

# NEWSLETTER of The American Handel Society

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## EBENEZER PROUT (1835-1909) AND MESSIAH: AN OVERDUE ASSESSMENT

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Portrait of Ebenezer Prout by Edward Bent Walker, 1904

“Prout shaming” has become something of a favorite pastime among Handel scholars of the last hundred years. But whatever Ebenezer Prout’s reputation has been (and will be), it should at least be based on something more substantial than snarky slights and anecdotes. A reassessment of Prout’s impact on Handel studies is long overdue.

Actually, an initial assessment of Prout is long overdue. There is little scholarly literature on this man, who was one of the most influential music critics and theorists of the late Victorian period. Prout’s 1902 edition of *Messiah*<sup>1</sup> was really just a minor part in the career of a major musical figure, and yet it lingers as his most lasting and perhaps most reviled contribution to music.

It has become too easy to consider Friedrich Chrysander’s study edition of *Messiah* as the truly scholarly edition, and Prout’s as the quaint “performance score” stuck in 19<sup>th</sup>-century practices. That both were published in 1902 merely makes the binary opposition even more compelling. But there is no doubt that Prout was Chrysander’s equal in knowledge of Handel’s music and baroque performance practices, and probably his superior when it came to manuscript studies and score analysis. As Prout reviewed the volumes released serially by the German Handel Society, he repeatedly pinpointed flaws in Chrysander’s readings and editorial decisions, identified manuscript sources that Chrysander had failed to consult, and pointed out—gently—that Chrysander was at a perpetual disadvantage as an editor, being neither an especially active performer nor a teacher of music. When Chrysander’s edition of *Messiah* was finally released, Prout was among the numerous Handelians who declared it

<sup>1</sup> George Frideric Handel, *Messiah*, ed. Ebenezer Prout, (London: Novello, 1902). Prout’s edition of the vocal score has been reprinted numerous times, even as recently as a Boosey reprint from 2007.

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## REPORT FROM HALLE

Graydon Beeks



The annual Handel Festival in Halle, Germany took place this year from May 31–June 16 with the theme “Empfindsam, Heroisch, Erhaben – Händels Frauen” (“Sensitive, Heroic, Sublime—Handel’s Women”). I was able to attend the first week, and so this report will include snapshots of only some of the significant events. I especially would have liked to have heard the Gala Concerts featuring Sandrine Piau, Karina Gauvin, and Carolyn Sampson, as well as the performances of *Agrippina* with Ann Hallenberg, *Susanna* under the direction of Paul McCreesh, and *Alcina* at Bad Lauchstädt, but all but the first of these occurred during the second week.

The official opening of the festival on Friday evening, May 31, was marked by the premiere of a new staging of the opera *Giulio Cesare* by Peter Konwitschny, making a return to Halle where he was Intendant of the Opera House in the years leading up to the Reunification of Germany. In what may have been a regrettable example of *Ostolgie* (i.e., nostalgia for the old East Germany), the work was sung in a new German translation (with German supertitles), and the male roles that Handel had written for castratos or for women were sung down an octave by basses and baritones. To make things worse, much of the staging seemed to me a travesty. The role of Sesto, written for Handel’s former prima donna Margherita Durastanti, was taken by a child actor who was given spoken lines, while what remained of his music was very well sung by Jake Arditti as the disembodied head

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