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HIS MAJESTY'S CHOICE: *ESTHER* IN MAY 1732

Handel's first oratorio production met with success that was both unforeseen and peculiar. For a work reputedly "composed in the Church style," performed with "no Scenary, dress or Action," and, furthermore, with its singers restrained "in a short Gallery," *Esther* was a theatrical prodigy, scoring six performances with "very full" houses.¹ Indeed, the author of the spirited commentary *See and Seem Blind* expressed his "great Surprize [to find] this Sacred Drama a mere Consort" and declared his preference for "one good Opera ... than Twenty Oratorio's."² What can explain *Esther's* triumph, then?

Innovation is certainly part of the answer ("This being a new Thing," writes the author above, "set the whole World a Madding").³ The infusion of sacred elements in an operatic context may have alarmed religious authorities, but it also piqued the curiosity of London's fashionable society. And Handel's homage to Hanoverianism, by way of tapping on the Coronation service, was undoubtedly crucial in filling the King's Theatre to capacity. No concert production, however, could have sustained full houses for so long without an extraneous factor, royal presence.

We do know that the Crown supported *Esther*, and lobbying for the production by Princess Anne, Handel's favorite pupil, should be taken for granted.⁴ However, the extent of this support was far greater than Deutsch has let us believe. The Court, he writes, attended four of the performances, three (May 2, 13, and 20) being reported in *The Daily Courant* and one (May 6) in Lord Percival's diary.⁵ Had he consulted the original advertisements (either in the *Courant* or in *The Daily Journal*), he would have noticed that all six performances were given "By His Majesty's Command."⁶ Indeed, rare issues of *The Daily Advertiser*, a paper that run no advertisements of *Esther* but had detailed knowledge of Court affairs, throw further light on *Esther's* reception by the Crown. The excerpts below appeared in the paper's London section (p. 1) on the (publication) day following each performance:

LONDON.

Last Night their Majesties, the Prince of Wales, Princess Royal, and the Princess Amelia, went to the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, and saw the Secret Story of Esther, an Oratorio compos'd by Mr. Handel. [no. 393, Wednesday 3 May 1732.]

On Saturday last their Majesties, &c. went to the Theatre in the Haymarket, and saw an Oratorio call'd Esther. [no. 397, Monday 8 May 1732.]

Last Night the King and Queen, &c. went to the Theatre in the Haymarket, and saw the Secret Story of Esther, compos'd by Mr. Handel. [no. 399, Wednesday 10 May 1732.]

The same Evening [i.e. "On Saturday last"] their Majesties, &c. went to the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, and saw the Oratorio of Esther, compos'd by Mr. Handel. [no. 403, Monday 15 May 1732.]

Last Night the King and Queen, his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, &c. were at the Theatre in the Haymarket, and saw Esther, an Oratorio in English composed by Mr. Handel. [no. 405, Wednesday 17 May 1732.]

Their Majesties, &c. were on Saturday Night last at the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, and saw the Oratorio call'd Esther in English. [no. 409, Monday 22 May 1732.]

Whether it was the printer's long exposure to party politics or the typesetter's poor hearing, the malapropism "secret" (instead of "sacred") seems to further pronounce *Esther's* political subtexts.⁷ That the Royal family attended all six performances of *Esther*, returning to the King's Theatre every three and four nights, shows more than support for the oratorio: it is an affirmation. Evidently, the Crown was pleased with Handel's artistic compliment, a biblical tale of political wisdom framed with references to the 1727 Coronation. George II, actually, had good reasons to be seen in public so often: he was preparing for his second sojourn in Hanover, an absence deeply regretted by the public⁸ (only five years earlier, George I had died on his way to the German Electorate⁹). Originally fixed for the second half of May,¹⁰ his departure was postponed until Saturday, June 3,¹¹ presumably because of a heavy domestic agenda. That Handel designated May 20 as *Esther's* last night may well relate to the King's imminent departure (this also raises the possibility that the oratorio was withdrawn prematurely).

Equally eager for public exposure was Queen Caroline, who had been appointed Regent for the duration of the King's absence. Frequent appearances in Handel's productions confirmed her good health (rumors about her death had circulated in early October 1731¹²; another indisposition occurred in April¹³) and consolidated her image as deputy head of state.¹⁴ *Esther* was the perfect allegorical vehicle to promote her role as national conciliator. Indeed, verses published on May 16 (an oratorio night), extol Caroline in "Estherian" terms: "Contending Parties and Plebeian Rage / Had puzzled Loyalty for half an Age: / Conquering our Hearts You end the long Dispute."¹⁵

Given *Esther's* political connotations, the uninterrupted presence of the King in Handel's first oratorio production emerges as a critical factor for its success. Only a year-and-a-half before the Handel/Senesino rift turned into a platform for political division, *Esther* could fill the Opera House not simply as a theatrical novelty but also as His Majesty's personal choice.

— Ilias Chrissochoidis

¹ *Manuscripts of the Earl of Egmont: Diary of Viscount Percival afterwards First Earl of Egmont. Vol. I. 1730-1733* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1920), 266; [?Aaron Hill], *See and Seem Blind: Or, A Critical Dissertation on the Publick Diversions, &c. Of Persons and Things, and Things and Persons, and what not. In a Letter from the Right Honourable the Lord B— to A— H— Esq* (London: H. Whitridge, [1732]; repr. Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1986),

- 15; Konrad Sasse (ed.), "Opera Register from 1712 to 1734 (Colman-Register)," *Händel-Jahrbuch* 5 (1959), 199-223: 220.
- ² See and Seem, 15, 19.
- ³ See and Seem, 15.
- ⁴ Charles Burney, *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster-Abbey and the Pantheon...in Commemoration of Handel* (London: for the Benefit of the Musical Fund, 1785), 100; the Princess would have a similar role in the production of *Deborah: The Manuscripts of the Earl of Carlisle, preserved at Castle Howard* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1897), 106.
- ⁵ Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1955), 290-92. So much faith has been put on Deutsch's authority, that the claim has evaded scrutiny even from Winton Dean ("the whole Royal Family were present at four [performances]": *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 206); more interested in context than in details, Paul Henry Lang applies "four" differently: "Handel's top opera team ... was called upon to repeat the performance four times within three weeks": *George Frideric Handel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 280.
- ⁶ See advertisements for the respective performance in *The Daily Courant* (nos. 5011, 5015, 5017, 50[21], 5023, 5027) and *The Daily Journal* (nos. 3537, 3539, 3543, 3545, 3549).
- ⁷ See Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 276-85; Kenneth Nott, "Sacred and Profane: The Ambitious Minister and the Unsearchable Ways of God's Wisdom," *The Musical Times* 136 (1995): 87-90; and Ilias Chrissochoidis, "Born in the Press: The Public Molding of *Esther* into an English Oratorio," in *Early Reception of Handel's Oratorios: Narrative-Studies-Documents*, 2 vols. (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2004 [Ph.D. diss., Stanford University]), 1:451-74.
- ⁸ W. H. Wilkins, *Caroline the Illustrious: Queen-Consort of George II. and sometime Queen-regent: A Study of Her Life and Time*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1901), 2:112, 184.
- ⁹ T[obias] Smollett, *A Complete History of England*, 4 vols. (London: James Rivington and James Fletcher, 1757-1758), 4:516; [Oliver Goldsmith], *An History of England*, 2 vols. (London: J. Newbery, 1764), 2:136.
- ¹⁰ *The Daily Journal*, no. 3512, Monday 3 April 1732, [1]; *The Daily Advertiser*, no. 399, Wednesday 10 May 1732, [1]; *The Daily Courant*, no. 50[21], Saturday 13 May 1732, [2]. George II's first visit to Hanover, in 1729, was also in mid-May 1729: Smollett, *History*, 4:530.
- ¹¹ *The Daily Advertiser*, no. 418, Saturday 3 June 1732, [1]; *The Daily Journal*, no. 3562, Saturday 3 June 1732, [1]; *The Daily Courant*, no. 5039, Saturday 3 June 1732, [2].
- ¹² "The report that was set about Friday last of the Queen's death was the invention of the Spittlefeild wevers [*sic*] and the stock jobbers, to fall stock" (Peter Wentworth to the Earl of Strafford, 7 October 1731: *The Wentworth Papers, 1705-1739*, ed. James J. Cartwright (London: Wyman & Sons, 1883), 474). For Caroline's precarious state of health, see Wilkins, *Caroline*, 2:344-45.
- ¹³ "Her Majesty is so well recover'd of her last short Indisposition, as to go last Saturday to the King's Theatre in the Haymarket to see the Opera *Coriolanus*": *The Daily Advertiser*, no. 378, Monday 17 April 1732, [1].
- ¹⁴ Her first Regency, in 1729, is reviewed in Wilkins, *Caroline*, 2:112-230.
- ¹⁵ *The Daily Courant*