

ON HANDEL'S SAUL AT THE GLYNDEBOURNE

A ARTE ALEGRE #2

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The Glyndebourne presented Handel's *Saul*, directed by Barrie Kosky, in 2015. Opus Art released a DVD of this performance in 2016. We highly recommend the Bärenreiter-Verlag edition of the vocal score to read while listening to any version of *Saul* (HWV 53). The Bärenreiter

edition is especially apt for accompanying the Glyndebourne production: the DVD packaging states that the Glyndebourne production used the edition of the oratorio published by Bärenreiter (and edited by Percy M. Young) as their score.

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George Frideric Handel's *Saul* was first performed in London in January 1739. Handel composed *Saul* in the relatively new form he was experimenting with: oratorio. Using the story of Saul's downfall from the book of 1 Samuel of the Old Testament, Handel's librettist Charles Jennens (who is most famous for the *Messiah* libretto of 1741) had drafted a version of the text as early as 1735. The oratorio takes place within bookends that are imposed on the two Books of Samuel: it begins with the defeat of Goliath (1 Samuel 17:55; Handel provides the heading for the first vocal song: "An Epanicion or Song of Triumph for the Victory over Goliath and the Philistines"); and it concludes with the lament for the deaths of Saul and Jonathan from 2 Samuel (2 Samuel 1:27). Early in Act I, the High

Priest sings the words to a poem that mirrors the chaos that will ensue in the oratorio, a chaos that lasts until Saul's death:

Nature began of labour eas'd,
Her latent Beauties to disclose
A fair harmonious world arose,
And tho' by diabolick guile,
Disorder Lord it for a while
The Time will come
When Nature shall pristine Form regain
And Harmony forever reign.

Although Saul's jealousy and raging in the oratorio correspond with the torment inflicted on him by an "evil spirit" (1 Samuel 16:14 and 18:10), Handel presents Saul as a strong ruler with steady airs.

Through this representation, Handel projects some of Saul's backstory into the oratorio. If we recall earlier in 1 Samuel, Saul was a young man out looking for his father's lost donkeys when he met Samuel who soon anointed him as ruler of the Israelites (1 Samuel 9:3-10:1). Saul's rise to become king is swift in the Scripture. It suggests that, by his own accord, Saul might not have been ready for this station because he was hiding among the baggage at the moment when Samuel was to appoint him as king before the crowd of Israelites (1 Samuel 10:22). This is a pronounced image of fear we find early in Saul's history. After Saul has made several poor choices, Samuel informs him that the Lord has rejected him as king (1 Samuel 15:23). The defeat of Goliath renders this rejection quite clear, and Saul begins to spiral downward by laying waste to his own good judgment. We can identify with this weakness more when we see an aspect of ourselves in Saul's narrative—for example, to be soothed by music, or to rage when we hear of success that is not our own. This is the hero Handel gives us in the oratorio, an individual who has been defeated and rejected, and accordingly we feel sorrow when Saul dies on the battlefield. The (Dead) March, and "Mourn Israel" Elegy on the Death of Saul and Jonathan at the conclusion of the oratorio are telling of Handel's sympathy for his oratorio's hero. The Scripture tells that Saul commits suicide from fear of what the enemy would do to him and it is Jonathan who is rightfully killed by the Philistines in battle (1 Samuel 31:1-6). But Handel's musical account does not impose a moral judgment by representing these two conditions of death as cowardly versus courageous; and this is (in light of the circumstances of the original story) a generous gesture.

We might argue that the Scripture is less charitable toward Saul than Handel's illustration of the same individual in music. Handel's original audience would have been familiar with the story of Saul from a religious education, and from the popularity of the theme of Saul and

Saul's madness for works of music and the arts in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The score offers an interpretation of the story first, by making the oratorio centered most prominently on one character (Saul's airs generally have stronger melodies) and second, with frequent appearances of the word "virtue" in the libretto. Handel's treatment of the word "virtue" (explored in one instance below) is often simple, but striking. For example, in a context to express that virtue is more valuable than material wealth, Handel's music allows the beauty of the word's meaning to blossom. This is essentially critical nuance expressed in music; Handel's interpretation of the libretto and the original story as found in the Old Testament reveals that the oratorio is not worried about going through the motions of detailing a plot—he seems much more interested in expressing the power of virtue musically.

Handel's treatment of Saul's airs reflects meaning from the libretto, and offers a perspective on different episodes in the original story. It is critical of the original story by making Saul into a person who reflects faults and values familiar to us in our daily lives. When Saul's son Jonathan enters the narrative space of the oratorio, he complements Saul himself. Jonathan is compassionate and recognizes the value of virtue over greed and arrogance. As a voice of reason in the oratorio—as in the Scripture—he establishes a value for virtue that is both human and not necessarily of noble birth; further, he is able to respect his father at the same time as align himself with the highest virtue. Handel's Jonathan expresses conviction through an eagerness to explain and defend his beliefs. We find his airs appeal to what is good and what is possible. Further, we recognize in Handel's musical settings that Saul, despite his misery and madness, also has the capacity for that good. The tragedy that befalls Handel's hero is that Saul succumbs to his own desperation, and he is never able to reunite with the light that had once blessed him.

2.

Christopher Purves, who plays the titular role of Saul, embodies the disorder that is described in the High Priest's poem (cited above)—both in his own airs and by bleeding into the airs of the other characters. Purves's tone and approach to the musical elements of Saul's part are commendable. The character of Saul is sometimes portrayed by an aging basso, with a vocal color that crackles with vibrato. Purves is, much to the contrary, fully infused with diabolical steam and his voice is steady with the richness of the Fiend.

But whenever a production like Glyndebourne's *Saul* comes around, the heavy-handedness of critical debate generally follows on whether this particular oratorio, or any oratorio by Handel, should be staged at all. Percy M. Young—the editor of the score the Glyndebourne production used—famously made a strong case that *Saul* should not be staged. This argument is frequently regarded as old-fashioned for current taste, as it was published in 1948: *to recognize the sublimity of Saul it is necessary to refer to the intellectual and not the corporeal*. Handel's oratorio genre emerged precisely out of the political and religious environment. Thus some may argue that, in Handel's time, the lack of physical staging elements was not necessarily chosen first and foremost for aesthetic reasons.

One problem that goes beyond whether the oratorio should be staged or not is that the mood of stage direction—the set, the costumes, the physical movement—often communicates a different story than the one that is being sung about in the oratorio. Barrie Kosky's production provides an overload of information in directions that one might not have ever associated with *Saul*: a roco-co party, *West Side Story*, and fearsome gore in the form of graphic, feverish images.

But any production should not be written-off solely because it was staged or not staged. Kosky's particular vision, beyond what is mentioned above, presents happy parallels with *King Lear*

within the action. The connection between Handel's *Saul* and Shakespeare's *King Lear* is not far away from the imagination of even the most conservative critic of this oratorio. The uncharted dimension the director takes, however, is building Saul's rage and anger into a descent toward (clinical) madness. Saul's movements subsequently inspire an audience to feel uncomfortable, sickened, and rather gloomy. Someone familiar with the oratorio under different direction may remember that Saul is Handel's hero here and is supposed to be someone we can relate to (and thus we should be inspired *not* to feel and act as he does, hence one of the virtuous messages of the work). Yet Saul's insanity in this production is extreme and sometimes outright loony (as in the vision of Samuel); this makes it difficult to relate to Saul as “a person like me,” but instead awakens the thought: “Gosh, what a terrible disease. I'm glad I don't have that.” Notice that presenting the character of Saul in this way is like placing a layer of wax paper over the pages of Handel's score: it is a little noisy, and it is something one must see through to recognize the musical skeleton and flesh. The warring between what is visual versus what is musical hits home when we realize that we are building a narrative from the visual *only* (which is something that this production invites us to do with scene after scene of glamorous outpourings of tangible material).

The staging of an oratorio tends to create a world where the music becomes the backdrop and motor, but not the centerpiece. The acting, props, and blocking of the participants (to borrow a term from the theater) are all supposedly inspired by the music, and this is how the director defends certain choices made. But a strange thing happens: rather than support the music, the staging becomes a metaphor that transfers its sense onto the music (and not the other way around, no matter how much the music inspired a choreographer's art).

Saul's jealousy in reaction to praises for the death of Goliath turns outwardly violent in Saul's air "With Rage I shall burst his Praises to hear." The direction has Saul roaming around the stage, exploding with noise; he is like a beast with an enormous thorn in its side. The basis of Saul's melodic line in this air is simple and strong—it plows through a minor triad full of certainty. These are stable intervals, but musically speaking it is a very private moment. The accompaniment begins at *piano*, which implies that the voice should have some amount of dynamic dimension to mirror the changes in

the instrumental parts. It is important that the voice reflects the differences between loud and soft levels, because it shows the ebb and flow of Saul's inner struggle. We need only to look at the libretto to understand we are witnessing something excruciatingly personal about Saul. In this short air, the king exposes his disease: his ability to deliberate is riddled with hate and envy. Saul does not need to scatter the chorus out of his path in order to let on that his future is dark and unfortunate; this is as certain as Saul is confident about the words he sings.

Violino I. *Andante.*

Violino II.

Viola.

SAUL.

Bassi.

With rage I shall burst his — praises to hear!
 Wie wallt mir vor Zorn in — Bu.sen das Blut!

Organo tasto solo, e lottava bassa.

Example 1. Handel, *Saul*, act I, scene iii (*With Rage I shall burst his Praises to hear!*), mm. [0]-6.

The greatest opportunity for an introspective turn in this air is near its close, when Saul exclaims: "Oh! How I both hate the Stripling, and fear! What Mortal a Rival in Glory can bear?" This is the second time we hear Saul sing these words here, but the words are marked this time explicitly in Saul's part with *piano* at the exclamation "Oh!" as a break from what is immediately before it. Saul begins this line in the score quietly in the major mode, as though honesty has gotten the best of him and he must reveal what he is thinking about without the expressive connotations of the minor mode. Saul's confidence of what violence he *shall* do in the future dissipates into fear, because he is unsure of his ability to persevere with the psychological hardships

that face him. As an intellectual battle between strength and doubt, it strangles any kind of physical representation in movement; the music can tie together these opposing thoughts in an elegant way, and it almost goes unnoticed that they conflict with one another. Stage direction for this air, however, is forced to settle on one prevailing sentiment and externalize it through the annihilation of the weaker element (in this case, it is Saul's expression of doubt). By the end, what we see in the score is that fear controls the reasoning process; dressed so heavily with fear, Saul can hardly edge away. And the lightness of glory consistently moves ever farther from him. His melodic line stands stable on the dominant scale degree, which is a vantage point for change

and modulation, but his brokenness is evident (specifically through arpeggios and phrases stunted with interjections). There are many instances or arcs where the melody could move cleverly into the major mode for the duration, but it does not. It is stuck in a weary minor, with Saul's inability to come to terms with greatness that shades his own.

The character of Saul's son, Jonathan—played by Paul Appleby—serves as a bridge between sight and sound. His heartwarming gestures and the way he places himself upon the stage offer a balance to the family dynamic. We can also identify with Jonathan, whose duty and compassion he wears on his sleeve. Jonathan's physical appearance helps in this because he is wearing a strangely fitting suit. He is dressed as though from an era closer to ours than the rest of the cast. And to catch our attention without acrobatics, he uses understated physical moves

like a feathery turn of his palm in an attempt to explain his motives, complementing this with an electric expression in his eyes. But Jonathan's true art is the art of the musical phrase; at this point we find that we are not really talking about the gift that Handel provides in the airs for the character of Jonathan, but about Appleby's skill in the part.

In one of Jonathan's most impressive airs, "Birth and Fortune I despise!," we appreciate Appleby's depth as a singer and the full-range of his expressive technique. In the loosely paced "from virtue" sections, his voice is the only sound saturating the stage. Appleby approaches these measures with undeniable conviction, and accents the words "from virtue" with persuasive crescendo and decrescendo. Virtue becomes a book that Jonathan opens and closes. He takes in the words slowly, admiring the content.

Example 2. Handel, *Saul*, act I, scene ii (*Birth and Fortune I despise!*), mm. 27-40.

In Appleby's steady command of the air, the physicality of the stage direction is hardly noticeable. By giving such a sophisticated representation of the character, the singer as an individual shines through and we recognize not only superior musicianship but also grace. Appleby is clearly thinking about Jonathan's musical phrases as music, not theater.

Appleby's Jonathan helps to remind us how strong the instrumental music is in this oratorio. It is not a hidden fact that the greatness of the

oratorio starts out right on the first page, because one of the best instrumental works in *Saul* is actually the first piece we hear. This musical work (before the curtain raises) is a symphony with four movements (*Allegro-Larghetto-Allegro-Andante larghetto*). The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, conducted by Ivor Bolton, performs this brilliantly. At present we are most interested in the third movement, which is an organ concerto. (This movement can also be an oboe concerto—one of the many fabulous

choices Handel leaves up to a music director.) Unlike concertos we might imagine from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like Mozart, Beethoven, and Liszt's concertos where we find solo parts for the solo instrument in all or almost every movement, Handel's is only one movement long within the larger context of the symphony. It is a taste of concerto, so to speak.

If we were watching Handel's own production of *Saul*, we can bet this movement would have been one of the highlights. Some remark Handel purposely included elaborate organ concertos in his oratorios to bring in more people to see the oratorio. Handel's middle-class public preferred instrumental concert music over Italian opera (that Handel was known for earlier in his career in London), and these persons would pay to see the great composer play the organ himself. Beyond being a wonderful composer, he was an extremely accomplished organist and improviser. As we see in the score for the opening symphony of *Saul*, at the close of the second movement, Handel has written "Org. ad libi-

tum," meaning the organist may improvise before the start of the third movement organ concerto. Again, this is a choice that Handel leaves up to the music director. In Handel's music in the oratorio, at the right moment, improvisation is king. In short, it shows the thoughtfulness and learnedness of the performers.

The transitions of the organ *solo* parts into where the orchestra joins in the *tutti* sections are the most impressive aspect of this opening concerto. These transitions are seamless and resemble a running relay race at the moment when the baton is blindly handed off to the next runner—the athlete who must take the lead does not look back, and the weight of a phantom hand disappears into the speed of the next leg. With great agility, the organ solo phrases blend into the *tutti* orchestral parts and the energy from the solo organ is flawlessly transferred into the orchestra as a whole. It is exciting to listen to, and it is arguably one of the best-executed moments in the entire oratorio.



Example 3. Detail of organ part: Handel, *Saul*, (*Symphony*, movement III), mm. 13-16.

Beyond the opportunities that Handel offers the organ soloist for improvisation, as in the closing section of the third movement, the music also allows the performer to display their skill of interpreting a musical phrase. Baroque musical notation only rarely indicates the shape of the musical phrase. For vocalists, the phrase is generally implied by the words of the libretto, the punctuation in the libretto—like commas and periods—and musical rests. Many of the chorus anthems in *Saul* are fugues, and punctuation is

crucial in order to identify words and meaning within a complex texture. For example, notice the simple phrases that constitute one of the memorable fugue anthems from *Saul*:

Envy! Eldest born of Hell!
Cease in human Breasts to dwell.

Because the solo instrumental parts lack linguistic punctuation to indicate phrase, there is a freedom for embellishments and ornaments, as

well as expression. The organist does not stray far from the score in terms of improvisation in this performance, but the attention to phrase is second to none. As we see in Example 3 above, a long string of notes without a strong purpose or direction can sound tedious, but the organist effortlessly provides a shape to these musical phrases.

One of the other major instrumental works in this production is the symphony that opens the Glyndebourne's Part II (in the score, this is Symphony n. 58, Act II, scene v). This symphony is comprised of two movements (Largo—Allegro; the symphony has three movements in the score, but the third [Gavotte] is not always played). The second movement is another organ concerto, we presume for the delight of the audience to hear the great Handel play once more. The music for organ solo here is rich in figurations similar to those found in the Allegro movements of Handel's Suites for Harpsichord. The figures are not difficult to play from a technical perspective, thus at an Allegro 6/8 tempo, the music has a jovial, dance-like mood. The musical phrases, with few rests, disengage from the smiling flurry of sound only to pause on a note that is decorated with one of Handel's trills. Uplifting to a point of vertigo, it is an impressive feat for an organist to show the joy it is to play Handel's music; and the audience can experience, to some extent, the rapture of simple figurations that refer up to a pedal point—the same note ringing like the hours, six, twelve times through the measures, all easily played under the fingertips, combined with breezy scales in the interval of a tenth.

For Handel's first performance of *Saul* in 1739, Handel special-ordered an extraordinarily expensive organ for the King's Theatre. Handel was thrilled with this instrument as it gave him the ability to conduct the oratorio from the organ. This incredible organ concerto, here, in the middle of the oratorio, most likely drew the audience's attention not only to Handel's phenomenal playing but also to the organ itself. And

what an organ it must have been, costing over 100.000,00 € in today's currency, the concerto must have shown the beauty of music and also the beauty of the machine.

Unfortunately, the genius of this organ concerto is overtaken by a larger stage presence. The Glyndebourne production has placed this concerto as the opening to their Part II for a sensational *coup de théâtre*. Near the close of the first movement of the Symphony (n. 58), the curtain raises to a darkened stage that is illuminated by a field of candles and the sinister outlines of the hands and faces of several dancers in the back. There is a conspicuous dark rectangle at center stage, surrounded by tiny flames. Given the circumstances, this space suggests a grave. At the start of the symphony's second movement, from beneath the floorboards, the solo organist arises while playing this concerto on a relatively small organ (an English organ without foot pedals). This new, and unexpected, presence elicits laughter and applause from the audience. Once they quiet down, you do get the sense that the people are really, truly *listening*.

The organist stage guest is dressed in a costume similar to Saul's in Act I, and wears a lavish wig similar to those Handel has on his head in certain portraits. The organ and organist spin on this raised platform during the entire movement in a dizzying display of movement and image (or iconography). The organist, the talented James McVinnie, becomes the organist as star. As though Handel came down to bless the production, we are privy to a strange visitation from the oratorio's creator. But this moment creates a current of uneasiness as the whole thing borders on being blasphemous. And there is something lost, nevertheless, in the visual stimulus. Even if it recalls that the audience in Handel's time may have been able to watch Handel during the entire oratorio—both directing and playing the marvelous organ concerto movements—seated at the massive organ at the stage (as pictured in posthumous engravings), the expression would

have been of another kind. It is eerie when the creator and the created come face to face in this scene. Further, it compounds an additional iron-

ic element that is projected on the oratorio in a confusing and inconclusive juxtaposition: Handel, the composer, and Saul, the ill-fated king.

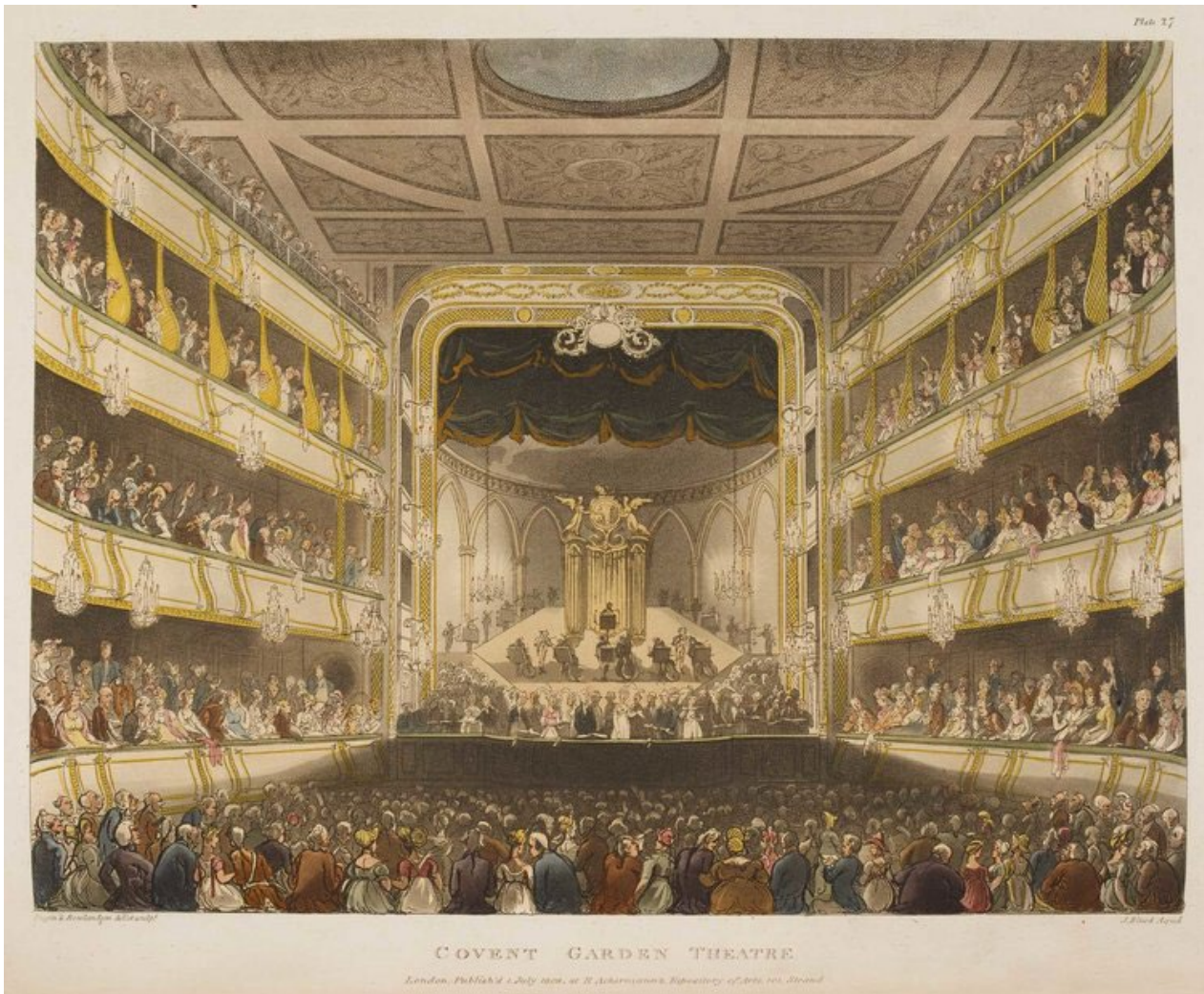


Plate 1. An oratorio performance at Covent Garden Theatre, as it appeared 1803-8. From Rudolph Ackermann, *The Microcosm of London* (1808-10), after A. C. Pugin and T. Rowlandson.

This is not Nature, we might say, but Beauty masked to serve a different master. The harmony of the production is resolved in the legendary (Dead) March when the most human (Jonathan) and the most supernatural (Saul) have perished with their heads in the sand. The aesthetic merit of the production as a whole inspires reflection on its parts, even if each moment recalls numerous associations each more wild than the next.

The Form of the oratorio, nevertheless, stands. And despite productions that pierce our spirit this way and that, the music will once again regain its proprietary throne.

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