

REVIEWS



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DONALD BURROWS

HANDEL AND THE ENGLISH CHAPEL ROYAL

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As British monarchs have gradually ceded their role as rulers to the landed elite, parliament, political parties and the electorate, so the place of the Chapel Royal in the musical firmament has declined. We no longer think of the Chapel and its musicians as representing the confluence of all the leading performers, composers and occasions of state. But the situation was very different in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Donald Burrows's latest volume leads us through Handel's compositions for the Chapel, the occasions, the changing ranks of performers, and the variety of buildings, instruments and pitches, and engages our historical imagination engages with a prime musical institution of this period.

The volume is packed with facts. Nineteen chapters, five plates, twenty-three other illustrations and twenty tables fill 556 pages. There are nine appendices, a lengthy bibliography and indexes. Much of the material derives from gritty work in archives (chiefly the institutions formerly known at the Public Record Office and the library of the British Museum) undertaken by Burrows for his dissertation – the first in music to be accepted by the Open University, in 1981. But he has doubled the chronological scope by including the reign of George II, by going back to the archives for another arduous trawl and by broadening the range of contemporary sources, notably through thorough re-examination of a long list of newspapers and magazines (a surprisingly large quantity of material eluded Otto Erich Deutsch). His approach to the music is not only grounded in an unmatched knowledge of the manuscript sources but is also informed by having directed the first modern performances of some of the works.

Burrows characterizes his *modus operandi* as 'dealing in approximately equal measure with the musical pieces [of Handel] as a series of individual (and remarkable) artifacts, and with the historical circumstances of the pieces in relation to Handel's biography and British political history' (ix). He regards the repertory as 'engaging in itself, but also of significance in relation to Handel's compositional practice and the history of church music in the Baroque period, in London and beyond' (ix). At this late date it may seem a tad defensive (or old-fashioned) to justify the study of Handel's church music on the basis of its inherent quality, but the chief difficulty with this self-proclaimed 'belief' is that we are offered insufficient comparative data and exposition through which the assessment of the proclaimed significance of the works to the history of church music can be judged.



Indeed, there is no clear summary of Handel's compositional achievements in comparison with the works of the officially appointed composers responsible for providing new music on a regular basis for the Chapel between 1711 and 1759, chiefly William Croft, John Weldon, Maurice Greene and William Boyce. Burrows couples Handel with the much-lamented Henry Purcell, characterizing both as having 'a breadth of vision and a strength of style . . . which marks them out from their contemporaries' (432), though he adds Greene to the pantheon on the next page. While ardent Handelists will have no problem with the book being heavily weighted towards the Handelian side of the binary title, others may wonder about the finger on the scale.

Part of the imbalance between Handel and other composers lies in the frequency with which Handel claimed for himself the role of 'composer for grand state occasions' – several national thanksgivings, two weddings, a funeral and a coronation – rather than the more mundane church festivals and homecomings of the king. The official composers simply did not have the opportunity to show their stuff. For example, Greene was proclaimed as the composer of the anthem for the Princess Royal's wedding in the first newspaper announcements in October 1733, but was soon supplanted by Handel. As Burrows points out (315), this switch must have been even more galling for Greene than the flap six years earlier over the coronation music, as Greene had completed composition of the wedding anthem and was preparing for its rehearsal.

The imbalance is epitomized by the interpretation Burrows puts on the documents concerning the appointment of Handel as 'Composer of Musick for his Majesty's Chappel Royal' dated 25 February 1723. Burrows argues that Handel held an official post. While there are technical reasons for doubting that the warrant ordering the appointment could be executed and the position formalized, equally persuasive arguments can be made on the basis of the absence of Handel's name from the official payrolls and lists. Furthermore, the king could exercise privilege and command whomever he liked to write music. By the end of 1723 Handel's annual income from the royal family was £600 (a pension of £400 and a salary of £200 as music master to the princesses). The annual salary for the regular Chapel Royal composers was £73.

Handel's involvement with the Chapel Royal as a composer was limited to nineteen pieces over thirty-seven years, which at £200–400 per year is nice work if you can get it, particularly as the pensions continued to be paid for another ten years following the last event (the anthem for the peace celebrations of 1749). While it is nominally accurate to say that the compositions are contributions to English church music, they cannot be said to be within the grasp of ordinary choirs or to fit the regular liturgy. Handel never set the canticles (other than the *Te Deum* and *Jubilate*), he never wrote psalm tunes or set the versicles and responses, and the Ordinary of the Mass received no attention from him. The three hymn tunes he wrote at the request of Mrs Rich remained unpublished until 1826. As Nicholas Temperley has pointed out, Handel's influence (for good or ill) on English church music should not be exaggerated.

The cycle of studies of Handel's oeuvre begun by Winton Dean with the publication of *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* in 1959 is now complete with the appearance at the end of last year of Dean's volume on the later operas. Although Ellen Harris's *Handel as Orpheus: Voice and Desire in the Chamber Cantatas* (2001) is controversial and, by contrast, Alfred Mann's 1996 volume on the orchestral music is orthodox if not ancestral in approach (and lacks the grounding of detailed archival enquiry), we now have treatments of Handel's works in all the major genres and of the circumstances of their initial performances. In *Handel and the English Chapel Royal* Burrows provides us with an exhaustively researched and invaluable resource that, in addition to explicating some of Handel's best known pieces, helps to clarify why the Chapel Royal was regarded as a centre of musical excellence in the first half of the eighteenth century.

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