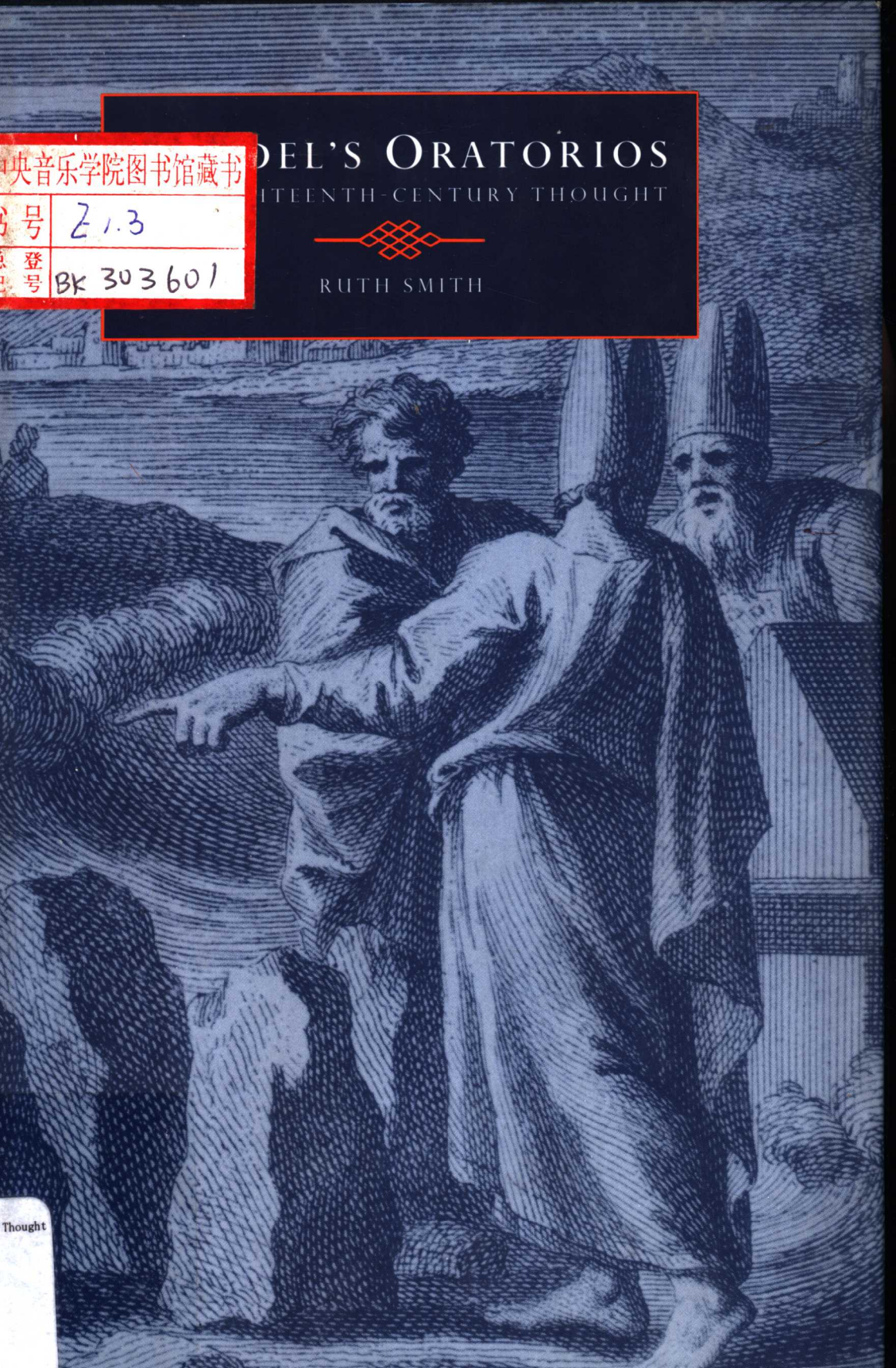
DEL'S ORATORIOS

ITEENTH-CENTURY THOUGHT

RUTH SMITH



HANDEL'S ORATORIOS AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY THOUGHT

RUTH SMITH

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In this wide-ranging and challenging book, Ruth Smith shows that the words of Handel's oratorios reflect the events and ideas of their time and have far greater meaning than has hitherto been realised. She explores literature, music, aesthetics, politics and religion to reveal Handel's works as conduits for eighteenth-century thought and sensibility. She gives a full picture of Handel's librettists and shows how their oratorio texts express key moral-political preoccupations and engage with contemporary ideological debate. British identity, the need for national unity, the conduct of war, the role of government, the authority of the Bible, the purpose of literature, the effect of art – these and many more concerns are addressed in the librettos. This book enriches our understanding of Handel, his times, and the relationships between music and its intellectual contexts.

To the memory of
Hilary M. Gornall
(1922–1979)
teacher and friend

Acknowledgements

Like the author of a much more substantial work, 'I must frankly own, that if I had known, beforehand, that this book would have cost me the labour which it has, I should never have been courageous enough to commence it.'[1] The topic was patently a piece of the jigsaw of eighteenth-century intellectual history waiting to be dropped into place; but I would not have had the confidence to persevere without the help and encouragement of many friends and academics.

This book originated with its dedicatee, who lent me (when I was a pupil in her English class) the Peter Pears/Anthony Lewis recordings of *Acis* and *L'allegro* and, later, tapes of Douglas Brown's Third Programme talks on Handel's English word-setting. To her I owe both the impulse for all my academic work and the educational grounding which made it possible. Jeremy Prynne supervised my initial research and likewise gave me lasting stimulus and an example of intellectual and scholarly standards to try to live up to. As an undergraduate at Girton I benefited from the humane teaching of Joan Bennett, Anne Barton and Mary Ann Radzinowicz, who allowed me to read texts in preference to textual criticism.

David Armitage, Michael Burden, Donald Burrows, Merlin Channon, Jane Clark, Alun David, Christine Gerrard and Murray Pittock kindly let me read their work in progress, to the great benefit of this book. I am very much indebted to Gill Allen, David Armitage, Jeremy Black, Philip Brett, Donald Burrows, Ted Buttrey, Merlin Channon, Christine Gerrard, Mark Goldie, Paul Langford, Jeremy Maule, Tom McGeary, Murray Pittock, Curtis Price and Mike Smith for the time and thought they gave to reading parts of my text and for their helpful suggestions and encouragement. I am

[1] Mrs Isabella Beeton, *The Book of Household Management* (1861), preface.

grateful too for the support and assistance of Brian Allen, Lord Aylesford, Anne Barton, Ruth, Frances and Frank Benatt, Lorenzo Bianconi, Derek Brewer, Paul and Liz Chipchase, Jane Clark, the late Gerald Coke, the late Peter Croft, Eveline Cruickshanks, the late Charles Cudworth, Rosemary Dooley, Howard Erskine-Hill, George Haggerty, Anthony Hicks, the late Earl Howe, Ann Johnston, Jonathan Keates, Emily Lane, Richard Luckett, Malcolm MacDonald and Libby Valdez, Shan Millie, Arthur Sale, Stewart Sinclair, Brian Skeet, Elsa Strietman, Brian Trowell, Brian Vickers, Marie Wells, Andrew Wilton and my colleagues at Cambridge University Careers Service. The book has been written without the benefit of official faculty or college affiliation, so support from more informal contacts has been proportionately more important and welcome.

I am deeply indebted to the existence, holdings, borrowing regulations and staff of Cambridge University Library (including, of course, its (former) tea room). I am likewise grateful to the staff of the British, Bodleian, and Pendlebury Libraries; to Jacky Cox, archivist, King's College, Cambridge; to Stephen Parks, Curator, Osborn Collection, Yale University Library; and to Frank Stubbings and the staff of Emmanuel College Library, Cambridge, for their help and hospitality. Like many other Handel students I have greatly benefited from the generous welcome of the late Gerald Coke and Mrs Coke, and I gratefully acknowledge permission to quote from material in the Coke Collection.

The Leverhulme Trust has twice sustained this enterprise with a generous research award, for which I am most grateful, not only on account of the financial benefits, but because of the encouragement implied. Grants for scholars in the humanities who are over the age of thirty and who do not have an academic position are not plentiful, and the Trust's enlightened policy and liberality in this regard are keenly appreciated.

At Cambridge University Press Penny Souster's supportive combination of patience and pressure enabled the book to come into being, while Linda Bree's eagle eye saved it from many subeditorial lapses. To both I am very thankful.

This is also the place to mention the two books which I have used most, and which prompted this one. Otto Erich Deutsch's *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (1955) is an inestimable and pioneering collection of contemporary reaction to Handel and his works, and

the first half of this book is greatly indebted to it. Winton Dean's *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (1959) set new standards in Handel studies; it brings together a huge amount of essential information in wonderfully accessible style, and remains indispensable. This book is intended to complement it.

Ruth Smith
3 April 1994

Abbreviations

BJECS	*British Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*
Dean, *Oratorios*	Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (1959)
Deutsch	Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (1955)
ECS	*Eighteenth-Century Studies*
GHB	*Göttinger Händel-Beiträge*
HJ	*Historical Journal*
HJb	*Händel Jahrbuch*
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
J/H	Correspondence between Charles Jennens and Edward Holdsworth, Coke Collection
M&L	*Music & Letters*
MT	*Musical Times*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
PQ	*Philological Quarterly*

DATES

Until 1752 the Julian calendar was used in England and the new year began on 25 March; dates for the period 1 January to 24 March are given as in the eighteenth century, in the form '1 January 1742/3'.

Unless otherwise indicated, place of publication is London

Where possible, the edition cited is contemporary with the period of the oratorios' genesis

Contents

Introduction

> A knowledge of the context remains necessary to a knowledge of the innovation
>
> J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985)

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This book is about the words of Handel's oratorios. In recent decades concern for historical authenticity has transformed our reception of baroque music, Handel's included. Scholarly performers strive to recreate for modern ears the sounds that the composers' first audiences would have heard; music historians increase modern understanding and enjoyment of the music by explaining its historical contexts. This book aims to bring a complementary historical perspective to our understanding of the librettos – the verbal texts – of a mainstay of western culture, Handel's English oratorios.

It might be thought that such familiar works do not need this treatment. After all, what is obscure or recondite about, for example, *Messiah* or *Judas Macchabæus*? Their continual performance by people of every kind from the date of their composition to the present proves their accessibility. But though the music is accessible, the point of the words which Handel set frequently eludes us. To some of us they are so familiar that we tend not to hear them, far less think what they mean. Those who have listened to them critically in the twentieth century have often damned them as worthless. Robert Manson Myers' comment is representative of this response: 'When one reads the words of some of Handel's oratorios in cold blood, it seems nothing short of a miracle that Handel should have been inspired to write music around them.'[1] Large portions of the ora-

torios have been judged defective even by their most enthusiastic advocates because of their verbal texts. In the major modern study of Handel's English theatre works Winton Dean writes that *Samson*, a work which he admires, 'suffers from an excess of diversionary airs: no fewer than fourteen – exactly half the total – are sung by anonymous Philistines and Israelites or by Micah [a bystander to the 'action']. At least eight of these are better omitted if the oratorio is to retain its shape in modern performance.'[2] Leaving aside the question of licence to cut according to taste, this proposed rejection by a leading interpreter of a substantial portion of a major work in the corpus on grounds of verbal rather than musical text – one of several such recommendations in Dean's book – fairly indicates that there is much in the librettos that the twentieth-century audience finds difficulty in appreciating.[3] Apparently our judgement of what makes an effective oratorio is often opposed to Handel's. And Handel's estimate was frequently endorsed by his audience, in opposition to our own response. For example, *Joseph and his Brethren*, in modern opinion an almost complete failure largely because of its dreadful libretto, was popular in his own day.[4] Evidently appreciating the oratorios is not plain sailing, and we still have something to learn about them. Why did Handel accept those texts which he chose to set? Why are they constituted as they are? What are the 'diversionary' passages about, and why are they there? Did the original audiences see things in them that we do not? It is part of my aim to raise such questions and suggest answers to them.

This book develops ideas first outlined in 1983, when I argued that we would enlarge our understanding and enjoyment of Handel's oratorios and his other English theatre works if we took account of their intellectual contexts.[5] This approach gives a different perspective on the compositions from that afforded by previous studies, which are grounded in biography or music criticism and scholarship.[6] Handel is no longer the focus; the words and the ideas in and behind his compositions come to the fore. The basic method is familiar: looking at a body of creative work against its intellectual background, relating it to the relevant ideas and preoccupations of the time.[7] The procedure is routine for the creative literature of the period but has only recently begun to be adopted for its musical-literary works. The novelty of approach is in the particular combination of work and background: there has been no previous attempt on this scale to examine the words of Handel's oratorios in relation

to the thought of their time.[8] It is long overdue. Dean called for a study of Handel's English librettists in 1959 but, before and since, they have been neglected, to an astonishing extent: witness the many accounts which give the impression that Handel wrote his own oratorio librettos. When I outline my subject-matter to educated non-specialists, their most frequent first response is 'Didn't Handel write them himself, then?'; they can hardly be blamed for their ignorance on this score when both specialist musicologists and leading cultural historians still give the impression that he did.[9]

This book discusses the librettos but only occasionally touches on the music. Happily it is no longer necessary to argue the importance of librettos and their authors in the study of major words-and-music compositions, an importance acknowledged in, for example, the prominence given them by *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. In the case of Handel's oratorios and other English theatre works the separation of text and music for the purpose of increased understanding seems to me legitimate. Handel did not, so far as we know, write any of the librettos (see Appendix 1 for librettos, authors and sources). He was not a proto-Wagner. Nor was his collaboration with his librettists of a Strauss–von Hofmannsthal intensity (it would have been very unusual for its time if it had been). In the very scant surviving correspondence of composer and librettists we have only a single indication of his suggesting new verbal material: Charles Jennens reported that he wrote 'Il Moderato' to conclude his rearrangement of Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* 'at Mr Handel's request'.[10] More usually, so far as we can tell, Handel's involvement with his librettists' texts consisted of editing them, principally cutting them (to what extent this was a collaborative exercise we are often uncertain). As Dean has shown, Handel and his librettists often seem to have had different ends in view; this reflects not only the circumstance of the collaborators working independently for at least some of the process, but also, as this book will suggest, differing priorities, which need to be more clearly distinguished than studies concentrating on the music have allowed. Handel's working relationship with his librettists is outlined in the second part of this introduction. Finally, there is more than enough to say in one book about the librettos and the ideas which shaped them without attempting discussion of their musical setting. But new findings about the librettos bring new light to Handel's treatment of them, and I invite musicologists to go on from here. The initial survey

which I made of this material was drawn on by a musicologist and a literary historian to show Handel's response to what the librettist provided; the present book will have succeeded if it prompts further studies of the same kind.[11]

But analysing the librettos is not easy. Handel's impact on his librettos is so powerful, there is so much to notice and say about his settings of the words (and about all the additional music), that the words themselves have tended to be viewed as it were backwards. Our understanding of the words is coloured, often distorted, by the impression which the music makes on us and, as Dean in particular pointed out, the music often imposes its own flagrant distortion (one of the major themes of his book is Handel's readiness to override the apparent meaning of the librettist's words with the music to which he set them). Once one knows the music it is hard to read the words without hearing the transforming musical versions of them in one's head, as one scholar candidly admits in his own approach to *Messiah*: 'it is impossible to-day to separate the text from the music'.[12] But I believe the effort to separate the text from the music is worth making, since it will increase our understanding and appreciation of these literary-musical compositions. Handel's English librettos were compiled or written by English men of letters who drew on major literary sources, including Sophocles, the Bible, Dryden and Milton. The process of clarifying the oratorios' make-up is served by identifying the texts the librettists chose to adapt, the selections they made from them and the alterations they effected; asking the reasons for their preferences and changes; and recognising the ideas which their productions express. These lines of enquiry are central to the present undertaking. They yield the conclusions that Handel's oratorio librettos made considerably more meanings available to their original audiences than we now realise, that these meanings can be identified by reference to ideas current at the time, and that the librettos, and hence Handel's English works, encapsulate views current in their time on major issues of their day. What these ideas and views were is worth identifying. In the same way that 'authentic' performance reveals unsuspected musical vitality, so the recovery of verbal meanings in the oratorios enables us to understand what captured the interest of the original audiences and so increase the depth and range of our own responses.

The sense of the words has been muffled not only by the power of Handel's music but by conceptions of the nature of the oratorios

influenced by subjective response. The pioneering work of Young, Dean and some of their successors rescued Handel from his distorting and bowdlerising nineteenth-century editors, but remade him to suit their own tastes. The work which has dominated the study of Handel's English theatre music since its publication and which will continue to be indispensable on account of its vast quantity of illuminating information, Dean's *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (1959), proclaims in its title that the key element sought and found in its subject is the ability to dramatise. And for Dean, drama chiefly means the portrayal of characters reacting and interacting, the interplay of motive and emotion within and between characters, and strongly plotted action. This is what he most admires, what he looks for, what he rejoices to find and regrets to find lacking. The very human inclination, shared by all generations of interpreters, to define their subject according to their own preferences, is positive in that it helps to engage their contemporaries' enthusiasm on their subject's behalf (as Dean has done for a whole generation of listeners and interpreters), but it risks several kinds of distortion.

Firstly, to make dramatisation of character the defining element imposes a particular definition on the corpus. Of Handel's twenty-five English theatre works Dean selected for detailed discussion only the eighteen with named characters, relegating the others – *Israel in Egypt*, *Alexander's Feast*, the *Ode for St Cecilia's Day*, *L'allegro, il penseroso ed il moderato*, *Messiah*, the *Occasional Oratorio* and *The Triumph of Time and Truth* – to the margins. This selection gives the sense that parts of the corpus, including works generally regarded as among Handel's greatest achievements, do not merit the highest regard because they do not match the criterion 'dramatic'. Secondly, while selection on these terms has proved invigorating to enjoyment and performance of Handel's music, it negates the strong connections between works discussed and works excluded. The selection runs counter to, and so has tended to obscure, the major distinction drawn in Handel's own time, not between works with and without *dramatis personae* but between sacred and secular works. Handel's advertisements for his premières use the designation 'oratorio' consistently and exclusively for those works with religious subjects. Thirdly, the 'dramatic' criterion leads to the dismissal from serious consideration of large tracts of the librettos even of the selected works, and even whole librettos. Dean writes of *Joseph and his Brethren*: 'The essential requirements for a composer, firm con-

struction, distinct characters, interesting situations, and concrete imagery, are wholly to seek.'[13] Whether they were of prime importance to the librettist, even whether he thought in such terms, is not considered; what the librettist's aims and criteria actually were, and what he did provide, remains to be objectively elucidated. In fact (fourthly), Dean himself constantly shows that these 'essential requirements' were not necessary for Handel to produce great music, and the existence of *Messiah* proves it. The librettist often provided, and Handel often responded magnificently to, elements other than character and plot. These elements often spring from the concerns of the collaborators' own time, from beliefs, standards and principles to which Dean is unsympathetic.[14] His contempt for mid-eighteenth-century moral and cultural canons, particularly moral didacticism in art, leads him to find that Handel persistently 'transcends' the 'limited sympathies and narrow didacticism of his librettists'.[15] The inference (for which I am unaware of any non-musical evidence) is that Handel did not share the artistic and moral assumptions of his contemporaries and (a fifth form of distortion) deflects serious attention away from these assumptions and their presence in the oratorios. Finally, while it is true that many of the oratorios are dramas, it is even truer if we use the criteria of their own time rather than ours to define 'dramatic'. For the eighteenth-century audience, more of Handel's English works, and more within them, would have seemed dramatic than Dean allows. *Acis and Galatea*, *Esther*, *Athalia*, *Semele*, *Joseph*, *Hercules*, *Alexander Balus*, *Susanna*, *Theodora* and *Jephtha* all exhibit characteristics of eighteenth-century sentimental drama, and a study of Handel's English works as *eighteenth-century* theatre is overdue (Brett and Haggerty have shown how satisfying it would be[16]). The ahistorical stance of Dean's appraisal has had its critics. William C. Smith, for example, commented that 'scholars and writers . . . are not fair to the subject when the Handel they create for us is a present day figurehead fashioned out of their own philosophy'.[17] The balance is beginning to be redressed, but much remains to be done.

My enquiry, following eighteenth-century definitions of oratorio, focuses on the librettos with religious themes (but many of its findings are relevant to the librettos of Handel's secular English theatre works). It attempts to recover the eighteenth-century perspective by making an objective survey of the ideas in the librettos, and to yield a fuller understanding of the completed works by