
The study of context has achieved significance in quite different fashions and rates of speed in various fields of music history. For Mozart, contextualism has become quite central, thanks in particular to the work of Neal Zaslaw, though we still know precious little about other composers of the time. For Beethoven, we still lack a true social biography, but can turn to general works on concert life in his time and to aspects of reception of his works. For composers of the Italian Renaissance we have perhaps the most highly developed study of context, at least in terms of patronage. For Handel, rich sources have been elucidated on the development of the King's Theatre and aspects of his role as entrepreneur. But a huge gap has existed for Handel's oratorios and their religious and political dimensions: as Nicholas Temperley warned thirty years ago, we cannot understand works such as these without talking about religion. What Smith has come up with is a model study in contextualism to which historians like myself feel quite akin.

It is not surprising that Smith came to study Handel in such a fashion from the field of English literature, rather than from either musicology or history. For a long time, scholarly study of the oratorios was deeply affected— one might say in some ways inhibited—by performance practice. The use of large forces in grandiose, ceremonial fashion diminished their dramatic nature and made scholars averse to thinking about them in religious terms. Handelians such as Winton Dean and Paul Henry Lang came out of quite secular musical backgrounds, and tended to play down, or in some cases outright deny, any religious meaning in these works; they saw the oratorios in terms of pagan humanism.¹ In this respect they were quite similar to historians such as J. H. Plumb or Roy Porter who have not tended to see eighteenth-century Anglicanism, or even Dissent, as major social or cultural forces.² The return to religion in the eighteenth century

has been associated most directly with the controversial scholar J. C. D. Clark, who argued that England remained in an aristocratic mold best termed an *ancien régime*, and that Jacobites constituted a major political force right up to the defeat of the Scots in the Great '45.\(^3\) Linda Colley established a convincing middleground between different views in her book *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, arguing that we must see English national character as founded upon both land and capital and as linked intimately with Protestantism.\(^4\) Ruth Smith has a moderate point of view similar to that of Colley and indeed demonstrates a remarkable command of the literature of eighteenth-century England.

Smith views the oratorios from three different perspectives: Handel and his librettists; the reading and listening public; and the political and religious community. Her perspective on Handel is essentially deconstructive; she argues against the idea that he conceived of the works as complete works of art from start to finish. She concludes that "He did not have a Romantic concern for his works' 'integrity'" (p. 38). Instead she stresses the discontinuities between librettist and composer, the necessity that they obey public taste, and the many practical contingencies that dictated their techniques. Her main object of attack is the notion (so prominent in Dean's work) that Handel aimed at dramatic shape in terms of plot, character and dénouement; she takes every opportunity to show that the sources do not prove such a conception on his part. Kenneth Nott has recently made a similar argument for *Jephtha*, but from a musicologist's point of view.\(^5\)

Lydia Goehr would probably find sympathy with the argument here, since she has written a path-breaking book on the rise of the idea of the work of art in music during the nineteenth century.\(^6\) I would nonetheless urge caution in this regard. While performers changed arias within the oratorios, they did not see these works as *pasticcio* nearly to the extent that they did operas, and the repeated republication and performance of the oratorios gave them a permanence that we must take seriously. The canonic

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status of these works, which I have argued arrived by the 1780s, gave them the status of art works on a certain plane, and by that time commentators had begun to attack what they regarded as untoward ornamentation of Handel’s melodies.

Smith attempts to clear away a whole array of assumptions about librettists; she asks us to take them seriously in their own right. She also shows how literary people had their own cultural agendas, did not take opera very seriously, and were slow to accept the oratorio as a worthy genre. Her perspectives are similar to those of the literary scholar James Anderson Winn, whose intriguing book on the relations between music and poetry through the ages makes us realize that the two arts were more rivals than colleagues in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Smith makes an interesting analysis of how the librettists transformed the Biblical texts. In one chapter she shows how they excerpted sentences or phrases from Biblical passages for anthems, leading readers rapidly through texts they knew well by giving them particularly vivid selections. In another chapter she makes the case that the librettists not only simplified the Biblical stories but also purged them of all details that might seem morally reprehensible. In so doing they were accommodating the criticism mounted by Deists against the Bible both as failing to serve as an historical authority and as a moral model. “Even the least sophisticated libretto’s are remote from the Old Testament world of a partisan, intolerant, vengeful deity promoting a disobedient, complaining rabble of in-fighting tribal colonists entirely in His own interests and often apparently at their expense” (p. 234).

When we turn to the musical public’s understanding of the oratorios, we see how Smith has contributed greatly to expanding the bibliographical range of Handel studies. She has made the first extensive use of works that either served as precedents for the oratorios’ librettos or shaped how people understood them. During the eighteenth century people read a great deal of religious literature, not only the Bible but also paraphrases of its texts and disputations over theological problems; one has to see each libretto linked to a wide variety of related writings and discourses. The style of Biblical texts—at least the fashion by which they were translated—was a source of admiration and imitation, a concern that must have been as important to many listeners as the music itself. The secular and the

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sacred flowed together in Biblical commentaries, since the idea of the sublime served as a key means by which to interpret Biblical writings.

In viewing the librettos as part of theological controversy, Smith situates herself among scholars who have concluded that England, not France, was the first site of the Enlightenment. A critique of church dogma that permeated both politics and culture with debate of major issues and ecclesiastical practice became widespread from the 1670s onwards. Smith argues that, as a general rule, the librettos were designed to circumvent the Deist movement in its attempts to question miracles and spiritual mysteries. This does not mean that the librettists were reactionaries; far from it, they established a centrist—one might say Newtonian—position in accepting reasoned explication for divine phenomena while still speaking of their existence.

One might also argue that the texts of the oratorios interacted with religious and political issues not as a matter of propaganda, but rather as a vehicle of topical entertainment. Political meaning did not necessarily arise from the espousal of a partisan viewpoint in a libretto. Men of letters tended to be identified with a particular faction, as a musician normally would not be, but what they did with librettos politically had more to do with the audience’s expectation that they would hear lots of references to recent events and disputes. The author of any play in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries thus felt obliged to allude to things around him as a way to entertain his public. In opera this discourse usually did not involve taking a position; as Curtis Price has shown, opera librettos often contained ambiguous political implications that must have generated much discussion.9

Smith shows in specific terms how centrally the oratorios functioned in public life. In the chapter “Towards Oratorio” she explores passages in The Spectator that call for sober entertainment through the evocation of sacred texts, and remarkable contemporary concerts that mingled sacred and secular music put on by Cavendish Weedon for members of Parliament. Although music historians have known of these tendencies, Smith is the first to put them in broad context, showing that the oratorios did not come out of nowhere, but were rather the culmination of several decades of fertile innovations in musical life. The Finnish historian Henrik Knif has added to this discussion recently in his impressive study of commen-
tary on opera in *The Spectator*, he argues that Richard Steele had a much more positive view of music than is often assumed.\(^{10}\)

Smith portrays the oratorios as part of a movement for the moral rebuilding of English life. "In putting onto the theatrical stage works that endorsed Christian teaching and advocated public and private virtue, Handel and his librettists were fulfilling many elements of the programme being pursued by a variety of groups to produce a reformed, public art that would revitalise the nation's morals, religious belief, spirituality and patriotism" (pp. 52–54). A historian would look at this movement in broader but also more specific terms. During the 1690s there appeared a variety of organizations outside of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, most prominently the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, that challenged people directly to improve morals, especially by reporting evil deeds (from swearing to whoring) to their councils. The movement grew out of the political instability that came after the Glorious Revolution and the deep-seated social changes brought by capitalistic development and urbanization. The Manners Campaign, as it has been called, had a devastating impact upon the London theater, for the publication of a work by Jeremy Collier critical of its scripts in 1698 called the whole post-Restoration theatrical world seriously into question.\(^{11}\) One can argue that the establishment of the King's Theatre in 1705 came as a solution to the breakdown of the theater undertaken by Van Brugh and his colleagues; they decided to start an institution that would be impervious to such criticism by virtue of its Italian texts and would stand above the chaos of the time by close links with the Peerage. The oratorios served as a second such solution to this ongoing attempt to reform society; it is no accident that they began to purge both immoral words and political slogans from the scripts in the same decade in which the Licensing Act of 1737 brought censorship to the theaters.

Biblical stories about the Israelite people, Smith shows, served as a means by which the English portrayed themselves in their political travails. Her literary perspective is crucial here, since she defines the librettos as part of the genre of the epic: "the nation is taken to be the central concern, the individual hero existing principally as the barometer of national strength" (p. 132). But she sees the librettos presenting not confidence but uncertainty, providing a vehicle by which people could work through their anxieties about the instability of political life.

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It should be obvious that one cannot distinguish politics from culture in a context such as this. As Smith puts it, “During the first half of the eighteenth century music was a major metaphor for politics” (p. 72). By “politics” here she does not mean party divisions or parliamentary actions, but rather politics “out of doors,” as it was put, the public controversies far more pronounced in England than elsewhere in Europe until French politics opened up in the 1750s. One should note, however, that she erroneously identifies the Rev. Arthur Bedford as a Non:Juror. Bedford wrote in the manner of a Tory and established a charity school in Bristol with that party’s support, but he voted Whig in the city. In later years he was pilloried in the press for associating himself with the Non-Juror Jeremy Collier in the moral campaign against the theaters.\(^\text{12}\)

In examining the nature of political rhetoric, Smith follows the important recent work of Christine Gerrard on the “Patriot” Opposition, the faction of dissident Whigs that opposed Robert Walpole and helped oust him in 1742.\(^\text{13}\) Gerrard’s book, like Smith’s, demonstrates how much it is literary scholars who are gaining a precise understanding of the rhetoric that surrounded these political events—terms such as Liberty, Constitution, Luxury and Standing Army. Gerrard has demonstrated that slogans of a patriotic nature took highly diverse forms in the hands of different parties, and she has pulled us back from interpreting these tendencies on the model of mass-based nineteenth- or twentieth-century nationalism. By the same token, Smith argues that the nationalistic rhetoric surrounding the oratorios should be seen to have been worried and defensive rather than aggressive, indeed militaristic. The new perspectives on this history make clearer how and why Handel became identified with Walpole, after having entered the court essentially under Tory auspices. In this area Smith follows the work of Donald Burrows and Graydon Beeks in making more precise the diverse, changing links Handel set up with factions in the political community.\(^\text{14}\)

We need to take a wide perspective on the oratorios—seeing them as part of the on-going political and social consolidation that occurred in

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Britain during the hundred years following the Civil War. Between about 1640 and 1750 Britain was essentially in a state of protracted post-revolutionary instability, the kind of political experience France underwent after 1789 and both Russia and China underwent after the turn of our century. During this time a cycle of change in regime took a century to work itself out. Musical life was affected profoundly by this process, often in positive ways, for it opened up many new opportunities for musicians to do business, even if conditions often proved chaotic. Handel took advantage of the last stages of this process, not only in shaping the King's Theatre to his liking, but also in developing a new concert genre in the oratorio. Smith shows us how shrewdly Handel and his librettists tailored their works for a specific intellectual and political situation, and in so doing came up with an extraordinary new musical experience.

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