REPORT FROM HALLE 2007

This year’s Handel Festival in Halle was organized around the theme of “The Triumph of Time and Truth – Myth and Allegory in Handel.” The musical standards were high – consistently higher than I can remember from any recent Festival. As always, there were more events than any one person could take in, and a severe case of bronchitis forced me to miss several performances I had hoped to attend. For these latter I can only report hearsay.

The opening concert on Thursday, May 31, featured excerpts from L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato which appeared to have been selected to minimize the element of contrast which forms the basis of that work. The performance, under the direction of Federico Maria Sardelli, was pleasant but seemed under rehearsed. This was followed on Friday evening by a concert performance in the Frankesche Stiftungen of Giove in Argo, Handel’s pasticcio of 1739, reconstructed by AHS member John Roberts who also composed the missing recitatives. The production, under the musical direction of Alan Curtis, was a cooperative venture with the Göttingen Handel Festival and the Festwochen Herrenhausen, and had already been heard in the other two venues. Il Compresso Barocco played with infectious enthusiasm. Among the soloists there was outstanding singing from sopranos Mary-Ellen Nesi and Laura Cherici. Although it was sometimes disconcerting to hear familiar movements in unfamiliar contexts, Giove in Argo is clearly a major re-discovery and one looks forward to encountering it again. Professor Roberts’ reconstruction will be published as part of the HHA.

The scheduling of Giove in Argo on Friday night made it impossible to attend the première of the new production of Ariodante at the Opera House, which marked the first performance of the forthcoming HHA edition by AHS member Donald Burrows. I heard the deuxième on Sunday evening and my response was one of modified rapture. Musically things went very well, indeed, with...

continued on p. 2

THE “HANDEL DOCUMENTS” PROJECT

We are fortunate that the historical period and circumstances of Handel’s career have left behind a substantial documentary trail. His public performances in London were advertised in the newspapers; his professional and social connections were such that his activities were reported in private correspondence and in the archives of courts and patrons; even his musical scores are “documents” in their evidence for dates of composition, and for the composer’s relationship with particular performers. During the last fifty years an indispensable reference work for the texts of contemporary documents has been Handel: A Documentary Biography by Otto Erich Deutsch, published in 1955. Deutsch's work was a remarkable achievement in its range and coverage, especially since it was...
prepared in post-war Britain where libraries and archives had only gradually returned to their normal functions. However, the Documentary Biography has also been a subject for increasing frustration. It is not surprising that, given the quantity of material that it covers, the book had a considerable number of errors both in the transcriptions of documents and in the commentaries; furthermore, much new material has been discovered since 1955. Some of the new documents were included in Band IV of the Händel-Handbuch, published in 1985, but in other respects this presented a rather uncritical German translation of the Deutsch's 1955 text. While Deutsch's work forms a fundamental resource for a twenty-first century collection of Handel documents (in just the same way that Deutsch built upon the material collected a century earlier by Victor Schoelcher), what is needed now is not simply a "new Deutsch" but a fresh and concentrated review of the documents that are currently known, interpreted with the benefit of modern scholarship.

Although the need for an up-to-date and accurate collection has been recognized for many years, it has been very difficult to overcome the problems posed by the size and complexity of the task. When Winton Dean endowed a fund for the Handel Institute, it was his wish that it should be devoted in the first instance to the preparation of a new published documentary collection, but the practical problems of realising this objective were large: the people with the best relevant experience were heavily involved in other activities, and the project would require major resources in the way of an office base, staff and materials, if it were to be undertaken in a professional and humane manner. After a certain initial hesitation, I prepared a bid for a major project grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council for "George Frideric Handel: the collected documents," under the aegis of The Open University and incorporating support from the Winton Dean Fund. In a highly competitive situation, I am pleased to report that this bid has been approved.

The project will be based in The Open University's London Regional Centre in Camden Town, within easy reach of the major research resources at the British Library and the Gerald Coke Handel Collection at the Foundling Museum. I shall be the project leader; the other permanent staff are Anthony Hicks (as Visiting Research Fellow) and Helen Green (as Research Assistant), and we shall also be relying on assistance from Terence Best (Visiting Research Fellow), especially in the area of foreign-language documents. The major funding is for a period of three years, and by the time you read this the project will already be under way. It concentrates the mind to realise that, if the work were to be completed in three years, we would have to cover more than two years of Handel's life every month. For various reasons, the outcome is planned at the moment as a book, and we hope that three years of efficient research activity will take us near to that goal. A successful result in terms of comprehensive coverage will, however, need assistance from beyond the immediate project team, not only from Handelians but also from people with specialist knowledge of eighteenth-century archives. We shall be issuing an "open-house" appeal for information about new documents that may come within the scope of the project - but not yet, as we shall be fully occupied with beginning the task of collecting and checking already-known material for the first year of the project.

— Donald Burrows

MEMBERSHIP DUES AND DIRECTORY

Remember to keep your dues (and contact information) current for inclusion in the forthcoming Membership Directory.

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. 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. 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." 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. 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 public (only five years earlier, George I had died on his way to the German Electorate). Originally fixed for the second half of May, his departure was postponed until Saturday, June 3, 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 1731; another indisposition occurred in April) and consolidated her image as deputy head of state. *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.”

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

---

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK
(Summer 2007)

In this age a healthy endowment is essential to support the activities of any non-profit institution or society. Many members of the AHS are well aware of the massive efforts currently underway to increase the size of the endowment of the American Musicological Society. They may also be aware of similar efforts by smaller sister societies, including the Society for Seventeenth-Century Music and the newly formed Haydn Society of North America.

Thanks to a generous gift from the late David Edelberg, the AHS has been blessed with an endowment from the early years of its existence. That endowment has not grown significantly, however, and the income it yields — together with membership dues and gifts — is just sufficient to support the current activities of the Society. The AHS Board would like to expand those activities to include, among other things, more money to support research projects through the J. Merrill Knapp Fellowship; travel and housing support for speakers at AHS Conferences; and support for student members of the Society to attend those conferences. I am sure that members of the Society can envision other worthwhile projects.

The AHS does not need to undertake a campaign the size of AMS Opus, even if we had the resources to do so. And the AHS is not in a position to offer prizes to the largest donors — although I might be able to arrange for some gift certificates for Handel's Ice Cream, which is very good indeed. The needs of the Society are, however, real, and I would urge us all to remember the AHS when we decide how to allocate our charitable giving for the year.

— Graydon Beeks

NEWSLETTER
of
The American Handel Society

Kenneth Nott, Editor
The Hartt School
University of Hartford
200 Bloomfield Avenue
West Hartford, CT 06117-1599
Tel: (860) 768-4895
Fax: (860) 768-4441
E-mail: Nott@hartford.edu

The Editor welcomes comments, contributions, and suggestions for future issues.