

Communications

To the Editor of the **Journal**:

Suzanne Aspden's " 'Fam'd Handel Breathing, tho' Transformed to Stone': The Composer as Monument" (this **Journal** 55 [2002]: 39–90) seeks to elevate the iconography of Handel from a symptom to a cause of his canonization in Great Britain. Against common understanding of Roubiliac's statues of Handel—as reflecting the composer's fame and acceptance—Aspden proposes them as agents of shaping his national reputation. This is an exciting claim. Being also an ambitious one, it calls for solid justification. Statements like “the role Roubiliac's first Handel statue played in shaping . . . the composer's reputation” (p. 45) or “The creation of these figures for the public . . . is rather a vital part of the formation of the composer's place in national culture” (p. 43) require substantial evidence. This evidence I hardly find in the article, whose narrative seems to decline from strong, causal claims to loose and ambiguous associations.

As there is little doubt about the nationalistic connotations of the Westminster Abbey memorial of Handel, the bone of contention here is Roubiliac's statue of the composer in Vauxhall Gardens (1738). What, exactly, in this artwork justifies Aspden's view of it as an instrument “in creating the concept of his national ‘genius’ ” (p. 43)? “The design does not immediately provide an answer” (p. 50), she concedes. And I agree, with a qualification: it does not provide any at all. As art historian Malcolm Baker explains, “This work was being presented and assessed for its artistic merits rather than for the significance of its subject.”¹ The aesthetic response to the statue would persist for decades. Writing in the 1770s, John Hawkins found his contemporaries unable to appreciate “the ease and gracefulness of the attitude, the dignity of the figure, the artful disposition of the drapery, or the manly plumpness and rotundity of the limbs”; their admiration was instead directed at “how naturally the slipper depends from the left foot.”² Heroes never play with slippers.

1. Malcolm Baker, “Tyers, Roubiliac and a Sculpture's Fame: A Poem About the Commissioning of the Handel Statue at Vauxhall,” *The Sculpture Journal* 2 (1998): 43.

2. John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, 3 vols. (London: Novello, Ewer; New York: J. L. Peters, 1875), 1:xxxii.

With no traces of nationalism in the statue itself, Aspden works peripherally, presenting its venue as a nationally significant site. That Vauxhall Gardens could have “foster[ed] a sense of collective identity” (pp. 44–45) is unquestionable. But I find misleading any attempt to promote it as a secular equivalent of Westminster Abbey (“both [statues] sited in spaces particularly critical for national self-definition” [p. 43]; “Parallels and symmetries are evident” [p. 79]). To quote Peter Kivy, “It is one thing to have one’s statue in an entertainment park, and quite another to have it in the Abbey, ‘near the Poet’s Corner.’”³ Indeed, the mixed reputation of Vauxhall Gardens, a popular subject of satire, forbids any comparison with the universally revered Westminster Abbey.

Aspden also underplays the commercial motivation behind Jonathan Tyers’s actions and John Lockman’s statements. She writes of Tyers’s “re-forming zeal” (p. 49) as if unaware of the life-restoring power of innovation in commercial entertainment (hence the “‘Chinese’ booths” [p. 45] in a British garden). Moreover, attributing the statue’s commission to a sort of cultural policy of Tyers (p. 50) sounds too refined to square with reality. Nathaniel Smith, a student of Roubiliac, preserved a more humble version: “At the time Mr. Tyers had engaged in the Vauxhall-Garden speculation, he requested the advice of [sculptor] Mr. Cheere as to the best mode of decoration. ‘I conclude you will have Music,’ observed Cheere, ‘therefore you cannot do better than to have a carving of an Apollo. What do you say to a figure of Handel?’”⁴ The answer having been yes, of course, “the credit of Cheere’s idea was therefore popularly assigned to Tyers.”⁵ Still more crucial, Aspden’s “understanding . . . of the gardens’ function and significance” (p. 45) relies precariously on Lockman (p. 48), a professional puffer known for “writing commendatory verses or essays dedicated to the wealthy or powerful, and praising business ventures in newspapers.”⁶ Not only that, but Lockman served as “Tyers’s publicist” (p. 46 n. 23) and orchestrated the campaign to promote the gardens.⁷ The national aura of Vauxhall Gardens seems to have been more likely a marketing strategy.

Things get complicated, nevertheless: What Aspden claims to pursue is not explicit statements of nationalism but mental constructions, the workings of the spectator’s mind (p. 42). This is evident in her attempt to link Roubiliac’s

3. Peter Kivy, *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 49.

4. Katharine A. Esdaile, *The Life and Works of Louis François Roubiliac* (London: Oxford University Press and Humphrey Milford, 1928), 36. See also *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Leslie Stephen, vol. 10 (New York: Macmillan; London: Smith, Elder, 1887), 177.

5. Esdaile, *Roubiliac*, 36.

6. David Bindman, “Roubiliac’s Statue of Handel and the Keeping of Order in Vauxhall Gardens in the Early Eighteenth Century,” *The Sculpture Journal* 1 (1997): 26.

7. David Bindman and Malcolm Baker, *Roubiliac and the Eighteenth-Century Monument: Sculpture as Theatre* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 68.

style with nationalism. The combination of mythological topoi and modern elements in the statue (pp. 50–51) was a novelty indeed. It had long existed, however, as a mental construction. In 1711 Handel was introduced to the English public as the “*Orfeo del nostro Secolo*.”⁸ The phrase would reverberate through the 1730s: “On convient qu’il est l’Orphée de son siècle,” reported Abbé Prévost, who had spent several years in England.⁹ As the permanence of a mythic figure blended with the compelling presence of Handel’s music, a powerful image emerged: Handel the harmonizer of a discordant Britain. The first such allusion can be read in Daniel Prat’s *Ode to Mr Handel, on his Playing on the Organ* (1722).¹⁰ But it is in Aaron Hill’s ode from 1733, I think, that it receives full expression. Hailing the composer as David’s successor, Hill pleads that his (sacred) music restores unity in Britain: “Ah! give thy *Passport* to the Nation’s Prayer. . . . Teach us to pray, as *David* pray’d before. . . . And, since thy Notes, can ne’er, in vain implore! / Bid ’em becalm unresting Faction o’er: / Inspire Content, and Peace, in each proud Breast, / Bid th’ unwilling Land be blest.”¹¹ It is the same Orphic/Davidian force of taming the passions that Tyers/Lockman would evoke in 1738: “His Harmony has so often charm’d even the greatest Crouds into the profoundest Calm and most decent behaviour.”¹²

Contrary to Aspden’s downplaying these associations as “an accepted feature of eulogies to musicians” (p. 52), Hill’s ode came out only weeks after his famous plea to Handel for the creation of an English opera.¹³ With these images purposefully constructed, widely circulated, and further invigorated by the success of *Alexander’s Feast*, viewers of the Vauxhall *Handel* probably did not even need “a close inspection” (p. 55) of the statue to recall them. And the fervent response to its artistry rather than to its subject does confirm that Roubiliac simply translated in visual terms a preexisting semi-mythical image of Handel. So, if we decide to take up Aspden’s view that the nationalization of Handel hinges on this semi-mythical image, then we must also concede that his national reputation long preceded the creation of the statue.

Even with an Andersonian view of nationalism (see p. 42), the question, then, persists: How can we possibly verify that Roubiliac’s images created a

8. Giacomo Rossi, “Il Poeta al Lettore,” in *Rinaldo, an Opera* (London: T. Howlatt, 1711).

9. *Le Pour et Contre* 6 (1735): 103.

10. Ruth Smith, *Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 209. The poem is reprinted in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1955), 139–44.

11. [Aaron Hill], “An Ode, on Occasion of Mr. Handel’s Great Te Deum, at the Feast of the Sons of the Clergy.” Signed by “Eusebius,” the poem appeared in *Weekly Miscellany*, 10 February 1733, [3]. It was reprinted in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* 3 (1733): 94, and found its way into Hill’s collected works: *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill, Esq*, 4 vols. (London: Printed for the Benefit of the Family, 1753), 3:167–69.

12. *The London Daily Post, and General Advertiser*, 18 April 1738, [2].

13. Aaron Hill to Handel, 5 December 1732, in Hill, *Works* 1:115–16.

national reputation that had already been there? Did viewers of the Vauxhall statue buy more Handel scores or attend more oratorio performances? Did the press become more appreciative of him? Did Handel's finances improve dramatically after April 1738? Without something concrete we are left only with struggling claims in the wilderness of uncertainty.

The problem that Aspden forces upon us actually concerns the origins of her argument in another discipline, visual studies. Back in 1985, art historian David Bindman offered a stimulating reading of the Roubiliac statue as actively preserving social order in the gardens, "a talisman to fend off disorder within and without the gates of Vauxhall."¹⁴ Aspden extends and elaborates this idea into "the process of ordering the national psyche through instatement of canonical images" (p. 54).¹⁵ But there is a crucial difference between them. Bindman is able to ground his reading in historical evidence;¹⁶ Aspden, however, seems more interested in theorizing about images than in providing solid documentation.¹⁷

Even with these problems, Aspden's article serves us well. For we need to be reminded that disciplinary crossovers are not *de facto* exercises of academic liberalism; limitations do exist and dangers remain afoot.¹⁸ Roubiliac's *Handel* offers a paradigmatic case. The 1738 statue was a breakthrough in the sculptor's career. Was it so in Handel's? It stands as a landmark in the history of British art. Does it so in music history? How much was Handel's pre-Commemoration fame indebted to this Roubiliac image, anyway? What can eighteenth-century iconography tell us about Handel that we do not already know from the existing sources? Should a composer's "image" be limited to visual representation alone? And, surprisingly last, is our viewing of Roubiliac's *Handel* still framed by a 264-year-old publicity campaign?

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14. Bindman, "Statue," 30.

15. Aspden's indebtedness to Bindman is evident in her nearly twenty references to his work, a few with admissions like "Some of the issues raised here have also been usefully discussed by Bindman" (p. 45 n. 17) and "This connection is also made in Bindman and Baker" (p. 75 n. 118). Given these strong ties, it is puzzling why Aspden should read a casual statement of his as teleological: To observe that the statue was created before the composition of *Messiah* does not constitute a "teleological position" (p. 41). Actually, I find nothing in Bindman's article to support her claim. Aspden probably underestimates its origin as a lecture to a nonmusicological audience and hence its need of biographic signposts.

16. Cf. Bindman, "Statue," 25, 30.

17. A recent complaint by Princeton historian Theodore K. Rabb may well apply here: "Having discovered visual evidence in recent decades, historians have gone overboard in building arguments on the conclusions they derive from images" ("Text and Image," *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 February 2002, 17).

18. For a broad discussion of these problems, see Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).