

Gli Orti Esperidi ('The Gardens of the Hesperides'). Libretto by PIETRO METASTASIO, first set by Nicola Porpora (1721, Naples).

In Greek mythology, the name 'Hesperides' may refer either to the sublime garden situated at the western extremity of the Mediterranean world or to the three (or more) nymphs, spirit-beings, or goddesses who tended it. Here, guarded by Ladon, a never-sleeping dragon with one hundred heads, grew the tree that bore the golden apples of fertility from which the gods derived their immortality. Because of the extreme western location of the garden, the Hesperide nymphs were also acknowledged as the golden goddesses of the sunset. Metastasio actually places the garden at the north-western tip of Africa where it is touched by the Ethiopian Sea – the present-day South Atlantic, and an early reference in the serenata to the forests of Atlas aligns the poet's source with that version of the myth that claims the Hesperides to be the daughters of Atlas and Hesperis. This reference also acknowledges the region's Atlas Mountains, and the use of the name Egle for the single Hesperide character accords with the Aigle (or Aegle) named quite consistently across most renditions of the story.

PART 1 Venus has brought her beloved Adonis to the garden, hoping to escape the anger and jealousy of Mars, her all-powerful lover. Aegle greets Venus who tells her that she has come to find an appropriate gift to offer in tribute to Elisa [Elisabeth of Austria] – a golden apple, like the one awarded her by Paris when in competition with Juno (Hera) and **Minerva** (Athena). Venus leaves to retrieve her gift and Aegle, alone with Adonis, begins to tell him of a far distant innamorato but is suddenly interrupted by Mars who has come in search of Venus. When Adonis tells him where she has gone, he becomes curious as to his informant's identity, whereupon Adonis identifies himself as Elmiro, and with a combination of truth and fabrication describes his journey to the garden while also leaving Mars with the impression that he and Aegle are lovers. Palemon, a sea god who accompanies Mars and is in love with Aegle is distraught. Meanwhile, Mars, observing the apparent accord between Aegle and Adonis, wishes for a similar relationship with Venus. Alone again with Venus, Adonis recounts these events, fearing that with so powerful a threat, Venus will betray his love. Reassured, he suggests they flee, but the couple decide to remain, uphold the pretense as Adonis has explained to Mars, but retain the truth in their glances towards one another.

PART 2 Unable to find Venus, Mars complains to Adonis of her indifference towards him. Adonis responds ambiguously, listing observations he has made regarding Venus's devotion to her lover, a figure he describes in third person. Mars, however, remains both sceptical and threatening. Palemon, alone with Aegle, upbraids her inconstancy and remains adamant in this belief despite her attempts at explanation. Seeing Venus and Adonis approach, Aegle bids Palemon hide with her in the hope that something in their conversation may convince him. After reasserting their love and their need to defy Mars, Venus hesitatingly recounts her vision of Adonis's death, the victim of a wild boar. In response, his only concern is that he would then have to exist far from her. Palemon finally accepts the truth when, with Mars approaching, Venus tells Adonis to resume his role as Elmiro. Mars wonders why Venus would avoid him on Elisa[beth's] birthday, since he honours this occasion by holding his warlike heart in check. She defends herself with an allusion to others she has shunned on his account and reminds him of how she moved Vulcan, her former husband, to forget her adulterous affair with him and forge his armour. Mars replies with the forewarning that his mood is quite dependent upon her response to him, thus motivating a feigned reconciliation whereby Venus can proclaim Elisa[beth's] era a golden age of peace and prosperity. Adonis withdraws, reminding Venus that the heart of Elmiro is still that of Adonis. Further tribute is then rendered to Elisabeth when Mars questions Palemon, now reconciled with Aegle, about his background. He replies that he came out of the water the day Elisabeth was born, and was subsequently struck by her radiance and her physical and inner beauty. Although Aegle sees the approach of graces, cupids, and Neapolitan divinities, Venus calls for calm and for concentration upon Elisabeth's fertility. Mars, however, remains spirited by the Austrian victories he has afforded and offers to continue as Austria's ally and defender. 'Later,' Venus suggests, leaving Mars to contemplate future glories, the Turk driven further back, and Asia rescued. After such conquests, Venus announces, the [Austrian] eagle will return, amid much rejoicing, to its nest.

In contrast to the *Angelica* of the previous year, also given as part of the birthday celebrations for the Empress Elisabeth, *Gli Orti Esperidi*, indirectly commissioned by the viceroy, Marc' Antonio Borghese, was performed in Naples on 28 August 1721 at the Royal Palace. Dedicated to the vicereine and with Marianna Benti-Bulgarelli in the role of Venus, this serenata, like the other three written between 1720 and 1722, centres around a famed mythological couple, and like *Angelica*, the plot hinges upon a false show of love for an undesired suitor. Unlike *Angelica*, however, where tribute to the Empress is restricted to the *licenza*, *Gli Orti Esperidi* honours her and relates to her situation within the course of the action. In 1713, when Elisabeth and Charles VI were childless, a will previously made by the Emperor became part of the Pragmatic Sanction whereby not only was the Empire to remain indivisible, but also, in the event of no male heir, the crown should pass to the couple's eldest daughter, thus overriding the claims of the daughters of Charles's deceased elder brother, Joseph I. The birth of a son, however, would have rendered such a provision irrelevant. Such were the hopes with the arrival of Leopold Johann in 1716, but he died within months of his birth. Now, in 1721, Elizabeth was pregnant again, thus explaining the intentions of Venus in *Gli Orti Esperidi*. As for the role of Mars, Austria was at its territorial peak in 1721, having achieved extensive expansion through Hungary into Serbia and Bulgaria by 1718 and having reunited Sicily with its possession of the Kingdom of Naples in 1720. For the next thirteen years, Venus appears to have kept Mars largely in check, but angered again in 1733, he seems to have turned against his old ally.

Settings: Porpora (Naples 1721); Conforto (Naples 1751); Santos (Queluz 1764); Lima (Lisbon 1779); Vannacci ? 1802)