

Siface re di Numidia ('Syphax, King of Numidia') [Siface; Viriate]. Libretto by PIETRO METASTASIO, first set by Francesco Feo (1723, Naples). Revised by Metastasio and first set by Nicola Porpora (1725, Venice and Milan).

In the *argomento* to his 1723 libretto, Metastasio explains how Siface [Syphax], King of Numidia, weary of war, sought a lasting peace with Viriato [Viriathus], King of Lusitania, by offering marriage to his daughter, Viriate. Having dispatched his confidant, Libanio, to accompany his bride from Lusitania, Siface travelled from his palace in Cirta, capital of Numidia, to the port city of Rusconia to meet her, but here he became infatuated with Ismene, daughter of Orcano, governor of the city at the time, and one of his loyal subjects.

Act 1 While awaiting Viriate's imminent arrival, Orcano and Erminio, commander of the Numidian army, wonder why Siface remains silent amid the general rejoicing. Although upon greeting Viriate, he expresses appreciation for her gifts of love, honesty, and constancy, a coolness in his manner arouses her misgivings which are soon intensified when Libanio and Orcano are so quickly instructed to accompany her to the royal apartments. Unaware that Erminio is also in love with Ismene, Siface alarms him with a confession of his love for her, thus rendering his commander an immediate supporter of Viriate's cause. Ismene, for her part, simply wants the throne, without which she threatens to reject Siface and for which she has no hesitation in casting Erminio aside. Viriate, discovering her situation, accuses Orcano of using his daughter to gain the throne for himself, but soon realizes her error when Orcano threatens Ismene with drawn sword, then offers his own life to Viriate in reparation for his daughter's conduct. Meanwhile, Libanio, acting upon Siface's orders, attempts to draw Viriate into a compromising situation, and in failing, discovers a genuine affection for her. Alone with Ismene, Viriate makes an unsuccessful attempt to rid herself of her rival through gentle persuasion, a procedure that culminates in Ismene's defiant refusal to leave the palace and Viriate's angered warning that women such as her are intended for the king's pleasure, never for the throne. The act ends in a trio in which Siface finds himself accused by both women of treachery and deceit.

Act 2 Against Libanio's counsel, Siface orders him to take Viriate into custody, explaining that by means of a forged letter he can secure her death and that of his rival, Erminio. He is thus able to assure Ismene that the rebukes and insults she has suffered will be avenged. Thus persuaded, Ismene questions of her father the impropriety of offering her affections to his king, while Siface suggests that the elevation of his daughter is surely a just reward for his past services. Furthermore, Siface claims to have proof that Viriate and Erminio have plotted against him, and of this conspiracy, Orcano will be the judge. Libanio, meanwhile, in arresting Viriate, offers himself as a means by which she might retain her freedom. She refuses, and is arrested along with Erminio who comes to her aid. With her path to the throne now laid open, Ismene adopts a cavalier attitude towards the moral stance of the two victims, with just a modicum of pity for Erminio. With both present in a mock court scene, and with Orcano as judge, Siface reads a spurious letter supposedly written by Viriate to Erminio, in which the king's assassination is planned. To add to the fallacy, they are also accused of the murder of one of Viriate's servants, supposedly to silence his awareness of their liaison, but actually killed by Libanio for refusing to authenticate the letter. Siface offers Viriate a pardon if she will leave Numidia and to Erminio if he will confess his crime. Both refuse, and Orcano seizing the opportunity of the escort back to the prison assures Erminio that his apparent acceptance of Siface's treachery is but a sham.

Act 3 Libanio, still acting upon Siface's command, brings Viriate a cup of poison and a dagger, bidding her choose her means of death. Again, although she declines his proposal as a step towards acquittal, she asks for the means by which she can write a letter to her father. Siface, having come to hasten Viriate's death, suspects treachery, and remaining apart until the letter is finished, snatches it from her, only to discover a plea for his pardon. Although moved, he still insists upon her death, for which purpose she requests his sword, a timely possession used immediately to defend him when Orcano and Erminio enter, swords drawn, in an attempt to rescue her. Overwhelmed, Siface embraces Viriate, while Orcano and Erminio consider immediate flight, informing Ismene of the turn of events and urging her to accompany them. Siface, however, comes upon the two men, and even as he unexpectedly expresses his gratitude for their audacity, Ismene rushes in holding a dagger, closely followed by Libanio who accuses her of having murdered Viriate. To this crime she confesses, declaring Siface's falsehood and empty promises to be the true cause. He is distraught, his lamentations goading him towards such vengeance that only Viriate's startling arrival saves Ismene's life. The wound has not proved fatal, and with so much now restored to her, she extends the favour to Erminio with Ismene.

The plot of *Siface* centres around the Spanish historical figure, Pedro the Cruel (1334–69), King of Castile from 1350. Although in love with María de Padilla, he was forced into marriage with Blanche, daughter of the Duke of Bourbon, to secure a Franco-Castilian alliance against England. Pedro abandoned Blanche immediately after the marriage (1353) and María remained his mistress until her death in 1361. These events are recorded in vol.5, bk.4 of the Bartolomeo de Rogatis *Historia della perdita e reacquisto dell Spagna occupata da Mori*, which account Domenico David acknowledges in his *argomento* as the source for his libretto, *La forza della virtù*, first set by Carlo Pollarolo for Venice in 1692. Acclaimed by members of the Arcadian Academies, this libretto served as a basis for several subsequent settings including one by Giacomo Perti for Bologna (1694) and a version of Pollarolo's opera with arias by Alessandro Scarlatti given in Naples in 1699 as *Creonte tiranno di Tebe*. As demonstrated by Rosy Candiani (*Pietro Metastasio da poeta di teatro....*, Rome: Aracne, 1998, 91-129) and Lucio Tufano ("Itinerari librettisti tra sei e settecento....," *Il melodramma di Pietro Metastasio*, Rome: Aracne, 2001, 193-231), Metastasio drew upon all three of these texts, thus creating a derived work which he would subsequently discount in favour of *Didone abbandonata* as his first libretto for the professional opera house. The derivation process involved changes in location and in the names and numbers of the *dramatis personae*, with two allegorical figures, Virtù (in a machine) and Tajo (the river through Toledo) discarded from David's libretto and two comic servants removed from *Creonte* along the way.

In true Aristotelian fashion, the *Siface* text demonstrates a marked attempt to emphasize characters in action, that action evolving out of "Siface's infidelity, Viriate's constancy, Ismene's ambition, and Orcano's heroic sensibilities.," as Metastasio states in his *argomento*. Such characterization the poet extended further in his revision of the text for Nicola Porpora that had simultaneous premieres on 26 December 1725 in Milan and Venice. In this version, the characters of Ismene and Erminio become more complex, Orcano's deliberate ambiguity during the trial scene of act II expanded, and the *dénouement* made more convincing with the removal of Ismene's attempt on Viriate's life. The *recit.* text of the two Porpora renditions is much the same, and both contain set pieces carried over from the original Feo setting as well as the newly-written arias common to both. The Venice version, however, retains more from the Feo score than does its Milan counterpart which also contains substitute arias from previous Porpora operas. Porpora attended the Milan premier, Metastasio the one in Venice, along with Nicola Grimaldi and Marianna Benti-Bulgarelli, his original *Siface* and Viriate who now played the same roles in this new revision. Surprisingly, it is the Milan version that is printed in the Brunelli edition of the poet's works rather than the libretto from the Venice premiere, an occasion Metastasio surely recalled when, in a letter to Vincenzo Alberti dated 29:06:1772, he referred to *Siface* as having been written at Porpora's request.

Aristotle advocated free reference to historical names and events as a means of adding authenticity to a drama, but he also cautioned against altering fundamental historical facts even though the dramatist, like the portrait painter, should aim for character likeness, but with enhanced appearance (9.51b16-18, 14.53b23-27, and 15.54b8-11). Livy, in his *Ab Urbe Condita* (28.17-18, 30.11-13, etc.), presents Syphax (*Siface*) as a powerful King of the Western Numidians, defeated, along with Hannibal, at the end of the Second Punic War. Metastasio makes no mention of Sophonisba, his wife (Livy, 30.12), but rather, contrary to Aristotle's recommendation, reduces him to the level of a tyrant in his persecution of a fictitious Viriate, whose name appears to have been derived from Viriathus, whom Silius Italicus describes as leader of the Lusitanians (*Punica* [10.219-231]). Thus, in adapting the existing libretto, Metastasio chose the lesser of two evils. Either to distort the historical couple, Syphax and Sophonisba or reduce the disregard for history to just one character and give him a fictitious partner. In choosing the latter, Metastasio has created a moral heroine whose existence, along with her moral integrity, is a fiction, thus making *Siface* a fictional moral drama within an historical framework, a juxtaposition that must have contributed to his subsequent dissatisfaction with this libretto as exemplified in the letter cited above. Never again was the moral hero or heroine of a Metastasian drama so completely devoid of historical authenticity. (For Sophonisba's story, see the commentary on *Il sogno di Scipione*. For Metastasio's awareness of it, see the commentary on *Giustino*).

Settings:

Feo (Naples 1723); Porpora (Venice 1725 [v.1]); G. Redi (as *Viriate* – Florence 1729); Porpora (Rome 1730, rev. ?Vanstryp [v.2]); G.M. Nelvi (Frankfurt 1732); Vinci (Naples 1734 *post.*); Leo (Bologna 1737); Hasse (rev. Domenico Lalli as *Viriate* – Venice 1739); Maggiore (Rovigo 1744); Cocchi (Naples 1748); Fiorillo (Brunswick 1752); Fischietti (Venice 1761); Mich. Valentini (as *Viriate* – Pavia 1761); Galuppi (as *Viriate* – Venice 1762).