

# NEWSLETTER of the American Handel Society

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## “WE MOST HEARTILY WISH TO NEVER HEAR IT AGAIN”: THE FALSETTIST IN 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY PERFORMANCES OF HANDEL’S *MESSIAH*

Luke Howard

It is only somewhat facetious to claim that everything there is to know about the countertenor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be gleaned from the relevant Wikipedia article, which skips over the century completely.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there was a noticeable decline in the employment of the male falsetto voice during that period, which was subsequently reversed in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tracking that arc is relatively easy. Accounting for it involves a more nuanced approach, and that is where 19<sup>th</sup>-century concert reviews of *Messiah* can help. *Messiah*'s ubiquity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century offers details of performance practice and reception that can elicit a more granular understanding of the falsetto voice's historical trajectory.

A useful starting point might be the Westminster Abbey performances of *Messiah* in the 1780s and 90s. In 1786, for example, the chorus consisted of fifty-eight sopranos (forty-five of whom were boys), fifty-one adult male altos and, of course, all-male tenor and bass sections. Charles Knyvett (1752–1822) was the principal alto soloist on that occasion. There is no question that Knyvett sang in the alto range, but what did that actually mean in terms of his vocal production and voice type? Modern-day scholars of the high male voice, including Simon Ravens and David Rugger,<sup>2</sup> make a clear distinction between the alto falsettist, the dual-register tenor, and the natural or modal countertenor, even though all might sing in the same range. These distinctions were not always clear in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Among English tenors, both Charles Incedon (1763–1826) and John Braham (1774–1856) were dual-register tenors who used falsetto extension in their upper range. Braham had reportedly smoothed over the break so perfectly that it was impossible to tell when he switched into falsetto, leading one critic of the day to claim, “no voice can be in this respect more perfect.”<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding Braham's “perfect” voice, contemporary writers noted the perpetual difficulty of switching between the modal voice and falsetto without creating jarring “yodel”-like contrasts of volume, timbre, and effect.<sup>4</sup> Critics and pedagogues of the day also noticed that even though dual-register tenors occasionally employed falsetto, the most powerful execution of the technique generally came from bass singers, not tenors. Many of the male altos in cathedral choirs were natural basses singing in falsetto, which had to this point been primarily a choral and ensemble (not a solo) voice type. That distinction remained key in the future of the falsettist during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

1 “Countertenor,” *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Countertenor>.

2 See Simon Ravens, *The Supernatural Voice: A History of High Male Singing* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2014); and David Rugger, “Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body: Countertenors, Voice Type, and Identity” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2018).

3 “Mr. Braham,” *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* 1 (January 1818): 89.

4 Ibid.

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## REPORT FROM HALLE 2023

Graydon Beeks

The Handel Festival in Halle took place this year from May 26 to June 11 with the theme “Opera: Dispute over Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee.” As in past years it featured a variety of concerts, operas, and special events spread over two weeks and three weekends. I was only able to attend the first week, but I hope this report will convey the flavor of the event. The weather was unusually clement for the time of year—neither too hot nor too cold, with little rain in evidence. This allowed for mingling and dining *al fresco* which lent an air of pleasant informality to the proceedings.

The Festival opened on Friday, May 26, with a performance of the new production of *Serse* at the Halle Opera. The featured singer was mezzo-soprano Anna Bonitatibus in the title role, and she gave a commanding performance. After the conclusion of the opera, she was presented with the Handel Prize of the City of Halle in honor of her distinguished international career and especially of her performances of Handel's works, and the audience clearly endorsed the award. On Friday, June 9, she also appeared as Matilde in a concert performance of *Lotario* with the Handel Festival Orchestra, again under the direction of Attilio Cremonesi.

Countertenor Leandro Marziotte, in the role of Arsamene, *Serse*'s brother and rival for the affections of Romilda, acted convincingly but I found his voice sometimes harsh and occasionally out of tune. Soprano Franziska Krötenheerdt, who had impressed last year in the role of Angelica in *Orlando*, had unfortunately injured herself and was unable to appear as Romilda. Her replacement, Yewon Han, sang impressively from the orchestra pit while the director of the production, Louisa Proske, mimed the role on stage. Soprano Vanessa Waldhart and mezzo-soprano Yulia Sokolik, memorable as Dorinda and Medoro in *Orlando*, were again impressive in the roles of Atalanta and Amastre respectively. Bass Andreas Beinhauer perhaps worked too hard attempting to be funny in the role of Elviro, Arsamene's comic servant, while the other bass, Michael Zehe, although visibly too young for the role, acted and sang well as Romilda's father, Ariodate. Maestro Cremonesi conducted the Handel Festival Orchestra and both were on good form. As was the case last year, there was a pleasing absence of percussion in the pit, and the organ had again been banished.

The staging, on the other hand, was at the very least questionable. It derived from a play on words generated by the opening scene of the libretto, in which the Persian tyrant *Serse* (Xerxes) is depicted as having fallen in love with a plane tree that provides him with welcome shade in a hot climate. In this production he is shown as an oil billionaire who has fallen in love with an airplane,

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In 1820 *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* published a series of detailed articles on "The Vocal Art." The first three essays were on tenor, soprano, and bass voices. Charles Knyvett's son, William (1779–1856), campaigned the editor-in-chief, Richard Bacon, for a fourth article on the "Counter-tenor." (Significantly, there was no article on the female alto, which was not considered a unique vocal category at the time—they were simply "low sopranos.") William Knyvett, the leading falsettist of the new century, admitted that he possessed a natural bass voice "distinguished by no superiority"<sup>5</sup> (though he had publicly sung the bass solos in *Messiah*), but he refined a single-register falsetto voice, making him one of the first single-register male altos to have a successful solo career.

In the article, Knyvett proposed the single-register falsettist (i.e., himself) as the most viable current alternative to the castrato and the female contralto in solo repertoire. It is clear that Knyvett's model and musical ideal was a low-voiced castrato, in the manner of Senesino or Guadagni. "When the first impulses of disgust were once over," the article explains, "the tone [of the castrato] appeared to us more capable of pathos than that of any other voice, and also of brilliant execution. . . . No contraltos were equal to the best singers of this class."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the case for the male alto soloist was, from the start, pegged to its affinity with the castrato voice.

An earlier contributor to this journal had observed, "the falsette is the most sweet and brilliant of all the tones of male singers, and is of a more pathetic cast than any natural voice."<sup>7</sup> Knyvett also believed that the falsetto voice, though "unnatural," exhibited compensatory qualities such as delicacy, liquidity, sweetness, but especially ornamentation: "This power is particularly exemplified in the shake which is more complete in falsettes, and acquired with far less labour than by singers of any other kind."<sup>8</sup>

Knyvett ruefully offered a few caveats: the solo falsetto voice tended to be weak in volume and out of tune.<sup>9</sup> Knyvett's co-author, Richard Bacon, added, "one never hears Mr. K in a song without lamenting its want of power." With regard to performances of Handel arias, in particular, Bacon suggested, "we cannot help suspecting that the greater part of them would be far more effectively taken by a low soprano and some even by a bass."<sup>10</sup>

Knyvett and Bacon also understood that the recent rise of the male alto soloist in *Messiah*, including Knyvett's own father singing at Westminster Abbey, was problematic. While in 1820 the falsetto might have been the best option to replace the castrato, it was still an inferior voice, the authors claimed, due to "the thin and feeble effect which the falsette produces when contrasted with the power and fullness of soprano, tenor, or bass, in the large buildings."<sup>11</sup> And larger performances, in larger buildings, were beginning to be staged with increasing frequency throughout England.

At this point, Knyvett still described the alto arias in Handel's oratorios as expressly suited for "singers with low voices [i.e., contraltos], or for low artificial sopranos [i.e., alto castrati]."<sup>12</sup> These are low-voice arias, not high-voice arias, and that's not just a semantic distinction—it has implications for timbre, tessitura, interpretation, text setting, and emotional temperature.<sup>13</sup> That admission, however, flew in the face of Knyvett's own performance practice, which employed the highest of high male voice types.

It was not all that unusual to refer to castrati as "artificial sopranos" in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. But in 1822 a critic in *The Quarterly Musical Magazine* referred to the castrato voice as an "artificial falsette" instead of "artificial soprano." The same writer

claimed that dual-register tenors used falsetto "in imitation of Castrati," solidifying Knyvett's perceived link between castrati and falsetti. The author mentioned Knyvett by name and praised his tone while still lamenting his lack of vocal power. In general, though, the attitude toward falsettists as a group was dismissive:

It is certainly melancholy to a high degree, but a part of this emotion is attributable to the pain we constantly labour under for the performer himself, who seems to task unequal powers—there is also a sense of feebleness in point of volume, which always touches the very verge of contempt.<sup>14</sup>

And again, there is an overt call for the female contralto—"perhaps the most affecting" of any of the voice types—as the preferred voice to sing Handel's arias from *Messiah*.<sup>15</sup>

When Knyvett sang the alto solos in *Messiah* at the Yorkshire Grand Music Festival in 1823, the reviewer identified Mozart's additional accompaniments as another emerging problem for the falsettist. While none of the soloists cared much for singing over an augmented orchestra, it was reported that Mozart's accompaniments "can overpower a counter-tenor voice that is at all deficient."<sup>16</sup> Knyvett's voice was not reported to be deficient on this occasion, but it was a salient warning for all future falsettists; the bigger the orchestra, the more trouble you are in.

Knyvett sang *Messiah* solos again at York Minster in 1825 and 1828, when he shared alto duties with another up-and-coming countertenor, Mr. Terrail. In a case of blatant historical revisionism, the reviewer on that occasion claimed that "O Thou that Tellest," a secondary alto solo, was actually written for, and should be sung by, a countertenor.<sup>17</sup> Given the flexibility with which Handel himself assigned and altered these alto-range arias for various singers during his lifetime, it is not certain they were "written for" any particular voice type at all—certainly not a countertenor. But through the sole influence of Knyvett, these arias were now being considered primarily (and historically) countertenor territory.

A review of the 1834 Royal Music Festival in Westminster Abbey written by Richard Edgcumbe noted that the aria "He was Despised" of *Messiah* was sung by a female, Miss Masson, on account of "there being no good countertenor," the voice type to which, he added, this aria was now generally assigned. It is a curious observation, given that at least three countertenors had sung solos earlier in the Festival. Either Edgcumbe had simply decided that none of them were "good" or that no countertenors were "good."

Edgcumbe certainly was not swayed by Miss Masson's performance, either, which he judged as correct but without feeling. Rather, he made the intriguing suggestion that this aria could have been taken by a tenor:

As it is within the compass of a tenor, Harrison, Knyvett, and others, having sung it, Braham might have taken it, and would have given it all its deeply pathetic expression, which was totally lost.<sup>18</sup>

Edgcumbe's inclusion of Knyvett with Harrison and Braham as a *bona fide* "tenor" might not have been a mistake, if Knyvett's falsetto voice was actually stronger and more reliable than most other falsettists of the day. What is even more telling is that it did not seem unusual to Edgcumbe for either a single-register or dual-register tenor to take that alto aria—he had witnessed it several times before. Edgcumbe seemed convinced, at least, it should be a high-voice male, not a low-voice female, aria.

But contralto soloists, including Miss Masson and Mrs. Shaw, appeared with increasing frequency. Performances of *Messiah* at the Hanover Square Rooms and at Hereford in 1837 featured female soloists singing what were now routinely identified

5 "Mr. William Knyvett," *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* 2, no. 8 (1820): 472.

6 "Preliminary Remarks on Counter-Tenor Singing," *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* 2, no. 8 (1820): 468–69.

7 [Timotheus], "To the Editor: Elements of Vocal Science," *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* 2, no. 7 (1820): 259.

8 "Mr. William Knyvett," 475.

9 "Preliminary Remarks," 470.

10 "Mr. William Knyvett," 473.

11 "Preliminary Remarks," 470–71.

12 *Ibid.*, 470.

13 See Chapter 3, "Falsetto Beliefs," in Andrew Parrott, *Composers' Intentions? Lost Traditions of Musical Performance* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2015).

14 "The Philosophy of Musical Composition, No. 5," *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* 4, no. 13 (1822): 24.

15 *Ibid.*

16 "The Messiah," *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* 10, no. 38 (1828): 243.

17 A review included in *The Third Yorkshire Musical Festival* (York: Blanchard and Clapham, 1828) in the volume catalogued in the Gerald Coke Handel Collection, Foundling Museum, acc. no. 10282.

18 Richard Edgcumbe, *Musical Reminiscences of an Old Amateur* (London, 1831), 281–82. Quoted in Ravens, *Supernatural Voice*, 168.

in the reviews as the “countertenor solos.”<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Shaw sang “He was Despised” at Manchester in 1836 in a manner of pathetic expression “beyond all praise,”<sup>20</sup> contrasted with Mr. Terrail’s “O Thou that Tellest,” which was so weak it could barely be heard.<sup>21</sup>

Then from 1840 to 1841, the change in reception of the falsetto voice in *Messiah* took another significant turn, simultaneous with the development of the *tenore di forza* or “chest-voice tenor” on the Continent. In 1840 the falsettist Mr. Young performed in *Messiah* at Exeter Hall in London, taking what were now sometimes called the “alto solos” (no longer exclusively “countertenor solos”), and singing them with great feeling and expression.<sup>22</sup> Young returned the following year (1841) to repeat the performance, and while the reviewer for *The Musical World* admitted that Mr. Young sang beautifully, he disapproved of the countertenor voice in general as “unmusical” and “ridiculous,” and concluded “we most heartily wish to never hear it again.”<sup>23</sup> He got his wish—there does not appear to have been a major performance of *Messiah* in London after 1841 that included a falsetto soloist, not for another century, at least.

When Mr. Hawkins sang “O Thou that Tellest” at an Edinburgh performance in 1843, the reviewer noted that because it was sung by a “contra-tenor,” the aria was “thus unnecessarily spoiled.”<sup>24</sup> Hawkins sang the same selection at Oxford in 1844; the critic there reported “we should have preferred [it] from the voice of a mezzo-soprano.”<sup>25</sup> And at Nottingham in 1852, a Miss Wells sang contralto in *Messiah*, prompting the following appraisal:

We have always considered a female contralto the finest and most affecting voice in creation, and have almost invariably listened with dissatisfaction whenever we have heard the male thin and unnatural falsetto striving to mimic the full melodious tones of the former.<sup>26</sup>

At another provincial performance later in 1852, a countertenor, Mr. Richards, sang “the two contralto songs...with skill and effect,” but the critic added that these arias “are always best when delivered by the natural voices of women.”<sup>27</sup>

This question of whether the alto arias should be sung by high-voiced men or low-voiced women was limited, at the time, to performances of Handel’s music, especially *Messiah*. Male soloists weren’t typically engaged to sing the alto parts of Mozart’s Requiem, Haydn’s *Creation* (which has no alto solos), Beethoven’s *Christ on the Mount of Olives* (also no alto solos), or Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*—all of which were also exceedingly popular works on the choral festival circuit at the time.

Teaching of the countertenor technique had reportedly ceased in England and Scotland by 1850, and the burgeoning amateur choral society movement consolidated a division into two natural female and two natural male voice parts.<sup>28</sup> At Sheffield in 1852, there were two countertenor soloists in *Messiah*, Mr. Yates and Mr. Mason. Yates was described as having a good countertenor voice, but Mason’s singing of “He was Despised” was censured as “a wretched piece of singing, devoid of feeling, taste, or judgment. Counter-tenor voices, even the best, are an abomination in solos.”<sup>29</sup> This reviewer also railed against countertenors in the chorus, observing that they couldn’t be heard when the other parts were at full volume, and he made the plea that “female voices are indispensable.”<sup>30</sup>

In 1872 the male falsetto voice was characterized in a music journal as an “illegitimate, vulgar, and hideous mode of utterance” using the same method of vocal production as “the cry, scream, yell,

and all shrillness.”<sup>31</sup> Another correspondent reported that he “was always taught to regard [the falsetto] as unpleasant and unnatural, and [it] certainly appeared so to me, compared with the alto of women or boys.”<sup>32</sup> In the article on “Voices” in the first edition of George Grove’s music dictionary, the author concurs, describing the countertenor voice as “peculiar...an unnatural register.”<sup>33</sup>

Male altos still lingered in the festival choirs during the third quarter of the century, despite some resistance. Lowell Mason, the well-known American music director and composer, attended an 1852 Norwich performance of *Messiah* and penned a stinging criticism of the inclusion of men and boys in the soprano and alto sections of the chorus: “There were boys enough to spoil almost any Soprano,” and the roughness of male alto voices “has no mercy upon one’s nervous system, or musical sensibilities.”<sup>34</sup>

As late as 1883, a reviewer noted that the choral altos at the Handel Festival in London demonstrated “combined sweetness and strength due to the judicious blending of male *falsetto* with the natural female voice.”<sup>35</sup> But, despite the lingering presence of male altos in cathedral choirs and associated festival choruses, the alto section in the provincial choral societies would gradually become an all-female affair during the century’s closing decades.<sup>36</sup>

William Knyvett had succeeded temporarily in steering the performance practice of *Messiah*’s alto-range arias through the solo single-register falsetto voice, at least for as long as he was an active singer himself (until ca. 1835). But eventually the widespread development of the female contralto was bound to take over. The slender case Knyvett had made for a solo falsettist role in *Messiah* was really nothing more than a justification of his own career, suited to his own time. It was not a historically-informed restoration of how these arias had typically been sung in Handel’s day, nor an instruction on how they should be sung in the future. It was a temporary solution to a problem specific to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1908 Dr. G. Edward Stubbs, an American musician and scholar, published his book *The Adult Male Alto*, initiating a decades-long endeavor to rehabilitate the reputation of the falsettist. Stubbs claimed the male alto was still wrongly confused with the “tabooed” voice of the castrato with which “it is completely dissociated.”<sup>37</sup> But was the solo falsettist really “wrongly confused” with castrati? History (and William Knyvett) would instead suggest that the solo falsetto voice was consciously intended to mimic the effect of the castrato, certainly in performances of Handel’s oratorios. That was the whole reason falsettists, beginning with William Knyvett, even had solo careers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The reasons for the rise of the solo falsettist in *Messiah* were, we might say, fostered by the permanent absence of low castrati and the temporary shortage of well-trained female contraltos. The solo falsettist was a necessary but transient measure. The fall was due to factors that were social and cultural as much as musical, but musical reasons include the persistent problems of volume and intonation among 19<sup>th</sup>-century falsettists, the thicker orchestration of Mozart’s accompaniments, a preference for solo female contraltos in other repertoire, and a rising group of female singers equal to that task.

At a conference of the Royal Musical Association in 1937, John Hough presented a paper on the history of the countertenor voice. The Association chairman, Sir Percy Buck (an amateur falsettist himself), responded that it was still “a subject about which few of us know anything much.”<sup>38</sup> And that is the milieu into which Alfred Deller emerged in the early 1940s, initiating the solo countertenor revival, which is, of course, another story entirely.

19 See, for example, “Ancient Concerts,” *Morning Post* (London), May 21, 1835, 3; and “Hereford Music Meeting,” *The Musical World* 7, no. 82 (1837): 55–56.

20 “Musical,” *Morning Post* (London), September 17, 1836, 3.

21 “Tunbridge,” *The Musical Journal* 2, no. 45 (1840): 290.

22 “Sacred Harmonic Society,” *The Musical Record* (1840): 310.

23 “Metropolitan: Sacred Harmonic Society, Exeter Hall,” *The Musical World* 16, no. 299 (1841): 395.

24 S. “Edinburgh Musical Festival,” *The Musical World* 18, no. 42 (1843): 348.

25 “Multiple News Items,” *The Standard* (London), June 20, 1844, 3.

26 “Multiple Commerce Items,” *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, January 15, 1852, 5.

27 “Provincial: Exeter,” *The Musical World* 31, no. 1 (1853): 7.

28 J. Seligmann, “Should Counter-Tenor be Sung by Male or Female Voices?,” *Saroni’s Musical Times* 2, no. 7 (1850): 66–67.

29 “Provincial: Sheffield,” *The Musical World* 30, no. 9 (1852): 141.

30 Ibid.

31 *The Metronome: A Monthly Review of Music* 1, no. 10 (1872): 75.

32 R. S. O., “Comment on Songs for Men’s Voices,” *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 15, no. 352 (1872): 511.

33 W. S. R., “Voices,” *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 4, ed. George Grove (London: MacMillan and Co., 1890), 334.

34 Lowell Mason, “The Norwich Musical Festival,” *The Musical World and New York Musical Times* 4, no. 8 (1852): 114.

35 J. B., “The Handel Festival,” *The Musical World* 61, no. 25 (1883): 380.

36 This can be traced back to the experimental “exclusion of male altos” from the chorus at the 1857 Lancashire Festival in Manchester, which was considered “in many instances [to be] very grateful to the ear.” See “Provincial: Manchester,” *The Musical Gazette* 2, no. 51 (1857): 51.

37 A Review of G. Edward Stubbs, *The Adult Male Alto* (New York: H. W. Gray Co., 1908), in *The New Music Review* 7, no. 75 (1908): 186. The renowned late 20<sup>th</sup>-century countertenor René Jacobs continues to make a similar claim today. See Ravens, *Supernatural Voice*, 215.

38 John Hough, “The Historical Significance of the Counter-Tenor,” *Proceedings of the Musical Association* 64 (1937): 20.

which constituted the set for the entire opera. The opera house's revolving stage was used—not to say overused—to provide external and cutaway internal settings for the action. Since *Serse* is known for its comic elements, which were retained from the 17<sup>th</sup>-century source libretto, the director inserted any number of gags involving aspects of the flight experience, together with a certain amount of gratuitous sex and violence. Most distracting was the almost constant unnecessary presence onstage of persons engaged in activities seemingly designed to upstage the character singing the aria.

I do not mean to convey a completely negative impression. The basic story of Handel's libretto was presented in updated form, and the essential characters of the protagonists were not altered. Nonetheless, I felt that less fiddling around would have been far more effective: it would have conveyed the director's trust in the singers' abilities to project their roles and in the audience's ability to understand the plot. It would also have made for a subtler blend of the comic and serious.

Saturday began with the Festival Lecture, given by Prof. Arnold Jacobshagen of the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz Köln, which gave an overview of the problems inherent in the production and performance of opera from Handel's time to the present. This was followed by the Membership Meeting of the Georg-Friedrich-Händel Gesellschaft, which was preceded by a short program of harpsichord music presented by the President of the Hungarian Handel Society, Zsombor Toth-Vajna. I offered greetings on behalf of the American Handel Society and a brief report on our February 2023 conference in Bloomington. This was an election year, which resulted in some changes in the membership of the Vorstand. Prof. Wolfgang Hirschmann will continue as President and I will become one of three Vice Presidents, serving alongside longtime Vice Presidents Dr. Hanna John, former Director of the Halle Festival, and Prof. Donald Burrows, the Chair of the London Handel Institute. The 2023 issue of the *Händel-Jahrbuch* was distributed to members of the Gesellschaft who were present and copies were mailed to other members in the following weeks. Thanks to the moving forward of the date for payment of membership fees, members of the AHS who have joined the G. F. Handel Gesellschaft for this year should have received their copies without the delays encountered last year.

On Saturday night I heard a performance of a recently discovered Italian version of *Messiah* which is preserved in a manuscript acquired by the Händel-Haus in Halle in 2019. It belonged to the music collection of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Lord Cowper (1738–1789), who spent most of his life in Florence and was a major patron of the city's cultural life in the 1760s–1780s. *Messiah* was first performed there on August 6, 1768 in the Palazzo Pitti, the home of Cowper's friend Pietro Leopoldo, Grand Duke of Tuscany, and later Hapsburg Emperor Leopold II in succession to his mother the Empress Maria Theresa and his brother Emperor Joseph II.

The musical text of this Italian version, which is based on Randall & Abell's London print of 1767, was shortened and lightly re-scored. The English text was converted into rhyming Italian by Abate Antonio Pillori (fl. 1745–1778) working with the tenor and composer Salvatore Pazzaglia (1723–1807), a process which resulted in multiple changes in the number of syllables and therefore the number of notes to which they were to be sung, as well as changes in the meaning of the sung text. The musical cuts created some surprising omissions including "I know that my Redeemer liveth," as well as striking juxtapositions, as when the preparation for the expected air "The Trumpet shall sound" led instead to the chorus "Worthy is the Lamb that was Slain."

The performance by the Coro Filarmonico Ruggero Maghini di Torino and the Innsbrucker Festwochenorchester under the direction of Alessandro De Marchi was generally polished, but there seemed to be a certain lack of commitment to the music and a desire to make everything sound as lyrical as possible. Among the soloists, the most impressive was the alto Margherita Maria Sala, who sang the long da capo aria "He was Despised" with moving conviction. The soprano Eleonora Bellocchi, who had the lion's share of the work, sang beautifully but spent the entire evening communing with her music stand rather than projecting to the audience. The bass Luigi De Donato blustered impressively. All told, it was a version of the oratorio worth hearing—but perhaps only once.

On Pentecost Sunday I travelled to Bad Lauchstädt to attend a performance of a Czech production of the Handel pasticcio *Alessandro Severo* in the historic Goethe Theatre. This 1737 work

recycles many of the composer's "hits" from earlier operas including *Ariodante*, *Giustino*, and *Berenice* in support of a libretto adapted from one by Apostolo Zeno originally performed in Venice in 1717. The story concerns the Roman Emperor Severus, his dominating mother Giulia and her jealousy, and resulting mistreatment of the emperor's young wife Salustia. A plot to kill Giulia is hatched by Salustia's father, General Marziano, and his friend Claudio, who has problems of his own generated by the appearance of his vengeful ex-girlfriend Albina in male disguise. In true *opera seria* fashion all is resolved in the end thanks to Giulia's change of heart and Alessandro's clemency.

The staging by Monika Hliněnská was simple and straightforward, with nods to historical costumes and stage practices. Historical gestures were used effectively at the beginning of the opera to establish the artificial world that Alessandro and Salustia imagine they are living in, but the rest of the acting was more naturalistic. There were sometimes more people onstage than was strictly necessary, but rarely was attention drawn away from the character(s) singing.

The singing itself was excellent and was usually coupled with comparable acting. Countertenor Raffaele Pe in the title role performed his high-lying and virtuosic music, originally given to the castrato Cafferelli, with great technical skill and presented a convincing portrait of a self-absorbed and irresolute mama's boy. Mezzo soprano Sylva Čmugrová captured the mostly villainous but sometimes ambivalent character of Giulia successfully and was clearly a skilled singing actress. The same was true of bass Jaromír Nosek in the role of Marziano. The soprano Hana Blažíková was less obviously acting, but instead presented a very appealing persona on stage, and her facial expressions, which were always appropriate to the dramatic situation, "read" clearly to the audience. Additionally, she sang like an angel. The other two members of the cast—soprano Helena Kalambová as Claudio and mezzo soprano Tereza Zimková as Albina—also sang well, but their acting was not as strong.

The Collegium Marianum of Prague played superbly, conquering the challenges of a very small orchestral pit and the harsh acoustics of the theater. They seemed accustomed to playing together in an ensemble of just that size, and the tone of the violins was particularly unified and pleasing. They obviously understood what their director Jana Semerádová wanted from them, and she in turn established appropriate tempos and conveyed her desired phrasing and dynamics. She also played the flute obbligato in one aria. If she bounced around a bit more, that was perhaps necessary, her gestures were always in service of the music. It was all in all a memorable experience and one hopes that we will hear more from this team in the future.

On Monday afternoon we were treated to a performance of the Italian *Serenata Aci, Galatea e Polifemo* in the Aula of the University. This is a high-ceilinged room that has been beautifully restored in recent years but still retains its overly reverberant acoustic. The work, which calls for three soloists and a small orchestra, was almost certainly composed to be performed as part of a wedding celebration in Naples in the summer of 1708. Federico Fiorio, the countertenor who undertook the role of Aci that was originally written for a soprano castrato, has a beautiful voice with an extraordinary range and the technique to deal with the often-virtuosic writing. The other two soloists we had heard before in *Il Messia*. The alto Margherita Maria Sala, here singing Galatea, easily surmounted the difficult music written for her character and sang with real commitment. The bass, Luigi De Donato, commanded the immense range required for the Cyclops Polyphemus and was also able to make some lovely soft sounds along with the bluster generally required for the character.

The ensemble Modo Antiquo, under the direction of Federico Maria Sardelli—who also played alto recorder in one aria—clearly had the music under their fingers, but often played too aggressively with an ungratifying tone, the oboe being a primary offender. Despite some lovely moments the overall impression was of too much volume, which may very well have been more the fault of the acoustics than of the efforts of the performers.

The Scholarly Conference on the topic "The Politics of Opera: Handel's Opera Academies 1719–1737" took place on May 30 and 31 in the Chamber Music Hall of the Händel-Haus, opening with the presentation of the 6<sup>th</sup> International Handel Research Prize to Christoph Schaller for his study of the reception of *Messiah* in Augsburg. Sixteen speakers from five countries presented papers on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from English responses to Italian opera in general to specific operas by Handel and his contemporaries. Members of the AHS who gave papers included John Roberts, Ivan

Ćurković, Matthew Gardner, Donald Burrows, and myself. All the papers, which elicited spirited discussion from an attentive audience, will be published in the 2024 volume of the *Händel-Jahrbuch*. The Tuesday session ended with a presentation on recent activities and research in the library and archive of the Händel-Haus Foundation by Juliane Riepe, Theresa Stiller, and Jens Wehmann. Wednesday concluded with a tour of the editorial offices of the Hallische Händel-Ausgabe.

One of the features of recent Festivals has been the proliferation of Gala Concerts given by distinguished international soloists, usually accompanied by equally distinguished international ensembles. This year there were six such concerts, and I heard very positive reports of the program on duets given by Anna Prohaska and Bejun Mehta with the Lautten Compagny under the direction of Wolfgang Katschner on Sunday evening. Later in the Festival there were similar concerts by Raffaele Pe, Jakub Orliński, and Andrea Marcon and Julian Prégardien. On Tuesday evening it was the turn of soprano Julia Lezhneva with Concerto Köln. The program, with the title “Grand Tour,” included arias from Handel’s *Rodrigo*, *Agrippina*, *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno*, and *Alessandro*, together with arias from Carl Heinrich Graun’s *Coriolano* and *Silla*. These were interspersed with instrumental pieces by Handel, Vivaldi, and Johann Gottlieb Graun. Lezhneva has a slightly darker voice than one is used to hearing in baroque music these days, supported by a remarkably solid technique in both virtuosic and lyrical music. Her performance of fast roudades was truly breathtaking and her slow singing was lovely if overly self-indulgent. There was often a sense of tempi being stretched to their absolute limits in both directions. This latter, coupled with occasional ensemble problems in the orchestra, was not helped by the difficult acoustics of the Ulrichskirche. The end result was a concert that was filling but perhaps not completely fulfilling.

There were more performances that I missed, both during my time in Halle and after my departure. These included a revival of last year’s production of *Orlando*, at which Franziska Krötenheerdt had recovered enough to sing the role of Angelica while seated at the side of the stage, and a performance of *Giulio Cesare* at the Leipzig Opera. There were also concerts of various sorts and sizes, a more conventional version of *Messiah*, and two staged performances of *Rinaldo* in its 1731 version at Bad Lauchstädt. Next year’s festival (with the theme “Oh Là Là! Handel? - French Inspirations”) will take place from May 24 to June 9, 2024. Concert tickets should be available beginning in late autumn. The Conference, on the topic of “Handel and French Music Culture,” will assemble on May 27–29, 2024.

### CALL FOR APPLICATIONS: THE J. MERRILL KNAPP RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP 2024

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 not limited to, purchase of microfilms, travel for research, and production expenses for publications. 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 applications is **March 1, 2024**. 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 the Knapp Fellowship Committee. Electronic submissions are preferred; letters of recommendation and the application can be emailed to **Dr. Alison DeSimone** at [alisoncdesimone@gmail.com](mailto:alisoncdesimone@gmail.com). Paper submissions can be mailed to Alison DeSimone, 1291 W 72nd Terrace, Kansas City, MO 64114. All applications must arrive by March 1, 2024.

## FROM THE PRESIDENT’S DESK

The J. Merrill Knapp Research Fellowship is offered by the American Handel Society in alternate years to support scholarly projects related to Handel and his world. 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. An announcement of the 2024 Fellowship, found elsewhere in this issue of the *Newsletter*, includes details of the application process. Members of the Society are encouraged to spread the word of this opportunity and to encourage eligible scholars to apply.

I would also like to call attention to the Thirteenth Handel Institute Conference to be held November 17–19, 2023, in London. This conference, which is normally held every third year, has been scheduled a year earlier to celebrate the refurbishment and reopening in spring 2023 of the Handel House Museum at 25 Brook Street and also the tercentenary of the composer moving into the property in 1723. The paper sessions on November 18–19 will take place at Bridewell Hall; the conference committee is also planning to schedule a reception and tour at the Handel & Hendrix Museum, and an event at Foundling Museum. The program will be available on the Handel Institute website from August 15, 2023, and registration will open in mid-September.

Finally, for any members who have not paid their membership dues for 2023—or for potential new members—it is still possible to do so either online through the AHS website or by submitting the membership form found elsewhere in the *Newsletter*. I encourage all current members to spread the word to potential members.

— Graydon Beeks

### CALL FOR PAPERS: INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARLY CONFERENCE AT THE HANDEL FESTIVAL IN HALLE 2024

If one can trust the *Mémoires d’un Musicien* of 1756, then George Frideric Handel had in his library numerous volumes of operas by Jean-Baptiste Lully, André Campra, Jean-Marie Leclair, and Jean Philippe Rameau. These volumes included Rameau’s works for keyboard and treatises on music. In 1733 Abbé Antoine François Prévost mentioned that Handel had “emprunté le fond d’une infinité de belles choses de Lully, et surtout des Cantates Françaises.” This is a good reason to set up the International Conference to reconsider the conditions, requirements, scope, and significance of the impact of French music on Handel’s oeuvre. These influences affect nearly all genres in his oeuvre: the Italian operas based on French librettos (*Teseo*, *Amadigi di Gaula*), and the English oratorios based on French plays (*Esther*, *Athalia*, *Theodora*, *Jephtha*), the overtures and suites for orchestra, and for harpsichord. The influences are also visible in the cantatas (of which the French *Sans y penser* is certainly a special case), in Handel’s church music, the music for the stage drama *Alceste*, and in the collaboration with the French dancer Marie Sallé. The conference aims to explore the transfer routes of French music to Germany, Italy, and England as well as the adaptations and transformations of French models in Handel’s works. Other focal points will be the history of the impact and performance of Handel’s music and the changing images of Handel in France from the 18th century to the present. Comparative reflections on the reception of French music by Handel’s contemporaries are also very welcome.

The organisers invite interested scholars to participate in the conference with a 25-minute paper and ask for an application with a proposal and abstract by **October 15, 2023**. Travel and accommodation costs will be covered for the conference days (three nights, May 26–29). Organizers: Georg-Friedrich-Händel-Gesellschaft e.V., Internationale Vereinigung; Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Institut für Musik, Medien- und Sprechwissenschaften, Abteilung Musikwissenschaft; Stiftung Händel-Haus Halle. Contact: Dr. Annette Landgraf, [landgraf@musik.uni-halle.de](mailto:landgraf@musik.uni-halle.de); Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Hirschmann, [wolfgang.hirschmann@musik.uni-halle.de](mailto:wolfgang.hirschmann@musik.uni-halle.de); Dr. Juliane Riepe, [leitung.bibliothek@haendelhaus.de](mailto:leitung.bibliothek@haendelhaus.de); Ulrike Harnisch, [gesellschaft@haendel.de](mailto:gesellschaft@haendel.de)

## RECENT PUBLICATIONS

- Beeks, Graydon. "The Pre-Publication Circulation and Scoring of Handel's Op. 2 Trio Sonatas." *Händel-Jahrbuch* 69 (2023): 117–33.
- Burrows, Donald. "1959, 1985: The Anniversary Festivals in Halle and Their Importance." *Händel-Jahrbuch* 69 (2023): 241–52.
- . "Correcting the 'grossest faults': Charles Jennens and the Composition of Handel's 'Messiah.'" *Music and Letters* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcad035>.
- . "King George III and the 'Smith Collection' of Handel Manuscripts." *Early Music* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/em/caad011>.
- Gardner, Matthew. "Singers and Creativity in *Orlando* and *Alcina*." *Händel-Jahrbuch* 69 (2023): 173–87.
- Jerold, Beverly. *Equal Temperament in the Eighteenth Century: The Ear versus Numbers* Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2023, <https://www.brepols.net/products/IS-9782503606750-1>.
- Kimbell, David. "'Qual vento, che gira il cervello'—Operatic Irrationality in a Rational Age: Some Remarks on *Orlando*." *Händel-Jahrbuch* 69 (2023): 223–40.
- Lanfossi, Carlo. "*Orlando* in Analysis: Modern Performances as Textual Treatment." *Händel-Jahrbuch* 69 (2023): 157–71.
- Roberts, John H. "Handel's First Pastorals: More on Florindo and Daphne." *Händel-Jahrbuch* 69 (2023): 93–115.
- Timms, Colin. "Sorcery in the Libretto of Handel's *Orlando*." *Händel-Jahrbuch* 69 (2023): 205–221.
- Twomey, Cathal. "From 'Deary Shore' to 'Lucid Skies': Divinity, Mortality, and Ironic Self-Borrowing in an Aria from Handel's *The Choice of Hercules*." *Händel-Jahrbuch* 69 (2023): 255–66.
- Vickers, David. "'Their Sound is gone out into all Lands': Period-Instrument Recordings of *Messiah*, 1980–2020." *Händel-Jahrbuch* 69 (2023): 275–317.

Willner, Channan. "The Split Anstieg: Initial Ascents Involving the Bass, and Their Consequences" (2023), <http://www.channanwillner.com/online.htm>.

Zazzo, Lawrence. "Handel, Hagen, and Werktreue: In Search of an Historically-Informed Approach to Musician Alterations in Handel Opera Revivals." *Händel-Jahrbuch* 69 (2023): 53–67.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Encounters with Eighteenth-Century Music

September 8, 2023: Celebrating Elaine Sisman

October 26, 2023: Listening in the Caribbean

January 16, 2024: Confessions of a Telemanniac

February 23, 2024: Opera Seria, Identity, and the Performance of History

May 10, 2024: Non-Verbal Teaching of a Non-Verbal Art  
Registration required. See <https://encounters.secm.org>

### 13th Handel Institute Conference, London

November 17–19, 2023

Bridewell Hall

14 Bride Lane

Fleet Street, London EC4Y 8EQ

<https://handelinstitute.org/conference/2023>

### Halle Handel Festival

"Oh là là! Handel? - French inspirations"

May 24–June 9, 2024

<https://haendelhaus.de/hfs/startseite>

### International Scholarly Conference, Halle (Saale)

"Endless Beauties: George Frideric Handel and French Music Culture"

May 27–29, 2024

<https://www.haendel.de/scholarly-handel-conference/?lang=en>

## American Handel Society

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# AMERICAN HANDEL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP FORM

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I agree to have the following listed in a printed Directory of AHS Members (check as appropriate):  Address  Phone  Email

I would like my copy of the Newsletter delivered:  electronically  by mail

Class of Membership — Circle applicable cell(s) (for current calendar year, unless otherwise specified)	\$	£	€
Regular	40	30	35
Joint (one set of publications)	50	38	44
Student or Retired	20	15	18
Rinaldo Circle	75	55	66
Cleopatra Circle	125	95	110
Theodora Circle	250	190	220
Messiah Circle (Lifetime membership)	500	400	450
Subscriber (Institutions Only)	48	36	42
Donation – Travel Grant, Serwer Lecture, Knapp Fellowship, Traver Concert, ongoing activities (please specify intent)			
Friends of the Handel Institute, London*			
Regular	30	20	-
Student	15	10	-
Membership in the Georg-Friedrich-Händel-Gesellschaft*			
Regular	45	-	40
Student*	20	-	15
Dual Membership – Georg-Friedrich-Händel-Gesellschaft / Göttinger-Händel-Gesellschaft*†			
Regular	75	-	65
Regular (with <i>Göttinger Händel Beiträge</i> )	115	-	95
Student	27	-	21
Student (with <i>Göttinger Händel Beiträge</i> )	56	-	46
Dual Membership – Georg-Friedrich-Händel-Gesellschaft / Händel-Gesellschaft Karlsruhe*			
Regular	63	-	55
Student*	23	-	17.5
Triple Membership – Georg-Friedrich-Händel-Gesellschaft / Göttinger-Händel-Gesellschaft / Händel-Gesellschaft Karlsruhe			
Regular	93	-	80
Regular (with <i>Göttinger Händel Beiträge</i> )	125	-	105
Student	30	-	24
Student (with <i>Göttinger Händel Beiträge</i> )	60	-	48.5
TOTAL REMITTANCE			

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

† This organization has additional categories of Regular Membership that require a higher membership fee but provide additional benefits (see its website). Arrangements for these other categories may be made directly with Mrs. Pomeroy Kelly (see below).

Those paying in dollars should make their checks payable to AMERICAN HANDEL SOCIETY and mail them to Marjorie Pomeroy Kelly, Secretary/Treasurer, AMERICAN HANDEL SOCIETY, 49 Christopher Hollow Road, Sandwich, MA 02563. Those wishing to pay in Euros should remit to Stephan Blaut, 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 Handel Institute, London may also pay their AHS dues in sterling by making their checks payable to THE HANDEL INSTITUTE and mailing them to Ms. Sylvia Levi, Hon. Treasurer, The Handel Institute, 254A Kew Road, Richmond TW9 3EG, United Kingdom, with the appropriate annotation. Please do not send checks in Euros or sterling directly to the AHS as we are no longer able to process them.

Online payment options are available at <https://www.americanhandelsociety.org/join/>

**Payments in dollars for GFH or HI memberships must be received before May 15.**

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## American Handel Society

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