

‘*Sosarme, Re di Media*’ (‘*Sosarmes, King of Media*’) was written at the time when Handel was artistic director of the new Royal Academy of Music, in London (1729–1734). He opened the 1731–1732 season by repeating his earlier operatic works. The first première was ‘*Ezio*’, in January 1732; it was taken off the repertoire after five performances. The composer had greater hopes for the success of his other new opera – a musical drama in three acts ‘*Sosarme, Re di Media*’, first performed on 15 February 1732 in the King’s Theatre, London.

The text was based on an earlier libretto, ‘*Dionisio, Re di Portogallo*’ (‘*Dionisius, King of Portugal*’), by Antonio Salvi († 1742), and arranged by an unknown writer, perhaps Paolo Antonio Rolli (1687–1767), or Samuel Humphreys (c.1698–1738). Salvi was one of the period librettists for whom writing of operatic texts was just a side line. He was not, however, a second-rate librettist – quite the opposite. Having no need to care for his daily bread, he was able to develop his individual style, influenced by French drama: the characters of his librettos talked naturally, and often expressed their emotions in a moving way. Opera composers found Salvi’s characters full of real life, instead of the usual routine types, corresponding with the roles. Salvi’s texts were used by the leading Italian composers, such as A. Scarlatti, A. Vivaldi, or A. Caldara.

The libretto of ‘*Sosarme*’ differs in a certain way from the ordinary baroque opera type. First of all, the indispensable love-plot plays only an inferior role. The centre of the action is the monarchist legitimacy principle, the disregard of which is the base of the conflict between the opera characters. The London public of the time certainly saw the plot of the work as an allusion to the actual situation at the British Royal Court, where King George II (1683–1760) quarrelled with his son, Crown Prince Frederick Lewis (1707–1751). The real reason of their feud is unknown, but its course was well known to the public. The English people hoped for a change in the gloomy political and family situation on the side of William IV of Orange (1711–1751), fiancé of the King’s daughter, Princess Anne (1709–1759), Frederick’s sister (and Handel’s pupil).

Today’s performances of baroque operas challenge every performer who takes part in them. The goal of the Cappella Accademica ensemble is to revive these operas in the sense of the period aesthetic principles. The singers, therefore, study the corresponding stage movement as much as possible within 18th century theatre practice, which differs considerably from realistic acting. A member of the public, not used to the rather exotic world of baroque opera, will be surprised by the static and statuesque performance, where all changes of the action and feelings of the characters are expressed ‘only’ by stylized deportment of the actors, their gestures and mimicry. The main difference between baroque and modern acting lies in the totally different concept of ‘naturalness’. For a baroque actor, theoretician and member of public, this term did not equate with realism. A 17th and 18th century actor was expected to be ‘natural’, but this naturalness was of a highly stylized art – ‘unnatural’ for us today.

The opera action takes place in Sardes (today the Sart village, to the east of the town of Izmir, in Turkey), a capital of Lydia. – The Lydian King Haliate refused his son Argone the right of succession, and transferred it to his illegitimate son Melo. Argone revolted against his father, and proclaimed himself King. Returning from the war, Haliate finds the gates of Sardes closed. With his army, he begins a siege of the capital of his own empire. The title character of the opera *Sosarmes* can most probably be identified with the important Median ruler, Kyaxares (645–585; he was in power between 625–585 BC).

Act I The long siege makes Argone's situation precarious. He calls his troops to a decisive battle against Haliate. Erenice, wife of Haliate, is frightened by a dream, in which the goddess Hekate appeared to her to predict an early end to the war: but peace is to be redeemed by royal blood! Erenice believes that either her husband, or her son, is to fall. Elmira, daughter of Haliate and fiancée of Sosarme, brings news of Argone's battle preparations. Erenice falls into despair. – Haliate's counsellor, Altomaro, wants to use the rift between Argone and Haliate to install his grandson Melo as king. Melo, however, refuses to do injustice to anybody. Sosarme meets Melo and defends Haliate. He wants to go to Sardes, and make Argone seek a peaceful outcome to the feud. Later Sosarme talks to Haliate and defends Argone; he refuses to take part in Haliate's plans of vengeance. – Argone wants to lead his troops in the decisive battle. Erenice fears for the lives of her son and husband, Elmira believes that Hekate's prediction is about to come true.

Act II From the ramparts, Elmira sees Sosarme challenging, as a first, the attack of Argone's troops. Argone returns from the battle with his sword covered in blood; he has wounded Sosarme and taken him prisoner. Erenice and Elmira believe, however, that Sosarme is dead. – Through Sosarme's imprisonment, Haliate's situation becomes increasingly worse, Sosarme's soldiers are revolting. Due to this, Haliate is ready to make peace with Argone. He sends Altomaro to the town, as a negotiator. Altomaro reproaches Melo for his unwillingness in trying to gain the throne. Melo predicts a bad end to his intrigues. – Elmira is tending the wounded Sosarme. Erenice brings news of Haliate's peace delegation. She begs Sosarme to force Argone also to an appeasement. – Argone is ready to agree, on condition that Haliate would grant all his rights. Altomaro does not deliver Haliate's message; he claims that the King calls his son to a duel, to decide the war. Argone takes on the challenge. The desperate Erenice decides to go to the camp: she wishes to divert her husband from the duel. Sosarme calms Elmira down. The girl cherishes her hopes.

Act III Altomaro is bringing a false message to Haliate, saying that Argone challenges, on Erenice's advice, his father to a duel. Haliate takes up the challenge. Erenice arrives, but the indignant Haliate refuses to listen to her. Melo wants to thwart the duel, and care for Argone's rightful accession to the throne. – Argone leaves, in secret, for the duel with his father. Sosarme and Elmira are not able to hold him back. Hoping to avert the worst they follow him. – For the last time, Altomaro gives the incentive to the King's intractability towards his son. Argone and Haliate cross their swords, fighting. Unintentionally they wound Melo and Erenice, who try to divert the duel. Altomaro sees that his intrigue has been revealed, and runs away. Sosarme arrives with Elmira; they bring the news of Altomaro's suicide. Haliate forgives his son and grants him all rights of the Crown Prince.