

**ILDIKÓ PINTÉR-KERESZTES**

**TREATMENT OF THE CHORUS  
IN HANDEL'S ORATORIOS  
BASED ON OLD TESTAMENT SUBJECTS**

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My interest in this topic was aroused by my great desire for acquiring a deeper knowledge of the Bible. After reading most of the Old Testament, however, I had the feeling that it is not only in music where its influence and traces can be found, so I also started to focus my attention on fine arts. As a result I discovered paintings by Rembrandt based on the Old Testament, and after getting acquainted with them I read several books on the painter's life and art.

I was concerned with Handel's works before my doctoral studies only incidentally. I was inspired by my consultant, Katalin Komlós to research the Old Testament and the works by Handel based on it. At that time I only knew a few of the approximately two-hundred movements.

The main sources of my research were of course Chrysander's *Händelgesellschaft* edition (old Handel-edition), published in the late 1800s. Although I tried hard to obtain – besides the scores indispensable for my work – at least one audio-recording of each oratorio, up to this time I have been unable to acquire an audio-recording covering the whole oratorio of the relatively rarely performed *Alexander Balus*. There have been of course several recordings of the more often performed pieces of the composer.

Writing the present DLA thesis was also necessitated by the fact that there is very little special literature in Hungarian language on Handel's oratorios. There are only some short analyses, reviews on them in the series *A hét zeneműve* (two writings by Máté Mesterházi), in Péter Várnai's book on oratorios and in the books on Handel from the Grove monographs also available in Hungarian. I would like to make up for this deficiency at least partly with the help of my DLA thesis.

## II. The Procedure of the Research

My first and foremost task was to give a detailed analysis of the choral movements of Handel's oratorios. I started the analysis with the oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus* which implied several novelties and remarkable composing techniques, even some never to be met again later in other pieces. What is meant here are some rarely used altered chords, movements based on passacaglia-style bass themes and certain kinds of polyphonic combinations. These initial analyses served a good purpose when I planned what points to consider in the analysis of the choral movements.

The other main source of my DLA thesis was Winton Dean's book on Handel in English language examining the oratorios from a mostly different point of view. The chief highlights are the circumstances of the birth of the librettos, their analysis, also the publications, autographs and the author's working conditions. Nevertheless, the introductory chapters were of great help to me to get acquainted with the origins of the genre.

The examination and summary of works based on the Old Testament preceding Handel's activity was time-consuming, however, I do not feel the months spent on it useless, since I am convinced that this way we can have a much deeper understanding of the influence of the Old Testament on Baroque vocal music. For my researches with this end in view two works were indispensable: the two genre-historic books on oratorios by Günther Massenkeil and books of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Fine arts as attendant arts were connected with this work in which I found paintings by Rembrandt the most suitable here. I have selected the illustrations to be found at the end of the thesis from his paintings.

## III. The Results of the Research

I examined first – as antecedents of Handel's oratorios – the Baroque oratorios also treating Old Testament topics. However, in the course of the research I recognized besides oratorios also some other genres named differently but also based on Old Testament stories. The first chapter and Appendices I and II belonging to it are about these works, the times and the places of their performances.

Chapter II of my thesis examines already closer influences, namely the English roots of Handel-oratorios. All the studies on Handel maintain the view according to which the antecedents of the composer's oratorios written in England are merely the genres he already used previously. Starting from this statement I examined all the genres belonging here, among others the English masque, the English anthem and the Italian oratorio volgare. Furthermore, I laid special stress on examining the English dialogue, which – according to my view – may also have been a significant source of English oratorio.

The second great part of the thesis already deals with the fourteen Handel oratorios based on the Old Testament. Chapter III introduces their rise in detail, their eventual reworking, the writers of the librettos. In the next two parts (Chapters IV and V) I wrote about the arrangement of the choirs, their personifications and about the movements consisting of several parts. I also included here the sub-chapter about the eventual manifold connections of soloists and choirs and also the *pausa* and Adagio-closing very often finishing Handel-choirs.

The lengthiest part of the thesis contains my conclusions drawn while analyzing five oratorio choirs. Of course the most essential requirement for being able to write this part was to study scrupulously the 60 choirs serving as the basis of the detailed musical analysis. Point for point I examined the choice of tonality and metre (Chapter VI), the

instrumentation (Chapter VII), the types of cadences and the special harmonies used by the composer (Chapter VIII), the homophonic and polyphonic styles of composing (Chapter IX), the scale-motifs, the bass-themes of passacaglia character (Chapter X).

The chapter introducing the cadences is very comprehensive and of summarizing character, it introduces the types most characteristic of Handel and helps to understand the depicted analysis with the help of expressive notes-examples. I mentioned here the different kinds of the most often used authentic cadence, in which the diversity of the dominant function chord is obvious due to the miscellaneous suspensions, anticipations and sometimes the combination of these two. I am the first to try to write about these types comprehensively and sum up my researches in a scientific way.

Already when examining scale-motifs it attracted my attention that Handel showed a preference for composing two-part texture. An explanation to this can be found in the relevant passages of Chapters IX and X. I think discovering this type of composition and the fields of application belong to the novelties of this thesis, since I had not come across them before in any special literature either in Hungarian or any other languages.

One of the chapters including the most novelties of the thesis describes the composition of homophonic and polyphonic movements. There are very few choir-movements which can be classified solely into one or the other type. So we should rather consider here homophonic and polyphonic sections revealing themselves most clearly in choirs consisting of several parts. So the two kinds of composing often get mixed. The different starting of fugue expositions shows the nicest examples of the two types. The two-part texture was the first opportunity for Handel to break away from homophony, but later he returns there again. The simplest way of polyphonic composition, the canon very often appears at the beginning of imitation sections. I mentioned separately the choirs which only have a canon, and dealt separately with the ones in which it can be the beginning part of a longer imitation section, for example of a fugue.

While analyzing the polyphonic parts in detail it became obvious to me how many different possibilities are implied in this phrase in Handel's choirs. The musical examples in Appendix IV are of great help to the detailed analyses of the parts written about fugue expositions and fugues.

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