



THE HANDEL INSTITUTE
NEWSLETTER

In this issue we report on the 1998 London Handel Festival (for the first time - *nostra culpa!*) and the Royal Opera's production last September of *Giulio Cesare*. Duncan Chisholm

and Thomas McGeary discuss contemporary poems about Handel, and Brian Trowell reviews a major new book on the composer.

Terence Best

The London Handel Festival 1998

The London Handel Festival, which takes place in the spring under the benevolent direction of Denys Darlow, is the major annual Handel celebration in this country. It complements the musicological and organisational work of the Handel Institute, and members of the Institute are consulted on scholarly matters; it is well supported by the members of the London Handel Society, and by the public which attends the concerts in gratifying numbers.

There are many attractive features: staged performances of an opera in the agreeable surroundings of the Britten Theatre at the Royal College of Music, and choral and instrumental concerts in locations with strong Handelian connections, most notably St George's, Hanover Square, and the Thomas Coram Foundation. This year St Andrew's, Holborn, which contains Coram's tomb, was added to the list; St George's Chapel, Windsor, is also in the frame, with its superb choir. The 1998 programme book was of the highest standard of scholarship and presentation, being largely the work of Anthony Hicks.

Over the years the standards of performance have risen consistently, and the programme is ambitious. Of the events I was able to attend, the first was *Radamisto* at the Britten Theatre. As in previous years there were two complete casts of young professional singers from the Royal Schools' opera course; I saw the dress rehearsal and the opening performance of the first cast, conducted by Denys Darlow (Michael Rosewell conducted the other). It was an important occasion, because it was the first complete performance of the first version of the opera to be given anywhere since the end of the original run on 22 June 1720; the ballets were omitted (it is not certain that those in Acts I and II were ever performed). In some passages which Handel later revised

(and were printed so by Chrysander) the singers used the original tessitura.

The production by Robert Chevara was straightforward and simple: rather too simple in some ways, since this is an opera with a good deal of spectacle - a siege, a battle, and Zenobia throwing herself into the river Araxes - but perhaps cost was a factor. The costumes were 18th-century rather than 1st-century, but there is no harm in that, and it reflects what we know of the practice of Handel's time. The action was naturalistic and generally convincing, although the producer did occasionally succumb to the familiar anxiety about whether the singers should just sing without fussy by-play - I began to be irritated by Tiridate's repeated prodding of his various enemies with his sword while the text threatened them with death (and also when it didn't).

The singing was of a high standard, with sensible and effective ornamentation in the da capos. Emma Bell as Radamisto (a part written for Margherita Durastanti) was suitably boyish and passionate; it was sad that Miriam Murphy was unable to sing Zenobia because of a throat infection, so Rahel Wagner from the second cast took over in the rehearsal and the first performance. She gave a dramatic and finely sung account of this wonderful role, some of which was transposed because there are problems with its voice range. Natasha Marsh was a magnificently indignant Polissena, and brought off the almost impossible 'Sposo ingrato' superbly in spite of Tiridate's prods. José Gallisa, with his powerful bass voice, brought dignity to Farasmane; Mark Guerin as Tiridate was rather taxed by the high notes, but acted with swashbuckling villainy. Jennie Such and Ee-Ping Yee were effective as Tigrane and Fraarte: difficult roles to bring off dramatically, as soprano



army generals with the occasional penchant for blood and slaughter are hard to make convincing. A point which producers should work on when women play male parts is to persuade them to avoid too feminine gestures: Fraarte's foot-stamping and flouncing off when Zenobia rejected him spoilt an otherwise passionate and committed performance. This was overall a great success, one of LHF's best productions, and it held the audience enthralled; it proved yet again that if you keep things moving and do it properly, you can perform a Handel opera uncut, and it works.

The Choral and Orchestral Concert in St Andrew's on 22 April was another fine evening: the choir of St George's Chapel, the sopranos Jeni Bern and Joanne Lunn, and the London Handel Orchestra gave us *Dixit Dominus*, *Silete venti*, *Donna che in ciel*, instrumental works by Handel and Boyce, and an interesting new anthem, *Bright Phoenix* by Francis Shaw. It was an original and well-designed programme, and both singing and playing were first-rate. How lucky we are to have these superb cathedral choirs in this country: I have never heard a more thrilling performance of *Dixit Dominus*.

On the following Monday at St George's, Hanover Square, there was a concert in aid of the Handel House Trust by the choir, orchestra and soloists of the Purcell School, directed by Simon Brown. We had *Zadok, the priest*, some instrumental works, and *Exodus from Israel in Egypt*, with the final chorus of *Moses' Song*. The orchestra played very well, and the choir sang with vigour, but compared with the previous concerts this was something of a disappointment. One would hope that a specialist music school would have someone who could advise on now generally-accepted Baroque performance practice, even when modern instruments are used, and this was lacking; but the most curious feature of the evening was that while an enthusiastic tympanist was present for *Zadok*, he joined the choir for *Israel*,

which was consequently performed *senza timp.*, to its great disadvantage. One could see no reason for this; and are there no trombones at the Purcell School?

The final concert, played to a packed St George's, was perhaps the most significant event of the Festival: the first performance in modern times of the oratorio *Il Trionfo del Tempo e della Verità* in its 1737 version. It has never been published, although there is a performing-score in Hamburg, which was the basis of a new one prepared by Anthony Hicks. The libretto is no masterpiece - allegorical ones never are - but, as Hicks argued in the programme notes, Handel may have had good reason at this time to put on an Italian oratorio, so he resurrected his youthful effort of 1707 and reworked it with his usual skill. The result was a delight: there is some fine music, and it was excellently performed by the London Handel Choir and Orchestra, conducted by Paul Nicholson, with Emma Kirkby, Jeni Bern, Catherine Denley and the countertenor Robin Blaze as soloists; and very good they were: the ovation at the end was well deserved.

Other major events that I was unable to attend were the annual *St Matthew Passion* on Good Friday, *Susanna*, and *Alexander's Feast* in Windsor. According to my informants these all matched the rest of the Festival, which must surely be one of the best to date. All power to Denys Darlow and his colleagues, and long may they continue.

Terence Best

HANDEL IN HELL?

Even before his arrival in England, Handel was compared to the demigod Orpheus, son of Apollo and symbol of musical inspiration. Cardinal Pamphili referred to him as 'novello Orfeo' in his cantata text *Hendel, non può mia musa* - a good example of the flattery

which earned Handel's dismissive comment 'that old fool'. Fool or not, Pamphili was aware of the composer's special talent. Not long after the great success of *Agrippina*, Handel veered to England, and not long after his arrival in London Giacomo Rossi, his librettist for *Rinaldo*, referred to 'Mr. Hendel, the Orpheus of our century'. The comparison stuck between 1708 and 1711 and continued to stick. It was not unusual for baroque poets to indulge in extravagant praise: Farinelli also was compared to Orpheus. What is unusual is the special and prolonged use of this comparison for Handel, who sprang upon the London scene fully armed with an established reputation and, despite cavilling and criticism, never lost the aura of a superstar.

Like any good performer, Handel knew enough to play with this image, as did his supporters. In *Il Parnasso in festa* he played with the roles of both Apollo and Orpheus to give a graceful compliment and fond farewell to his favourite pupil, the Princess Royal. He is linked through these symbolic characters to the sun, reason, light, virtue - and prophecy. When, in 1735, the Abbé Prevost gossips about the London scene, he comments quite casually: 'Everyone agrees that he [Handel] is the Orpheus of his age and that this new work is a masterpiece... He is admired, but from a distance, for he is often alone'. The work referred to was probably the London staging of *Athalia*, to which Prévost may have been attracted since it is based upon a drama by Racine, albeit skilfully altered to coincide with a more Hanoverian stance. For protestant England the modern Orpheus in his bardic guise chose his Old Testament oratorio texts well, further enhancing his image as a prophetic soul.

In May 1738 Roubiliac's famous statue of Handel was erected in Vauxhall Gardens, with the composer holding an Apollonian sunburst lyre in a charmingly casual pose that is distinctly reminiscent of one for Orpheus.



A song text by John Lockman with music by Thomas Gladwin, printed on 6 June 1738, refers to his 'Airs divine' - and is joined to quite possibly the ugliest of all contemporary representations of Handel, a crude engraving of the statue. Handel's setting of *Alexander's Feast, or The Power of Musick* presented another bard, Timotheus, but also linked the composer to Dryden, who had been closely associated with his only immediate musical predecessor of greatness, Purcell. Dryden had an elevated view of the role of the creative artist as 'Vates', the Roman mixture of poet, priest and prophet. Handel's growing number of settings of Dryden, Milton and biblical stories continued the underlying comparison of Handel himself 'as of a person separate to God'. And, as with Dryden, this was not a stance that would prevent his attendance at the coffee-house or pub.

From 1739 to 1745 an opposition of increasing bitterness was launched against Handel, and among the names of those who joined the fray one of the most notable was that of Lady Margaret Brown, wife of Sir Robert Brown. She was a supporter of Lord Middlesex and his Italian operas, and may have been amongst the 'quality' who were pressuring Handel to write for them. He did supply the pasticcio *Rossane*, but was meanwhile working secretly on his English opera *Semele*, which appeared in February 1744. It is interesting that Smith, in a letter of this period, is kept in the dark and assumes that the text is one by Dryden, not Congreve. Mrs Delaney enjoyed the work, but admitted 'SEMELE has a strong party against it, viz. the fine ladies, petit maîtres, and ignoramus's. All the opera people are enraged at Handel, but Lady Cobham, Lady Westmoreland, and Lady Chesterfield never fail it'.

There is not enough documentation to supply all the answers concerning this artistic war, so it is all the more heartening to find, in the series of

pamphlets, a hitherto unnoticed poem with a new slant. Before dealing with it, however, we must place it in the context of some earlier 'inspired' lyrics. After *Semele*, Handel had another classical tale, *Hercules*, prepared for his 1745 season. Middlesex and his company shut down, and Handel mounted a very ambitious programme for his sixtieth year, including two new works (the other was *Belshazzar*) and a retrospective of most of his major odes and oratorios. Opposition to the season seems to have been well orchestrated. *Hercules* failed. When Handel offered to refund ticket money, his supporters rallied and encouraged him to continue. Verses appeared of a distinctly classical bent, and the old comparison with Orpheus became a potent illustration of the composer's difficulties.

A poem 'To Mr. Handel' appeared on 21 January 1745 with a superscription from Virgil encouraging the composer: 'Tu ne cede malis, sed contra audentior ito'. A contemporary translator rendered this as follows:

But thou, secure of soul, unbent with
woes,
The more thy fortune frowns, the
more oppose.

The poem describes the death of Orpheus, torn apart by the mad women of Thrace; Lady Brown makes an appearance in the following section:

The Thracian Women 'tis well
known,
Despis'd all MUSIC, but their own;
But chiefly ONE, of envious Kind,
With Skin of Tyger capuchin'd,¹
Was more implacable than all,
And strait resolv'd poor ORPHEUS
Fall;
Whene'er he play'd, she'd make a
DRUM,
Invite her Neighbours all to come.

The poem is larded with footnotes giving quotations from the story as told by Ovid - a very learned attack!

A further defence of Handel appeared in the *Gazetteer* on 13 March 1745; it is by a different hand but includes the phrase 'Proof that ORPHEUS was, is HANDEL now'. Another Ode to Handel appeared on 2 May, with a few classical tags from Horace and Plutarch, but more significantly with a scornful dismissal of Folly, Envy and Despair as infernal powers.

The new poem, 'Orpheus and Hecate', was advertised in the *General Advertiser* on 30 April 1746, by which time Handel's crisis was virtually over. The victory predicted for the Hanoverian forces against the Stuarts had taken place at Culloden on 16 April, vindicating the *Occasional Oratorio* and enhancing Handel's position as an apologist for the house of Hanover. The title and text of the poem, which deals with Orpheus's descent to Hades, are as follows: ORPHEUS AND HEKATE / AN / ODE / INSCRIBED TO THE / PATRONESS / OF THE / ITALIAN OPERA / Tantum Odiis, Iraeque dabat... / ...illa SORORES / Nocte vocat genitas... MET. lib. 4 / LONDON / Printed for W. Webb near St. Paul's / 1746 (MDCCXLVI) / (Price Six Pence)

When Orpheus, as old Poets tell,
Cary'd his Music down to Hell,
He fill'd the Shades with Joys;
Alecto, and Tisiphone,
Megaera, with Brown HEKATE,
Transported heard his Voice.

And whilst He led the Song divine,
The Spectres all in Chorus join;
Such was grim PLUTO's Will!
Tantalus quaff'd a flowing Bowl,
Sisyphus ceas'd his Stone to roll,
Ixion's Wheel stood still.

His Person, Melody, and Lyre
Set the infernal Queen on Fire,
Who courted him to stay;
But PLUTO, to prevent all Strife,
Order'd the Poet, with his Wife,
Back to the Realms of Day.

¹A capuchin is a cowed cloak which became fashionable for ladies. Like the lady mentioned, the garment was Brown.



Joyful they speed for upper Air;
 When, to divide the happy Pair,
 HECAT' contriv'd a Spell:
 Now, now, she cry'd, in rapt'rous
 Tone,
 His Harmony is all my own!
 I'll make a Heav'n in Hell!

For me, and my Tartarean Crew,
 Endless the wanton Song renew!
 O ever touch the Lyre!
 But still the Bard, in heav'nly Lays,
 Wou'd sing his KING's and Maker's
 Praise,
 And kindle martial Fire.

Enrag'd, the triple-headed Dame*
 Howl'd; in a Trice the Furies came,
 Threat'ning a dreadful Fate;
 Till PHOEBUS, with the tuneful
 Nine,
 And lovely Graces, all combine
 To shield Him from their Hate.

Thus sav'd from Death, He shares
 the Love
 Of Men below, and Blest above,
 The Virtuous, Brave, and Wise;
 While ev'ry chaste, and pious Mind,
 To Vice averse, to Good inclin'd,
 Must HECAT's Name despise.

The British Library copy of the poem (C. 57. g. 7 (14)) has a few additions in a contemporary hand, one of which identifies the 'Patroness of the Italian Opera' as Lady Brown; this is confirmed by the alteration of the usual description of Hecate from 'black' to 'Brown', just as in the earlier poem the word 'capuchin'd' had been highlighted. The poem has been catalogued wrongly under Sir Charles Williams, although R. Walpole has noted that it is 'certainly not by Sr. Ch. Williams'. Could the close conjunction of the Furies Alecto, Megaera and Tisiphone point to the librettist of *Hercules* as the author of this poem? Certainly Broughton, who must have been disappointed by the fate of *Hercules*, was a classical scholar and translator, and a loyal supporter of Handel. *Hercules* also has some links

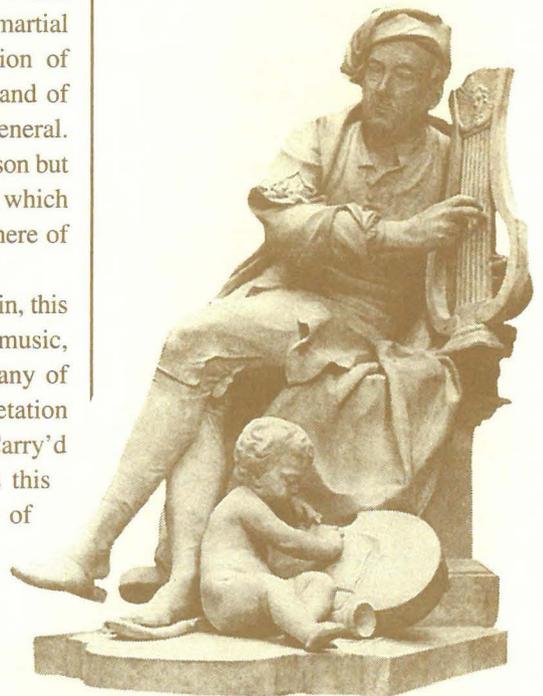
with Ovid, an author close to the heart of the poet of this satire. The superscription is an abbreviated form of the description of Juno preparing to drive Athamus mad at the end of the story of Semele in Book IV of the *Metamorphoses*. A rough translation is: 'So much did she yield to her hate and wrath... she called the Sisters born of Night...'

Since Hecate is clearly Lady Brown, who are the others in this little drama? The poet chose to make the operatic patroness Hecate rather than Proserpina for two reasons. First, Pluto, the God of the Underworld, is likely to be the plutocrat Lord Middlesex, ruler of the 'hell' of the Italian opera, and his amorous connections were apparently not with Lady Brown but with the soprano Muscovita - among others. The second reason is the chance given to use the description of Hecate from Ovid's Book VII ('Tuque triceps HECATE') to score a satirical point over Lady Brown. Handel, as usual, is Orpheus, pictured at the zenith of the musical myth; if there were any doubt, this would be dispelled by the revealing lines describing his return to the upper air ('But still the Bard, in heav'nly Lays, / Wou'd sing his KING's and Maker's Praise, / And kindle martial Fire'). That's a good description of Handel's *Occasional Oratorio* and of the themes of his oratorios in general. Apollo may not be a specific person but rather Handel's creative energy, which separates him from the dark sphere of Pluto and Hecate's operatic hell.

Who, then, is Eurydice? Again, this may refer simply to Handel's music, unable to be kept in the company of Middlesex, but another interpretation may be drawn from the line 'Carry'd his Music down to Hell'. Was this Handel's reluctant arranging of *Rossane* for Middlesex? Or had he lost to Middlesex a singer he intended to use in his own season? Both Galli and Frasi sang in the Middlesex

group before allying with Handel; Frasi also sang arias by Handel at a benefit concert in March 1746 and continued to sing pieces by him until he gave her a principal part in his 1749 season. There is not enough information at present for Eurydice to be fully identified, but the following comment of George III comes to mind: 'his Amours were rather of short duration, always within the pale of his own profession'.

That Handel was attractive to women can be seen from remarks as early as those of Electress Sophia of Hanover. The fact is rather surprisingly confirmed, also, by the figure of Hecate, and may hint at the beginning of the feud between the composer and Lady Brown ('His Person, Melody, and Lyre / Set the infernal Queen on Fire, / Who courted him to stay... / HECAT' contriv'd a Spell: / Now, now, she cry'd, in rapt'rous Tone, / His Harmony is all my own! / I'll make a Heav'n in Hell!). She describes his song as 'wanton', which reveals more about her than Handel's music, but 'His Person' escapes her clutches. Truly, in this case, Hell hath no Fury like a Lady scorned.



Statue of Handel as Apollo by Louis François Roubiliac; commissioned by Jonathan Tyers for Vauxhall pleasure-gardens, where it was erected in April 1738.

* Tuque triceps HECATE — MET. lib. 7. The Antients represented Hecate with Three Heads, that of a Horse, a Bitch, and a Savage; the second is supposed to be the Head used on this Occasion.



HANDEL AT VAUXHALL

On the evening of 1 May 1738 the season at the Spring-Gardens at Vauxhall opened with a new attraction that would become a London landmark: a life-sized marble statue of Handel. The erection of a public statue to a living artist was unprecedented in Europe¹ and testifies to the central place that Handel had assumed in Britain's musical life. Many 'Handolators' celebrated the event with poems, which found their way into newspapers and magazines.² Illustrations of the statue in its alcove were popular in the engraved vignettes of songsheets.

Two such poems were printed in May and July 1738 in the *Literary Courier of Grub-street*, the little-known successor to the *Grub-street Journal*.³ The poems, though perhaps of interest less for literary merit than as evidence of nascent Handel hagiography, are worth reprinting here. The second poem escaped the notice of Otto Erich Deutsch and the editors of the *Händel-Handbuch*. The first is no doubt the original for the version reprinted, with slight variants, in the *London Magazine* (May 1738), from which it was reprinted (with an omission that ruined a rhyme) by Deutsch and, following him, the *Händel-Handbuch*.⁴

Thomas McGeary

Upon *Handel's* Statue being placed in Spring-garden at *Vauxhall*.

As in debate the tuneful sister stood,
In what sequester'd shade, or hallow'd wood,
Should Handel's S[t]atue (Music's master!) stand,
In which fair art well mimicks nature's hand,
Thus spoke the God that, with enliv'ning rays,
Glads the whole earth, and crowns the Bard with bays,
"Here bid the marble rise, be this the place,
"The haunt of ev'ry muse, and ev'ry grace,
"Where harmony resides, and beautys rove:
"Where should he stand but in *Apollo's* grove?"

On seeing Mr. *Handel's* statue in Vaux-hall gardens.

How far the sculptor's utmost art can go
This statue, wond'rous proof thereof! may show;
Musick's great master's here's exprest so well,
So freely on the lyre his fingers dwell
That wholly it our soul's alarms confounds,
We listen, and expect the op'ning sounds.
But ah! in vain, 'tis Handel's self must give
The pow'r to charm, to move, to make it live.

-
- 1 On the statue, its location, and subsequent history before arriving at its present home in the Victoria and Albert Museum, see Terence Hodgkinson, *Handel at Vauxhall*. Victoria and Albert Museum Bulletin Reprints, no. 1 (1969) [expanded reprint from the *Bulletin of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, i/4 (1965), 1-13].
- 2 For a survey of Handel in poetry and novels, see Robert J. Merrett, 'England's Orpheus: Praise of Handel in Eighteenth-Century Poetry', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, xx/2 (1987), 97-110.
- 3 *Literary Courier of Grub-street*, nos. 19 and 30 (11 May and 27 July 1738); it ran from January to July 1738 and continued the *Grub-street Journal* (1730-37).
- 4 *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London: A. and C. Black, 1955), 462-3; *Händel-Handbuch*, iv: *Dokumente zu Leben und Schaffen* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1985), 297. Both omit the words 'with bays'.
-



A final question is raised by the description of Juno at the beginning of the poem. Did some of the 'quality' see a connection, intentional or not, between the jealous figure of Juno (*Semele*) or Dejanira (*Hercules*) and the 'Patroness of the Italian Opera'? However that may be, the poem is an interesting example of a defence of Handel in the role of Orpheus, using this long-standing comparison with both humour and compassion - though not for the unfortunate Lady Brown.

Duncan Chisholm

GIULIO CESARE AT THE BARBICAN

(19 September 1997)

The Royal Opera's first attempt at a Handel opera, for which we have had to wait an unconscionable time, was a disappointment. That it was given with maimed rites - no spectacle, virtually no scenery, a few inadequate and not always relevant props - was perhaps excusable since it had to work on different stages. What was indefensible was the blundering wrong-headed production. Lindsay Posner, who has worked mostly in the spoken theatre, evidently regarded Baroque opera and Handel's score as a bundle of decrepit conventions asking to be camped up. An insufferable facetiousness replaced the irony that flickers over this score, alternating with intense emotion and full-blooded passion.

Tasteless infelicities were legion: Achilles serving Ptolemy with pyramid-shaped iced lollies, Caesar sharing an opium pipe with Ptolemy and then going all dopey in 'Va tacito', of all arias, Ptolemy and Achilles popping up from their coffins to join in the final *coro*. The Parnassus scene, one of the most magical in opera, misfired completely, with Nireno as a winged Cupid ostentatiously sharpening his arrows, Cleopatra perched in mid-air, and the wrong number of Muses

strolling on just when they were no longer required.

Posner ignored the first rule of Handelian opera, that the singers carry the dramatic action, and anything that distracts attention from their arias is a plaguey nuisance. Aria after aria was undercut by someone or other doing the fidgets - often the 'movement group', who capered about in animal masks throughout 'L'angue offeso'. Ptolemy, a vicious and menacing figure, was caricatured as an effete buffoon, playing with toy crocodiles and carried on and off by a slave. The costumes were a weird mixture of styles, ranging over two millennia and three or four continents, Cleopatra sporting a lurid pink trouser-suit. The 'eminent pile of trophies' crowned by Pompey's ashes, addressed by Caesar in the opera's most solemn scene, was a miserable little pot that Caesar deposited on an empty stage and Cleopatra later carried off on her shoulder.

Fortunately there was compensation in some fine singing. It is not often that one is tempted to award the palm to two countertenors, but David Daniels as Sextus (a part written for a woman) and Brian Asawa as Ptolemy, the victim of some of the producer's least happy ideas, gave constant pleasure, deploying secure rounded tone throughout the range without the vestige of a hoot. Ann Murray, an experienced Caesar, seemed to have lost some of her pristine warmth in fast arias, but gave a beautiful account of the Act III scene 'Dall'ondoso periglio'. Amanda Roocroft's Cleopatra was adequate, and something more in 'Se pietà', but conveyed little of the radiance and infinite variety of this wonderfully rewarding part. Clearer enunciation of the words would have simplified her task. Gerald Finley was an impeccable Achilles (so much so that one regretted the loss of his Act III aria). Catherine Wyn-Rogers, perhaps not in the best of health, was a rather bland and impassive Cornelia. The Barbican acoustic was not helpful, either to the orchestra, which often

sounded thin, or to the singers when (as frequently happened) they were placed too far up-stage.

That the opera failed to catch fire or exert its full dramatic grip was due partly to the production, partly to Ivor Bolton's conducting, which too often let the pace slacken by lingering over final cadences and pausing before attacking the next number. One or two lightly scored arias threatened to fall apart, one or two quick ones became an unseemly scramble. The final scene was unbalanced by the emasculation of its two principal movements, the four-horn *sinfonia* and the love duet, followed by a *coro* taken at such a lick as to suggest that the last boat to Rome was on the point of leaving. Six arias in all were omitted (it was a pity to lose Caesar's vernal response to his first sight of Cleopatra), one ('Chi perde un momento' for Nerino) inserted from a revival, and four pieces reduced to their A sections. There were also substantial cuts in the recitative, some of them apparently pointless. It is interesting to note that a stage performance of the uncut 1724 score at Birmingham twenty years ago exceeded the Barbican performance in duration (intervals excluded) by less than twenty minutes. A great deal of nonsense is talked about the length of Handel's operas; *Giulio Cesare* is the longest.

Winton Dean

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO HANDEL

Edited by Donald Burrows
Cambridge University Press, 1997
xvi + 349pp., with 12 plates
ISBNs: 0 521 45425 5 (hb., £45,
US\$59.95); 0 52145613 4 (pb., £15.95,
US\$19.95)

Handel now joins Bach, Chopin and Schubert in the admirable series of *Cambridge Companions to Music*. He has on the whole been very well served by the editor, Donald Burrows (who contributes two essays besides the



Preface and Introduction) and his team of sixteen, most of whom are well-known and well-tried experts in their fields. The book is a collection of short studies, not that other familiar kind of 'Companion' which is an alphabetically-arranged encyclopedia giving instant access to information on works, venues, collaborators, associated artists and contemporaries (Andrew Jones and Elizabeth Gibson are editing such a book on Handel for Oxford University Press); but readers expecting a reference work will be able to find much of what they want by using its index, chronology, classified work-list, bibliography and often generous end-notes and suggestions for further reading, not to mention the intelligent grouping of material in the eighteen essays.

These condense the current state of knowledge on various topics and the fruits of very recent research, some of it original and some of it now made available for the first time in English, into succinct and readable reviews varying in length from nine to twenty-three pages and arranged under three main headings. Part I, 'Background', deals with biographical, practical and intellectual context. Part II 'The Music', offers some analytical discussion and five genre studies. Part III, 'The Music in Performance', half the length of the previous sections, seems less carefully focussed: of the four essays, one examines Handel's setting of Italian and knowledge of its grammar, two, somewhat overlapping, deal with performing practice in regard to the orchestra and to oratorio, and the fourth is a philippic by Winton Dean setting out the desiderata for the modern stage production of Handel's opera - still, alas, sorely needed. It is strange that Part II contains no connected account of Handel's operas. There is a good deal about opera elsewhere, in Chapter 6 (Italian librettists), Chapters 8 and by reflection 9 (both concerned essentially with the aria) and in 15

(Italian language), 16 (orchestral practice) and 17 (stage practice): I suppose the editor ran short of space - though he still made room for two essays on aspects of the oratorio (fine contributions, both).

Professor Burrows' Preface and Introduction explain the historical and practical orientation of the *Companion*. We are not to expect the 'new musicology', nor much in the way of reception history save in relation to the modern revival of the operas: 'it seemed more appropriate to approach the subject of Handel through the positive route of presenting and surveying the materials that might lead us to an imaginative recreation of the circumstances of Handel's life and music, rather than exposing the various ways in which subsequent ages "got it wrong"', he writes. Fair enough, though the interested listener and performer might perhaps have expected rather more comment of an analytical nature, as an aid to understanding the extraordinary mixture of conventionality and unpredictability by which Handel works his magic. But that takes a lot of space and many music examples, and perhaps we must rest content for now with the two essays in Part II, though both are essentially limited to aria forms.

Part I seems to me very successful, bringing out much important material which a short biography cannot normally accommodate. There could be no-one more fitted than John Butt to depict for us the kind of social, musical and educational culture surrounding the young Handel in Germany. His judicious reconciliation (where possible) of discrepancies in the contemporary biographical evidence, and his account of Handel's likely educational fodder, both general and musical, could not be bettered. Carlo Vitali, primarily a literary expert, writes on Handel's Italian background: though he starts off with a rather forbidding salvo of statistics, he is also helpful, especially on the political social and literary aspects, and

winnows out the certain from the uncertain in relation to Handel's Italian experience. This is a valuable account of the difficult conditions that led to the diaspora of Italian music and musicians throughout Europe - including the transfer to foreign presses, particularly German, of Italian music-publishing.

William Weber, an intellectual and social historian of music, places Handel in his new milieu in London in exemplary manner, but goes further than usual in emphasising Handel's leadership and his role in bringing together an audience of listeners otherwise divided in their religious and political convictions. I doubt, however, that the 'soft Strains of the Opera... qualified and allay'd the native city of the English', who were more noted for their pugnacity (p.46); and the London literati (p.52) were more likely to have been disturbed by the rush, rather than the 'rash of popularity given to it [the Italian opera] by the public', for all that they were, no doubt, a scrofulous lot.

There follow four studies on particular aspects of Handel's London life and production. The well-known theatre-historians Judith Milhous and Robert Hume give an excellent short guide to the London theatres. H. Diack Johnstone, who has so signally rescued many indigenous English composers from undeserved neglect in Handel's giant shadow, surveys the whole culture with a telling eye for detail (venturing briefly into the provinces, though his brief was London), showing that Handel got as much as he gave. Lowell Lindgren offers a masterly and omniscient survey of Italian musicians and librettists in Handel's London and manages to include the dancers too. Finally, Ruth Smith, long admired as a historian of ideas who can relate contemporary intellectual, social and religious trends to the texts of Handel's oratorios, writes an admirable essay on his English librettists, giving due weight to the fact that it was his pre-eminence that attracted most of them into writing for him.



Part II, 'The Music', begins with two analytical chapters on 'Handel and the aria' by C. Steven LaRue and 'Handel's compositional process' by David Ross Hurley, also largely confined to the aria. Both make useful points, but these younger American scholars needed more space if they were to generalize in the way that the subject demands. LaRue might perhaps have commented on Burney's suggestive footnote classifying Handel's *Alcina* arias as old-style, new-style and mixed-style, and on the types of melody and rhythm generated in Handel's imagination by the characteristic metres of Italian verse (a topic which Terence Best might also have explored in Chapter 15). When Handel was faced with the task of setting English prose in aria style in *Messiah*, it is curious to see him using repetitions in order to achieve something like an Italian *quinario* with an English prose text:

He was despised,
a man of sorrows,
despised and rejected,
a man of sorrows,
rejected of men,
and acquainted with grief.

One wanted longer comment on *da capo* ornamentation, too, and something on the *rondò*. Hurley's essay offers a detailed study of the successive drafts of a duet and an aria. One further reason for Handel's rejection of two early versions of the *Hercules* duet 'Joys of freedom' must be that each breaks down, at bars 134ff. and 160ff. respectively, into brief snatches of imitation which mutilate the text.

Anthony Hicks contributes an excellent survey of the currents that flowed into Handelian English oratorio from Italy and Germany (not, apparently, France), and of Handel's likely intentions, as well as his methods, in transplanting an alien form into English concert life. He does full justice also to the odes and 'secular oratorios', showing that Handel must

have seen them as an important complementary activity equal in value, as their quality suggests, to his sacred works. He is cautious and judicious over the still obscure origins of *Esther*. I would certainly wish to associate the work with the extraordinarily theatrical ambience of the re-modelled St Lawrence Whitchurch at Cannons, with its stage, its sky-painted apse and its carved wing-pieces: surely, in this very un-English scheme and its remarkable acoustic, the Earl of Carnarvon must have had in mind an Italianate oratorio chapel of the type he could have admired in Southern Germany and Austria on his travels with and on behalf of the Duke of Marlborough. Hicks' discussion of the precursors of oratorio ranges commendably widely; but Cavalieri's *Rappresentazione di anima, e di corpo* hardly incorporates the fully-fledged style of monodic recitative into sacred musical drama (the texts are not in *versi sciolti*, for a start). Footnote 43 has (unimportantly) vanished from the main text.

It is useful to have Graydon Beeks' review of the occasions and qualities of Handel's sacred music, which he rescues from the reproach of being more ceremonial than religious. Malcolm Boyd, who is expert in the history and sources of the Italian and German cantata, performs a valuable and thought-provoking service by considering Handel's cantatas and chamber duets as designed for the same milieu as the instrumental chamber music, and explores interesting analogies between them. His Example 12.3 (b) comes from the first section of *Troppo cruda*, however. Donald Burrows himself writes on 'Handel as a concerto composer', a superb survey. He might have adduced Peter Holman's *Four and Twenty Fiddlers* as a valuable guide to instrumental textures current during Handel's youth. He is excellent on Handel's use of the French overture format, but perhaps underplays the role of the forward-looking Italian operatic

sinfonia (completed on occasion by the opening chorus, as in *Acis and Galatea*, a tradition still observed in some of Haydn's operas). Handel's avoidance of Vivaldian structures in his concertos is indeed remarkable, when we consider his use of the ritornello principle in his arias. The section closes with a splendid overview by Terence Best of the keyboard music, giving due space, as one would expect of so experienced an editor, to questions of piracy and authenticity.

Best also opens the third section, with an essay whose title, 'Handel and the Italian language', at least for me (as a former translator) promised more than it had space to investigate. All the same, he throws up some curious conundrums. Such an essay might usefully have considered Handel's approach to word-setting more generally. I'm not sure that most people yet 'agree that apart from a few well-known lapses of accentuation he set the [English] language beautifully to music'. Not that I disagree, but the case needs more convincing demonstration if the reverse opinion is to be combated. Even the 'few well-known lapses' need questioning. Nobody sings what Handel set in 'The trumpet shall sound', where he stresses the first and fourth syllables of 'incorruptible' as '*incorruptible*'; yet the poet Andrew Marvell stresses 'corruptible' as '*corruptible*'.

Mark W. Stahura's chapter on 'Handel and the orchestra' offers a valuable compilation of evidence, though he is careful not to push hypotheses further than the known facts will warrant. Indeed, he does allow himself to consider, in relation to the ripieni/concertini question, whether dynamic markings might mean, not simply 'louder' and 'softer', but 'more desks' and 'fewer desks'. He is right not to take the unusual 'ripieno' markings from Handel's 1749 season as exemplary: some of them are plainly designed to keep the less experienced string-players out of action when a



new tempo is being established. My only criticism of this chapter would be that Stahura restricts himself too much to performing practice. If his title promises discussion of Handel and the orchestra, there ought to be some comment on the principal source of variety in Handel's operas and oratorios, which is not the addition of wind instruments (or more exotic ones) to the string band, but the constantly changing combinations within the strings' textures from aria to aria, and indeed between sections of arias.

I have already signalled Winton Dean's 'Production style in Handel's operas', which deserves to be administered as a pre-production purgative to any opera director who approaches Handel by reading Benedetto Marcello rather than listening to what the style of the music says, let alone examining what evidence about staging and acting survives from Handel's own time. (Dean gives a useful brief survey, but does not list the book that resulted from Dene Barnett's articles on acting.) Many of his complaints about misdirection could of course be applied more generally to operas of the standard repertory; but, as he points

out, it is peculiarly shocking that well-appointed professional companies, presenting great operatic music *for the first time* to a public unused to its forgotten conventions, should so traduce it - too often, to critical applause. When the magical opening of *Seerse* becomes an exercise in arranging deck-chairs, one feels that our civilization is itself on the deck of the Titanic.

The final essay, on 'Handel's oratorio performances', is again by Professor Burrows, and is a masterly review of contemporary and somewhat later evidence about the stage arrangements for oratorio and other material on performing practice. I suspect that all the performers were on stage for the *Esther* performances of 1732, but that the pit and the empty orchestra pit were not yet 'floor'd over, and laid into the Boxes' as in 1736: with the singers and Handel, directing, well forward on the forestage in front of the proscenium. That would account for the need of some sort of 'gallery', balustrading intended to stop the singers from falling into the orchestra pit, with similar protection at two or three times the height (the 'pulpit') to keep the more energetic Handel safe

(no doubt he was also on a dais). I am not sure that Burrows is right to object that this would make it 'hardly practical for soloists to adopt conversational stances towards each other in recitatives, let alone for Belshazzar's knees to knock visibly when he saw the writing on the wall'. In the first place, there would have been quite a lot of room for those involved in a scene to come forward; in the second, if there was acting or interplay in what was after all a concert performance ('no...Action, so necessary to a *Drama*') it would have been highly stylized and limited to what little might be suggested by singers with books in their hands. On musical performing practice, Burrows' essay is an object-lesson in what one may and may not infer from secondary material such as records of payments to performers - and a fine coda to a generally distinguished book.

Brian Trowell

HANDEL RODELINDA

Libretto - Composition - Reception
by Ulrich Etscheit
German text; paperback; BVK 1404 £25.00

The score of "Rodelinda" is one of Handel's most powerful and is also the work which, in 1920, prompted the Göttingen Handel Renaissance.

Ulrich Etscheit's book makes a comparative analysis of the libretto and its sources and examines the relationship between the structure of the text and the music. The documentation of the Göttingen Handel Renaissance, the biography of its founder Oskar Hagen, and the commentaries on selected later productions of "Rodelinda" are of immense interest in the history of theatre.



Bärenreiter

Burnt Mill, Elizabeth Way, Harlow, Essex CM20 2HX
Tel (01279) 417134 Fax (01279) 429401
eMail: baerenreiter@dial.pipex.com

WHY DO THE NATIONS?

Handel and the various national musical styles of his period are the theme of the next Handel Institute conference, to be held in London on 20-21 November 1999. Further details will appear in future issues of this *Newsletter*, but readers may wish to note the dates now.

HANDEL INSTITUTE AWARDS

Applications are invited 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*. Further details 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.