Handel's Epigones in the late 18th Century
Suzanne Aspden

What does it mean to "interpret" Handel? I think we generally take the notion as shorthand for "interpreters of Handel's music" – and that is certainly one way in which this essay will explore the concept of Handel interpretation. But in examining Handel interpretation of the later eighteenth century, it quickly becomes clear that not just his music, but the man himself, was being "interpreted"; anecdotes about him and analyses of his character – whether tending to the pious or the humourous– proliferated in the later part of the century, of which Hawkins' assertion of Handel's "blameless morals, and . . . deep sense of religion" on the one hand and Burney's comical, heavily accented quotations on the other, might serve as contrasting examples.[1] In general, they added to the sense of Handel as part of the fabric of British life, the naturalised Englishman conforming in some sense to a developing ideal of Britishness: bluff and rough-mannered, but ultimately generous and religiously minded.

It is also interesting (if unsurprising) to see the way in which the anglicisation of Handel's music shifted in the later eighteenth century. In the early eighteenth-century it was common for parts of Handel's instrumental music – particularly his minuets – to circulate with English texts added, texts which focussed on the themes of love won, lost and betrayed that were so familiar from cantata texts of this period. An (anonymous) texting of the minuet to *Rodelinda* might serve as an example; it begins: "Strephon, in vain / Thou courtest occasion / With tender persuasion / To combat disdain. / Rouse up thy soul, / Nor let the ungrateful / Tho' lovely Deceitful / Thy reason controul."

In the later eighteenth century (and beyond), however, the anglicisation shifted to a religious focus – not surprisingly, given the small industry that sprang up around the generation of "new" "Handel" oratorios, as Eva Zöllner has shown.[2] While compilers such as John Christopher Smith and Samuel Arnold drew particularly on Handel's lesser-known oratorios for their "new" works, opera arias and instrumental pieces could also be repurposed, as in Edward Toms' *Israel in Babylon*, where arias such as "Ah, si morrò" from *Admeto* became "Trust in God", or the minuet from *Berenice* was texted as "Humble, patient bear the rod".[3] (Of course, there was some traffic in the other direction too: in 1779, Susan Burney noted that an Italian pasticcio attempted to lure in custom by advertising itself as including "many songs of Handel", and that one of them was "Return oh God of Hosts" from *Samson*, "adapted to Italian words" for Pacchierotti.[4]) Overall then, Handel was often represented in the later century as a deeply religious man, just as his non-religious or non-civic music was generally either adapted or quietly forgotten.

It is notable, however, that this view of Handel seems also to have manifested itself in interpretations of his music and musical legacy: both performers and composers of the later eighteenth century appear to have interpreted Handel in a particular, perhaps religiously inspired manner. While this essay focuses primarily on composers, singers also deserve brief attention, because they in many ways kept Handel "alive" for audiences in the latter part of the century. In her comment on Pacchierotti's singing of "Return of God of Hosts", Susan Burney noted that his performance style – at least in rehearsal – was unusual:

It is, in its Solemn and Antique style a fine song – Pacchierotti *expressed* it like an Angel, but, keeping himself I trust in *reserve* for the time of public Performance, was *too* chaste & too *retenûe* – a fault of which he is indeed not often Guilty . . .[5]

Of course, Burney may have been right that Pacchierotti was merely "keeping himself in reserve", but given the framing of the aria as "solemn and antique", one might also see his "chaste" vocal style as a reflection of that sense of antiquity. Indeed, the sense that there was (by the later part of the century) a distinctive vocal style for earlier music is indicated by a commentator in an 1827 article in the *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*, who stated that the aim of the Concert of Ancient Music, established in 1776 had been "to preserve not only the works of certain masters, but the style of executing those compositions which have been handed down by tradition from the authors themselves".[6] Pacchierotti may not have participated in those concerts, but it is not unreasonable to imagine he, like all contemporaries cognisant of that fashionable musical society, would have endeavoured to conform to the style mandated by them. Indeed, Pacchierotti was admired for his stylistic sensitivity: Lord Mount-Edgcumbe in his *Musical Reminiscences* noted that in his first performance in England, in the pasticcio *Demofoonte*, Pacchierotti "sung four songs in different styles, by as many different composers, which shewed his versatile talents to the greatest advantage, and at once established his reputation".[7]

In that regard, it is noteworthy that other singers of this period were described in similar terms to those Burney used for Pacchierotti. The leading oratorio singer of the early 1770s, Elizabeth Linley, whose singing was unfortunately curtailed on her marriage to R. B. Sheridan in 1773, was heard in private performance by Pacchierotti himself in 1779. He offered his opinion on her voice to Susan Burney:

Pacchierotti . . . s^{d} M^{rs} Sheridan seemed to him to have the advantage over all our female Singers – He said her Voice was more clear & more touching in its tone than Miss Harrops, &*without affectation*[;] he believed she had the most feeling, & sung Handel's Music best. . .[8]

Linley's voice was, indeed, routinely described as "unaffected", "sweet", "expressive", and she was particularly associated with Handel's music.[9] Thus, after her untimely death from tuberculosis, one magazine eulogized: "Who that ever heard the late Mrs Sheridan sing . . . "Brighter scenes I seek above / In the realms of peace and love" . . . did not feel a rapture blended with devotion, which is more than mortal?"[10]

What is more, the rhetoric of "sweetness" and lack of "affectation" seems to have attached itself to celebrated Handelian singers more generally. Daniel Lyons, writing in the middle of the following century, summarised Burney's remarks on Gaetano Guadagni: "Handel was so much pleased with his sweet and full voice, that he engaged him to sing the fine airs in *Samson* and *The Messiah*, which he had composed for Mrs. Cibber's sweet and affecting voice".[11] And Giulia Frasi, who was Handel's prima donna from 1749 until his death, and who continued as the mainstay of Handelian oratorio until 1768, attracted an assessment from Charles Burney that might remind us of his daughter's comment on Pacchierotti's rendition of Handel: Frasi had "a clear and sweet voice, free from defects, and a smooth and chaste style of singing, which, though cold and unimpassioned, pleased natural ears, and escaped the censure of critics".[12]

Although this is a merely taste of comments on the most admired Handelian oratorio singers, rather than a proper survey, it is hard to escape the sense that a rather distinctive tone or style was being cultivated for the Handelian repertory in the late eighteenth century – a style which, I have suggested elsewhere, we might call "elegaic".[13] Perhaps Frasi, who dominated the oratorio scene for nearly twenty years, was particularly influential in this regard, an authoritative repository of the "tradition" "handed down . . . from the authors themselves", that the 1827 commentator observed was so important to the Concert of Ancient Music.

Just as interesting is the response of composers who followed Handel. Here we should think not simply of those who sought to write oratorio after Handel, whom we might expect to conform to the Handelian idiom in a genre that he had largely created. Composers working in other genres nonetheless absorbed and expressed Handel's influence. Of course, we have long known of this influence, not least because Charles Burney wrote disparagingly of those who lacked the imagination or even the integrity to forge their own paths. Maurice Greene, for example, he described as an "acute observer of the improvements in composition and performance, which Handel, and the Italian singers . . . had introduced", but Burney went on to say that his compositions were "therefore more elegant . . . than those of his predecessors, [but] less nervous and original", being "flimsy"

when compared with Handel's.[14] And in a sweeping generalisation, illustrated with examples of Thomas Arne's borrowing from Bononcini and Handel, Burney observed that "In the perusal of old operas, discoveries are perpetually made of plagiarisms and imitations in the most favourite vocal airs and instrumental movements of our own composers".[15] Handel, Burney felt, was a chief source of material. In his *Account* of the Handel Commemoration, he observed that:

> Handel . . . though not a native of England, spent the greatest part of his life in the service of its inhabitants: improving our taste . . . and introducing among us so many species of musical excellence, that, during more than half a century, while sentiment, not fashion guided our applause, we neither wanted nor wished for any other standard.[16]

In private, Burney could be more blunt, complaining in 1805 that "the exclusive admiration and patronage of Handel's music . . . has checked the progress of the Art so much, that we are at least 50 years behind the rest of Europe in its cultivation, taste, and variety".[17]

But Burney's sneers about plagiarism and insipidity perhaps mask what was really going on, which was a compositional mirroring of the beginnings of musical canon formation already occurring in social and critical formats, as described by William Weber some time ago.[18] Indeed, as Peter Holman has recently suggested in an essay on Samuel Wesley's antiquarianism, "by the 1770s . . . English musical life was distinctive in European terms in its engagement with the past".[19] Holman sees this as partly a matter of custom – particularly for church music, which was generally treated in musically conservative fashion, and not just in England – and partly as a demonstration of skill across idioms.[20] But I suggest that the coincidence with the interest in canon formation means we can see the employment of old idioms not just as proof of technical dexterity.

With regard to Handel, as with other styles, the best of the composers working in latter part of the century were not merely grasping at out-of-date musical ideas, either as a prop for their own failing imaginations (as Burney might have it) or to demonstrate technical skill (as Holman suggests). I propose that they were consciously and overtly invoking Handel as a means both of paying their respects and of positioning themselves in relation to the great composer – expressing canonic thinking by musical means. We can tell that this was the case because the Handelian references are frequently marked by what we might call phenomenal accent (to borrow a term from music theorists, Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff), this being "any event at the musical surface that gives emphasis or stress to a moment in the musical flow".[21]

A passage in Thomas Arne's 1771 "masque" *The Fairy Prince*, in which he invokes Handel's "Zadok the Priest" might demonstrate the point (Example 1a). This chorus occurs at the end of the first act,

and as such already occupies a structurally accented position; written in verse-anthem style, with alternating duet and chorus, the latter sections are further set off by this juxtaposition. Arne's reminiscences of Handel are several: the rhythmic pattern of the opening phrase (along with its triple repetition) is identical to Handel's initial setting of this text (in bars 63-65), while the phrase shape borrows more from Handel's second presentation of this text (at bars 79 to 80; see Example 1b). The harmonic stasis and textual repetition of the final chorus section might also be paralleled with the concluding bars of *Zadok*. Arne, like Handel, prepares for this new section by closing on its dominant (Example 1c); Arne even uses the violin's accompanimental motif from Handel's equivalent preparatory phrase, "And all the people rejoiced", in abbreviated form for his own vocal line on "to sound and sing" (Example 1d). All this was certainly deliberate: in this masque, Arne and his librettist, George Colman (the elder), were celebrating the young Duke of York's investiture in the Order of the Garter; they had chosen to base their work on a literary classic, Ben Jonson's *Masque of Oberon* – with additions from Shakespeare and Dryden. So, for Arne to add a sense of musical classicism too, by invoking George III's favourite composer and a chorus which had drawn special remark and admiration since at least the 1740s, was entirely fitting.[22] It was also of a piece with other archaising gestures in this masque.

Texts or narratives often seem to have acted as triggers to the musical recollection of Handelian style, or as markers that composers could be sure their audiences would understand: in the preceding example from Arne, he added "God save the King" to Colman's original "Long live the King!", to match Handel's anthem, and was perhaps prompted to this by the line immediately preceding – "In union sweet rejoice, to sound and sing" – in which the important word, "rejoice", might have recalled the previous line of Handel's text: "And all the people rejoiced and said".

Similarly, in William Hayes' ode *The Passions*, of 1750, the recitative text "Revenge impatient rose" seems to have triggered a recollection of Handel's "Revenge Timotheus cries" from *Alexander's Feast* (perhaps because the rhythm and accentuation in the two phrases is identical) (Example 2). Hayes thus extracted the phrase from the recitative and inserted it into the following aria ("He threw his blood-stained sword in thunder down"), highlighting the text as an interpolation through juxtaposing it with the aria's first phrase, and then using the repetition of "revenge", the arpeggiaic construction, and the interjections from the orchestra which are also found in Handel's aria (Example 3a, Example 3b). This aria and the following grand chorus, which uses the same text, conclude the first part of Hayes' ode, and as such serve as another kind of structural accent, emphasising homage to Handel.

While Arne and Hayes both "had the misfortune", as Burney put it, to "live in the age and neighbourhood of a musical giant", proof of the canonic nature of the musical response to Handel is evident in the subsequent generation of composers. The younger Thomas Linley – brother to Elizabeth Linley, mentioned above – was born just a few years before Handel's death, and so had no direct contact with him; indeed, Linley is better known for his childhood friendship with the young Mozart. Nonetheless, in his *Song of Moses* of 1777, several of the choruses adhere to Handelian style, as was the norm at this time; and, as Peter Holman has observed, there seems to be specific reference to Handel's chorus "Moses and the children of Israel" from *Israel in Egypt*, in Linley's opening chorus, with the setting of the section "Praise be to God, and God alone" paralleling Handel's setting for "I will sing unto the Lord".[23] Here again, it can be no accident that Linley matches Handel's style and refers to a specific chorus for the opening of both composers' "song of Moses" where both texts concern praising God. The point is that the composer wanted the listener to understand and appreciate the sophistication of the reference and the graciousness of the homage, and as *Israel in Egypt* was one of the better-known oratorios at the time, Linley could be reasonably confident in that aim.

There is another reference in the next chorus, 'O Israel turn', which follows a beautiful and decidedly Handelian aria; the text, "The wave hath closed above each warlike head, / Sunk like a lifeless stone, vanished, and dead", seems to have prompted Linley's recollection of the wonderfully evocative chorus for the similarly overwhelmed Philistines at the end of *Samson*, which ends "No help is nigh, / Oh, mercy, Heav'n we sink, we die!". That notion of "sinking" perhaps recalled *Samson*'s chorus for Linley, for while the two choruses are stylistically very different, the dispersed calls on "sunk"/"sink", "vanished" and "dead"/"die" are notable, as is the melodic motto on "Sunk like a lifeless stone", which seems to come from Handel's "No help is nigh" (Examples 4a and 4b). The contemplative turn to Linley's chorus, an onlooker's perspective which contrasts with the frantic first-person pleas of Handel's Philistines, does not diminish the resonance, but rather deepens the sense of appraisal in Linley's quotation of his great predecessor.

This sense of appraisal, the framing of Handelian reference via structural or phenomenal accent, makes it clear that not only the Handelian style, but Handel himself, was being called to listeners' remembrance. We can see this, of course, as a mark of the esteem in which Handel was held at this time. But, as I intimated at the beginning of this essay, its significance was greater than this, for it demonstrates the articulation of canonic awareness. And this canonic awareness in English music

was expressed through a musical historicism which pre-dated and perhaps anticipated the historicism we traditionally associate with the high Classical period. Thus Thomas Arne, Thomas Linley (senior) and others all used stylistic variety drawn from their musical patrimony – Renaissance polyphony and Purcell as much as Handel and more recent styles – as a means of characterisation in their dramatic music, a means of adding weight and cultural resonance to the stories they told. Space does not permit an examination of the ways in which they did this– in works from Greene's *Florimel* to Arne's *Artaxerxes* to Linley's *Duenna* to Dibdin's *Entertainments* – but it is fitting to observe that an example they might well have had in their minds when using historicism in the service of narrative was that of Handel himself, who on occasion used this very technique in his oratorios. How appropriate, then, that he too was enfolded into this canon of musical classics by later eighteenth-century composers who were not, as Burney saw them, mere plagiarists and epigones, but rather, in their own way, also commentators and historians.

[1]John Hawkins, *A General History of Music*, vol. 2, p.910; cited in Donald Burrows, *Handel*, 2nd edn., New York, Oxford 2012, p.493. Charles Burney's "A Sketch of the Life of Handel", in *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster-Abbey . . . 1784*, London 1785, includes numerous such quotations; for example, pp. 33, 36. On the cultivation of anecdotes, see Charles Cudworth, *Mythistorica Handeliana*, in: *Festskrift Jens Peter Larsen*, Copenhagen 1972, pp.161-166. Another example of religiosity: James Beattie's recounting of two Handel anecdotes to Rev. Dr. Laing on 5 May 1780, about standing in the *Messiah* and Handel's aspiration to "make [people] better", not merely entertain them, in his oratorios; Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography*, London 1955, p.855.

[2] Eva Zöllner, *English Oratorio after Handel: The London Oratorio Series and Its Repertory, 1760-1800*, Marburg 2002.

[3]Eva Zöllner, *Israel in Babylon or The Triumph of Truth? A Late Eighteenth-Century Pasticcio Oratorio*, in: *The Consort* 51/2 (1995), pp.103-117, at p.115.

[4]Susan Burney, *The Journals and Letters of Susan Burney: Music and Society in Late Eighteenth-century England*, ed. Philip Olleson, Aldershot 2012, p.89. The popularity of this aria no doubt contributed to its inclusion. Nor was this the first time it had been set to Italian words, George Harris noting the castrato Monticelli's "incomparable" performance of an Italian setting in 1746; see Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill, *Music and Theatre in Handel's World: The Family Papers of James Harris, 1732-1780*, Oxford 2002, p.222. I am grateful to Donald Burrows for drawing this account to my attention.

[5]Susan Burney, *Journals and Letters*, see note 4, p.90.

[6] *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* 9 (1827), pp.50-93, at pp.72-3; cited in Tim Eggington, *The Advancement of Music in Enlightenment England: Benjamin Cooke and the Academy of Ancient Music*, Woodbridge 2014, p.72.

[7] [Richard Edgcumbe, Earl of Mount Edgcumbe,] *Musical Reminiscences of an Old Amateur, Chiefly Respecting the Italian Opera in England for Fifty Years, 1773 to 1823*, 2nd edn, London 1827, p.27.

[8]Susan Burney, *Journals and Letters*, see note 4, p.76.

[9] For further discussion, see: Suzanne Aspden, "*Sancta Cæcilia Rediviva". Elizabeth Linley: Repertoire, Reputation and the English Voice*, in: *Cambridge Opera Journal* 27/3 (2015), pp.263-287.

[10]Alan Chedzoy, *Sheridan's Nightingale: The Story of Elizabeth Linley*, London 1997, p.297.

[11]Daniel Lyons, *Origin and Progress of the Meeting of the Three Choirs of Gloucester, Worcester, & Hereford, and of the Charity Connected with it,* ed. & continued by John Amott, organist of Gloucester Cathedral [with notes by E. Rimbault and others], London [1864/5?], p.25.

[12] [Charles Burney,] *Frasi, Giulia*, in: *The Cyclopaedia*, ed. Abraham Rees, 31 vols., London 1802-20, vol. 15.,n.p.

[13] Suzanne Aspden, *"Sancta Cæcilia Rediviva"*, see note 9.

[14] Charles Burney, *A General History of Music: From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period*, 2 vols., Dover 1957, vol. 2, p.489, p.488. William Boyce, Burney says, was "one of the few . . . church composers who neither pillaged nor servilely imitated" Handel. Charles Burney, *General History of Music*, vol. 2, p.493.

[15]Burney, *General History of Music*, vol. 2, p.709n. Burney similarly noted that Arne borrowed from Handel's *Giustino*; *General History of Music*, vol. 2, p.808n.

[16]Charles Burney, *An Account of the Musical Performances,* see note 1, p.iii.

[17]Charles Burney, Material for the Memoirs, US-NHub, Osborne shelves c30, "116 (Bulstrode.) 1805 Earl & Cts. of Darnley". Emphasis original.

[18] William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England: A Study in Canon, Ritual, and Ideology,* Oxford 1992.

[19]Peter Holman, *Samuel Wesley as an Antiquarian Composer*, in: *Music and the Wesleys*, ed. by Nicholas Temperley and Stephen Banfield, Urbana 2010, pp.183-99 at p.183.

[20]Following Holman, Tim Eggington examines in some detail the importance of antiquarianism in the compositions of one notable member of the Academy of Ancient Music, Benjamin Cooke, in *The Advancement of Music in Enlightenment England*, see note 6.

[21] Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*, Cambridge, Mass. 1985, p.17.

[22] Handel's anthem had, of course, been incorporated into *Esther*, and was most often heard in that guise. In 1749 William Hayes mounted a festival of Handel oratorios in celebration of the opening of the Radcliffe Library (and Hayes' receipt of the D.Mus. degree), including *Esther, Samson*, and *Messiah* (12-14 April 1749). One B. Kennicott wrote an *Account of the Proceedings at Oxford*, in which he noted of the performance of *Esther* that "the only part enchored was the fine Coronation Anthem, God save the King. It was observed by

some that this whole Line was remarkable[:] Mercy to Jacob's Race, God Save the King." Cited in Simon Heighes, *The Lives and Works of William and Philip Hayes*, New York, London 1995, pp.8-9. Donald Burrows has suggested to me that there may have been other performances of this chorus from "Zadok the Priest" which cannot be readily identified, because "God save the King" was also the title of what was rapidly become the national anthem; see, for example, Gertrude Harris's comment on marking George III's anniversary in 1778, in Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill, *Music and Theatre in Handel's World*, see note 4, p.990.

[23]Peter Holman, *Samuel Wesley as Antiquarian Composer*, see note 19, p.191.