

Georg Friedrich Haendel

(1685 - 1759)

Semele (HWV 58)



Oratorio profane, sur un sujet – les amours de Jupiter et Sémélé – tiré des Métamorphoses d'Ovide. Le livret résulte d'une adaptation – sans doute de Newburg Hamilton – d'un masque de William Congreve (1670-1729) écrit pour John Eccles (1707), augmenté d'autres textes de Congreve et de Pope.

Haendel commença la composition le 4 juin 1743, compléta l'acte I le 13 juin, l'acte II, le 20 juin, et termina l'instrumentation le 4 juillet. Il avait délaissé l'opéra italien depuis 1741, c'est pendant l'été 1743 qu'il renonça, après avoir tout d'abord donné son accord, à donner suite à la proposition de Charles Sackville, comte de Middlesex, d'écrire un ou deux opéras pour la compagnie d'opéra portait son nom et qui cherchait à séduire les Londoniens. L'œuvre fut créée, à Londres, au Covent Garden, le 10 février 1744, à la manière d'un oratorio.

Cette représentation marque le début à Londres de Francesca Cuzzoni qui tient le rôle de Théophane. L'opéra est un immense succès et est repris en décembre 1723, 1726, 1727 et 1733. Ottone est la seule œuvre d'Haendel qui a été interprétée par Farinelli, qui tient le rôle d'Alberto en décembre 1734.

Rôles

Jupiter,	(ténor)
Cadmus, Roi de Thèbes	(basse)
Sémélé, Fille de Cadmus, aimée et amoureuse de Jupiter	(soprano)
Athamas, Prince de Béotie, amoureux et futur époux de Semele	(alto)
Ino, Sœur de Sémélé, amoureuse d'Athamas	(mezzo-soprano)
Somnus, Dieu du sommeil	(basse)
Appolon,	(ténor)
Iris, Sœur de Junon	(soprano)
Cupidon,	(soprano)
Chœurs des Prêtres et des Augures / des Amours et des Zéphyrs / des Nymphes et des bergers / des Suivantes	

Argument

Après les amours de Jupiter avec Europe, fille d'Agenor, roi de Phénicie, il met de nouveau en fureur Junon avec une nouvelle liaison dans la même famille ; c'est-à-dire avec Sémélé, nièce d'Europe et fille de Cadmus, roi de Thèbes.

Sémélé est sur le point d'épouser Athamas ; ce mariage est prêt à être célébré dans le temple de Junon, déesse des mariages, quand Jupiter sous le signe de mauvais présages interrompt la cérémonie ; il transporte ensuite Sémélé dans une demeure privée préparée pour elle.

Junon, après de nombreux stratagèmes, prend la forme et la voix d'Ino, sœur de Sémélé ; grâce à ce déguisement et à des insinuations habiles, elle parvient à lui faire demander une requête à Jupiter, qui, étant accordée, doit provoquer sa ruine complète.

Acte I

Le temple de Junon, à Thèbes.

Près de l'autel se trouve une statue en or de la déesse. Les prêtres portent leurs vêtements de cérémonie. Des flammes s'élèvent de l'autel et on voit la statue de Junon s'incliner.

Sémélé, fille du roi Cadmus, est fiancée à Athamas, prince de la Béotie voisine, mais elle aime secrètement Jupiter qui lui est apparu sous un déguisement. Le prêtre proclame que Junon a accepté un sacrifice, et la foule assemblée se réjouit (Lucky omens bless our rites).

Son père et son fiancé prient Sémélé de ne pas retarder la cérémonie de mariage plus longtemps ; elle supplie les dieux de l'aider dans cette situation difficile (Oh Jove, in pity teach me which to choose).

Dans la scène suivante, qui est parfois coupée, Sémélé exprime son chagrin (The morning lark) et Athamas son amour pour elle (Hymen, haste, thy torch prepare !). Ino craint que sa sœur ne cède aux prières d'Athamas, dont elle est également éprise. Semele la presse de lui confier toutes ses pensées.

Cadmus sermonne Ino (Why dost thou thus untimely grieve ?) qui lui répond. Sémélé et Athamas interviennent, si bien que l'aria de la basse se transforme en un magnifique quatuor. Le feu s'éteint sur l'autel, et le peuple accueille avec terreur ce signe du mécontentement divin (Avert these omens, all ye powers).

La flamme renaît et la statue s'incline. Mais quand elle s'éteint à nouveau le peuple sait que ce n'est plus la colère de Junon, mais celle de Jupiter qui se manifeste. La foule paniquée se précipite hors du temple (Cease your vows, 'tis impious to proceed).

Cadmus, escorté de sa suite, entraîne Sémélé ; Athamas et Ino restent seuls. Ino avoue à Athamas l'amour qu'elle lui porte. Athamas est prêt à se sacrifier pour elle. Duo (You've undone me).

Cadmus revient avec sa suite et annonce à Athamas avoir vu un aigle enlever Sémélé. Tous pleurent sa disparition jusqu'au moment où les prêtres saluent Cadmus et lui annoncent que la faveur de Jupiter est descendue sur sa famille (Hail Cadmus, hail !) – explication qui ne souffre aucune contradiction, car Sémélé émerge d'un nuage pour les rassurer dans un aria magnifique (Endless pleasure, endless love Semele enjoys above).

Acte II

Sinfonia

Un paysage agréable clos par une montagne tapissée de forêts et où jaillissent des cascades. Junon et Iris apparaissent : Junon dans un char tiré par des paons, Iris sur un arc-en-ciel. Les deux soeurs descendent de leur engin et se rencontrent

Junon a chargé sa soeur Iris de retrouver Sémélé. Iris lui montre le palais que Jupiter a fait construire pour Sémélé, près de Cythère. Junon se répand en invectives contre Semele, et crie vengeance. Iris lui raconte comment Jupiter a entouré sa nouvelle favorite de protections, dont deux dragons féroces.

Junon dit à sa soeur qu'elles vont demander à Somnus, le dieu du Sommeil, de sceller par le sommeil les yeux de ces dragons, et qu'ensuite elle se vengera.

Un appartement dans le palais de Semele.

Elle dort ; des Amours et des Zéphyrs attendent

Cupidon vient chanter l'aria Come, Zephyrs, come while Cupid sings qui est omise dans les partitions pour voix - de même que le rôle de Cupidon était carrément supprimé dans l'adaptation du livret de Congreve - et dont Haendel a utilisé la première partie dans Hercules (How blest the maid !). Semele s'éveille et chante l'un des airs les plus fameux de Haendel (Oh sleep, why dost thou leave me?).

Les Amours font rentrer Jupiter auprès de Sémélé ; il lui jure son amour avec lyrisme (Lay your doubts and fears aside). Sémélé répond par l'aria ornée (With fond desiring), dont le refrain est chanté par le chœur des Amours et des Zéphyrs. Sémélé se plaint, et Jupiter la presse d'exprimer les vœux qu'il pourrait satisfaire. Quand elle évoque la différence fondamentale qui les sépare, lui un dieu, et elle une mortelle, il s'inquiète du tour que prennent ses pensées et cherche en hâte à l'en distraire (I must with speed amuse her). Ils se retirent, et le chœur commente (Now Love, that everlasting boy, invites to revel). Jupiter revient et annonce son intention d'offrir la compagnie d'Ino à Semele. Il les installera toutes deux en Arcadie. Si cette aria sereine (Where'er you walk) a valeur de présage, on peut espérer que les deux soeurs connaîtront la félicité en ce lieu.

Transportées dans un cadre bucolique, Sémélé et Ino s'embrassent. Des bergers et bergères se joignent à elles. Les deux soeurs s'assoient et contemplent les jeux champêtres

Ino raconte son voyage, et comprend qu'elle s'est rendue en un lieu saint à la demande expresse de Jupiter (But hark ! the Heavenly sphere turns round). Elle chante un duo avec Semele (Prepare, then, ye immortal choir), laissant au chœur le soin de conclure (Bless the glad earth with heavenly lays).

Acte III

La grotte de Somnus. Le Dieu du Sommeil est étendu sur sa couche. On entend une douce symphonie. Puis la musique change de rythme

Entrée de Junon et d'Iris : elles vont demander à Somnus son aide pour écarter les obstacles accumulés par Jupiter autour de Semele. La lente aria de Somnus (Leave me loathsome light) - pièce d'une grande beauté qui le caractérise parfaitement - se termine par ce vers évocateur : Oh murmur me again to peace.

Junon sait comment le stimuler. En effet, à la seule mention du nom de Pasithéa, il renaît à la vie (More sweet is that name than a soft purling stream). Junon dévoile son plan : Jupiter doit être éloigné de Sémélé par des rêves, les dragons doivent être calmés d'un coup de baguette de plomb, et Ino doit s'endormir afin que Junon prenne sa forme pour apparaître devant Sémélé. L'amoureux Somnus, à qui elle promet Pasithéa, lui accorde tout ce qu'elle demande dans le duo : Obey my will.

Sémélé dans ses appartements

Junon, sous l'apparence d'Ino, complimente Sémélé pour sa beauté et lui demande si Jupiter lui a accordé l'immortalité. Elle présente un miroir magique à Sémélé, qui s'y contemple avec admiration. Son aria bravura (Myself I shall adore), avec son effet d'écho, montre comment Haendel savait faire d'une idée frivole un air d'une grâce et d'une beauté suprêmes.

Junon conseille à Sémélé de repousser les faveurs de Jupiter tant qu'il ne lui promettra pas l'immortalité et qu'il n'apparaîtra pas sous sa forme divine, et non en simple mortel comme il l'a fait jusqu'ici. Car Junon sait qu'à la seule vue du dieu, Sémélé mourra. Celle-ci, crédule, l'embrasse (Thus let my thanks be paid). Junon, entendant Jupiter approcher, se retire.

Jupiter entre, veut embrasser Sémélé. Elle le regarde aimablement, mais s'éloigne un peu de lui. Jupiter confie à Sémélé que, dans un rêve, elle l'a repoussé ; son aria (Come to my arms, my lovely fair) est d'une extrême ardeur ; mais elle ne faiblit pas et s'en tient à sa résolution (I ever am granting, you always complain).

Jupiter lui donne sa parole d'accomplir son désir, quel qu'il soit. Elle demande à le voir dans toute sa splendeur divine. Il manifeste sa consternation par des fioritures agitées (Ah, take heed what you press), mais elle insiste, mettant autant d'emphase dans ses vocalises (No, no, I'll take no less).

Jupiter, resté seul, déplore dans un récitatif bouleversant les conséquences inévitables de son serment. Junon célèbre son triomphe imminent (Above measure is the pleasure).

Sémélé songeuse, est étendue sous un dais. On entend une "symphonie funèbre". Sémélé lève les yeux et voit Jupiter descendant sur un nuage Des éclairs éclatent de tous côtés et on entend le tonnerre gronder dans l'air.

Sémélé réalise trop tard que cette vision la brûle mortellement, et expire (Ah me ! too late I now repent).

Lorsque le nuage où trônait Jupiter arrive juste au dessus du dais sous lequel Sémélé se reposait, un éclair fend soudainement le ciel, et le tonnerre se met à gronder. Sémélé et son palais disparaissent, tandis que Jupiter remonte rapidement au ciel. On voit le mont Cythère se détacher en arrière-plan d'un paysage plaisant.

A la cour de Cadmus, le chœur commente cette histoire d'amour et de mort qu'Ino vient de rapporter (Oh terror and astonishment, Nature to each allots his proper sphere). Elle révèle aussi que, selon une prophétie, elle doit épouser Athamas. Celui-ci, respectueux des convenances, s'en réjouit (Despair no more shall wound me).

Un nuage éclatant descend et s'arrête sur le Mont Cythère. Le nuage s'ouvre et laisse apparaître Apollon, assis tel un Dieu Prophétique

Apollon déclare qu'un phénix naîtra des cendres de Sémélé, qui témoignera d'un dieu plus grand que l'Amour et qui empêchera pour toujours les soupirs et les chagrins. Le chœur se réjouit (Happy, happy shall we be).

(d'après Tout l'Opéra - Kobbé - Robert Laffont)

ACT ONE

Overture

Scene 1

Cadmus, Athamas, Semele, Ino and Chorus of Priests. The scene is the temple of Juno. Near the altar is a golden image of the goddess. The Priests are in their solemnities, as after a sacrifice newly offered: flames arise from the altar and the statue of Juno is seen to bow...

2. Accompagnato

Priest

Behold! Auspicious flashes rise,
Juno accepts our sacrifice;
The grateful odour swift ascends,
And see, the golden image bends!

3. Chorus of Priests

Lucky omens bless our rites,
And sure success shall crown your loves;
Peaceful days and fruitful nights
Attend the pair that she approves.

4. Recitative, arioso and duet

Cadmus

Daughter, obey,
Hear and obey!
With kind consenting
Ease a parent's care;
Invent no new delay,
On this auspicious day.

Athamas

Oh, hear a faithful lover's prayer!
On this auspicious day
Invent no new delay.

5. Accompagnato

Semele (apart)

Ah me!
What refuge now is left me?
How various, how tormenting
Are my miseries!
O Jove, assist me!
Can Semele forego thy love,
And to a mortal's passion yield?
Thy vengeance will o'ertake such perfidy.
If I deny, my father's wrath I fear.

6. Air

Semele

O Jove! In pity teach me which to choose,
Incline me to comply, or help me to refuse!
Teach me which to choose,
Or help me to refuse!

7. Air

Semele

The morning lark to mine accords his note,

And tunes to my distress his warbling throat.
Each setting and each rising sun I mourn,
Wailing alike his absence and return.
The morning lark. . . *da capo*

8. Recitative

Athamas

See, she blushing turns her eyes;
See, with sighs her bosom panting!
If from love those sighs arise,
Nothing to my bliss is wanting.

9. Air

Athamas

Hymen, haste, thy torch prepare,
Love already his has lighted!
One soft sigh has cur'd despair,
And more than my past pains requited.
Hymen, haste. . . *da capo*

10. Recitative

Ino

Alas, she yields,
And has undone me!
I cannot longer hide my passion,
It must have vent,
Or inward burning
Will consume me.
O Athamas,
I cannot utter it!

Athamas

On me fair Ino calls
With mournful accent,
Her colour fading,
And her eyes o'erflowing!

Ino

O Semele!

Semele

On me she calls,
Yet seems to shun me!
What would my sister?
Speak!

Ino

Thou hast undone me!

11. Quartet

Cadmus

Why dost thou thus untimely grieve,
And all our solemn rites profane?
Can he, or she thy woes relieve,
Or I? Of whom dost thou complain?

Ino

Of all! But all, I fear, in vain.

Athamas

Can I thy woes relieve?

Semele
Can I assuage thy pain?

Cadmus, Athamas, Semele
Of whom dost thou complain?

Ino
Of all! but all, I fear, in vain.

Thunder is heard at a distance and the fire is extinguished on the altar.

12. Chorus of Priests

Avert these omens, all ye pow'rs!
Some god averse our holy rites controls;
O'erwhelm'd with sudden night the day expires,
Ill-boding thunder on the right hand rolls,
And Jove himself descends in show'rs
To quench our late propitious fires.

Flames are rekindled on the altar.

13. Accompagnato

Cadmus
Again auspicious flashes rise,
Juno accepts our sacrifice.

The fire is again extinguished.

Again the sickly flame decaying dies:
Juno assents, but angry Jove denies.

14. Recitative

Athamas
Thy aid, pronubial Juno, Athamas implores!

Semele (apart)
Thee, Jove, and thee alone, thy Semele adores!

A loud clap of thunder; the altar sinks.

15. Chorus of Priests

Cease, cease your vows, 'tis impious to proceed,
Begone, and fly this holy place with speed!
This dreadful conflict is of dire presage,
Begone, and fly from Jove's impending rage!

Exeunt

Scene 2

Athamas and Ino

16. Recitative

Athamas
O Athamas, what torture hast thou borne,
And oh, what hast thou yet to bear?
From love, from hope, from near possession torn,
And plung'd at once in deep despair!

17. Air

Ino
Turn, hopeless lover, turn thy eyes,
And see a maid bemoan,

In flowing tears and aching sighs,
Thy woes too like her own.
Turn, hopeless lover. . . *da capo*

18. Recitative

Athamas
She weeps!
The gentle maid, in tender pity,
Weeps to behold my misery!
So Semele would melt
To see another mourn.

19. Air

Athamas
Your tuneful voice my tale would tell,
In pity of my sad despair;
And with sweet melody compel
Attention from the flying fair.
Your tuneful voice. . . *da capo*

20. Recitative

Ino
Too well I see,
Thou wilt not understand me.
Whence could proceed such tenderness?
Whence such compassion?
Insensible, ingrate,
Ah no, I cannot blame thee!
For by effects, unknown before,
Who could the hidden cause explore,
Or think that love could act so strange a part,
To plead for pity in a rival's heart?

Athamas
Ah me, what have I heard,
She does her passion own!

21. Duet

Ino
You've undone me,
Look not on me!
Guilt upbraiding,
Shame invading,
You've undone me,
Look not on me!

Athamas
With my life I would atone
Pains you've borne,
To me unknown.
Cease to shun me.

Both
Love alone
Has both undone!



Scene 3

To them Enter Cadmus, attended.

22. Recitative

Cadmus

Ah, wretched prince, doom'd to disastrous love!
Ah me, of parents most forlorn!
Prepare, O Athamas, to prove
The sharpest pangs that e'er were borne,
Prepare with me our common loss to mourn!

Athamas

Can fate, or Semele, invent
Another, yet another punishment?

23. Accompagnato

Cadmus

Wing'd with our fears and pious haste,
From Juno's fane we fled.
Scarce we the brazen gates had pass'd,
When Semele around her head
With azure flames was grac'd,
Whose lambent glories in her tresses play'd.
While this we saw with dread surprise,
Swifter than lightning downward tending,
An eagle stoop'd, of mighty size,
On purple wings descending,
Like gold his beak, like stars shone forth his eyes,
His silver plummy breast with snow contending.
Sudden he snatch'd the trembling maid,
And soaring from our sight convey'd,
Diffusing ever as he less'ning flew
Celestial odour and ambrosial dew.

24. Recitative

Athamas

Oh prodigy, to me of dire portent!

Ino

To me I hope, of fortunate event!

Scene 4

Enter to them Chorus of Priests and Augurs.

Cadmus

See, see, Jove's Priests and holy Augurs come,
Speak, speak of Semele, and me declare the doom!

25. Chorus of Priests and Augurs

Hail Cadmus, hail!
Jove salutes the Theban king!
Cease your mourning,
Joys returning,
Songs of mirth and triumph sing!
Hail Cadmus, hail!

26. Air and Chorus

Semele

Endless pleasure, endless love,
Semele enjoys above!
On her bosom Jove reclining,
Useless now his thunder lies;
To her arms his bolts resigning,
And his lightning to her eyes.

Priests and Augurs
Endless pleasure, endless love
Semele enjoys above!

ACT TWO

27. Symphony

Scene 1

*A pleasant country, the prospect terminated
by a beautiful mountain adorn'd with woods and waterfalls.
Juno and Iris descend in different machines. Juno in a chariot
drawn by peacocks; Iris on a rainbow; they alight and meet.*

28. Recitative

Juno

Iris, impatient of thy stay,
From Samos have I wing'd my way
To meet thy slow return.

Iris

With all his speed not yet the sun
Through half his race has run,
Since I, to execute thy dread command,
Have thrice encompass'd sea and land.

Juno

Say, where is Semele's abode?

Iris

Look, where Cithaeron proudly stands,
Bœotia parting from Cecropian lands.
High on the summit of that hill,
Beyond the reach of mortal eyes,
By Jove's command and Vulcan's skill,
Behold a new-erected palace rise!

29. Air

Iris

There, from mortal cares retiring,
She resides in sweet retreat.
On her pleasure, Jove requiring,
All the Loves and Graces wait.
There. . . *da capo*

30. Recitative

Juno

No more, I'll hear no more!

31. Accompagnato

Juno

Awake, Saturnia, from thy lethargy!
Seize, destroy the cursed Semele!
Scale proud Cithaeron's top,
Snatch her, tear her in thy fury,
And down to the flood of Acheron
Let her fall, let her fall, fall, fall,
Rolling down the depths of night,
Never more to behold the light.
If I th'imperial scepter sway, I swear
By hell!
(Tremble, thou universe, this oath to hear!)
Not one of curst Agenor's race to spare.

32. Recitative

Iris

Hear, mighty queen, while I recount
What obstacles you must surmount.

33. Accompagnato

Iris

With adamant the gates are barr'd,
Whose entrance two fierce dragons guard.
At each approach they lash their forked stings
And clap their brazen wings;
And as their scaly horrors rise,
They all at once disclose
A thousand fiery eyes
Which never know repose.

34. Air

Juno

Hence, Iris, hence away,
Far from the realms of day!
O'er Scythian hills to the Maeotian lake
A speedy flight we'll take!
There Somnus I'll compel
His downy bed to leave, and silent cell;
With noise and light I will his peace molest,
Nor shall he sink again to pleasing rest,
Till to my vow'd revenge he grants supplies,
And seals with sleep the wakeful dragons' eyes.
Hence. . . *da capo*

Exeunt

Scene 2

*An apartment in the palace of Semele.
She is sleeping, Loves and Zephyrs waiting.*

Cupid

Come, Zephyrs, come, while Cupid sings,
Fan her with your silky wings!
New desire I'll inspire,
And revive the dying flames.
Dance around her
While I wound her,
And with pleasure
Fill her dreams.
Come, Zephyrs, come. . . *da capo*

Semele awakes and rises.

35. Air

Semele

O sleep, why dost thou leave me,
Why thy visionary joys remove?
O sleep, again deceive me,
To my arms restore my wand'ring love!

Scene 3

To them Enter Jupiter.

36. Recitative

Semele

Let me not another moment
Bear the pangs of absence;

Since you have form'd my soul for loving,
No more afflict me
With doubts and fears and cruel jealousy!

37. Air

Jupiter

Lay your doubts and fears aside,
And for joys alone provide.
Though this human form I wear,
Think not I man's falsehood bear.
Lay your doubts. . . *da capo*

38. Recitative

Jupiter

You are mortal and require
Time to rest and to repose.
I was not absent,
While Love was with thee
I was present:
Love and I are one.

39. Air

Semele

With fond desiring,
With bliss expiring,
Panting,
Fainting,
If this be Love, not you alone,
But Love and I are one.
Causeless doubting,
Or despairing,
Rashly trusting,
Idly fearing,
If this be Love, not you alone,
But Love and I are one
With fond. . . *da capo*

40. Chorus of Loves and Zephyrs

How engaging, how endearing,
Is a lover's pain and care!
And what joy the nymph's appearing
After absence or despair!
How engaging. . . *da capo*

41. Recitative

Semele

Ah me!

Jupiter

Why sighs my Semele?
What gentle sorrow
Swells thy soft bosom?
Why tremble those fair eyes
With interrupted light,
Where hov'ring for a vent,
Amidst their humid fires,
Some new-form'd wish appears?
Speak, and obtain!

Semele

At my own happiness
I sigh and tremble,
For I am mortal,
Still a woman;
And ever when you leave me,
Though compass'd round with deities
Of Loves and Graces,
A fear invades me,
And conscious of a nature
Far inferior,
I seek for solitude
And shun society.

Jupiter (apart)

Too well I read her meaning,
But must not understand her:
Aiming at immortality
With dangerous ambition.

42. Air

Jupiter

I must with speed amuse her
Lest she too much explain.
It gives the lover double pain
Who hears his nymph complain,
And hearing, must refuse her.
I must. . . *da capo*

43. Chorus of Loves and Zephyrs

Now Love that everlasting boy invites
To revel while you may in soft delights.

44. Recitative

Jupiter

By my command
Now at this instant
Two winged Zephyrs
From her downy bed
Thy much lov'd Ino bear,
And both together
Waft her hither,
Through the balmy air.

Semele

Shall I my sister see,
The dear companion
Of my tender years?

Jupiter

See, she appears,
But sees not me;
For I am visible
Alone to thee.
While I retire, rise and meet her,
And with welcomes greet her.
Now all this scene shall to Arcadia turn,
The seat of happy nymphs and swains;
There without the rage of jealousy they burn,
And taste the sweets of love without its pains.

45. Air

Jupiter

Where'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade;
Trees, where you sit, shall crowd into a shade.
Where'er you tread, the blushing flow'rs shall rise,

And all things flourish where'er you turn your eyes.
Where'er. . . *da capo*

Exit.

Scene 4

Semele and Ino meet and embrace. Chorus of Nymphs and Swains.

46. Recitative

Semele

Dear sister, how was your passage hither?

Ino

O'er many states and peopled towns we pass'd,
O'er hills and valleys, and o'er deserts waste;
O'er barren moors, and o'er unwholesome fens,
And woods where beasts inhabit dreadful dens.
Through all which pathless way our speed was such,
We stopp'd not once the face of earth to touch.
Meantime they told me, while through air we fled,
That Jove did thus ordain.

47. Air

Ino

But hark, the heav'nly sphere turns round,
And silence now is drown'd
In ecstasy of sound.
How on a sudden the still air is charm'd
As if all harmony were just alarm'd!
And ev'ry soul with transport fill'd,
Alternately is thaw'd and chill'd.

48. Duet

Semele and Ino

Prepare then, ye immortal choir,
Each sacred minstrel tune his lyre,
And all in chorus join!

49. Chorus of Nymphs and Swains

Bless the glad earth with heav'nly lays,
And to that pitch th'eternal accents raise,
That all appear divine!



ACT THREE

Scene 1

*The Cave of Sleep. The God of Sleep lying on his bed.
Juno and Iris appear.*

50. Symphony

51. Accompagnato

Juno

Somnus, awake,
Raise thy reclining head!

Iris

Thyself forsake,
And lift up thy heavy lids of lead!

52. Air

Somnus (waking)

Leave me, loathsome light,
Receive me, silent night!
Lethe, why does thy ling'ring current cease?
Oh, murmur, murmur me again to peace!

Sleeps again.

53. Recitative

Iris

Dull God, canst thou attend the water's fall,
And not hear Saturnia call?

Juno

Peace, Iris, peace! I know how to charm him:
Pasithea's name alone can warm him.

(To Somnus)

Somnus, arise!
Disclose thy tender eyes;
For Pasithea's sight
Endure the light.
Somnus, arise!

54. Air

Somnus

More sweet is that name
Than a soft purling stream.
With pleasure repose I'll forsake,
If you'll grant me but her to soothe me awake.
More sweet. . . *da capo*

55. Recitative

Juno

My will obey,
She shall be thine.
Thou, with thy softer pow'rs,
First Jove shalt captivate.
To Morpheus then give order,
Thy various minister,
That with a dream in shape of Semele,
But far more beautiful
And more alluring,
He may invade the sleeping deity;
And more to agitate his kindling fire
Still let the phantom seem to fly before him,
That he may wake impetuous, furious in desire,

Unable to refuse whatever boon
Her coyness shall require.

Somnus

I tremble to comply.

Juno

To me thy leaden rod resign,
To charm the sentinels
On mount Cithaeron.
Then cast a sleep on mortal Ino,
That I may seem her form to wear,
When I to Semele appear.

56. Duet

Juno

Obey my will, thy rod resign,
And Pasithea shall be thine.

Somnus

All I must grant, for all is due
To Pasithea, love and you.

Exeunt

Scene 2

An Apartment. Semele alone.

57. Air

Semele

My racking thoughts by no kind slumbers freed,
But painful nights to joyful days succeed.

Scene 3

To her Enter Juno as Ino, with a mirror in her hand.

58. Recitative

Juno (apart)

Thus shap'd like Ino,
With ease I shall deceive her,
And in this mirror she shall see
Herself as much transform'd as me.

(To Semele)

Do I some goddess see,
Or is it Semele!

Semele

Dear sister, speak,
Whence this astonishment?

Juno

Your charms improving
To divine perfection,
Show you were late admitted
Amongst celestial beauties.
Has Jove consented,
And are you made immortal?

Semele

Ah no! I still am mortal;
Nor am I sensible
Of any change or new perfection.

59. Air

Juno (giving her the glass)

Behold in this mirror
Whence comes my surprise!
Such lustre and terror
Unite in your eyes,
That mine cannot fix on a radiance so bright,
'Tis unsafe for the sense and too slipp'ry for sight.

60. Recitative

Semele

Oh, ecstasy of happiness!
Celestial graces
I discover in each feature!

61. Air

Semele

Myself I shall adore,
If I persist in gazing.
No object sure before
Was ever half so pleasing.
Myself. . . *da capo*

62. Recitative

Juno

Be wise, as you are beautiful,
Nor lose this opportunity.
When Jove appears,
All ardent with desire,
Refuse his proffer'd flame
Till you obtain a boon without a name.

Semele

Can that avail me? But how shall I attain
To immortality?

63. Accompagnato

Juno

Conjure him by his oath
Not to approach your bed
In likeness of a mortal,
But like himself, the mighty thunderer,
In pomp of majesty
And heav'nly attire,
As when he proud Saturnia charms,
And with ineffable delights
Fills her encircling arms,
And pays the nuptial rites.
You shall partake then of immortality,
And thenceforth leave this mortal state
To reign above,
Ador'd by Jove,
In spite of jealous Juno's hate.

64. Air

Semele

Thus let my thanks be paid,
Thus let my arms embrace thee,
And when I'm a goddess made,
With charms like mine I'll grace thee.

65. Recitative

Juno

Rich odours fill the fragrant air,
And Jove's approach declare.
I must retire.

Semele

Adieu, your counsel I'll pursue.

uno (apart)

And sure destruction will ensue,
Vain wretched fool, adieu!

Exit.

Scene 4

*Jupiter enters, offers to embrace Semele;
she looks kindly on him, but retires a little from him.*

66. Air

Jupiter

Come to my arms, my lovely fair,
Soothe my uneasy care.
In my dream late I woo'd thee,
And in vain I pursued thee,
For you fled from my prayer,
And bid me despair.
Come to my arms, my lovely fair.

67. Recitative

Jupiter

O Semele!
Why art thou thus insensible?

68. Air

Semele

I ever am granting,
You always complain.
I always am wanting,
Yet never obtain.
I ever am granting,
You always complain.

69. Recitative

Jupiter

Speak, speak your desire,
Say what you require,
I'll grant it.

Semele

Swear by the Stygian lake!

70. Accompagnato

Jupiter

By that tremendous flood, I swear.
Ye Stygian waters, hear,
And thou, Olympus, shake,
In witness to the oath I take!

Thunder is heard at a distance and underneath.

71. Recitative

Semele

You'll grant what I require?

Jupiter

I'll grant what you require.

72. Accompagnato

Semele

Then cast off this human shape which you wear,
And Jove since you are, like Jove too appear!

73. Air

Jupiter

Ah, take heed what you press,
For, beyond all redress,
Should I grant your request, I shall harm you.

74. Air

Semele

No, no, I'll take no less,
Than all in full excess!
Your oath it may alarm you.
Yet haste and prepare,
For I'll know what you are,
With all your powers arm you.
No, no. . . *da capo*

Exit.

Scene 5

75. Accompagnato

Jupiter (pensive and dejected)

Ah, whither is she gone! unhappy fair?
Why did she wish, why did I rashly swear?
'Tis past, 'tis past recall,
She must a victim fall.
Anon when I appear
The mighty thunderer,
Arm'd with inevitable fire,
She needs must instantly expire.
'Tis past, 'tis past recall,
She must a victim fall.
My softest lightning yet I'll try,
And mildest melting bolt apply;
In vain, for she was fram'd to prove
None but the lambent flames of love.
'Tis past, 'tis past recall,
She must a victim fall.

Scene 6

Juno, alone.

76. Air

Juno

Above measure
Is the pleasure,
Which my revenge supplies.
Love's a bubble,
Gain'd with trouble,
And in possessing dies.

With what joy shall I mount to my heav'n again,
At once from my rival and jealousy freed!
The sweets of revenge make it worth while to reign,
And heav'n will hereafter be heav'n indeed.
Above measure. . . *da capo*

Scene 7

The scene discovers Semele under a canopy, leaning pensively, while a mournful symphony is playing. She looks up and sees Jupiter descending in a cloud; flashes of lightning issue from either side, and thunder is heard grumbling in the air.

77. Accompagnato

Semele

Ah me! Too late I now repent
My pride and impious vanity.
He comes! Far off his lightnings scorch me,
Ah, I feel my life consuming:
I burn, I burn, I faint, for pity I implore,
Oh help, oh help, I can no more!

She dies. The cloud bursts, and Semele with the palace instantly disappears.

Scene 8

Cadmus, Athamas, Ino and Chorus of Priests.

78. Recitative

Ino

Of my ill-boding dream
Behold the dire event!

79. Chorus of Priests

Oh, terror and astonishment!
Nature to each allots his proper sphere,
But that forsaken we like meteors err:
Toss'd through the void, by some rude shock we're broke,
And all our boasted fire is lost in smoke.

80. Recitative

Ino

How I was hence remov'd,
Or hither how return'd, I know not:
So long a trance withheld me.
But Hermes in a vision told me,
As I have now related,
The fate of Semele;
And added, as from me he fled,
That Jove ordain'd I Athamas should wed.

Cadmus

Be Jove in ev'rything obey'd.

Joins their hands.

Athamas

Unworthy of your charms myself I yield,
Be Jove's commands and yours fulfill'd.

81. Air

Athamas

Despair no more shall wound me,
Since you so kind do prove.
All joy and bliss surround me,
My soul is tun'd to love.
Despair no more. . . *da capo*

82. Recitative

Cadmus

See from above the bellying clouds descend,
And big with some new wonder this way tend.

Scene the Last

A bright cloud descends and rests upon Mount Cithaeron, which, opening, discovers Apollo seated in it as the God of Prophecy.

83. Symphony

84. Accompagnato

Apollo

Apollo comes, to relieve your care,
And future happiness declare.
From Semele's ashes a phoenix shall rise,
The joy of this earth, and delight of the skies:
A God he shall prove
More mighty than Love,
And sighing and sorrow for ever prevent.

85. Chorus of Priests

Happy, happy shall we be,
Free from care, from sorrow free.
Guiltless pleasures we'll enjoy,
Virtuous love will never cloy;
All that's good and just we'll prove,
And Bacchus crown the joys of love.

