

# QUICK START GUIDE

## Julius Caesar

### STORY IN A NUTSHELL

Julius Caesar has defeated his rival Pompey in Greece and pursues him to Egypt. There, Caesar finds refuge with Ptolemy XIII, who reigns over the Nile valley with his sister and wife, Cleopatra. Attempting to win Caesar's favor, Ptolemy orders Pompey's death and sends his severed head to Caesar as a gift. The gift backfires spectacularly: Caesar is infuriated and vows to punish Ptolemy. The king's adviser, Achillas, offers to kill Caesar in exchange for the hand of Pompey's widow, Cornelia, and Ptolemy agrees.

Cleopatra is tired of her joint reign with Ptolemy and, in an effort to become sole ruler of Egypt, she decides win Caesar's support by seducing him. Just as he is about to follow her into her quarters, he learns of Achillas's plot against him and rushes off to confront the conspirators. When Cleopatra receives news that Caesar has been killed, she takes control of the Roman armies and is captured by the Egyptians. But Caesar has survived and now rushes to save Cleopatra.

Caesar and Cleopatra emerge victorious and everyone celebrates the return of peace.

### ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Director James Robinson is known for "transporting" operas from their original settings to counterpart settings, comparable in key ways to the original, but closer to the modern audience's experience. His production of *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, which HGO presented last spring, was set not at a Turkish pasha's palace but onboard the Orient Express; Robinson and his designers have transported *Julius Caesar* to the late 1920s–early '30s—the golden age of the Hollywood movie musical—more specifically to an MGM backlot, where a movie with an exotic Egyptian setting is being filmed. Robinson says he chose

that period because he sees similarities between the spectacle of the movie musical era and that of the Baroque period from which the opera came, and wanted to combine elements of both. He adds that *Julius Caesar* has the strongest narrative of the Handel operas, thus making it compatible with a cinematographic treatment.

### HOW HISTORICAL IS THE OPERA?

The basic plot points of the opera are based in fact. Caesar did pursue his Roman rival Pompey to Egypt, where Pompey was assassinated by agents of Ptolemy XIII. Ptolemy did present Caesar with the head of Pompey in an effort to curry his favor, and Cleopatra did seduce Caesar to win his support for her rulership.

However, in this production, Cleopatra intrigues Caesar by staging an elaborate scene in which she emerges from a pyramid. According to the historical record, she had herself rolled up in a carpet and delivered to Caesar, who, in his 50s, was entranced with the young girl of about 21.

In one of the opera's most significant departures from historical fact, Cleopatra receives the false news that Caesar has drowned. History tells us that her husband-brother Ptolemy XIII actually drowned while trying to cross the Nile.

### WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

It has been Houston Grand Opera's practice to cast the three roles of Julius Caesar, Ptolemy, and Nireus with countertenors, and we do so again with Anthony Roth Costanzo, David Daniels, and Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen, respectively. All three roles were originally cast with castrati, males who were surgically altered to prevent their voices from dropping into a lower register. The countertenor is capable of singing in the same range as the castrati of old, about in the same range of mezzo-sopranos.

The emergence of modern-day countertenors is a relatively new phenomenon, which began in the 20th century with Alfred Deller. Most countertenors specialize in early repertoire but a growing number of new works are being composed for them.

Also listen for the da capo aria, one of the hallmarks of Baroque opera in which the singer repeats the first section of the aria but adds his or her own vocal ornamentation. Sometimes the singer improvises this ornamentation on the spot, making for a unique performance each time.