# NEWSLETTER
# of
# The American Handel Society

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## Handel and Lady Cobham

In his article "Burney on Handel: A New Source" in the Autumn 1995 issue of The Handel Institute Newsletter, Graham Thomas presents three Handelian anecdotes related by Dr. Charles Burney to the circle which surrounded Dr. Johnson's friend Hester Thrale. These stories—one of which was previously unknown and the others earlier versions of anecdotes published by Burney in his 1785 *Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster-Abbey and the Pantheon . . . . in Commemoration of Handel*—were told to members of the group who were on holiday at Brighton, probably in 1777, and copied into a notebook by the Thrale's young friend Margaret Owen (1742–1816). The notebook eventually found its way to the National Library of Wales where it is catalogued as Brogyntyn MS 8499.

The third of these anecdotes concludes with a curious phrase: "He [Handel] reckon'd the P's of Orange his best Scholar & L'dy Cobham the next." There are other stories which attest to Handel's high opinion of Princess Anne, George II's eldest daughter who married William, Prince of Orange in 1734, but who was Lady Cobham and why was she omitted from the printed form of the Burney's story? So far as I know, the only other mention of her in the Handelian literature is in a letter of 21 February 1744 from Mrs. Delany to her sister Mrs. Dewes, in which she says, "They say Samson is to be next Friday, for Semele has a strong party against it, viz. The fine ladies, petit maîtres, and *ignoramus's*. All the opera people are enraged at Handel, but Lady Cobham, Lady Westmoreland, and Lady Chesterfield never fail it."

Thomas suggests that the Lady Cobham of Burney's anecdote was Hester Temple, Viscountess Cobham, who died in 1752. This seems unlikely, since she was apparently known by that title for only a brief period in late 1749 following the death of her brother before she was created Countess Temple in her own right. A much more likely candidate is her sister-in-law Anne, whom Deutsch identifies as Mrs. Delany's Lady Cobham.

She was born Anne Halsey, the only surviving child of Edmund Halsey, wealthy owner of the Anchor Brewery in Southwark, Surrey, and of another home at Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire. She was married in 1715 to Richard Temple (1675–1749), a distinguished general in Marlborough's wars who had been created Baron Cobham in 1714 as one of the Coronation peerages. He had inherited Stowe House in Buckinghamshire in 1697 but had not

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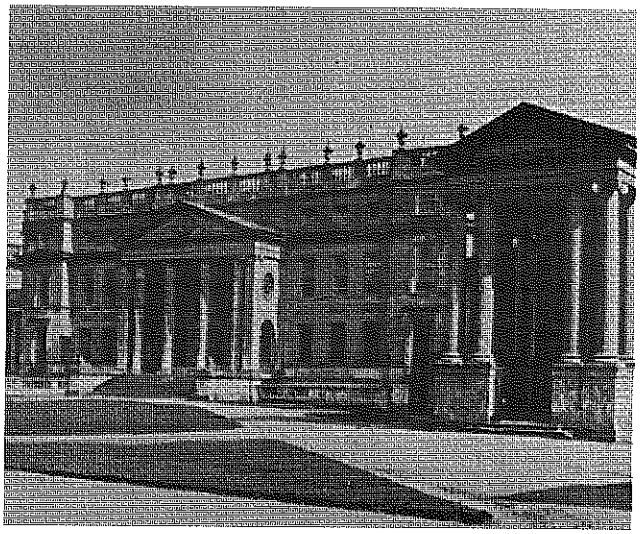

*North Front of Stowe House in 1925. Courtesy of Stowe School Photographic Archives.*

## Handel on Stage

The coincidence of the annual Händel Festspiele in Halle, Germany, with productions of Handel's works at the English National Opera (ENO) in London and at the Glyndebourne Festival outside London gave me the unusual opportunity to see staged productions of four dramatic works by Handel within the space of two weeks. Taken together, they presented a snapshot of the current state of Handelian operatic production.

The ENO co-production with Welsh National Opera of *Ariodante* (May 30) was performed in English in the cavernous London Coliseum with modern orchestra conducted by Ivor Bolton and first-rank opera stars, including Ann Murray as Ariodante and Gwynne Howell as the King of Scotland. *Theodora* (June 1) was performed in the new Glyndebourne theater with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment conducted by baroque opera specialist William Christie and a cast of mixed early music and operatic singers including Dawn Upshaw as Theodora, Lorraine Hunt as Irene, and David Daniels as Didymus. The Händel Festspiele opened with *Tolomeo* (June 6, in Italian) performed at the Opernhauses Halle by the early instrument Händelfestspielorchester conducted by Howard Arman and by baroque vocal specialists, including as Tolomeo the

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## 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.

***Serse,*** September 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 24, 26, 28, 29. Opera San Jose. Montgomery Theater, San Jose, CA (408) 437-4450.

***Israel in Egypt,*** September 20–22, 25, 26, 1996. Judith Nelson, Jennifer Green, Daniel Taylor, Peter Klaveness, David Tigner, Philharmonia Chorale, John Butt, director, Nicholas McGegan, conductor. Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, 57 Post Street, Suite 705, San Francisco, CA 94104 (415) 391-5252.

**1996 Maryland Handel Festival,** November 1–3, 1996, University of Maryland at College Park. Featuring the annual AHS Lecture, Conference Sessions, Young Artist Concert, and *Judas Maccabaeus* with John Aler, Jennifer Lane, University of Maryland Chorus, Smithsonian Chamber Orchestra, Paul Traver, conductor (301) 405-5571; FAX (301) 314-9504.

***Semele,*** November 30, December 1,4,6,7,8. Greater Buffalo Opera. Shea's Performing Arts Center, Buffalo, NY (716) 852-5000.

**The Handel Institute Conference,** "Handel and his Rivals," November 30–December 1, 1996. King's College London. Professor Colin Timms, Department of Music, University of Birmingham, Edgabaston, Birmingham B15 2TT.

***Giulio Cesare,*** January 25, 28, February 1, 4, 9, 1997. Munich Staatsoper. 49 89 221 316.

***Alcina,*** February 7, 22, March 4, 1997. Opernhaus Zurich. Zurich 41 268-6666.

***Serse,*** February 20, 22, 23, 26, 28, March 1, 5, 1997. Seattle Opera, Seattle Opera House, Seattle, WA (206) 389-7676.

***Alcina,*** April 3, 5, 1997. Manhattan School of Music Opera Theater, Merker Hall, New York, New York (212) 749-2801, ext. 428.

***L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato,*** English National Opera. June 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 1997. London Coliseum, London 44 171 632-8300.

Handel and Lady Cobham *from page 1*

inherited much money. With Anne Halsey's dowry of £20,000 (Huntington Library Stowe Temple Personal 15), the marriage allowed Cobham to embark on the building and landscaping projects at Stowe for which he is best remembered. He continued his political and military career, being created Viscount Cobham in 1718 and eventually Field Marshal in 1742, and served as leader of the "Patriot Opposition" in the 1730s, the principal members of which were his ambitious Grenville nephews. There is no indication that he had any interest in music, although William Congreve, writing during a New Year's visit to Stowe (probably in 1714), describes how "the Hautboys who played to us last night had their breath froze in their instruments till it dropt of[f] the ends of them in icicles."

It seems reasonable to assume that Anne Halsey, as the daughter of a wealthy and socially ambitious man of trade, would have received some training in music. She may well have studied with Johann Christoph Pepusch (1667-1752), since he composed a serenata to a text by John Hughes, "Wake th' Harmonious Voice and String"(autograph in the Royal Academy of Music), to celebrate her marriage to Cobham. Very little else is known about her life, although it is possible to suggest that her childless marriage may not have been an entirely happy one. She was described in 1745 as "even more sullen, complaining and absurd than ever," but she was a friend of the Garricks and during the last decade of her life of the poet Thomas Gray, who enjoyed the lively company of her young kinswoman and companion Henrietta Speed. In her Will, dated 28 October 1759 (Huntington Library Stowe Temple 16 (12)), Lady Cobham directed her Executrix to "Burn all my Letters and other private papers not appearing to be papers of business," and that direction seems to have been carried out after her death in March of the next year.

Lady Cobham's Will does, however, confirm her interest in music. After her husband's death in 1749 she continued to live in the town house in Hanover Square which he left to her, although she seems to have moved some of her possessions from Stowe, which had passed to Countess Temple and subsequently to her nephew Richard Grenville (1711–1779), First Earl Temple, to her family home at Stoke Poges where she spent summers. Among her specific bequests she gave "to Mr Rawlins my old harpsicord that is at Stoke and all my Musick Books." She also left "to my God Daughter Ann the daughter of Thomas Rawlins which Ann is married the sum of £20."

According to Sainsbury, who seems to have received his information from the subject's grandson, Thomas Rawlins (or Rawlings) "was born about the year 1703. He performed at almost all Handel's oratorios, operas, &c. and was a scholar of the celebrated Dr. Pepusch." He was on the roster of musicians at Cannons from 1719 to 1721 as a second violin, and in November 1720 received £25 from the Duke of Chandos's Steward "for the use of my Mastr Dr Pepusch" (Huntington Library Stowe 87, p.91). In addition to Lady Cobham, Rawlins was acquainted with another of Handel's supporters, William Freeman of Hamels, Hertfordshire, who at his death in 1750 left to "Mr. Thomas Rawlins Musician all my musick." Rawlins was appointed organist at Chelsea Hospital in 1753 and died in London in 1767.

From the Harris Family correspondence it is clear that Rawlins, in addition to his activities as a string player and music teacher, was a music copyist, and that one source to which he had ready access was Lady Cobham's collection. Rawlins was at Stowe in August 1737 where he copied one of Handel's anthems for James Harris of Salisbury (Hampshire Record Office 9M73/G557/1). The next summer he sent Harris a copy of Alexander's Feast from Stowe in two installments (9M73/G557/2-3). Rawlins' estimate for this latter copying job had been "about three pounds," which was cheaper than the estimate of £4–11s from Handel's own copyist John Christopher Smith (9M73/G306/14b). Rawlins's music hand has yet to be identified, and the fate of the various "musick books" which he inherited is unknown.

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countertenor Axel Köhler who has been an important leader in the renaissance of historical performance in Halle. On June 8, *Rodelinda* (in Italian) was performed in the intimate Goethe-Theater Bad Lauchstädt (which dates back to the earliest years of the nineteenth century) by the historical instrument orchestra La Stagione Frankfurt conducted by Michael Schneider and by a cast of young international soloists.

Despite the widely different venues and performance choices, these productions demonstrated the broad acceptance of baroque performing practice norms. The casting, for example, consistently honored Handel's choice of range for each part with no wholesale transpositions of the castrati parts from treble to the lower male voices. Castrato roles can be sung at pitch today either by women (in pants roles) or by countertenors. These productions illustrated the trend toward the latter. The ENO production was the only one to have the lead castrato role (Ariodante) sung by the star woman singer (Ann Murray) in the tradition of performances by Janet Baker and Marilyn Horne, where the secondary male role is performed by a countertenor (here Christopher Robson as Polinesso). When only one castrato was available to him, Handel's typical practice was to have the male alto sing the lead male role and a woman, the secondary male role. This was followed only in the *Tolomeo* production, in which Jennifer Lane sang Alessandro, although Handel actually had two castrati for his premiere (Senesino and Baldi). In *Rodelinda* all roles were played by singers of the same sex as their character with countertenors Daniel Taylor and Kai Wessel singing Bertarido and Unulfo respectively, matching Handel's premiere when these parts were sung by castrati Senesino and Pacini. With the increase in the quality and number of operatic countertenors, this solution becomes more and more feasible, not just in small houses, such as the Goethe-Theater at Bad Lauchstädt, but also in big houses. In *Theodora,* the role of Didymus, premiered by castrato Gaetano Guadagni, was sung splendidly by countertenor David Daniels, who undoubtedly will be heard in larger opera houses in the very near future.

In addition to casting, the performances themselves were stylish. Recitatives moved along at close to speech tempo, and recitative cadences were generally elided, so that there was little delay from the older, nineteenth-century (church-oriented) practice of waiting for the instrumental cadence following the vocal cadence. Arias, too, moved mostly at dance-oriented tempi, with demonstrations of first-rate vocal dexterity on the runs and adept ornamentation in the *da capos.* The orchestras, too, whether of modern or historic instruments, played lightly but with strong articulation and with passion where necessary. Of course, the performances were not perfect. I was, for example, disturbed by long pauses between movements in the production of *Rodelinda,* but it is impossible to come away from these performances without being heartened by the sense of baroque performance that seems to have permeated performances of very different types around the world. At no time in this century has Handel's music been better served musically.

The question of dramatic practice is another issue. Whereas musicians now appear to *trust* the Handelian scores and, therefore, are willing to allow the music to speak in its own voice, directors are not similarly comfortable with opera seria. They seem rather to have the lingering attitude that baroque opera is essentially undramatic and unstageworthy, a situation that calls for "correction." As a result, the direction often, at least in my eyes, opposes the action, which in almost all of Handel's operas and oratorios is about simple and direct human emotion regardless of the complexity of the interactions.

For example, *Ariodante* tells the story of the betrothed Ariodante and Ginevra. Their happiness is shattered when Ariodante is deceived into believing that Ginevra is unfaithful. This already tragic situation is exacerbated by Ginevra's father's rejection and condemnation of his daughter, Ariodante's apparent suicide, and his brother's lust for revenge. The story bears close comparison to the story of Hero and Claudio in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing,* especially in its happy ending, but is also a cousin of Shakespeare's *Othello.* The ENO production, directed by David Alden and designed by Ian MacNeil, largely ignored this very real human drama, making the opera instead into a surreal nightmare. In the first act, the curtain opened on last movement of the overture revealing an oversized palace room in which dancers appeared in tail coats (looking a little bit like *A Chorus Line,* but perhaps meant to be servants) in a menacingly robotic performance where they stomped loudly in unison on each repeated-pitch motive of quarter note, quarter note, half note.

In the first act, the main characters were overwhelmed both by the room and by effete, overbearing attendants. There was no happiness celebrated here for the impending union of Ginevra and Ariodante; instead there were uncomfortable, black meditations on the wedding veil (Ginevra) and the crown (Ariodante). Not surprisingly, the entire act took place in the oppressive, interior space of the palace room, without moving, as in described in the score and libretto, to the royal garden or, later, to a delightful vale. Further, instead of a danced celebration by shepherds and shepherdesses of the expected nuptials, the first act ended with a single shepherdess appearing (in what the program book called a masque) on a small stage that had opened at the back of the room. During the orchestral dance movements she came down from the stage and was attacked and repeatedly kicked by "Addams family" aristocrats who seemed to have ice water in their veins; she was left lying in the center of the stage. I assume this was meant as an ominous preview of Ginevra's circumstances in Act II, where she is reviled and abandoned by all.

The second act of this psycho-drama was no easier to follow. The opening set looked to me like the top of a large, green metal oil or water tank, complete with a fixed ladder over the curved top; my companion said it was probably the palace roof, but that was not obvious to me. At the end of the act, after she is abandoned, told that Ariodante is dead, and disowned by her father, Ginevra loses her senses, and the libretto calls for dances representing the good and evil spirits of her dreams. Instead, Alden offered a pantomime drama showing Ginevra sexually molested by her father, which vision I suppose results directly from her father's condemnation of her as a slut but is perhaps also supposed to represent a repressed memory, throwing all the characters' relations into disarray. The third act may have clarified this, or confused it further, but I left.

The *Tolomeo* production directed by Anthony Pilavachi, similarly removed the action from the normal human

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Was Lady Cobham one of Handel's students? It seems perfectly possible, although it is more likely that the bulk of her musical training came at the hands of Rawlins and, perhaps, Pepusch. Did Handel consider her second only to Princess Anne among those students? Here, I think, we must conclude that Burney was embellishing his story for the benefit of the circle to which he had only recently been introduced. It turns out that Henry Thrale was Lady Cobham's first cousin once removed; his grandmother had been Edmund Halsey's sister. Furthermore, Anne Halsey's marriage to Lord Cobham had been the direct cause of Henry's father being brought to London to manage the brewery. After Halsey's death, Ralph Thrale purchased the business from Lord and Lady Cobham and, in the words of Hester Thrale, "the Son [i.e. Henry] he wisely connected with the Cobhams & their Relations ... so that *my* Mr. Thrale was bred up at Stowe & Stoke and Oxford, and every genteel Place" (Thraliana, April–May 1778).

Henry Thrale received bequests of £500 and £200 in Lady Cobham's Will, and was to inherit additional sums if the principal beneficiery and Executrix, Miss Speed, died without heirs. He was also named trustee of £500 to be invested in an annuity for Mrs. Amy Gyfford and her daughter Sarah, and was charged to "direct and advise" Miss Speed in the management of her affairs. Lady Cobham had clearly been a major player in Henry Thrale's life, and Burney, who would have known at first hand her relationship with Handel, had a clear incentive to flatter Thrale through his titled relation. When Burney came to publish the anecdote in 1785 Henry Thrale had been dead for four years, Mrs. Thrale had become Mrs. Piozzi, and there was no longer any need enhance the status of Lady Cobham.

*Passages from the Stowe Manuscripts are quoted with the permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. References to the Harris correspondence are cited with the permission of the Earl of Malmesbury, and I am grateful to Rosemary Dunhill, Hampshire County Archivist, and her co-editor Donald Burrows for making them available to me in advance of publication.*

*Graydon Beeks*

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sphere, but offered instead of a surreal fantasy a literal madhouse. The single unit set (by Carlo Tommasi) consisted of a cylindrical white tile room with a terrace running around the outside. As an apparent bow to the stage direction that the opera takes place in "a country by the seaside" (according to legend, Cyprus) this sanitarium was placed at the water's edge. The story of the opera tells of Tolomeo, king of Egypt, who, separated from his wife, deprived of his crown and exiled, is living on Cyprus in the disguise of a shepherd. Seleuce, his wife, follows him, disguised as a shepherdess. Before they can be reunited, Araspe, the king of Cyprus, falls in love with Seleuce, and his sister Elisa falls in love with Tolomeo. To complicate matters further, Tolomeo's brother Alessandro also is on the island seeking to reconcile with his brother, and he falls in love with Elisa.

This production placed all of the characters constantly on stage wearing various adaptations of white hospital garb and strait jackets (costumes by Jutta Karen Delorme). All appeared to be suffering from some sort of personality disorder, and each had his own suitcase in which he carried the props of his identity, giving a whole new meaning to the concept of the "baggage aria"—arias that baroque singers are said to have carried from one performance to another in their luggage. Thus Tolomeo was continually setting up his toy sheep only to have them knocked down and thrown about by the other characters. Alessandro had toy Egyptian soldiers, representing no doubt the army he supposedly is leading. Elisa had an extraordinary costume ensemble—garish purple platform shoes, piles of jewelry, various flimsy pieces of clothing, and an astonishingly tall red wig—that she meticulously put on over her hospital whites during the course of the first act. Seleuce, by contrast, seemed to have a phantom bride outfit, and Araspe had various weapons and helmets. Often when one of the characters had an aria, the other four were actively arranging or rearranging their possessions or costumes or running up and down the Piranesi-like disappearing staircase that curled up the back wall. At the end of the opera, the characters, once again in their pure whites with their personalities packed away in their suitcases, contemplated the freedom and escape of the out-of-doors, but together decided to return to the tiled room and bolt the doors.

I would infer from the productions of both *Ariodante* and *Tolomeo* that the directors found the conventions of baroque opera seria incapable of expressing normal human emotions or relations. Thus they removed the action to surreal dream state or insane asylum, saying, in effect, that baroque opera is crazy. However, all those who were privileged to see the production of *Tolomeo* at the

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## The American Handel Society Research Fellowship 1996

The Directors of The American Handel Society are pleased to announce that the recipient of The American Handel Society Research Fellowship in 1996 is Barbara Durost, a D.M.A. candidate in conducting at the Claremont Graduate School, who is completing a thesis entitled "The Secular Odes of William Croft: A Critical Edition." In this study, Ms. Durost will focus especially on the four odes written during the last three years of Queen Anne's life, and a fifth composed after the accession of George I. It is hoped that a study of Croft's work in this field will shed some light on Handel's activites during the same period, when he composed his *Ode on Queen Anne's Birthday,* Utrecht Te Deum and Jubilate, and "Caroline" Te Deum. Ms. Durost will use her fellowship to study the manuscript sources in England and to search for concordances in major collections of single songs, and anthologies in English libraries. The Fellowship Committee consisted of Olga Termini, chair, Graydon Beeks, and Robert Freeman. The winners of the fellowship since it was established in 1989 are listed below.

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| 1989 | David Ross Hurley | University of Chicago |
| 1990 | Richard G. King | Stanford University |
| 1991 | John Winemiller | University of Chicago |
| 1993 | Michael Corn | University of Illinois |
| 1993 | Channan Willner | City University of New York |
| 1995 | Mark Risinger | Harvard University |
| 1996 | Barbara Durost | Claremont Graduate School |

Maryland Handel Festival in 1987, conducted and directed by Nicholas McGegan and sung by students from the University of Maryland vocal program, know how powerful and direct this opera can be.

The Bad Lauchstädt performance of *Rodelinda,* in contrast to the other two operatic productions, approached authentic baroque practice. In addition, this production, directed by Christian Gangneron, had the advantage of a near-contemporary theater, an excellent early music band, and an unusually strong group of young soloists. However, the rich, multi-layered brocade and velvet costumes (by Claude Masson) and the attempt at baroque mannerisms, not to mention the pauses between recitative and aria, the (inauthentic) dropping of the curtain for relatively simple set changes (by Theirry Leproust), and the improbable and excessive use of lifts carrying characters up and down from below the stage, made the drama stiff and inaccessible.

"Authenticity" is, of course, impossible for a host of reasons, not the least of which being that an "authentic" audience cannot be found, and it is often overlooked that for modern audiences "authentically-enhanced" performances can be just as distancing as a madhouse, or perhaps more so. Curiously, this was understood in the eighteenth century, when the pastoral traditions in literature and painting deliberately removed the audience from the real world. Perhaps this performance inadvertently partook of that tradition. Rather than watching the drama of a wife realizing her husband is not dead as she had feared and then fighting for his life against the forces of tyranny (all of which is reminiscent of *Fidelio*), the audience saw beautifully dressed puppets going through the motions but not the emotions. In all fairness, I must acknowledge that some of the slowness could have been the result of the stifling temperatures, which inside the closed theater must have neared 100°F; however, as the opera house at Bad Lauchstädt was built as a summer theater, this may just have been another piece of authenticity.

All of this discussion brings me to Peter Sellars's highly controversial production of *Theodora* at Glyndebourne, receiving on the night I attended both bravos and boos. Although not without its problems, it was without doubt the most powerful and affecting of the productions I saw. Of course, the very question of whether to stage Handel's oratorios is a thorny one; they were not staged in Handel's lifetime, and although unquestionably dramatic, they are not always theatrical. In particular, it is often difficult to know what to do with the chorus, which plays various dramatic, reflective and narrative roles. When staging an oratorio, then, the question of authenticity is moot, and in some ways this provides additional flexibility. This is particularly true in the case of *Theodora,* which was one of the least successful of Handel's oratorios and performed by him only four times in the course of two different seasons—a situation we would not rush to recreate.

I am no avid fan of Sellars's work, having enjoyed particularly his *Tannhauser* (recast to tell the story of American TV evangelist Jim Baker), but less his Ronald Regan in Beirut *Giulio Cesare* (Handel) or post-war industrial Japan *Mikado* (although a number of its tableaux were fabulous). Sellars is best known for his direction of the Mozart-Da Ponte operas: *Don Giovanni* in Spanish Harlem, *Cosi fan tutte* in Despina's diner, and *Le nozze di Figaro* in the Trump Tower. I have never seen his equally famous depiction of Handel's *Orlando* as an astronaut at Cape Canaveral (outside Orlando, Florida).

The story of *Theodora,* unlike Handel's other oratorios, is not biblical but historical. It tells of the Christian martyr Theodora who with her faithful lover, Didymus, is put to death at the hands of the Antioch president Valens in the year 304 AD. As with the operas he has directed, Sellars chose to make the setting of *Theodora* modern and realistic. Unlike the others, however, the setting was abstract and could have represented any totalitarian government repressive of religious sects. I was interested that British commentators all placed the setting unquestionably in the United States and associated the tyrant Valens with an American president. It is certainly true that Valens's supporters looked American, but today that hardly means that they were American. Further, it was difficult to place Valens. The London Independent (Sunday, 26 May 1996, Real Life, p. 15) identified him with John F. Kennedy; others said President Clinton; the "thumbs up" gesture of which Valens was fond could have taken us back to Ronald Regan; but the drunken scene at the beginning of Act II made me think of Boris Yeltsin. In short, I think it is important that this staging was the least specific of any Sellars productions I have seen. It was modern, with an American accent to be sure, but also inclusive in its condemnation of tyranny and discrimination anywhere.

The set by George Tsypin was a simple white box open on one side to the audience. In the box were huge, oversized broken and repaired glass bottles of various shapes. I thought immediately of museum exhibition cases with their glass fragments and shards from earlier civilizations and placed this setting in that context: a showcase of human destruction. The Biblical verses from Psalm 31: 11-13 (Revised Standard Version) also came to mind: "I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. Yea, I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life." These certainly could be the words of Theodora, but there was no clue in the program as to the director's or designer's thoughts.

One aspect of the direction that received a lot of attention and some criticism was the choreographed hand motions used by chorus and soloists alike. Because these were tied to specific musical phrases they recurred with each musical repetition. I had first seen Sellars use this technique in his Boston First Night (December 31, 1995) staging of Bach's solo cantata "Mein Herze schwimmt in Blut" sung by Lorraine Hunt, which was later repeated in New York by Dawn Upshaw—perhaps as a warm-up for his two principal female soloists. I didn't like it then, and I still had some (but less) trouble with the soloists' use of this (sometimes oppressive) technique in *Theodora,* but what surprised me was how powerful the motions became in the chorus, where the use of hand motions was especially choreographic. It was as if the chorus was dancing with its hands rather than its feet. And the effect was to visualize the contrast that Handel makes between the chorus of Christians and the chorus of heathens. Whereas the heathens tend to sing rhythmically together in homophony, the Christians generally sing in the more complex textures of imitation and counterpoint. Although this is clear by ear, the hand motions visually turned the heathens into a mob, with their unison hand gestures, while in the Christian choruses the hand gestures emphasized the waves of sound in

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each voice overlapping, stopping, renewing the fugal theme as if each member of the chorus was participating in an active discussion. This visualization of the music was beautiful, and particularly reminiscent of Mark Morris's remarkable choreography of Handel's *L'Allegro, il penseroso, ed il moderato* with its meticulous attention to the musical phrase and direction. A Sellars-Morris-Handel collaboration would be truly something to see.

In many ways, the choruses became the centerpiece of the drama in this production, partly because of their choreographic distinction, but also because the choruses so clearly represented the central conflict between Christian and heathen forces. Further they were the extension of the two leaders: Valens, leader of the heathens, and Irene, leader of the Christians, both of whom sang throughout with their respective followers. Listeners who cherish the Nicholas McGegan recording of *Theodora* with Lorraine Hunt singing the title role were probably surprised to learn that in this production Hunt sang the role of Irene. This was no doubt due in some measure to her recent change in vocal identity from soprano to mezzo, but her passion and intensity in this role greatly heightened the drama in a way I had not expected. Irene was the heroine of this production, leading the Christians with seriousness and fervor and supporting Theodora and Didymus in their spiritual commitment.

Valens, sung by Frode Olsen, was the perfect foil. He was, of course, despicable, but also cavalier and light-hearted about his tyranny, so that the audience was forced to laugh at him and then recoil at their own reaction. His manipulative abilities were immediately apparent in his first da capo aria, "Racks, gibbets, sword and fire," where he feigned a heart attack between the B section and da capo; paramedics swarmed in to attend to him, and, lying on a stretcher, he gulped oxygen between the extended vocal runs and ornamentation, ending the aria by throwing off all the equipment and walking off stage, laughingly leaving the puzzled attendants behind. This was a brilliant stroke of direction: it characterized the cruelty of a man who likes to be center stage and treats his subordinates with disdain, and it also called vivid (and hilarious) attention to the conventions of the da capo aria in a manner that rivaled P.D.Q. Bach at his best (remember "Iphigenia in Brooklyn"?). At the beginning of the second act, Valens again brought down the house by turning the vocal runs of his aria "Wide spread his name" (which follows his demand for "floods of wine") into drunken demagoguery with head nodding and finger wagging.

The greatest flaw in this production was the ending. The direction and set until then had been abstract and stark; in particular, the depiction of Theodora's prison by a spare rectangle of light on the darkened stage was brilliant. At the end, however, Sellars became fussily detailed, and the set was overrun with machinery and equipment as Theodora and Didymus were executed on stage by lethal injection. Less would have been more heartbreaking and more chilling. Despite this disappointment and some smaller quibbles I had, *Theodora* succeeded where the other productions failed because Sellars clearly believed in the story and felt its emotion. Even more importantly, perhaps, it was clear that Sellars heard the music and responded to it directly, both by humorously mocking the formal conventions without either falling into parody or adding another layer of stylization and by listening at the level of the musical phrase and communicating that to the audience. I was not convinced that any of the other directors either heard the music or believed the story of their productions.

Still, it is critical that Handel's dramatic works, in particular his operas, be produced on stage. Although it may be possible to hear and enjoy a familiar opera in a concert performance, perhaps because the mind can more easily supply a stage picture, it is difficult if not impossible for audiences unfamiliar with baroque operas to follow them without staged productions. This was brought home to me at the performance of Reinhard Keiser's *Masaniello furioso* at the Händel Festspiele by Fiori musicali and the Barockorchester Bremen. Although originally planned as a staged production, the funding from Bremen fell through, and at the concert performance, it took enormous strength of will to identify which of the nine characters was which. A colleague and I resorted to drawing character charts for one another in order to place the characters and the action. Despite its frequently complex dramatic situations, however, baroque opera tells of human interaction that has no less meaning for us today, and the musical scores are aesthetically rich and technically brilliant. Now that these baroque scores are being performed so well musically, it is important for directors to listen. It will not do to dismiss these operas as insane, nor to dress them fussily in "authentic" costumes and leave it at that. These works deserve our hearts and minds, as well as ears and eyes.

*Ellen Harris*

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## Maryland Handel Festival Conference
## November 1–3, 1996
## University of Maryland, College Park

Paul Traver, Artistic Director;
Howard Serwer, Associate Director

**Friday, November 1**
8:00 PM
CONCERT 1
*The King Shall Rejoice*
Music Fit for a King by Mr. Handel for Chorus and Orchestra including the spectacular *Coronation Anthems* and *Water Music and* featuring Melissa Coombs, soprano
Paul Traver, conductor
University of Maryland Chorus
Smithsonian Chamber Orchestra Memorial Chapel
Tickets: $17.00/15.00/11.00

**Saturday, November 2**
9:00 AM
Conference Session 1
*The Political and Religious Context of Handel's Oratorios*
Speaker: Ruth Smith,author of *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-century Thought*
Howard Serwer, coordinator
Ellen Harris, chair
with Anthony Hicks and William Weber
Room 3216, R. Lee Hornbake Library

1:30 PM
American Handel Society Business Meeting

3:30 pm
American Handel Society Lecture
*Mr. Handel's Friends: Contemporary Accounts of the Composer from the Papers of James Harris*
Donald Burrows, eminent scholar, editor and conductor
Homer Ulrich Recital Hall, Tawes Fine Arts Building

5:30 PM
Concert II
*Young Artist Recital*
Homer Ulrich Recital Hall, Tawes Fine Arts Building

6:30 PM
Membership Dinner

**Sunday, November 3**
9:00 AM
Conference Session
*Later Reception of Handel's Music*
Howard Serwer, coordinator
Ellen Harris, chair
Speakers: Merlin Channon, Richard King, Annette Landgraf
Room 3216, R. Lee Hornbake Library

1:30 PM
Pre-Concert Lecture
*Morell's Libretto for Handel's Judas Maccabeus*
Ruth Smith
Room 1400, Marie Mount Hall

3:00 PM
Concert III
*Judas Maccabaeus*
Linda Mabbs, soprano
Jennifer Lane, mezzo-soprano
John Aler, tenor
Gershon Silins, bass
Paul Traver, conductor
University of Maryland
Smithsonian Chamber Orchestra Memorial Chapel
Tickets: $19.00/16.00/12.00

For more information or to purchase tickets call (301) 405-5568. Maryland Handel Festival, University of Maryland, 2140 Tawes Fine Arts, College Park, MD 20742 Tel. (301) 405-5571, FAX (301) 314-9504.

NEWSLETTER
of
The American Handel Society

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