the complete list of all Venetian opera librettos on this subject.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive list of all operas—both first performances and revivals—identified to date, see the CORAGO database: <https://corago.unibo.it>.

<sup>12</sup> For a comparative reading of the librettos, see L. BIANCONI, T. WALKER, *Production, Consumption and Political Function of Seventeenth-Century Opera*, «Early Music History», 4, 1984, pp. 209-296.

Before we continue our journey through the operatic versions of Armida, let us briefly review a work from 19 June 1707, set in a true Arcadian paradise in the countryside near Viterbo.

We are in Vignanello, in the garden of Francesco Maria Ruspoli's castle—a place where, as Tasso famously wrote, 'for once, nature playfully imitates art.' Here, Art and Nature, order and chaos, come together to create an ideal 'third space,' a real *paradeisos* of pure, pastoral Arcadia.<sup>13</sup>

In short, it is like stepping into one of Tasso's Fortunate Isles and the perfect setting for Georg Friedrich Händel's *Armida abbandonata*. Freed from the demands of full theatrical staging (even though the *cantata* is structured like an opera scene), the singer—twenty-one-year-old Margherita Durastante—could focus entirely on expressing Armida's full range of emotions, accompanied by only two violins and a continuo.

No stage needed, unless we count the magnificent garden of Vignanello itself—just a powerful voice and the expressive sound of the violins.

In the opening recitative, the violins take over the basso continuo first with arpeggios and then with chords. They fall silent during the aria, but come back with dramatic force in the accompanied recitative *Oh voi, dell'incostante*, where they become the raging waves and winds unleashed by Armida's fury. Finally, everything calms down in the closing aria *Venti fermate*, where the two violins, playing in triple time, accompany Armida's melancholy resignation.

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Now, let us take a short detour and chart a parallel path to the one we have followed so far, as we cross the Alps and arrive in the France of Louis XIV.

*Armide*, set to a libretto by Philippe Quinault, is the last *tragédie lyrique* by Jean-Baptiste Lully.<sup>14</sup> Across its five acts, the plot focuses on Armida's story of love and abandonment, and more specifically on her inner torment and the vanished happy ending. This shift in perspective should come as no surprise if we look at the world outside the theatre. As a matter of fact, Quinault's work was perfectly aligned with the political agenda of the Sun King himself. Louis XIV needed men ready for battle, not ones seduced by enchanted castles or lulled into complacency by the comforts of a quiet life. For this reason, Quinault focused exclusively on the central episode of the story, turning it into a clear moral warning for the wandering and the wavering.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See W. KIRKENDALE-G. MONARI, *Georg Friedrich Händel, Francesco Maria Ruspoli e Roma*, LIM, Lucca 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Académie Royale de Musique, Paris, 15 February 1686.

<sup>15</sup> On the political use of music and melodrama in the France of Louis XIV, see R. M. ISHERWOOD, *La musica al servizio del re*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1988.

Needless to say, his work proved so impactful that the heroine's two monologues—one at the end of Act II (*Enfin, il est en ma puissance*) and the other at the end of Act V (*Le perfide Renaud me fuit*)—soon became an important battleground for the *querelle* between the 'melodists', championed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the 'harmonists', represented by Jean-Philippe Rameau, who devoted more than fifty pages of his treatise to a detailed analysis of Armida's monologue.<sup>16</sup>

The same libretto was later set to music by Christoph Willibald Gluck for his own *Armide*,<sup>17</sup> once again sparking heated debate between the 'traditionalists'—who viewed the work as an affront to Lully, whose music was still widely performed—and the 'modernists', who not only supported the operatic 'reform' Gluck had proposed more than fifteen years earlier, but also embraced the rationalist aesthetic articulated by Rameau.

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Let us now return to the Italian opera scene.

From the 1720s onward, the number of operas centred around the sorceress declined sharply, partly as a result of Metastasio's drive toward rationalisation, but also because of a changing cultural climate that increasingly favoured more overtly moralising stories.

From the late 1760s, however, interest in Armida began to grow once again, with at least two dozen new productions set to librettos by a new generation of poets—some shining brighter than others.<sup>18</sup>

Four works published between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and presented here in strict chronological order, deserve special mention. The first is *Armida abbandonata*, Nicolò Jommelli's<sup>19</sup> first *opera seria* after his return to Italy following thirty years spent across Europe.

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<sup>16</sup> J. P. RAMEAU, *Nouveau système de musique théorique*, Paris, 1726; first published in Italian in 1753. The controversy is later taken up in F. Lesure, *Querelle des Gluckistes et des Piccinistes*, Paris, 1781; modern ed., Minkoff, Geneva, 1984.

<sup>17</sup> Paris Opéra, 23 September 1777. See M. ARMELLINI, *Le due 'Armide'. Metamorfosi estetiche e drammaturgiche da Lully a Gluck*, Passigli, Florence, 1993; and C.S. BRAUNER, *Da Tasso a Rossini: le metamorfosi di Armida*, in *Armida*, Fondazione Rossini, Pesaro, 2000 ('I libretti di Rossini', 7), pp. xi-cxxiv

<sup>18</sup> From CORAGO, cit., a brief summary: the libretto by Jacopo Durandi was set, among others, by Pasquale Anfossi (Turin, 1770), Vincenzo Manfredini (Bologna, 1770), Giuseppe Gazzaniga (Rome, 1773), Ferdinando Bertoni (Venice, 1781), Nicola Zingarelli (Rome, 1786), Michele Mortellari (Modena, 1776), and Antonio Sacchini (Milan, 1772). The libretto by Giovanni Ambrogio Migliavacca, on the other hand, inspired Gennaro Astarita (Venice, 1777) and Josef Mysliveček (Milan, 1780), while Giuseppe Scarlatti (Vienna, 1766) and Vincenzo Righini (Vienna, 1782) used the text by Marco Coltellini. Nor should we forget Tommaso Traetta, with a libretto by Giacomo Durazzo (Vienna, 1760); Domenico Cimarosa's *opera buffa* based on a text by Giuseppe Palomba (Naples, 1777); Luigi Cherubini on a libretto by Bartolomeo Vitturi (Florence, 1782); Luigi Gatti (text by De Gamerra, Mantua, 1775); Felice Alessandri (Foppa, Padua, 1794); Francesco Bianchi (Da Ponte, London, 1802); Gaetano Andreozzi (An, Naples, 1802); Giovanni Riario Sforza (Pagliuca, Naples, 1812); and Pietro Pasquinoli (Bergonzi, Cremona, 1817).

<sup>19</sup> Teatro San Carlo, 30 May 1770. The libretto was written by Francesco Saverio de' Rovati.

It boasted a truly stellar cast, with the castrato Giovanni Aprile as Rinaldo and Anna De Amicis—one of the greatest singers of her time—in the title role.

From Naples we move on to Vienna,<sup>20</sup> where Antonio Salieri<sup>21</sup> described his *Armida* as ‘magical, heroic, and romantic, almost tragic.’ It was his first *opera seria* after arriving in the imperial capital.

From Vienna, the journey continues to Esterháza,<sup>22</sup> where Franz Joseph Haydn presented his *Armida*, a *dramma eroico* so successful that it was revived no fewer than fifty-four times over the following four years. This melodrama—the last operatic work in Haydn’s catalogue—features a striking reversal of hierarchies: Armida is reduced to an expressive stereotype, while Rinaldo, torn between love and duty, dominates the narrative.

Bringing the circle to a close, *Armida* returns to Naples with Gioachino Rossini,<sup>23</sup> echoing the renewed interest in Tasso’s works that had flourished in the city from the second half of the eighteenth century onward. The opera, however, failed to achieve the success it deserved. It was criticised as being too ‘Italo-German’<sup>24</sup> in style and proved exceptionally demanding to stage, requiring no fewer than six tenors to stand alongside a single *prima donna*—at that time, Isabella Colbran.

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The nineteenth century did not forget about the Saracen sorceress. Her enduring allure found expression in melodramas such as Carlo Taddeucci’s *Armida* (Florence, 1868), as well as in fantastical ballets like that of Ferdinando Pratesi (Rome, 1869).

In 1868, none other than Johannes Brahms composed *Rinaldo*, a *cantata* for male chorus, soloists, and orchestra (Op. 50), based on a poem by Goethe, which was in turn inspired by Tasso. In Brahms’ work, however, Armida is a silent presence—felt rather than heard.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Theater am Kärntnertor, 2 June 1771, libretto by Coltellini.

<sup>21</sup> R. ANGERMÜLLER and E. BIGGI PARODI (curated by), *Antonio Salieri (1750-1825), e il teatro musicale a Vienna*, LIM, Lucca, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Eszterháza theatre, 26 February 1784, libretto by Nunziato Porta. See H. C. ROBBINS LANDON, D. W. JONES, *Haydn*, Rusconi, Milan 1988, pp. 319-385, 325.

<sup>23</sup> Teatro San Carlo, 9 November 1817, libretto by Giovanni Schmidt. See C. S. Brauner, *Da Tasso a Rossini: le metamorfosi di Armida*, in *Armida*, Fondazione Rossini, Pesaro, 2000 (“I libretti di Rossini”, 7), pp. xi–cxxiv; and D. Chiodo, *Armida. Da Tasso a Rossini*, Vecchiarelli, Rome, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> As reported in the *Giornale delle due Sicilie* the day after the premiere.

<sup>25</sup> The figure of Tasso himself enjoyed enormous literary popularity as a protagonist between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. See U. BOSCO, *Il Tasso come tema letterario nell’Ottocento italiano*, «Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana», 91 (1928), pp. 1–66. On Tasso’s literary reception in the Romantic era, see also A. DI BENEDETTO, “La sua vita stessa è una poesia: sul mito romantico di Torquato Tasso,” *Esperienze letterarie*, XXII (1997), pp. 7–34; and P. DI SACCO, *I romantici e Tasso tra poesia, critica e storia della cultura*, *Otto/Novecento*, 23 (1999), pp. 67–116.

Last but not least, we should mention Antonín Dvořák's *Armida*, in four acts, set to a libretto by Jaroslav Vrchlický. Drawing on Quinault but reinterpreting his work through the lens of a renewed Symbolist sensibility, the opera offers yet another incarnation of the sorceress. In her final, grandiose appearance, Armida emerges as a true *femme fatale*, a seductress straight out of one of Wagner's operas.



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