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Michael Lloyd, Oxford

Towards An Outline of Handel's Theology¹

It was very unwise of me to agree to speak on the subject of 'Handel's theology', for three reasons. First, I am not a Handel scholar. Secondly, I am not a musicologist. And thirdly, Handel didn't write any theology. (I said that to a colleague in the Theology Faculty, and he said, 'Yes, and fourthly, you are not a theologian', so that was encouraging.)

It does, however, raise the question of methodology – of how one seeks to tease out what were the distinctive and instinctive assumptions and beliefs of a composer who left no written record of those beliefs. I shall be using three tools. The first is *biographical*: are there comments and anecdotes that his contemporaries and early biographers claim to have recorded, which might shed light on what he believed? To be candid, the biographical evidence is depressingly sparse. Donald Burrows laments the fact that whilst 'We can document Handel's public and professional life with fullness and precision [...], we know virtually nothing about his opinions on the political, religious or philosophical issues of his day.'² We are therefore largely dependent upon the other tools.

The second is *textual*: what libretti did Handel choose to set when he was free to do so? Are there any patterns to his choices? And what did he do with those libretti? Did he change them in any way, and, if so, are those changes in any way significant? Did he omit to set parts of those texts? On at least one occasion, as we shall see, he excused his refusal to set a particular passage by claiming that it would make the oratorio too long. Even if that proffered reason is taken at face value, the choice of which passages of the libretto to excise could well be significant. So if we can see some characteristic of the omitted words that seems inimical to our growing sense of what his views were, we are entitled to see the omission as further cumulative evidence that that growing sense is approximately on target.

So there is the biographical tool, the textual tool, and thirdly, there is the *musical* tool. The text may be putting the weight on one place or one person – the music may be putting it on quite another. A question to which one needs to be alert in listening

1 I am very grateful for all the questions and comments that followed the paper (to the 2012 Halle Handel Conference) on which this article is based, which have forced further reflection upon me. I am particularly grateful to Donald Burrows for generously taking the time to make a number of extremely helpful suggestions. I am indebted to him at several points, but the failings remain my own.

2 Donald Burrows, *Handel: his life and work*, in: *Handel. A Celebration of his Life and Times*, ed. Jacob Simon (catalogue for a National Portrait Gallery exhibition in 1985), London 1985, p. 9.

to a Handel opera or oratorio is whether Handel is in any way subverting the surface meaning of the words with the music that he gives to the different characters.

So, armed with these tools, but acutely aware of their bluntness, what might we begin to say about Handel's theological convictions? I tentatively offer the following amateur and highly provisional sketch.³

I

His theology was *ecumenical*.⁴ The age into which Handel was born was wearied and horrified by the religious wars of the seventeenth century, and it hankered after a less polemical engagement and rapprochement between the fragmented elements of Christendom. Leibniz, for example, according to the historian Gerald Cragg, was best known to his contemporaries, not as a mathematician and philosopher, but 'as an advocate of Christian reunion. He felt that the internal divisions of Christendom were as needless as they were disastrous.'⁵

Halle's great educationalist, August Hermann Francke and his fellow pietists were 'more ecumenically minded than most contemporary Protestants and their accounts of orthodoxy gave ample scope for the beliefs of Roman Catholics, Reformed Calvinists and the more radical Christian sects, as well as for the varieties of their Lutheran fellows.'⁶ Francke tried to instill a like ecumenical spirit into the children under his charge. He got them to sing the old songs of the Bohemian Brethren, verses brought from France by Huguenot glass-blowers, and poems of medieval Catholic mystics.⁷ Whether or not Handel was ever actually *taught* by Francke, that was the spirit of the age and of the area, and Handel seems to have imbibed it. Hamish Swanston is prepared to suggest that 'The origins of Handel's cheerful confidence in

3 Another difficulty in writing of 'Handel's theology' is the likelihood that his views on the religious issues of his day – as on the political and philosophical – will have changed over time.

4 The word 'ecumenical' is here being used in the sense of openness towards different denominations and traditions within the *oeconomia* of Christian faith. Recent research has suggested that his attitude towards members of the Jewish faith was possibly less generous. See Michael Marrisen, *And He shall Purify the Sons of Levi: a Re-reading of Handel's Messiah*, forthcoming in 2014.

5 Gerald Cragg, *The Church & the Age of Reason 1648–1789*, Harmondsworth 1983 (1960), p. 43.

6 Hamish Swanston, *Handel* (Outstanding Christian Thinkers Series), ed. Geoffrey Chapman, London 1990, p. 2.

7 *Ibid.*

dealing with a whole range of Christian believers may be sought in the teaching and example of these Halle pastors.⁸

Born into a Lutheran family, he does not seem to have felt compromised to take the post of organist at the Calvinist Domkirche in Halle, and later worked for Roman Catholics in Italy and Anglicans in London. True, jobbing musicians can't be choosers, but Mainwaring reports that Handel pronounced himself 'neither qualified nor disposed to enter' into disputes between denominations.⁹ Deborah Rooke may be right to detect in *Deborah* a defence of Britain's laws, liberty and religion against the threat of Catholic rule,¹⁰ but that seems more out of a desire to promote (and ingratiate himself with) his Hanoverian patrons than out of any strongly anti-Catholic sentiment¹¹ – at least until the Jacobite rebellion of 1745. This was, after all, the composer of the Vespers of our Lady of Mount Carmel.¹²

II

His theology was *generous*. Cragg, again, points out that, in the seventeenth century, 'Travel introduced a fluidity which brought new experiences and which often called into question old beliefs. [...] New patterns of virtue were brought to light. The Egyptian, the Chinese, the Persian, the Siamese, even the virtuous savage – all might be pagans, but it was discovered that they were true philosophers. They proved to be

8 *Ibid.*

9 Cited in Jonathan Keates, *Handel: The Man and His Music*, London 2008, p. 50.

10 Deborah W. Rooke, *Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti: Sacred Drama and Biblical Exegesis*, Oxford 2012, pp. 51–2.

11 This contention finds some support in the fact that, when Handel revisited Rome in 1729, 'he received a very friendly and obliging letter of invitation from Cardinal Colonna, with a promise of a very fine picture of his Eminence. But', says Mainwaring, 'hearing that the Pretender was then at the Cardinal's, he prudently declined accepting both the invitation and the picture.' See: John Mainwaring, *Memoirs of the Life of the late George Frederic Handel* (unchanged reprint of the original edition London 1960), Amsterdam 1964, p.113. He was evidently entirely comfortable accepting and enjoying the hospitality and patronage of a Roman Catholic Cardinal, but was not prepared to associate (and be associated) with one who posed a threat to the Hanoverian dynasty.

12 For an account of some of the research which established the Feast of Our Lady of Carmel (on July 16) as the liturgical setting for Handel's Latin Church Music, see: James S. Hall, *The Problem of Handel's Latin Church Music*, in: *The Musical Times* 100 (1959), pp. 197–200.

models of wisdom and virtue, even though they had never heard of the Christian faith.¹³

This, of course, played into the hands of the Deists. Handel's maturity coincided with the zenith of Deism – the 1720s and 1730s. Deism majored on God as Creator rather than on God as Redeemer. It believed in general revelation (in the order of creation, as recently elucidated by Newton) rather than in special revelation (in history). Deists such as Matthew Tindal argued that, clearly, moral understanding and moral virtue are not dependent upon any specifically Christian revelation. (The sub-text here was that challenging the tenets of that specifically Christian revelation – in particular its miraculous elements¹⁴ – would not unleash any corresponding moral threat.)

To judge by his generous portrayals of the characters of pagan women such as Seleuce¹⁵ and Rosmira¹⁶, it seems as if Handel accepted the premiss that pagan virtue was morally equivalent to that of Christian believers – without drawing from it, as Tindal did,¹⁷ the conclusion that special revelation was unnecessary and irrelevant. Handel's 'pagan' operas contain characters who bear out the claims that pagans were capable of comparable virtue to that of any Christian – while his 'Christian' oratorios, such as *Messiah*, still insist upon the special and necessary nature of revelation in the person of Christ. In Johannine language, it is not incompatible to hold *both* to the exalted nature of Christ as the Word – the unique and indispensable revelation and communication of God to and in the world that He made – and the universal availability of a degree of enlightenment from the Word, even to those who have not heard of Him: 'That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.'¹⁸

Handel seems, by his choice of opera plots, settings and characters, to have been, consciously or unconsciously, steering a middle line between the Deist writers (with

13 Gerald Cragg, *The Church* (see note 5), p. 46.

14 Handel seems to have maintained a belief in the miraculous to the end of his life, if the passion, profundity and poignancy of the music he gave to 'He saw the lovely youth' (*Theodora* Act II, Scene 6) is anything to go by.

15 Wife of Tolomeo.

16 Betrothed to Arsace in *Partenope*.

17 See his *Christianity as old as the Creation* – one of the key publications (in 1730) of the second wave of the Deist movement. This important work was revealingly subtitled, *The Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature*. Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as old as the Creation: or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature*, London 1730.

18 John 1:9.

Katie Hawks, London

Handel's Timely Triumphs

Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno (The triumph of Time and Truth) is not a liturgical work. But it started life as a commission from a Roman cardinal and ended life as a collaboration with an Anglican clergyman. It is almost unique amongst Handel's *opera* for being not just revived but revised twice.¹ *Il trionfo* was Handel's first oratorio; it turned out to be his last,² and in the middle was a version rewritten during what we might term his 'mid-life crisis', the 1730s. The original 1707 music is brilliant, and produced lots of plunder for other works, Italian and English. The later versions of it, in addition, contained booty from other works, both liturgical and non-liturgical, sacred and secular, Italian and English.

The three versions of *trionfo*, therefore, may help us answer the questions raised by this Conference, *viz*:

1. Are there stylistic differences between works composed for different denominations?
2. Does Handel have a particular church style?
3. Is there a marked difference in musical language between the concert oratorios and his liturgical music or are there points in common?

Additionally to these, there is the question of national style – not least because when discussing last year with some undergraduates 'how English was Handel's music, or how 'Handel' was English music?' I found myself uncharacteristically at a loss for words. All versions of *Il trionfo* are essentially the same, but the 1737 and 1757 versions do sound 'English' compared with the unquestionably Italian original. The 'Englishness' does not stop at the music: although there are very few changes between the 1707 and 1737 versions (and Morell's 1757 libretto is quite a faithful rendering),

1 There are also three versions of *Acis and Galatea*.

2 There is a debate about how much of the 1757 was Handel's own revision, and how much was contributed by his amanuensis J. C. Smith the younger. See, for example, Anthony Hicks, *The Triumph of Time and Truth*, programme note, *London Handel Festival*, 1999, p. 39; *idem.*, *The late additions to Handel's oratorios and the role of the younger Smith*, in: *Music in Eighteenth-Century England. Essays in Memory of Charles Cudworth*, ed. by Christopher Hogwood and Richard Lockett, Cambridge 1983, esp. pp. 152–163. It seems plausible that Handel chose the arias and choruses taken from other works, even if he left to Smith the actual shaping of them. The key probably lies in the recitatives, although given Handel's character, I find it hard to imagine that he gave Smith *carte blanche*.

there are nonetheless one or two changes which do, I think, give the work more of an English sensibility. We shall, therefore, be considering the work's alterations.

Handel composed *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* for Cardinal Benedetto Pamphilij, who wrote the libretto. The audience was select – the Arcadian cognoscenti of Rome, who knew intimately the poetic and intellectual landscapes of Horace, Virgil, Dante and Petrarch. The last of these had, some centuries before, written six poems called *I Trionfi*, and, as Mary Ann Parker noted, there was a waft of Petrarch about Pamphilij.³ Because *Il trionfo* was for a private audience, there are references and in-jokes which would not have been suitable for general public consumption. The least subtle of these was the realisation of 'Un leggiadro giovinetto' by Handel himself, with concerto organ part to suit.⁴ He was not the only musician referred to: the final aria has an obbligato violin, which was perhaps played by one of the 'angeli' spoken of in the previous recitative, that minister of violin heaven, *Archangelo* Corelli. (This is speculative – it could equally have been, for example, Antonio Montanari, another member of the Cardinal's musical circle).

That final aria is extraordinary, not just for its beauty but also for its unexpected end. M. A. Parker sees this as a Petrarchan moment: 'the overriding impression of the end of Petrarch's poem', she says, 'is one of incompleteness'.⁵ Whether it does indeed display Petrarchan incompleteness or not, the way the aria ends could, with its sudden, surprising stop, easily create a loop, going into the B section again, and returning *da capo, ad infinitum*. It could actually be 'unending', like the God and his heaven which the words describe, and which Tempo has described earlier as 'in cielo, ov'io non giungo, e dove bella eternità risiede' (in Heaven, where I have no place, and where glorious Eternity resides).

3 Mary Ann Parker, *Handel's Trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno: A Petrarchan Vision in Baroque Style*, in *Music & Letters* 84 (2003), pp. 403–413.

4 Huub van der Linden suggests that this was a dig at Handel by Pamphilij. See Huub van der Linden, *Benedetto Pamphilij as Librettist: Mary Magdalene and the Harmony of the Spheres in Handel's Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno*, in: *Recercare* XVI (2004), pp. 133–161. Undoubtedly Pamphilij here was making the point that music can be a vanity, but the ending of the work surely shows music to be also God-given and heavenly. The 'Taci' motif (Recitativo, Bellezza: 'Taci, qual suono ascolto!'), where the singer interrupts the orchestra, remained a favourite with the composer, who used it in *Acis and Galatea* (Air, Galatea: 'Hush, ye pretty warbling choir', *Silete venti* (Accompagnato: 'Silete venti'), and *L'Allegro* (Accompagnato, Il Penseroso: 'Hence, loathed melancholy').

5 Mary Ann Parker, *Handel's Trionfo* (see note 3), p. 408.

Time's recitative and the final recitative and aria are two of only three places in *Il trionfo* in which God is mentioned. The rest of the work could have been written by one of the pantheist Romans that Pamphilij so admired. In this he was merely carrying on the tradition of Dante, Petrarch and the rest of Italy's Renaissance men; such 'antiquery' was possible because Catholicism in Italy was unchallenged and ubiquitous. People saw it and heard it and breathed it daily, and there was perhaps no need to affirm it emphatically in such a work as this.

If *Il trionfo* owes a lot to Petrarch, it also owes much to Catholic confessional psychology. Ruth Smith has called this work a *Bildungsroman*, and has shown the dynamic of the drama to be the transformation of Bellezza from an underconfident young woman frightened of the uncertainties of ageing to a person of strength, faith and Stoicism.⁶ This scenario is, therefore, firmly rooted in Roman Catholic philosophy.

The libretto must have inspired Handel, who, after all, was himself a tip-top psychologist, for he composed music of superb quality. The music is full of youthful enthusiasm, experimentation and optimism; it is also quintessentially Italian – at least, it was once Corelli had weeded out Handel's all-too-French initial overture.⁷ Tempo's aria 'Urne voi' is a good example of Handel's Italian style. The piano-forte contrast and the repeated quaver or semi-quaver phrases and open harmonies and very stringy sound are very much associated with composers like Vivaldi, and the B section is full of Italianate suspensions, discords and exciting modulations, as Tempo opens up the horrors within the tomb.

Most of *Il trionfo*'s music was Handel's original and own. However, he did borrow several arias from someone else – but not an Italian. For example, Disinganno's luscious 'Crede l'uom', which Handel used later in two operas, came from an aria by the composer who influenced Handel so heavily in Hamburg, the cosmopolitan, but German, Reinhard Keiser. Indeed, Handel used material here from seven of Keiser's operas.⁸

6 Ruth Smith, *Psychological Realism in Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno*, in: *Händel-Jahrbuch* 54 (2008), pp. 219–228. This is also a classical idea, seen, for example in the 'choice of Hercules' scenario – see Ruth Smith, *The Choices of Hercules and Handel*, paper for the American Handel Society Conference in Seattle, 2011.

7 Incidentally, assuming Anthony Hicks to be right about the 1757 overture being the original 1707 one (Anthony Hicks, *The Triumph* [see note 2], p. 40) would support John Roberts' argument about Handel's overtures in his article *A Confessional Curiosity: Handel's Motet Silete venti* in this volume.

8 Anthony Hicks, *Il Trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno*, programme note, *London Handel Festival* (1997), p. 28.

Il Trionfo then became stock in Handel's 'little pie shop,' his borrowings library. Most immediately, he used various arias in his next oratorio, *La Resurrezione*. He then transferred it from sacred to secular, using it in *Vincer se stesso* (*Rodrigo*) and, in particular, *Agrippina*, where no fewer than eight arias made an appearance. Thereafter, his borrowings from *Il trionfo* declined in number, becoming the odd aria here and there by the time he reached London. This has little to do with language, metre or genre, but is because, as time marched on, Handel's library of his own and other composers' works increased, and he had a wider selection of musical sources.⁹

The next work which he borrowed more than one aria for was another oratorio, *Deborah*. Written in 1733, this was a mish-mash of English anthems,¹⁰ a German passion (*Brockes Passion*), and an Italian liturgical work, *Dixit Dominus*, and *Il trionfo*. *Deborah* demonstrates how indiscriminate Handel was about the genre of his borrowings, and, at least according to his borrowings from and in *Il trionfo*, there are no stylistic differences between different denominations or between liturgical music and concert oratorios.

His borrowings for *Deborah* raise another question: why Handel used what he did where he did, and what he did with it. Asking why he chose *that* particular piece to use in *this* particular situation can help us interpret the music or the subtext. Sometimes the reasons are obvious. Of course Piacere's 'Come nembo' should become Nero's 'Come nube' in *Agrippina*: not only are the words comparable but so are the characters. At other times a situation may be similar enough to imagine why a particular piece sprang to mind, so that the heated discussion over Bellezza's fate by the quartet of protagonists in part II of *Il trionfo* ('Voglio Tempo') might appropriately become the heated discussion over the Israelites' or Baalites' fate by four protagonists in Part II of *Deborah* ('All your boast'). Why, however, Handel thought that Piacere's 'Tu giurasti' was suitable for Jael's 'O the pleasure' is more obscure. The aria is at once spikey and slimey and menacing and insecure: Piacere threatens Bellezza that she promised not to leave him. Piacere is the villain of *Il trionfo*, who turns out in the end to be rather impotent and runs away. Jael, on the other hand, is a faithful Israelite who

9 Language and metre did not matter: melismas are easily created and lines changed to suit new numbers of syllables, especially if converting Italian to English words. For example, 'Voglio Tempo'/'All your boast'. In same-language borrowings, the metre and stress are different, e.g. Cleopatra's 'Venere bella' is different from 'Un leggiadro giovinetto'. For borrowings, see Winton Dean and Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas 1704–1726*, Oxford 1987, Appendix D; Winton Dean, *Handel's Operas 1726–1741*, Woodbridge 2006, Appendix D; and Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, Oxford 1990, Appendix E.

10 For further discussion of this, see David Vickers' article in this volume.