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Introduction

A knowledge of the context remains necessary to a knowledge of the innovation

J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985)

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This book is about the words of Handel's oratorios. In recent decades concern for historical authenticity has transformed our reception of baroque music, Handel's included. Scholarly performers strive to recreate for modern ears the sounds that the composers' first audiences would have heard; music historians increase modern understanding and enjoyment of the music by explaining its historical contexts. This book aims to bring a complementary historical perspective to our understanding of the librettos – the verbal texts – of a mainstay of western culture, Handel's English oratorios.

It might be thought that such familiar works do not need this treatment. After all, what is obscure or recondite about, for example, *Messiah* or *Judas Macchabæus*? Their continual performance by people of every kind from the date of their composition to the present proves their accessibility. But though the music is accessible, the point of the words which Handel set frequently eludes us. To some of us they are so familiar that we tend not to hear them, far less think what they mean. Those who have listened to them critically in the twentieth century have often damned them as worthless. Robert Manson Myers' comment is representative of this response: 'When one reads the words of some of Handel's oratorios in cold blood, it seems nothing short of a miracle that Handel should have been inspired to write music around them.'[1] Large portions of the ora-

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torios have been judged defective even by their most enthusiastic advocates because of their verbal texts. In the major modern study of Handel's English theatre works Winton Dean writes that *Samson*, a work which he admires, 'suffers from an excess of diversionary airs: no fewer than fourteen – exactly half the total – are sung by anonymous Philistines and Israelites or by Micah [a bystander to the 'action']. At least eight of these are better omitted if the oratorio is to retain its shape in modern performance.'[2] Leaving aside the question of licence to cut according to taste, this proposed rejection by a leading interpreter of a substantial portion of a major work in the corpus on grounds of verbal rather than musical text – one of several such recommendations in Dean's book – fairly indicates that there is much in the librettos that the twentieth-century audience finds difficulty in appreciating.[3] Apparently our judgement of what makes an effective oratorio is often opposed to Handel's. And Handel's estimate was frequently endorsed by his audience, in opposition to our own response. For example, *Joseph and his Brethren*, in modern opinion an almost complete failure largely because of its dreadful libretto, was popular in his own day.[4] Evidently appreciating the oratorios is not plain sailing, and we still have something to learn about them. Why did Handel accept those texts which he chose to set? Why are they constituted as they are? What are the 'diversionary' passages about, and why are they there? Did the original audiences see things in them that we do not? It is part of my aim to raise such questions and suggest answers to them.

This book develops ideas first outlined in 1983, when I argued that we would enlarge our understanding and enjoyment of Handel's oratorios and his other English theatre works if we took account of their intellectual contexts.[5] This approach gives a different perspective on the compositions from that afforded by previous studies, which are grounded in biography or music criticism and scholarship.[6] Handel is no longer the focus; the words and the ideas in and behind his compositions come to the fore. The basic method is familiar: looking at a body of creative work against its intellectual background, relating it to the relevant ideas and preoccupations of the time.[7] The procedure is routine for the creative literature of the period but has only recently begun to be adopted for its musical-literary works. The novelty of approach is in the particular combination of work and background: there has been no previous attempt on this scale to examine the words of Handel's oratorios in relation

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to the thought of their time.[8] It is long overdue. Dean called for a study of Handel's English librettists in 1959 but, before and since, they have been neglected, to an astonishing extent: witness the many accounts which give the impression that Handel wrote his own oratorio librettos. When I outline my subject-matter to educated non-specialists, their most frequent first response is 'Didn't Handel write them himself, then?'; they can hardly be blamed for their ignorance on this score when both specialist musicologists and leading cultural historians still give the impression that he did.[9]

This book discusses the librettos but only occasionally touches on the music. Happily it is no longer necessary to argue the importance of librettos and their authors in the study of major words-and-music compositions, an importance acknowledged in, for example, the prominence given them by *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. In the case of Handel's oratorios and other English theatre works the separation of text and music for the purpose of increased understanding seems to me legitimate. Handel did not, so far as we know, write any of the librettos (see Appendix 1 for librettos, authors and sources). He was not a proto-Wagner. Nor was his collaboration with his librettists of a Strauss–von Hofmannsthal intensity (it would have been very unusual for its time if it had been). In the very scant surviving correspondence of composer and librettists we have only a single indication of his suggesting new verbal material: Charles Jennens reported that he wrote 'Il Moderato' to conclude his rearrangement of Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* 'at Mr Handel's request'.[10] More usually, so far as we can tell, Handel's involvement with his librettists' texts consisted of editing them, principally cutting them (to what extent this was a collaborative exercise we are often uncertain). As Dean has shown, Handel and his librettists often seem to have had different ends in view; this reflects not only the circumstance of the collaborators working independently for at least some of the process, but also, as this book will suggest, differing priorities, which need to be more clearly distinguished than studies concentrating on the music have allowed. Handel's working relationship with his librettists is outlined in the second part of this introduction. Finally, there is more than enough to say in one book about the librettos and the ideas which shaped them without attempting discussion of their musical setting. But new findings about the librettos bring new light to Handel's treatment of them, and I invite musicologists to go on from here. The initial survey

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which I made of this material was drawn on by a musicologist and a literary historian to show Handel's response to what the librettist provided; the present book will have succeeded if it prompts further studies of the same kind.[11]

But analysing the librettos is not easy. Handel's impact on his librettos is so powerful, there is so much to notice and say about his settings of the words (and about all the additional music), that the words themselves have tended to be viewed as it were backwards. Our understanding of the words is coloured, often distorted, by the impression which the music makes on us and, as Dean in particular pointed out, the music often imposes its own flagrant distortion (one of the major themes of his book is Handel's readiness to override the apparent meaning of the librettist's words with the music to which he set them). Once one knows the music it is hard to read the words without hearing the transforming musical versions of them in one's head, as one scholar candidly admits in his own approach to *Messiah*: 'it is impossible to-day to separate the text from the music'.[12] But I believe the effort to separate the text from the music is worth making, since it will increase our understanding and appreciation of these literary-musical compositions. Handel's English librettos were compiled or written by English men of letters who drew on major literary sources, including Sophocles, the Bible, Dryden and Milton. The process of clarifying the oratorios' make-up is served by identifying the texts the librettists chose to adapt, the selections they made from them and the alterations they effected; asking the reasons for their preferences and changes; and recognising the ideas which their productions express. These lines of enquiry are central to the present undertaking. They yield the conclusions that Handel's oratorio librettos made considerably more meanings available to their original audiences than we now realise, that these meanings can be identified by reference to ideas current at the time, and that the librettos, and hence Handel's English works, encapsulate views current in their time on major issues of their day. What these ideas and views were is worth identifying. In the same way that 'authentic' performance reveals unsuspected musical vitality, so the recovery of verbal meanings in the oratorios enables us to understand what captured the interest of the original audiences and so increase the depth and range of our own responses.

The sense of the words has been muffled not only by the power of Handel's music but by conceptions of the nature of the oratorios

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influenced by subjective response. The pioneering work of Young, Dean and some of their successors rescued Handel from his distorting and bowdlerising nineteenth-century editors, but remade him to suit their own tastes. The work which has dominated the study of Handel's English theatre music since its publication and which will continue to be indispensable on account of its vast quantity of illuminating information, Dean's *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (1959), proclaims in its title that the key element sought and found in its subject is the ability to dramatise. And for Dean, drama chiefly means the portrayal of characters reacting and interacting, the interplay of motive and emotion within and between characters, and strongly plotted action. This is what he most admires, what he looks for, what he rejoices to find and regrets to find lacking. The very human inclination, shared by all generations of interpreters, to define their subject according to their own preferences, is positive in that it helps to engage their contemporaries' enthusiasm on their subject's behalf (as Dean has done for a whole generation of listeners and interpreters), but it risks several kinds of distortion.

Firstly, to make dramatisation of character the defining element imposes a particular definition on the corpus. Of Handel's twenty-five English theatre works Dean selected for detailed discussion only the eighteen with named characters, relegating the others – *Israel in Egypt*, *Alexander's Feast*, the *Ode for St Cecilia's Day*, *L'allegro, il penseroso ed il moderato*, *Messiah*, the *Occasional Oratorio* and *The Triumph of Time and Truth* – to the margins. This selection gives the sense that parts of the corpus, including works generally regarded as among Handel's greatest achievements, do not merit the highest regard because they do not match the criterion 'dramatic'. Secondly, while selection on these terms has proved invigorating to enjoyment and performance of Handel's music, it negates the strong connections between works discussed and works excluded. The selection runs counter to, and so has tended to obscure, the major distinction drawn in Handel's own time, not between works with and without *dramatis personae* but between sacred and secular works. Handel's advertisements for his premières use the designation 'oratorio' consistently and exclusively for those works with religious subjects. Thirdly, the 'dramatic' criterion leads to the dismissal from serious consideration of large tracts of the librettos even of the selected works, and even whole librettos. Dean writes of *Joseph and his Brethren*: 'The essential requirements for a composer, firm con-

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struction, distinct characters, interesting situations, and concrete imagery, are wholly to seek.'[13] Whether they were of prime importance to the librettist, even whether he thought in such terms, is not considered; what the librettist's aims and criteria actually were, and what he did provide, remains to be objectively elucidated. In fact (fourthly), Dean himself constantly shows that these 'essential requirements' were not necessary for Handel to produce great music, and the existence of *Messiah* proves it. The librettist often provided, and Handel often responded magnificently to, elements other than character and plot. These elements often spring from the concerns of the collaborators' own time, from beliefs, standards and principles to which Dean is unsympathetic.[14] His contempt for mid-eighteenth-century moral and cultural canons, particularly moral didacticism in art, leads him to find that Handel persistently 'transcends' the 'limited sympathies and narrow didacticism of his librettists'.[15] The inference (for which I am unaware of any non-musical evidence) is that Handel did not share the artistic and moral assumptions of his contemporaries and (a fifth form of distortion) deflects serious attention away from these assumptions and their presence in the oratorios. Finally, while it is true that many of the oratorios are dramas, it is even truer if we use the criteria of their own time rather than ours to define 'dramatic'. For the eighteenth-century audience, more of Handel's English works, and more within them, would have seemed dramatic than Dean allows. *Acis and Galatea*, *Esther*, *Athalia*, *Semele*, *Joseph*, *Hercules*, *Alexander Balus*, *Susanna*, *Theodora* and *Jephtha* all exhibit characteristics of eighteenth-century sentimental drama, and a study of Handel's English works as *eighteenth-century* theatre is overdue (Brett and Haggerty have shown how satisfying it would be[16]). The ahistorical stance of Dean's appraisal has had its critics. William C. Smith, for example, commented that 'scholars and writers . . . are not fair to the subject when the Handel they create for us is a present day figurehead fashioned out of their own philosophy'.[17] The balance is beginning to be redressed, but much remains to be done.

My enquiry, following eighteenth-century definitions of oratorio, focuses on the librettos with religious themes (but many of its findings are relevant to the librettos of Handel's secular English theatre works). It attempts to recover the eighteenth-century perspective by making an objective survey of the ideas in the librettos, and to yield a fuller understanding of the completed works by

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understanding what they could have meant in their own day. Much in the oratorios which seems irrelevant or insipid to us would have been, on the contrary, fully engaging for Handel's first audiences. In order to recognise the librettos' meanings we need to recognise the impact on them of the thought of their time and to appreciate the artistic and moral criteria that influenced their authors. Contemporary aesthetic prescription, religious discourse, moral teaching and political ideology provide the entry points. (There is a parallel in our need to appreciate the primacy which the eighteenth century accorded to the constituent elements of 'history painting' – a genre that leaves many modern viewers cold – before we can respond fully to its art.) Hence this study occupies what Pat Rogers – to my mind with excessive deprecation – has called 'not so much musicology as the humbler province of contextualization'.[18] It evaluates the librettos not as satisfying artistic constructs or as vehicles for the composer's skill but as reflections and embodiments of the *ideas* of their time. By 'their time' I mean the time of their creation and first performance, not of their later reception (much study of the ideas in the oratorios has been confused by back-projection from the reception accorded them in the later eighteenth century[19]). Part I locates the oratorios' English origins in contemporary prescriptions for literature and music and contemporary religious debate. Part II first establishes the forms of discourse available to and used by the librettists, then identifies major contemporary concerns – moral, religious and political – which are apparent in the oratorios, and finally discusses the reflection of these concerns in individual librettos.

It was Dean's contention that Handel was strikingly independent of the received opinions of his time and that his oratorios are highly original works. In his account of Dryden's political poetry Stephen Zwicker comments that 'Literary historians who find Dryden innovative . . . more often than not reveal uncertainties in their grasp of seventeenth-century literary and intellectual contexts'.[20] Correspondingly, once we know the context, we usually have to revise our view of an artist's 'originality'. This has happened with Handel in the twentieth century and even in his own time when informed listeners recognised his use of other composers' material and models. Handel was no maverick, and the absorption of his society's ideas into his works is consistent with his compositional practice of building on its musical forms.[21] Some readers may feel that the oratorios,

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or at least the librettos, are diminished by an awareness that their verbal texts embody received ideas, and for them this second-handness will widen the gap which they already perceive between what they regard as the librettos' artistic inferiority and Handel's genius. I find that, on the contrary, it is immensely satisfying to understand why the librettos are as they are, and to recognise in them the intellectual, emotional, political and spiritual preoccupations, questions and solutions (however well or ineptly handled) of eighteenth-century authors and audiences. Analysing the subsoil in which the librettos have their taproots, and as a result understanding the components of the plant itself, makes a performance of *Messiah*, *Joshua* or *Alexander's Feast* (or any of the oratorios, odes and dramas) a richer experience; and seeing in the librettos the reflection of much eighteenth-century thought is to put another piece in place in the jigsaw of eighteenth-century intellectual history. Past attempts to explain Handel's oratorios by categorising them have proved hazardous, the categories being overwhelmed by the number of qualifications they entailed.[22] But setting the librettos in the light of contemporary ideas illuminates common themes in oratorios which have previously seemed widely diverse in subject and quality. This yields a more satisfactory description of the genre than we have so far achieved – establishes it, in fact, *as* a genre, on the grounds of consistency of ideas and their expression, and shows it to be not a thing apart but a signal repository of the prevailing ideas of its time and a major conduit of eighteenth-century sensibility and thought.

The dominant influences on mid-eighteenth-century English thought were religion and politics. They permeated life and art, and they permeate this book. This was still a culture in which (as much recent historiography has reminded us) religious belief and the morality taught by religion informed prescriptions for the content of works of art and the works themselves. The pulpit was the major public-address system. Sermons addressed and influenced every aspect of private and public life (including art), religious debate was a major element of intellectual life, religious publications dominated book production, and people believed that God supervised their lives and could and would intervene with punishment on a personal or national scale if provoked by wrongdoing.[23] It has been persuasively argued that the arts, including music, were fostered by the Church of England in order to increase piety and religious ortho-

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doxy.[24] Creating a Handel who speaks to the secular mid twentieth century made it fashionable to dismiss as apocryphal anecdotes from his own time illustrating his commitment to Protestant belief.[25] Edward Fitzgerald's phrase that he was 'pagan at heart'[26] has been supported with interpretations of his music, usually without acknowledgement that the music in question illustrates a dramatic fiction. For Dean and many successors influenced by him, religion in Handel's oratorios is closer to ethical humanism than to Protestant Christianity: 'the God of the greater oratorios is not the jealous Jehovah of the Old Testament, still less the Christian God of the Atonement, but rather the remote and impartial controller of man's destiny'.[27] Besides being a reading that is impossible if *Israel in Egypt* and *Messiah* are taken into account, this is to suggest that the oratorio authors had and expressed beliefs which would have been considered freakish, if not blasphemous, in their own time, and would have set them completely apart from the society they were addressing. But the writers of the librettos were members, or even ministers, of the Church of England. Unsurprisingly, comparison of their texts with contemporary Anglican writing reveals the very considerable extent to which Handel was given conventional doctrinal material to set, and endorses Larsen's observation that 'Oratorio acknowledges two masters, the church and the theatre.'[28] Separating artistic concerns from those of religion and morality in a way which would have been incomprehensible to the eighteenth century, Dean stated of Handel's concern in the oratorios: 'The voice of the moralist, the preacher, and the propagandist he rejected'.[29] But these are precisely the voices which we will find resounding through the librettos. If Dean is right, Handel was even further at variance with his librettists and his contemporaries than Dean himself has suggested. Or maybe Handel was more attuned to the evangelical Protestantism of his librettos than his secularised portrait suggests.

In the mid eighteenth century religion was bound up with politics: 'There was no conceptual separation between issues of Church and state, religion and politics'.[30] Full participation in citizenship depended on conformity to the Church of England. The Stuart claimants to the British throne were Catholic and, it was feared, would impose Catholicism if they regained power. The (Lutheran) Hanoverians were accepted as rulers of Britain by many of their subjects because they safeguarded Protestantism and supported the

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Church of England. European and international politics tended to be aligned according to Protestant versus Catholic national identity. Linda Colley has convincingly argued that Protestantism was the chief defining characteristic of British nationhood (including Handel's oratorios in her evidence): 'Protestantism determined how most Britons viewed their politics. And an uncompromising Protestantism was the foundation on which their state was explicitly and unapologetically based'.[31] It was not only conservative members of the Church of England who connected political stability with the dominance of Protestantism. Low Church and Dissenting opponents of 'priestcraft' (a key trigger word, connoting attempts by the clergy to take over political power) were equally ready to suspect that those 'endeavouring to root out the Christian Religion' from British minds were 'making their utmost Efforts for the bringing back Popery, Slavery, and the Pretender' (in other words, fomenting anarchy). It was generally agreed that 'the establish'd Religion in every Country, and especially every Free Country, is the Foundation and Basis of the Publick Spirit and Publick Virtue of that Country', and that 'The Original Contract . . . between the Prince and the People', which is 'the very Life and Soul of the Constitution of *Great Britain*' unquestionably 'depends upon the Influence and Efficacy of the Christian Religion'.[32] The national (Protestant) religion and the national (non-arbitrary) government were mutually dependent. National celebrations (for example anniversaries of royal accessions) and national crises (war or natural disasters) were the occasions for special church services and special sermons and these, time and again, as later chapters describe, delivered their messages by comparing the British nation with the biblical Israelites. Secular political discourse, from tracts on statecraft to speeches in Parliament, used the same analogy.

The meshing of religion and politics in the fourteen oratorios about the Israelite nation would have seemed entirely natural to their first audiences. The presence of political themes in these works of art and entertainment would also have been unsurprising. As at no other period before or since, politics pervaded literature and music theatre, and, as much contemporary testimony asserts, the nation was unusually politically aware and opinionated, from top to bottom of society. From the moment that Handel first arrived in England, he was involved in producing music for national events. The librettists would have been unusual if they had excluded

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