

Le cinesi. Revised libretto by PIETRO METASTASIO, first set by Nicola Conforto (1751 Aranjuez).

The scene represents a room in the house of Lisinga, decorated in the Chinese manner, with a table and four chairs. Lisinga, Sivene, and Tangia sit together drinking tea in an attitude of total preoccupation. Silango, listens unseen from the partly open door. Lisinga, after observing each of her companions for some time, finally breaks the silence.

Bored, three young Chinese women ponder how they might amuse themselves in a manner that would be enjoyable, innocent, and different. Tangia has fleeting thoughts on the matter but they come to nothing. Much to their chagrin, Silango enters to offer his opinion, but since this is a room strictly off-limits to men, reputations are at stake and he must leave – but best to delay until darkness offers its cover. Meanwhile, in spite of his recent travels in Europe, he must realize that he is no longer in France or Italy and must readjust to the customs of his native China. Lisinga suggests that as a group, they perform a dramatic piece. All three agree, but in turning to such a European pastime, each one favours a different genre. Lisinga opts for an heroic drama, while Sivene would have a pastoral and Tangia a comedy. Thus Silango proposes that each one perform a scene in her preferred style and they will adopt the one they consider to be the best. Since her companions hesitate, Lisinga takes the lead and as Andromache, widow of Hector, plays out a scene in which the life of their child, Astyanax, is threatened by Pyrrhus, unless she agree to marry him. Much to Tangia's discomfort, Lisinga finishes her scene without resolution, but it is Sivene's turn, and she begins by describing a pastoral scene in which Tirsi, a shepherd, accuses Licori, a shepherdess, of having little love for him. Licori, who promises more love than she intends to give, treats his grief with disdain. Silango volunteers to play the shepherd, and as Tirsi, expresses the shepherd's complaint over Licori's coldness and disdain. Tangia finds this shepherd rather weak, but Lisinga prevents further discussion by requesting Sivene's reply. Sivene, as Licori, assures Tirsi that he is her first love after her dog and her sheep. She could love him more if he were more enterprising. Meanwhile, he satisfied or both should return to their respective pastures. Silango has questions, but Lisinga, keeping matters on track, insists upon the comedy scene. In response, Tangia asks her companions to suggest the type of comic character she should play, whereupon Lisinga, with Silango in mind, suggests a foppish youth recently returned from foreign lands. Tangia presents her character standing at his vanity table touching up his wig. He acknowledges the common folk with condescension and comments on the crass nature of society youths not schooled in the Tuilleries of Paris, the only source of true irresistible refinement. With the three scenes completed, the style of the united presentation must now be decided. Tragedy is impressive, but crying as a means of enjoyment seems odd. The pastoral is gentle but endless talk of huts and herds becomes tiresome, and comedy, as a demonstration of human foibles, can be offensive to one who identifies with the circumstances. Silango provides a way out. Together the group should perform a ballet. All agree, and join in general rejoicing.

In response to a request from Farinelli, Metastasio prepared this revised version of *Le cinesi* in 1749, adding a male character, Silango, whose opening intrusion and contribution to Sivene's pastoral scene provides the chief areas of expansion to the original work. For Metastasio, however, the greatest challenge with the new character, as expressed in a letter to Farinelli dated 27:12:1749, was his seamless integration into the existing action. In achieving that aim, lines of text were redistributed, resulting in a greater emphasis on humour arising from the interplay of the four characters, allowing Lisinga, no longer performed by the heir apparent, to have an annoying brother who would dare to enter and remain in forbidden territory and take over some of her former leadership. Sivene gained a love interest, amusingly paralleled by Silango joining her for her pastoral scene. For Tangia, Sivene's new situation provided the opportunity to show a little jealousy and, prompted by Lisinga, to equate the newcomer with the dandy of her comic scene. In addition to these developments, all the satire of the original *Le cinese* remains. Nicola Conforto was the first to set this revised version, and although a printed libretto suggests a 1750 performance in Milan, the lack of any performance details suggests an anticipated performance that did not eventuate. The premiere, therefore, took place on May 30, 1751 when, with the title *La festa cinese*, it was mounted in celebration of the name day of Ferdinand VI at Aranjuez. The singers, recruited by Farinelli, included sopranos Anna Peruzzi as Lisinga and Teresa Castellini as Sivene, along with contralto Elena Pieri as Tangia and castrato, Giovanni Manzuoli as Silango. All but Pieri had sung in Galuppi's *Demofonte* at Madrid's Buen Retiro Palace in 1749. As with the 1735 version of *Le cinesi*, and in spite of

the extension and the professional singers, the revised version was still identified in the libretto as a *componimento drammatico*. It was subsequently labelled an *azione teatrale* in Gluck's score, commissioned by Prince Joseph Friedrich von Sachsen-Hildburghausen for a performance realized at his summer residence of Schloßhof, east of Vienna, on 24 September 1754, in honour of an imperial visit. The event and its preparations are well documented in Karl von Dittersdor's *Autobiography*, the purpose of the visit being to interest the Empress Maria Theresa and her consort, Emperor Francis I, in the purchase of the property, a venture that proved successful. Contralto, Vittoria Tesi-Tramontini, retired from the stage in Vienna and now a member of the prince's household, sang the role of Lisinga. She was joined by soprano, Theresia Heinich as Sivene and contralto, Katharina Starzer as Tangia, both of whom were engaged by the prince for the summer. Starzer was the sister of Joseph Starzer, the ballet composer, and a pupil of Giuseppe Bonno, as was the tenor, Joseph Friebert (Silango) who had been in the prince's service for some time, and who would sing the role of Tirsi opposite Caterina Gabrielli's Nice in Gluck's setting of *La danza* the following year.

Settings:

Conforto (Aranjuez 1751 - as *La festa cinese*); Gluck (Vienna 1754); Holzbauer (Mannheim 1756); Misón (as *La festa cinese* - Madrid 1757); Sales (Augsburg 1757); Jommelli (Ludwigsburg 1765); Perez (Lisbon 1769); Astarita (Florence 1773); Millico (Naples ?1780s); Anton of Saxony (Dresden 1784); Cedronio (Naples 1789); M. García (London ?1831).