

The Da Capo Aria

(George Frideric Handel)

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

- ▶ An influential German composer who spent much of his time living and working in London
- ▶ He is considered one of the greatest composers of both vocal and instrumental music in the Baroque era
- ▶ He was a cosmopolitan artist, drawing equally on German, Italian, French, and English musical traditions
- ▶ Handel was primarily a composer of dramatic music, writing a large number of Italian operas and English oratorios (the most famous of which is his *Messiah*)
- ▶ Handel probably wrote more than 1000 *da capo* arias

The *da capo* aria

- ▶ The *da capo* aria was one of the most important vocal forms of the Baroque period, featured in operas, oratorios, and cantatas
- ▶ These arias stop the action and reflect on the emotions of the characters (most of the action is in the recitative)
- ▶ A *da capo* aria consists of two main sections (based on two stanzas of text) that are contrasting in character
- ▶ *Da capo* literally means “from the head (beginning),” so when you get to the end of the B section, you always return to the beginning, repeating the A section in its entirety (often with ornaments added by the singer)
- ▶ This creates a ternary (or ABA) form

More details about the form

- ▶ The A section is usually much longer than the B section
- ▶ The two sections are also generally in different (but closely related) keys
- ▶ The A section itself is often in *continuous binary form*, with the first part moving towards the dominant and the second part moving back to the tonic
- ▶ The B section is sometimes performed at a slower tempo and may be left harmonically “open” (ending on V)
- ▶ In many *da capo* arias, the internal sections of the aria are separated by recurring instrumental *ritornelli* sections—this helps to unify the structure