Messiah Anniversary: Some Further Thoughts

In the August 1991 issue of this newsletter, the lead article celebrated the 250th anniversary of Handel’s composition of Messiah with a brief summary of the current state of research on this oratorio and a description of three significant recent publications. Six months later, as we approach the same anniversary of the first performance of Messiah at the Music Hall in Fishamble Street, Dublin, on April 13, 1742, it seems appropriate to call attention to several other recent publications which were either omitted from the earlier article or have appeared since its deadline.

The first is a critical discography of Messiah prepared by Teri Noel Towe as part of the anthology Choral Music on Records, edited by Alan Blyth and published by Cambridge University Press in March 1991. In it, Towe discusses seventy-six complete or slightly abridged recorded performances dating from the beginning of the century. This discography is essential for both the serious collector of Handel recordings and the person searching for that one “perfect” recording of Messiah. In a related development, Koch International plans to issue this month a recording entitled “A Collector’s Messiah.” This anthology, on two compact discs, will reproduce rare and unusual early performances including the first commercial recording—abridged “Every Valley” first released in 1898.

Towe’s discography is cited to open an article by Andrew Porter entitled “Messiah: Two new perspectives,” published in the fall 1991 issue of Historical Performance. The Journal of Early Music America. In it, Porter reviews at some length Donald Burrows’s Cambridge Music Handbook for mentioned in my August 1991 article, and the Harmonia Mundi recording of Messiah listed in the “Recent Handel Recordings” column in this issue of the newsletter. The latter, conducted by Nicholas McGegan and containing nearly all of the recoverable alternative movements, permits the listener in possession of a programmable compact disc player to recreate the various performing versions presented by Handel. Porter has some cautions concerning both the quality of the performance and its completeness, and his review is especially important reading for performers and prospective purchasers.

Agrippina

In A.D. 37, the year that Gaius Caesar, known as Caligula, became emperor, there was born to Cneius Domitius Aenobarbus (died A.D. 40) and Agrippina, daughter of Germanicus and grand-niece of Augustus, a son, Domitius Nero. Caligula died in A.D. 41 and was succeeded by Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus (Claudius). Book xi of Tacitus’ Annals begins with accounts of the unspeakable behavior of Claudius’ consort, Messalina and concludes with her very unpleasant death. Book xii reports the decision taken by Claudius’ freed men, Pallas and Narcissus among them, that the proper consort for the fifty-one year old emperor was Agrippina, the widow of Domitius Aenobarbus; no matter that he was her uncle. Nero was eleven years old when his mother married Claudius; Claudius adopted Nero as his successor when the latter was twelve, and five years later his mother succeeded in poisoning the emperor and placing the seventeen-year
Book Review


David Ledbetter’s *Continuo Playing According to Handel* is intended as a practical tutor for beginners in figured bass realization, utilizing transcriptions, with commentary, of Handel’s exercises in thoroughbass and fugal improvisation (sample realizations are appended). The book does not attempt a comprehensive treatment of continuo performance in Handel’s works; the commentary contains sound advice and some excellent supplementary exercises by Ledbetter, but generally speaking does not discuss the fine points of Baroque accompaniment — quick adjustments in texture, dissonance treatment, proper doubling, expressive forms of arpeggiation, etc. — not even of continuo harmonization. It is true that many of the former are not directly suggested by, and in some cases not relevant to, the exercises themselves. However, the title suggests a broader, more extensive discussion than that provided by Ledbetter, and these studies do bring up some interesting harmonization problems which Ledbetter does not mention: the penultimate bar, second beat of the Fugue Exercise no. 3 (pp. 48, 99), for example, may contain an interesting example of “prospective” figuring; the section on seventh chords (pp. 22–24) does not treat the stationary seventh; and the option of using an occasional 6–4 chord in a long chain of notes figured 6, a practice sanctioned by Mattheson in his *Grosse General-Bass-Schule*, is not suggested.

The exercises survive in two sources: the Fitzwilliam Museum autographs, published in facsimile by Alfred Mann (*Hallische-Handel Ausgabe, Supplement*, vol. 1), and a copy made by J. C. Smith Jr., part of the Gerald Coke Collection (described in passing by Ledbetter as “another autograph source,” p. 64). It is unfortunate that no comparison is made between the two sources, since any substantive variants in the Smith Jr., copy might derive from his study with Handel.

The realizations are executed in a fluent chordal style and are eminently reliable, although individual exercises have been realized more successfully by Alfred Mann. Frequently, Ledbetter’s top part rises well above the generally accepted upper limit for a continuo accompaniment (especially pp. 74, 78, 93, 94). Since these studies are not true accompaniments, Ledbetter’s use of the upper range is perfectly acceptable; however, some brief caveat should have been included as a warning for the inexperienced player. Ledbetter’s preference for ascending and descending scale patterns in the soprano, although often effective and implied by the exercises themselves, occasionally yields part-writing which — as the author himself admits — is not strictly correct (pp. 28f, 84). This sets a poor example for the beginner, who should learn to follow the rules scrupulously before attempting more sophisticated tech-

Abstract of the 1991 American Handel Society Lecture

The speaker for the 1991 American Handel Society Lecture was Professor Paul Brainard of Yale University. Professor Brainard’s lecture, entitled “Bach and Handel: Another Look,” was given at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C. on Friday, November 1, 1991. The following article is the author’s synopsis of the lecture.

Bach and Handel: Another Look

The juxtaposition of the two names Handel and Bach has challenged historians with one of those topics that are seemingly inexhaustible, even as the quest for understanding the two men as individuals continues to open up new perspectives.

The first segment of the paper was mostly about Handel, because it addressed one of the very few areas in which we understand far less about him than about Bach: the vexed question of what Sedley Taylor called “Handel’s indebtedness to works by other composers.” It took as its point of departure the well-known fundamental distinction between Handel’s method of appropriating individual ideas from existing music, and Bach’s practice of adapting entire compositions to new uses. A corollary of this difference is that, with Bach, we are never in doubt about the intentionality of the process. With Handel, intentionality is precisely what is most often and most seriously in question. My discussion of this issue advocated, in sum, “a more ‘holistic’ view of compositions that are suspected of being meaningfully related,” exercising care with “optical” resemblances and taking context more fully into account.

The second segment of the paper was concerned with word-tone relationships, beginning with the well-known fact that both Bach and Handel respond with equal acumen to certain kinds of individual words, in the manner of the old madrigal. In qualification of this, it was proposed — as a highly tentative hypothesis, subject to extensive further study — that Handel appears to be far more selective than Bach in the kinds of “purple” (affective) words that he singles out for figural treatment. Thus, although he is just as enthusiastic as Bach in depicting “joy” and the like through typical responses like rapid coloraturas, he seems to be much less prone than Bach to give similar emphasis to individual words of sorrow, pain, grief, etc. Whereas Bach seems almost unable to leave these words alone, Handel more frequently passes over them without special attention. Obviously I am NOT suggesting that Handel does not choose to portray pain and the like (think of the power of his setting of “He was despised”), but merely that he seems to be less interested than Bach in the local figural implications of those particular kinds of words. Rather, his is an expressivity achieved only in the larger...
American Handel Society Recording Award

The American Handel Society has instituted an annual prize for an outstanding recent recording of a work by Handel. The prize committee welcomes recommendations for a new recording released during 1991 that is worthy of recognition. In addition to being a musically superlative performance, the recording should take into account current thoughts about eighteenth-century performance practice. Although the award need not be restricted to performances on "period instruments," the recording should utilize correct and stylistically valid continuo realization, ornamentation (where appropriate), etc.

The performance should use an accurate edition worthy of recognition by a scholarly society — one that reflects a version of the work which Handel himself knew. All things being equal, a recording that constitutes a significant contribution to Handel's recorded oeuvre is preferable. That is, if several recordings are eligible for the prize in a given year, an excellent performance of a previously unrecorded major work will carry more weight than a frequently recorded one. However, if a frequently recorded work otherwise meets the criteria established by the committee more than any other recording, it should claim the prize.

Suggestions for recordings to be considered by the recording award committee should be sent to David Ross Hurley, 5514 South Blackstone Avenue, Apartment 319, Chicago, Illinois 60637.

Recent Handel Recordings

This list contains recordings released since the last list was printed in the April 1991 newsletter or for which information is only now available. Rereleases in compact disc format of older recordings have been included only if they seem of particular interest.

Agrippina (HWV 6)
Sally Bradshaw, soprano
Wendy Hill, soprano
Lisa Saffer, soprano
Nicholas Isherwood, bass
Drew Minter, countertenor
Michael Dean, baritone
Drew Minter, countertenor
Béla Szügyi, bass
Gloria Banditelli, soprano
Capella Savaria
Nicholas McGegan, conductor
Harmonia Mundi France 907063

Amadigi di Caula (HWV 11)
Nathalie Stutzmann, mezzo-soprano
Jennifer Smith, soprano
Eiddwen Harrhy, soprano
Bernarda Fink, mezzo-soprano
Pascal Bertin, mezzo-soprano
Les Musiciens de Louvre and Choir

Handel Calendar

The American Handel Society welcomes news or information about events of interest to Handelians. If possible, please include the address and phone number where readers may obtain details.

Messiah, May 10, 1992, 3 pm, Kennedy Center ("Kennedy Center Tribute to Germany"). Benita Valente, Denyce Graves, Jeffrey Gall, Drew Minter, Curtis Rayman, David Arnold. The University of Maryland Chorus, the Smithsonian Concerto Grosso, conducted by Paul Traver. Pre-concert lecture by Andrew Porter, 1:45 pm. (202) 467-4600.

Göttinger Händel-Festspiele, June 4-8, 1992. Symposium, "Handel and European Church Music of his Time": Christian Bunnah (Berlin), Friedhelm Krumbacher (Kiel), Friedrich Wilhelm Riedel (Mainz), Hans Joachim Marx (Hamburg), Donald Burrows (Milton Keynes, Great Britain), Graydon Becks (Claremont, California, United States). Performances: June 4, 5, and 7 - Ottone, re di Germania (Drew Minter, Lisa Saffer, Michael Dean, Juliane Gondek, Ralf Popken, Patricia Spence, the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra, conducted by Nicholas McGegan); June 6 - "Brokes" Passion (Nico van der Meel, Matthias Görne, Christine Schäfer, Graham Pushee, Wilfried Jochens, The Vocal Ensemble of St. Jacobi, and the Cythara Ensemble, Hamburg, conducted by Rudolf Kelber. Göttinger Händel-Gesellschaft e. V., Hainholzweg 3-5, 3400 Göttingen, Germany, attn. Frau E. M. Starke.

Händel-Festspiele, Halle (Saale), June 12-16. June 12 - Giulio Cesare in Egitto; June 13 - Coronation Anthems for George II (Choir of Westminster Abbey, the London Handel Orchestra, conducted by Martin Neary); June 13, 14 - Alcina; June 13 - Il pastor fido; June 13 - L'Allegro, il penseroso ed il moderato (Robert-Franz Singakademie, Philharmonisches Staatsorchester Halle, conducted by Jürgen Böhme); June 14 - Samson (Ernst-Senn-Chor Berlin, Philharmonisches Staatsorchester Halle, conducted by Heibert Beissel); June 15 - Ode for St. Cecilia's Day (Berliner Rundfunkchor, Berliner Sinfonieorchester, conducted by Max Pommer). Direktion der Händel-Festspiele, Kleine Brauhausstraße 26, O-4020 Halle (Saale), (046) 2 32 77.

Maryland Handel Festival and American Handel Society Annual Meeting, October 30-November 1. Featured performance - Hercules; conference topic - "Representations of Classical Antiquity in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century." Further information will be provided in the August newsletter. Maryland Handel Festival/ American Handel Society, Department of Music, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, attn. J. Parker. (301) 405-5570.
Another recent publication which is of special interest to performers is the chapter on Messiah by Peter Le Huray in his book Authenticity in Performance. Eighteenth-Century Case Studies, published by Cambridge University Press in 1990. While this useful discussion raises significant questions of performance practice and provides some tentative answers, it suffers from having appeared before Donald Burrows's edition of Messiah for Edition Peters, and his Cambridge Music Handbook. Le Huray refers his readers to the landmark Watkins Shaw edition of 1599 without indicating that some of its premises have since been called into question. For example, Shaw accepted the "con Rip:" and "senza Rip:" markings found in the conducting score as indicative of Handel's standard performing policy, while most scholars now generally agree that they refer only to performances in 1749, when Handel's orchestra contained an unusually large body of string players. Le Huray accepts Shaw's interpretation on the basis of the presence of violin concerto parts in the surviving Foundling Hospital material, without noting (as Shaw does in A Textual Companion to Handel's Messiah) that there are no differences between these and the other Foundling Hospital violin parts, and that neither carry the "con Rip:" and "senza Rip:" indications. It is also misleading of Le Huray to state that all the solo tenors and basses employed in Messiah "seem to have been English," since both Gustavus Waltz and Henry Theodore Reinhold were English only in the same sense that Handel was.

A further article which sheds some light on Messiah is Martin Picker's "Sir Watin Williams Wynn and the Rutgers Handel Collection," published in the December 1991 issue of The Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries. Wynn, a Welsh Baronet who lived from 1749-1789, was a notable patron of the arts active from the time of his majority until his death. He was one of the directors of the Concerts of Ancient Music and of the 1784 Handel Commemoration, and his collection of Handel prints and manuscripts was described by Burney in his account of that great event. The bulk of the collection was acquired by Rutgers around 1950, and was described by Picker in the December 1965 issue of the same journal. A single manuscript volume containing Part II of Messiah in the hand of John Matthews surfaced in 1988, and was described by Donald Burrows in the December 1989 issue of this newsletter. Picker's latest article places Wynn's collection in the context of his other activities and, in a postscript, describes a printed volume of organ concertos at Rutgers not from the Wynn collection, which was originally owned by Anglo-American organist, singer, composer, and teacher Raynor Taylor (1747-1825), who as a chorister in the Chapel Royal was said to have been present at Handel's funeral.

Finally, yet another lost manuscript of Messiah has come to light. This is a copy made shortly after Handel's death by the English organist, theorist, composer, and teacher Marmaduke Overend (died 1790), a student of William Boyce and, from 1760 until his death, organist at Isleworth, Middlesex. His library was sold in 1791, and the Messiah manuscript, bound in distinctive blue morocco leather, reappeared in various sale catalogues over the next two centuries. It surfaced most recently as Lot 385 in Christie's sale of June 26, 1991, from which it was purchased for the Gerald Coke Collection, where it will be available for scholarly study.

Graydon Beeks

old lad on the throne. From this lurid bit of history, Vincenzo Cardinal Grimani, who knew his Tacitus (and Suetonius) very well indeed, fashioned a brilliant, intrigue-laden libretto for the twenty-four year old Handel to set to music. Agrippina probably had its first performance in January, 1710, and contemporary accounts report a brilliant success.

In January and February, 1992, the Washington Opera presented twelve performances of Handel's Agrippina at the John F. Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater in a production "originally conceived and directed for the Cologne Opera by Michael Hampe." Hampe (we assume it was he) devised an elegant theatrical conceit: staging the opera as a Napoleonic-period piece. This was an ingenious idea given the Empire's fixation on the Roman imperial style. It had a kind of recursive historical logic and provided an excuse for some very beautiful costumes — especially Ottone's absolutely smashing general's uniform. The sets too were stylish, but alas, the curtain was rung down for each change of venue.

The role of Nerone (Nero) sung by Jon Garrison, a tenor specializing largely in the standard eighteenth-century repertoire, was vocally miscast as an arrogant, girl-crazy thirteen-year old: a proto-Cherubino with a scheming mother. Hampe seems to have half understood the problem, because in this production Nerone first appears riding a hobby horse and playing peek-a-boo with Agrippina. At other times he was made to cuddle up to her in ways that made teenagers avoid, and which in the case of a big, strapping, mature tenor looked and sounded like Oedipus run amok. Dale Travis, a baritone, sang the role of Ottone (the future emperor Otho). That Handel set this role for an alto reflected operatic convention and perhaps his and Grimani's understanding that Otho was eighteen at the time of the action. Handel (or perhaps Grimani) decided that Narcissus (Narciso) should be an alto, but Hampe dropped him into the cellar too. By so doing, Hampe missed the great vocal and theatrical fun of the bass Pallas and the alto Narciso (Jonathan Green) playing off one another. The two superfluous baritones obliterated the contrast provided by low roles for Claudio (Claudio) and Lesbo. Fortunately, there is only one ensemble that was affected: the quartet "Il tuo figlio," in which Narciso sank, from time to time, below the bass, and Nerone's enthusiasm at being named Caesar was audibly dampened by its demotion into the tenor range.

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Agrippina from page 5

The new recording of *Agrippina* directed by Nicholas McGegan [see “Recent Handel Recordings” in this issue of the Newsletter] uses all of the music to be found in Chrysander’s edition, and runs three hours and thirty minutes. To equate it with the theater, one must add two intermissions of fifteen minutes, making a total of four hours. The program for the Kennedy Center production advised the audience that the “running time is approximately two hours, forty-five minutes including one intermission.” In fact the performance ran about three hours and fifteen minutes in spite of the fact that one intermission was omitted, many arias were dropped (including most of those for Narciso and Pallante), B sections and reprises of at least six arias were not sung, and the recitative was so drastically cut that at times the intrigue became almost unintelligible. The time saved was wasted in the simple recitatives, sung mostly at full voice and therefore far too slowly, and in dropping the curtain twice for scene changes. Occasionally the scene change behind the curtain, not only wasted time, but spoiled a dramatic effect. In act I, we are not introduced to Poppea until scene xiv. At the end of scene xiii, which takes place in the “Square of the Capitol,” Ottone, with the stage to himself, speaks of empire and “un divin volto e amato,” and sings of his hopes and dreams. The scene changes and for the first time we see Poppea — in her boudoir seated in front of a mirror, singing an apostrophe to her lovely pearls. Clearly the theatrical intent is to make Ottone’s dream manifest in the flesh and to do it instantaneously in the sense that movie-makers cut from scene to scene for dramatic effect. Instead, we sat in the dark and listened to dull thumping behind the curtain.

As nature abhors a vacuum, so do stage directors detest quiet, mistaking it for entropy. Predictably, the performers regularly upstage each other during arias and from time to time even managed to upstage themselves (Poppea dabbing herself with a large powder puff during “Vaghe perli,” or Agrippina trying to help Poppea dress while singing “Non hò corche per amarti”). Beyond that, there were myriad infelicitous details and even an anachronism or two as when immediately on Nerone’s exit after his “Con saggio tuo,” Agrippina pumped her right fist and forearm in imitation of Jimmy Connors’s reaction to winning a difficult point. The directing occasionally lurched into the sophomoric as when Nerone repeatedly went out of his way to trip a beggar while distributing alms in the Forum, or when he made a flying leap into Poppea’s bed from a closet where he had been hiding. At other times it went out of its way to insult the audience’s intelligence, as in Poppea’s “Bel piacere,” when she and Ottone undress one another. The right look, the right tempo, the right gesture would have been just as erotic.

In the lead article of volume 1 of the *Händel-Jahrbuch* (1928), Hermann Abert complained that since the first modern production of a Handel opera in Göttingen in 1920, “there has been a wild hunt by producers, directors, and conductors for the long buried Handel opera scores so that each could have a premiere; most notably each of them has found an arranger who has, alas, simply butchered the work for his purposes. At present it seems to us quite clear that in spite of all the real enthusiasm, this new Handel movement has been subject to the three forces of our times: speculation, snobbery, and modishness.” Though the Kennedy Center’s production of *Agrippina* was a far cry from the performances Abert knew in the 1920s, his words still apply; indeed, “[the production] disrupted the inner workings of the composition.” *Plus ça change ...*.

Brenda Harris as Agrippina and Janice Hall as Poppea sang and acted very well. David Evits and John Ostendorf, both redoubtable singers of Handel’s music, seemed uncomfortable and not at their best. Comment on the work of Jon Garrison, Jonathan Green, or Dale Travis would be out of order, because they were singing roles not intended for their voices.

Howard Serwer

Book Review from page 2

One objectionable aspect of these realizations is the over-abundance of ties which often seems to contradict harmonic and metrical imperatives. In fact Ledbetter states categorically, “If you are playing these exercises on an organ, you should tie any common tones between chords” (p. 4). Admittedly, continuo-type textures on the organ are generally more sustained in style and execution than those on the harpsichord. Nevertheless, a pointed articulation of upper parts is often desirable on the organ to delineate rhythmic and melodic structure. An excessive sustaining of common tones only makes an organ accompaniment thick and unwieldy.

In a few instances, the realizations contravene the implications of Handel’s figuring or the actual intervals represented (pp. 77, 88, 98). In the first example, the use of 2 alone is admittedly ambiguous, but given the musical context and clear pedagogical plan of the series, 2 most probably means 5-2, realized by Ledbetter as 6-4-2. The latter is introduced and used extensively in the following piece; thus it seems likely that the composer intends a definite distinction between [5]-2 and 6-4-2. In the second instance (p. 88, bars 38-40), Handel’s vertical sequence of compound figures obviously indicates the desired chordal spacing, since the passage is an almost exact repetition of an earlier progression, but with the figuring rearranged into abnormal configurations: 8-9, 8-3-7, 5-6, etc. Handel’s intent is clarified by the careful positioning of figures in the autographs (*Händel Ausgabe, Supplement*, vol. 1, pp. 32, 33), which is not always followed in the transcription and the realization of this exercise (pp. 35, 88).

Ledbetter resorts to the expedient of three-part texture fairly often in these realizations, whereas en quatre continuo treatment is usually more instructive. The commentary often implies, quite unjustifiably, that three-part texture is the only or best method to execute certain

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progressions (pp. 10, 22, 44).

The use of terminology is another drawback of the commentary: “stretto” is used twice in the analysis of a piece which hardly contains a real stretto passage (p. 54), “dominant chord” is used in the broadest possible sense (p. 35), and there is nothing particularly “galant” about conjunct parallel thirds over a dominant bass pedal (p. 36). Usage of this type might prove somewhat confusing to the beginning theory student, as would the implication that any compound figure with #4 in it indicates a diminished seventh chord (p. 36). Ledbetter seems to confuse the regula dell’ ottava with common sequential cliches of continuo harmony which happen to have a bass in conjunct motion (p. 7); at one point he practically equates the regola with a “scale sequence” (p. 17). Also, example 11 on page 22 is radically different from any regola I have seen in a Baroque thoroughbass tutor.

Several useful items are conspicuously absent from the bibliography; one wonders about the value of any listing of late Baroque thoroughbass treatises, however limited in intent, which omits Mattheson and St. Lambert. Nevertheless, Ledbetter’s book is a welcome contribution to the small number of modern pedagogical works on figured bass. Except as noted above, the format and accuracy of the transcriptions is highly satisfactory. Hopefully, these fine practice pieces will become known to a wider group of keyboard players and early music specialists. Ledbetter offers excellent suggestions for further practice in the compositions of J. S. Bach.

Patrick J. Rogers

Recordings from page 3
Marc Minkowski, conductor
Erato 2292-45490-2 (2 discs)

Floridante (HWV 14)
Drew Minter, countertenor
Mária Zádorí, soprano
Katalin Farkas, soprano
Annette Markert, mezzo-soprano
István Gáti, baritone
József Moldvay, baritone
Capella Savaria
Nicholas McGegan, conductor
Hungaroton 31304-06 (3 discs)

Giulio Cesare (HWV 17)
Jennifer Larmore, contralto
Barbara Schlick, soprano
Bernarda Fink, mezzo-soprano
Marianne Rerholm, soprano
Derek Lee Ragin, countertenor
Furio Zanasi, bass
Dominique Visse, countertenor
Olivier Lalouette, bass
Concerto Köln

René Jacobs, conductor
Harmonia Mundi France 901385.87 (3 discs)

Siroe (HWV 24)
D’Anna Fortunato, mezzo-soprano
Andrea Matthews, soprano
Steven Rickards, countertenor
Julianne Baird, soprano
John Ostendorf, bass
Brewer Chamber Orchestra (performed on original instruments)
Rudolph Palmer, conductor
Newport Classics NCD-60125 (3 discs)

Orlando (HWV 31)
James Bowman, countertenor
Arleen Auger, soprano
Catherine Robbin, contralto
Emma Kirkby, soprano
David Thomas, bass
Academy of Ancient Music
Christopher Hogwood, conductor
L’Oiseau-Lyre 430 845-2 (3 discs)

Alcina (excerpts) (HWV 34)
Nancy Argenta, soprano
CBC Vancouver Orchestra
M. Huggett, conductor
CBS Enterprises SMCD 5091
[also on disc: incidental music to The Alchymist (HWV 43)]

“Arioso Arias”
Arias from Alcina (HWV 34), Amadigi (HWV 11),
Arion (HWV 33), Giulio Cesare (HWV 17), Giustino
(HWV 37), Ottone (HWV 15), and Rinaldo (HWV 7a)
James Bowman, countertenor
The King’s Consort
Robert King, conductor
Hyperion CDA 66483

Incidental music to The Alchymist (HWV 43)
Emma Kirkby, soprano
Judith Nelson, soprano
Patrizia Kwella, soprano
David Thomas, bass
Academy of Ancient Music
Christopher Hogwood, conductor
L’Oiseau-Lyre 430282-2
[also on disc: incidental music to Comus (HWV 44)]

La Resurrezione (HWV 47)
Nancy Argenta, soprano
Barbara Schlick, soprano
Guillemette Laurens, mezzo-soprano
Guy de Mey, tenor
Klaus Martens, bass
Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra
Ton Koopman, conductor
Erato CD 2292-45617-2 (2 discs)

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Recordings from page 7

Acis and Galatea (HWV 49a)
Dawn Kotoski, soprano
David Gordon, tenor
Glenn Siebert, tenor
Jan Opalch, bass
Seattle Symphony Chorale, Seattle Symphony Orchestra
Gerard Schwartz, conductor
Delos 3107 (2 discs)

Athalia (HWV 52)
Joan Sutherland, soprano
Emma Kirkby, soprano
James Bowman, countertenor
David Thomas, bass
Academy of Ancient Music
Christopher Hogwood, conductor
L'Oiseau Lyre 215427 (2 discs)

Saul (HWV 53)
Lynne Dawson, soprano
Donna Brown, soprano
Derek Lee Ragin, countertenor
John Mark Ainsley, tenor
Alastair Miles, baritone
English Baroque Soloists and Monteverdi Choir
John Eliot Gardiner, conductor
Philips 426265-2 (3 discs)

Messiah (HWV 56)
Joan Rodgers, soprano
Della Jones, mezzo-soprano
Philip Langridge, tenor
Christopher Robson, countertenor
Bryn Terfel, bass-baritone
Collegium Musicum 90
Richard Hickox, conductor
Chandos CHAN 0522/23 (2 discs)

Messiah (in German; Mozart orchestration, K. 572)
Donna Brown, soprano
Cornelia Kallisch, soprano
Roberto Sacca, tenor
Alastair Miles, bass
Gächinger Kantorei Stuttgart, Bach Kollegium Stuttgart
Helmut Rilling, conductor
Hänsler Classic Exclusive Series 98.975 (2 discs)

Messiah (HWV 56; contains all of Handel's alternate versions)
Lorraine Hunt, soprano
Janet Williams, soprano
Patricia Spence, mezzo-soprano
Drew Minter, countertenor
Jeffrey Thomas, tenor
William Parker, bass-baritone
University of California, Berkeley Chamber Chorus
Philip Brett, director
Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra

Nicholas McGegan, conductor
Harmonia Mundi HMU-907050.52 (3 discs)

Belshazzar (HWV 61)
Anthony Rolfe Johnson, tenor
Arleen Auger, soprano
Catherine Robbins, contralto
James Bowman, countertenor
David Wilson-Johnson, bass
Richard Wistreich, bass
The English Concert and Choir
Trevor Pinnock, conductor
Archiv 431 793-2AH3 (3 discs)

Belshazzar (HWV 61)
Felicity Palmer, soprano
Maureen Lehane, mezzo-soprano
Paul Esswood, countertenor
Robert Tear, tenor
Thomas Sunnegardh, tenor
Peter van der Bilt, bass
Staffan Sandlund, bass
Stockholm Chamber Choir, Vienna Concentus Musicus
Nikolaus Harnoncourt, conductor
Teldec/Warner Classics 2292-42567-2 (3 discs) [reissue]

Theodora (HWV 68)
Roberta Alexander, soprano
Jard van Nes, mezzo-soprano
Jochen Kamal, countertenor
Hans-Peter Blochwitz, tenor
Anston Scharinger, bass
Vienna Concentus Musicus and Arnold Schoenberg Choir
Nikolaus Harnoncourt, conductor
Teldec 2292-46447-2 (2 discs)

Alexander's Feast (HWV 75a), Harp Concerto in B-flat Major (HWV 294b), Organ Concerto in G minor, op. 4, no. 1 (HWV 289c)
Nancy Argenta, soprano
Ian Partridge, tenor
Michael George, bass
Andrew Lawrence-King, harp
Paul Nicholson, organ
Tragicomedia
The Sixteen Choir and Orchestra
Harry Christophers, conductor
Collins Classics 7016-2 (2 discs)

Handel Cantatas: Caro sempredigloria (HWV 87), Lungi da me pensier tiranno (HWV 125b), Siete rose rugiadosa (HWV 162), Udite mio consiglio (HWV 172)
Derek Lee Ragin, countertenor
Ensemble Divitita Cologne
Channel Classics CCS 0890

Clori, Tirsi e Fileno (HWV 96)
Lorraine Hunt, soprano
Jill Feldman, soprano

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(contextual) affective sense, not by local color. Bach’s response to sorrow is of both kinds simultaneously. (Illustrations were chosen from the four arias in Bach’s St. John Passion that partly share the same poetry as Handel’s “Brokes” Passion.)

As a further aspect of the text-music relationship, the question of declamation was considered. Although Handel’s accentuation of English is often criticized, other writers, notably Winton Dean, have countered with at least the implication that misaccentuation in Handel needn’t matter to us. How much it mattered to Handel is, however, the more important question. Early on in his career, his questionable renderings of English (for example, in the Utrecht Te Deum) may well be attributable to his simply not knowing the language very well. Later, after decades of speaking English, however imperfectly, one doubts that he could possibly still be as totally unconversant with the language as his treatment of it in arias and choruses — not, by the way, in recitatives — might seem to suggest. For instance, it seems very unlikely that “He SHALL feed his flock” is the way Handel himself would, without some external reason, accentuate those words in normal speech in 1742. (Both during the formal presentation and in the ensuing discussion, speculation about possible reasons for the accentuation, both musical and theological, remained inconclusive.)

In this same context, we should not overlook the fact that questionable or downright wrong accentuation can be found not only in Handel’s English settings, but in his Italian (again barring recitatives), and even in his German ones. And it appears to be really true that the misaccentuations don’t “matter” in Handel, for the reason that in much of his music we are dealing with a new aesthetic that has greatly loosened vocal music's ties to natural speech, and in which considerations of “tune” can easily outweigh those of speech-accent — even to the point of an outright reversal of the Monteverdian dictum “che la parola sia padrona dell’ armonia, e non viceversa.” Bach, by contrast, still subscribes to that old ideal of word-supremacy; and it is both rarer, and of considerably greater moment, when we find him composing in blatantly unnatural speech-rhythms. (BWV 109/5 and 111/2 were investigated as sample cases in point.)

Further related to the question of declamation is a stylistic trait that seems common in Handel, relatively rare in Bach. It appears to be the product of Italian operatic conventions and versification schemes; but in Handel it operates not only with Italian texts, but with English and German ones as well. The term proposed for it was “bar-ostinato,” meaning the insistent reiteration of a measure-oriented rhythm of one or two bars’ length, often with punctuation by rests between the statements. (Examples studied included “Künftiger Zeiten” and “Das zitternde Glänzen” from Handel’s German Arias and, as a relatively rare example in Bach, the aria BWV 68/2. Further reference was made to a group of eight arias from Scipione, all of which are wholly or predominantly in settenario verse and feature a quasi-formulaic or ostinato-like rendering of the settenario line.)

It was further pointed out that Bach seems to be most inclined to accept declamatory imperfections in recycled or “parodied” compositions (examples from the B Minor Mass were cited in illustration). A similar conclusion applies to Handel: from study of a number of sets of “borrowings” or concordances in the extensive listings of Bernd Baselt, George Buelow and John Roberts, I propose that we may more readily condone (or, as it were, explain away) many of Handel’s lapses of text underlay when we recognize them as the concomitant of melodic family relationships.

A final set of observations was prompted by the chance occurrence of my having looked up the name Bach in the index of Winton Dean and Merrill Knapp’s recent book on the Handel operas. I found that most of the references to Bach occurred in discussions of particular movements in Handel, and that a striking number of them used descriptive terms such as “Bach-like” or words to that effect in describing Handel’s music (a number of examples were cited). The clear inference from these passages is that most of Handel is not “Bach-like.” We all know it in principle, but seldom explicitly acknowledge just how fundamental were the differences between these two composers of vastly different temperament, artistic ideals, and career-dictated compositional choices. Isn’t it significant that Bach’s music was criticized more than once during his lifetime for its excessive complexity, while Handel’s music drew at worst the isolated comment that it was “plus savante que touchant?”

I doubt that Handel, even if he had known Bach’s music well, would ever have indulged in the language of Bach’s critics — certainly not in public; but it seems indisputable that in much of his music Handel did seek to cater to precisely the same new taste (“neu Verstand”) to which those critics, often explicitly, subscribe — that is, the “naturalistic” aesthetic of the Enlightenment with its demand for tunefulness, accessibility, simple harmonies, uncomplicated textures. Unlike most of the exponents of these supposed virtues, Handel never stooped to superficiality.

(The talk ended with comparisons of pieces that I think of as model illustrations of the differing stylistic and expressive languages of Handel and Bach respectively. They included the Sarabandes of Handel’s G minor harpsichord suite and Bach’s third English Suite, and a second pairing of “Mourn, Israel” from Saul and the opening chorus “Kömmt, ihr Töchter” from the St. Matthew Passion. Comparison of the latter two pieces is perhaps “a way of saying in music what so many of us have attempted to grasp in words.” A concluding quotation was read from the Handel biography of Paul Henry Lang, in whose memory the 1992 American Handel Society meetings were held, and whose Handel/Bach discussion is, in my view, one of the most penetrating in print.)

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