

## REVIEWS



## BOOKS

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WINTON DEAN

*HANDEL'S OPERAS: 1726–1741*

Woodbridge and Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2006

pp. xx + 565, ISBN 978 1 84383 268 3

Winton Dean's long-awaited monograph, effectively the sequel to his collaboration with the late John Merrill Knapp (*Handel's Operas: 1704–1726* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987)) has been out for well over a year. By now, all dedicated Handelians will surely own a copy, and share in a sense of collective fulfilment. We are able at last to benefit fully from this leading British scholar's sixty-odd years of research on Handel the opera composer. Those familiar with the monograph co-authored with Knapp (771 pages in total), or those who have seen the present study, will be amused to read that the original plan was to write about all forty-two of Handel's operas in one volume (the fourteen pasticcios are mentioned only in passing), for the depth and breadth of Dean's knowledge – from his passionate engagement with issues of performance to his sustained work on the sources themselves – suggests that the two-volume format was still a considerable restriction.

The monograph is densely packed with information, encompassing a compelling narrative of Handel's opera career from the moment when soprano Faustina Bordoni's engagement was secured for the Royal Academy of Music in June 1725, through to the performances of his final opera, *Deidamia*, in the early months of 1741. Within this period, Handel's operas were staged at no fewer than three of London's theatres (King's Theatre, Covent Garden and Lincoln's Inn Fields), under at least as many managerial structures. The works themselves met with a varied reception during his lifetime. *Admeto* was one of the most successful (nineteen performances in its first production of 1727, three later productions in London, seven productions in Brunswick and Hamburg); the first full rehearsal had a profound effect on Handel patron Elizabeth Legh, who was, apparently, 'transported with joy' upon hearing it (49). *Arminio*, in contrast, managed a mere six performances in 1737, and was never revived in Handel's lifetime. Edward Dent, writing in the 1950s, damned the opera as 'feeble' and 'quite unworthy of Handel' (353; reference not supplied by Dean). Yet its published score had garnered over double the subscribers of *Admeto* (143 versus 57). Modern audiences seem to share Dent's sentiments, for *Arminio* has not been revived often, receiving just four productions between 1935 and 2005 (Appendix E, 'Modern Stage Productions to End of 2005', pages 512–40). *Admeto*, on the other hand, has been surpassed in the twentieth century by *Serse*, which received over 200 productions between 1924 and 2005, including translations into Swedish (1979), German (1984) and Polish (1985). As one of the first operas to be performed by Oskar Hagen in Göttingen (1924), *Serse* toured extensively in Germany over the next three decades, with modifications to its scoring, structure, stage directions and voice specifications (all castrato parts would have been transposed down an octave). Dean decries these 'distortions' in 'Epilogue 2' (487–491, which considers 'Handel's Operas on the Modern Stage'), while acknowledging Germany's



leading role in returning Handel to the operatic repertory. Readily critical of directors (who are, as Dean pointedly suggests, an anachronism in this repertory), he reserves his sharpest criticism for the ‘pretentious symbolism’ of the ‘concept production’ (490). While modern audiences are able to appreciate Handel as a ‘splendid entertainer’, misinformed direction obscures his ‘full power as a front-rank dramatic composer’ (491).

Dean is an astute and transparent critic, faulting even some of the more successful operas if he feels they do not come up to the mark. Ever appreciative of the dramatic potential of these works, he responds to the clumsy adaptation of a source libretto with alternately pungent and lucid criticism, describing the libretto of *Arianna in Creta* as ‘a wretched affair’ (259) before identifying its technical construction as ‘particularly awkward’. He notes that the exit aria convention, ‘important as a binding agent, is honoured as much in the breach as in the observance. Characters repeatedly leave the stage without an aria . . . and when they do have an aria it is dramatically null’ (260). Handel, as a skilful dramatist with a supreme ability to depict character through the da capo aria, resorts too often in *Arianna* to simile arias; as Dean reports, ‘black clouds, an oak, a lion, a lost traveller, a nightingale, a gentle breeze and a storm-tossed steersman are all called in evidence’ (260). Presumably it was the ‘pretty tunes and simple textures’ of Handel’s music that captivated his audience (261); Dean’s criteria are more searching, for he faults the composer for a ‘mechanical application’ of repetition and sequence, and for failing to explore the inner motivation of his characters (261). Dean confidently assigns Handel the responsibility for both the adaptation of the later librettos (from 1729) and the musical response to them; there is an underlying assumption through much of his writing that Handel would have had far more independence than seems plausible, in light of what we know about theatrical structures and patronage at that time.

There is much to inspire the reader, largely on account of Dean’s profound appreciation of opera. He suggests that Handel’s treatment of the supernatural in *Giustino* (1737) – an opera featuring a dream of Fortune and her followers, and another scene in which a chained heroine’s cries for help are echoed off-stage – offers a ‘climate of romance’ quite uncharacteristic of Metastasian opera seria. Moreover, *Giustino* is notable for its emphasis on the picturesque, to which Handel responds by ‘loosening’ the generic design of his model (Vivaldi’s setting for Rome in 1724), to the extent that we have ‘one remarkable scene in which nine movements are structurally linked’ (366). Dean champions *Serse* (1738) as ‘misunderstood’ in its time, simply because it was not characteristic of 1730s opera seria. Instead, its ‘dramatic approach and creative affinity’, namely the balancing of ‘sophisticated comedy with passionate undertones that touch the springs of tragedy’, are reminiscent of Mozart’s Da Ponte operas (423).

Dean, who knows all the oratorios and operas (and their primary sources) in intimate detail, is also insightful when discussing Handel’s compositional technique, describing the infamous borrowing as ‘not so much theft as a strange form of re-creation’, and observing that the composer’s use of multiple sources for *Serse* was ‘not the product of conscious patchwork, but of [his] subconscious mind working on a medley of ideas floating in his memory’ (424–425). Handel would initially develop a pre-existing idea, and then subject the result of this process to ‘ruthless compression’ (444). Dean’s study of the ‘baffling’ and incomplete autograph for *Imeneo* (1740) leads him to conclude that Handel – who often quotes from his own early works or music he had composed but abandoned – took more care to disguise his borrowings when they came from a recently performed work of his own, or from the work of another composer.

The discussion of the sources themselves highlights the particular difficulties that face Handel scholars today. The weaknesses of the Chrysander edition and the gaps in the *Händel Handbuch* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1978) are familiar realities. While considerable work on the musical sources has been carried out in the last decades, with the chief aim being to produce the new Handel edition, it is a complex task in light of Handel’s travels, and the thriving copying industry that arose during his London years. Although the Donald Burrows–Martha Ronish catalogue of Handel’s autographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) provides some systematic study of paper and watermarks, the lack of a thoroughly systematic study of all the papers used by Handel’s numerous (and mostly anonymous) copyists, and the lack of a rigorously analytic catalogue of scribal hands, offer considerable hurdles for present and future scholars. (A smaller problem is the tendency



to refer to Handel sources by their original collection – a good habit in itself – but not consistently to supply modern locations or pressmarks.) Thus when Dean tersely suggests he has arrived at the date of a particular source on account of its paper (and gives no further information), he initiates questions for which there are no answers. Which type of paper was used? Does its watermark suggest an early or a late stage in the paper mould's lifespan? The curious newcomer is unable to glean crucial information from Handel sources (or contemporary sources for other composers sharing the same scribes and paper) without 'recreating the wheel'. A lot of research has been done in this area, but it is not published.

Dean, however, cannot be expected to have filled these particular gaps in this present study. We at least have his conclusions about the sources, if not the process through which he arrives at them. And while his densely packed prose makes heavy demands on his readers – who are required to trace some references, know a fair bit about the London theatre, supply the original Italian for quotes from the autographs, and keep scores at hand to appreciate the comments about arias that are not precisely identified – the value of his work is not diminished as a result. In an age where the desire for instant gratification and 'quick-fix' solutions seems to have polluted so many aspects of modern life, his work stands apart.

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## SCOTT MESSING

*SCHUBERT IN THE EUROPEAN IMAGINATION, VOLUME 2: FIN-DE-SIÈCLE VIENNA*

Rochester, NY and Woodbridge: University of Rochester Press, 2007

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Although the feminine trope of Schubert reception has long been recognized, Scott Messing is the first scholar to place it centre stage in the context of a cultural history of the composer. Following his first volume on the nineteenth century (*Schubert and the European Imagination, Volume 1: the Romantic and Victorian Eras* (Rochester, NY and Woodbridge: University of Rochester Press, 2006)), his second continues to trace the appropriation of Schubert as a *Mädchencharakter* by focusing on fin-de-siècle Vienna. While undertaking his research, Messing found this period to be one of the most ignored in Schubert reception, with little engagement with documentary and bibliographic sources on the composer. He was surprised, he tells us in his Introduction, to discover how many of the leading cultural figures of Viennese modernism responded to the traditional view of Schubert as feminine. From this perspective, Messing links different writers and artists and unites different disciplines of musicology, historiography and cultural studies. Consequently, his book extends to the fin de siècle the recent trend of contextualizing Schubert within the social and cultural climate of his contemporary Vienna.

Messing's decision to devote the second volume to fin-de-siècle Vienna is also determined by the coincidence of various events, between those of Schubert reception and those of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and by the extent to which the image of the composer was politicized in his native city. The first two chapters trace the waning of imperial power during which the *Mädchencharakter* myth was enshrined. Close attention is given to the political and national propagation of Schubert, with the author recognizing the tension between the feminine associations of the composer and the need, particularly among those on the right, to assert chauvinistic ideals. Chapter One focuses on Schubert's statue in the city's Stadtpark (1862–1872), a project that precedes the fin de siècle but marks the first civic commemoration of the composer that had wider historical implications. Messing highlights important events that occurred during the decade that began with the proposal for a statue and ended with its eventual unveiling: the submission deadline for the monument's design; the first performance of the Unfinished Symphony; the publication of