The English Concert
Handel’s *Alcina*
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Words cannot express my pleasure in welcoming you to Cal Performances this weekend, as London’s renowned Handel specialists The English Concert, directed by insightful conductor Harry Bicket, makes its long-awaited return to Zellerbach Hall with a concert presentation of Handel’s 1735 masterpiece *Alcina*. Today’s performance launches a new project in collaboration with the ensemble that will see annual concert presentations of a complete Handel oratorio or opera. I’m so happy you could join us for what promises to be a memorable experience; it’s wonderful that we can gather together again, enjoying great music under the same roof!

When the pandemic forced Cal Performances to close its doors in March 2020, no one could have imagined what lay ahead. Since then, we’ve witnessed a worldwide health crisis unlike any experienced during our lifetimes, an extended period of political turmoil, recurring incidents of civil unrest and racially motivated violence, and a consciousness-raising human rights movement that has forever—and significantly—changed how each of us views social justice in our time.

Of course, the pandemic remains with us to this date and future challenges—including many adjustments to “normal” procedures and policies—can certainly be expected. I encourage you to check Cal Performances’ website regularly for the most current information regarding our COVID-19 response. First and foremost, I assure you that there is nothing more important to us than the health and safety of our audience, artists, and staff. (And I remind one and all that proof of vaccination is mandatory today, as is protective masking throughout the event.)

Our season continues next weekend with eagerly awaited recitals with mandolinist Avi Avital and guitarist Milos˘ (Nov 11), jazz master Aaron Diehl and his trio (Nov 12), violinist Leonidas Kavakos and pianist Yuja Wang (Nov 13), and cellist David Finckel and pianist Wu Han (Nov 14). Our full calendar offers more of the same, packed with the kind of adventurous and ambitious programming you’ve come to expect from Cal Performances. In particular, I want to direct your attention to this year’s *Illuminations*: “Place and Displacement” programming, through which we’ll explore both loss and renewal, disempowerment and hope, while seeking paths forward for reclaiming and celebrating vital cultural connections that can fall victim to political and social upheaval.

Please take the opportunity to explore the complete schedule through our website and season brochure and begin planning your performance calendar; now is the perfect time to guarantee that you have the best seats for all the events you plan to attend.

Throughout history, the performing arts have survived incredible challenges: periods of war, economic collapse, and, yes, terrible disease. And if it will take time for us—collectively and individually—to process the events of the past 18 months, I’m certain that the arts have the power to play a critical role as we come to terms with what we have experienced and move together toward recovery.

I know you join us in looking forward to what lies ahead, to coming together once again to encounter the life-changing experiences that only the live performing arts deliver. We can’t wait to share it all with you during the coming year.

Cal Performances is back. Welcome home!

Jeremy Geffen
Executive and Artistic Director, Cal Performances
Sunday, November 7, 2021, 3pm  
Zellerbach Hall

The English Concert
Harry Bicket, artistic director, conductor, and harpsichord

George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)  
Alcina, opera in three acts

Karina Gauvin (Alcina), soprano  
Lucy Crowe (Morgana), soprano  
Elizabeth DeShong (Bradamante), mezzo-soprano  
Paula Murrihy (Ruggiero), mezzo-soprano  
Alek Shrader (Oronte), tenor  
Wojtek Gierlach (Melisso), bass

This performance will include two 20-minute intermissions,  
the first following Act I  
and the second following Act II.

The performance will last approximately  
three hours and 45 minutes, including the two intermissions.

This performance is made possible, in part, by Patron Sponsor Bernice Greene,  
Patron Sponsor Nadine Tang, and an Anonymous donor.
Set in legendary medieval Europe around the time of Charlemagne, *Alcina’s* libretto was adapted by Antonio Marchi from Ludovico Ariosto’s 16th-century epic poem *Orlando furioso*. Alcina is a Circe-like sorceress who lures men to her enchanted island, then turns them into wild beasts or inanimate objects once she tires of them.

**Act I.** Disguised as her brother Ricciardo, Bradamante, escorted by her tutor Melisso, has landed on Alcina’s island in search of her missing fiancé, Ruggiero. They encounter Alcina’s pretty sister, Morgana, who immediately falls in love with “Ricciardo.” The barren island is suddenly transformed to reveal Alcina’s magnificent palace, where she is surrounded by her courtiers and her new lover Ruggiero, who has forgotten Bradamante and is completely captivated by the sorceress.

Alcina’s general, Oronte, appears, furious that his beloved Morgana has fallen for Ricciardo/Bradamante and challenging “him” to a duel. He reveals the terrible things Alcina does to her discarded suitors.

Bradamante angrily reveals her identity to Ruggiero, but—spellbound by Alcina—he refuses to believe her and challenges this supposed rival.

Morgana begs Bradamante to flee this dangerous realm.

**Act II.** Melisso accuses Ruggiero of betrayal of his knightly duties because of his enslavement to Alcina. He gives the young man a magic ring that undoes his enchantment and brings him back to his senses. Melisso instructs him to pretend he is still in love with Alcina, but to prepare to leave her. Bradamante again reveals her identity to Ruggiero, but he still doesn’t believe her, thinking this is another one of Alcina’s spells. At the palace, Alcina is preparing to turn Ricciardo into a wild beast to placate Ruggiero, but is stopped by Morgana and later Ruggiero. Ruggiero asks Alcina’s permission to arm himself and go hunting while assuring her he still loves her. Oronte arrives and tells Alcina that Ruggiero is trying to escape. Alcina, who truly loves Ruggiero, is in despair. In her subterranean chamber, she calls on demons to aid her in keeping Ruggiero, but her magical powers fail her and she destroys her wand.

**Act III.** Now knowing Ricciardo’s true identity, Morgana tries to rekindle her love with Oronte. Alcina and Ruggiero meet by accident; he admits he wants to leave her, revealing his love for Bradamante. Alcina reacts in fury. Ruggiero, Bradamante, and Melisso fight Alcina’s warriors and beasts.

Oronte announces their victory to Alcina; she admits she is now powerless to oppose them. After some hesitation, Ruggiero finally shatters the urn containing the source of Alcina’s powers, and she and Morgana vanish with a cry. The palace crumbles into dust, and the enchanted beings are returned to their human forms. All join in a dance to celebrate their release and the destruction of Alcina’s evil magic.

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**SYNOPSIS**

George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)

*Alcina*, opera in three acts

The war for supremacy in the world of Italian opera production in early–18th-century London was as vicious as anything that happened on the battlefields or in the courts of Europe in that era. From 1720 on, when he directed his first operatic season at the Royal Academy of Music, Handel was the reigning monarch of this world, but there were many pretenders to the throne. For the better part of a decade, Handel had to compete with Italian composer Giovanni Bononcini, not only as to which was the better composer, but also which could engage the most celebrated Italian singers and showcase them in the most lavish productions.

In 1727, Handel suffered a blow with the death of King George I, who had backed Handel with his patronage and financial largesse. A bigger one came the next year: the triumphant London production of John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, an English-language comic adventure with music inspired by popular ballads. Suddenly, the imported form of Italian
opera seria seemed an artificial and elitist art form to the British public, and before 1728, both Handel's and Bononcini's companies sank in a sea of debt.

But the enterprising Handel was not yet finished, and neither was Italian opera in London. By the 1730s, now supported by the Princess Royal, he was back in business, but this time facing a new rival: the Opera of the Nobility led by Nicola Porpora, an able composer and, moreover, Italy’s most famous vocal pedagogue, whose pupils included the legendary castrato Farinelli. Not content with having Farinelli on his roster, Porpora lured away many of Handel’s vocal stars, including the castrato contralto Senesino, with fatter contracts. Handel’s unlikely savior was the impresario John Rich, who, ironically, had been the producer of The Beggar’s Opera; flush with profits from that show, he built a handsome new opera house at Covent Garden on the site of the present Royal Opera House and invited Handel to go into partnership with him there.

On April 16, 1735, Handel introduced one of his greatest masterpieces, the exquisite fantasy opera Alcina, replete with an extraordinary title character, spectacular scenic effects, and a series of the most gorgeous and dramatically expressive arias he had ever created. It was one of the major successes of Handel’s career, receiving 18 performances in its first season and even winning the support of his erstwhile opponent, the former Prince of Wales, now George II.

Magnificent as it was, Alcina could not ultimately save the overheated, money-hemorrhaging field of Italian opera in England. By 1737, the ferocious rivalry between Handel and Porpora—as well as changing tastes—destroyed both their companies. Finally, Handel turned his back for good on operatic composition and moved on to the oratorio genre.

An Innovative Opera
Challenged by Rich to make his operas more appealing to jaded London audiences, Handel introduced a number of new elements in Alcina. Though it hardly matches the role it plays in his oratorios, he placed more emphasis on the chorus, which introduces us to Alcina’s court with “Questo è il cielo di contenti” (“This Is the Heaven of Delight”)—ravishing music that portrays Alcina’s realm as a golden paradise for the senses. The chorus also voices the wonder of the final transformation scene as Alcina’s realm is disintegrated and the wild beasts in their cages to regain their human shapes.

Scenic display had always been an important feature in Italian opera for the London stage, but Handel considerably raised the ante with Alcina. What first appears as a barren desert as the curtain rises is soon transformed into the enchantress’s gorgeous court. And the final scene is the most spectacular of all, as Ruggiero’s shattering of the magic urn causes Alcina’s kingdom to disintegrate and the wild beasts in their cages to regain their human shapes.

Deprived of most of his Italian stars, Handel turned to homegrown singers to fill many of the leading roles. Although the three major parts—Alcina, Ruggiero, and Bradamante—were entrusted to Italians, English singers played Morgana and Oronte. Tenor John Beard, who would eventually become the manager of Covent Garden, took the role of Oronte, Alcina’s jealous general; his arias, especially Act I’s cynical “Semplicetto!” with its nastily nagging bass line warning Ruggiero never to trust a woman’s love, add an engaging touch of comedy to the score. Cecilia Young sang Morgana, and the arias Handel composed for her light soprano are among the opera’s most attractive, especially Act II’s “Ama, sospira” with its brilliant violin obligato part.

A Closer Listen
Handel lavished his finest music on his three leads. The brave, devoted Bradamante is given the opera’s most demanding coloratura test in her Act II “Vorrei vendicarmi” (“I would be
expressing her frustration and fury that Ruggiero persists in disbelieving her identity. This is a classic Handelian rage aria, driven by a frenzied violin part. Throughout Alcina, however, the composer frequently brings high contrast to the B section of the da capo aria form, this time with much slower, poignant music in the minor mode that reveals the suffering that lies behind her anger.

In Act I, Ruggiero is also given a brilliant virtuoso showpiece in “Bramo di trionfar” (“I long to triumph”), whose challenging coloratura melismas suited the vocal strengths of its originator, castrato star Giovanni Carestini. Handel actually struck this aria from his original score, perhaps because it seemed to convey the wrong mood for a character who at this point in the story is hardly heroic as he continues to languish in his infatuation with Alcina. More suited to Ruggiero’s character as lover is Act II’s “Mi lusinga il dolce affetto” (“I am filled with sweet affection”), one of the opera’s most ravishingly beautiful lyrical moments in which highly expressive slow melismas express his growing realization of his betrayal of Bradamante.

Also from Act II comes the opera’s most famous aria, “Verdi prati” (“Verdant meadows”), which Carestini initially refused to sing because of its lack of virtuosity. Handel reacted in fury, ordering him to sing it or forfeit his fee. Not a full-fledged da capo aria, it unfurls unadorned phrases of legato loveliness as Ruggiero muses that the beauties of Alcina’s pastoral paradise will soon be destroyed.

The glories of the score, however, go to Handel’s alluring heroine/villainess, Alcina herself. Over the course of six magnificent arias, the composer charts the many facets of her personality and the erosion of her magical powers. When we first meet her in Act I’s regal, yet feminine, “Di, cor mio” (“Tell them, dear heart”), she exhibits no hint of her malevolent side, but appears in this enraptured music to be simply a woman in love with Ruggiero. But “Si, son quella” (“I am still true”) later in the act shows her manipulativeness as she tries to lure a restless Ruggiero back into her embrace with a mournful cello solo as her accomplice.

Genuine sorrow appears in Alcina’s “Ah! mio cor” in Act II after Oronte brings her the news that Ruggiero seeks to escape from her. Built on an orchestral ritornello that represents the painful beating of a breaking heart, it opens with a great sigh of anguish, which becomes still more poignant at the da capo return. The spectacular B section, by contrast, is a miniature rage aria showing she is still a dangerous opponent.

If one had to select the greatest of Alcina’s numbers, it would surely be the scena of accompanied recitative—“Ah! Ruggiero crudel”—and aria—“Ombre pallide” (“Pale shades”)—that closes Act II. Handel saved the more arioso-like accompanied-recitative form for very special moments, and “Ah! Ruggiero” is one of his most remarkable, dramatizing the undoing of a woman of great stature and power. In this scene of tragic grandeur, Alcina is reduced to pleading with her supernatural powers to aid her, amid impotent cries of “perché” (“why”).

“Ma quando tornerai” (“But when you return”), Alcina’s response to Ruggiero’s farewell in Act III, is a stunning example of the polychromatic da capo aria of mixed emotions. The jagged, leaping lines of the fast A section express her desire to punish Ruggiero for his treachery; in the plaintive B section, the tempo slows as she makes a final plea for his love in grand descending phrases in the minor mode. Her final aria, “Mi restano le lagrime” (“Only tears remain to me”), is an achingly beautiful melody in the rarely chosen key of F-sharp minor and a gently rocking siciliano rhythm. Alcina longs to escape her pain by transforming herself into some inanimate object, as she has done with so many of her hapless victims. In this sublime music, she is now utterly powerless: a supernatural being changed by love into a mortal woman.

—Janet E. Bedell

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The English Concert is an outstanding orchestra: exceptional, in the world-renowned quality, ambition, and variety of its live and recorded output; unique, in the zeal of its players for working and performing together; unwavering, in its desire to connect with its audience throughout the world.

Under the artistic direction of Harry Bicket and principal guest director Kristian Bezuidenhout, The English Concert has earned a reputation for combining urgency, passion, and fire with precision, delicacy, and beauty. The group's artistic partners reflect and enhance the members' pursuit for new ways to bring their music to life.

Joyce DiDonato, Dame Sarah Connolly, Iestyn Davies, Alison Balsom, Trevor Pinnock, Dominic Dromgoole, Tom Morris and many others have not only brought their extraordinary skills to individual projects, but continue to help shape the way the group performs. One cornerstone of the orchestra's annual cycle is its international Handel opera series. Blossoming from an ongoing relationship with Carnegie Hall, touring regularly takes the ensemble to an ever-increasing number of the world's great concert halls, from Theater an der Wien and Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, to Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie and London's Barbican. Meanwhile, its regular London series allows the musicians to explore a radically different path, presenting programs to its home audience that continue to challenge and inspire.

The English Concert is the orchestra-in-residence at Garsington Opera.

Internationally renowned as an opera and concert conductor of distinction, Harry Bicket (artistic director and conductor) is especially noted for his interpretation of Baroque and Classical repertoire and since 2007 has been the artistic director of The English Concert, one of Europe’s finest period orchestras. In 2013, following regular guest appearances with Santa Fe Opera, he became their Chief Conductor and in 2018 assumed the music directorship. Since taking up his position, he has conducted Così fan tutte, Fidelio, La finta giardiniera, Roméo et Juliette, Alcina, and Candide. During the 2019 season, he also performed Strauss' Four Last Songs with Renée Fleming. Born in Liverpool, Bicket studied at the Royal College of Music and the University of Oxford.

The English Concert tour of Rodelinda, planned for spring 2020, fell victim to the severe disruption caused by the ongoing pandemic, though, remarkably, a studio recording was made that has received critical acclaim. The English Concert also revised its planning to include a series of small-scale, highly successful livestreamed concerts from historic venues in the London area. Guest engagements later this season will include Bergen National Opera (La clemenza di Tito).

Earlier this week, Bicket appeared at LA Opera in performances of Handel's Alcina with The English Concert.

Karina Gauvin (Alcina), soprano
Karina Gauvin was born in Repentigny, Quebec, Canada and is recognized for her work in the Baroque repertoire; she also sings music of the 20th and 21st centuries with equal success. Highlights of recent seasons include Vitellia in La clemenza di Tito at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, Armida in Handel’s Rinaldo at the Glyndebourne Festival, the title role in Gluck’s Armide at the Netherlands Opera, Giunone in Cavalli’s La Calisto at the Bavarian State Opera, and Duchesse d’Étampes in Saint-Saëns’ long-lost Ascanio at the Grand Théâtre de Genève. Gauvin sang Debussy’s The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian and Mahler’s Symphony No. 2 with the San Francisco Symphony and Lia in Debussy’s L’Enfant prodigue with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France. Her extensive discography—over 50 titles—has earned her numerous awards and three Grammy nominations. Gauvin recently participated in a new recording project of the complete songs of Jules Massenet. (Karina-Gauvin.com)

Lucy Crowe (Morgana), soprano
From Staffordshire, England, Lucy Crowe studied at the Royal Academy of Music, where she is now a Fellow. With repertoire ranging from Purcell, Handel, and Mozart to Donizetti’s

ABOUT THE ARTISTS
Adina and Verdi's Gilda, she has sung with opera companies and orchestras throughout the world. Recent opera highlights include her debut at the Dutch National Opera in the title role of Rodelinda and a return to the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden for Poppea in Agrippina. Later this season, Crowe performs Susanna in Le nozze di Figaro at the Metropolitan Opera. Highlights in concert this season include Bach's Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony under Zubin Mehta, Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with the Orquesta Nacionales de España under Juanjo Mena, and Handel's Judas Maccabaeus with B'Rock Orchestra in Bayreuth. Her debut disc for Linn records, released this year, features Berg, Strauss, and Schoenberg.

Elizabeth DeShong (Bradamante), *mezzo-soprano*
Elizabeth DeShong is from Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania, and her engagements this season include Calbo in Rossini's Maometto II with the Washington Concert Opera and a reprise of Suzuki in Madama Butterfly at the Metropolitan Opera. During the 2019/20 season, she performed Suzuki at the Met, Hansel in Hansel and Gretel with the Melbourne Symphony, and Pauline in The Queen of Spades at Lyric Opera of Chicago. Recent highlights include her debuts with the Los Angeles Philharmonic as Ariel in Sibelius’ The Tempest and the Philadelphia Orchestra in Rossini’s Stabat Mater, a tour of Europe and the US with The English Concert as both Juno and Ino in Handel’s Semele, the Verdi Requiem with the Minnesota Orchestra, Adalgisa in Norma with the North Carolina Opera, and John Adams’ The Gospel According to the Other Mary with the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, conducted by the composer. (ElizabethDeShong.com)

Paula Murrihy (Ruggiero), *mezzo-soprano*
From County Kerry, Ireland, Paula Murrihy’s 2020–21 season featured her debut in the title role of Calbo in Rossini’s Maometto II with the Washington Concert Opera and a reprise of Suzuki in Madama Butterfly at the Metropolitan Opera. During the 2019/20 season, she performed Suzuki at the Met, Hansel in Hansel and Gretel with the Melbourne Symphony, and Pauline in The Queen of Spades at Lyric Opera of Chicago. Recent highlights include her debuts with the Los Angeles Philharmonic as Ariel in Sibelius’ The Tempest and the Philadelphia Orchestra in Rossini’s Stabat Mater, a tour of Europe and the US with The English Concert as both Juno and Ino in Handel’s Semele, the Verdi Requiem with the Minnesota Orchestra, Adalgisa in Norma with the North Carolina Opera, and John Adams’ The Gospel According to the Other Mary with the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, conducted by the composer. (ElizabethDeShong.com)
Mark Morris Dance Group

*Dancing Honeymoon* (1998; music arranged by Ethan Iverson)
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Breathtakingly lyrical, giddily lighthearted, formally brilliant, ethereally transcendent—Mark Morris Dance Group returns to its West Coast home away from home with a program of repertory gems that traverse the expansive terrain that defines the work of this pace-setting company.

Dec 17–19
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role in Handel's *Ariodante* in a livestream concert performance at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. A regular guest at the world's major opera houses and concert halls, she also performed Dorabella in *Così fan tutte* at the Palau de les Arts in Valencia and returned to the role of Ariodante in her company debut at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. Her opera appearances this season include The Composer in *Ariadne auf Naxos* at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, a return to the Palau de les Arts as Nicklausse in *The Tales of Hoffmann*, and the title role of Carmen with the Irish National Opera. She began the season as Micah in *Samson* with Harry Bicket and The English Concert at the London Handel Festival, followed by performances in Dublin and Limerick in Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été* with the Irish Chamber Orchestra. (PaulaMurrihy.com)

**Alek Shrader (Oronte), tenor**
From Cleveland, OH, Alek Shrader has appeared with many of the world’s most prestigious opera companies, including the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Seattle Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Dallas Opera, Bayerische Staatsoper, and the Salzburg and Glyndebourne festivals. He recently made his directorial debut with *Dido and Aeneas* in the Catacombs of Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery. Shrader also co-wrote and co-directed *Mercy*, a film based on *La Clemenza di Tito* set for release by the Curtis Institute of Music this year. Earlier this year, he performed Count Almaviva in San Francisco Opera’s drive-in production of *The Barber of Seville*. Other recent appearances include Harlequin in *The Kaiser of Atlantis* with Atlanta Opera and Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni* with Washington National Opera. Next summer, he will return to the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis for *Harvey Milk*. Shrader was a winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.

**Wojtek Gierlach (Melisso), bass**
From: Warsaw, Poland, Wojtek Gierlach’s recent performances include Sparafucile in *Rigoletto*, the Parson in *The Cunning Little Vixen*, and Procida in *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* for Welsh National Opera. He previously appeared with that company as Rocco in *Fidelio*, Giorgio in *I Puritani*, and Alidoro in *La Cenerentola*, the latter a role he has also performed at the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence, Deutsche Oper Berlin, and Teatro de la Maestranza in Seville. Gierlach recently performed Figaro in *The Marriage of Figaro* and Zbigniew in Stanisław Moniuszko’s *The Haunted Manor* at Poland’s Teatr Wielki Poznań, as well as the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni* for Opera Wroclawska. Previous engagements include the Priest in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* at Covent Garden, Don Basilio in *The Barber of Seville* with Deutsche Oper Berlin, Talbot in *Maria Stuarda* at Deutsche Oper am Rhein, and Melisso in *Alcina* with Harry Bicket and The English Concert at the Barbican, Carnegie Hall, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, and Theater an der Wien.
CELEBRATE THE SEASON!

Damien Sneed

*Joy to the World: A Christmas Musical Journey*

Sneed is joined by a stellar cast of 10 singers and musicians performing holiday classics such as “Silent Night,” “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” “The Christmas Song,” excerpts from Handel’s *Messiah*, and more.

Dec 3
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*Making Spirits Bright for 50 Years and Counting!*

This very special holiday program features favorite songs like “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” and “Carol of the Bells”; and familiar classical, choral, and popular music arranged to make brass instruments sing.

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