

Georg Friedrich Händel

SEMELE

(1744)

text by Newburgh Hamilton

Semele, Daughter to Cadmus,
belov'd by and in love with Jupiter (soprano)

Jupiter (tenor)

Athamas, a Prince of Bœotia, in love with,
and design'd to marry Semele (alto)

Juno (mezzo-soprano)

Ino, Sister to Semele, in love with Athamas (mezzo-soprano)

Iris (soprano)

Cadmus, King of Thebes (bass)

Priest (alto)

Somnus (bass)

Apollo (tenor)

Chorus of Priests and Augurs

Chorus of Loves and Zephyrs

Chorus of Nymphs and Swains

Attendants

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.

Accompagnato

Priest

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

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.

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.

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.

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!

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*

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.

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!

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.*

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.

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.

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.

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

Recitative

Ino

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!

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*

Recitative

Athamas

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

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*

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!

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.

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?

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 plumy 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.

Scene 4

Enter to them Chorus of Priests and Augurs.

Recitative

Cadmus

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

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!

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

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.

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!

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*

Recitative

Juno

No more, I'll hear no more!

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!

Recitative

Iris

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

Accompagnato

Iris

With adamant the gates are barr'd,
Whose entrance two fierce dragons guard;
At each approach they lash their forky 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.

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. Semele awakes and rises.

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.

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!

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*

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.

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*

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*

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.

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*

Chorus of Loves and Zephyrs

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

Duet*Semele and Ino*

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

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.

Symphony

Accompagnato

Juno

Somnus, awake!
Raise thy reclining head!

Iris

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

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.

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:
Pasi-thea's name alone can warm him.

(To Somnus)

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

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*

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.

Duet

Juno

Obeys 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.

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.

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.

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.

Recitative

Semele

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

Air

Semele

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

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?

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.

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.

Recitative

Juno

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

Semele

Adieu, your counsel I'll pursue.

Juno (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.

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.

Recitative

Jupiter

O Semele!
Why art thou thus insensible?

Air

Semele

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

Recitative

Jupiter

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

Semele

Swear by the Stygian lake!

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.

Recitative

Semele

You'll grant what I require?

Jupiter

I'll grant what you require.

Accompagnato

Semele

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

Air

Jupiter

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

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**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.

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.

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.

Recitative

Ino

Of my ill-boding dream
Behold the dire event!

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.

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.

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*

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.

Symphony

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.

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!