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JENS PETER LARSEN

HANDEL ESSAYS

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HANDEL ESSAYS

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Preface

The systematic study of Handel's work, begun by contemporary writers during Handel's lifetime and continued through two and a half centuries, entered a completely new phase with the publication of *Handel's Messiah, Origin · Composition · Sources* (1957) by Jens Peter Larsen, in which the distinguished Danish scholar traced the derivation of the widely varying manuscript sources as well as the evolution of Handel's highly varied choral style.

This work, now out of print but about to be reissued in paperback (W.W. Norton, New York), was preceded and followed by a number of essays on Handel's choral music which were presented by the author at various Handel festivals held at three international Handel centers—Halle, Göttingen, and London.

With the study of *Messiah* serving as a focus, Larsen explores in these essays the rise and development of Handel's oratorio style and he summarizes his discussion with an exposition of his principal argument: the need for considering Handelian oratorio on its own terms and in its own right. Characteristic of Larsen's scholarship—the care with which he pursues each thought, his ability to move with compelling logic from general to specific considerations, his flawless narrative—these essays are offered here in a first compilation on the occasion of the author's seventieth birthday. A comprehensive list of his Handel studies is given in the concluding bibliography.

January 1972

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The volume of Jens Peter Larsen's Handel Studies was one of the earliest in the series of Special Issues of the *American Choral Review*, and since its appearance it has remained in such demand that it, in fact, gave the impetus for establishing a new Reprint Series. That it did not become the first issue in the latter was due to the abiding initiative of the author, who wished to add to a reprint lectures he had given at the International Musicological Congress in Basel (1949)—the first of his significant Handel essays—and at the Maryland Handel Festival of 1987—his last; he worked on a revision of the manuscript until the time of his death in August, 1988.

His work is of enduring vigor: Just as the first edition of this volume announced a re-issue of his fundamental *Messiah* study by W.W. Norton,

New York, the present edition appears in time to announce a further printing of the work by the same publishers; and, by permission from the *American Choral Review,* it will include the first of the essays here presented in the Appendix.

There seems to be special justification in issuing Larsen's previously published studies in reprint form. His scholarly career covered the span of several generations, and while other scholars have added further to the body of Handel research, his achievements have retained fresh and authoritative validity.

It is interesting, and it bespeaks his admirable strength, that Larsen's last Handel study proved to be also his most provocative. There was an inner logic in his work that led him back once more to the question of ornamentation in order to create a new scholarly basis for a discussion. Its key word, "graffiti," acquired instant fame. Yet the author was not concerned with polemics but facts. Nevertheless, his presentation called for response, and as such, a highly engaging lecture by Professor Ellen Harris, President of the American Handel Society, at the 1988 Maryland Handel Festival was designed.

Her perceptive argument, from which passages are quoted below, joins two issues of modern debate: ornamentation and "borrowings." It was the latter that had introduced a moralistic tone into Handel research, and the emotions it aroused carried over into the former. But her conclusions (as summarized, for instance, in the postulate "We need to study compositional process in order to begin to understand Handel's compositional intent.") converge with Larsen's views in much of their essence:

> . . . it is possible to delineate boundaries within which a performance approximates the conditions of the original. We know that Handel's music was performed with improvised keyboard continuo, and with vocal and instrumental ornamentation. We also know that at least some of this was not always in good taste. That does not mean we should eliminate all improvisation and ornamentation, nor does it mean that we must ornament badly to be authentic.

Larsen has indeed guided our thinking back to the authentic situation: While it was the composer himself who played the keyboard improvisation, it was the cast of uniquely trained and famed, yet controversial soloists of opera who gloried in vocal embellishments. Their bygone arena continues to challenge and bedevil modern Handel performances and audiences, and we are grateful to the scholar who added new challenge from his incomparable perspective and wealth of experience.

A.M.

Esther and the Origin of the Handelian Oratorio Tradition

Presentations of the history of past epochs are bound to include elements of a purely accidental nature; this may apply to matters of general or specific cultural significance. Whatever is deemed worthy of a record for posterity depends upon subjective judgment, and whatever is slighted by the eyewitnesses may be forever lost. It is an old truth that history is written by the winning party. This applies directly to the account of situations, to the distribution of light and shadow, and to the inclusion or omission of personages, happenings, or developments.

A similar adjustment of historical material for posterity, however, takes place to a certain extent during the very course of events. Those who won the first round, the conspicuous participants, command the attention. The spotlight rests on them, and on their acts—often, of course, rightly so. But it can happen, too, that later analysis will register a quick decline of works that were initially accorded the greatest interest, and overwhelming recognition of works that were hardly noticed at first.

The most striking example of such reevaluation and posthumous understanding of unrecognized quality is probably Bach's *St. Matthew Passion.* The first performance of this great work roused such little interest that it is impossible to ascertain its date. (This fact may give some consolation to neglected composers, or it may serve as a sobering reminder for successful ones—depending upon situations and temperaments.) Though especially poignant, this case is not to be considered unusual. The music historian will often find himself faced with material for hundreds of works that seem quite unimportant today, whereas the sources are silent on the one work that does seem important.

The work with which we are concerned at present, the first version of Handel's *Esther*—probably performed originally in the fall of 1720—cannot be compared with Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* on artistic grounds, but from the point of view of Handel's development and of the development of the modern oratorio tradition in general, it assumes a decisive role. Yet what we can say about its origin and its first performance is inversely proportionate to its importance. *Esther*, or, as the work in its original form was also called, *Haman and Mordecai*, was written, according to traditional biographic information, in 1720, at a time when Handel was said to be chapelmaster to the Duke of Chandos at Cannons,

his residence near London. Recent scholarship has raised some questions about this traditional account. There is no doubt that Handel composed a number of works for the Duke, but he could not have been his chapelmaster—this post was held by Pepusch, the compiler of the music for the famous *Beggar's Opera*. Handel probably lived in London at that time, coming to Cannons only for certain performances, such as *Esther* and *Acis and Galatea* which was composed at about the same time.

With regard to the performance of *Esther* the situation is even less clear. A contemporaneous account of the performance has not turned up so far, and it is therefore not clear whether it took place in the court chapel at Cannons, as has been stated by the English music historian Charles Burney, among others, or in the large hall of the castle itself. It remains to be investigated whether a theatrical performance with scenery and action was involved, or whether the presentation contained limited dramatic action or was merely sung. English scholars are inclined to assume a genuine theatrical production, though without any documentation for such an opinion. In fact, a contrary opinion is supported by a newspaper notice of a somewhat later date.

In 1732 both *Esther* and *Acis and Galatea* were revived, and from these new performances the great English oratorio tradition has taken its point of departure. On May 2, 1732, a performance of *Acis and Galatea* was announced in *The Daily Post* with the following comment: [*Acis and Galatea* will be presented] "with all the Grand Chorus's and other Decorations, as it was perform'd before his Grace the Duke of Chandos at Cannons." This seems like a clear confirmation of the thesis of a dramatic presentation at Cannons. But now something surprising happens. The notice, which had been repeated on May 3, was revised from May 6 on as follows: [*Acis and Galatea* will be presented] "with all the Grand Chorus's, Scenes, Machines, and other Decorations; being the first Time it ever was performed in a Theatrical Way." This change, which must be considered a correction of the first announcement, proves only a non-theatrical performance for *Acis and Galatea* at Cannons, but in my opinion it implies beyond any doubt a non-theatrical production for *Esther* as well.

Not the least part of the uncertainty to which we are committed results from the fact that the production of *Esther* must decidedly be considered to have been an experiment. There was no English oratorio tradition. Burney states this as follows:

> Oratorios, though common in Italy during the last century, were never attempted in England, either in public or private, till the year 1720, when Handel set the sacred drama of Esther for the chapel of the Duke of Chandos at Cannons![1]

[1] *A General History of Music* (1789), new edition by Frank Mercer (New York: Dover, 1957) Vol. II, p. 775.

Surely there was no intention of establishing an oratorio tradition implicit in the *Esther* performance at Cannons. It would be difficult to say why such an intention should exist, and it might suffice to point out that during the twelve years before the revival of *Esther* in 1732 not the slightest suggestion of a continuation of such a trend appeared. Probably the first public presentations of Racine's *Esther and Athalia*, which were given in Paris, served as an impetus for this experiment. These works, however, cannot be regarded as direct models which guided Handel, for their musical content was confined to the great choruses. The strong emphasis on the chorus, the biblical subject, and the "classic," monumental character are probably the three principal qualities that link Handel's work to that of Racine. The musical components for the oratorio *Esther*, from which the entire Handelian oratorio tradition was to evolve, must be found elsewhere. There was *one* definite line of development in Handel's work up to this point: that of the opera composer. Yet aside from this definite line we can recognize a number of sudsidiary lines—various influences which do not seem to lead to a clear-cut individual goal but which nevertheless suggest another principle line of development to those who are aware of the later aspects of Handel's work. This line, which marks a less obvious and less conscious road towards the oratorio, will be sketched briefly here.

Like Mozart, Handel belongs to a group of composers who are not tied to one country whose traditions they essentially continue, but who are influenced by changing traditions early in their careers. In the case of Handel there are three national traditions which determined the course of his work: the German environment of his early period, the Italian environment of his ensuing years, and the English environment of his mature and late years. In each of these he gathered elements that helped to build his oratorio style.

Even in the very first phase of Handel's career—his apprenticeship under the excellent Halle church musician Zachow—style elements appear which point towards the oratorio. What Zachow taught him was well founded and sound, German church music tradition at its best—choral writing and contrapuntal art, not the fashionable, melodic style of opera. Yet the merging of church music and opera, from which in time the specific form of the Handelian oratorio was to take its origins, seems to have made its appearance early. A somewhat unclarified account has it that the young Handel became acquainted with the world of court opera in Berlin in his youth. It is, however, certain that at eighteen he moved from Halle to Hamburg, the only city in Germany in which he could enter upon an operatic career without court connections. Here opera occupied a central position, but in addition there were influences that

widened his musical horizon still further. It was in these very years that there arose in Hamburg the new form of the "oratorical" or "theatrical" Passion without which Bach's Passion works could hardly have come about. Among Handel's earliest works is his shorter setting of the *Passion according to St. John*. A later setting—the so-called "Brockes Passion," probably composed during a trip to Germany—leads us directly to one of the chief sources for the music of *Esther*, the first English oratorio. We will return to this point shortly.

After about three years in Hamburg, Handel had saved enough money to go to Italy. There is no doubt that Italian opera attracted him. Italy was the promised land of opera. From there the influence of Italian operatic traditions spread through all of Europe. The three or four years that Handel spent in Italy gave him the opportunity to become steeped in this tradition. He was closely associated with Italy's leading opera composer, Alessandro Scarlatti, and other outstanding composers. In the course of these years, Handel himself became one of the foremost opera composers of his time. His opera *Agrippina* (Venice, 1709) in particular established his fame.

In this phase of Handel's development his attention was still mainly directed towards opera. In addition, however, there were influences upon his work, the effects of which were to become fully apparent only later. The style of Corelli became decisive for his instrumental music, as his concertos and violin sonatas unmistakably show. But the impulse for the oratorio tradition, which was to arise much later, can also be traced largely to Handel's Italian period. This refers to the genre of oratorio in general as well as to the monumental choral style that is such a distinguished characteristic of the Handelian oratorio.

Handel's work became associated with the form of the oratorio in Rome in the spring of 1708. Opera performances were ruled out in the Holy City at this time and oratorio performances served as a substitute. Handel wrote his first two oratorios there: *La Resurrezione* and *Il Trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno*.

These works have little in common with his later oratorio style. Above all, they are written almost entirely as solo works without the choral effects that are so essential to the later oratorios. But superb choral writing by Handel appeared during these years in his Latin Psalms, especially *Dixit Dominus* and *Laudate Pueri*. As these works show, he had fully absorbed the grand choral style of the Baroque that had originated in Venice around 1600. This needs to be emphasized; it has often been overlooked that Handel had proven his strength as a choral composer even before his English period, although he received new impulses in England that were to contribute decisively towards the development of a highly varied and unparalleled choral style.

From Italy, Handel—now a musician of international reputation—

went to Hanover as court chapelmaster; but, as is well known, his Hanoverian period was to become merely an episode between Italy and England. Only a few months after his appointment in Hanover, towards the end of the year 1710, he made his first journey to England, where, after a renewed short stay in Hanover, he settled permanently in 1712. His chief occupation in England remained opera for many years to come—with an interruption during the period between 1715 and 1720. This may be the least explored portion of his life. As has been mentioned, we are not sure of the places where he stayed during these years, what works he composed, and under what circumstances they were performed. Only one thing is certain: this span of time is marked by the smallest operatic output of the entire active period of his middle years. Instead, Handel cultivated a number of other musical forms. In the field of instrumental music, with which we are less concerned in this connection, he was highly active writing clavier suites, chamber sonatas, and concertos. Much more important from our point of view is his growing interest in such vocal forms as were rooted in English musical traditions.

At the very beginning of his English period, still during Queen Anne's reign, Handel had been commissioned to write two major works which were bound to place before him the problem of taking a stand in following such traditions. This applies especially to the *Ode for the Birthday of Queen Anne* of 1713. There were models by Purcell, Handel's great predecessor, from which he could take a point of departure—or we might say, could have taken a point of departure. The situation is this: If we compare the *Birthday Ode* with earlier choral works by Handel, certain differences clearly emerge; but if we make a comparison with Purcell's writing, the differences are certainly no less clear. This might best be explained as follows: Handel probably had the opportunity of seeing compositions of this kind by Purcell. If this is so, they may have had an influence on the planning of the general outline of his works, but we can in no way speak of a direct imitation. There are certain isolated traits that reflect Purcell's style—or may reflect Purcell's style—such as the typical combination of solo introduction and choral refrain sharing the same musical material. Also obviously deviating from the choral style of Handel's Italian works, is the growing tendency towards simple rhythmic effects, often veritable dance patterns, as opposed to the essentially sonorous choral effects of the Italian works that appear here in only two numbers.

In the case of the other early example of a Handelian setting of an English text, the *Utrecht Te Deum* and *Jubilate*, composed about the same time, a connection between Handel's and Purcell's work has often been strongly argued. But I do not believe that the conjecture of such a correlation touches upon the basic issue. The corresponding arrangement

of the text in small sections and similar features have been quoted as evidence of Handel's indebtedness to Purcell. But even if we were to assume that Handel might not have arrived at such an arrangement without the model of Purcell, we would merely acknowledge proof of Handel's acquaintance with Purcell's work though not his musical dependence upon Purcell. For in the *Utrecht Te Deum* and *Jubilate* the influence of Handel's Italian choral style from the Latin Psalms is convincing. This is especially clear in the *Jubilate*, for its beginning is based upon the magnificent concertato opening of his Psalm *Laudate Pueri*. The direct connection is manifest. It seems plausible that Handel went through appropriate models in Purcell's work before composing both the *Birthday Ode* and the *Utrecht Te Deum*, but these seem to have merely guided him in a general conception of the form without affecting the essence of his musical style.

Among the compositions that are traditionally known to have been dedicated to the Duke of Chandos, the eleven or twelve *Chandos Anthems* occupy the first place. Again we are dealing with a specifically English tradition, and again it seems justified to state that Handel created a novel form which could not easily be identified with the tradition of the English Anthem—granted that without the existing English tradition he would not have composed works of this genre. In the anthems we find reminiscences of the Latin Psalms and of the *Birthday Ode*, and, by no means least important, we find conspicuous quotations from German Protestant chorales. These might be traced, of course, to impressions from his childhood and youth, but it is more plausible to relate them to the renewed impression of the religious service with which he had grown up. He had been in Germany in 1716 or 1717 (or in both years), and apparently he had become acquainted with the new trends of sacred music. Important among them was the new form of the church cantata, traces of which we can recognize in the *Chandos Anthems*. Particularly important, however, was the Passion on the text by Brockes which we have mentioned. What prompted him to set this text to music is one of the questions from these years for which we cannot supply an answer for the time being.

We encounter a closer contact with English traditions in three works which probably all date from the end of this period in Handel's work: the so-called "Chandos" *Te Deum* in B-flat major and the two oratorios *Acis and Galatea* and *Esther*. In the B-flat major *Te Deum* Handel departed somewhat from Italian traditions. The choruses often suggest more the melodic style of the aria than the monumental choral style—a tendency which points to the future.

With the two oratorios Handel shows that he is guided by an impulse, the entire development of which we cannot trace, although we find it documented in the renewed interest in the genre, especially

through the revival of the two works in 1732. From the English tradition of the so-called *masque* a line of development leads through Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* to Handel's *Acis and Galatea*. The *masques*, originally derived from allegorical plays, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries assumed a manner of *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a combination of ceremonial presentations, dances, and elaborate stage effects, all of them supported by music. At first a self-contained work, the *masque* became in some of the great examples of Purcell's incidental stage music a set piece within a larger work. From the little that we know about Handel's performance at Cannons, it does not seem safe to conclude that conditions for the elaborate apparatus needed for this genre existed. If we find both the designations *masque* and *oratorio* for *Esther* (or *Haman and Mordecai*), we are led to the conclusion that there was no readily suitable term, since an experiment, so to speak, of an improvisatory nature, was being made. The argument for the term *masque* is founded upon purely musical grounds—the combination of arias and choruses forms the basis of the musical structure, and it has remained the basis of the Handelian oratorio. It is not justified, however, to interpret the term *masque* in the sense of a scenic performance, or conversely to interpret the term *oratorio* in the sense of a non-dramatic performance.

The question as to what Handel knew of such works and performance traditions is even more important here than it is in connection with the works we mentioned earlier and which were related to a then existing English tradition; for this type of *Gesamtkunstwerk* may be assumed to have died with the passing of the Purcellian era. Thus we are bound to arrive at the realization that the original version of *Esther*—or, to use the designation the work was given by the Handel biographer Friedrich Chrysander, *Esther I*—was a highly unusual work. On the one hand, it was tied to the tradition of many models or antecedents; on the other, it could obviously not be placed in direct comparison with any of these antecedents. The suggestion may come from Racine's *Esther*, but this was a drama with no musical elaboration other than choruses. From the point of view of musical concepts Handel might have classed *Esther* as an oratorio even if the type of oratorio with which Handel had become acquainted in Italy and which he himself had briefly cultivated was a solo oratorio to which the central element of alternation between solo and chorus was foreign. *Esther I* had many musical characteristics which related the work to the *masque* tradition, but the typical *Gesamtkunstwerk* tendencies of *masque* performances were probably absent in this case.

If we turn from conceptual considerations—from considerations of the essentially dramatic nature of the work—to purely musical considerations, the picture becomes even more complex. We have touched

briefly upon the question of Handel's use of already existing material. This is an aspect of artistic activity that stands in contrast to the stereotyped search for originality which we find in later periods. The composers of the eighteenth century, like their predecessors, aimed above all at *excellence*, not necessarily at *novelty*. To a large extent they quoted or utilized not only their own works but also works by other composers in order to create valid new material. In particular, they followed the practice of the so-called *contrafactum*—they gave new texts to works they had written for special occasions and which they considered outdated with those occasions; they remodeled them according to new needs and adapted them to new contexts. This practice can be documented with many examples in the works of both Bach and Handel.

The practice of *contrafactum* leads us finally to an important source for *Esther I* and for the rising Handelian oratorio tradition: sacred music. No less than eight numbers from *Esther* were taken from Handel's setting of the Brockes Passion. The fact points out again that we face a synthesis of a number of latent antecedents in the case of *Esther*. The connection with forms of sacred music is clearly expressed in the choruses, especially in the monumental choral conclusion. In turn, if the initiative of a young friend and follower of Handel's had not resulted in a revival and a subsequent revision of *Esther* (1732), which caused the rise of a new tradition of non-staged oratorio performances in the theater, *Esther I* would have remained an interesting experiment from Handel's early period. Through the course of events, however, this experiment prepared the ground for the oratorio tradition that was to come. It did not present a definitive form of the Handelian oratorio. (Fortunately, there are no definitive forms.) Rather the work paved the way for a genre that represents the successful synthesis of sacred and secular, dramatic and contemplative, English, German, and Italian prototypes. The revision of 1732 stood for a certain assimilation of opera, and opera soloists became the principal performers in oratorio presentations for a number of years. This does not mean a greater emphasis upon the dramatic aspect of oratorio—in fact, it does not touch on the question as to whether or not a staged dramatic presentation was involved. But with the greater emphasis upon the soloistic element, a balance between the two cardinal lines of development in Handel's creative career was brought about: that of opera, which Handel took up consciously and which was founded upon the tradition of Italian solo singing, and that of oratorio, which Handel took up involuntarily and which slowly rose to a dominant position marked by the reconciliation of soloistic and choral elements. This decisive reconciliation originated in *Esther I*.

The Development of Handelian Oratorio and *Messiah*

In the history of European music certain outstanding names and genres are so closely connected that they are almost invariably mentioned together. Mozart and the opera, Wagner and the music drama, Beethoven and the symphony may serve as examples for such pairing of composer and form. No doubt the combination of Handel and the oratorio belongs in this series.

If we are not content, however, with the mere idea that such connections exist but probe more deeply into their nature, distinguishing features characteristic of each of the associations begin to emerge.

To single out some obvious situations: Mozart's role as opera composer or Beethoven's role as symphonist would never be considered the roles of initiators. Here we are not dealing with the origin but with the decisive reinterpretation of musical forms. Mozart was in no way consciously concerned with a reform of opera, and Beethoven based his work clearly upon the mature phases of Haydn's and Mozart's symphonic writing. Nevertheless, both Mozart and Beethoven arrived at new approaches of entirely original quality.

In Wagner's case the circumstances are different in spite of seeming similarities. Though taking his point of departure from existing opera, Wagner's whole interest guided him towards new territory. He wished to free himself of the conventions of opera, and this wish was fulfilled to a large extent. Establishing a new theoretical basis and experimenting with new musical concepts, Wagner arrived at a totally novel form of art. Music drama is a phenomenon rooted in Wagner's work in a manner quite different from that in which the phenomenon of opera is connected with Mozart's or the phenomenon of the symphony is connected with Beethoven's work.

In the light of these considerations, how are we to judge Handel's position with regard to oratorio? Are we concerned with a creative impulse directed towards a new genre as in the case of Wagner and the music drama, or did Handel merely reawaken a traditional form without radically changing it? In some measure this question is easily answered. There is no doubt that Handel brought about a radical change. The concept of the Handelian oratorio is so unparalleled that it must be considered an original creation in the strictest sense. Nor was there an established tradition upon which Handel could build. On the contrary:

Burney has expressly stated that no attempt at producing oratorios had been made in England prior to Handel. It is true that Handel had become acquainted with the form of the oratorio during his early years in Italy and that he tried his hand at it. But his mature works—those truly representative of the Handelian oratorio—are in no way a continuation of his early oratorio writing; they must be considered in terms of a new individual genre. This was doubtless also the impression these works gave to Handel's contemporaries and direct followers.

Yet, at the same time, our comparison points out a complete divergence of Wagner's and Handel's approaches to a new form. Wagner's fight for the music drama is conscious and manifest. Handel enters his career as oratorio composer accidentally and without any firm resolve. Wagner's music drama is the result of eminent intellectual will power. Handel's oratorio is the result of the steady growth of a musical instinct forever directed towards dramatic expression, but not a result systematically planned to become the form of oratorio. One might rather say that the form of oratorio systematically captured Handel. The student of cultural history who is also interested in the psychology of the creative artist will find Handel's road towards this genre one of the most fascinating episodes in eighteenth-century art. With the present discussion, I would like to trace Handel's development as oratorio composer and to describe the role of *Messiah*, his best known oratorio, within this development.

As we have mentioned, Handel encountered the oratorio in Italy, where he stayed between the years 1707 and 1710 and where he received the impressions that were to become decisive for him, above all through Scarlatti's operas and Corelli's instrumental music.

Originally intended to serve devotional purposes, the form of the oratorio had taken on most of the musical conventions of opera during the second half of the seventeenth century. Its function had changed. Rather than devotion, its purpose—in the circles where Handel met with the form—had become entertainment. Opera being ruled out during Lent, and in Rome at this time in general, nobility had turned its musical patronage to oratorio, opera's legitimate and closely related counterpart. The oratorio plot had to be chosen from the Bible or from the lives of the Saints or similar subject matter, but the character of the oratorio was akin to that of opera, the primary object of both being the soloists' vocal display. Handel's two oratorios from those years, *La Resurrezione* and *Il Trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno*, are actually of this kind.

After the two precursors of his later work, Handel seems to have given no further thought to the composition of oratorios for about a dozen years. In the two new works written about 1720 for the Duke of Chandos (*Acis and Galatea* and *Esther*) we can recognize links with

Handel's later work that suggest the origin of the Handelian oratorio proper, but our knowledge about these works and their performance is sparse, and Handel's renewed concern with the genre seems to have been a matter of chance rather than plan.

After these two works, produced for a small, private audience, approximately another dozen years passed before Handel returned to the form of the oratorio. This time the spark ignited, although it took Handel a few more years to complete the transition from opera to oratorio. The occasion for this return to the form again seems accidental. One of the members in the original *Esther* cast of 1720, Bernard Gates, had meanwhile been appointed to the office of Master of Children of the Chapel Royal. For Handel's birthday, February 23, 1732, Gates planned a performance of *Esther* with his group of boys and with the assistance of other choristers from the Chapel Royal and Westminster Abbey. While this performance was again privately held, it stirred up so much general interest that several repeat performances took place. Handel was even prompted to schedule a public performance. Thus oratorio emerged from its earlier seclusion into the bright light always shed on public theater. The Handelian oratorio became, like opera, a public entertainment and renounced its original intimate and devotional character.

Connected with the absorption of oratorio into the London stage repertoire is the establishment of special performance traditions which grew in part from the circumstances of the moment.

There is, first of all, the manner of presentation. It seems to have been Handel's intention to give scenic performances, as in opera, with stage sets, costumes, and action. Here he met with unexpected resistance. The Bishop of London simply forbade the chapel boys to appear in the common environment of theater life. As a compromise, one arrived at a concert performance—a non-scenic presentation without costumes or action, as has remained the general custom until today.

A second, equally important departure from Handel's earlier practice was the change from Italian to English texts. It might seem relatively inconsequential whether one or the other language was used, but this is not so. The shift of language had a decisive effect in several respects. For one thing it made it possible to reach a much wider audience—the exclusive character of the earlier oratorio began to disappear. For another, it was possible to abandon the stereotyped character of libretto that formed the basis of Italian opera and oratorio and give oratorio texts an aura of the great English dramatic traditions. The text of oratorios became more alive and natural than the conventional opera libretto. It enhanced Handel's capacity for achieving great results with simple means.

A third consequence of the use of a new performance language

might have seemed a serious drawback initially but eventually proved a favorable factor: the elimination of Italian opera stars—so far the only possible source of performers—as interpreters of Handel's work. From the point of view of purely vocal performance, the conversion of Handel's staff of soloists that took place in the following years was doubtless a loss. Handel's soloists were now English singers of average quality or Italian singers without the European reputation of Handel's former operatic stars. But these singers were not encumbered with the prima donna attitudes of a Cuzzoni or a Farinelli. Their approach to musical work was not conditioned by the demand that it must serve merely as a basis for vocal virtuosity, even at the cost of the dramatic sense. With these singers Handel found opportunities for attaining a dramatic and musical unity that he could never have attempted with his Italian forces. (We might be reminded here that Gluck's reform of opera, thirty years later, was accompanied by a similar change of singers.)

To these characteristics of the newly arising English type of oratorio a very important one must be added which—though not quite unknown in the Italian oratorio—assumed such a prominent role in Handel's writing that it led to totally new consequences: the use of the chorus.

What caused Handel to develop oratorio so strongly in this direction is a question to which perhaps no complete answer can be given. To some extent he may be indebted to English seventeenth-century forms of dramatic music. But Handel's acquaintance with the larger forms of church music doubtless exercised a particularly strong influence upon the new character of oratorio. We cannot consider it mere coincidence that *Esther*, in its original version of 1720—Handel's first English oratorio—followed the *Chandos Anthems*, a series of veritable church cantatas. Nor can it be ascribed to coincidence that the second *Esther* version of 1732, rearranged for the London stage, contained large choral portions from the *Coronation of Anthems* of 1727, and that the complete *Funeral Anthem*, composed on the death of Queen Caroline in 1737, was incorporated (with changed text) a year later into *Israel in Egypt*. Sacred music was the most important factor in Handel's choral interpretation of the oratorio form.

It would be tempting to trace detailed aspects of the role of the chorus in the development of the Handelian oratorio, but this would lead beyond the scope of the present essay. We will have to limit our discussion to the general principles involved. And here we must single out above all the observation that while the monumental chorus derived from models of church music dominates Handel's first English oratorios, many other choral forms were soon added. Not the least important among them is the smaller, agile choral episode which is easily integrated in the dramatic continuity and which, unlike the somber anthem chorus,

does not claim the preferred position at the beginning or end of an oratorio act. The universal wealth of Handelian choruses is one of the musical miracles of the classical European age. Their choral multiformity, depth, originality, simplicity, and grandeur are appreciated in our time by only a small segment of the audiences that attend the all too rare performances of Handel oratorios.

With the revival and revision of *Esther* in 1732, the Handelian type of oratorio was more or less established. Yet this type remained merely a point of departure. In the ensuing years, Handel continued to discover new possibilities, always arriving at greater variety. He never ceased to cast new light on the dramatic and musical content of the form. After the new *Esther* version, Handel wrote two further oratorios dealing with biblical heroines: *Deborah* and *Athalia* (1733). But after this first phase, it seemed that both Handel and his audience required some interval of time in order to absorb the new genre. During the next few years Handel revived the existing oratorios but did not add any new ones. *Alexander's Feast*, composed in 1736, as well as the *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day* that followed three years later, were works that suggested the connection with English traditions in the domain of the secular cantata. Above all, they offered new examples of the flexibility in choral writing and of a closer integration of choral and soloistic elements than can be found in the earlier works.

A high point in Handel's choral work is the *Funeral Anthem* of 1737, which we have already mentioned—a superb piece consisting of choral movements only. At this point in his career Handel must have realized that his operatic activity was doomed. Encouraged, we may assume, by the artistic success of such works as the two previous ones listed in our survey, he turned his efforts fully towards the oratorio in 1738 and broke off his operatic endeavors two to three years later.

The oratorios of Handel's most mature years, i.e., essentially from 1738 to the beginning of the loss of his eyesight in 1751, number approximately twenty works of rather diversified nature. Considered particularly characteristic of the form—probably rightly so—are those oratorios in which Handel presents the fate of one of the major Old Testament figures: *Saul*, *Samson*, *Judas Maccabaeus*, to mention only three of the best known. These works, which are all of a strongly dramatic, heroic, and lofty quality, and which deal more or less with the general subject of Israel's suppression and liberation, stand in contrast to another series of works, also drawn from the Old Testament but not equally monumental in character. Among these we might mention *Joseph*, *Solomon*, and *Susanna* —works generally viewed as less representative of Handel's oratorio art than the "heroic" oratorios.

Completely detached from the biblical sphere are two other groups

of oratorios. One includes two works written in 1743–44 on subjects from classical antiquity: *Semele* and *Hercules*. These oratorios almost give the impression that Handel tried, in a roundabout way, to revive opera. Rather than operatic oratorios, one might consider them operas written in the oratorio manner, and it is quite natural that modern attempts to place oratorios on the theater stage have been especially inspired by these two works. The other group of non-biblical oratorios from Handel's later years includes *L'Allegro* (1740) and the third version of *Il Trionfo* (1757), which is Handel's last oratorio. In these two works Handel again took up the type of allegorical oratorio he had written in his youth.

There is one group, not mentioned so far, that is closest to sacred music. Aside from the *Occasional Oratorio* (1746), whose chance nature is indicated in its title, this group contains two of Handel's most prominent oratorios: *Israel in Egypt* (1738) and *Messiah* (1741).

These two oratorios are distinguished in several ways from all others. They are rightly counted among Handel's greatest works. Yet they are not typical representatives of the Handelian oratorio, though they cannot be separated from the development of the form that led to them. We would like to turn our attention primarily to three characteristic features which these two works have in common and which can help to explain their special quality: 1. Both works are based on purely biblical texts (except for some minor additions in *Israel*), i.e., they are not merely based on biblical subjects, but arias and choruses are set to the scriptural words themselves, rather than to the usual paraphrased libretto. 2. The action is not carried by individual personages as is otherwise the case in oratorios. This does not mean that there is no action, no dramatic development—it is merely of a kind different from that of the oratorios regarded as "typical." 3. In both oratorios the connection with the anthem—the sacred choral work—is particularly tangible. As we have mentioned, Handel incorporated the complete *Funeral Anthem* on the death of Queen Caroline into *Israel in Egypt*, altering the text to make it suitable as a lament for Joseph. The last part of this oratorio is based on the Song of Moses, thus again of distinctive anthem character. Similarly, the last part of *Messiah* is a large anthem of praise extolling the Redemption.

These three points are essential to the character of the two works. There are, of course, further characteristics of their unusual quality. In the case of *Israel in Egypt* in particular, we might mention two: the use of directly expressive means in the epic description of the Egyptian plagues, and the overwhelming role of the chorus as main protagonist. *Israel in Egypt* is almost entirely choral, and in this respect without parallel among Handel's oratorios. It is tempting to conjecture that the *Funeral Anthem*, written one year earlier and subsequently absorbed in the plan for *Israel*

in Egypt, inspired in Handel the thought of writing an entirely choral oratorio. The perfection that he achieved in the music for the *Funeral Anthem* may have had such an effect upon the composer that he may have given serious thought to the plan of developing the form of the oratorio in this direction. But he overlooked the fact that a choral work three times as long as the *Funeral Anthem* and lacking the variety created by the combination of soloistic and choral elements would prove too formidable a challenge for his audience. *Israel in Egypt* met with no success, and even the insertion of several Italian arias and various cuts in the choruses failed to save the work.

After this overemphasis upon the choral element, Handel was apparently somewhat apprehensive about the use of the chorus. In the *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day* (1739) he placed choral sections only at the beginning and at the end and in a small episode in the middle of the work. The major musical interest is given rather to the soloistic use of instruments. In *L'Allegro* (1740) there are only three larger independent choral portions, otherwise merely choral refrains for arias whose melodic fabric they continue. These choruses are all very lively and bright, totally different from the ponderous choral weight of *Israel in Egypt*.

In *Messiah*, Handel's most celebrated work, written in the fall of 1741 and first performed in Dublin in 1742, the choral and soloistic elements are conspicuously balanced, especially when considered against the background of the oratorios that precede this work.

Handel's *Messiah* has given rise to many—more or less well-founded—arguments and will continue to do so for a long time to come. As we have stated, its text is entirely biblical, but in contrast to the *Israel* text, we are not dealing here with a connected passage from the Scriptures. The words for *Messiah* represent a sensitive composition of Bible verses for which Charles Jennens, a friend of Handel's, was probably responsible. What prompted the idea of an oratorio of this kind may remain an open question. It is possible that Handel had his earlier oratorio *La Resurrezione* in mind. This work, however, differs from *Messiah* in nearly every respect, except that the central idea in both cases is the Redemption of Mankind.

Messiah is not, as has often been assumed, a representation of the life of Christ—a combination of Nativity, Passion, and Resurrection plays. The work is guided by the single idea of presenting the drama of Redemption, the struggle between light and dark, between God and mankind. In a certain sense the work is akin to Handel's allegorical oratorios. As in *Il Trionfo*, the first two parts of the work are entirely rooted in the contest of good and evil. But the scope is broader, the forces brought into play are incomparably stronger, and the total conception expresses an unmatched magnificence.

The musical structure of *Messiah* shows Handel's manifold creative

powers most strongly. This is apparent both in the whole plan and in every single phase of the work. A most convincing example of Handel's innate sense of drama is given in the sequence of scenes that form the first part. It is devoted to the theme of Redemption through the advent of Christ: the prophecy and the appearance of the Messiah. In six scenes, this theme is treated in ever-changing expression of light and dark. It is represented by the basic musical means of contrasting tonalities and elaborated upon in endless fine musical detail. After the somber darkness of the overture, which suggests no ray of hope, the first scene, made up of *accompagnato*, aria, and chorus, spells gentle radiance: "Comfort ye my people, saith your God." The following scene introduces, in genuine dramatic contrast, the fear of the Lord and the messenger of his covenant: "But who may abide the day of his coming." Two more scenes contrasting Darkness and Light follow before the actual introduction of the Christmas message.

In the second part the contrasts mount and a final balance of forces is achieved. The scenes are bigger and less readily distinguished from one another, but here, too, Handel's dramatic genius is revealed at its height.

The third part, a concluding anthem of praise, proclaims the end of the struggle and the victory of light. But even here there remains a reflection of lightning contrasts. The Last Judgment scene with its mighty aria, "The trumpet shall sound," follows after the sublime credo of the aria "I know that my Redeemer liveth." As in the second part, the dramatic continuity leads to overwhelming choral compositions.

Messiah represents a unique achievement within Handel's oratorio oeuvre. Its stature is to some measure founded in the conception of its text and its challenge to Handel's creative powers. Handel's music discloses his greatest dramatic force and his ability to blend simplicity with grandeur. The unity of its conception and the diversity of its execution impart to this work a quality of perfection that will endure beyond all changes, shortcomings, and vicissitudes in interpretation.

Messiah Performance Traditions

Some time ago I saw a window display in a music store—an arrangement of record albums bound to be of particular interest to me. They were all recordings of Handel's *Messiah*—seven complete renditions, I believe, and four or five sets of excerpts. This, of course, attests to one thing above all: the work is one of the chosen masterpieces that can be called timeless, even though there are enough voices in recent Handelian literature that advocate a less prominent position for *Messiah* among Handel's works.

This attitude can be traced to specifically English performance traditions for which there is no exact parallel in continental Handel performances. For generations English speaking audiences have heard the work, or portions of it, not only in the concert hall but in churches all over the country and in a manner approaching services of worship. Recently a strong reaction against this tradition has set in, both in England and in the United States. A new style of oratorio performance has gained recognition in theory and practice—a style that tends to minimize the differences between oratorio and opera. At the same time we are witnessing a certain neo-romantic wave which, to those of us who are old enough to have participated in the post-Romantic Handel tradition before World War I, comes as an ironic surprise, for we see young conductors trying to create an image that to our relief had disappeared by the 1920's or 30's. Doubtless the performance of Handel's works—and the performance of *Messiah*—presents problems to the modern interpreter, as it did to his colleagues of earlier generations.

This leads us to a second consideration prompted by the mentioned display of *Messiah* recordings. Can these recordings provide us with interpretations that will do justice to the great and vital impressions we associate with this work? If we judge these recordings rather differently, as is bound to be the case with any listener—some of them as excellent, others as less successful or downright disastrous—can we base our verdict on anything but subjective criteria? Can we determine why one performance seems good, even perfect, and another one preposterous? I would like to return to this question later in my discussion. But first it will be necessary to clarify two principal points. 1. By what is the character of a given performance decisively guided—by the work, the interpreter, or the audience? 2. What are the problems of interpretation to which the varying quality of performance may be attributed?

The first of these two questions may seem farfetched, but it is inescapable. We cannot remove the distance in time: Handel's works were originally presented and received under conditions different from those existing today. Some compromise must be found between a strictly literal, a freely "modernized," and a more or less opinionated approach (and a tendency on the part of conductors and soloists towards letting the interpreter eclipse the work). The often attempted formulation of a dichotomy between "historically faithful" and "artistically unconstrained" performances is an oversimplification. An ideal result will always require the understanding of problems arising from the separation in time and it will require an artistic interpretation based on such understanding.

As an example through which the nature of these problems might be more aptly illustrated than through words, I would like to choose the opening *accompagnato* recitative and aria for tenor in two recordings: Victor D. B. 5239 (soloist, Aksel Schiøtz; conductor, Mogens Wöldike) and Victor HQS 1052 (soloist, Robert Tear; conductor, Charles Mackerras). The first recording is considerably older; at its time, however, it seemed sensationally new because the performance of aria accompaniments (such as that of this tenor aria) in Handel's scoring for string orchestra only—without added wind parts—was still highly unusual. This plain, unadorned orchestral sound, as well as the unadorned presentation of the vocal part, made the recording a classical model. The other recording, of recent date, is anything but unadorned. The solo performance is totally dominated by a modern tendency towards richly embellished vocal interpretation. One can in no way escape the impression that the soloist wants to show his audience how well he masters the art of ornamentation. His singlemindedness in this respect is completely naive—though taken seriously in wide circles. We will have to return to this question also.

The intriguing point of comparison of these widely differing interpretations is that both are the result of a historical orientation. In the first case this orientation leads to the omission of added nineteenth-century orchestration, restoring the freedom with which a gifted singer can present the glorius melodic flow of Handel's music. In the second case it leads to the false conclusion that Handel's oratorio solos are to be treated like the bravura arias of operas, with constant elaboration of the given musical text—a wealth of vocal virtuosity in which the original music is nearly lost.

We have singled out two performance aspects, but there are many more that contribute to the remarkable change of interpretation in different periods. We might name the following: 1. the basic choice of musical text, i.e., the exclusion or inclusion of various arias and choruses, and the selection of one out of several existing versions of the same piece; 2. the structure and size of orchestra and chorus; 3. the choice of soloists;

4. the problem of ornamentation already mentioned and connected with the choice of soloists; 5. the volume of sound and dynamics; 6. the question of tempi.

These separately listed criteria are, of course, to be given joint, rather than isolated, consideration. They belong together and depend on one another; changes in one respect will more or less influence changes in other respects. Nevertheless, a certain problem of performance practice will assume a predominant role at a given time—characterize an epoch, so to speak—as did, for instance, the problems of additional orchestral accompaniments fifty to a hundred years ago and as does the problem of ornamentation today.

When and under what circumstances did these problems arise? In order to find an answer to these questions, we must doubtless direct our thoughts back to Handel's own *Messiah* performances. To begin with, the problem of basic choice of musical text was created by Handel himself. Varying versions of individual numbers—actually starting with departures from the original score in the first *Messiah* performance at Dublin—arose with successive performances of the work under Handel's own direction. Yet these changes never included such cuts as are often made today. Handel did make some cuts—in some works more than in others—but none that would jusify routine cuts in modern performances. The size of his performance forces, too, may have varied from occasion to occasion. For *Messiah* renditions in Handel's regular place of performance—the theater—he probably used double or triple the number of singers and players used for the more exclusive concerts in the rather small Foundling Hospital chapel where, according to the preserved lists, he had to be content with a chorus of six boys and from twelve to fourteen men, and with an orchestra of about thirty players. At the same time, the choice of Handel's solo ensemble varied. Usually it included a woman alto; in some performances (about 1750) he used the alto castrato Guadagni. But the time of the internationally famous Italian singers, whose services Handel was able to enlist for his opera performances in the 1720's and early 1730's, was long past at the time of his definite turn to the oratorio; in this respect, especially, the break between opera and oratorio tradition is irreconcilable. With regard to volume, dynamics, and tempi—aspects that became problematic with the *Messiah* performances near the end of the eighteenth century—we can hardly assume much change within Handel's own performances (if we except the varying of volume due to the transfer of *Messiah* performances from the theater to the smaller chapel).

The great change in performance traditions evidently came about through the transfer from the theater, not into the smaller church auditorium, but into the large church—Westminister Abbey—with performances beginning in 1784. Here a decisive change of the total

nature of presentation set in. It was based, first of all, on an enormous enlargement of performance forces—a mass effect which, like all effects of this kind, produced a deep impression and, for this reason alone, soon rendered Handel's own practice obsolete. Connected with this mass effect was an unavoidable loss of tempo, which will require a separate discussion.[1]

The new, large performances found an echo on the Continent. Johann Adam Hiller, one of Bach's successors at St. Thomas's in Leipzig, planned a performance of similar dimensions in the Berlin Cathedral. This, in turn, was followed by the well-known Viennese performances sponsored by Baron van Swieten, director of the Imperial Library and distinguished patron of the arts—the performances for which Mozart reorchestrated *Messiah* and several other Handel oratorios.

These reorchestrated versions are concerned not so much with the volume as with the quality of sound. What Mozart provided was an ingenious coloring of the original contours so that a total picture arose that was more readily discernible for an audience accustomed to the classical Viennese style. The new instrumentation is quite beautiful in its own way, but it changes the character of individual pieces as well as of the whole composition. As we know from other works, Handel himself might have provided a pattern of richer colors—although not this particular one—had he been so inclined. His sparse orchestration of *Messiah* was without doubt intentional. If not, his repeat performances in London year after year would have provided Handel with ample opportunity to alter the work in this respect as he, in fact, did in others.

Thus there is a fundamental difference between the performances at Westminister Abbey and Mozart's Vienna performances which took place shortly thereafter. The Westminster Abbey performances do not represent a conscious change; a type of performance already known in essence during Handel's life through such ceremonial occasions as the coronation of George II in 1727 or the memorial service for Queen Caroline in 1737 was now applied to the oratorios. That this affected the presentation of oratorios profoundly may not even have been realized. Mozart's arrangements, on the other hand, represent a deliberate concession to contemporaneous taste—a conscious alteration which may have been made with the thought in mind that Handel might have applied a similar orchestration had he known the "progress" leading from the Baroque to the Classic style. It must have pleased Mozart to deal with these works. His is the classical example of the arranger whose work is prompted by fashion.

The continuation of oratorio performances in the nineteenth century was influenced by one further development: Taking their point of departure from such enterprises as the *Tonkünstler-Societät* concerts in

[1] See the following chapter.

Vienna and the *Singakademie* concerts in Berlin, new choral organizations arose that were to carry the nineteenth-century spirit of oratorio performance into the twentieth. Here the oratorios were not sung by relatively small ensembles, as was the custom in Handel's day, with the soprano part taken by boys and all others by men (choristers from church choirs); the performers were now amateurs—in the true sense of the word—who took a delight in sharing the performance experience; and the rendition of choruses tended towards strongly massed effects. The arias were usually given to professional soloists, either opera singers or artists who specialized in oratorio singing. The orchestral accompaniment was normally based on Mozart's arrangement or on one of the arrangements made in imitation of Mozart's by such editors as Robert Franz or Ebenezer Prout. This type of performance has been known in England since the late eighteenth century—for instance, in the famous "Three Choir Festivals"—and, as we have mentioned, it assumed a specific character resembling the service of worship. The *Messiah* presentations in the large Crystal Palace, on the other hand, continued the tradition of massive performances in the concert hall.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Chrysander published his monumental edition of Handel's Complete Works. One might imagine that the general availability of Handel's scores in an edition faithful to the original manuscript would in itself have had an effect upon the performance situation. But such an effect was not felt for a long time. At the time I myself received the first impressions of Bach's and Handel's choral works (about 1920), performances were still bound up with Robert Franz's arrangement of the *St. Matthew Passion* and Mozart's *Messiah* score as a matter of course. Nor can we ignore Chrysander's own arrangements in this connection—practical editions published independently of his great *Gesamtausgabe* and, fortunately, almost entirely forgotten today. It is hard to believe that the same editor could have been responsible for volumes representing such diametrically opposed attitudes towards the publication of Handel's works. Chrysander's practical editions abound with arbitrary cuts, rearrangements of the proper continuity, and alterations of the melodic line which, considerably exceeding the nature of mere ornamentation, lend to aria cadences new dramatic accents quite foreign to Handel's music. Chrysander may have been guided by the idea of recreating patterns typical of Handel's own performance practice. Today it is obvious that these editions represent no more than a concession to the taste of his time. His activity coincided with the height of the Wagner cult. Chrysander's arrangements are oriented towards the vocal attitudes of the Wagnerian era, not to the bel canto art of Handel's time.

About 1920 a significant Handel Renaissance set in, which emanated from the University of Göttingen where the art historian Oskar Hagen

gathered students and colleagues in an endeavor to restore Handel's operas to the theatrical stage. The initiative of this group has undoubtedly been of decisive influence in furthering the modern interest in Handel's work. But the style of Hager's performances was not essentially different from that expressed in Chrysander's practical editions. Again we are dealing with drastic redistribution and shortening of the musical text, melodic reformulation with a view towards Wagnerian opera, and, of course, reorchestration.

A specific interest in performances following Handel's own practice first came to the fore during the period between the two world wars. The exact beginning of this new attitude is not easily determined. In general, it was once again influenced by the taste of the time; after many generations, the taste of the time was finally conducive to tracing the nature and circumstances of the composer's own performance situation. The decline of Romanticism and a conscious turn towards objectivity of expression, typical of the post-war period, may have furnished the basis for a new style of Handel interpretation. Another factor was undoubtedly the experience gained from new trends in Bach performance, the revival of the harpsichord, and the growing appreciation of the true nature of the Baroque orchestra.

While the change from romanticized to historically faithful Handel performances was very much in evidence in the 1930's and 40's, there were, nevertheless, conspicuous overlaps with earlier times. Liberal treatment of the score, change of continuity, and reorchestration still dominated Beecham's recordings in the 1950's. As examples of recordings more faithfully following the Handelian performance practice, we might cite Sir Adrian Boult's *Messiah* and Mogens Wöldike's *Saul* renditions, to name only two. What is especially pleasing in performances such as these is the combination of the following factors: 1. There are no arbitrary rearrangements of the continuity except for some very cautiously planned cuts; 2. Any addtitions to Handel's orchestration are ruled out; 3. Neither the choral nor the orchestral sound is heavy—the orchestra is small or medium-sized, and the chorus (in the *Saul* recording employing boys' voices according to Handel's own practice) sings in a flowing rather than robustly accentuating style; 4. The soloists treat the vocal line with similar sensitivity rather than with operatic force (this dichotomy is obviously not meant to imply the fact that a good opera singer could not be an excellent oratorio soloist); 5. The conductor is able and willing to place the work above the performance rather than the performance above the work.

Today we witness—as I mentioned initially—a new phase of Handel interpretation which might again be related to certain postwar tendencies. On the one hand, there is a resurgence of Romantic music and corresponding performance traditions; on the other hand—in more

exclusive avant-garde circles—there is heightened emphasis upon a contrived style of expression and a striving for novelty at any price. In addition, recordings and broadcast performances have given increasingly wider and greater recognition to the interpreter. In the age of the long-playing record, the performances of famous singers and conductors, like those of film stars, are available at small expense.

One more significant development has contributed to creating a special situation for contemporary Handel oratorio practice. In refuting nineteenth-century traditions, English Handel performances, in particular, have adopted a theory which, though not completely new, had previously found scant recognition: oratorio is seen as disguised opera, to be performed, if possible, on the theater stage. This applies, of course, to the generally dramatic oratorios, rather than to *Messiah*. But while obviously not presented theatrically, the work is now, nevertheless, subjected to the theatrical mode of performance claimed as proper for the dramatic oratorios. This is noticeable in various ways. Slow and fast tempi are exaggerated. A relatively quiet *Allegro* becomes a genuine *Presto*; a flowing *Siciliano* becomes a highly expressive *Adagio*. *Largo* is not understood, as in Handel's time, in the sense of "broad" (occasionally even *Largo allegro*) but rather in the sense of "slow." Although touched-up orchestration is, as a rule, avoided, such an orchestral effect is to a large extent emulated through intense increase and decrease of dynamics. The most prominent change, however, is in altering the musical line—at times beyond recognition. The underlying argument is that the music of the Baroque never sounded as it appeared in notation: written note values invariably required changes—dotted notes becoming double-dotted, and even notes becoming *notes inégales*—and above all, written notes required changes through improvised ornamentation. What this argument ignores is that these rules did not apply generally but only for certain types of works, at certain times and places, and with a certain choice of performers.

Thus the most striking innovation in recent *Messiah* recordings is the trend towards an improvised alteration of the melody, although the other tendencies mentioned are in evidence as well. The practice of vocal ornamentation, as we know, was characteristic of Italian opera; it was taken for granted especially in the case where an eminent singer presented the repetition of the first part in a *da capo* aria. Since opera and oratorio, however, are now apt to be considered on equal terms—allowing for the different character of the text—this manner of presentation is deemed appropriate in oratorio and thus in *Messiah*. Yet the conclusion remains pseudo-scholarly and misguided. A few facts will give sufficient evidence: 1. No single notation for the ornamentation of an oratorio aria has come down to us from Handel's hand. 2. Various accounts and documents from Handel's time seems to indicate that Handel regarded

vocal ornamentation as an unavoidable adjunct to the activity of famous singers, but that it was a matter of little or no interest to him. 3. In the case of *Messiah*, the decisive criterion is the choice of soloists. As we have already mentioned, Handel was no longer in contact with the great Italian singers at the time *Messiah* was written and performed. A somewhat malicious contemporary account of Handel's oratorio performances states that his singers included "a man with one note in his voice and a girl without ever an one."[2] The latter refers to the soloist who sang the alto part in the first performance of *Messiah* at Dublin and in later London performances—Mrs. Cibber, a celebrated actress rather than a professional singer, who, nevertheless, achieved lasting fame through her moving presentation of the aria "He was despised." It is unthinkable that the English tragedienne would have tried to adopt an Italian opera style.

In view of this consideration, it is particularly interesting to compare portions of the alto part in various recordings. The aria "O Thou that tellest good tidings to Zion," for instance, is simply and quite beautifully sung by the English alto soloist Norma Procter in the above-mentioned recording conducted by Boult. It receives a rather unusual presentation by the American countertenor Russell Oberlin; while his vocal timbre may be an entirely new experience for many listeners, his performance is exceptionally musical. But the accompaniment in this recording (Philips ABL 3274, Leonard Bernstein, conductor) gives an example of added instrumentation that is still used today. A third recording, conducted by Mackerras and also mentioned above, shows the same aria in a performance by Janet Baker—well sung, but with appalling examples of exaggerated ornamentation. Especially striking is the passage by which Handel stresses the exclamation "Behold, your God" in elongated notes placed in conscious contrast to the generally flowing 6/8 rhythm: giving in to the temptation of resolving these important long notes into meaningless coloratura passages is tantamount to destroying the composer's interpretation of the text.

Thus we seem to have arrived at a new fashion-inspired distortion of the Handelian style. While its historical premise is false, its acceptance and practice is wide, for we are dealing with a confluence of characteristically modern trends: the reaction against earlier traditions, the urge for constant novelty, the tendency to treat Handel's oratorios as operas, and the deification of the star performer.

Yet we can rest assured. This attitude, too, will in time be subject to the limitations dictated by fashion; Handel's music will survive. That this phase does not, in fact, lead us closer to Handel's own practice is in itself a challenge for a younger generation to find new and well-founded solutions for Handelian performance.

[2] See Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel; A Documentary Biography*, London/New York, 1955, p. 560. The "man with one note" was apparently Handel's tenor soloist James Beard.

Handelian Tempo Problems and *Messiah*

Handel's music—and Baroque music in general—poses problems to the performer that one can scarcely hope to solve completely. Even though it may be agreed among all concerned that a modern performance ought to be guided as far as possible by the artistic effect intended by the composer, we have to face the fact that a modern performance cannot be an exact reproduction of a performance in Handel's time. Too much has changed in the intervening two centuries. Considering some of the major issues—choral sound, orchestral sound, soloistic vocal art, size of vocal and instrumental groups, auditorium size, and especially the changing musical attitudes of performers and audiences—it becomes obvious that an "ideal" performance, satisfying all demands of authenticity, is, in fact, unattainable. Every performance must in some way represent a compromise.

In view of this fact, one might raise the question whether there is any justification for a historical approach to performance at all. As we have mentioned in the previous chapter, due to a fairly wide-spread misunderstanding such a "historical approach" has become categorically distinguished from the "artistic approach": there is a tendency to associate any historical investigation with the concept of a passive replica diametrically opposed to artistically intuitive reinterpretation. Fortunately, such a distinction does not in reality exist. The purely historical performance is only a phantom created by polemic imagination. Nor is there such a thing as a purely intuitive performance free of all influences of tradition. It is important to bear in mind that the composer conceived of his work in actual sound. Good performances and satisfying artistic experiences can doubtless be accomplished with means of sound different from those at the composer's disposal. But without a conscious exploration of the work's own world of sound, the performer will never be in a position to bring the work truly to life again.

Nevertheless, one might still question the validity of discussing Handelian norms of tempo. Handel's tempi seem to be something too elusive—tempo, in general, might be something too elusive and too variable—to be dealt with on any terms other than the performing artist's free reign. For this reason Handelian tempo problems have not found much detailed consideration in the past. Editors of *Messiah* editions have made individual tempo suggestions in the form of metronome

indications for single pieces, but I think William Cusins, the distinguished nineteenth-century English conductor, was the only one who tried to investigate the problem of whether the conception of tempo had changed since Handel's day and whether it would be possible to find some foundation for evaluating the original tempi. We shall return to his study later, but first it will be necessary to say a few words about the measurement of tempo in general.

Until about 1700 we find very little, and little of importance, in the way of actual indications of time in music. One may refer to something like Johannes Buchner's *Fundamentbuch* from about 1550, in which we are told that one *tactus* should fill out the time between two steps of a man walking moderately. Michael Praetorius says in his *Syntagma musicum* that in the case of a moderate tempo, 160 *tempora* would last a quarter of an hour. This would lead to a metronome indication of 80 or 90 for a quarter-note.

References to the pulsebeat as a time unit are to be found as early as in the writings of the Renaissance theorist Gafurius, who fixes the time of a whole note as follows: "It should take as long as the pulsebeat of a man breathing quietly," which suggests about 70 as metronome indication. In the eighteenth century, the idea of using the pulse as a unit for time values was especially propagated by Bach's contemporary, Johann Joachim Quantz. He arrived at modifications of tempo in a fairly simple way, through a doubling of the duration of note values. Thus in an *Allegro assai* (in 4/4 time), a half-note is fixed at 80, in an *Allegretto* it is the quarter-note, and in an *Adagio cantabile* the eighth-note that will have 80, whereas in an *Adagio assai* the eighth note should have 40 as metronome indication, according to the system of Quantz. One quite understands that he himself tries to modify these rough indications, telling us that it would be unreasonable and impossible to measure the time for each and every piece of music according to the pulse. On the whole it would seem as if Quantz's rules were meant mainly as a guide for beginners. I do not think we should attach too much significance to his system.

The idea of using a clockwork as a basis for fixing musical time values had been put forth occasionally in earlier times, but it was not until the turn of the eighteenth century that a way was found to construct an apparatus in which the pendulum principle was used for measuring time values in music. Various French scholars have contributed to such constructions and others have left us results of their experiments with them dating back to Handel's early years of oratorio writing. Their indications of time values are, quite naturally, based mostly on arias and dance movements from the operas of Lully and his followers. We cannot discuss these indications here. It may suffice to point out that they seem to indicate pronouncedly lively tempi throughout.

It would be extremely welcome if contemporary measurements of

time values for Handel's music could be found, but to the best of my knowledge, so far we have nothing of the kind. The only, and unfortunately not very exact, indications of this sort that I remember having seen are a few original annotations by Handel in the autograph score of *Solomon*. At the end of the first part he writes "50 minutes"; at the end of the second and third parts he puts "40 minutes." These are certainly not to be taken as measured time values in a strict sense, but we must regard them as authentic estimated values for each part of the oratorio. As they probably represent the only authentic indications of their kind, they seem very important, despite their rather casual character. We might even try to use them as basis for an evaluation of time values in connection with other oratorios.

If we want to learn what these figures can tell us about Handel's tempi, our first step should be to compare them with similar figures from later times, which we are able to check. I have used the metronome indications in Novello's edition as the basis for a comparison. Counting no time for pauses between the single numbers, nor for traditional final ritardandi, etc., and leaving out the aria "Sacred raptures," which is not in Handel's manuscript, I arrive at the following figures for each of the three parts: about 61 minutes, 59 minutes, and 57 minutes. In addition, I have tried to play through the score of the entire oratorio, deliberately aiming at lively tempi throughout, according to my own conception of time values. This led me to the following figures: a little less than 60 minutes for the first part, and about 50 minutes for each of the two following parts.

When we compare these figures with Handel's own (50 minutes, 40 minutes, and 40 minutes), we must arrive at the conclusion that he wanted to have his music performed in what we would call very quick tempi. Of course, this is not simply a question of tempo, but of the whole style of performance, especially of the singing of soloists and chorus. No doubt the English manner of singing is more suited for a free flowing style of performance than the heavier German one. May I answer an argument here which might be advanced against the value of our comparison. It might be suggested that the surprisingly short time indications given by Handel himself could be explained by the fact that a number of arias were shortened or left out in his own performances. But this is not the case. Of course Handel did rearrange his oratorios at times and substituted new versions of arias for old ones, but the ruthless abridgment of oratorios so familiar in our time is, as I have mentioned before, an invention of a later period, not Handel's.

When we add up the time of performance for the whole of *Solomon*, according to Handel's own indications, the result would be 2 hours and 10 minutes. This is, of course, without any regard to pauses between the three parts or to the possible introduction of organ concertos played as

interludes. Taking these two factors into consideration, we may suppose that a total duration of from 2½ to 3 hours would be a reasonable time for an oratorio performance in Handel's own day. Further evidence for this conclusion follows.

One of the first to comment on Handel's oratorio performances was the old Oxonian Thomas Hearne, who left some rather unkind remarks in his journals about the Handel performances at Oxford in the summer of 1733. He reports that the *Esther* performance on the 8th of July lasted from 5:30 p.m. to around 8:00 p.m. That would mean 2½ hours, and it fits well into the picture at which we have just arrived. Of course, we must ask whether the two works in question are of roughly the same dimensions. They certainly do not differ very much in length even if *Esther* may be a little shorter than *Solomon*. This might indicate a slight reservation with regard to the very quick tempi suggested by Handel's annotations in *Solomon*.

A second piece of evidence—though only indirect—for our suggestion regarding the normal duration of an oratorio performance in Handel's time may be found in the correspondence between Handel and his librettist, Charles Jennens, concerning the composition of *Belshazzar*.[1] Jennens was inclined to let his text outgrow its natural limits, and Handel found it necessary to oppose this tendency in a letter of October 2, 1744, in which he writes: "Dear Sir/I received the 3rd act with a great deal of pleasure as you can imagine, and you may believe that I think it a very fine and sublime oratorio, only it is really too long, if I should extend the musick, it would last 4 hours and more." It is quite obvious that Handel regards 4 hours as a monstrosity, quite unacceptably exceeding the normal duration of an oratorio. Actually, the first part of *Belshazzar* is so long that in a complete performance it would last about 20 minutes longer than the first part of *Solomon* or of *Messiah*. Thus there was ample reason for Handel's protest. The third part was shortened, but nevertheless the performance time approaches 3 hours, or rather 3½ hours, if we count on some time for an organ concerto or a pause between the various parts.

We have reviewed all the references from Handel's own times that I have so far been able to discover. Very likely some further evidence may be found in other letters and memoirs from the eighteenth century. I should like to add only a few references from the late eighteenth century, after Handel's death, which seem to throw some light on later development in performance traditions. Manson Myers quotes one or two pieces of evidence for a slowing down of tempi from about the year 1785, when the monumental festival performances in Westminister

[1] See Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel; A Documentary Biography*, London/New York, 1955, p. 595.

Abbey began.[2] In the journal of one Miss Hamilton we hear about a performance on the 5th of June, 1784, which lasted from 12:00 noon to 4:00 p.m., i.e., the very 4 hours that Handel himself found intolerable. A letter from Horace Walpole dated May 29, 1786, confirms this, once again giving 4 hours as the duration. How much external circumstances, such as long intermissions, may have been responsible for this development cannot be said, but it seems reasonable to assume that the actual performance, even without a break, was of longer duration than in Handel's day.

Finally, exact information occurs in some very remarkable annotations in a few orchestral parts to *Messiah* from the British Museum (class mark: g 74 v 52). Here we are dealing with three parts, presumably dating from about 1800: one violin I, one violin II, and one bass part. In the part for the second violin the exact time of duration is noted at the end of each of the three acts, namely, "1 h. 18 min.," "1 h. 15 min.," and "39 min." In the part for the first violin the following indications occur: "1 h. 20 min." at the end of the first act, and "3 h. 25 min." at the end of the third act. If we combine these indications, we arrive at the duration of each act, and, through addition, obtain a playing time for the entire oratorio of 3 hours and 12 minutes, and a duration for the whole performance, including intermissions, of 3 hours and 25 minutes. It should be noted that a few cuts have been made in the performance in question.

Now we arrive at the period where the development of tempi can be checked through a vast number of editions that have metronome indications for the single numbers. A list of such metronome indications in various *Messiah* editions (pp. 36–37) may serve as a basis for the observations given below. My list comprises eleven different editions, the first from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the later ones from about 1900—Prout (Novello), Chrysander/Seiffert (Breitkopf & Härtel)—up to about 1940—Coopersmith (Carl Fischer).

The two editions listed at the beginning by Smart and Horsley are the ones whose importance had already been stressed by Cusins in an article about *Messiah* that appeared in 1874. Cusins wanted to find a basis for evaluating the tempi of his own time and he used the two sets of metronome indications given by Smart and Horsley for his comparison between old and new performance traditions. He refers to the fact that, as a boy, Sir George Smart had turned pages for Joah Bates, who conducted the great Handel performances in 1784, whereas Dr. Horsley's indications probably date back to Wilhelm Cramer, one of the section leaders in the same performances. It may be questioned whether traditions of tempi from 1784 could be preserved in this manner, and it must be kept in mind that there is evidence for the fact that the

[2] Robert Manson Myers, *Handel's Messiah*, New York, 1948.

Tempo indications in *Messiah*

	Smart	Horsley	Crotch	Rimbault	H. Bishop	Novello	Elvey	Prout	R. Franz	Chrysander/ Seiffert	Coopersmith
Overture I	60	60	50	42	42	60	50	60	54	58	60
— II	116	126	112	126	112	116	108 (216?)	116	112	—	116
Accomp. recit. ♪	80	80	—	60	69	80	58	72	80	120	80
Aria	76	88	—	72	76	66	92	80	80	84	88
Chorus	116	116	96	116	116	116	108	100	120	116	116
Accomp. recit.	76	—	—	60	60	72	ad lib./ 72/ ad lib.	76	76	—	—
Aria I ♪	96	88	—	76	76	100	72	88	88	—	88
— II	138	120	—	144	144	138	176 (88?)	138	120	—	138
Chorus ♪ (Recit.)	144	132	126	120	138	116	144	144	144	—	168 (♩=84)
Aria/Chorus ♪	138	126	120	120	138	120	150	138	120	120	126
Accomp. recit. ♪	80	60	—	76	66	80	72	72	80	76	80
Aria	72	72	—	66	66	63	84	72	72	69	72
Chorus	76	80	66	66	69	69	92	76	76	72	80
Sinf. ♪	—	92	88	104	104	104	80	132	168 (♩.=56)	162 (♩.=54)	104
Accomp. recit. I ♪	104	72	—	92	76	88	88	112	112	138	138
Accomp. recit. II ♪	—	72	—	108	96	80	100	144	112	168	168
Chorus	88	76	63	—	72	80	84	80	88	84	88
Aria (Recit.)	104	96	—	96	104	96	—	88	92	100	96
Aria ♪	112	150	—	104	80	126	80	112	112	174 (♩.=58)	120
Chorus ♪	144	132	126	132	152	120	176	138	138	168 (♩=84)	160 (♩=80)
Chorus	44	56	37	42	40	40	40	40	44	54	44
Aria ♪	72	63	—	60	63	72	56	72	84	120 (♩=60)	88
Chorus ♪	88	72	74	—	69	72	92	72	84	80	80
Chorus 𝅗𝅥	96	88	84	80	96	88	100	80	80	69	88
Chorus I	100	66	76	88	100	76	100	92	92	92	92
— II	80	66	76	(88)	60	60	58	60	(92)	88	66
Accomp. recit. ♪	80	60	84	63	72	80	88	80	76	—	80
Chorus	88	72	82	69	69	88	88	80	80	88	88
Accomp. recit. ♪	—	—	—	56	—	—	—	—	—	58	—
Arioso ♪	69	60	—	56	60	66	100 (50?)	66	76	100 (♩=50)	66

	Smart	Horsley	Crotch	Rimbault	H. Bishop	Novello	Elvey	Prout	R. Franz	Chrysander/ Seiffert	Coopersmith
Accomp. recit.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	56	—
Aria ♪	108	104	—	92	104	88	84	108 (♩=60)	120	132 (♩=66)	108
Chorus (Recit.)	88	76	74	76	76	88	92	76	80	84	80
Chorus	92	80	—	80	88	72 (♪=144)	92	72	88	—	88
Aria	96	96	—	100	100	84	108	84	92	—	84
Chorus	72	66	66	58	72	80	76	80	72	92	80
Aria ♪	108	96	92	96	96	120	80	104	104	174 (♩.=58)	108
Chorus	88	80	66	88	96	72 (♪=144)	76	88	88	(NB) (Vers. B)	88
Aria	120	108	—	120	120	112	132	112	116	116	126
Chorus (Recit.)	104	88	72	92	104	80 (♪=160)	104	76	92	—	88
Aria	108	88	—	108	108	80 (♪=160)	92	84	100	—	84
Chorus	72 (♪=144)	66	72	—	76	66 (♪=132)	76	72	88	88	92
Aria	72	66	—	60	69	72	54	72	72	63	76
Chorus I	60	52	36 (♪=72)	50	54	60	80	60	58	63	60
— II	92	92	88	84	104	84/80	96	84	92	96	92
Accomp. recit.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	69	—
Aria (Recit.)	100	92	—	104	104	80	92	80	100	92	84
Duet ♪	104	92	108	100	60	88	66	138 (♩=69)	108	—	69
Chorus ♪	152	112	120	72	80	112	88(?) (♩=88)	138 (♩=69)	144 (♩=72)	—	69
Aria	98	88	—	104	120	88	92	88	100	—	88
Chorus I	60	54	30 (♪=60)	50	33(?) (♪=66)	60	60(?) (♪=60)	60	60	66	60
— II ♪	116	132	100	84	92	100	100	120	72	76	168(?) (♩=84!)
— III	80	69	60 (♪=120)	72	76	60 (♪=120)	80(?) (♪=80)	72	80	84	76
Chorus	92	84	76	84	92	84(?) (♪=84!)	92	84	96	112	92

performances of 1784 lasted a good deal longer than those of Handel's time. Nevertheless, we might follow Cusins in assuming that these two lists reflect the performance style from about 1784. As already noted by Cusins, the tempi found in these are rather quicker than the tempi from the middle of the nineteenth century. Smart's tempi in particular are, as Cusins puts it, "the quickest of all." According to Grove's *Dictionary* they might command authority reaching even farther back. Grove tells us that Smart was much sought after by singers who wanted to acquire the proper style of performing Handel's songs, which he had learned from his father, who, in turn, had seen Handel conducting his oratorios.

The figures in the third column, though published earlier than those just mentioned, must definitely be taken as reflections of a later performance tradition. They come from a vocal score by Dr. Crotch, comprising only the choruses and the two orchestral pieces.[3] This edition must date from about 1820 and shows the year 1817 as part of the watermark. The metronome indications refer to the early period of such markings; they are not given in normal metronome figures but in terms of pendulum lengths, which I have transcribed here to ordinary metronome indications. It will be seen that the figures given by Crotch indicate a pronounced slowing down of tempo compared to Smart and even to Horsley. If we calculate the duration of the pieces given by Crotch, excluding all recitatives and arias, we will arrive at the following figures: Smart, about 1 hour, 8 minutes; Horsley, 1 hour, 13 minutes; and Crotch 1 hour, 22 minutes.

The next four editions belong to the middle of the nineteenth century. No clear pattern of development emerges from these. They have been listed merely to show the arbitrary nature of the metronome indications in a number of editions published almost at the same time. In some of these editions we find especially strange indications that aim at an increased effect, either in the form of slowing down or of quickening the tempo, or combining both to create a pronounced contrast: for instance, in the aria "But who may abide" or the chorus "All we like sheep." On the whole, these editions seem to indicate a certain quickening of tempo as against Crotch's edition. If we take Novello's edition—for so many years a standard edition of the work—as a comparison, the total time for the pieces given by Crotch will give us 1 hour, 17 minutes, i.e., 5 minutes less than Crotch, but still 8 or 9 minutes more than Smart. With the Prout edition of 1902 we get still closer to the tempi of the two editions first mentioned. Prout takes the duration of the Crotch selection back to 1 hour, 13 minutes, as does Horsley, but his

[3] London, printed for Robert Birchall. A copy is preserved in the British Museum, class mark h 435 n 5. Cf. also the discussion of Crotch's tempo measurements by Barry Brook in *Fontes Artis Musicae*, Vol. XII, 1965/2–3, pp. 196–201.

timing exceeds Smart's by 5 minutes. Even shorter performance times are given in the three last editions. The once very popular German edition by Robert Franz, dating from about 1875, carries us to 1 hour, 11 minutes, and the two others—the edition by Chrysander and Seiffert of 1902 and that edited by Coopersmith in about 1940—bring us back to 1 hour, 8 minutes, exactly the duration of these pieces according to Smart.

In this brief summary I have concentrated on the choruses and orchestral pieces; first, because this was the only possibility of bringing Crotch into the picture, since he includes only these numbers, and secondly because the choruses are rarely subjected to completely arbitrary changes in tempo. Thus a general tendency in the development of performance traditions emerges more clearly. Before I try to sum up the conclusions of our investigation regarding such a tendency in general, I should like to add a few remarks about the modifications of tempo in some specific pieces, among them some of the arias.

If we go through the single pieces, comparing the metronome indications in the various editions, we find that some of them show only a rather limited variation of tempo. This applies, for instance, to the second part of the overture, to the first chorus, "And the glory, the glory of the Lord," to the arias "O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion" and "The people that walked in darkness," and to the chorus "For unto us a child is born." Considering the variation in these pieces "rather limited" is certainly to be understood in a relative sense. Obviously a change of metronome indication from 66 to 92 or from 96 to 120 is more than a small nuance. However, compared to the radical changes found in other numbers, a certain moderation still remains here.

A slightly more pronounced variation of tempo occurs in a number of other pieces not listed separately here. But particularly interesting is a group of pieces showing quite extraordinary variations of tempo in the different editions. This group includes the following numbers: the *accompagnato* "Comfort ye, my people" (58–120), the sinfonia (80–168), the *accompagnatos* "And lo! the angel of the Lord" (72–138) and "And suddenly there was with the angel" (72–168), the aria "He shall feed his flock" (80–174), the aria "He was despised" (56–120), the aria "How beautiful are the feet" (80–174), the chorus "Since by man" (36–80/84–104), the duet "O death, where is thy sting" (60–138), and the first half of the chorus "Worthy is the lamb" (30–66/72–168).

In the case of nearly all these pieces, the slowest performance takes more than double the time of the fastest. The reader will find an actual performance in the differing extreme tempi highly instructive. In the present context we can only offer a few general observations on the nature of the pieces involved.

It is to be expected that arias of a markedly emotional character would be particularly liable to an exaggeration of the expressive element through a pronounced slowing down, and indeed this fate has overtaken both the aria "He was despised" and the arioso "Comfort ye, my people." A second category of pieces is likewise predestined to suffer from exaggerations of tempo, namely, those that contain contrasting tempi. This category includes the Christmas recitative and the two choruses "Since by man came death" and "Worthy is the lamb." But tempo variations are particularly pronounced in yet a third category of pieces where it was perhaps less to be expected, namely, that determined by a typical "flowing" Baroque tempo. This applies above all to the Sicilianos or similar sections, namely, the pastoral *Pifa*, the arias "He shall feed His flock," "How beautiful are the feet," and finally, the duet "O, death," so strongly characterized by a consistently moving bass.

In most editions, these pieces have—in accordance with nineteenth-century conceptions—been assigned tempi that are undoubtedly too slow because editors failed to recognize their essential character.

Only the tempi of Chrysander/Seiffert seem to have caught the essence of these pieces; it must be noted, however, that the tempi of this edition are based, so far as the Sicilianos are concerned, on a pattern of two, not six stresses, because the dotted quarter-note, not the eighth-note, is the unit employed. Our table might give rise to several other observations, but we must limit ourselves to the following final conclusions:

From the source material available—admittedly scanty—several stages of development in the conception of tempo determining the performance of Handel's music seem to emerge: First, the tempi of the original Handel performances up to the 1760's, which may strike us as surprisingly lively. Second, the tempi from the period of the first great Handel celebrations in 1784–85, which, as a consequence of the change in musical approach and the transference of oratorio performances from the theater to the cathedral, had slowed down perceptibly. Third, the tempi from the early nineteenth century, which, following the general tendency of the time towards a slow performance of church music—and that is what oratorios were generally considered to be—represent a maximum of tardiness. Fourth, the tempi from the mid-nineteenth century, which, although quickening somewhat, still show a tendency towards exaggeration of contrasts combined with some obvious uncertainty. Fifth, the tempi of the period around 1900, which may to some degree—particularly in Chrysander/Seiffert —claim recognition as a revival of eighteenth-century traditions. Broadcasts and recordings suggest that this tempo interpretation has, to a certain extent, been accepted in our time.

Everything points to the fact that excessive slowness has been the

besetting sin of most Handel performances. If, however, we must consider a lively tempo a fundamental requirement, it should once again be stressed that such a tempo is not created merely by speeding up a performance in terms of mechanical metronome markings; it should rather be the result of a fully pulsating motion in which Handel's music may truly live and breathe.

Oratorio versus Opera

With the last opera performances of the season 1740–41 Handel's long career as an opera composer came to a close and he may have been undecided as to where to turn from there. It is entirely possible that he thought of leaving London. He went to Dublin for the following season 1741–42, which included as a major event the first performance of *Messiah*. But by late summer he was back in London and remained there for the rest of his life. Instead of operas, he now produced oratorios. After a preamble in about 1720, he had started to experiment in 1732 by alternating between opera and oratorio performances. Now, however, oratorio performances no longer served as an alternate possibility; they took the place of opera completely although they were given in concert form, not staged.

After Handel's death, the original manner of performance was faithfully continued under John Christopher Smith, the younger, who had assisted Handel in presenting the oratorios during his last years when he was totally blind. But towards the end of the eighteenth century we encounter the rise of new Handelian performance traditions—radically different but of decisive influence throughout the nineteenth century and still in evidence in the twentieth. Finally, the overthrow of numerous old traditions after World War I led to a fresh evaluation of Handel's work, most importantly and prominently, a rediscovery of Handel's operas—the so-called "Göttingen Handel Renaissance" that began in 1920.

Even though the early performances in the "Göttingen Handel Renaissance," made possible through the enthusiasm of Oscar Hagen, were influenced to a great extent by Romantic music traditions, they succeeded in revealing a hitherto unknown Handel. The strong impression left by convincing performances of Handel's operas did not only lead to a revision of the widely held opinion that these works were hopelessly outdated antiquities, it also led to a questioning of the foundations of traditional oratorio performance. From time to time during the 1920's, staged performances of oratorios were attempted, mostly in Germany (*Saul, Hercules, Theodora, Alexander Balus, Belshazzar*); and in the 1930's this trend shifted to England (*Samson, Saul, Jephtha, Susanna, Athalia, Belshazzar, Hercules*). Compared with the number of traditional oratorio performances, however, these staged performances remained exceptions; they were regarded as interesting experiments, but scarcely as a serious challenge to the established oratorio tradition.

After World War II, performances of Handel oratorios in staged versions have increased considerably and there has been a general tendency towards obliterating the borderline between oratorio and opera. To quote just one example: In the summer of 1969 the oratorio *Susanna* was performed by the London Handel Opera Society in the course of the Göttingen Handel Festival in a staged version and presented without any reservation as an "Opera (sacred drama)." The roles of the two judges were presented almost as types from comic opera and there were many other surprising details. There is no reason to doubt that a good performance of this kind may bring the work in question closer to some people, just as a modernized Shakespeare performance or a Shakespeare film may convey to some of its viewers a new impression of *Hamlet*. But since a certain reservation towards the nineteenth-century oratorio tradition is bound to influence modern judgment, the staged performance might be accepted as a new norm—or even as a historically founded oratorio performance.

Some clarification is needed here. The oratorio performances of the past were in the main stamped by post-Handelian traditions, as we have pointed out. Does a modern operatic oratorio performance, therefore, bring us closer to the true Handelian spirit? Is the tendency towards identifying oratorio with opera founded on facts? Are we faced with something that comes close to historical truth or are we dealing with a misinterpretation of history? And one more question: How much does the interpretation of oratorio as disguised opera influence the actual musical performance? I would like to comment briefly on these questions.

The trend towards merging oratorio and opera and towards disregarding the differences between these two genres has appeared most noticeably in England in recent years.[1] The bequest of the Victorian Age, by which *Messiah* is presented in the manner of devotional music, met with strong opposition, which in turn created a polemic attitude apt to obscure rather than to resolve the issues at hand. What is presented as fact is stamped by opposition to traditional views rather than by impartiality. I might quote one example: On the first page of Winton Dean's book, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*—undoubtedly one of the most brilliant contributions to Handel research in our time—the author makes the following statement: "At all periods—except perhaps the nineteenth century—some oratorios have been staged and others not." It is not made clear what should be regarded as the normal case and what as an exception. The reader will have to believe that either of these possibilities would be quite normal. Nevertheless, it would, in fact, be most difficult to find any staged oratorio performance at all until after Handel's time. The older liturgical drama was based on

[1] Cf. chapter 3: *Messiah* Performance Traditions.

different traditions. The oratorio, as shown by its name, originated and developed in the prayer hall; it had no connection with the stage from its very beginning. "We now know that not a single oratorio in Italy before 1750 was acted. The only thing sometimes to be seen on a 'stage' was an altarpiece or a decoration, and, of course, the performers," says Ursula Kirkendale in her penetrating analysis of the Ruspoli Documents on Handel.[2]

Handel's own oratorio performances were never staged, even though they took place in the theater, serving as a concert hall. We are often told that Handel's first performances of *Acis and Galatea* and *Esther* around 1720 were staged, but this cannot, in fact, be true.[3] When he revived the two works in 1732, the public announcement contained the specific statement: "There will be no action on the stage." Nevertheless, there is a certain difference in the text for the announcement of the two works. The announcement for *Esther*—billed as "The Sacred Story of Esther: an Oratorio in English"—continues as follows: ". . . but the house will be fitted up in a decent manner for the audience. The music to be disposed after the manner of the Coronation Service." In the announcement for *Acis and Galatea*—presented as a "Serenata"—the corresponding sentences read: ". . . but the scene will represent, in a picturesque manner, a rural prospect, with rocks, groves, fountains and grottos; amongst which will be disposed a chorus of nymphs and shepherds, habits and every other decoration suited to the subject." Obviously neither of these two performances was staged, but the "Serenata" *Acis and Galatea* did call for some scenic decoration and nymphs' and shepherds' choruses, whereas the oratorio *Esther* was presented strictly in concert performance, as we know from other sources, too. This became the tradition of Handel's own oratorio performance style for the rest of his life. Only in the case of *Messiah* were there some church performances aside from those given in the theater—those given in the Foundling Hospital Chapel for charity purposes. But these were also in concert style, without any suggestion of a liturgical function.

The difference between oratorio and opera as performed by Handel is, therefore, clearly expressed: An oratorio was always performed in the manner of a concert, but an opera performance involved a complete display of theatrical means and effects. That oratorio and opera were regarded as two separate categories was also underlined by the fact that oratorio performances were normally given on Wednesdays and Fridays in Lent when theatrical performances were traditionally prohibited.

The opinion that oratorio and opera should be regarded as equals

[2] *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. XX (1967), p. 235.
[3] Cf. p. 7.

is, of course, primarily based upon the premise that these two forms, after all, present dramatic action in a rather similar manner. But do they really? Undeniably, they have something in common, but if one compares the artificial intrigues of treacherous kings, jealous queens, sly villains, and spiteful rivals in the operas with the tragic fates of protagonists like Saul or Jephtha in the oratorios, one cannot possibly overlook the difference. Very soon after the establishment of Handel's oratorio performances in London, objections were raised against the use of the theater although the performances were in concert form. This was scarcely mere prudishness but rather an expression of a clear understanding, even in Handel's time, of the essential distinction between the two art forms.

The difference was, of course, further stressed through the choice of language and the character of the text. Instead of Italian libretti, in which the text of individual arias had to establish above all a definite "affection" to which both composer and performer would be committed, English texts were now introduced, some of them taken directly from the Bible, others founded on stories from the Old Testament, or, in general, upon a "moral" idea. One might have some reservations about the "moral" interpretation of oratorio texts today, but one could not ignore it as an original tendency in oratorio. It has been suggested that Handel favored such tendencies to meet the taste of the growing English middle-class public. Whether or not this is true has to do with the history of English taste rather than with an appreciation of Handel's music.

The affinity of oratorio and opera rests mainly upon their fundamental construction—their predominant use of arias with connecting recitatives. But this affinity is not quite as unproblematic as we are usually told. A close comparison of the style of arias from oratorios and operas will reveal important differences. This has to do with the change of text and subject matter but it is also connected with the change of singers that took place in the course of the 1730's. This change has been described in a rather matter-of-fact manner by Sir John Hawkins in his *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (1776):

> Instead of airs that required the delicacy of Cuzzoni, or the volubility of Faustina to execute, he [Handel] hoped to please by songs, the beauties whereof were within the comprehension of less fastidious hearers than in general frequent the opera, namely, such as were adapted to a tenor voice, from the natural firmness and inflexibility whereof little more is ever expected than an articulate utterance of the words, and a just expression of the melody. . . . To such a performance the talents of a second-rate singer, and persons used to choir service were adequate.

Finally, a very clear distinction between Handel's oratorios and operas can be seen when we turn to the question of the use of the

chorus. In the operas there are no choruses in the real sense but at most some ensembles that might suggest a choral texture. In the oratorios, however, the chorus plays a fundamental role. It might seem, therefore, that this feature alone would establish the difference between the two art forms. Yet in English opera before Handel's time, as in French opera of the same period, arias and choruses customarily stood side by side. This may account for the tendency among English scholars to relate Handel's oratorio choruses to a specifically English tradition of dramatic music. The English scholar Edward J. Dent wrote in his essay on English influence in Handel's music (*Händel-Jahrbuch*, 1929): "Handel's treatment of the chorus was the most valuable thing he learned in England; its dramatic use did not derive from the English church but rather from the English theater."

No doubt there are some works, such as *Acis and Galatea* or *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* in which traces of a specific English choral tradition can be found, but the richness and diversity of Handel's choral style cannot be explained as a result of his supposed contact with English dramatic practice alone. There are other influences—above all influences coming from church music, though not necessarily from English church music. Handel wrote magnificent church music even in the early years he spent in Italy and some of these works served as models for works he later wrote in England. One example is his fine psalm setting, *Laudate pueri* (1707), which he used in his *Utrecht Jubilate* (1713) and again in his anthem *O be joyful in the Lord* written a few years later. Another important source for his choral style was the German church music with which he grew up. His German heritage is still obvious in his Brockes-Passion (1716–17), from which he drew much material for his early English oratorios.

A comparison of choruses from Purcell's dramatic compositions—e.g., *King Arthur* or *The Fairy Queen*—with choruses from Handel's oratorios shows a basic difference in character. Purcell's choruses serve a purely dramatic purpose; they are relatively short, often rhythmically accentuated and dancelike, and in most cases homophonic or containing only slight suggestions of polyphony. They form a natural counterpart to the arias, most of them also short and, in fact, represent a continuation of an aria more often than a contrast to it.

Such connection of aria and chorus will also occasionally be found in Handel's works, e.g., in *L'Allegro*, but Handel's large, typical oratorio choruses are different. They are often written as fugues or in the manner of concerted movements and at times show a cantus firmus structure. Many of these choruses can be identified with the choral traditions of church music, with such models as the introductory cantus firmus setting for the psalm *Dixit Dominus* or the chorus "Tu es sacerdos in aeternum" from the same work, used again in revised form thirty years

later in the famous chorus "He led them through the deep" from *Israel in Egypt*. Handel's *Coronation Anthems* of 1727 were used without any essential changes in *Esther* and *Deborah*, and his profound *Funeral Anthem*, became, as we have noted, the first part of *Israel in Egypt*, the words being adapted, with slight changes, to a lament on the death of Joseph. But even many outstanding oratorio choruses that cannot be traced to specific anthems are unmistakably related to their style, whereas they have very little in common with the choruses in Purcell's operas. Such choruses serve neither as continuation nor as counterpart to the arias; they are entities in their own right—dramatic statements in themselves rather than mere accents of a dramatic continuity.

In summary, the Handelian oratorio cannot be made to fit into the world of opera; its individuality must be respected. Oratorio was distinguished from opera from the outset and throughout Handel's career as a non-staged genre performed only on certain days in Lent. The different character of its texts is reflected in a certain limitation of musical expression, as compared with opera, and a reduction of the amount of technical skill demanded of the singers. The latter fact is obviously connected with a new choice of soloists in Handel's oratorio performances.

The very important role of the chorus in Handel's oratorios marks another clear distinction between oratorio and opera. I have stressed the fact that Handel's extensive use of the chorus cannot be directly related to English opera traditions. These may have contributed towards an easier acceptance of the combination of arias and choruses in the oratorios, but we cannot speak of an actual influence. Not only do we lack any information as to how much Handel knew of these traditions—or if he was acquainted with them at all—but seventeenth-century music drama shows no affinity to the Handelian oratorio to begin with, least of all with regard to the use of the chorus.

Having arrived at the conclusion that staged performances of Handel's oratorios have nothing to do with Handel's own performance practice, we must regard them as experimental modernization—a "new look." If the question of staging had no bearing on the purely musical character of the performance, then we could stop here. The consequences of approaching oratorio as opera, however, are more far reaching, especially because many conductors tend to deal with eighteenth-century opera from the point of view of nineteenth- or twentieth-century opera. They are apt to ignore the fundamental differences in pacing, sonority, orchestral volume, and other matters. The determining structural factor in Baroque opera—and in Baroque music in general—is the contrast of major units (e.g., arias and choruses), each founded in one particular expression—in Baroque terminology, the "affection"—which, in turn, is reflected in one specific sonority and one rhythmic

motion. But a "modern" interpretation is apt to alter the basic character of Baroque music by a dynamically varied and accentuated performance in which everything—tempo, rhythmic motion, sonority, and volume—becomes a means of expression at the discretion of the conductor, as it would in the performance of a Romantic opera or a tone poem. This has to do with the fact that the performance of an oratorio is often no longer in the hands of the person who has carried out the task of preparing the work with the chorus from the beginning. Rather, it is turned over at the last moment to a harassed orchestral conductor who deals with it between rehearsals and performances of works by Beethoven, Wagner, Stravinsky, Schönberg, and Stockhausen. Thus, not only the borderline between oratorio and opera, but also between oratorio and modern orchestral repertoire, is vanishing.

Oratorio performance in our time is, therefore, continually confronted with new problems. The nineteenth-century tradition, with its semi-devotional approach, vast choruses, and unavoidable "additional accompaniments," must be regarded as outdated. At the same time, the recent tendency to change oratorio into opera by dramatizing it, tampering with the steady quality of its rhythmic Baroque texture, and dissolving its melodies in modern pseudo-improvisation, must be regarded as equally invalid.

The true spirit of oratorio demands a performance that is sensitive but natural and direct, using a limited number of performers, preferably with boys' choir, and using soloists without prima donna attitudes (though, if possible, of prima donna qualifications!). Above all, it demands a quality of pacing devoid of "modern drive" and ambitious interpretative distortions but governed rather by an even rhythmic flow (almost comparable to that which one finds in a good jazz ensemble). Handel's music must be allowed to unfold on its own terms: simple in its greatness, great in its simplicity.

APPENDIX I
Is There a Definitive Version of *Messiah*?

The question of a "definitive version" of Handel's *Messiah* arises from the fact that a sizeable number of single pieces, especially arias, were handed down — and performed — in different versions, dating back to Handel's own time. The problem was first approached by William George Cusins.[1] Through Friedrich Chrysander's facsimile edition and Max Seiffert's edition as Volume 45 in Chrysander's publication of Handel's Works almost the complete set of existing versions was made available, and from these scholarly oriented publications they passed into the practical editions.

The growing interest in the changing form of the work is to be welcomed, though with a word of caution: the different versions of individual numbers do not necessarily represent the same level of source significance. The question of revisions and their place in the development of the work is a complicated one that places before the scholar tasks of greatly varying nature. In the present context we can offer only suggestions, yet with the hope that they may provide a certain outline of the problem in its entirety.

Why did Handel write so many different versions? Evidently there are several reasons. It is to be remembered, first of all, with what incredible speed he completed the composition. *Messiah,* not unlike other of Handel's oratorios and his operas, was written in an uninterrupted span of twenty-three days. Here, as in other cases, the composer counted on checking and correcting details in the course of rehearsals and repeated performances. Some of his changes must therefore be considered part of his personal working procedure, emendations of matters with which he had not been satisfied.

Other changes go back to outside influences, changing performance conditions, and especially changes of soloists. The process of adjusting arias to the specific technical and expressive capacity of a given soloist was taken for granted in the eighteenth century. Since Handel's *Messiah* performances

[1]W.G. Cusins, *Handel's Messiah. An Examination of the Original and of Some Contemporary MSS,* London, 1874.

took place over a considerable number of years — 1742 to 1759 — an unavoidable succession of different soloist casts took place, and this is the reason for most of the alterations to which the work was subjected. In the different phases of composition is reflected the varying quality of the singers: soloists of rather modest ability for the Dublin premiere, more capable soloists in the first London performances and, above all, one especially qualified singer, Gaetano Guadagni, about 1750. In the many adjustments — or even new compositions — we sense the correlation between Handelian oratorio and scenic traditions. Constant revision bespeaks the fact that form and features of oratorio are entirely committed to live performance.

That Handel's *Messiah* underwent an unusually large number of changes, however, is founded in the nature of solo assignments which, unlike those in most oratorios, are not linked to specific personages but may be freely exchanged without disturbing the total structure.

The changes made in view of the ability of given soloists would generally have to be concessions the need for which no longer applied when a new group of soloists was involved. Yet in some cases the modified version proved so satisfactory that it was retained for further performances. Herein lies the central problem of our discussion. To what extent may we regard the versions that Handel used in the last performances given under his own direction as definitive? Were these always forms he wished to preserve or might one assume that in the case of some numbers he would have intended to go back to other existing forms in future performances?

For such a question there is, of course, no unqualified answer; in fact, considered strictly, such a question cannot be answered at all. One would have to concede that it would never have occurred to Handel to commit himself to a definitive version. His would have been the wish to maintain complete freedom of revision as might seem needed. Even the appearance of a work in print did not mean a final phase to him. Handel was in the habit of making further changes at will as if the work in question had never been published.

If Handel had attached any importance to the idea of leaving a final version of his work for posterity, we would doubtless be informed of the existence of an authentic copy — a manuscript representing a "definitive edition." But no single one in the extensive collection of sources preserved in Hamburg, London, or Cambridge could lay claim to ultimate revisions undertaken by the composer. Nor does a comparison of these sources yield a picture of a critical examination fully completed.

If we therefore are left to conclude that the question of a definitive version remains unanswered in terms of the documentation provided by the composer, there is nevertheless sufficient material for an answer to the less

absolutely formulated question as to a version that Handel, so to speak, might have approved if an edition in the more modern sense would have had to be prepared for publication. To put it in a formula: what would have been the concrete contents of such a publication? Can traditional *Messiah* performances be accepted without reservation as regards their musical text, or does an investigation of the sources yield points of view from which such performances should be revised?

It is at least in two directions that Chrysander's basic editorial work (as it was presented after his death by Seiffert) might be continued in order to gain deeper insight into the evolution of the work. A number of eighteenth-century manuscript copies of *Messiah* that were not consulted by Chrysander offer us as many different constellations, which, upon closer examination, can be reduced to a few principal types. All of them are of help in affording the student of sources a clarified view of the way in which the work developed. Further information can be gained from a study of the original manuscript notations regarding the choice of particular soloists. Their names have often been mentioned ever since Cusins introduced them into the literature, but their significance for the problem of different versions was not recognized.

The manuscript sources form the unequivocal basis for the edition of Handel's works, for the original prints must be considered worthless from a text-critical point of view. Chrysander's work was essentially based on the following:

> The autograph from the Royal Collection, now deposited in the British Library.
>
> The conducting score used during Handel's lifetime and now preserved in the library of St. Michael's College, Tenbury. It was copied by Handel's amanuensis J.C. Smith the elder and named the "Ouseley" copy after its former owner but also referred to as the "Dublin" copy.
>
> A second conducting score, also copied by J.C. Smith the elder and now located in the State University Library, Hamburg. Chrysander considered it a score used by Handel in his later years, but it is actually the copy used by J.C. Smith the younger, Handel's successor as conductor of the oratorio performances.
>
> A further copy written by J.C. Smith after Handel's death and owned by the London Foundling Hospital (Thomas Coram Foundation).
>
> The so-called "Goldschmidt" copy, again named after its former owner and now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

Aside from these manuscripts which, taken together, contain nearly all existing versions of individual movements, several additional ones must be considered in view of a complete musical text and a design of the total work. They are listed here in the order they seem to have assumed in the chronological development of the work.

A copy at King's College, Cambridge, which had been discovered in the late nineteenth century by the Handel scholar A.H. Mann in Dublin.

The *Messiah* volume of the Granville Collection, British Library.

The so-called "Needler" copy and a copy formerly owned by William Barclay Squire, both of which are now in the British Library.

The *Messiah* volume from the extensive Lennard Collection, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

An isolated copy (R.M. 18.b.10) from the Royal Collection.

The *Messiah* volume of the so-called Smith Collection, again forming part of the Royal Collection.

A copy in the Rowe Collection, King's College, Cambridge.

A copy formerly in the possession of Sir Newman Flower and now in the Manchester Public Library.

A comparison of these manuscripts leads to the conclusion that the first four seem to be closest to the earliest London performances of 1743; the next two apparently reflect the performances of 1745; the copy from the Smith Collection, together with a portion appended to the Lennard copy, suggests the period after which performances of the work were resumed in 1749. The posthumous copies described earlier essentially represent the form the work had assumed just prior to, and shortly after, Handel's death.

The classification of copies here presented is based to a large extent upon the investigation of the choice of soloists. The close connection between solo assignments and aria versions becomes evident from numerous pencil entries in the two principal manuscripts, the autograph and the Ouseley copy. A large number of soloists' names, often accompanied by directions for transposition of the movement in question, stands before us. Though it must be conceded that Handel's autograph listings of names offer no absolute assurance that the singers concerned actually performed the corresponding arias, and though we may have to count on some gaps in the listings, these authentic performance directions will naturally have to be considered of primary importance. The entries of names alone do not give us an indication of their temporal sequence. But with the help of additional material, such as the Walsh prints, Burney's *General History of Music,* and various manuscript sources, a rather reliable account of soloists for *Messiah* performances, at least in Handel's later years, can be established. A few examples may show how the combination of data can guide our recognition of an emerging preferred form for the work.

The best known among them is doubtless the aria "He shall feed His flock." Two versions are generally accepted: the original form for soprano in B-flat major and the derived form assigning the first half, in F major, to an alto. The former has become traditional in Germany and other countries on the continent, and the latter, in England and America.

The unusual division of the piece into halves sung by different soloists (without any synthesis in the manner of an actual duet) with the resulting disturbance of tonal unity has on occasion given rise to the conjecture that it did not originate with Handel but after his death. A thorough examination of the sources, in particular of the original assignment of soloists, furnishes a clear answer to the question. The matter, however, is complicated in that there seems to be a third possibility.

All available evidence points to the fact that the aria, at least in the earliest performances but apparently also in a few later ones, was rendered as a complete alto solo. The singer entrusted with it in the premiere performance was Mrs. Cibber, the principal alto soloist. That it was she who sang the aria can be gathered from the annotation for a transposition in the Ouseley copy, from a pencil entry in a preserved program booklet, and from a remark in Burney's account of the commemorative performances in 1784. The only one of the older copies that shows this version is the one discovered by A.H. Mann. The other early sources generally include the version for soprano. Only in those that must be considered as documenting the tradition of Handel's later years — the Hamburg copy, the Smith Collection copy, and the appended section of the Lennard copy — do we encounter the version for alto and soprano.

It is Smith's, the copyist's, annotation of the name of "Miss Frederick" as the soloist for the transposed beginning of the aria contained in the Ouseley copy, that offers us the possibility of fixing a date for this version or rather its first occurrence. As can be gathered from the documents preserved at the Foundling Hospital, this young singer participated in the 1758 *Messiah* performances, thus still under Handel's direction, though her place was taken by another soloist in the following years. Thus it is safe to assume that the duet version goes back to Handel's own practice. The fact that there are purely musical arguments in its favor might at this time merely be suggested.

Nevertheless, we are dealing here with a typical case in which two versions may be considered as being definitive. Whereas the version for alto alone cannot be associated with Handel's later years, both the versions for soprano alone and for alto and soprano — especially the latter — can lay claim to having been regarded as final solutions.

The most incisive changes in the structure of the work, however, took place in the second half of Part II. The aria "Thou art gone up on high" exists in no less than four versions, of which the one now generally used may indeed be taken to be Handel's definitive version. More complicated is the history of the next aria, with connecting chorus, "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace." Two different compositions, both having gone through various stages of changes, were here combined and rounded out by a third. In this case, too, the version now generally adopted

may claim definitive status (if the entire section does not fall prey to the unfortunate tendency of cutting). Yet what is involved in ascertaining a definitive version of this portion of the work implies a thorough revision of Chrysander's views as to its evolution.

On the basis of the criteria here applied, the form of a number of further movements can be subjected to similar critical evaluation; others present no problems.

The samples given must suffice in the present context. Even though our fundamental question as to a "definitive *Messiah*" must, in the end, be answered in the negative, the analysis of sources in many instances offers a clearer view of the composer's changing intentions. Their proper perception will remain a justified challenge presented by the performer to the scholar.

II
The Turning Point in Handel's Career

For almost seventy years, eighteenth-century music has been an essential part of my life. It has given me the greatest pleasure, and I cannot imagine what life would have been without it. Furthermore, I have had the great privilege to make it the focus of my scholarly work. These rather personal remarks are meant to suggest a point of departure for a consideration of the fact that we are attempting to bridge a gap of more than two hundred years when we want to form an idea of performance practice in Handel's time. Throughout many years I have experienced incredible changes in the general approach to Handel's music. First, there was my early experience of hearing Handel's *Messiah,* performed virtually as a piece of German religious music, its text sung in translation, and the orchestral accompaniment adjusted to Classic or Classic-Romantic ways of expression; after that followed a growing endeavor to establish a recaptured tradition; and still later arose the trend towards a suppression of any oratorio tradition at all in favor of an operatic (or semi-operatic) interpretation that was quite unknown in Handel's own time. And at each particular stage in this evolution a new foundation of "common knowledge" was formed, based on the sure conviction that its latest form was the right one.

What I would like to deal with here is the oratorio tradition as established by Handel himself; that is, the oratorio performances of approximately his last twenty years, when oratorio was no longer an occasional addition to the predominant opera repertory, but a replacement for it. And let me add that when I say "oratorio tradition," I have in mind both the oratorios as Handel wrote them and as his audiences heard them in performance. In the years 1738–41 the transition from opera seasons to oratorio seasons took place, the dominance of Italian opera singers from abroad suddenly stopped, and the vigor and attraction of permanent oratorio seasons was put to the test.

The opera institution that came to life in 1719 may well have appeared to be a final fulfillment of the dream Handel had had of opera since his early youth. He could now present opera on the highest level and go abroad to gather the finest singers available in Europe — singers urgently needed to make the venture a success. Burney stresses this point in his *A General*

History of Music when he says:

> . . . The poetry of an Italian opera in England is wholly out of the question; nor has the Music much to do with its success; it is generally upon the *singing* that its favour entirely depends. In France and Italy, on the contrary, where operas are performed in the language of each country, the poetry and conduct of a drama are of infinite consequence to its success. And on our own stage, when we have attempted operas, neither the Music nor performance could ever support a bad poem. Great and favourite signers only can save an Italian musical drama of any kind in this country.[1]

The opera enterprise, made possible through support from royalty and nobility, served, after all, an artificial concept of culture in England. It was in all essential features an alien enterprise: Italian texts, sung mainly by Italian singers in a certain stereotyped musical language almost as foreign to an English audience as the Italian language itself. There is a remarkable logic in the fact that, at one point, this official and fashionable institution had to surrender to the private experiment at Chandos, virtually unnoticed and almost forgotten after a short time.

One question arises, which, so far as I can see, has scarcely been asked, though it may seem to be of a fundamental character: The establishment of the Royal Academy of Music may well have been a fulfillment of Handel's dream, but was the opera tradition that came into being in the course of the next fifteen to twenty years a fulfillment of his ideas of opera as well? If we consider Handel's position as *the* famous composer in England, and, in fact, on the Continent — and his sovereign mastery, as shown and admired in works in the grand style, such as the famous Coronation Anthems, his beautiful *Funeral Anthem for Queen Caroline,* his instrumental works like the *Water Music* and *Fireworks Music* — is it really possible to believe that he was happy in a position as servant to the singers upon whom the favor of his operas was entirely dependent?

It is obvious that he and the singers were bound together: He needed the best possible artists to give his operas the most captivating performances, and they were best served by a composer who knew how to write operatic arias that well-nigh surpassed any others of their time. But the singers were in the stronger position. To quote Burney once more:

> . . . Nothing but *miraculous powers* in the performers can long support an opera, be the composition ever so excellent. Plain sense and good poetry are equally injured by singing, unless it is so exquisite as to make us forget every thing else. If the performer is of the first class, and very miraculous and enchanting, an audience seems to care little about the Music or the poetry.[2]

[1]Reprint of the 1789 edition, with critical and historical notes by Frank Mercer (New York: Dover Publications, 1957), Vol. II, pp. 680 f.

[2]Ibid., p. 684.

We can say it quite briefly: Most people did not come to hear Handel's music, but primarily to hear Cuzzoni, Faustina, Senesino or Carestini sing. Opera was the art of the performer, not so much the art of the composer.

The most obvious expression of the power of the singers was, of course, in the so-called embellishments and the free cadenzas through which they changed the composer's melodic invention, reducing it into a sort of draft awaiting its real shape by the performer. Their primary ambition was not to give the finest possible performance of the composer's aria, using their art of performance to brighten the composer's creative work, but to use the aria as a vehicle for demonstration of their artistry, their art of sophisticated, yet willful, ornamentation of the melody, or — to use a modern idiom — their graffiti. This emerges quite unmistakably in the famous textbook on the art of singing, published in 1723 by Pier Francesco Tosi. He writes at length about the singer's opportunities for changing the melody, and his fundamental approach is perhaps expressed most directly in this short statement:

> Without varying the *Airs,* the knowledge of the Singers could never be discovered; but from the Nature and Quality of the Variations, it will be easily discerned in two of the greatest Singers which is the best.[3]

It is no wonder that Handel quarrelled from time to time with his singers. We have the familiar story of how he threatened to throw Cuzzoni out of the window, and there is also the more serious one about Carestini, who found the wonderful aria "Verdi prati" in *Alcina* too simple and did not want to sing it. Handel, with obvious justification, insisted, and Carestini left the company at the end of the season.

The long series of Italian operas left Handel only limited opportunities for producing major works of a different character. The Coronation Anthems (1727) gave splendid proof, after a long interval, of his undiminished mastery of choral composition in the grand style. And in 1732 followed the unexpected revival of the two Chandos oratorios, *Acis* and *Esther*. We can omit here a report of the historic circumstances. What matters in our context is Handel's realization of the potential of public performance without staging apparatus, and I shall limit myself to some words about the rise of a new significant performance tradition.

Whether the idea of a transfer of the performance in private quarters to one in the theater involved a change of the solo parts from boys to opera soloists does not seem clear, yet the final result remained, as is well known, a performance in English with choral singers from the church choirs, but with the Italian opera singers as soloists being somewhat restricted due to difficulties of language. Regardless of such difficulties, Handel had appar-

[3]*Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni, o sieno osservazioni sopra il canto figurato,* Bologna, 1723; English version by Johann Ernst Galliard (2nd ed., London, 1743), facs. reprint, with a new preface by Paul Henry Lang, New York, 1968, p. 95.

ently now sensed new possibilities offered by the genre. The manner of performance was unstaged — and remained so in later years — not as a novelty, we might stress, but in full agreement with all previous oratorio traditions. He composed two further oratorios in the following year, 1733, then stopped, to resume oratorio performances each season, but not with new works — *Alexander's Feast,* a departure and a gesture towards the English Ode and Masque traditions, was an exception, in itself of great importance for the evolution of English oratorio.

But 1733 saw also the inception of a new opera enterprise, in competition with Handel's opera activities. After increasing difficulties in keeping two Italian opera companies alive, a crisis arose. When, several years later, John Jacob Heidegger, Handel's associate, called for subscriptions for the following opera season, he failed to get sufficient response, and he had to make public that he was not going to engage the usual group of Italian singers but would have to abandon the planned season.

Handel was quick. Heidegger's announcement appeared in the *London Daily Post* on July 26, 1738, and three days earlier Handel had begun to compose new works for the coming season, this time not operas as usual, but oratorios. Two works were composed in the period between July 23 and November 1: *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt,* marking the beginning of the great Handelian dramatic and epic oratorio *oeuvre.* Aside from the two lighter operas that concluded the series — *Imeneo* and *Deidamia* (performed 1740–41) — the transition from opera to oratorio had become final.

It was quite obvious that this would create grave problems. In view of Burney's statement ("If the performer is of the first class, and very miraculous and enchanting, an audience seems to care little about the Music or the poetry"), it might have seemed almost impossible to offer anything that could replace the lost opera. Two problems emerged above all: 1. After almost twenty years of ever new star-parades, would it be possible to find singers who could be accepted, and how would they compare to the bygone favorites? 2. When a new group of soloists *was* found (certainly consisting of singers without "miraculous powers"), poetry and music would again — as in the days before the period of Italian enchantment — be matters of essential importance. Thus the question of soloists, as well as that of literary texts and their appropriate setting, must have been very much on Handel's mind at this decisive point in his career.

The issue of soloists was apt to lead to problems in two directions: How would they appear to an audience spellbound by Italian magicians, and how would they be able to satisfy the composer who for twenty years had been forced to give in to the whims of his stars — and who must have had a certain feeling of relief mixed with some insecurity concerning the abilities of the available singers.

It is not difficult to answer the question about the reaction of an audience, accustomed to the professionalism of the great Italian singers, in being confronted with the available oratorio soloists who took the place of their favorites. In a letter about the performance of *Samson* (a few years later) Horace Walpole pokes fun at the group of soloists with the following description:

> Handel has set up an Oratorio against the Opera, and succeeds. He has hired all the Goddesses from the farces, and the singers of roast-beef from between the acts at both theatres, with a man with one note in his voice, and a girl without ever an one, and so they sing and make brave Hallelujahs, and the good company *encore* the recitative, if it happens to have any cadence like what they call a tune.[4]

In another letter from the same time he concentrates his evaluation in one sentence: "They give me an idea of heaven, where everybody is to sing whether they have voices or not."[5]

A somewhat more contained description is given by John Hawkins in his *General History of the Science and Practice of Music.* He stresses the trend towards reducing expenses in the change to oratorio and says:

> Instead of airs that required the delicacy of Cuzzoni, or the volubility of Faustina to execute, he hoped to please by songs, the beauties whereof were within the comprehension of less fastidious hearers than in general frequent the opera, namely, such as were adapted to a tenor voice, from the natural firmness and inflexibility whereof little more is ever expected than an articulate utterance of the words, and a just expression of the melody; and he was happy in the assistance of a singer — Mr. Beard —possessed of these and many other valuable qualities. He knew also, that he could attach to him the real lovers and judges of music by those original beauties, which he was able to display in the composition of fugue and chorus, and these being once gained, the taste of the town was likely to fall in, as it frequently does, with the opinion of those who are best qualified to give a direction to it. To such a performance the talents of a second-rate singer, and persons used to choir service were adequate. Signora Francesina, and afterwards Signora Frasi, and some others in succession, were engaged on terms comparatively easy; and the Chapel Royal and the choir of St. Paul's furnished boys and chorus singers sufficient in abilities and number to answer his purpose.[6]

I find these descriptions very informative — notwithstanding Walpole's sarcastic way of expression. As might be expected, he, like Hawkins, stresses the great divergence of the old and the new group of soloists.

[4]Cf. p. 30

[5]Deutsch, op. cit. (see p. 30), p. 561.

[6]New edition, with an introduction by Charles Cudworth, (New York: Dover, 1963), Vol. III, p. 889.

Hawkins's description of the tenor soloist from whom "little more is ever expected than an articulate utterance of the words, and a just expression of the melody" points indirectly, but clearly, to an essential difference between the groups: Beard, Handel's leading male soloist for almost twenty years, did not practice the Italian style of ornamentation. When we remember Tosi's statement — that without such "changes" one would not be able to "realize which one of the two first-rate singers is the best" — it must seem absolutely clear that none of the singers of this type could — or would — dream of making a show of vocal virtuosity that would go far beyond their capacity.

One further interesting statement may be deduced from Hawkins's calculated description: The audience was changing to some extent from the more fashionable and snobbish admirers of the Italian voice-equilibrists to the less prominent audience of "real lovers and judges of music."

And what about Handel's own evaluation of the decisive change in the sound and capacity of the soloists? We can scarcely doubt that he may at times have had nostalgic feelings, reflecting on great moments of wonderful sounding music in old times of opera. But he must certainly also have had a new feeling of freedom, freedom from having to accept and listen to "changes," which were certainly pleasing to many in his audience but very likely a painful maltreatment of the music so far as he was concerned. If he had found Beard an inferior singer, unqualified as a soloist in his works, he would not have used him so extensively, beginning with *Alexander's Feast* in 1736 — when Beard was not yet twenty — and continuing until his death. The same is true for a number of other oratorio singers forming, with Beard, a permanent team of soloists. I do not think that it can be doubted that Handel considered these singers the right ones for the type of oratorio he had in mind and to which they helped to give shape.

The literary texts — the "libretti" or "word-books" — undoubtedly presented a major problem. For the operas the air was full of potential texts; it seemed possible in most cases to find libretti that could be used as a point of departure. But for the oratorios new solutions had to be found. We shall leave the question of librettists aside in the present context; it must merely be stressed that — quite in accordance with Burney's description — the matter of quality of the work-book became essential in this case. Stories like those of Saul, Samson, or Judas Maccabaeus dealt with genuine figures as opposed to the somewhat artificial kings and queens of operas. A fundamental issue was, of course, that of the possible varieties of oratorio, but it is so closely related to the music that we must discuss them jointly.

The quoted statement by Hawkins also hints at the change of musical setting: "He knew also that he could attach to him the real lovers and judges of music by those original beauties, which he was able to display in the

composition of fugue and chorus," and Hawkins adds in a footnote:

> The choruses of Mr. Handel's oratorios are of a cast very different from those in his opera; the latter are simply counterpoint, and are destitute of all art and contrivance; the former answer to the sublime in poetry; they are of his own invention, and are the very basis of his reputation.[7]

Various points are emphasized here: The experience of the music was no longer restricted to listening to a chain of arias but included the Handelian choruses as well. These indeed excelled in sublime invention and accomplished fugues, quite different from the less complex ensemble — or chorus — settings in the operas. These "original beauties" of Handel's music were not derived from opera traditions, but were fresh shoots from old roots. The fundamental change, emanating from the change of soloists and the consequent change of medium leads to a completely novel balance: drama and literary text are again questions of importance, and so is the very substance of music, freed from the reign of vocal virtuosos.

This constellation brought various musical forms and styles from Handel's earlier days into focus again. For there had been no ready formula for a genre, the name of which had been introduced more or less by chance in Handel's younger years and adopted without much speculation in 1732–33 — a genre that now came to mean a non-theatrical, semi-dramatic work for soloists, chorus and orchestra, reflecting a personal drama, a biblical story, or a contrast of ideas, using a variety of soloistic features — arias, accompagnato and secco recitatives — as well as a variety of choral features — fugues, concerted chorus and monumental choral recitatives. From Handel's earlier periods at least three rather clear choral traditions converged in this final realization: the German church cantata and Passion, the Latin Psalm and Italian (and Latin) oratorio, and the masque, ode, and anthem. We cannot discuss this complicated development fully, but will limit our remarks to some of the works and performances from the decisive phase of 1738–39.

In 1736 Handel had written *Alexander's Feast*, and in 1737 he presented a new version of the (Italian) *Trionfo del tempo e del disinganno* (twenty years later revised and presented as *The Triumph of Time and Truth*); in 1739 followed the *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*, and in 1737 he had composed the *Funeral Anthem for Queen Caroline*. Thus the line of important choral works having a bearing upon the development of the oratorio was never broken.

The first two oratorios to serve as successors of opera were *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt*. *Saul* is the prototype of the oratorio dealing with Old

[7]Ibid., p. 889.

Testament heroes, a work characterized by a well-balanced structure of simple, yet eloquent, arias and extremely effective, expressive choruses. In *Israel in Egypt*, however, apparently inspired by the much admired *Funeral Anthem*, Handel overestimated the possibilities of the choral component and consequently had to find various ways of rescuing the work from failure. It was perhaps for this reason that he designed the *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day* merely with great frame choruses, whereas the next oratorio, *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, excels in fresh combinations of arias and choruses. With the two famous oratorios from 1741–42, *Messiah* and *Samson*, the oratorio tradition may seem to have been established, even though the later works do not present a straight line of development.

Handel had succeeded in creating on *his* terms a type of concerted piece in the grand style in which the principal facets in the evolution of his own style had been the decisive determinants. There is a wide gap between this form, in which the union of textual foundation and musical composition had become a fundamental factor, and Handel's Italian works in his peak period as an opera composer (c. 1720–40), for which the virtuoso singers' performance had constituted the central experience.

The "turning point in Handel's career" is not — or perhaps, ought not to be — just a historical designation. For nearly two hundred years the oratorio tradition was continued, in principle by continuing the old manner of performance eschewing pronounced operatic tendencies — though with more or less changed sonorities (massive choral effects, large orchestras with additional accompaniments), and carried by a Romantic approach. In our century — from about 1925–30 and onwards — a cleansing of sonorities helped bring oratorio performances closer to the original ones. But the revival of the Handel opera in the 1920's exerted an unfortunate influence. Three directly misleading features have taken many modern Handel oratorio performances quite far away from the old tradition:

1. From modern experiments with Handel operas came the belief that ornamentation should be introduced into the oratorios in which they have never been at home.
2. At the same time the staging of oratorios became quite fashionable, contrary to all old performance practices.
3. Since there were no old models for the work of the stage directors, it came to be a challenge for them to exhibit modern possibilities of staging, even if all their details had to be invented.

At times it may seem as if oratorio performance of our time has changed into a playground for singers and stage directors. We might need a "new turning point" aiming at a suppression of personal and misguided ambitions, in order to allow "Handel's original beauties" to unfold freely again.

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