

NEWSLETTER

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HANDEL'S GREATEST HITS: THE COMPOSER'S MUSIC IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BENEFIT CONCERTS

Buried in *The London Stage* are advertisements for concerts including or devoted to Handel's music. Starting in the 1710s and continuing through the eighteenth century, musicians of all types used Handel's music on their concert programs, most especially during their benefit evenings.¹ These special events were dedicated to promoting a sole performer (or other members of the theatrical staff at a particular playhouse or concert hall). As was tradition, performers would have organized these events from beginning to end by hiring the other performers, renting the theater, creating advertisements, soliciting patrons, and programming the concert. Advertisements suggest that singers and instrumentalists employed Handel's music in benefit concerts for their own professional gain. They strategically programmed particular pieces that would convey specific narratives about their own talents, as well as their relationship to the popular composer.

Benefit concerts were prime opportunities for performers to construct a narrative, or a story, through their chosen program. On the one hand, concert programs allowed performers to evaluate and cater to perceptions of current taste. But benefit concerts could also reveal something about the performer him- or herself; these carefully organized events promoted the beneficiary in specific ways in order to entice audiences. Properly chosen pieces that suited both the performer's skills and audience taste would help bolster the beneficiary's reputation and fill his or her pockets with extra income. But benefits were always a gamble: not only could the size of the audience depend on something as fickle as bad weather, but a small audience could damage a performer's annual income, as well as his or her reputation.

Yet, it was a gamble that most were willing to take. By the early eighteenth century, the most prominent singers of the opera gave benefits, as well as some instrumentalists, and various employees associated with London's theatrical companies. The typical season for benefit performances occurred in the winter and spring, before the wealthier audience members left London

¹ Benefit concerts are different from benefits of plays or operas produced at London's theaters in this period. Singers, actors, and actresses who had contracts with a particular playhouse (such as Drury Lane or the Queen's Theatre) were often also contractually entitled to one benefit per season. Benefit concerts, on the other hand, were mostly independently produced and afforded beneficiaries a little more control over the event. For the main literature on eighteenth-century benefits, see Robert D. Hume, "The Origins of the Actor Benefit in London," *Theatre Research International* 9/2 (1984): 99-111; David McKenty, "The Benefit System in Augustan Drama" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1966); and St. Vincent Troubridge, *The Benefit System in the British Theatre* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1967).

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REPORT FROM HALLE



The Handel Festival in Halle took place this year from Friday, May 27 to Sunday, June 12, 2016 with the theme "History – Myth – Enlightenment." Following the pattern established last year, the Festival extended over three weekends. The Opening Concert, which had been a feature of recent Festivals, was not given. Instead, the first major musical event was the premiere of the new staging of *Sosarme, Re di Media* at the Opera House, using performing materials prepared by Michael Pacholke for the Hallische Händel-Ausgabe (HHA). Handel began setting this story of dynastic conflict between father and son as *Fernando, Re di Castiglia*, and located the tale in the Portuguese court of Dionysius I in the early 14th Century. Presumably because of the close political and military ties between Britain and Portugal, he subsequently changed the location to ancient Lydia some 600 years before Christ and changed the names of the characters accordingly. The Halle staging by Philipp Harnoncourt updated the action to an unspecified present, with generic fighters engaged in urban civil war. It was not the silliest production one had ever seen, although the staging of the great duet "Per le porte del tormento" was cringeworthy. In general the complicated story was as clearly told as it is likely to be, although the decision to portray Sosarme (Senesino's role) as incompetent as well as ineffectual was probably a mistake.

Countertenor Benno Schachtner in the title role sang well and his acting was effective within the director's concept of the role. Soprano Ines Lex sang and acted very well as Sosarme's intended, Elmira (Strada's role), who is at the center of the drama. As also happened last year, she was let down by her costume designer, and if a representative from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) had seen her climbing backwards up a ladder to the top of a structure that was visibly unstable, the show would surely have been closed down. Ki-Hyun Park as King Haliata's advisor and the eventual villain, Altomaro, once again displayed a wide-ranging bass voice entirely appropriate to a role created for Montagnana. The remaining singers were more than adequate. The Handel Festival Orchestra, under their Artistic Director Bernhard Forck, played well; as usual, the presence

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