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REFLECTIONS ON THE SOURCES AND STAGING OF *SEMELE*

Mark Risinger

My interest in preparing the forthcoming HHA edition of *Semele* originated over a couple of summers in the mid-1990s, during the time I spent studying Handel's autograph and completing research for my dissertation. I had fallen in love with the music some time before, thanks to recordings by John Nelson and others: from the opening bars, the music captures the listener's imagination and reflects the turbulent nature of the story about to unfold, and I had already been completely drawn in by the succession of beautiful moments Handel creates as *Semele* ascends to near-immortality and then becomes the victim of her own rashness and folly.

Encountering the manuscript sources firsthand, however, opened up a whole new realm of appreciation and affection. As happens to most of us, I suspect, when we first confront a Handel autograph, the overwhelming thrill of sitting in the presence of so rare and precious an object meant that it took some time before I was able to calm down and observe closely enough to accomplish any real "work" on it. Several aspects of the *Semele* autograph make it particularly interesting, the most important being that it has not yet (as of this writing) been subjected to modern conservation but is still in its late-18th-century binding, with red leather spine and beautifully marbled papers. Even more exciting was the discovery that Handel had made such extensive cancellations and corrections as he composed that he removed entire folios, most of which are now bound in other manuscripts in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. To the stubs of paper left by the removal of these single leaves, he attached replacements using large blobs of red wax that are still there and fully visible. There is something about the three-dimensionality of this wax, even more than the paper and ink on which it is fixed, that brought Handel to life for me as a living and working individual. I found (and continue to find) it absolutely mesmerizing. The dates at the end of each of the three Acts give one a sense of the usual rapid pace at which Handel was working in the summer of 1743, even more impressive given his discarding and rewriting of certain large numbers and altering the role of Athamas from tenor clef to alto at an advanced stage of composition. Numerous original stage directions and scene

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REPORT FROM HALLE

Graydon Beeks



Because the Handel Festival in Halle now stretches over three weekends, it is not always possible to schedule the Handel Conference and the various meetings that precede it to coincide with the opening festivities. This year the meetings took place at the end of the first full week and the Conference at the beginning of the second full week. Matters were further complicated by the fact that the Sunday of the second weekend was Pentecost and the Monday following was a major holiday in Germany. What follows is primarily a report of the events I was able to attend.

The theme for this year's Festival was "Original? – Counterfeit?" and there were performances of a number of works attributed to Handel and, in most cases, no longer considered to have been composed by him. This was not an issue with the first concert I attended, which was a performance of the oratorio *Deborah* given on Thursday, June 1st in the Marktkirche by the choir and orchestra of the Capella Cracoviensis under the direction of Jan Tomasz Adamus. The tempos were on the fast side, which failed to faze the performers. The Polish chorus and orchestra were excellent, while the soloists were a more mixed lot. British soprano Rebecca Bottone in the title role sang well but never seemed to inhabit the character of Deborah. The countertenor Xavier Sabata as Barak was more successful dramatically and sang stylishly, although it was unclear whether his soft-grained voice projected further back in the church. Hasnaa Bennani was very impressive as Jael and in the one aria assigned to the Israelite Woman that she was assigned to sing. Michael Czerniawski brought a dramatic but rough-hewn bass voice to the role of the villain Sisera, but his English pronunciation was not acceptable. Overall one had the impression that *Deborah* contains a wealth of good music – both reused from the Cannons and Coronation Anthems and other works by Handel, and newly composed – but that the story, which culminates with Jael describing how she dispatched the sleeping Sisera with a hammer and tent peg, is hard to warm to.

Friday, June 2nd brought a staged performance of *Jephtha* at the Halle Opera. This was problematic, but not in the way that stagings of Handel's oratorios generally are. The usual problem involves having a static chorus on stage. This problem was "solved" by giving the chorus lots of things to do, generally upstaging the singing of the soloists. The problem specific to this production

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