

NEWSLETTER

of

The American Handel Society

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Winter 2008



Tempesta di Mare, one of the groups performing at the Centre College Handel Festival.

AMERICAN HANDEL FESTIVAL

CENTRE COLLEGE

FEBRUARY 26 – MARCH 1, 2009

Listed below is the Festival Schedule as it currently stands. Details regarding conference registration, travel and lodging information may be obtained from the conference website:

<http://web.centre.edu/achs2009/Conference%20Schedule.html>

TEACHING HANDEL'S OLD TESTAMENT ORATORIOS

Whenever I teach a course that covers the vocal music of Handel, I face the challenge of finding a way to help students familiarize themselves with the literary sources on which his works are based. This is true not only of Handel's operas, but even the Old Testament oratorios which assume on the part of the listener a more than passing acquaintance with scripture. There are of course exceptions to this rule, but generally it is true that most twenty-first century students are not well-versed in the stories of the Old Testament. Furthermore, even those students who are familiar with the stories may not fully comprehend the role played by the

continued on p. 2

continued on p. 3

FESTIVAL SCHEDULE

Thursday Evening:

- Reception at the house of the head of humanities program Snacks will be provided

Friday:

- Coffee and muffins
- Morning Paper Session: 8:30 - 1:00
- Lunch: Centre College Carnegie Room (optional)
- Afternoon Paper Session: 2:00 - 5:00
- Musical Performance: Handel keyboard music at the on campus Presbyterian Church
<http://www.presbydan.org>

Saturday:

- Coffee and muffins
- Morning Paper Session: 8:30 - 1:00
- Lunch: Toy Box Cafe
312 W. Main Street
Danville, Kentucky
- Formal Dinner: Centre College Carnegie Room
- Musical Performance: L'Allegro (performed on modern instruments)

Sunday:

- Brunch: Centre College Carnegie Room
- Musical Performance: Tempesta di Mare performing an all-Handel program (period instruments)

THE J. MERRILL KNAPP RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

The Board of Directors of The American Handel Society invites applications for the J. Merrill Knapp Research Fellowship to support scholarly projects related to Handel and his world. One or more fellowships may be awarded in a calendar year up to a total of \$2,000. Requests for funding may include, but are not limited to, purchase of microfilms, travel for research, and production expenses for publication. This fellowship may be used on its own or to augment other grants or fellowships.

In awarding the Knapp Fellowship, preference will be given to graduate students, scholars in the early stages of their careers, and independent scholars with no source of institutional support.

The deadline for the 2009 award will be March 1, 2009. There is no application form. Each applicant should submit an outline of the project, a budget showing how and when the funds will be used, and a description of other funding for the same project applied for and/or received. In addition, applicants should have two letters of recommendation sent directly to:

Professor Robert Ketterer
226 Jefferson Building
University of Iowa
Iowa City, IA, 52242
robert-ketterer@uiowa.edu

SPECIAL OFFERS FROM THE AMERICAN HANDEL SOCIETY

The American Handel Society is offering sets of back issues of the *Newsletter* for the price of \$10 per year (three issues each), going back to the first year, 1986. All volumes are available, but some numbers are in short supply. We reserve the right to supply photocopies of individual numbers where necessary. In addition, the AHS has a limited number of copies of *Handel and the Harris Circle* at the price of \$7. This attractive and important booklet, written by Rosemary Dunhill, provides a useful introduction to the rich Harris family archive, recently deposited at the Hampshire Record Office in Winchester and discussed by Donald Burrows in the December 1996 issue of the *Newsletter*. For further details, contact the *Newsletter* Editor.

Bible in eighteenth-century Britain. This means that some sort of bridge between our secular twenty-first century and Britain's Bible-saturated culture must be built, for understanding the oratorios of Handel requires not only knowing the stories on which they are based, but also acquiring some sense of the centrality of the Bible to all domains of British life, even those we would now consider "secular." Such an understanding, it seems to me, is essential not only to my students' understanding of the oratorios, but for anyone who wants to approach them in a sympathetic way. Nor do I mean to imply that I sufficiently appreciate the extent to which the Bible informed the life of British men and women of the eighteenth century.

What first emerges from consideration of this issue is the fact that the British sense of national identity was for a long time intricately interwoven with Scripture. In *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*, Christopher Hill has written:

"The Bible played a large part in moulding English nationalism, in asserting the supremacy of the English language in a society which from the eleventh to the fourteenth century had been dominated by French-speaking Normans... By the seventeenth century the Bible was accepted as central to all spheres of intellectual life: it was not merely a 'religious' book in our narrow modern sense of the word religion. Church and state in Tudor England were one; the Bible was, or should be, the foundation of all aspects of English culture. On this principle most protestants were agreed."¹

Though Hill has focused on the impact of the Bible on the century preceding that of Handel's oratorios, there is plenty of evidence to indicate that the impact was also strongly felt in subsequent centuries. In her study of Britain's role in the re-creation of the state of Israel, Barbara Tuchman relates how John Ruskin began his autobiography by telling how he read the Bible from beginning to end once a year as a child.² Literary critic Northrop Frye argues that "the Bible had set up an imaginative framework—a mythological universe, as I call it—within which Western literature had operated down to the eighteenth century and is to a large extent still operating."³

So what was it about this book, or collection of books, or "mythological universe" that made it so

important to English intellectual life for centuries? Hill's claim about the Bible's role in "moulding English nationalism" seems to be a critical point. According to Tuchman, the Bible's "appeal was in the two ideas that made it different from any other corpus of mythico-religious literature: the idea of the oneness of God and the ideal of an orderly society based on rules of social behavior between man and man and between man and God."⁴ Worshipping the true God who is one and all-powerful and modeling a social-political order according to the laws of that God—these are prominent themes in the Old Testament oratorios of Handel. For example, there are several references to religion, liberty and laws in *Judas Maccabaeus* and an unequivocal assertion, in the final chorus of Part Two, that "We worship God and God alone." In fact, most of Handel's oratorios tell the story of Israel's attempts to live according to biblical ideals in a hostile environment. Time and again Yahweh delivers Israel from such a threat through the agency of a chosen hero. This basic myth or story of deliverance reflected how many in eighteenth-century England viewed their contemporary political situation: a vulnerable island nation, struggling to remain true to Protestant Christianity amid constant threats from nearby Catholic nations.⁵ When England embraced Anglicanism, "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became the English God" and "the heroes of the Old Testament replaced the Catholic saints."⁶

It seems inevitable then that these same biblical heroes would find their way into the genre of English oratorio. In 1642 John Milton remarked that "Scripture . . . affords us a divine pastoral drama in the Song of Solomon . . . And the Apocalypse of St. John is the majestic image of a high and stately tragedy, shutting up and intermingling her solemn scenes and acts with a sevenfold chorus of hallelujahs and harping symphonies. . ."⁷ In other words, the Bible is filled with stories and characters that seem ready made for dramatization. Yet, Milton's words notwithstanding, the process of adapting biblical episodes to a dramatic form is not as easy as it seems. It entails a tricky compromise between the conventions of the new genre and the nature of the original source story. The adaptation is even more difficult when the source story is biblical and thus imposes certain theological limits on the freedom permitted the adapter. Though certain biblical stories seem in their original forms to be "pastoral dramas" or "the majestic image of a high and stately

tragedy,” in reality they do not automatically meet the requirements of a three-act musico-dramatic setting with recitatives, arias and choruses, a cast of four or five soloists and interesting “situations” that fit the quasi-operatic conventions of the new drama.

Thus, besides familiarity with the Bible, especially the Old Testament, the student of Handel’s oratorios must understand what’s entailed in making a libretto adaptation, and this is where s/he gets little help from critical literature of the last few decades which is dominated by “fidelity criticism.” Fidelity criticism holds that an adaptation must in most if not all respects remain faithful to its source, especially when that source is a canonical work of literature. To say that the original (biblical) story is better than the libretto is akin to saying that the book is better than the movie. It would be better to say that the adaptation is different from the original and then examine why and how this is so. A librettist, like a screenwriter, has an obligation to make a workable, convincing adaptation that conforms as much with the requirements of the new genre as with that of the source. It’s a little like trying to serve two masters, though when it comes right down to it, the “story rights” of the new genre will often trump the “rights” of the original. I previously mentioned some of those conventions and they bear repeating: three acts (about one hour each), effective opening and closing scenes for each act, a cast of four or five soloists and situations that will justify a number of aria and chorus types. Viewed in this way, no biblical episode is a “pastoral drama” or a “stately tragedy” in its original form, though many have the potential for being successfully adapted as such.

A detailed consideration of how this process of adaptation is achieved in Handel’s oratorios would take us well beyond the scope of this essay, still some of the basic parameters of the process can at least be mentioned. As in Baroque opera, oratorio librettists have the option of re-working an existent spoken or sung treatment of the story. For *Jephtha* Thomas Morell took some ideas and character names from a sixteenth-century Latin play by George Buchanan on the same subject.⁸ *Joseph and His Brethren* borrows a two-act libretto by Apostolo Zeno (forming essentially acts two and three of the new adaptation) combined with a newly written first act.⁹ Many stories in the Old Testament resemble stories from non-biblical literature. The

Jephtha episode resembles other sacrificial dramas, especially Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Aulis*, a play which greatly aided Morell’s attempt to expand a rather brief and sketchy (though dramatically powerful) tale from the Book of Judges.¹⁰

Given the scope and variety of stories in the Old Testament, a librettist well-versed in scripture can also borrow elements from other books of the Bible to flesh out a libretto. This is a type of fidelity to the spirit rather than the letter of the source and resembles the way a preacher or theologian connects disparate biblical passages. As previously mentioned, a common theme in Handel’s oratorios is the deliverance of Israel from an oppressor. This story type appears throughout the Bible, but is found in a concentrated, formulaic way in the Book of Judges, the source for three Handel oratorios: *Deborah*, *Samson* and *Jephtha*. The deliverance pattern found in Judges consists of the following stages: “(1) Israel does what is evil in YHWH’s sight; (2) YHWH gives/sells the people into the hand of oppressors; (3) Israel cries to YHWH; (4) YHWH raises up a savior/deliverer; (5) the deliverer defeats the oppressor; (6) the Land has rest.”¹¹ Not every episode in Judges uses all six stages, nevertheless the framework “establishes a norm”¹² against which the others may be compared. In the deliverance oratorios of Handel, the first act usually starts after stage two has occurred, so a cry for help (usually a substantial anthem chorus) comes either at or near the beginning of the first act. What’s interesting, though, is that some of Handel’s oratorios incorporate this type of chorus even if there is no cry for help in the original story. The stories of Jephtha and Samson in Judges both lack cries for help, yet substantial choruses of petition are found in both oratorio adaptations (“O God, behold our sore distress” in *Jephtha* and “Return, O God of hosts” in

MEMBERSHIP DUES AND DIRECTORY

Your mailing label for this and subsequent issues indicates the most recent year for which you have paid dues: 08 indicates dues paid for 2008. If the number on your label seems incorrect, please contact AHS Secretary/Treasurer Marjorie Pomeroy.

Samson). The Book of Esther makes no mention of God, let alone a cry for His help, yet the oratorio (both 1718? and 1732 versions) features a cry for help (“Save us, O Lord”). “The History of Susanna” (from the Old Testament Apocrypha) likewise has no cry for help, though the oratorio adaptation of it opens with a substantial choral cry for help (“How long, oh Lord”).

What seems to be happening here is the creation of an oratorio convention, one likely expected by Handel’s audience and perhaps even required by the composer when he set a libretto. Handel’s oratorios are known for their diversity of types such as dramatic and non-dramatic. Yet, beneath these differences there often lurk significant common threads. Thus *Israel in Egypt*, a non-dramatic oratorio with no named characters and very few arias, follows the same cry-for-help, deliverer-sent, deliverer-fights, Israel-wins trajectory as do a number of dramatic oratorios (*Deborah*, *Jephtha*). The libretto for *Judas Maccabaeus* and the First and Second Books of Maccabees differ in a number of key aspects, in part because the libretto is shaped according to elements found in Judges and Exodus. It’s as if Handel and his librettists, while producing English oratorios year after year, hit upon a number of conventions, some biblical, some musical, that seemed to “work” and satisfy the audience’s expectations. Of course, there were also notable misfires (*Israel in Egypt* in its

eighteenth-century reception). Nor am I saying that the creation of these conventions was completely conscious or intentional. Rather, through a combination of instinct, trial and error, and response to the gravitational pull of certain patterns—some biblical, some musical, some political—a fairly stable, yet flexible repertory of genre conventions emerged which helped create the identity of the deliverance oratorio and ensured its survival and use in successive centuries.

So it seems that anyone approaching Handel’s English oratorios is better prepared for the encounter if they keep in mind some fundamental concepts. The first is the way the Bible, especially the Old Testament, permeated all aspects of British society for a very long time. This gave Handel’s audience a rich referential context which is difficult to resurrect in the early twenty-first century. Second, there must be at least a basic understanding of the process of adaptation and the limits of fidelity criticism. In fact, being too faithful to an original source can weaken an opera or oratorio adaptation.¹³ Finally, it must be recognized that the repeated adaptation of biblical stories season after season resulted in a number of genre conventions that shaped audience expectations and the creation of newer oratorios by Handel and later composers such as Spohr and Mendelssohn.

The challenge in understanding Handel’s oratorios is that they are densely packed works with a combination of elements—musical, verbal, political, religious—the significance of which can elude the listener who is far removed in time (and culture) from their original contexts. But that is also the reward in studying these pieces: there is more in them than their creators (and first audiences) knew and thus they become for us inexhaustible sources of enrichment and delight.

— **Kenneth Nott**
University of Hartford

HANDEL-L

HANDEL-L is a discussion list open to everybody wishing to discuss the music, life and times of George Frideric Handel and his contemporaries. Subscribers are welcome to initiate or respond to a wide variety of topics. “Lurkers” are welcome to monitor proceedings anonymously.

All Handel enthusiasts, at any level of specialisation, are encouraged to provide reviews and feedback concerning recordings, opera productions, concerts, and literature. HANDEL-L combines this appreciation of Handel’s music with comments, short reports, and discussion from scholars, performers, and journalists who maintain a serious interest in the composer and his world: the discussion list is a valuable source for breaking the latest Handel news around the world.

To join HANDEL-L visit <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/handel-l/>

(Endnotes)

1 Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (New York: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1993), p. 7.

2 Barbara Tuchman, *Bible and Sword: England and Palestine from the Bronze Age to Balfour* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), p. 83.

- 3 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), p. xi.
- 4 *Bible and Sword*, p. 82.
- 5 See Ruth Smith, "The Meaning of Morell's Libretto of *Judas Maccabaeus*," *Music & Letters*, vol. 79, no. 1 (February 1998), pp. 50-71.
- 6 *Bible and Sword*, p. 83.
- 7 John Milton, "The Reason of Church Government Urged against Prelaty" in *The Portable Milton*, ed. Douglas Bush (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), pp. 126-7.
- 8 Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 340.
- 9 Duncan Chis olm, "New Sources for the Libretto of Handel's *Joseph*," *Handel Tercentenary Collection*, ed. Stanley Sadie and Anthony Hicks (London, 1987), pp. 182-208.
- 10 Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, p. 338; Nott, "'Heroick Vertue': Handel and Morell's *Jephtha* in the Light of Eighteenth-Century Biblical Commentary and Other Sources," *Music & Letters*, vol. 77, no. 2 (May 1996), pp. 194-208.
- 11 David M. Gunn, "Joshua and Judges," *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 104-5.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 13 Roberta Montemorra Marvin, "Andrea Maffei's 'Ugly Sin': The Libretto for Verdi's *I masnadieri*," *Historical Musicology: Sources, Methods, Interpretations*, ed. Stephen A. Crist and Roberta Montemorra Marvin (University of Rochester Press, 2004), pp. 280-301.

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK (WINTER 2008)

The Anniversary Year of 2009 is upon us, and we should soon begin to see publications, recordings, and concerts celebrating the life and music of George Frideric Handel as well as the other composers who have significant anniversaries this year. Among the first Handel Conferences will be that sponsored by our own society and hosted by Centre College in Danville, Kentucky at the end of February. A detailed program will be found elsewhere in this issue of the Newsletter, together with information about registration, travel and lodging. I hope that many members of the society will make the endeavor to attend.

Also in this issue of the Newsletter you will find an announcement of the J. Merrill Knapp Fellowship which is offered by the AHS. The members of the Board of Directors at their meeting in November agreed to the revised guidelines for the Fellowship which, it is hoped, will make it appealing to a larger number of scholars. Please make it known to younger scholars and independent scholars who may not be members of the AHS.

Finally, please remember that the Newsletter Editor is always happy to receive reviews of concert and opera performances as well as reports on conferences. These will be a particular service to fellow members of the society in a year when the state of the economy may force many of us to curtail travel plans. Please remember that there is no guarantee of publication, but I have not heard the Editor complaining that he has too many submissions to choose between. Perhaps that should be one of the society's goals for 2009.

— Graydon Beeks

NEWSLETTER of The American Handel Society

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The Editor welcomes comments, contributions,
and suggestions for future issues.

HANDEL CALENDAR

The American Handel Society welcomes news or information about events of interest to Handelians. If possible, please include address, telephone number and URL where readers may obtain details. Announcements concerning Handel events from around the world are available by logging onto <http://gfhandel.org/>

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* - This organization does not have a reduced rate for retirees.

Those paying in dollars or sterling should make their checks payable to THE AMERICAN HANDEL SOCIETY and mail them to Marjorie Pomeroy, Secretary/Treasurer, THE AMERICAN HANDEL SOCIETY, 49 Christopher Hollow Road, Sandwich, MA 02563. Those wishing to pay in Euros should remit to Prof. Dr. Manfred Rätzer, Treasurer, Georg-Friedrich-Händel-Gesellschaft, Gr. Nikolaistrasse 5, 06108 Halle (Saale), Federal Republic of Germany, and indicate that the payment is for the account of the AHS. Friends of the London Handel Institute may also pay their AHS dues in sterling by making their checks payable to The Handel Institute and mailing them to Malcolm London, Hon. Treasurer, The Handel Institute, 108 Falcon Point, Hopton Street, London, SE1 9JB, with the appropriate annotation.

Payments in dollars for GFH or HI memberships must be received before 1 June.