

NEWSLETTER

of

The American Handel Society

Volume XXXI, Number 1

Spring 2016



© National Portrait Gallery, London

THE EARLY CAREER OF THOMAS LOWE, ORATORIO TENOR

English tenor Thomas Lowe (c.1719–83) is best known for his collaborations with Handel during the 1743 and 1748–51 oratorio seasons. Lowe premiered roles in *Samson*, *Joshua*, *Alexander Balus*, *Susanna*, *Solomon*, *Theodora*, and *The Choice of Hercules*. He performed in revivals led by the composer, including *Messiah*, and also likely participated in productions for which personnel remain uncertain, including *Esther*, *Alexander's Feast*, *Saul*, *L'Allegro*, *Hercules*, *Belshazzar*, and *Judas Maccabaeus*. Beyond the oratorios, Handel wrote for him songs, such as “From scourging rebellion” (HWV 228₉) and “Stand round, my brave boys” (HWV 228₁₈), as well as solos in the Peace Anthem (HWV 266) and Foundling Hospital Anthem (HWV 268). He further performed Handel’s music in the principal Dublin theaters, London’s pleasure gardens, and various regional theaters and country estates. In 1751, after just under a decade of near continuous activity, Lowe’s professional collaboration with Handel ended, although the tenor continued to perform Handel’s music throughout his career.

Lowe’s reputation has been discolored by assessments of theater historians, however. Charles Dibdin observed,

Lowe was a great favourite and perhaps had a more even and mellow voice than Beard; and, in mere love songs when little more than a melodious utterance was necessary, he might have been said to have exceeded him [...] Lowe lost himself beyond the namby pamby poetry of Vauxhall; Beard was at home ever where.¹

¹ Charles Dibdin, *A Complete History of the English Stage* (London, 1800), 5:364.

HANDEL’S USE OF FUGUE IN ALEXANDER’S FEAST

Before Handel threw himself wholly into the composition of biblical oratorios, he took up two poems by England’s late poet laureate, John Dryden (1631–1700). *Alexander’s Feast* (1736) and *Ode for St. Cecilia’s Day* (1739) as composed by Handel were performed during his lifetime without the accoutrements of the stage. Both works were penned by Dryden on commission in honor of St. Cecilia’s Day, the patroness of music. Upon close examination, however, both works potentially reflect covert cynicism regarding the influence of music and of particular musical instruments on civilization. Nevertheless, it seems Handel used these poems by England’s venerated poet and satirist as subject matter for his early oratorio-like performances to expand the proprietary boundaries of Lenten entertainment.¹

Handel’s overtly religious works were relatively immune from contemporary debate that considered the necessity of Lenten public entertainment to be instructive in both moral and religious capacities. Handel’s non-staged secular works (of which *Alexander’s Feast* served as a seminal model), though structured formally and musically within the context of his later religious oratorios, addressed topics that were seemingly antipathetic with the tenor of his religious works. These works, however, were performed in similar venues as Handel’s religious oratorios and were hailed as examples of how the conjoining of great poetry with great music could produce an ideal art form. This essay will discuss the way in which Handel may have attempted, through the use of a choral fugue, to strategically circumscribe *Alexander’s Feast* as a religious piece, despite the subject matter of Dryden’s poem bearing little resemblance to what Handel’s audience might expect in a biblical oratorio suitable for Lent.

Alexander’s Feast, commissioned in 1697 for the London St. Cecilia Day festival (a phenomenon which lasted a mere 20 years) was subsequently regarded so highly that it was referred to as the equivalent of England’s national epic. Robert Manson Myers observes that it “was recognized as a lyric of unusual merit” and he comments on the wide distribution as well as praise of the poem.² Myers quotes Joseph Wharton’s criticism of the poem as exemplary of its success:

¹ Dryden’s choice of pejorative adjectives in his reference to instruments in the Ode and his opaquely rendered narrative of Alexander’s court scene raise serious doubts as to the author’s true sentiments regarding the place of music in society. See Ruth Smith, “The Arguments and Contexts of Dryden’s *Alexander’s Feast*,” *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 18/ 3 (1978): 465–90. Smith notes that Dryden “keeps the reader alert to the moral implications [of Alexander’s actions] by continually refusing opportunities to probe the intentions behind the actions he describes” (p. 472).

² *Handel, Dryden and Milton* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1956), 23–4.

continued on p. 4

continued on p. 2