

THE GENRE UP TO THE 1760s (A FRESH INTRODUCTION)

Among genres in 18th-century music, English oratorio had a remarkable fate. Its life, reputation, and historical standing were owing exclusively to George Frideric Handel (in return, it became his chariot to posterity). Launched in 1732 as a species of drama,² it experienced within fifty years a shift in its cultural polarity, from secular entertainment to sacred music.³ It also overcame its privileged attachment to the aristocracy,⁴ becoming available to a broad spectrum of British society.⁵ By 1784, year of the Handel Centenary Festival, it had emerged as the first national genre in the history of art music.⁶

Handel was more than the creator and driving force behind English oratorio. He became identical with it, so that his towering achievements blocked the path to

¹ The article is an excerpt from Ilias Chrissochoidis, *Early Reception of Handel's Oratorios, 1732–1784: Narrative-Studies-Documents*, Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University 2004.

² See Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, vol. 2: *The Oratorio in the Baroque Era: Protestant Germany and England*, Chapel Hill 1977, p. 197.

³ This is true of *Messiah*, a narrative oratorio, but also applies to other Handelian favorites (e.g., *Judas Maccabaeus*), which received performances in cathedrals.

⁴ Handel wrote his oratorios as English alternatives to Italian operas, but for the same audience as the latter, namely British nobility and gentry. According to a testimony from 1732, *Esther* attracted "the finest Assembly of People I ever beheld in my Life": [?Aaron Hill], *See and Seem Blind: Or, A Critical Dissertation on the Publick Diversions, &c.*, London [1732], p. 15. The earliest public complaint on the social exclusivity of the genre appeared in 1738: "every Body knows [that Handel's Lenten] Entertainments are calculated for the Quality only, and that People of moderate Fortunes cannot pretend to them" (*Common Sense: Or, The Englishman's Journal*, Saturday 13 May 1738, [p. 1]).

⁵ Oratorio prices in London dropped to spoken theater levels only in 1768, when Samuel Arnold and Edward Toms entered the field of oratorio production. In the British provinces, the interjection of oratorios in choral festivals led to civic rituals. For a detailed discussion of Handel's audiences, see David Hunter, *Patronizing Handel, inventing Audiences: The Intersections of Class, Money, Music and History*, in: *Early Music* 28 (2000), pp. 32–49.

⁶ William Weber, *The 1784 Handel Commemoration as Political Ritual*, in: *The Journal of British Studies* 28 (1989), pp. 43–69; also in: William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England: A Study in Canon, Ritual, and Ideology*, Oxford 1992, pp. 223–42; Thomas McGeary, *Music, Meaning, and Politics: The 1784 Handel Commemoration Reconsidered*, in: *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge* 9 (2002), pp. 205–17, here: pp. 207–09.

distinction for other oratorio composers.⁷ The surprising success of *Esther*, in May 1732,⁸ and the opera wars in London during the 1730s left him with no option but to explore the new path.⁹ In order to support the genre, he turned himself into a public attraction, performing organ concertos in-between acts.¹⁰ He also exploited the ban on staged performances during fast days in Lent by offering his concert oratorios on Wednesdays and Fridays.¹¹ He thus avoided competition with other dramatic productions and, not least important, cultivated the genre's claims as moral entertainment.¹²

⁷ On 21 April 1784, John Stanley wrote that "there is little reason to suppose that any other than M^r Handels Musick would succeed, as people in general are so partial to that, that no other Oratorios are ever Well Attended": *The Letters of Dr Charles Burney. Volume 1: 1751-1784*, ed. Alvaro Ribeiro, SJ, Oxford 1991, p. 417, n. 6.

⁸ It was performed six times in May 1732; see Colman's "Opera Register," 29 May 1732: Konrad Sasse, ed., *Opera Register from 1712 to 1734 (Colman-Register)*, in: *Händel-Jahrbuch 5* (1959), pp. 199-223, here: p. 220.

⁹ For a comprehensive account of Handel's career in the 1730s, see Donald Burrows, *Handel and the London Opera Companies in the 1730s: Venues, Programmes, Patronage and Performers*, in: *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge 10* (2004), pp. 149-65.

¹⁰ The novelty was part of the first oratorio season ever produced in London, in 1735. Most likely, it was also a response to Farinelli's triumph with the rival opera company of Senesino. See Chrissochoidis (note 1), pp. 78-80. For a general discussion of the genre, see William D. Gudger, *Handel and the Organ Concerto: What We know 250 Years later*, in: *Handel: Tercentenary Collection*, ed. Stanley Sadie and Anthony Hicks, London 1987, pp. 271-78.

¹¹ According to the 1712 decree of the Lord Chamberlain, "The Managers of ye Opera and Comedy are permitted to perform as often and on what days they think fitt [*sic*] Wednesday and frydays [*sic*] in Lent only excepted": *Vice Chamberlain Coke's Theatrical Papers, 1706-1715*, ed. Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, Carbondale 1982, p. 184. Abbé Antoine-François Prévost was the first to take note of this feature; he writes "M. Handel n'a pas laissé de donner un nouvel Oratorio, qui s'exécute les Mercredis & les Vendredis" ("Mr. Handel has not omitted to produce a new Oratorio, which is given on Wednesdays and Fridays"): *Le Pour et Contre 6* (no. 80, [May] 1735), p. 103; English translation in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography*, London 1955, p. 390.

¹² The earliest document to spell out this property of the genre appeared in a public letter from 1739, which survives in a reprint from the following year; calling it "a truly-spiritual Entertainment," the anonymous author suggests, "if People, before they went to hear it, would but retire a Moment, and read by themselves the Words of the Sacred Drama, it would tend very much to raise their Delight when at the Representation [...] The Theatre, on this Occas[io]n, ought to be enter'd with more Solemnity than a Church; inasmuch, as the Entertainment you go to is really in itself the noblest Adoration and Homage paid to the Deity that ever was in one. So sublime an Act of Devotion as this Representation carries in it, to a Heart and Ear duly tuned for it, would consecrate even Hell itself": *The London Daily Post, and General Advertiser*, Tuesday 1 April 1740, [pp. 1-2]. The author's exaggerated tone has much to do with an organized attempt to derail Handel's season: see my forthcoming article *Advice to Mr. Handel: Mapping a Document in Time and Circumstance*.

Handel's hard efforts notwithstanding, English oratorio had a troublesome career in London up until 1747. On one front, ecclesiastical authorities and religious moralists objected any staged representation of sacred subjects.¹³ On another, Handel earned the disapproval of London's Italophile nobility, certain members of whom openly undermined his productions.¹⁴ Squeezed between two hostile camps, he sought support in the pro-English constituency of noblemen and gentry, setting to music favorite poems of Dryden (*Alexander's Feast*, *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*) and Milton (*L'Allegro ed il Penseroso*, *Samson*), and collections of biblical texts (*Israel in Egypt*, *Messiah*).¹⁵ He also strengthened his humanitarian record through high-profile charitable performances, most famously the 1742 premiere of *Messiah* in Dublin.¹⁶

¹³ Burney relates, on good source, that the Bishop of London forbade in 1732 a staged production of *Esther* at a theater, thus becoming responsible for the genre's most distinctive feature: Charles Burney, *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster-Abbey and the Pantheon ... in Commemoration of Handel*, London 1785, pp. 100–01. A public letter from 1738 openly questioned "Whether Mr. Handell has a License from the Ecclesiastical Court, or from the Licensers of the Stage, for playing on Wednesdays and Fridays", in: *Common Sense: Or, The Englishman's Journal*, Saturday 13 May 1738, [p. 1]. According to Edward Holdsworth, "a R. R. [Right Reverend] took offence at Exodus [i.e. *Israel in Egypt*]" in 1739: Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought*, Cambridge 1995, p. 422, n. 16. Handel felt this resistance very strongly in 1743, at the London premiere of *Messiah*. Charles Jennens reported, "there is a clamour about Town, said to arise from the B^{ns} [i.e. Bishops], against performing it": Charles Jennens to Edward Holdsworth, 21 February 1743: *Händel-Handbuch*, vol. 4: *Dokumente zu Leben und Schaffen*, Kassel 1985, p. 357. Indeed, the very day it was advertised, under the title "Sacred Oratorio," a letter appeared in the conservative *Universal Spectator* that challenged the whole genre: *The Universal Spectator, and Weekly Journal*, Saturday 19 March 1743, [p. 1]. With the exception of two performances, on 9 and 11 April 1745 (advertised as *A Sacred Oratorio*), *Messiah* would resurface in London only in 1749, nearly eight years after its composition.

¹⁴ See, for instance, the public letter in *The London Daily Post, and General Advertiser*, Saturday 4 April 1741, [p. 2]; and [Newburgh Hamilton], *Samson. An Oratorio. As it is Perform'd at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden. Alter'd and adapted to the Stage from the Samson Agonistes of John Milton. Set to Musick by George Frederick Handel*, London 1743, [pp. iii–v]. Most visible was the case of Lady Margaret Brown, whose anti-Handelian activity earned her the top spot in the composer's list of enemies: see David Hunter, *Margaret Cecil, Lady Brown: "Persevering Enemy to Handel" but "Otherwise Unknown to History"*, in: *Women & Music* 3 (1999), pp. 43–58; and my forthcoming article *Advice to Mr. Handel* (see note 12).

¹⁵ The effort to direct Handel to an English repertory is transparent in the genesis of *L'Allegro ed il Penseroso*; see the correspondence of James Harris and Charles Jennens, in: Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill, eds., *Music and Theatre in Handel's World: the Family Papers of James Harris 1732–1780*, Oxford 2002, pp. 82–84, 85, 88–89.

¹⁶ "Mr. Handel gave the House and his Performance, upon this Occasion, Gratis": *The London Daily Post, and General Advertiser*, Thursday 22 March 1739, [p. 1]; "It is but Justice to Mr. Handel, that the World should know, he generously gave the Money arising from this Grand Performance, to be equally shared by the Society for relieving Prisoners, the Charitable Infirmary, and Mercer[']s Hospital, for which they will for ever gratefully remember his Name": *George Faulkner. The Dublin Journal*, Tuesday 13–Saturday 17 April 1742, [p. 2].

The full establishment of the genre came only in the late 1740s, as it crossed paths with political and social currents in Britain. The Jacobite Rebellion of 1745–46 – an ill-designed campaign to restore the Stuart dynasty – triggered off an explosion of anti-Catholic sentiment. This affected Italian opera because of “popular prejudice against the performers, who being foreigners, were chiefly Roman Catholics.”¹⁷ It also heightened British identification with an embattled Israel.¹⁸ Cashing on the Duke of Cumberland’s elimination of rebel forces, Handel composed *Judas Maccabaeus*, a victory oratorio.¹⁹ Its instant success put the genre back to business and led to the sequels of *Alexander Balus* and *Joshua*.²⁰ From 1747 and up to his death, the composer would offer an annual oratorio season during Lent at Covent Garden Theatre.

What sealed the success of Handel’s enterprise was *Messiah*. Revivals at the Foundling Hospital in 1750 and 1751 offered legitimacy to the hitherto suppressed work. As a Handelian reported, “there was a prodigious croud at the Foundling Hospital [...] to hear the Messiah [...] two or three of the bishops were there; so that I hope, in a little while, the hearing of oratorios will be held as orthodox.”²¹ And so it did. Beginning in 1752, *Messiah* became the moral and musical anchor of Handel’s oratorio season. Along with its annual presentation at benefits in London, Dublin, and a growing number of other cities, it would become the biggest money maker in 18th-century music history. Justly did Burney assert: “it has fed the hungry, clothed the naked, fostered the orphan, and enriched succeeding managers of Oratorios, more than any single musical production in this or any country.”²² For a Protestant mercantile nation like Britain, *Messiah* exemplified the synergy of faith and profit.

Handel’s loss of sight in the early 1750s deprived the genre from new contributions, but helped shape the conditions for its posterity. In need of managing

¹⁷ Charles Burney, *A General History of Music, from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period ... Volume the Fourth*, London 1789, p. 452. “The rebellion broke out; all foreigners were regarded as dangerous to the state; the opera-house was shut up, by order of the Lord Chamberlain”: Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands, and United Provinces*, 2 vols., London 1775, vol. 1, p. 267.

¹⁸ For the analogy between the two nations, see Smith, *Handel’s Oratorios* (note 13), pp. 213–29.

¹⁹ According to Thomas Morell, “The Plan of *Judas Macchabaeus* was design’d as a compliment to the Duke of Cumberland, upon his returning victorious from Scotland”: Ruth Smith, *Thomas Morell and his Letter about Handel*, in: *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 127 (2002), pp. 191–225, here: p. 218.

²⁰ Along with the *Occasional Oratorio* of 1746, Smither classifies them together (see note 2), pp. 294–317.

²¹ George Harris to James Harris, 1 May 1750: Burrows/Dunhill (see note 15), p. 270.

²² Burney, *An account* (see note 13), p. 27; by 1761 London hospitals had admitted 20,000 persons: *The Gentleman’s Magazine* 31 (1761), p. 291.

a six-week oratorio season, Handel called to his aid John Christopher Smith, Jr., son of his long-time associate and employee. Smith was a composer of dramatic music, including the oratorio *David's Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan* (1740), and had an intimate knowledge of the London stage.²³ By 1759, the year of Handel's death, he had become the natural heir of the master, and beneficiary of his library and performing materials. He thus emerged as the transitional figure that wisely goaded the oratorio in a post-Handel era. In 1760, he invited John Stanley, now the kingdom's most celebrated organist, to fill Handel's admittedly large shoes as performer of concertos. Together they would offer annual oratorio seasons until 1774.²⁴

THE EARLY 1760s

The endurance of English Oratorio as theatrical enterprise was exceptional for London. By the late 1750s, it had been common knowledge that only a handful of works were sustaining the new oratorio season.²⁵ And the attraction of hearing Handel's performance on the organ terminated in 1759. Naturally, the early 1760s was a period of exploration for oratorio producers, as they sought to rejuvenate the genre.²⁶ At Covent Garden, Smith and Stanley offered a mixed repertory of Handel favorites and their personal contributions. Lack of public support, however, forced them to retreat to an all-Handel season.²⁷ Smith's connection to the Earl of Bute, the new King's most trusted advisor, offered salvation: George III agreed to patronize the Covent Garden oratorios.²⁸ Royal presence at a performance was widely reported in the press and boosted ticket sales. In the case of oratorio, it may have done much more. The appearance of regular royal commands, in 1762, coincides with that of secular works in Lenten oratorios (*Alexander's Feast* was consistently paired with the "Coronation Anthem"). It was also a reaction to Thomas Arne, who mounted a full-scale oratorio season at Drury-Lane Theatre with a mixture of his own works along

²³ On his career as an oratorio composer, see Eva Zöllner, *English Oratorio after Handel: The London Oratorio Series and its Repertory, 1760–1800*, Marburg 2002, pp. 113–29.

²⁴ For discussions of English Oratorio after Handel, see Smither (note 2), vol. 3: *The Oratorio in the Classical Era*, Chapel Hill and London 1987, pp. 201–13.

²⁵ *The Real Character of the Age. In a Letter to the Rev. Dr. Brown. Occasioned by His Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times*, London 1757, p. 22.

²⁶ For an extensive discussion of English oratorio in the 1760s, see Zöllner, *English Oratorio* (note 23), pp. 41–55.

²⁷ See the list of receipts for the 1761 season, *ibid.*, pp. 259–60.

²⁸ [William Coxe], *Anecdotes of George Frederick Handel, And John Christopher Smith*, London 1799, p. 53.

with several Handel heavyweights. The failure of his project left Smith and Stanley alone until 1768, when the young and entrepreneurial Samuel Arnold entered the field. Lowering admission prices to spoken theater levels, and using the press to aggrandize his productions, he exposed the genre to market forces as nobody had done before.

ENGLISH ORATORIO IN 1765

Equally distant from the hyperactive start and ending of the decade, the 1765 season found English oratorio in dynamic equilibrium.²⁹ Covent Garden Theatre was the sole purveyor of Lenten oratorios. Contenders however did make a strong presence early in the year through benefit performances. And although Handelian oratorio was on a secure footing, there were efforts to spice up the season with new features.

The first oratorio performance of the year exemplified the tension between preserving Handel's legacy and innovating. *Israel in Babylon*, a Handelian pasticcio compiled by trumpeter Edward Toms, was performed on January 25, for the benefit of the Decayed Musicians and their Families.³⁰ We are fortunate to have a detailed account of its creation, published in 1770:

UPON the Death of that exalted Genius Mr. Handel, some Professors and Lovers of Music were talking of his Works and unanimously agreed that his Chorusses far excelled those of all other Composers, and that he had carried that Stile of Music to a Degree of Perfection it had never before attained, at the same Time regretting his Loss, and that they could hear no more of those inimitable Productions. One of the Company said he thought there were Materials in Mr. Handel's instrumental Works which might be formed into Chorusses little inferior to some of the most celebrated of that great Author. This was looked upon as a wild chimerical Idea, laughed at, and pronounced to be impracticable: However, at his Leisure the Projector tried the Experiment, and produced to them several Fugues from Mr. Handel's Concertos wrought into Chorusses. The Professors to whom they were shewn were surprised and convinced, and wished to have them introduced into some Performance to hear the Effect. An Oratorio was the only Thing they could with Propriety be a Part of: These, with the Addition of more Chorusses from the Anthems which Mr. Handel composed for the Duke of Chandos, Songs and Duets from his Operas, and some favourite Movements from his instrumental Pieces, produced *Israel in Babylon*. It was twice performed at the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, for the Benefit of decayed Musicians and their Families, and received with universal Approbation, and it is esteemed the best Compilation that has been made from the Works of that great Master.³¹

²⁹ For a general survey of the 1764–1765 theatrical season, see *The London Stage, 1660–1800*, Part 4: 1747–1776, ed. George Winchester Stone, Jr., Carbondale 1962, [vol. 2], pp. 1069–1072.

³⁰ *The Public Advertiser*, Friday 25 January 1765, [p. 1].

³¹ *The Public Advertiser*, Tuesday 27 March 1770, [p. 2].

The note was signed "PHILO-HANDEL," but its author was certainly committed to Samuel Arnold and Edward Toms, who were reviving the work the following day.³² The last sentence aims at generating public interest and goodwill for the oratorio. Even as a publicity tool, the account is remarkable. It describes the conflict between loss and recovery: Handel was gone and with him the art of chorus writing as well; yet renewal was still possible. The unnamed member of the company (Toms no doubt, for he was a professional instrumentalist) offered a challenge that worked on multiple levels. He sought to equate Handel's instrumental and vocal music by showing that their barrier is largely a textual one. He also demonstrated that the richness and versatility of Handel's *oeuvre* were making possible the creation of a new repertory through pasticcio techniques. It would be interesting here to know if he was responding to John Brown's call for reforming the genre, as outlined in *A Dissertation on ... Music and Poetry* and exemplified in *The Cure of Saul*, which premiered at Covent Garden Theatre in 1763.³³ Brown had argued for single-author oratorios of dramatic coherence, but he allowed the use of multiple musical sources from diverse composers.³⁴ This last generated resistance from Handelian, who could never accept such *de facto* equation of their master with lesser figures. In this respect, Toms' solution was an orthodox one, as it drew exclusively on Handel material. At the same time, it highlighted the unique nature of Handel's legacy. Probably for the first time in music history, a composer's work was viewed in holistic terms, as a vast repository of pieces that could be taken out of their original context and arranged in new combinations. No doubt, this was a reaction to the impossibility of reviving his Italian operas in the London stage. It was an effort to salvage exceptional music from the carcass of an outdated genre and direct it to one still acceptable at the time, English Oratorio. By the same token, however, this refugee music would eventually contribute to the dissolution of oratorio into a Handel anthology. The composer himself had indulged in offering pasticcio oratorios, but only under exceptional circumstances.³⁵ In the post-Handel era, though, he was present only as past, cold enough to be dismembered and rearranged as an exercise in *ars combinatoria*.³⁶ *Israel in Babylon, or The Force of Truth* was

³² *The Public Advertiser*, Wednesday 28 March 1770, [p. 1].

³³ John Brown, *A Dissertation on the Rise, Union, and Power, The Progressions, Separations, and Corruptions, of Poetry and Music. To which is prefixed, The Cure of Saul. A Sacred Ode*, London 1763.

³⁴ For a discussion of Brown's reform, see Chrissochoidis (note 1), pp. 493–540.

³⁵ *The London Evening Post*, Tuesday 28–Thursday 30 March 1738: [p. 2]; see also Donald Burrows, *Handel's 1738 Oratorio: A Benefit Pasticcio*, in: *Georg Friedrich Händel – Ein Lebensinhalt: Gedenkschrift für Berndt Baselt (1934–1993)*, ed. Klaus Hortschansky and Konstanze Musketa, Kassel 1995, pp. 11–38.

³⁶ On the applications of combinatorial techniques in 18th-century music, see Leonard G. Ratner, "Ars combinatoria": *Chance and Choice in Eighteenth-Century Music*, in: *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Music: A*

ready by 1764. It received its premiere at the King's Theatre in the Haymarket on April 12, as the annual concert "For the Benefit and Increase of a FUND established for the Support of Decay'd MUSICIANS and their Families,"³⁷ for which charity Toms appears to have composed it.³⁸ Apart from its 1765 performance, it would appear again in the inaugural season of the Arnold-Toms oratorio company in 1768.³⁹

The second oratorio performance in early 1765 was by Thomas Arne, who had been the earliest and most serious competitor of Handel in the field of English works.⁴⁰ In 1732, he had been involved in the production of *Amelia*, whose success, according to a contemporary account, prompted Handel to mount oratorios.⁴¹ His *Comus* (1738), based on Milton, was a big and lasting success. During Handel's sojourn in Dublin (1742), Arne offered an ambitious production of *Alexander's Feast*. A few months later, he moved to Dublin and tried to establish an oratorio season following Handel's departure. Arne posed a threat to Handel only once, in Lent of 1755, by offering his oratorio *Abel* and the ever-popular *Alfred* against performances of *Judas Maccabaeus* and *Messiah*.⁴² In the early 1760s, he had been unable to challenge the Covent Garden oratorios. What survived from that period was *Judith*, his most ambitious contribution

Tribute to Karl Geiringer on his Seventieth Birthday, ed. H. C. Robbins Landon and Roger E. Chapman, New York 1970, pp. 343–63.

³⁷ *The Public Advertiser*, Thursday 12 April 1764, [p. 1].

³⁸ "We hear that the Proprietors of the King's Theatre and Sig. Giardini have granted Thursday, the 12th of April, for the Benefit of the Decayed Musicians and their Families. Sig. Giardini was so kind as to offer an Opera; but the Committee for the Concert had fixed on an Oratorio, called *Israel in Babylon*, compiled (from the Works of the late Mr. Handel) on Purpose for that Occasion": *The Public Advertiser*, Saturday 31 March 1764, [p. 2].

³⁹ "We hear that the Oratorio, call'd *Israel in Babylon*, compiled from some select Pieces of Mr. Handel's Music, which was performed twice for the Benefit of the Musical Fund at the King's Theatre in the Hay-Market, with universal Applause, will be performed this Lent at the Theatre Royal in the Hay-Market": *The Public Advertiser*, Monday 22 February 1768, [3]; *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Monday 22 February 1768, [p. 2]. For a detailed discussion of the oratorio, see Eva Zöllner, "Israel in Babylon" or "The Triumph of Truth": A Late Eighteenth-Century Pasticcio Oratorio, in: *The Consort* 51 (1995), pp. 103–17.

⁴⁰ For comprehensive accounts of the composer, see Peter Holman and Todd Gilman, *Arne, Thomas Augustine*, in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Sadie, 29 vols., London 2001, vol. 2, pp. 36–46; and Jane Adas, *Arne's Progress: An English Composer in Eighteenth-Century London*, Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers The State University of New Jersey 1993.

⁴¹ [?Hill] (see note 4), pp. 14–15.

⁴² See letter of William Shenstone to Lady Luxborough, [29–]30 March 1755: *The Letters of William Shenstone*, ed. Marjorie Williams, Oxford 1939, p. 438.

in the genre.⁴³ It was first performed in 1761 and it closed Arne's oratorio season in 1762. Two years later, it was revived for a benefit performance.⁴⁴ Its 1765 rendering might have been related to the disappointing one-week run of Arne's comic opera *The Guardian Outwitted* at Covent Garden (mid-December 1764).⁴⁵ Bad luck continued into 1765. Originally scheduled for February 7, *Judith* had to wait until the 15th due to "the Indisposition of a principal Performer."⁴⁶ The delay produced the only public encounter of Arne with a young prodigy from Salzburg:⁴⁷ "ON Account of Dr. ARNE's Oratorio of JUDITH, and the same Reason for want of some principal Assistants of Performers, Master and Miss MOZART are obliged to postpone the Concerts which should have been To-morrow, the 15th instant, to Monday the 18th instant."⁴⁸ (In the end, the Mozarts would perform on the 21st.⁴⁹)

By the time *Judith* received its single performance, London had heard another oratorio, *Ruth*. Its story was even more remarkable than that of the previous two works. It was a collaborative project, whose "Music is composed by three of the most eminent Masters, and is intended as a Benefaction to that charitable Institution."⁵⁰ The references are to the Lock Hospital, which had recently opened a new Chapel,⁵¹ and to Felice Giardini, Charles Avison, and William Boyce, who were to compose one act each. Giardini was undoubtedly the moving spirit behind this initiative. His involvement in the increasing wave of charitable fund-raising went back to the early 1750s, when he had performed for the annual concerts of the Decayed Musicians Fund and Lock Hospital. In 1756 and 1757, he had assumed administrative responsibilities

⁴³ For extensive discussions and analyses of *Judith*, see Smither (note 24), pp. 257–90, and Zöllner, *English Oratorio* (note 23), pp. 96–112. For the story of *Judith* as an oratorio subject, see Eva Zöllner, *Murder Most Virtuous: The "Judith" Oratorios of De Fesch, Smith and Arne*, in: *Music in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. David Wyn Jones, Aldershot 2000, pp. 158–71.

⁴⁴ *The Public Advertiser*, Wednesday 29 February 1764, [p. 1].

⁴⁵ *The London Stage* (see note 29), pp. 1088–89.

⁴⁶ *The Public Advertiser*, Tuesday 5 February 1765, [p. 2]; Thursday 7 February 1765, [p. 2].

⁴⁷ For an account of Mozart's performances in London in 1764–1765, see John Jenkins, *Mozart and the English Connection*, London 1998, pp. 24–32.

⁴⁸ *The Public Advertiser*, Thursday 14 February 1765, [p. 1].

⁴⁹ *The Public Advertiser*, Thursday 21 February 1765, [p. 1].

⁵⁰ *The Public Advertiser*, Saturday 5 March 1763, [p. 2].

⁵¹ For a short history of this institution, see Nicholas Temperley, *The Lock Hospital Chapel and its Music*, in: *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 118 (1993), pp. 44–72, here: pp. 45–51.

for these events, producing Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* and Hasse's *I Pellegrini*. The plans in 1763 changed slightly when Boyce was incapacitated: "Dr. Boyce, who kindly undertook to compose the Music of the Third Part of the ORATORIO, being prevented by a severe Fit of Illness from executing it this Season, Mr. Avison was so obliging as to do it, that the Charity might not suffer, or the Public be disappointed."⁵² *Ruth* received its premiere on April 15, to a grateful audience and was proposed for the Hospital's annual performance as "a lasting Monument of [its composers'] Benevolence."⁵³ This did not happen, though. In the subsequent two performances of the work, in 1765 and 1768, Giardini gradually replaced Avison as the sole composer of the oratorio. Beginning in 1768, *Ruth* would be regularly performed as Lock Hospital's annual concert until 1780.⁵⁴

The February 13, 1765 revival of the oratorio was successful.⁵⁵ Elizabeth Harris wrote glowingly to her son James, "We were much pleas'd with the musick yesterday at the Lock Hospital[.] Avisons chorus were very fine, the last two acts of Giardini's pleas'd me most, though great praise is due to Mr Avison."⁵⁶ John Wesley, who in the previous year had problems with the prosody of *Judith* also seemed to approve this oratorio: "The sense was admirable throughout; and much of the poetry not contemptible. This, joined with exquisite music, might possibly make an impression even upon rich and honourable sinners."⁵⁷ Wesley's comment highlights the remarkable cultural radiance of English Oratorio at this time: it was affective entertainment sent on a moral mission to loosen tight pockets.

There is a common thread running through *Israel in Babylon*, *Judith*, and *Ruth*. They all were independent efforts to enrich the genre in the aftermath of Handel's death. They made use of various compositional strategies (single and multiple authorship, and compilation). And their performance history was discontinuous, and mostly related to extra-musical events. Thus, in 1765, a considerable body of non-Handelian oratorios was available but their potential for commercial exhibition was very limited.

⁵² *The Public Advertiser*, Friday 15 April 1763, [p. 1].

⁵³ *The Public Advertiser*, Friday 22 April 1763, [p. 1].

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the oratorio, see Simon McVeigh, *The Violinist in London's Concert Life, 1750–1784: Felice Giardini and His Contemporaries*, New York and London 1989, pp. 162–64.

⁵⁵ *The Public Advertiser*, Wednesday 13 February 1765, [p. 1].

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Harris to James Harris, Jr., 14 February 1765: Burrows/Dunhill (see note 15), p. 438.

⁵⁷ John Wesley, *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Emory, 2 vols., New York 1856, vol. 2, p. 197.

This state of affairs was in stark contrast to the Covent Garden oratorio season, which promptly began on February 22, 1765. This being only a week after Arne's *Judith*, it might explain why Smith and Stanley offered the ever-popular *Judas Maccabaeus*.⁵⁸ The comparison between the two works would always be in Handel's favor. On February 27, Covent Garden moved in the direction of secular works with "ALEXANDER'S FEAST. And the CORONATION ANTHEM."⁵⁹ Given this strong start with two Handel favorites, it may come as a surprise that the next bill was Edward Tom's "ISRAEL In BABYLON" (March 1).⁶⁰ Why would Smith and Stanley take in someone else's pasticcio, especially since it had already been performed a month earlier? Part of the answer has to do with the King's state of health, which forced him to attend only the first performance of the season. Indeed, on March 1, it was reported, "His Majesty was so much indisposed Yesterday that he was not at Court."⁶¹ A protracted absence of the King from the oratorios might easily have alarmed the Covent Garden management. Perhaps incorporating Tom's pasticcio was a way of attracting audiences. It might also explain why they skipped odes for the rest of the season, moving rapidly to solid oratorio programs. As early as the third week they revived *Samson* and *Judas Maccabaeus* (March 6 and 8).⁶²

It appears that *Israel in Babylon* was successful enough for the managers to invest in Handel's least popular oratorio, *Israel in Egypt*. The 1739 premiere of the work had been a Cinderella story, as it moved from certain failure to unexpected success.⁶³ In reviving it for the first time since Handel's death, Smith and Stanley assured the public that it would be offered "With considerable Alterations and Additions by Mr. HANDEL."⁶⁴ In fact, the March 13 performance came with "The Chorus's entire, and the Songs from other the Works of the late GEORGE FREDERIC HANDEL, Esq."⁶⁵ The managers went for the best of both worlds. Handel's choruses, famous for their pictorialism, were combined with popular arias from other compositions. The second

⁵⁸ *The Public Advertiser*, Friday 22 February 1765, [p. 1].

⁵⁹ *The Public Advertiser*, Wednesday 27 February 1765, [p. 1].

⁶⁰ *The Public Advertiser*, Friday 1 March 1765, [p. 1].

⁶¹ *The Public Advertiser*, Friday 1 March 1765, [p. 2].

⁶² *The Public Advertiser*, Wednesday 6 March 1765 [p. 1]; Friday 8 March 1765, [p. 1].

⁶³ See Chrissochoidis (note 1), pp. 128–36.

⁶⁴ *The Public Advertiser*, Wednesday 13 March 1765, [p. 1].

⁶⁵ *Israel in Egypt, An Oratorio, or Sacred Drama: As it is Performed at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden, London 1765.*

half of the season included solid oratorios. *Solomon* was performed on March 15;⁶⁶ *Samson* and *Judas Maccabaeus* were offered once again, on March 20 and 22;⁶⁷ and the season closed with the obligatory *Messiah* (March 27 and 29).⁶⁸

Overall, the Covent Garden series this year featured a strong repertory, but it also remained open to new possibilities, as the two *Israel* pasticcios demonstrate. The King's absence, however, generated enough anxiety to call for extra publicity shots, such as the appearance in the press of old Handelian epigrams and verses: "Hearing Mr. HANDEL'S Oratorio of SAMSON";⁶⁹ "Writ after the first Representation of the Oratorio of JUDAS MACCHABAEUS";⁷⁰ "To the MANES of Mr. HANDEL."⁷¹ All were printed on the days of performance for the respective works. The last one being signed by John Lockman, a well-known puffer,⁷² one wonders if he orchestrated this mini-campaign to support Smith and Stanley.

CRITICISM

By 1765, English Oratorio had a performance history of over three decades. The genre was firmly established and a core repertory had emerged, with *Messiah*, *Judas Maccabaeus* and *Samson* leading in popularity. Aside from the regular Lenten series in Covent Garden Theatre, oratorios were performed in annual benefits of charitable institutions and in choral festivals in the provinces. This regular exposure provided the ground for critical reflection on the genre. Two instances illustrate the substance and depth of oratorio criticism in 1765. The first was a letter sent

To the Printer of the Public Advertiser.

SIR,

I WAS at the Oratorio of Israel in Egypt last Night [i.e. March 13]; and notwithstanding it was advertised in the public Papers that a Concerto on the Organ was to be played by

⁶⁶ *The Public Advertiser*, Friday 15 March 1765, [p. 1].

⁶⁷ *The Public Advertiser*, Wednesday 20 March 1765, [p. 1]; Friday 22 March 1765, [p. 1].

⁶⁸ *The Public Advertiser*, Wednesday 27 March 1765 [p. 1]; Friday 29 March 1765, [p. 1].

⁶⁹ *The Public Advertiser*, Wednesday 20 March 1765, [p. 2].

⁷⁰ *The Public Advertiser*, Friday 22 March 1765, [p. 2].

⁷¹ *The Public Advertiser*, Wednesday 27 March 1765, [p. 2].

⁷² Lockman was a professional writer, and his literary productions included an oratorio libretto, *David's Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan*, set by William Boyce in 1736; see Chrissochoidis (note 1), pp. 1460–64.

Mr. Stanley, after waiting a considerable Time between the Second and Third Acts, to the no small Astonishment of the Audience, the Third Act begun without a Solo or Concerto, or even an Apology for either. This Circumstance was taken much amiss by that Part of the Company near me, especially as the Managers might have desired Mr. Pinto to oblige the House with a Concerto (which he is very capable of when he pleases) notwithstanding Mr. Stanley's being prevented from attending by Illness, or some *urgent Business*. — This seemed the more necessary, as the Managers were honoured with the Company of two of the Royal Family. Give me Leave to mention, Mr. Printer, that I believe a great Part of the People, who frequent Oratorios, would be glad to hear a Concerto from Mr. Pinto now-and-then by way of Variety; for the Organ is made so capital an Instrument in the Band, that I think the Violin would be a pretty Relief. In the Chorus's last Night, I observed the Organ was so powerful, that the other Instruments were quite *drowned* (in the musical Phrase). This has struck me often (for you must know I am a tolerable Proficient) and I have found many Adepts in Music, who have been entirely of my Opinion.

Your humble Servant,

March 14. N.⁷³

For a mere complaint, the letter is suspiciously long. Evidently, the author was a partisan of Mr. Pinto and used an accident to boost the violinist's career.⁷⁴ In doing so, however, he allows us to access contemporary attitudes towards the oratorio. To begin with, John Stanley's blindness might have produced customary delays, as he had to navigate through a crowd of musicians and singers on the stage. Any last-minute bodily need could have taken even more time for him to address. For a long entertainment like oratorios, such delays could easily produce frustration. Even more vexing, however, was skipping an announced performance of instrumental music. Organ concertos were a unique feature of oratorios. Leaving aside the religious connotations of the instrument,⁷⁵ they provided instrumental relief to a vocal landscape and a splash of virtuosity to a chorus dominated work. The complaint was justified, especially because the managers did not apologize. Its public expression may well be a hidden attack on the Covent Garden management on behalf of those who pushed for change in London's oratorio scene. Samuel Arnold, the most formidable

⁷³ *The Public Advertiser*, Tuesday 19 March 1765, [p. 2].

⁷⁴ Pinto had offered a violin concerto at the *Israel in Babylon* benefit a year earlier: *The Public Advertiser*, Thursday 12 April 1764, [p. 1]. For his life and career, see Dorothy de Val, *Pinto, Thomas* (bap. 1728, d. 1783), in: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 60 vols., Oxford 2004, vol. 44, p. 387; and Nicholas Temperley, *Pinto, Thomas*, in: *The New Grove* (see note 40), vol. 19, p. 762. Burney offers a mixed assessment of Pinto's qualities as a violinist, Burney, *A General History* (see note 17), pp. 468–69n.

⁷⁵ See Smith, *Handel's Oratorios* (note 13), pp. 86–87.

competitor of Smith and Stanley in the 1770s, would regularly use the press to shape public opinion.⁷⁶

By the end of the letter, however, we understand that the initial complaint was a prelude to a second and most consequential one. This concerns the replacement of organ solos with other instrumental music. The author makes clear that there is a growing impatience among listeners with the dominance of organ in oratorio performances. He even uses biblical imagery to illustrate his point (the italicized "drowned," an obvious reference to the fate of Egyptian army in the Red Sea). "Variety" and "Relief" are the key words here. The author indicates that the oratorio had already achieved a fixed soundscape and that it was time for the managers to introduce new colors. Implicit in his preference for a string instrument is, of course, the violin's association with the modern *cantabile* style, as much as the organ was linked to contrapuntal techniques and *basso continuo*. From this perspective, the complaint is also a call for modernizing part of the music in oratorio performances. His wish would eventually be granted, as instrumental solos and concertos (occasionally vocal solos, too) would be regularly included in these performances. But the price was considerable, as it contributed to the transformation of oratorios into variety music concerts.

The problem of unity is also raised in *A Comparative View of the State and Faculties of Man with those of the Animal World* by John Gregory. A Scottish doctor who infused Enlightenment ideas in the medical profession, Gregory was also a member of the Musical Society in Aberdeen and had informed views on music aesthetics:⁷⁷

Our Oratorios lie under two disadvantages; their being deprived of action and scenery; and their having no unity or design as a whole. They are little else than a collection of songs pretty much independent of one another. Now, the effect of a dramatic performance does not depend on the effect of particular passages, considered by themselves, but on that artful construction, by which one part gives strength to another, and gradually works the Mind up to those sentiments and passions, which it was the design of the author to produce [...] The effect of Music may sometimes be lost by an unhappy association of Ideas with the person and character of a Performer. When we hear at the Oratorio an Italian Eunuch squeaking forth the vengeance of divine wrath, or a gay lively strumpet pouring forth the complaint of a deeply penitent and contrite heart, we cannot prevent our being hurt by such an association.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ See Chrissochoidis (note 1), pp. 368–70.

⁷⁷ Laurence B. McCullough, *John Gregory and the Invention of Professional Medical Ethics and the Profession of Medicine*, Dordrecht, Boston, London 1998, pp. 28–172, esp. pp. 149–58.

⁷⁸ [John Gregory], *A Comparative View of the State and Faculties of Man, with those of the Animal World*, 2nd edn., London 1766, pp. 116–18.

This critique is reminiscent of John Brown's views from 1763 and its line can be traced back to Joseph Addison. But its perspective seems to be a cognitive rather than a moral one (the mind, for instance, cannot reconcile the idea of wrath with the warbling of a castrato). It also touches on performance practice, as it expects a congruity between the text and the sound, if not attitude, of the singer. On the other hand, this type of rationalized attitude towards music appears to leave out the power of habit and the links that repeated performances establish.

The above excerpts show a rising critical engagement with English oratorio, which by 1765 was understood as the highest achievement in the art of music. But while the social grounding of the genre in Britain was undisputable, the crucial front seemed to have been London's commercial stage. The dynamic equilibrium of the mid-1760s would give its place to a period of intense activity and reorganization, as new companies, composers, and works vied for the favor of the most demanding theatrical audience in Europe.

APPENDIX

1765 Oratorio Season

DATE	TITLE / COMPOSER (EXCEPT HANDEL)	VENUE	NOTES
Friday, Jan 25	<i>Israel in Babylon</i>	King's Theatre	benefit
Wednesday, Feb 13 Friday, Feb 15	<i>Ruth</i> / Giardini <i>Judith</i> / Arne	Lock Hospital King's Theatre	benefit
Friday, Feb 22	<i>Judas Maccabaeus</i>	Covent Garden	
Wednesday, Feb 27 Friday, Mar 1	<i>Alexander's Feast</i> <i>Israel in Babylon</i>	Covent Garden Covent Garden	
Wednesday, Mar 6 Friday, Mar 8	<i>Samson</i> <i>Judas Maccabaeus</i>	Covent Garden Covent Garden	
Wednesday, Mar 13 Friday, Mar 15	<i>Israel in Egypt</i> <i>Solomon</i>	Covent Garden Covent Garden	
Wednesday, Mar 20 Friday, Mar 22	<i>Samson</i> <i>Judas Maccabaeus</i>	Covent Garden Covent Garden	
Wednesday, Mar 27 Friday, Mar 29	<i>Messiah</i> <i>Messiah</i>	Covent Garden Covent Garden	