Handel’s English Oratorios from 1736-1742

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After a four-year stay in Italy, in 1710 Handel returned to Germany, and in June he obtained a post at the court of Hanover. However, as early as by the end of the year, he yearned to return to London. After a one-year sojourn in that kingdom he briefly returned to Hanover, only – in 1712 – to move to London for good. Apart from travels, he remained there till the end of his life.

Thus Handel spent two thirds of his life in England, and we must not be surprised that his most important and most large-scale oratorios were written in England, among them three so-called odes and most of his 25 oratorios. It is these – in particular “Alexander’s Feast” (ode), “Israel in Egypt”, “Saul” and “Messiah” (all oratorios and all in print with the publisher Carus) – which are to be discussed here. Of course all these works were composed to English texts. The Carus editions offer an additional German translation.

The Great Music Hall on Fishamble Street, Dublin, where Messiah was first performed

The so-called **English oratorio** can be described as Handel's "invention". The genre is a blend of his experiences in Italy (including Italian opera), elements of the German Passion oratorio (like the Brockes Passion of 1719) and the English anthem. He primarily used texts from the Old Testament in which scenes from the history of the Israelites take centre stage, but which he often enriched and expanded by the inclusion of dramatic (sometimes additional) stories of personal relationships. But Handel was less concerned with the dramatic concept of the oratorio (after all they are not operas, and staged production was not – despite minor stage instructions in some scores – intended) but rather with the depiction of the solemnly elevated and of the expression of affects and emotions. Applied to the works already listed that means that the words of "Messiah" and "Israel in Egypt" were taken from the Bible very nearly verbatim, with "Saul" falling

back on the Biblical source; it is only the libretto for “Alexander’s Feast” that was written by Newburgh Hamilton, based on an ode by John Dryden. The words for the other three works were put together by Charles Jennens, who may well be described as the most important of Handel’s librettists.

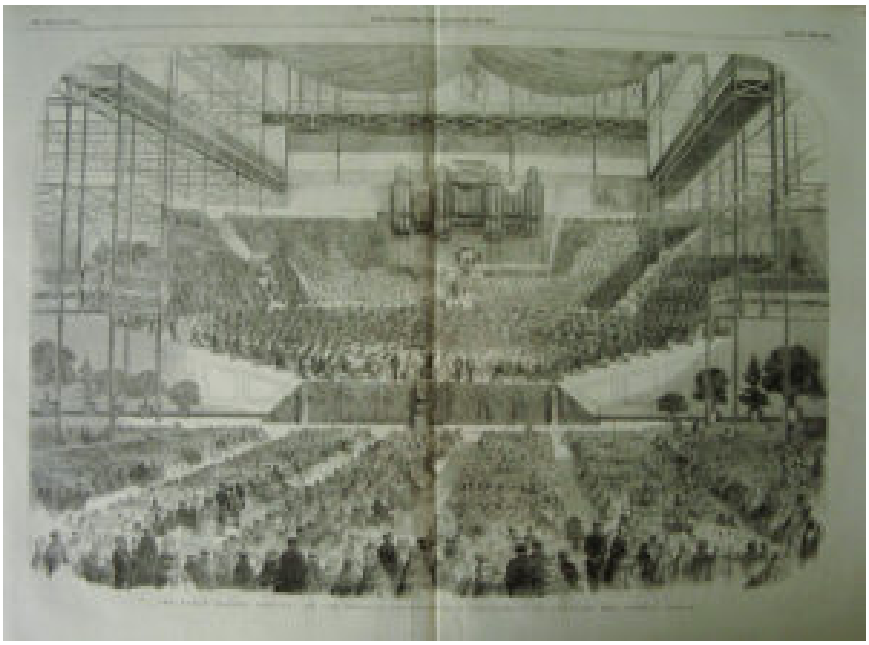
In the **chronology** of their creation and the first performances, the oratorios/ode referred to lie close together. “Alexander’s Feast” is from 1738/39, Handel composed “Israel in Egypt” and “Saul” in the years 1738/39, and “Messiah” followed in 1741.42. It was a most fruitful period in Handel’s creativity. Apart from the oratorio “L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato” (1740), during this period Handel composed a further eleven (!) operas, among them the one that is probably best known, “Serse” and, his last opera ever, “Deidamia” (1741).

We could expect this intense preoccupation with **opera** to have rubbed off onto the **oratorios**, but with “Messiah” and “Israel in Egypt”, this is most certainly not the case. We find story-telling, descriptions, explanations and programmatical scenes laid out most vividly and with immense stylistic sensitivity (“Israel in Egypt”). “Messiah” makes the listener enter into the story of the life and suffering of Jesus, allowing us to participate with sympathy. It is particularly in the great songs of praise at the end of the oratorios that it becomes clear that everything is underpinned by God’s power. “Messiah” and “Israel in Egypt” are the two among Handel’s oratorios with the biggest share allocated to the choir; we would be justified in describing the latter is a veritable choral oratorio. Looking at Parts II and III (“Exodus” and “Moses’ Song”) which are usually performed, we find that of the 31 numbers 20 are for the choir. The remainder is made up of four brief recitatives and seven arias. Part I, the Funeral Anthem, consists exclusively of choral numbers.

“Saul” is quite a different matter. Here the choir’s share amounts to less than a quarter of the whole piece. Recitatives

and arias dominate in a work that is shaped by twelve (!) individual characters and thus is more closely related to the opera genre. Handel emphasises this fact even in superficial matters, by subdividing the work into acts and scenes.

This applies even more strongly to Part II of “Alexander’s Feast” with its truly dramatic perspectives.



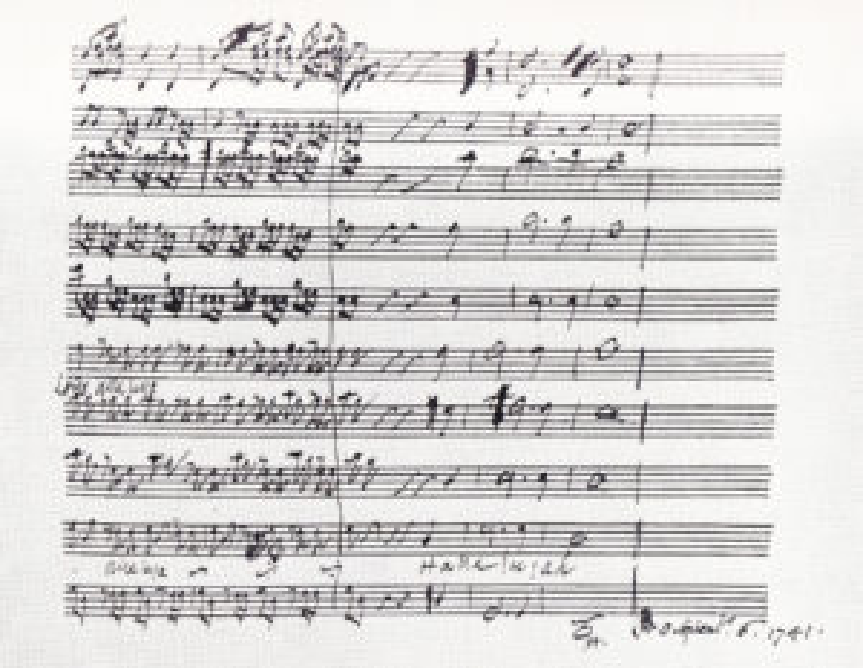
The Handel Festival at The Crystal Palace, London, 1857

As already hinted at – Handel was less concerned with the dramatic characterisation of individuals; rather, he employed most differentiated **musical affects** and subtle descriptions of **emotions**. He allows the listener to feel involved in the feelings of the *dramatis personae*. This, however, demands of the singers a high degree of sensitivity in relation to turns of phrases and rhetorical figures which need to be traced in the score. Nor do we find many dynamic instructions, articulation marks are extremely rare, and relationships between words and music need to be uncovered. These matters, however, are the very things recognition of which is essential if we wish to understand the music, to throw light onto the plot and for the liveliness of the interpretation. This is where the difference will lie between the listener merely

hearing sounds or feeling really grabbed by this music. The singer enjoys a large measure of interpretational liberty and thus at the same time bears a great responsibility for a performance that does the work justice. For a conductor this is a fascinating task and a challenge!

It is impossible to discuss all these situations in the works referred to – for this end nothing can replace careful scrutiny of the score. As prime examples, look at several numbers of Part II of "Messiah" or the description of the plagues in "Israel in Egypt", Israel's song of sorrow about the deaths of Saul and of Jonathan in "Saul", or the dirge in Part II of "Alexander's Feast" (Nos 7-10). This is really great, moving and emotional music that sweeps us away with it.

And now we approach another aspect of performance practice, one which is not without its problems: the question of the various **versions** and **arrangements**. "Alexander's Feast" alone boasts five versions (1736, 1737, 1739, 1742, 1751). Carus offers the original version of 1736 as well as the final one from 1751. The differences are not insignificant, and the decision as to which to choose needs to be carefully weighed up. Nevertheless we can work on the assumption that these different versions are not versions of the work, but adaptations to suit performance conditions, i e Handel adapted the pieces to local conditions – availability of instrumentalists, vocal soloists, quality of the choir, characteristics of the hall, degree of entertainment expected by the audience, etc) and thus tried to optimise the conditions for a successful performance in this place. and on this occasion. Nevertheless I'd advise against mixing and matching the different versions!



The final bars of the “Hallelujah” chorus, from Handel’s manuscript (Scanned from The Story of Handel’s Messiah by Watkins Shaw, published by Novello & Co Ltd, London 1963)

“Messiah”, too, comes in five versions (1742 Dublin; 1743 London; 1745/49 London; 1750 London; 1754 “Foundling Hospital Version”), but we cannot go into these in detail here. In the new Carus edition all variants are given with a clear overview. Alternatives which Handel never performed himself are to be found in an appendix, so that conductors can make informed decisions as to their own performances. “Messiah” and “Alexander’s Feast” are the oratorios/odes which were most enthusiastically received even in Handel’s lifetime. They were widely known and responsible for Handel’s success and fame. It is no coincidence that Mozart later chose those very pieces for a complete overhaul, clothing them in the gown of the classical orchestra.

The oratorio “Saul” experienced three different performing editions by the composer: 1738, 1739, 1741. The Carus edition follows the original version of 1738.

The oratorio “Israel in Egypt” is a special case. Although in

our day usually only Parts II (“Exodus”, the story of the Israelites’ escape from Egypt) and III (“Moses’ Song”, a great song of praise to God) are performed, it nevertheless was originally an oratorio in three parts. It is interesting to note that Handel composed Part III first, then Part II. Only when these compositions had been completed did he decide to incorporate them into a three-part oratorio by prefacing Parts II and III with “The Ways of Zion do mourn” which expresses the sorrow of the Israelites about the death of Joseph (son of the Israelite Patriarch Jacob). In doing so he fell back on an earlier composition of his (“Funeral Anthem for Queen Caroline”) which needed only minor adaptations. It was in this completeness that the three-part oratorio was heard in London in 1739/40. In the version of 1756-1758 the introductory funeral anthem was dropped in favour of movements from several others of his own oratorios. Thus the reception history of “Israel in Egypt” possesses two branches: on the one hand the oratorio in three parts, on the other only the actual departure from Egypt with Parts II and III. The funeral anthem (Part I) continues to enjoy a life of its own to this day. This fact is taken into account by the new Carus edition which publishes Part I separately and Parts II and III in their own volume. This greatly assists current performance practice.

As far as **casting** goes, Handel displays huge variability. We can look upon the instrumental forces as used in “Messiah” as a kind of basic casting for Handel’s oratorios: strings are joined by two oboes and two trumpets as well as timpani. Of course the bass part will be performed by cello and bassoon, and then there’s a choir, sometimes in four parts, sometimes in five, and four soloists.

The chapel of the London’s Foundling Hospital, the venue for regular charity performances of Messiah from 1750

For “Israel in Egypt” the instrumental body gets expanded by two flutes and three trombones. The choir is split into eight parts as a double choir, and despite the fact that there’s not that much for them to do, six vocal soloists are required.

“Alexander’s Feast” boasts an opulent orchestral casting: two flutes and two oboes are joined by three bassoons, two horns, two trumpets and timpani, and the strings, too, are richly scored with three violin parts, two viola parts, one solo cello, ripieno celli and double bass. The choir on occasion splits into up to seven parts, and four soloists complete the whole set-up.

“Saul” turns out to be even more inventively scored. There are no fewer than twelve vocal solo parts (these could, however, be covered by just six singers if required). The orchestra matches that of “Israel in Egypt” but additionally demands a carillon and a harp as the finishing touch.

A basic remark concerning the casting of the **continuo** bass line: this can be varied to match musical conditions and the

character and the affect of a piece. This applies to the bass line with cello or bassoon, possibly even bass viol and double bass or violone, as well as the harmonic area with harpsichord, organ and theorbo or lute. The greater the variety of sound and the character of the instruments, the more lively and appropriate to the music the continuo can be shaped. This combination of instruments forms the basis of any performance and is capable of achieving an incredible effect just on its own.

The way the entire ensemble was arranged in the space available made a considerable impact on the resulting sound and differed considerably from continental practice in the 19th and 20th centuries. In this we should quote Hans Joachim Marx in his standard work "Händels Oratorien, Oden und Serenaten": at the centre of the stage [stood] the organ, to the left and to the right of which staging was erected in steps, as for an amphitheatre, i e in semicircles. This was for the seating of the instrumentalists. The harpsichord was probably placed in front of the organ, with the instruments of the continuo group (cello, double bass, theorbo etc) on both its right and its left. Behind this group, on the staging, the strings and most of the woodwind would be arranged, with the horns, trumpets, bassoons and timpani on the top steps. The choir would be positioned in front of the orchestra, and the vocal soloists would be sitting at the front edge of the stage, which would be protected with railings. Like for the performance of operas, a curtain would be attached to the proscenium arch, which would only be opened when the performance of the oratorio was about to begin … The important difference between the English oratorio performances of the 18th and the continental ones of the 19th and 20th centuries is thus to be found in the placing of the vocal soloists and the choir in front of, rather than behind, the orchestra. The mere acoustics of this testify to the favouring of the voices above the instruments, something which fitted in with the aesthetic ideas of the time … "[1] An arrangement worth

considering for all musicians and managers whose spatial conditions would permit such an alternative!

Finally a few thoughts might be added in respect of **performance practice**. Of course every conductor must take the initial decision as to whether he will use modern instruments, maybe even in the Classical-Romantic tradition, or apply historically informed performance practice. If the interpretation as a whole is convincing, both options can do Handel's music justice. Nevertheless the author will not conceal the fact that he is a fervent enthusiast of the historically informed performance practice. Particularly with Handel, the music can be presented in a more transparent manner, lighter, more colourfully, with more rhetorical relevance, more three-dimensionally, with more daring sounds, more virtuosically and simply in a way that speaks to us more clearly and in a more enlightening manner, if historically informed performance practice is consistently employed. For that, however, we need not only an instrumental ensemble that specialises in this area, but also a choir trained and experienced in Baroque performance practice as well as soloists who are really steeped in Baroque performance practice, in respect of the aesthetics of sound as well as in their vocal technique (coloraturas, diminutions!).

This is, however, a wide field that requires special study. Some hints in these directions can be found in the score of the "Messiah" in the Carus edition. Let me here restrict myself to referring to the relevant literature about Baroque performance practice.

[1] *Hans Joachim Marx: Händels Oratorien, Oden und Serenaten. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht p. xxvii*

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