

NEWSLETTER

of

The American Handel Society

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1994 American Handel Society Lecture Handel's Operas in the Theater

The 1994 American Handel Society Conference began on November 4, 1994 with an inaugural lecture presented in Tawes Recital Hall at the University of Maryland in College Park. The guest lecturer was Winton Dean, who has provided the following precis of his talk.

Handel's operas have occupied the stage at two widely separated periods—during his lifetime and since 1920. As a result of the enormous gap (more than 160 years), during which the nature and forms of the art were radically transformed, Handel's operas came to be regarded as naive, primitive, and of only antiquarian interest. This was a major misjudgment: Handel's manipulation of the specialized conventions of the baroque theater, together with his profound insight into the subtleties of human character, enabled him to create a taut dramatic framework quite different from that of later opera but equally valid.

When the revival movement began in Germany in 1920 none of this was understood. Every aspect of the operas was rewritten to fit the supposed demands of the modern theater. The instant popularity of these revivals established a false tradition founded on two basic errors: that the plots need not be taken too seriously, and that the music could be rehashed ad libitum. Arias were reshuffled, making nonsense of the plots and the characterization. The high male parts were automatically put down an octave, and da capo arias chopped into fragments. Much of this persisted in Germany until quite recently, and it influenced developments elsewhere. The English-speaking countries were much slower to revive the operas. After the war productions by universities and small-scale societies in England made enterprising attempts to raise musical standards, though they were unable to reproduce the spectacle. For some time major opera houses either held aloof or tentatively copied German practice.

In recent years two new elements have entered the picture: the early music movement, which engendered a revival of interest in period instruments and Baroque performance practice, and the rise of the powerful stage director, a purely twentieth-century phenomenon. (In



The Intellectual Context of Handel's *Solomon*

Michael Corn, one of the winners of the 1993 American Handel Society Fellowship, is a graduate student at the University of Illinois. He is currently completing his dissertation, "The Temple of Taste: The Influence of Fashion on Musical Style in Early 18th Century England," under the guidance of Lawrence Gushee. A longer version of the following article was read at the national conference of the American Musicological Society in Minneapolis in November, 1994.

In his essay entitled "Our Relation to Old Music," Jacques Handschin suggests that "an historic musical style is always connected with an historical human type." Leaving aside the question of whether Handschin's observation is always true, I would like to use this idea as a point of departure from which to explore the historical human type presented in Handel's *Solomon* and the characteristics that define that human type. I will argue that the *Solomon* of the libretto possesses many of the characteristics of the "sentimental man." When *Solomon* is

continued on page 2

continued on page 3

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.

18th London Handel Festival, March 28–April 27, 1995. Performances include *Deidamia* (March 28–31), *Broches Passion* (April 19), London Handel Choir and Orchestra, Denys Darlow and Michael Rosewell, conductors. London Handel Festival, 13 Cambridge Road, New Malden, Surrey, KT3 3QE, 0181–336 0990.

Alcina, March 31, April 1, 7, 8, 1995. Maria Jette, David Henderson, Ex Machina and the Lyra Concert. Ex Machina, 230 Crescent Lane, West St. Paul, MN 55118, (612) 455–8086.

Giulio Cesare, April 9, 1995. Concert Performance. Miriam Abramowitsch, Andrea Baker, Janet Campbell, Ilene Morris, Randall Wong. Donald Pippin, conductor. Pocket Opera, 333 Kearney, Suite 703, San Francisco, CA 94108, (415) 989–1855.

Göttinger Händel-Festspiele, June 2–6, 1995. Geschäftsstelle der Göttinger Händel-Gesellschaft, Hainholzweg 3–5, 37085 Göttingen, Germany, attn. Frau Eva-Maria Starke, 05 51 / 567 00.

Händel-Festspiele, Halle (Saale), June 9–13, 1995. Händel-Festspiele, Halle, Händel-Haus, Grosse Ulrichstrasse 51, 06108 (Saale), Germany, 2 46 06.

Chandos Anthems, June 11, 1995. Soloists, Immanuel Presbyterian Cathedral Choir, Los Angeles Baroque Orchestra, Edward Murray, conductor. Immanuel Presbyterian Church, 330 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90010–1787, (213) 389–3191.

Tamerlano, July 22, 25, 29, August 4, 7, 10, 13, 19, 21, 1995. Dana Hanchard, David Daniels, others to be announced. Jane Glover, conductor. Glimmerglass Opera, P.O. Box 191, Cooperstown, NY 13326, (607) 547–2255.

Giulio Cesare, July 23, 26, 28, 1995. Emily Pulley, Mary Ann McCormick, Michelle DeYoung, Jorge Garza, Stephanie Blythe, Jamey Andersen, Christine Goerke, Eric J. Owens. Cal Stewart Kellogg, conductor. Wolftrap Opera. Wolftrap Ticket Service, 1624–A Trap Road, Vienna, VA 22182, (703) 218–6500.

Handel's Operas in the Theater from page 1

Handel's day this was the province of the librettist.) It was a potentially healthy development, provided the director respected the intentions of the composer. A few directors do, especially if they are also musicians; but this is the age of the rogue stage director, eager—whether from ignorance, cynicism, or the urge to exercise an inflated ego—to impose concepts of his own that not only fail to support the opera but actively undermine it. This matters less in repertory pieces like *Carmen* or *Rigoletto*, which will always bounce back, but has undoubtedly hindered appreciation of Handel's operas. The cancer spread from Germany to Britain and the United States. Established opera houses have been major offenders, sometimes encouraging controversial productions in the hope of boosting sales at the box office. All too often the result is a desolating vulgarity and a contempt for the opera as a work of art.

The present position is paradoxical in two respects. In all countries the standard of musical performance, both instrumental and vocal, has improved almost beyond recognition (confirmed by the recent spate of stylish recordings), but there has been no corresponding advance in the staging—rather the reverse, producing a sharp dislocation between musical and dramatic values. Secondly, performance by the smaller-scale bodies, however limited in scope, often give a clearer view of Handel's achievement, actual and potential, than those of most major opera houses, because the former are prepared to trust the composer, whereas the latter appear to consider his work viable only if given a sharp kick from behind. Their criterion becomes not what Handel achieved but what the public can be induced to swallow. A few recent productions, notably under the leadership of Nicholas McGegan, have convincingly disproved this, eliciting an immensely enthusiastic response from their audiences. Only if conductor and director alike accept the operas as works of art in their own right—not a series of disjoint arias or an opportunity for misplaced showmanship, but a closely organized large-scale unity—can Handel take his rightful place as one of the four or five supreme masters of opera.

Winton Dean

NEWSLETTER of The American Handel Society

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viewed in light of these features it obtains a textual identity unique among the Handelian oratorios.

The sentimentalism of Handel's time must be carefully distinguished from the modern term. Robert Markley describes sentimentalism as emerging "early in the eighteenth century less as a purely 'literary' phenomenon than as a series of discursive formations that describe what amounts to an aesthetics of moral sensitivity, the way in which middle- and upper-class men can act upon their 'natural,' benevolent feelings for their fellow creatures."²

As an eighteenth-century phenomenon sentimentalism was first described in 1934 when R. S. Crane identified a number of characteristics that he found manifest in theological writings dating roughly from the mid-seventeenth century and reaching an apex around 1750.³ He found that the "latitudinarians," a group consisting of preachers or "divines" such as Benjamin Whichcote, John Tillotson, and Isaac Barrow, began speaking in defense of the innate goodness of mankind.⁴ This was in sharp contrast to the puritanical view of the depraved nature of mankind due to its original fall from grace. Tradition held that a "good" man was one who suppressed and disciplined this sinful side of his nature. The latitudinarians "popularized another conception concerning the 'Good-Natured Man,' that is, that the benevolent emotions may be enjoyable to the individual who allows himself to feel them. Tillotson is representative rather than unique when he says, 'there is no sensual Pleasure in the world comparable to the Delight and Satisfaction that a good man takes in doing good.'⁵

The four central features of sentimentalism and the sentimental man include: 1. "the identification of virtue with acts of benevolence and still more with the feelings of universal goodwill which inspire and accompany these acts"; 2. "the antistoical praise of sensibility"; 3. "the assumption that such 'good Affections' are the natural and spontaneous growth of the heart of man uncorrupted by habits of vice"; 4. "the complacent emphasis on the 'pleasing Anguish, that sweetly melts the Mind, and terminates in a Self-approving Joy.'⁶

The sentimental man was one who naturally performed acts of good will, had an unself-conscious empathy with his fellow man, and was rewarded by a sense of "self-approving joy" as the result of these acts. It is important to note that these concepts were not in any way original at the time; rather, it is their topicality as subject matter that underlies their significance.

On the whole, the secondary literature on Handel's *Solomon*⁷ seems tacitly to accept the interpretation offered by Ruth Smith in her article on the intellectual contexts of the Handelian libretto: that *Solomon* aggrandizes George II in order to offset the humiliating terms of the treaty that ended the war of the Austrian Succession.⁸ While not entirely at odds with this position, the interpretation offered here to some extent "deconstructs" this view, thereby uncovering its supporting structure.

The oratorio explores two main themes. The first is man's relationship with God, the second the state's rela-

tionship with its king. The obvious parallel between these two systems, their equivalence within different realms, is one of the most important symbolic structures within the oratorio. Sentimentalism unites these two themes and consequently enriches the symbolic depth of the oratorio. Four conditions or convictions expressed within the libretto are particularly resonant with sentimentalism: material reward for benevolent behavior; the natural veneration for goodness; the state as powerful; the state as peaceful, and the antistoical praise of sensibility. Note that the following examples are meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive.⁹

One of the most important tenets of sentimentalism was that the natural reward for benevolence was the great joy that arose from performing good acts. It is possible to trace in the contemporary literature the transformation of the reward from "great joy" in a spiritual sense to a suggestion of a reward that is somewhat more material.

Joseph Glanvill's terse formulation of 1676 provides a conceptual basis by which power, wisdom, and justice—and consequently their rewards—are cast into binary oppositions upon the pivot of goodness. He writes that "Power without Goodness is Tyranny; and Wisdom without it, is craft and subtilty [sic]; and Justice, Cruelty, when destitute of Goodness."¹⁰ Justice, wisdom, and power—all positive characteristics, and central qualities of Solomon—are only differentiated from their opposites by the presence of goodness.

In 1731 George Stephens follows a similar line of reasoning, but by this date goodness as a property takes on a more dynamic role: "Moral Writers have well observed, that Justice is a Virtue of the greatest Consequence to Society, the very Cement, that binds it firmly together. And it is not equally true, that Goodness is the Ornament and Pleasure of it? Do not the Comforts and mutual Endearments of Life all flow from Goodness?"¹¹

Stephens links justice and goodness and draws forth the theme that the comforts of life emanate from goodness, rewarding, it would seem, the just and consequently, the good. It is not certain from this passage that Stephens had material comforts in mind when he penned the phrase "mutual endearments of life." On the other hand, the critical passage in the bible suggests that Solomon's wealth is his reward for asking for wisdom and knowledge in order to judge his people more affectively: "because this was in thine heart and thou hast not asked riches . . . Wisdom and knowledge is granted unto thee; and I will give thee riches, and wealth, and honour, such as none of the Kings have had . . ."¹²

The libretto of *Solomon* reverses the equation "justice plus goodness equals wealth and comfort"; it is the great wealth and success of the Israelites that points to Solomon's goodness. Indeed, we find in the characterization of Solomon a certain resonance with the very terminology used in the two citations just provided: justice, virtue, goodness, wisdom, power, comfort, and pleasure.

The Solomon of the libretto never hesitates to point out the magnificence of his wealth. In act I, scene ii

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Solomon's references to the splendor of his realm inspire his bride to respond, "bless'd be the day when first my eyes, saw the wisest of the wise," thus linking Solomon's wealth and wisdom. In act III Solomon welcomes the Queen of Sheba by inviting her to witness the great rewards that life has granted him, rewards that are to be understood as evidence of his goodness: "Thrice welcome queen, with open arms/Our court receives thee, and thy charms./The temple of the Lord first meets your eyes,/Rich with the well-accepted sacrifice./Here all our treasures free behold,/Where cedars lie, o'er wrought with gold;/Next, view a mansion fit for kings to own./The forest call'd of tow'ring Lebanon,/Where art her utmost skill displays,/And ev'ry object claims your praise."

Natural veneration for goodness is manifested not in Solomon, but in the reaction of others to him. The rector of Exford in Somerset addressed such reactions to the "benevolent man" in his 1714 sermon *Universal Benevolence: or, Charity in its Full Extent*: "Who can sufficiently express the Dignity of Such a Person? What Trophies does he deserve? What endless Monuments of Praise and Glory belong unto him? His is in an implicit League of Philanthropy with the Guardian Angels, he carries on the great Cause of the Savior of Mankind, he is the honorable Distributer of his Creator's Blessings, he wears more emphatically the Image of his God, and shares with Him in an universal Reverence, and (I was going to say) Adoration. For indeed, there are few that can with hold a Veneration from such a one . . ."

Here the phrase "he wears more emphatically the Image of his God" explicitly links the benevolent man with the Creator. Of course the emotion and situation describes precisely the reaction of the Queen of Sheba in the libretto. She cannot help but venerate Solomon and showers the wealth of her own kingdom upon his. The librettist overlays this material imagery with Solomon's own attractiveness, thus echoing act I scene ii, but is careful to return to the source of this Nile of wealth and goodness, reiterating the parallel between the realm of absolute power and that of Solomon's power: "Yet of ev'ry object I behold/Amid the glare of gems and gold,/The temple most attracts my eye,/Where, with unwearied zeal, you serve the Lord on high."

Thus by the end of the scene the libretto pushes to the foreground the irresistibility of Solomon's leadership and, by underlining Solomon's piety, implicitly suggests divine sanction.

The theme of the state as a peaceful, benevolent association of men and institutions touches upon one of the driving forces behind sentimentalism, which was promulgated for two basic reasons: first, it represents a moderate to liberal response to the extremes of puritanism; and second, it serves as a response to the (again extreme) position on the nature of the human soul found in Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Hobbes argued for the need for absolute government to control that mass of scoundrels that compose humanity. On the opposite end of this spectrum we find the position that "the nature of men is such that even without government they can be trusted to live together peacefully in sympathetic and helpful mutual relations."

Solomon falls somewhere between these two extremes. Embodied in Solomon himself, the government is a strong entity, legitimized by God. Yet Solomon is not a tyrant. His goodness is amplified throughout the state, and the people naturally respond to his goodness by behaving peaceably. For instance, when Solomon rightfully restores the good harlot's child to her, she says little about the success of her own petition; instead she describes how Solomon's virtue reflects positively upon the state (duet in act II, scene iii). While the restoration of the child does elicit feelings of gratitude and great joy, expressed in the music, another, perhaps equally active dynamic is at work here: the text places emphasis on Solomon's greatness and how it benefits all of Israel. This transformation of individual passion into concern for the greater good is yet another theme explored by writers associated with sentimentalism. To cite Joseph Glanvill once more, "Christianity is the highest improvement of them . . . the power of it consists in subduing self-will, and ruling our passions, and moderating our appetites, and doing the works of real Righteousness towards God, and our Neighbour."¹³ This theme of peaceful coexistence with one's neighbors had great topical importance at the time of the creation and premier of *Solomon*, which coincided with the end of the war of the Austrian succession.

To return to the question posed at the outset, the characteristics of the historical human type presented in Handel's *Solomon* are determined by the literature of sentimentalism, to which the oratorio belongs. This is not to say that the librettist consciously portrays a sentimental character so as to promote sentimental doctrine. Rather, sentimentalism belongs to what Michel Foucault would call the "positive unconscious" of the age: "positive" because it is an active force, and "unconscious" because it belongs to the naturalized sense of propriety.

Ruth Smith has listed the constituent characteristics of the Handelian libretto, which include "insistence on pathos; use of contrast; presentation of emotion rather than action; extended use of the chorus for unqualified commentary, the centrality of the virtuous nation rather than the sympathetic individual; and the championship of the nation by an accessible yet miraculous God."¹⁴ However apt this catalog is for most oratorios, it does not fit *Solomon*. Aside from a short example in the judgement scene, pathos plays a minor role in the libretto. Emotion and action seem rather well-balanced. The choruses do not function as moral commentaries, but rather as enhancements to the festivities. Above all, *Solomon* differs from the bulk of Handel's librettos in its focus on the "sympathetic individual" rather than the "virtuous nation"; it is through the medium of Solomon's virtue that Israel (i.e., England) benefits.

It should come as no surprise that the legend of Solomon was so frequently cited by English authors and artists. From the earliest times the standard procedure for defending any position was to look for biblical precedent. Solomon not only offers an object lesson in piety and the benefits of devotion, but also represents a noble lineage (important in England) well rewarded for his devotion

and benevolence with very real material rewards: gold, ships, and abundant trade.

Perhaps the true hegemonic function of the *Solomon* libretto within English society lies not in its promotion and deification of George II but in its use of trade and commercial venture as the real source of power, wealth, stability, and morality. As manifested in Handel's *Solomon*, sentimentalism can be characterized as a combination of Christian morality and English capitalism.

Michael Corn

Notes

1. Jacques Handschin, "Unser Verhältnis zur alten Musik" in *Musikgeschichte im Überblick* (Lucerne: Rüber Verlag, 1964), 386.
2. Robert Markley, "Sentimentality as Performance: Shaftesbury, Sterne, and the Theatrics of Virtue" in *The New 18th Century*. Edited by Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Routledge, 1987), 211.
3. R.S. Crane, "Suggestions Toward a Genealogy of the 'Man of Feeling,'" *English Literary History* 1:3 (December 1934): 205–230.
4. The term "latitudinarian" should be used with caution. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers two definitions that suffice to explain its general meaning and contemporary usage: 1. "one of those divines of the English Church in the 17th century, who, while attached to the episcopal government and forms of worship, regarded them as things indifferent," and 2. from Edward Fowler, *The Principles and Practices, of Certain Moderate Divines of the Church of England, (Greatly mis-understood) Truly Represented and Defended* (London, 1670), "those who profess a Freedom, and as it were a greater Latitude than usual in their Principles and Doctrine. It is also vulgarly applied to such as take a more than ordinary Liberty in their Lives and Conversations."
5. John K. Sheriff, *The Good-Natured Man: The Evolution of a Moral Ideal, 1660–1800* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 3.
6. Donald Greene, "Latitudinarianism and Sensibility: the Genealogy of the 'Man of Feeling' Reconsidered." *Modern Philology* 75 (1977), 159.
7. The date and author of the libretto of *Solomon*, set by Handel in May 1748, are unknown. Chrysander was the first to ascribe the libretto to Thomas Morell, author of a number of texts for Handel's oratorios. However, my investigation of this traditional attribution has uncovered no documentary evidence linking the libretto to Morell.
8. Ruth Smith, "Intellectual Contexts of Handel's English Oratorios," in *Music in Eighteenth-Century England*. Edited by Christopher Hogwood and Richard Lockett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
9. The contemporary citations provided in this section are largely from Crane or his modern proponents. I shall discuss only the first three characteristics of sentimentalism due to space constraints.
10. Joseph Glanvill, *Essays on Several Important Subjects in Philosophy and Religion* (1676), 21.
11. George Stephens, *The Amiable Quality of Goodness as Compared with Righteousness, Considered* (1731), 13.
12. II Chronicles 1: 11–12.
13. Glanvill, *Essays*, 24 (cited in Crane, 209).
14. Smith, "The Intellectual contexts of Handel's English Oratorios," 118.

Recent Handel Recordings

Handel Arias: from *Rinaldo* (HWV 7a), *Alcina* (HWV 34), *Giulio Cesare* (HWV 17), *Agrippina* (HWV 6), *Amadigi di Gaula* (HWV 11), *Ariodante* (HWV 33) and *Giustino* (HWV 37)
Kiri Te Kanawa, soprano
The Academy of Ancient Music
Christopher Hogwood, conductor
Philips 434992–2

Sosarme, Rè di Media (HWV 30)

Julianne Baird, soprano (Elmira)
D'Anna Fortunato, mezzo-soprano (Sosarme)
Jennifer Lane, mezzo-soprano (Erenice)
Drew Minter, countertenor (Melo)
Raymond Pellerin, countertenor (Argone)
John Aler, tenor (King Haliate)
Nathaniel Watson, bass (Varo)
Edward Brewer, harpsichord
Amor Artis Orchestra & Tagkhanic Chorale
Johannes Somary, conductor
(performed on period instruments)
Newport Classic 85575 (2 discs)

Messiah (HWV 56)

Julianne Baird, soprano
Jennifer Lane, mezzo-soprano
David Price, tenor
Kevin Deas, bass-baritone
Amadeus Ensemble Orchestra & Chorus
Valentin Radu, conductor
(performed on period instruments; 1749 Covent Garden version)
VOX2 7502 (2 discs)

Messiah (HWV 56)

Lynne Dawson, soprano
Hilary Summers, contralto
John Mark Ainsley, tenor
Alastair Miles, bass
The Brandenburg Consort
Roy Goodman, leader
The Choir of King's College, Cambridge
Stephen Cleobury, conductor
Argo 440672–2 (2 discs)

Selections from *Messiah* (HWV 56)

St. Petersburg Conservatory Chamber Orchestra & Chorus
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Infinity Digital QK 57254
[also on disc: works of J.S. Bach, Gounod, Mozart & Schubert]

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Atlanta Symphony Orchestra & Chamber Chorus
Robert Shaw, conductor
Telarc CD 80344
[Disc titled: "Music of Handel"]

Selections from *Solomon* (HWV 67), *Xerxes* (HWV 40) and Concerto #13 for Organ (HWV 295)

Les Concerts du Monde
Keith Clark, conductor
Telarc CD 80344
[Disc titled: "Music of Handel"]

Arias from *Acis & Galatea* (HWV 72)

Empire Brass
Telarc CD 80344
[Disc titled: "Music of Handel"]

Marian Cantatas & Arias (HWV 230, 233–235)

Anne Sofie von Otter, mezzo-soprano
Musica Antiqua Köln
Bernhard Goebel, conductor
(performed on period instruments)
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Concerto grosso in G, Op. 6, no. 1 (HWV 319)
Boston Baroque
Martin Pearlman, conductor
Telarc CD 80344
[Disc titled: "Music of Handel"]

Suite in D (HWV 349) from *Water Music*
Orchestra of St. Luke's
Sir Charles Mackerras
Telarc CD 80344
[Disc titled: "Music of Handel"]

Selections from *Music for the Royal Fireworks* (HWV 351)
Cleveland Symphonic Winds
Frederick Fennel, conductor
Telarc CD 80344
[Disc titled: "Music of Handel"]
The Harmonious Blacksmith (HWV 430) from Suite No. 5
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Gregory C. Wrenn

Semele at the Washington Opera

In the run-up to Handel's tricentennial, we had the pleasure of hearing many of his undeservedly neglected works. Since 1985 most of these works have once again vanished, but *Semele* continues to maintain its newly-won place. This is understandable: a secular, dramatic work in English, it includes some of the composer's best-loved tunes, perhaps above all the celebrated aria "Where'er you walk."

The Washington Opera presented twelve performances of *Semele* in January and February. Conducted by Martin Pearlman, music director of the Boston Baroque, and directed by Roman Terleckyj, this run was a revival of the company's 1980 production. It was presented on this occasion in the Kennedy Center's 1400-seat Eisenhower theater, a space similar in size to that of Covent Garden in Handel's day.

Though Handel produced the show "after the manner of an Oratorio," it has been the fashion of late to stage it. In the absence of Baroque stage machinery, a modern company must find ways of changing sets without interrupting the flow of the action. In this respect the production did quite well, maintaining a reasonably brisk pace. Some set changes were accomplished by placing scene-ending arias far downstage in front of the main curtain.

When *Semele* is done in "the manner of an Oratorio" we perceive the chorus as an omnipresent commentator, visible or invisible as our imagination dictates. No matter how clever the staging, in operatic productions the chorus creates severe, if not fatal, dramatic problems in the second and third acts. (The first act is not similarly problematic because its action consists of an aborted royal wedding ceremony. In such operatic circumstances a visible chorus witnessing and commenting on the events works quite well—no matter that their costumes made them look like Druids who had wandered in from a production of *Norma*.) In act II, the chorus comments on an intimate scene between Jupiter and Semele. In this instance the physical presence of the chorus in Semele's boudoir would be intrusive, to say the least. Mr. Terleckyj understood this, for in act II he sent about half the chorus into the pit where it created a fine distraction for the orchestra (of whom, more later) and for those in the footmen's gallery, who watched them jostling the players and each other. Their sound issued from the deep modern pit as from the cavern of Somnus himself: muffled and sleepy.

In act III the chorus appears only near the end of the drama, singing words that show that our Theban Druids had just witnessed Semele's immolation. But how could the chorus be present if, according to Handel's autograph stage direction, Semele succumbs to her fate while "while lying under a canopy?" The Washington Opera's solution was to have Juno sing her aria "Above measure is the pleasure," which precedes the immolation scene, downstage in front of the main curtain, allowing a behind-the-curtain set change and the entrance of the chorus. The curtain opens to discover the chorus, with backs to the audience, witnessing the immolation scene upstage, elevated, and behind a scrim. Poor Semele stands (rather than lies "under a canopy") to sing her heart-breaking "Ah me! Too late I now repent." Handel's stage directions also indicate that Semele "looks up and sees Jupiter descending in a cloud." In the present instance, Jupiter appears in a clumsy fragment of a stage chariot pushed on from the left. Because the set is designed so that Semele is already well to the left of center stage, Jupiter appears in such close proximity to her that she should have been incinerated instantaneously.

Poor Semele had to sing her two best numbers, "Ah me! Too late I now repent" and "Endless pleasure" at the end of act I from what we might call the apotheosis position. To force the singer to sing these from far upstage and up in the air not only goes against what Handel intended, but is cruel to the singer.

The director conscientiously arranged business in such a way as to upstage arias. In the third act, Juno appears toward the end of Jupiter's "O whither has she gone," lurks about smirking, and after he exits, she comes downstage to sing "Above measure is the pleasure." The director upstaged "The morning lark" (Shorn of its B-section and reprise) by sending a bird cage around for the principals and supers to examine. Ino's "But hark!" in act II was upstaged for a few Arcadians (not Druids) prowling about on unspecified business.

But surely the worst was the treatment accorded Somnus's "Leave me, loathsome Light." Our director had Iris fall asleep, collapsing at the feet of the god; Juno, apparently a stronger character, simply fell asleep standing up. Equally bad was the conversion of Somnus's "More sweet is that name" into a pedophilic scene in which a pre-pubescent, scantily attired little girl darted about the stage egged on by Juno and Iris, who seemed to serve as joint procuresses. The vision of Semele singing "Endless pleasure" was acceptable until Jupiter appeared and pawed her—just to remind us, I suppose, what the aria was about. Little was left to the imagination.

The dramatic infelicities were, alas, of a piece with the performance. The orchestra's ensemble was ragged and its intonation uncertain. There were two harpsichords at hand: a fine one in front of Mr. Pearlman, and a miserable instrument buried in the pit. Mr. Pearlman played his excellent harpsichord only in a couple of continuo arias; these turned out to be the best perfor-

mances on the show. The miserable harpsichord's sound was so soggy that it was unclear whether or not it was used in the overture and set pieces. One could, however, hear its rubber-band-like timbre during simple recitative, which was conducted(!) by Mr. Pearlman. (I assume that it was necessary to conduct recitatives because the bad harpsichord was so positioned that its player could not see the singers.) Though the singers' diction in the recitatives was excellent, the decision to end recitatives with the churchy "thud-thud" of the delayed cadence was unfortunate.

We draw the curtain of charity over the performances of most of the singers in the belief that their generally unsatisfactory work was the outcome of an unsatisfactory production. Patricia Spence as Juno/Ino was, however, outstanding, in spite of the conditions, and I should very much like to hear Thomas Paul (the priest and Somnus) in better circumstances.

Howard Serwer

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