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# Handel, His Contemporaries and Early English Oratorio

## Händel, njegovi sodobniki in zgodnji angleški oratorij

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### IZVLEČEK

### ABSTRACT

Pregled razvoja angleškega oratorija od prvih javnih uprizoritev Händlovega oratorija *Esther* (1732) do 1740. Obravnava vpliv Händla na njegove angleške sodobnike glede na slog, obliko, izbiro teme in alegorično vsebino, ter prikaže bolj celovito podobo angleškega oratorija v 30. letih 18. stoletja kot kdaj koli doslej.

Surveys the development of English oratorio from the first public performances of Handel's *Esther* (1732) until c. 1740. Handel's influence over his English contemporaries is discussed referring to style, formal design, subject choice and allegorical content, providing a more complete than hitherto picture of the genre in the 1730s.

When Handel gave the first public performance of an English oratorio with *Esther* in 1732, he was introducing London audiences to a new form of theatrical entertainment that would eventually become the staple of his London theatre seasons.<sup>1</sup> The first 'public' performances of *Esther* took place at the Crown and Anchor Tavern at the end of February and beginning of March 1732 and were well received; several weeks later, on 2 May, it was performed in the theatre with additions taken from various earlier works including the Coronation Anthems (1727) and with a new opening scene.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> This article was originally presented as a conference paper under the title '*Esther* and Handel's English Contemporaries' at the American Handel Society conference in Seattle, March 2011; it appears here in a revised version.

<sup>2</sup> For details of these performances see Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959; 1995), 203–14. See also Donald Burrows, *Handel and the English Chapel Royal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 288–91, and Donald Burrows, *Handel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 166.

popularity of *Esther* led Handel to write two further oratorios in 1733, *Deborah* and *Athalia*, after which he initially returned to his regular occupation of composing Italian operas.<sup>3</sup> In 1736, however, Handel again turned to English language works for the theatre with the ode for Cecilia's day, *Alexander's Feast*, which was soon followed by further oratorios, *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt* in early 1739; a second ode for St. Cecilia's day in late 1739; and a setting of Milton's poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* in 1740. This first group of English oratorios and odes can be seen as a period of experimentation, where Handel was still refining the genre of English oratorio and testing different methods of composition, subject choices and text sources, before it took on a more stable form in the 1740s.

Handel's oratorios from the 1730s have received plenty of scholarly attention and there can be little doubt that the first public performances of *Esther* and its warm reception by London audiences was one of the contributing factors in a chain of events that led Handel and his audiences to eventually abandon Italian opera completely after the 1741–2 season, with English oratorio taking its place.<sup>4</sup> Handel was, however, not the only composer in London to experiment with English oratorios and odes during the 1730s. Maurice Greene (1696–1755), Willem De Fesch (1687–1761), William Boyce (1711–1779) and Michael Christian Festing (1705–1752) all tried their own hand at such works (see appendix), taking their initial incentive from the success of *Esther*. The influence of Handel's first English oratorios over these composers as a model for style, formal design, subject choice and allegorical content has often been underestimated or neglected, yet by taking the works of Handel's contemporaries into consideration it is possible to gain a fuller picture of the development of English oratorio before 1740.

### **Maurice Greene: *The Song of Deborah and Barak***

The first of the oratorios to be written by Handel's contemporaries after the 1732 *Esther* performances was Maurice Greene's *The Song of Deborah and Barak*, which was probably performed sometime towards the end of 1732 by members of the Apollo Academy<sup>5</sup> – a semi-private musical club founded by Greene and Festing in 1731, as a result of the scandal surrounding the Bononcini-Lotti madrigal affair at the Academy of Ancient Music, causing both composers to walk out and found their own musical

<sup>3</sup> *Athalia* did not receive its first performance in London until 1 April 1735; the premiere of this work was given in Oxford at the Sheldonian Theatre on 10 July 1733. During the four seasons 1733–4 to 1736–7 Handel concentrated on writing and performing new Italian operas owing to the competition he was facing from the Opera of the Nobility. The 1735–6 season was an exception to this as he had no opera cast and consequently reverted to performing his three English oratorios, *Esther*, *Deborah* and *Athalia* and writing *Alexander's Feast*. Towards the end of the 1735–6 season the castrato Gioacchino Conti became available and Handel offered some operas. See Donald Burrows, "A Sacred Oratorio for the Theatre: An Experiment that nearly failed," *Händel-Jahrbuch* 55 (2009): 136.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Dean, *Handel's Oratorios*, 191–325; Anthony Hicks "Handel and the idea of an oratorio," in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, ed. Donald Burrows (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 152–8; see also Carole Taylor, "Handel's Disengagement from the Italian Opera," in *Handel Tercentenary Collection*, ed. Stanley Sadie and Anthony Hicks (London: MacMillan, 1987), 165–81.

<sup>5</sup> The libretto for Greene's *The Song of Deborah and Barak* was advertised in *The London Magazine* for September 1732, p. 322, and in October 1732 in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, p. 9.

society.<sup>6</sup> The work was clearly well received at the Apollo Academy as it was performed publically at a charitable concert given in Whitehall Chapel on 17 April 1733.<sup>7</sup> Further performances may have taken place at the Apollo Academy in the 1730s and 40s – although no evidence of a definite performance date survives, the libretto features in a collection of the academy’s best twelve librettos published in 1740.<sup>8</sup> Greene’s reason for producing an oratorio was almost certainly owing to the popularity of Handel’s *Esther* a few months earlier. He may also have been encouraged by the success of his own setting of Alexander Pope’s ‘Ode for Musick on St Cecilia’s Day’, which was performed at Cambridge on 6 July 1730 as his D.Mus exercise and in London on 18 November the same year, and was Greene’s first larger-scale secular work in English.

It is easy to see why *Esther* was popular in London: it was sung in English, combined elements of opera (arias, recitatives) with English church music (choruses), did not necessarily require ‘foreign’, Italian singers, and was based on a well-known story with allegorical content.<sup>9</sup> Whether Greene actually heard *Esther* or only heard about it is an awkward question to answer. Unfortunately no evidence exists to suggest that Greene was present at a performance of *Esther* – given that he had walked out on the Academy of Ancient Music the previous year, he may not have wanted to attend one of their performances, but as one of London’s foremost musicians he may perhaps have been interested to hear one of the public performances at the King’s theatre. Greene had been a follower of Handel’s works for many years and they had, until sometime in the late 1720s, been close friends, when Handel broke off all contact because Greene had also been, according to the music historian John Hawkins, ‘paying the same court’ of friendship to Handel’s rival Bononcini.<sup>10</sup> Greene, however, must surely have remained interested in Handel’s music, which can be attested in 1738, for example, when he subscribed to the publication of *Alexander’s Feast*.<sup>11</sup> Greene was not the only composer to quickly write an English oratorio following the first public performances of *Esther*: On 16 February 1733 the Dutch composer Willem De Fesch, who had recently settled in

<sup>6</sup> The Apollo Academy met at the Devil’s Tavern in the Strand at 7 p.m. on Wednesday evenings during the winter season (October–March) and provided a forum where Greene, his pupils and friends could perform their works. The performances were semi-private with only club members (or their guests by prior arrangement) being allowed to attend; anyone, however, could become a member by invitation or nomination by performing members or the managers in addition to payment of four guineas for the first season and two for subsequent seasons. For further details see *The Standing Orders of the Apollo-Society made At a General Meeting of the Members, on Wednesday the 4<sup>th</sup> Day of April, 1733. And confirmed At the subsequent General Meeting on Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> Day of April 1733* (London: 1733), 10, and Matthew Gardner, *Handel and Maurice Greene’s Circle at the Apollo Academy: the Music and Intellectual Contexts of Oratorios, Odes and Masques* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2008), 16.

<sup>7</sup> The performance, which also included a Te Deum setting by Greene, began at 12 noon. On the same day Handel offered a performance of *Esther* at the King’s Theatre beginning at 6:30 p.m. For details of both performances see *The Daily Journal*, 17 April 1733.

<sup>8</sup> *A Miscellany of Lyric Poems, The Greatest Part written for, And performed in The Academy of Music, Held at the Apollo*. London: Printed for the Academy, 1740.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of the allegorical content in *Esther* see Ruth Smith, *Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 276–84.

<sup>10</sup> Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*. London 1776. A New edition with the author’s posthumous notes, vol. 2 (London: 1875; Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1969), 879. For further details of the friendship and disagreement between Greene and Handel see Gardner, *Handel and Maurice Greene’s Circle*, 7–13 and H. Diack Johnstone, ‘Handel and his bellows-blower (Maurice Greene),’ *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge* 7 (1998): 208–17.

<sup>11</sup> *Alexander’s Feast or the Power of Musick. An Ode Wrote in Honour of St. Cecilia By Mr Dryden. Set to Musick by Mr Handel. With the Recitativo’s, Songs, Symphonys and Chorus’s for Voices and Instruments. Together with the Cantata Duet and Songs as Perform’d at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden. Publish’d by the author*. London: John Walsh, 1738.

England, gave the first performance of his oratorio, *Judith* to a libretto by William Huggins (1696–1761) – the music is, except for one air, lost, however the libretto survives.<sup>12</sup> De Fesch like Greene was clearly motivated by *Esther* and perhaps also by Huggins who, according to Burney, encouraged the performances of *Esther* at the Crown and Anchor Tavern.<sup>13</sup>

### Similarities between *Esther*, *The Song of Deborah and Barak* and *Judith*

The similarities between Handel's *Esther*, Greene's *Deborah and Barak* and De Fesch's *Judith* go beyond the fact that they are all English oratorios written in 1732–3. Firstly, the title roles of all three works are women and their stories all describe how a woman saves her people. Esther risks her own life by entering the presence of King Assuerus unbidden in order to persuade him to come to a banquet where she can expose the plot of his right-hand man, Haman, to commit genocide against the Jews. The story of Deborah and Barak relates how the Prophet Deborah sends Barak to lead the Israelites into battle, and ensures victory over the more powerful Canaanite army, giving, however, the final victory to another woman, Jael, who murders Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army, by inviting him into her tent and nailing his head to the ground with a tent peg. Judith, like Esther, also puts her own life in danger to save her people, but goes about it in a similar way as in the story of Deborah, in that Judith enters a foreign camp and disposes of the enemy's leader, here by means of decapitation. While the unknown librettist of Greene's *Deborah and Barak* and William Huggins who provided the text for De Fesch were primarily following Handel's example of writing an oratorio with a female heroine, they may well also have been aware of a publication that had been circulating since the early eighteenth century and which had reached its third edition in 1728. The book, by Nathaniel Crouch (published under his pseudonym 'Robert Burton'), is entitled *Female Excellency: or, The Ladies Glory* and includes descriptions of women from history who are particularly noteworthy.<sup>14</sup> The first three chapters of the book deal with the three heroines found in the first three English oratorios. The story of Susanna, which is also included, became an oratorio subject when Handel set it in 1748.

<sup>12</sup> *Judith: An Oratorio; or, Sacred Drama By W--- H--- Esq; The Musick Composed by Mr. William De Fesch, Late Chapel-Master of the Cathedral Church at Antwerp*. London: 1733. The libretto was later set again by John Christopher Smith (junior) in c. 1755–8 and by Thomas Augustine Arne in 1761. For details of these settings 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: Ashgate, 2000), 158–71. While Greene and De Fesch wrote new English language works following the success of *Esther*, Thomas Arne took a different route in performing a pirated version of Handel's *Acis and Galatea* from 1718 on 17 and 19 May 1732. Handel quickly retaliated by offering a newer version of the work on 10 June 1732. See *The Daily Post*, 2, 6, 11 and 17 May 1732 and *The Daily Courant* 5 and 10 June 1732. See also Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel a Documentary Biography* (London: A and C Black, 1955), 289–94.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Burney, *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster-Abbey and the Pantheon in Commemoration of Handel* (London: 1785), 100–1.

<sup>14</sup> Burton, Robert [Nathaniel Crouch], *Female Excellency: or, The Ladies Glory*. London: 1688, <sup>3</sup>1728. Crouch's pseudonym 'Robert Burton' occasionally appears as 'Richard Burton'.

Secondly, all three oratorio subjects could be interpreted as an allegory for eighteenth-century Britain and/or British politics and all three stories were popular, featuring in literary commentary and publications. *Esther* can be interpreted in various ways, the original Canons version from c. 1720 as supporting the Jacobite cause, or in 1732 the representation of the defeated French invasion of 1731, for example. As Ruth Smith has shown, the allegory was flexible enough to represent any national or religious group who were spared from persecution.<sup>15</sup> The story of Deborah and Barak had been used in connection with British politics long before Greene and Handel set the subject. In 1704, for instance, it was widely used as an allegory for the Duke of Marlborough's victory over the French and Bavarians at Blenheim on 13 August – a key event in the War of Spanish Succession.<sup>16</sup> The parallel is simple: Queen Anne (Deborah) sent out the commander of her armies (Marlborough) to disperse a national-religious enemy (the French). As part of the celebrations thanksgiving services were held across the country, many of the surviving sermons from these services use the story of Deborah and Barak as their theme. The subject was, however, not only limited to sermons, it also appeared in church anthems, poems and pamphlets.<sup>17</sup> The story of Deborah and Barak remained popular up until both Greene and Handel set the subject, but in how far it could still be related to British politics in 1732 is open to interpretation.<sup>18</sup> It was, however, no doubt, like *Esther*, a story that was still associated with victory in war against a foreign oppressor – something which was still the case as late as 1743 and 1745 when the story could be connected with the battle of Dettingen or the Jacobite Rebellion, and when Handel revived his *Deborah* in 1744.<sup>19</sup> The subject found in De Fesch's *Judith* can similarly be seen as a parallel to the recent wars with France, in that Judith also saves her land from a foreign oppressor.

Thirdly, the formal design of the oratorios by Greene and De Fesch owe some debts to Handel. According to Huggins's libretto for De Fesch's *Judith*, the work included 22 passages of secco recitative, three accompanied recitatives, seven choruses, fourteen airs (none of which are marked da capo in the libretto), and one grand march, spread

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, 280–1.

<sup>16</sup> See annotations in the copy of William Penn (Philanglus), *Deborah and Barak: A Poem* (London: 1705) held by the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, US-AUS, HRC WK A100 705D3. The allegory is also used in various sermons, see, for example, Evans, John. *A Sermon Preach'd at Chester and Wrexam, September: 7th 1704. Being the Day of Publick Thanksgiving for the Glorious Victory at Blenheim*. London: 1704; Grant, John. *A Sermon Preach'd at the Cathedral Church of ROCHESTER, on the Seventh of September 1704. Being the Thanksgiving-Day for the Glorious Victory obtained by the Duke of MARLBOROUGH, over the French and Bavarian Armies at Blenheim near Hochstet on the Banks of the Danube*. London: 1704; Jephson, Alexander. *A Sermon Preach'd in the Parish-Church of Camberwell, on the 7th Day of September 1704 being appointed by Her Majesty as a Day of Publick Thanksgiving and Rejoycing For the Glorious Victory obtain'd over the French and Bavarians at Blenheim, near Hochstet, on the 2nd August last past, by the Forces of Her Majesty and Her Allies, under the Command of the Duke of Marlborough*. London: 1705; Milbourne, Luke. *Great Britains Acclamation to her Deborah, A Sermon Preached in the Parish Church of St. Ethelburga, September VII. 1704. being the Day Appointed by her MAJESTY for a Solemn Thanksgiving for the Great Victory Gain'd by the Con-federate Forces of England, Holland and the Empire, against the French and Bavarians at Blenheim in Germany, under the Conduct of JOHN Duke of MARLBOROUGH and Prince EUGENE of SAVOY*. London: 1704.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed list see Gardner, *Handel and Maurice Greene's Circle at the Apollo Academy*, 303–4.

<sup>18</sup> See Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, 285–6, and Gardner, *Handel and Maurice Greene's Circle at the Apollo Academy*, 49–50.

<sup>19</sup> Literary works published around the same time also suggest a connection between these events and the story of Deborah and Barak, see Owen, Josiah. *The Song of Deborah, apply'd to the Battle of Dettingen. A Thanksgiving Sermon On Occasion of the Late Glorious Victory, Obtain'd by the Allied Army over the French. Preach'd August the 1<sup>st</sup>*. London: 1743; or John Adams, *Poems on Several Occasions, Original and Translated. By the late Reverend and Learned John Adams, M.A.* (London: 1745), 37–43.

across three acts divided into scenes.<sup>20</sup> The action seems to be quickly paced and the work appears to have been suitable for the theatre. Like the wordbooks for the 1732 performances of Handel's *Esther*, the libretto for De Fesch's work also carried the title of 'An Oratorio, or, Sacred Drama'. Greene's *The Song of Deborah and Barak*, in contrast, was never actually called an oratorio in any of the surviving sources by Greene himself.<sup>21</sup> Greene's work also differs from Handel's *Esther* in that, being based on the 'Song of Deborah and Barak' from Judges V, it is a narrative description of the events of Judges IV, where the original story is found. There are consequently no named characters and little dramatic action. The short work, which is made up of only one act and has a performance time of around 50 minutes, concentrates on Barak winning the battle and Jael murdering Sisera. The oratorio is made up of a French overture, six passages of secco recitative, six accompanied recitatives, four airs (all without da capo), one arioso, one duet and four choruses, and three soloists are divided almost equally in three sections across the work. The strong emphasis on accompanied recitative is perhaps indicative of Greene's interest in the emotional aspect of the story, and the chorus, although only employed twice, fulfils a similar function as in Handel's oratorios in that it represents the general population and commentates on the events of the story. Although Greene's work is a narrative rather than a dramatic oratorio, it still includes some dramatic music and Greene engages closely with the emotions of the story. One such example is the moment when Sisera is nailed to the ground by Jael – here Greene uses musical imagery to depict the blows of the hammer on the ten peg.<sup>22</sup> Greene may have chosen a more ode-like, narrative setting of the 'Song of Deborah and Barak' because of his own success with setting Pope's St Cecilia ode in 1730. His use of a popular biblical subject with a female heroine and allegorical story was, however, inspired by Handel's example in *Esther*.

## Handel's *Deborah* and *Athalia*

Following the success of *Esther* in 1732, Handel was also keen to produce further English oratorios, and in February 1733 he quickly composed *Deborah*, which received its first performance on 17 March, exactly one month before Greene's work was performed outside the Apollo Academy at Whitehall chapel, and one day after the premiere of De Fesch's *Judith*. That Handel composed a further oratorio was certainly due to the success of *Esther*, the choice of subject, however, may have been a snub or competitive attack against Greene. Handel's *Deborah* was a more spectacular work than Greene's, being over twice as long, employing considerably larger forces, including an eight-part chorus and rich instrumentation. Handel also continues the pattern of female title roles with *Deborah* and his third oratorio *Athalia*, although *Athalia*'s murderous, heathen queen moves away from the idea of female virtue. Whether part of Handel's intention in setting *Deborah* was intended as an attack against Greene or not, it seems to have discouraged Greene from

<sup>20</sup> *Judith: An Oratorio; or, Sacred Drama* By W---H--- Esq; *The Musick Composed by Mr. William De Fesch, Late Chapel-Master of the Cathedral Church at Antwerp*. London: 1733.

<sup>21</sup> For a list of surviving sources see Gardner, *Handel and Maurice Greene's Circle at the Apollo Academy*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> GB-Lbl Add. 5326, f. 44v.

producing further oratorios in the immediate future – his next large-scale work was the secular pastoral opera *Florimel, or Love's Revenge*, first performed in 1734, to a libretto by John Hoadly (1711–1776), who was to become Greene's regular librettist.<sup>23</sup>

## New English language works 1736–1740

From 1736 a new round of activity in producing English language odes and oratorios began among Handel's contemporaries. The first was a two-part oratorio *David's Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan* by William Boyce, a pupil of Greene who also worked as his copyist, given at the Apollo Academy on 16 April. The work, which describes the reaction of David to the news that King Saul and Jonathan are dead, is descriptive with no character names and follows the structural and stylistic example of Greene's *Deborah and Barak* rather than Handel's oratorios – a logical choice for Boyce as Greene's pupil.<sup>24</sup> One year after Boyce's first attempt at oratorio, Greene again turned to the genre with a new two-part oratorio *Jephtha*, like *Florimel* the libretto was by John Hoadly. Greene's timing may have had something to do with the fact that Handel had, in 1737, not written a new English oratorio for four years. Although the London premiere of *Athalia* took place in 1735, in the 1735–6 season *Esther*, *Deborah* and *Athalia* were all performed as part of a concerted effort to establish the genre and as a counter strike against the Opera of the Nobility,<sup>25</sup> and in 1736 Handel had performed a new ode for St. Cecilia's day, *Alexander's Feast*; none of these works were new English oratorios. Perhaps Greene thought the time was right to make another attempt, possibly with the hope of a theatre performance, especially as Handel appeared to have turned his interest back to Italian opera and towards English odes rather than oratorios.<sup>26</sup>

*Jephtha* is Greene's first dramatic oratorio, here the characters have their own parts, the chorus plays a more integral role, representing the virgins, soldiers and elders. However, the drama is more slowly paced than in Handel's oratorios and Greene, as in *The Song of Deborah and Barak*, places the emphasis on the emotions of the story, especially the relationship between Jephtha and his daughter. Jephtha, who returns from exile to save his land in need, makes a vow to God that if he is victorious in battle, he will sacrifice the first person he sees on his return home. This turns out to be his own daughter, who, at least in Greene's work and accordance with the Bible, is duly put

<sup>23</sup> The opera was evidently popular, otherwise it is difficult to explain why six manuscript sources and numerous word-books spread across 20 years that document that at least two versions of the work were performed survive. Greene may have been motivated to write a masque, rather than an oratorio, by the hope of performing the work publically while avoiding any reaction from Handel – the English pastoral masque was a genre in which Handel had shown little interest. For a description of the sources see H. Diack Johnstone's introduction to Maurice Greene, *Florimel or Love's Revenge*, *Music for London Entertainment 1660–1800*, series C, vol. 6 (London: Stainer and Bell, 1995), x–xi.

<sup>24</sup> The libretto was reset in 1738 (first performance 1740) by John Christopher Smith (junior) Handel's assistant and son of his principal copyist John Christopher Smith (senior), and it is possible to speculate that through Smith (junior) Handel might have seen the libretto – in January 1739 Handel's own *Saul* received its premiere. The music for Smith's setting is, with the exception of one duet, lost.

<sup>25</sup> Burrows, "A Sacred Oratorio for the Theatre," 136.

<sup>26</sup> Winton Dean and Otto Erich Deutsch refer to a performance of Greene's *Jephtha* at the King's Theatre in 1737, but no evidence exists to support this. See Dean, *Handel's Oratorios*, 589, and Deutsch, *Handel*, 427. The oratorio must have been performed at least twice as two versions of the work, transmitted in one manuscript source (GB-Ob MS. Mus. d. 54), exist.

to death – in Handel's setting of the same story from 1751, the daughter is saved. The musical structure includes airs (in contrast to *Deborah and Barak*, nearly all da capo), recitative (accompanied and secco), duets and choruses, all of which have been carefully planned and integrated into the story's structure and emotional events. It is the first work by Greene to fully attempt to engage with Handelian oratorio style.

A political connection can also be found in Hoadly's text which was highly relevant in the 1730s.<sup>27</sup> The libretto sums up the patriot ideals of putting the good of the country before personal needs which were being discussed by Lord Bolingbroke and his followers in the Prince of Wales's circle. Hoadly had, as Chaplain to the Prince of Wales, a connection to this circle and was engaging with patriot ideals, which were also relevant to the Prince, who spent his time gambling, drinking and supporting the arts, rather than taking an interest in his country. The story was popular in literary circles and Giacomo Carissimi's oratorio from c. 1645 had been performed by the Academy of Ancient Music in 1734, which may have helped lead Greene and Hoadly to the subject.<sup>28</sup> Whether Handel knew Greene's *Jephtha* is unknown, it seems unlikely that he went to the Apollo Academy to hear it, especially given the relations between him and Greene. However, he may have seen a copy of the libretto and he would probably have heard about the work. Thomas Morell, Handel's librettist for his own *Jephtha* composed in 1751, clearly knew Hoadly's libretto as he quoted from it, almost word for word, in his libretto for Handel.<sup>29</sup>

## Odes for St Cecilia's Day

The success of *Alexander's Feast* was probably responsible for a sudden interest among Handel's contemporaries between 1736 and 1739 in writing odes for St Cecilia. In this short period three such works were composed by Handel's contemporaries, one by Festing and two by Boyce, and it is likely that Greene's ode from 1730 was also revived, given that it was included in the 1740 Apollo Academy libretto collection.<sup>30</sup> *Alexander's Feast* had proved popular with it being published in 1738 in full score to which Greene and Festing both subscribed,<sup>31</sup> and the success of the ode was probably what led Boyce and Festing to revive the late seventeenth-century tradition of setting odes for St Cecilia's day. Boyce's first ode from c. 1737–8 to a text by Peter Vidal is a short work, consisting of seven numbers (including one recitative); likewise, Festing's ode, to a text by Joseph Addison, follows a simple structure in one part made up of sixteen numbers (including five recitatives). Festing's work may have been influenced by *Alexander's Feast* in so far as it uses a pre-existing text from the late seventeenth century. Boyce's second *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*, to a text by John Lockman and first performed in 1739, however, shows

<sup>27</sup> An analysis of the political allegory in Greene's *Jephtha* and Handel's *Jephtha* (1751) can be found in Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, 335–345, and Gardner, *Handel and Maurice Greene's Circle at the Apollo Academy*, 51–92.

<sup>28</sup> William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England: A Study in Canon, Ritual and Ideology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 185.

<sup>29</sup> Hoadly's text reads "Our Promis'd Joy to Sorrow turning, Our Songs of Triumph into Mourning?," Morrell's, "All our Joys to Sorrow turning, And our Triumphs into Mourning".

<sup>30</sup> *A Miscellany of Lyric Poems*, 37–42.

<sup>31</sup> See subscribers list to *Alexander's Feast or the Power of Musick*. London: John Walsh, 1738.



a more clear debt to *Alexander's Feast*. Firstly, Boyce's ode is in two parts of roughly the same length as Handel's work (70 mins), and secondly the content of part one of the ode closely resembles Handel's ode by describing in recitatives the effects of certain types of music and then demonstrating their effect in the following airs.<sup>32</sup> Whether Boyce and Lockman took their example from Handel's *Alexander's Feast*, or directly from Dryden's text which was well known, is impossible to know. It is also difficult to ascertain to what extent Handel's setting of Dryden's 1687 'Song for St Cecilia's Day', first performed on 22 November 1739, one day after the premiere of Boyce's ode, was in part a competitive move against the activities of the Apollo Academy composers.

*Alexander's Feast* did not just mark the beginning of a revived interest in odes for St. Cecilia's Day among London's composers; it was also the first work which began a tendency to set libretto subjects based on texts or themes from seventeenth-century English poetry. Examples include Handel's 1739 *Ode for St Cecilia's Day* to a text by Dryden; *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* and *Samson*, which use texts by Milton; *Semele* to a text by Congreve; Festing's *Ode for St Cecilia's Day* (Addison) and *A Song for May Morning* (Milton); Boyce's *Secular Masque* (Dryden); and Thomas Arne's *The Judgment of Paris* (Congreve). In this respect Handel's English contemporaries may also have been following his example.

## Singers

One further respect in which Handel's English oratorios and odes from the 1730s and those by his contemporaries differ is in their performance conditions. With the exception of the first three 1732 performances of Handel's *Esther* (first version) at the Crown and Anchor Tavern and the premiere of *Athalia* in Oxford, all of Handel's English oratorios and odes from the 1730s received their premiere in the theatre. For the *Esther* performances at the Crown and Anchor Handel used singers taken from the choir of the Chapel Royal, making up an all-male cast (the soprano solos were sung by boy trebles). For his oratorio performances in the theatre, however, Handel's cast generally consisted of soloists taken not from the London choirs, but rather from his company of Italian opera singers and/or by actors and English singers who had either already left one of the London choirs (such as John Beard as a tenor) or who had been educated outside the context of the church.<sup>33</sup> One reason for Handel's lack of use of Chapel Royal or church singers in his theatre performances of oratorios was owing to objections in London about the performance of sacred music in the theatre.<sup>34</sup> Further

<sup>32</sup> In part 2 of Boyce's work the typical display of instruments often seen in odes for St Cecilia (hautboys, warbling flutes, viols, trumpets, etc.) can be found.

<sup>33</sup> This applies especially to female singers who could not be part of one of the London choirs. They were usually either actors who had learnt to sing or singers who had been taught privately, such as Cecilia Young (1712–1789) who was taught by Francesco Geminiani. Cecilia Young was also involved in performances of *Ariodante* and *Alcina* and could therefore clearly sing in Italian.

<sup>34</sup> The topic of sacred music in the theatre was discussed at the conference of the Halle Händel-Festspiele in 2008, the papers covering a wide variety of topics can be found in *Händel-Jahrbuch* 55 (2009), for the 1730s in London see Burrows, "A Sacred Oratorio for the Theatre," 135–44; John H. Roberts, "The Composition of Handel's *Esther*," 1718–1720, *Händel-Jahrbuch* 55 (2009): 353–90 and Matthew Gardner, "Händel, die Kirche und „geistliche“ Musik im Theater," *Händel-Jahrbuch* 55 (2009): 125–34.

issues were that those singers from the Chapel Royal who were ordained priests, such as John Abbot, could not appear on stage in the theatre and that there may have been some conflict between the commitments of singers to the London choirs and theatre performances. Additionally, Handel's opera singers had already been engaged for the season and were readily available, and oratorio, which originally was only intended to supplement opera and not replace it, was performed in the theatre where singers of the best quality were expected by audiences – using his Italian cast for the first theatre performances of English oratorios was therefore the most straightforward approach available to Handel. As a result, for the first performance of *Deborah* in 1733 Handel employed his London opera cast, with the castrato Senesino in the role of Barak and Anna Strada del Pò as Deborah. A similar formula was repeated in 1735 for the first London performances of *Athalia*, where Strada del Pò and Carestini sang the roles of Josabeth and Joad; however, some English singers were also involved in these *Athalia* performances with, for example, Cecilia Young as Athalia and John Beard as Mathan. When in 1736 Handel performed *Alexander's Feast* in London, the cast was all English with the exception of Strada del Pò, and from this point on Handel's oratorio performances were predominantly given with English singers.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast to Handel's English language works, the oratorios, odes and masques by Greene, Festing and Boyce were primarily intended for semi-private performance at the Apollo Academy. Greene as organist and composer to the Chapel Royal and organist of St. Paul's Cathedral frequently drew on the choirs of these institutions to perform the solo parts and choruses of his oratorios, and it is reasonable to suppose that they were also available for performances of works by Greene's pupil Boyce, his friend Festing and perhaps for other concerts at the Apollo Academy.<sup>36</sup> As the Academy performed at the Devil's Tavern rather than in the theatre, this offered those members of the Chapel Royal and London choirs who were priests, such as John Abbot, or those who may have had scruples performing in the theatre the opportunity of participating in such works.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusions

Handel's *Esther* was undoubtedly a work that gave Handel's contemporaries the initial incentive to write English oratorios. On the one hand they modelled elements of their own works on Handel's oratorios – such as using popular subjects that engaged with national and moral ideals and to a certain extent musical structure. On the other hand, they were developing their own English styles with roots in the ode tradition, producing narrative oratorios such as *The Song of Deborah and Barak* and

<sup>35</sup> One exception is the French soprano Elisabeth Duparc ('La Francesina') who regularly sang in Handel's English works in the 1730s and 40s, including performances of *Saul, Israel in Egypt, A Song for St. Cecilia's Day, L'Allegro, Samson, Joseph and his Brethren, Belshazzar, Semele, Hercules and Occasional Oratorio*.

<sup>36</sup> Details of the singers for the solo parts and choruses in Greene's works set to texts by Hoadly can be found in a collection of Hoadly's librettos for Greene held in the De Beer collection at the University of Otago Library, Dunedin, New Zealand. Z-Du Eb 1737 H.

<sup>37</sup> Singers included Anselm Bayly, Thomas Bell, John Freeman, George Laye, Edward Lloyd, Benjamin Mence, Francis Rowe, Robert Wass and Samuel Weely. For a table of singers who performed in works by Greene and Boyce see Gardner, *Handel and Maurice Greene's Circle at the Apollo Academy*, 301–2.

*David's Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan*. Their initial reluctance to fully engage with dramatic oratorio was probably a result of several factors – a lack of detailed knowledge of Handel's oratorios, a desire to preserve forms such as the English ode, with which composers such as Greene had experience, and that ode-like works were better suited to the performance location of the Apollo Academy, rather than the theatre. After around 1740 Handel dominated the English oratorio scene until his death; his English contemporaries, however, continued to occasionally produce oratorios, odes or masques that were on the same or similar subjects to those by Handel (or vice versa) – including, for example, the *Choice of Hercules*, the *Force of Truth*, *Jephtha* and *Joseph*, some of which even closely overlapped with Handel's own performances of works on the same subjects, such as Smith's *David's Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan* (1740) or De Fesch's *Joseph* (1745). Despite their attempts at oratorio, the composers associated with the semi-private Apollo Academy in the 1730s were never really a threat to Handel, but perhaps they occasionally hoped that they could perform their works in the theatre – once Handel had died in 1759, the door was opened for other composers such as John Stanley and John Christopher Smith (junior) to perform oratorios in the theatre; unfortunately it was too late for Greene who Handel outlived.<sup>38</sup>

## Appendix: English Oratorios, Odes and Masques 1732–1740

Handel (first performances)		Handel's Contemporaries (first performances)	
		06/07/1730	Greene: <i>Ode for Musick</i> (performed in Cambridge)
02/05/1732	<i>Esther</i> (2nd version – King's Theatre)		
		late 1732	Greene: <i>The Song of Deborah and Barak</i> (Apollo Academy)
		16/02/1733	De Fesch: <i>Judith</i>
17/03/1733	<i>Deborah</i>		
		17/04/1733	Greene: <i>The Song of Deborah and Barak</i> (Whitehall Chapel)
10/07/1733	<i>Athalia</i> (performed in Oxford)		
		1734	Greene: <i>Florimel, or Love's Revenge</i> (pastoral opera)

<sup>38</sup> For details of the oratorios of Smith and Stanley see Zöllner, Eva. *English Oratorio after Handel: The London Oratorio Series and its Repertory 1760–1800*. Marburg: Tectum, 2002; Richard G. King, "John Christopher Smith's Pasticcio Oratorios," *Music and Letters* 76/2 (1998): 190–218.

Handel (first performances)		Handel's Contemporaries (first performances)	
01/04/1735	<i>Athalia</i> (London premiere)		
19/02/1736	<i>Alexander's Feast</i>		
		16/04/1736	Boyce: <i>David's Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan</i>
		c. 03/1737	Greene: <i>Jephtha</i>
		?1737-8	Festing: <i>Ode for St. Cecilia's Day</i>
		?1737-8	Boyce: <i>Ode for St Cecilia's Day</i> (Vidal text)
16/01/1739	<i>Saul</i>		
04/04/1739	<i>Israel in Egypt</i>		
		21/11/1739	Boyce: <i>Ode for St. Cecilia's Day</i> (Lockman text)
22/11/1739	<i>A Song for St Cecilia's Day</i>		
		22/2/1740	Smith: <i>David's Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan</i> (composed 1738)
		early 1740	Greene: <i>The Judgment of Hercules</i>
27/04/1740	<i>L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato</i>		

## POVZETEK

Po uspehu prve javne uprizoritve *Esther* leta 1732 je Händel začel odkrivati možnosti angleškega oratorija kot nove zvrsti, zato sta leta 1733 hitro sledili dve novi deli, *Deborah* in *Athalia*. Vendar pa Handel ni bil edini, ki je videl možnosti v angleškem oratoriju; leta 1732 sta tako Willem De Fesch kot tudi Maurice Greene ustvarila svoji lastni deli, *Judith* (glasba se je izgubila) in *The Song of Deborah and Barak*. Podobne okoliščine so se pojavile v poznih 30. letih 18. stoletja, po prvih uprizoritvah Händlove ode za praznik svete Cecilije, *Alexander's Feast* leta 1736; med leti 1736 in 1739 je William Boyce ustvaril dve odi za praznik

svete Cecilije, Michael Christian Festing pa eno, leta 1737 pa je Greene še enkrat poskusil z angleškim oratorijem z delom *Jephtha*; nekatera od teh del so brez dvoma dobila spodbudo z uspehom dela *Alexander's Feast*. Medtem ko je bil razvoj Händlovega angleškega oratorija v 30. letih 18. stoletja deležen precejšnje pozornosti, pa so bila dela njegovih angleških sodobnikov pogosto zanemarjena. V članku je napravljen ponoven pregled razvoja angleškega oratorija v 30. letih 18. stoletja, ki kronološko raziskuje odnose med Handlovimi deli in deli njegovih sodobnikov ter ocenjuje vpliv Handlovih prvih angleških oratorijev na sodobnike glede na slog, obliko, izbiro teme in alegorično vsebino.