



THE HANDEL INSTITUTE
NEWSLETTER

In this issue, as usual in the autumn, we review the summer German Handel festivals. This year's report is divided. Winton Dean covers the operas, and also the Halle *Saul*, a work of special significance for him: it was his participation in a staged performance, when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge before the War, that opened his eyes to the dramatic power of the oratorios, and so began his

life-long career as a Handel scholar. My review deals with the other aspects of the two festivals, and I also report on a production of *Tamerlano* in Turin. But we begin with an appreciation by Stanley Sadie of Alan Kitching, a pioneer in the field of Handel opera production who died recently at the age of 90.

Terence Best

ALAN KITCHING (1906–1997)

AN ADVENTUROUS HANDELIAN

'An Adventure': that was how, in the title of his retrospective book, Alan Kitching described his series of Handel productions at the Unicorn Theatre in Abingdon. Alan, a devoted and imaginative Handelian, died on 9 September 1997, aged 90. He had a remarkable personal record in the pioneering of the Handel operas. Using for nearly all his productions the modest resources of the Unicorn Theatre, in the granary of the fourteenth-century Abingdon Abbey, he put on fourteen of the Italian operas and one musical drama over a period of seventeen years, 1959-75.

His background was in the theatre rather than in music. He had studied Classics and English at Oxford, where he was much involved in the University Dramatic Society (OUDS). During the war years he worked as a statistician at the War Office; after that he worked in Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, and then became drama adviser in south Oxfordshire, working in the Rural Community Council. In Abingdon, he created the Unicorn Theatre out of a desire to stage Shakespeare within the conventions for which the plays were written, and he felt - as he makes clear in his book, *Handel at the Unicorn: an Adventure* (1981) - that Handel's music 'expressed the joys and sorrows of humanity in a direct and heart-warming way which had no equal except in the plays of Shakespeare'. Many would now endorse that claim, but when Alan put it forward he was considered at best eccentric and certainly impractical.

Handel's operas, although taken up shortly before by Charles Farncombe's new Handel Opera Society, were still widely regarded as unsingable, beyond the capacity of modern vocal technique and anyway absurd because of their high-voiced heroes and their supposedly crippling musical structure. Alan was among the first to realize that all this was nonsense, to accept the validity of the conventions (and to realize that Handel had done so) and to use them constructively.

So in 1959, the Handel bicentenary year, Alan and his wife Frances embarked on their series, at much the same time as the slightly more sporadic Birmingham Barber Institute productions began under Anthony Lewis. Alan did them in English, making his own translations, using period vocabulary derived from the original librettos wherever he could, preparing the editions (always avoiding the kinds of cutting, elsewhere customary in those days, that violated Handel's forms) and of course producing. Frances, up to the time of her premature death in 1968, conducted the small orchestra, in a gallery above the stage, and designed and made the costumes, in eighteenth-century style.

Their first production was *Orlando*, its first British revival since Handel's time (as indeed were all his productions). Kitching was gifted with a keen sense of stylistic propriety, of a kind that is anathema to producers today. 'Surely it is only if we try to recreate the spirit of the



original production', he wrote, 'that Handel's music can come alive and attain its full meaning... Handel's splendid vocal line, so firm in outline yet so richly detailed, to my mind cries out for wigs in full curl, feathered helmets and full-skirted tunics...the singers should learn to move in the grand manner and, having moved, to hold a heroic pose'. At first he avoided the more obviously heroic operas. But in a small theatre, with amateur actors, and the words, in antique style and easy to hear, it was not surprising that the productions sometimes induced titters, especially from an audience besprinkled with lively undergraduates; and here and there, over the years, the actors could not always resist the temptation of playing up to it.

Orlando was followed by *Hercules*, which the Kitchings had given in Surrey many years earlier; it was done with the chorus in the gallery, and dance or *tableaux vivants* on the stage. *Partenope* was the 1961 opera; then

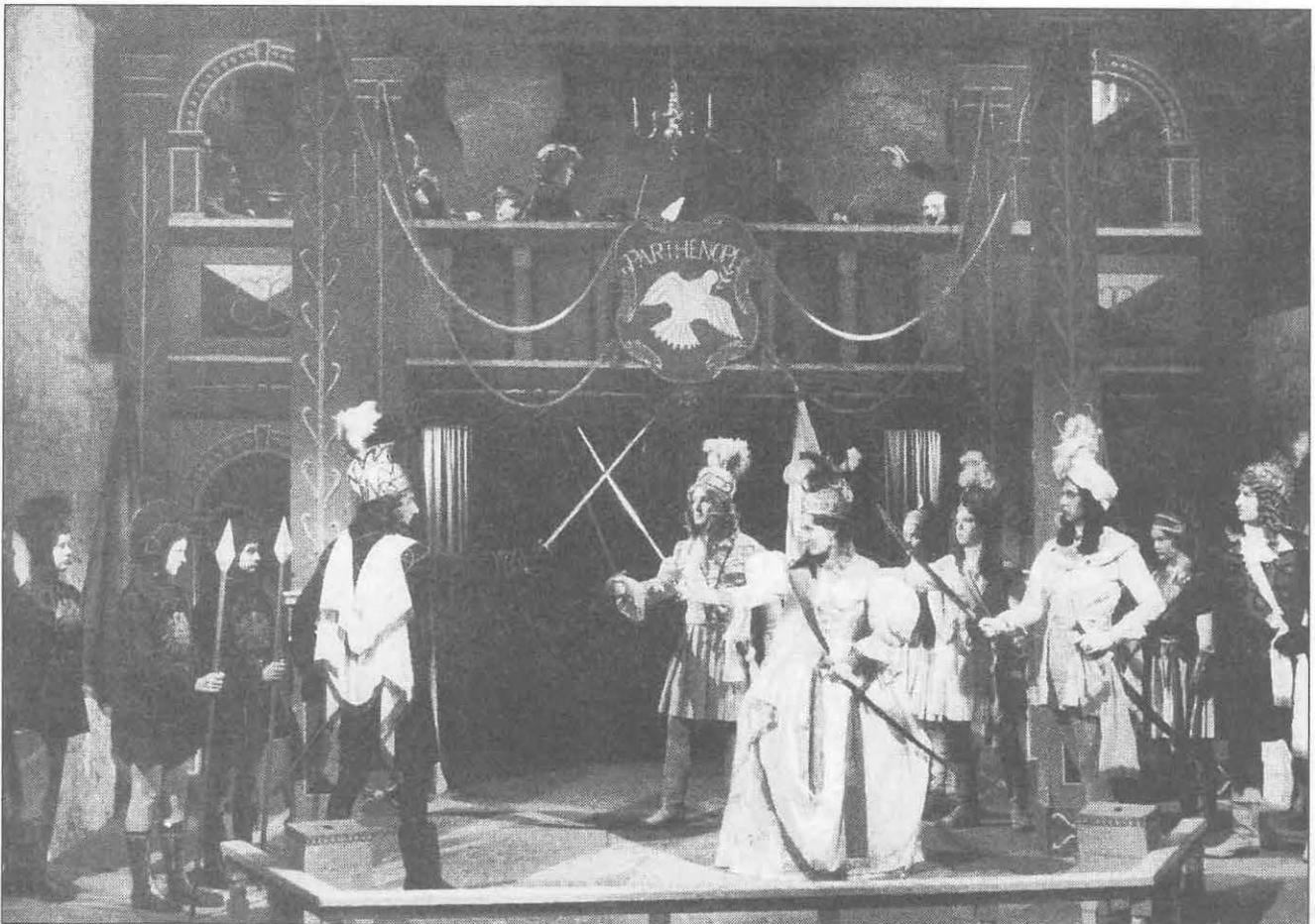
came *Floridante*, an opera that has always had a bad press, and never performed anywhere since 1733; the Kitchings handsomely demonstrated the shallowness of earlier judgments. *Agrippina*, the next year, proved specially well suited to the gently comic manner that so often crept into the Abingdon productions. 1964 saw *Admeto*, then in 1966 there was *Poro*. For their 1967 and 1968 seasons the company moved to the modern, more spacious but less appealing Abbey Hall, first for *Giustino*, never before revived, then *Amadigi*. The first opera after Frances's death was *Flavio*, in 1969, and then followed *Sosarme*, a modern stage première.

These were all, more or less, amateur performances: for the final period of the Abingdon Handel tradition the performances were largely on a professional basis. In 1971 there was *Il pastor fido* (1712 version), a first modern revival; *Arminio* came in 1972, *Tolomeo* in 1973, *Arianna* in

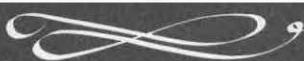
Creta in 1974, and lastly - in Henley rather than Abingdon - a first modern revival of *Lotario*. Several of these productions had additional performances elsewhere, notably in City of London livery halls.

This was an achievement that took an extraordinary degree of dedication and determination, and it is understandable that Alan sometimes resented the criticisms offered by his Handelian friends. It was his faith in Handel's sense of drama and the power of his music that carried him and his productions through. He found plausible and stylish answers to many of the problems of staging Handel operas today, and did so without compromising either his own principles or the integrity of the works themselves. When the tale of the twentieth-century Handel revival comes to be written, Alan Kitching's name will occupy an honourable place in it.

Stanley Sadie in



Alan Kitching's production of *Parthenope* at the Unicorn Theatre, Abingdon, in 1961, with the orchestra in the gallery above.



THE HÄNDELFESTSPIELE IN GÖTTINGEN AND HALLE 1997

GÖTTINGEN

The theme at Göttingen this year (30 May to 2 June) was 'Händels Italianità'. The emphasis was partly on music that he composed in Italy, but the influence of Italian music on his later works was also considered. So what we heard was not limited to the period 1706-10: the opera *Serse*, for instance, shows his 'Italianità' in a wider sense. The festival was well conceived around this subject, and the Wissenschaftliches Kolloquium, unlike that of last year, fitted it admirably.

The Italian theme was introduced by a free concert (charmingly called an 'Open-Door-Konzert' in German) in the University Hall, given by a very competent group of amateur players, the Orchester Göttinger Musikfreunde, conducted by Christian Hammer. The programme was well-chosen: two Vivaldi violin concertos, Handel's concerto grosso Op. 6 no. 2, and a symphony by J. C. Bach; the centre-piece was Handel's cantata *La Lucrezia*, one of the earliest of his Italian works. The soloists, Sibylle Wolf (violin) and Gerit Hammer (soprano) were professionals, and were both outstanding. It was a delightful opening to the festival.

The conference on the Saturday morning, entitled simply 'Händels Italianità', was organized in a most original way by the professor of music at the University, Dr Martin Staehelin. He was determined to get away from the drearily familiar conference formula of paper after paper with never a note of music. Three works were laid under scrutiny, all due to be performed at the festival: *La Resurrezione*, the concerto grosso Op. 6 no. 4, and *Serse*. After a brief introduction from Professor Staehelin, a recording of the first six numbers of *La Resurrezione* was played; every member of the audience had a little booklet containing a photocopy of the relevant pages of the score. Then followed two brief

papers, by Carolyn Gianturco on the musical characterization in the piece, and by Terence Best on Handel's word setting in these opening numbers. A discussion between members of the panel and the audience ended the session.

A similar process was applied to the concerto, with a paper by Hans Joachim Marx on the relationship between the op. 6 publications of Handel and Corelli, and to *Serse*, whose opening numbers were heard; they were followed by Lowell Lindgren, who compared Bononcini's *Serse* with Handel's, and Piero Gargiulo on the pastoral in Handel's opera. Professor Staehelin prepared everything and everybody with great care, even to the extent of coaching those of us who delivered our papers in German, with fine tuning of points of declamation. It was a most stimulating experience: other conference organizers, please note!

That afternoon, at the members' meeting of the Göttinger Händel-Gesellschaft, Winton Dean, whom I had been instructed to entice to the University Hall (I forget what the inducement was) was made an honorary life member of the society, with a charming speech in praise of his lifelong contribution to Handel studies, delivered in both German and English by the President, Dr Hans-Ludwig Schreiber.

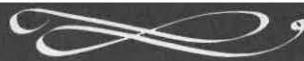
The same afternoon, in the St. Johannis-Kirche, we heard the first of two choral works which were performed in Rome at Easter 1708, Alessandro Scarlatti's *Oratorio per la Passione del Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo*, given by the excellent La Stagione of Frankfurt under Michael Schneider. The performance was first-rate, but I enjoyed the work less than did some of my colleagues. The music is beautifully crafted and has some touching moments, fine duet-writing, and splendid seventeenth-century brass

effects; but the libretto is impossible, being not so much a Passion oratorio as an utterly undramatic theological discussion between Colpa, Pentimento and Grazia (Guilt, Repentance and Grace). This seemed to me tedious beyond belief, far more so than the allegorical text of Handel's *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* of the previous year; and Scarlatti's music, though elegant, never takes fire.

What a joy to return in the evening and have the spirits lifted by the second work, Handel's *La Resurrezione*, performed by The Hanover Band, under Nicholas McGegan, and a splendid cast of singers, including our own David Thomas, who hammed his way splendidly through the part of Lucifero, confirming for me the view that I had expressed at the conference earlier in the day (and which was objected to by some German colleagues), that the conception of this anti-hero has more than a touch of comedy about it. The full power of the young Handel's inspiration came over in this performance, as one would expect from such a team, and the reasons for his triumph over his Italian contemporaries were once again in evidence.

On the Sunday afternoon there was a chamber concert devoted to Handel and his Italian predecessors, given by a British group, Concerto delle Donne, comprising three sopranos, cello and keyboard (organ/harpsichord). The composers ranged from Monteverdi and Luzzaschi to Steffani and Handel; the last was represented by two of his Italian duets, the trio from the Italian cantata *Cor fedele*, and the A major harpsichord suite. It was an unusual concert, well presented, although the blend of voices was less successful in Handel and Steffani than in the earlier repertory.

The last event we attended, apart from the *Serse* performances, was an orchestral concert by Fiori musicali of Bremen, one of the best of the early



music bands, led by Thomas Albert. After a shaky start in the orchestral suite from *Rodrigo*, we heard some excellent playing in short pieces by Bononcini, Caldara and Vivaldi, and in more substantial works - an oboe concerto by Vivaldi, Corelli's Op. 6 no. 4, Handel's Op. 6 no. 4 and his Op. 3 no. 2.

There were other, smaller concerts that we could not get to. Göttingen was as charming and friendly as ever, and we all felt that it had been a most successful festival. Among the visitors from abroad there were quite a few American and British, but it would be nice to see more. You would not regret it, either musically or socially; as Nick McGegan once memorably remarked, "Handelians are such jolly people".

HALLE

Most music festivals crowd a large number of events into a few days, so that it is physically impossible for one person to attend them all. In recent years generous funding (viewed with some envy from Göttingen) has allowed Halle to indulge in this habit to a greater degree than before, and an amazing wealth of concerts awaited us as we arrived in the city on 3 June from Göttingen, after the usual tedious road journey (I know of no other 125-mile stretch of road that takes so frustratingly long to travel). Two days of hard work for some of us in the editorial office of the *Hallsche Händel-Ausgabe* (HHA), and in meetings of the management committee of the *Georg-Friedrich-Händel-Gesellschaft* and the HHA Editorial Board, preceded the elaborate opening ceremony of the *Festspiele*, in which the ever-charming Oberbürgermeister Klaus Rauen welcomed everybody in several languages and one of the Handel prizes was awarded to that great singer Emma Kirkby; the *Serse* première followed.

No fewer than five Handel oratorios, plus *Acis and Galatea* and Mendelssohn's *St Paul*, were on offer,

and three operas (*Atalanta* is not reviewed here, as a performance beginning at 10 pm, after a long day which had included *Ariodante*, *Acis* and a boozy party, was too much for the stamina of your rapidly-ageing reviewers - though some younger and fitter colleagues went to it and found it disappointing). There were several chamber concerts and an extraordinary staging of *Cor fedele*. It was a feast indeed, and it is pleasing to report that the exceptional vitality and variety of Handel's genius ensured that no-one I met suffered from the slightest indigestion, except that brought on by the need to consume rapid meals in order to sustain life between the end of one performance and the beginning of the next.

The most original offering was the performance of *Clori, Tirsi e Fileno* (*Cor fedele*) of 1707 on the stage of the Goethe-Theater in Bad Lauchstädt. The singers were Anne Grimm (Clori), the extraordinary male soprano Jörg Waschinski (Tirsi), and David Cordier (Fileno). The orchestra was the *Lautten Compagny Berlin* (some of these early music groups do choose the oddest names), directed by Wolfgang Katscher, who is not a conductor but a theorbo player: he led from the front, and the long neck of his instrument acted as an effective baton - a most unusual procedure, but one that worked. The staging included ballets performed by the *TänzerInnen* [sic!] des *Barock TanzTheater Bremen*.

The whole thing was over the top, with a thunderous continuo section comprising harpsichord, harp, chitarone and theorbo, most of the time all playing at once, with jazzy effects from the harpsichord - most exotic and very exciting. The cantata was expanded by the insertion of ballet music, mostly genuine stuff from Handel's operas of the 1730s, but also from some other works, including an amusing quodlibet made out of 'Ombra mai fu' and 'Lascia ch'io pianga' and a witty scored-up version of Domenico Scarlatti's 'Cortège'

sonata, Kk. 380. Gimmicks included the delaying of the da capo of the duet 'Scherzando sul tuo volto' by a ballet. The soloists, who wore eighteenth-century court dress (nothing pastoral), sang very well, and to hear Waschinski was quite an experience. The event sounds outrageous, and it was. Some people whose judgment I respect hated it; I found it fun and enjoyed it, but I understand the others' reservations and shall long remember the indignation of some American friends who attended the second performance and in order to do so missed *Athalia*.

Acis and Galatea (1718 version) was given by Trevor Pinnock and his English Concert, with a fine team of soloists including three British singers, Catrin Wyn-Davies, Paul Groves and Brian Bannatyne-Scott. As expected, this was a fine performance by a group whose understanding of this music is second to none.

The crowd of events meant that I missed, with very much regret, what was reported to have been a magnificent performance of *Joshua* by Christopher Hogwood and his Academy of Ancient Music, with the New College choir, and also a *Judas Maccabaeus* under Howard Arman, with the Salzburger Bachchor and the Barockorchester Sol sol la sol [!]. *Athalia* was performed in the unhelpfully echoing acoustic of the former Ulrichskirche, now the Konzerthalle, but came off very well. A youthful choir, the Junge Kantorei, took time to get going in some of the choruses, which they were singing in a foreign language (German versions of oratorio texts are now a thing of the past in Halle) but improved as the afternoon progressed, and much of the singing was appropriately dramatic. The Barockorchester Frankfurt played splendidly, with strong attack, and the soloists, especially Elisabeth Scholl in the title-rôle, were first-rate. It was a thrilling performance of Handel's first oratorio masterpiece, although the use of organ in recitative and in *Athalia*'s first aria was a weak point.



There was a host of smaller concerts, and a Gala at the opera house featuring the star singers Emma Kirkby and Axel Köhler, one of the world's best countertenors. The climax of the festival was surely *Saul* (reviewed below by Winton Dean), but the previous evening *Solomon* was given in the opera house by the youth choir of Sachsen-Anhalt (the 'Land' in which Halle is situated) and a team of young soloists who had won a competition in February. The performance took some time to get up steam, but by the end of the first act all was going well: the choir sang enthusiastically, and the Händelfestspielorchester played well enough. I felt that Dieter Gutknecht's conducting lacked real vigour, and not all the young soloists had the measure of the music, particularly Ewa Krzak as Solomon. It was not a great performance, but the noble work came over well enough.

The Wissenschaftliches Konferenz was on the theme of Handel's oratorios and their influence on nineteenth-century composition. Fifteen papers were read in the course of two mornings, with some interesting exploration of Handel's influence on, among others, Spohr (Kenneth Nott), Mendelssohn (Annette Landgraf), Sullivan (Donald Burrows), and even Donizetti (Michael Pacholke). Howard Serwer, in his inimitable style, came up with the most way-out offering, 'Hymn- and tune-books of the Boston Handel and Haydn Society in the 1820s and '30s'.

As always, we came away exhausted but exhilarated, and happy that Handel remains venerated and increasingly well served in performance in his native land.

Terence Best

SERSE

It seems to have been a coincidence that the rival cities hit on the same opera, *Serse*, to inaugurate their 1997 Handel festivals. Regrettable as this was from one angle, it offered an

opportunity to compare the performances and the traditions from which they sprang. Next to *Giulio Cesare*, *Serse* has been by far the most frequently revived of Handel's operas in modern times, yet few of the productions I have seen have done it justice. The problem is to strike a balance between the comedy, which extends from nimble wit and delicate irony to near farce, and the serious episodes, all Arsamene's and Amastre's music, most of Romilda's and some of Serse's. The two most popular modern productions have singularly failed in this. Joachim Herz's at Leipzig, toured all over Europe, put itself out of court by a wholesale rehash of the score, so that little remained of Handel's characterisation or design. Nicolas Hytner's at the ENO, for all its slickness, repeatedly undercut the music with distracting irrelevance when serious emotion was in question. Both played for easy laughs. Maybe something in the opera lends itself to this, but it is far too subtle a work of art for such treatment to escape criticism.

Göttingen

Nicholas McGegan has conducted an opera at Göttingen every year since 1991, either acting as his own producer or collaborating with Drew Minter (on one occasion with Kate Brown). He has always kept his eye on the staging as well as the music, usually giving the opera without cuts and blessedly free from superimposed concepts. *Serse* followed this pattern. Gorgeous sets and costumes, by Scott Blake and Bonnie Kruger respectively, evoked an exotic oriental court in terms of the baroque theatre. Minter's production avoided the sin of curdling the serious scenes, though he let the servant Elviro too far off the lead (David Thomas, a natural buffo, was inclined to run amok). There were a few oddities (why did Serse keep tossing a coin in 'Il core spera', one of his most beautiful arias?) and a certain inconsistency in his treatment of gesture; sometimes it

conformed to baroque practice, elsewhere - especially when the singer of an aria resorted to the light fantastic toe - it came perilously close to D'Oyly Carte mannerism.

Hande wrote Serse's part for a castrato (Caffarelli), Arsamene's for a woman mezzo. It would be natural in a modern performance to cast a male singer for Serse, but the part lies too high for a countertenor, and the sexes are usually reversed. Hence the brutal overbearing side of Serse's character, which makes his final undoing so appropriate, is apt to be underplayed. Such was the case with Judith Malafonte's interpretation, though there was little to criticise in her singing. Brian Asawa, a countertenor without a hoot, was a first-rate Arsamene, vocally and dramatically, and Susan Bickley's firmly projected but touching Amastre was equally satisfying. Jennifer Smith (Romilda) and Lisa Milne (Atalanta) seemed a rather mature pair of sisters (the consequence perhaps of their voluminous costumes), but they were vocally well matched, and they played the bitchy scene at the end of the first act with humour and restraint. Dean Ely made much of the pompous general Ariodate. At the last of the three performances (I also attended the first) the long first act went like a flash, and the plot at once began to grip. McGegan and The Hanover Band were in excellent form. The performance has been recorded.

Halle

The operatic tradition in Halle has been much less secure. Musical standards under Howard Arman have been satisfactory (for some reason he was replaced in *Serse*), but the staging under an ever-changing succession of producers has gone from bad to worse, reaching an all-time low in *Tolomeo* last year after a perverse *Semele* in 1995. *Serse* had a new conductor in Hans-Martin Linde and a new producer in Ulrich Peters, who thankfully resisted the temptation to transfer the



action to a slaughterhouse, a film studio or a lunatic asylum. The period was perhaps deliberately vague, the costumes a mixed bag (spear-carrying soldiers in armour, men in oriental garb, women in something like modern dresses), the set nondescript, including what appeared to be a large pink phallic symbol. The acting style was a kind of slapstick *verismo*, in which even the scenery joined on occasion.

It appears to be a principle with many producers, not only in Germany, that characters on stage in a Handel opera should never be allowed to keep still; instead, even during arias, they rush about performing actions that seldom clarify the plot but regularly distract the audience's attention from the music. This can handicap the singers. The quarrel scene between the two sisters degenerated into a physical scrimmage with the singers fighting like cats. Not surprisingly, both went off pitch in their subsequent arias. During his heart-break aria 'Quella che tutta fè' Arsamene climbed some fifteen feet up a gymnasium frame (why?). As one began to wonder how he was to get down for his exit the curtain fell - in the middle of Act II - and the single interval followed. Not to respect Handel's act divisions was a major blunder. It distorted the whole opera, destroying the carefully contrived climaxes to the first two acts, which end with arias revealing the contrasted characters of the two sisters. This was made worse by the reduction of Romilda's 'Chi cede al furore' at the end of Act II, one of the glories of the opera and generally a sure hit, to a crude A-B-ritornello. It went for nothing, and the consequent displacement of the beautiful little sinfonia at the start of Act III undermined that too.

Strange things befell the plot in the second half of the opera. Characters appeared on stage who had no business to be present: what was Atalanta doing in Serse's arms as he sang his soliloquy 'Il core spera'? During Romilda's final aria all seven characters indulged in some gratuitous

countermarching, whereupon a mysterious eighth (female) appeared above them, dominating the final tableau. I was told that she represented Handel's next opera, but even if this made sense, how was the audience to know?

Disappointment might have been less had the musical direction been more sensitive. Linde, beginning with a ponderous Gigue in the overture, conducted in heavy bandmasterly fashion, breaking the flow with extra sforzandos and rallentandos in arias and delayed cadences throughout the recitatives, and sometimes allowing the orchestra to drown the singers. Amastre, placed too far upstage, was scarcely audible except in her last aria, which Gabriele Erhard sang nicely. There were awkward pauses reminiscent of the bad old days of twenty years ago, and two arias in addition to 'Chi cede al furore' were cut short, spoiling a deliciously witty touch in Atalanta's 'Dirà che non m'amò'. Lynda Lee, a more powerful and menacing Serse than her Göttingen counterpart, sang with great drive - and a touch of overdrive in 'Se bramate' and 'Crude furie'. Axel Köhler (Arsamene) was the most assured of the cast. Almost inevitably Elviro became a loose cannon. The performance as a whole was not nearly so crass as last year's *Tolomeo*; but attention needs to be paid to the first Handelian commandment: Thou shalt trust the composer, and him only shalt thou serve.

ARIODANTE in Halle

Two other theatrical events were more rewarding. In the little Goethe-Theater at Bad Lauchstädt Marc Minkowski conducted a highly dramatic *Ariodante*. Unhappily one essential was missing: owing to shortage of funds it was given in concert without action (the money devoted to *Serse* would have been better spent here). Even so, thanks largely to the skill of a strong cast in acting with the voice, the performance worked up tremendous tension, espe-

cially in the second act, one of the finest in any Handel opera. Della Jones, always a dramatic singer, projected heroic and tragic aspects of Ariodante's part with equal conviction. Maria-José Trullu was a wonderfully sinister and vicious Polinesso, delivering the rapid volleys of triplets in 'Se l'inganno' with absolute clarity. Sure Chahidjanian, a sonorous King of Scotland, and Gillian Webster and Veronica Cangemi in the contrasted soprano roles of Ginevra and Dalinda were no less successful in bringing the characters to life. The score was given in full including the dances and the original finale with its electrifying climax in an accompanied recitative that Handel wrote for Act II but did not perform. Minkowski believes in extreme tempos; 'Scherza infida' was even slower than at the Coliseum, and several arias were precipitously fast. Generally, with the cooperation of the singers, he got away with it; but one or two movements in Act III threatened to degenerate into an obstacle race.

SAUL in Halle

Saul the most dramatic of the oratorios, was given a semi-staged performance in the Konzerthalle, a converted church whose limitations were to some extent an inhibiting factor. It was presented as a charade; soloists and chorus assembled in mufti behind the orchestra, put on costumes and make-up during the overture, and reversed the procedure at the end. There was virtually no scenery and only limited action, none at all during the vivid symphonies representing David's marriage, the Feast of the New Moon and the battle. The carillon symphony was amusingly illustrated by the chorus chalking up graffiti. Saul was equipped with a formidable javelin, but could not discharge it for fear of damaging the fabric of the building. Nevertheless, as in *Ariodante*, much of the dramatic power came over, thanks to the conductor (Peter Neumann), producer (Wolfgang Barth) and the



singers revealing a true understanding of the work. There were minimal cuts in the lengthy score (one air and the B section and da capo of another), the High Priest's two dull airs, which Handel very soon abolished, might have been dispensed with. Gregory Reinhart was a splendid Saul, full of fire and menace, well supported by the strong countertenor Matthias Koch (David), John Elwes (Jonathan), Simone Kermes (Merab), Vasilijka Jezovsek (Michal) and the Kölner Kammerchor. *Saul* makes an overwhelming impact in the theatre (I write as a one-time participant); the Festival should give it a slap-up staging in the fully equipped opera house.

Winton Dean

TAMERLANO IN TURIN

In September 1997 the Teatro Regio di Torino put on the first Handel opera ever to be performed there. *Tamerlano* was an excellent choice, and it was the first production of the work anywhere to use the new HHA score and performing materials, edited by your reviewer. The conductor, Corrado Rovaris, said that this was the first time they had had a set of orchestral parts with no mistakes - a tribute to the latest production methods of the HHA.

Rovaris, with whom I had a long talk after the performance that I attended, also apologized, before I could utter a word, for the cuts (seven arias, and two 'B' sections and da capos), explaining that because the theatre authorities were anxious about the reception of a Handel opera by the public they felt the need to shorten it. In the event it was a considerable success with the Torinesi - there was a standing ovation and many cries of "Bravi" - and Rovaris promised that when they revive it the items cut will be restored. He was enthusiastic about the opera and wanted to do more Handel.

The production was borrowed from Glimmerglass Opera in the USA, and I found it generally pleasing. There was hardly any scenery, but the costumes were gorgeous and reasonably historical (not a military helmet, shell-suit or tea-shirt in sight, no revolvers or machine guns), although a curiously full robe for Tamerlano made Maria José Trullu, a fine artist who had sung Polinesso in the Halle *Ariodante* (see above), look uncomfortably like one of the photographs of the ageing Queen Victoria. The direction was sensible (arias were sung without fussy movement, while the recitatives were well paced and dramatically delivered with realistic action): a public used to Verdi or Puccini had no difficulty with it. Surtitles were provided - an aspect, I presume, of the concern that the audience should understand what the opera was about. A novel touch was that at the beginning of each recitative the surtitle gave a brief résumé of the scene, then after a few seconds launched into the text being sung. This did not seem necessary, since the diction was admirably clear throughout and the Piovene/Haym libretto would have caused no difficulty for a modern Italian audience.

The singing was first-rate. All the cast had been well coached in Handelian style, and they used modest ornamentation in the da capos. Patrizia Ciofi was a radiant Asteria, and Furio Zanasi sang Bajazet with passion and power; in the wonderful death-scene he was magnificent. Sara Mingardo as Andronico looked suitably boyish (complete with spade-beard and moustache) and sang with conviction; Marianna Kulikova and Antonio Abete dealt effectively with their rôles as Irene and Leone.

Rovaris's conducting was vigorous, with brisk tempi (I have never heard Bajazet's 'Ciel e terra' taken so fast). I should have liked more attack from the strings, especially in the accompanied recitatives; but all the right things happened, with overdotting and with telescoped cadences in the recitatives,

although Rovaris's mannerism of stopping dead before the penultimate note in the arias became tiresome. Continuo was provided by well-played harpsichord and theorbo; the player of the latter was surrounded during the intervals by groups of fascinated Torinesi asking what the instrument was.

The one concession to the school of thought that audiences are incapable of simply listening to a da capo aria without some visual entertainment was the incorporation into the proceedings of a small ballet troupe, attractively dressed as Tartars, who appeared and danced tastefully at the back of the stage while the singing was on. It was unnecessary, but because it was elegantly done it was not offensive and did not get in the way of the action. The Tartars also doubled as guards for the imprisoned Bajazet, for which activity they brandished fearsome-looking scimitars.

The one thing that irritated was that yet again a producer opted to end Act II with Asteria's 'Cor di padre', as in the original plan for the opera, even though at the last minute Handel moved this aria to Act III and replaced it in Act II with 'Se potessi un di placare'. Most serious commentators think that the composer knew what he was doing, and that he was right to do it: the change in the emotional emphasis is subtle but telling. In my conversation with Rovaris I asked why he had not followed the score at this point. The answer was interesting: he agreed totally with my preference for Handel's final decision but had been forced into accepting the other reading by the stage-director, who had 'heard the recording' (presumably that of John Eliot Gardiner, who also rejected Handel's verdict) and had 'built it into his conception of the drama'. Food for thought about the influence of recordings on productions of operas that are unfamiliar to the director.

Terence Best

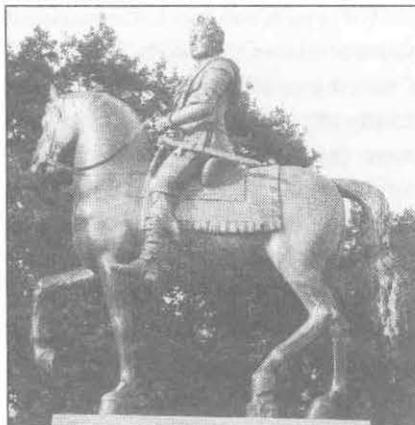


HANDEL AND GEORGE I IN BIRMINGHAM

There are at least two reasons why Handelians should be interested in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham. First, between the bi- and tercentenary years of 1959 and 1985 ten Handel operas (and eleven by other composers) were given professional productions in the Institute's intimate theatre-cum-concert hall. The series was inaugurated, as Stanley Sadie mentions above, by Anthony Lewis, Peyton and Barber Professor of Music at Birmingham from 1947 to 1968, and it was continued by Professor Ivor Keys (1968-86). The full list of Handel productions is: *Xerxes* (1959), *Imeneo* (1961), *Tamerlano* (1962), *Xerxes* (1963), *Ariodante* (1964), *Orlando* (1966), *Admeto* (1968), *Rodelinda* (1972), *Julius Caesar* (1977), *Sosarme* (1979), and *Poro* (1985). The operas were sung in English, and the casts included such figures as Janet Baker, Heather Harper, John Shirley-Quirk and Robert Tear. A brief account of the Barber Operas, and full cast-lists, are to be found in Fiona M. Palmer, *Barber Evening Concerts and Operas: The First Fifty Years* (Birmingham, 1996), a 60-page booklet available from the undersigned (address at the foot of this page; price £3.50 plus £1 postage and packing; cheques payable to the University of Birmingham).

Colin Timms

Visitors to the Barber Institute can hardly fail to notice the imposing equestrian sculpture on the lawn outside the main entrance, but how many Handelians realize that it is a statue of George I, attributed to the Anglo-Flemish sculptor John van Nost the elder (fl 1686-1711/13)? This monumental work, almost ten feet high, was commissioned in 1717 by the Corporation of the City of Dublin for the Essex Bridge over the River Liffey (later known as the Grattan Bridge), where it was erected in 1722. It was removed from this location in 1753



Statue of George I (c. 1717-22) attributed to John van Nost the elder: Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.

and set up in 1798 in the garden of the Mansion House, Dawson Street, on a plinth with an inscription of loyalty to the House of Hanover. There it remained throughout the nineteenth century and was observed in 1842 by William Thackeray 'peering over a paling'; it was moved to the rear garden when part of the Mansion House was rebuilt in 1927.

The statue was rescued in 1937 by Professor Thomas Bodkin, the first Director of the newly-founded Barber Institute. He and Robert Atkinson, the architect of the Institute, had been looking for an impressive monument with which to set off the exterior of the building. Bodkin had been Director of the National Gallery of Ireland and was able to use his contacts in Dublin to secure the neglected sculpture for the Institute. After restoration, it was erected in the gardens in front of the building on a plinth specially designed by Atkinson.

This statue of George I is one of the finest equestrian sculptures in Great Britain and the only eighteenth-century example in Birmingham. It is one of three surviving statues of the king on horseback attributed to John van Nost the elder, and the only one in bronze (the other two, in lead, are at Hackwood Park, Hampshire, and Stowe, Buckinghamshire). The exact authorship of the Barber version is unclear, as John van Nost the elder seems to have died before May 1713, perhaps as early as

1711. However, his business remained in the family after his death, and the execution of the piece was probably undertaken by his assistants, Andrew Carpenter (c. 1677-1737) and Christopher Burchard (fl 1716). Thanks to the conservation measures taken in 1993, it probably looks as impressive today as when set up in Dublin 275 years ago.

Paul Spencer-Longhurst

LONDON HANDEL FESTIVAL 1998

The 21st London Handel Festival will take place between 24 March and 3 May 1998. The Handel works to be performed are:

24-27 March – Britten Theatre, Royal College of Music, *Radamisto*

16 April – St George's, Hanover Square, *Susanna*

22 April – St Andrew's, Holborn, *Dixit Dominus*, *Donna che in ciel*, *Silete venti*, and an organ concerto

30 April – St George's, Hanover Square, *Il trionfo del Tempo* (first modern performance of 1737 version).

Booking forms will be available after 1 January 1998 from the Booking Office, London Handel Festival, 13 Cambridge Road, New Malden, Surrey, KT3 3QE (tel. 0181-336 0990).

AWARDS FOR RESEARCH AND PERFORMANCE

The Handel Institute invites applications for:

- **Handel Institute Awards** (up to £1000) in support of **research** projects involving the life or works of Handel or his contemporaries: **deadline 1 September 1998.**
- the **Gerard W. Byrne Award** (up to £1000) to support the performance of Handel's music and assist young professional musicians at the start of their careers: **deadline 1 April 1998.**

Further details on these awards from the Honorary Secretary (address below).

The Handel Institute is a registered charity (no. 296615). All enquiries should be addressed to the honorary secretary: Professor Colin Timms, Department of Music, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, England.