

Dr. Darby

Music 312

28 February 2009

The Handelian Oratorio: A study of *Messiah* and *Judas Maccabaeus*

George Frideric Handel wrote over six hundred musical works in his lifetime and over thirty of them were written in the genre known as oratorio. During his lifetime he made England the primary source of oratorio in the world. He not only brought oratorio to England but he also revolutionized choral composition and aria form through the genre. This paper will discuss the evolution of G.F. Handel's oratorios through the examples of Parts I and II of *Messiah* and *Judas Maccabaeus* and will cover topics such as the evolution of oratorio types, texts, aria forms, and uses of the chorus.

Oratorio began during the late Renaissance and early Baroque periods in Italy. The genre began in the oratories of churches and convents. At this time oratories were known as halls of prayer. Oratories were used to sing *Laude*, perform sacred dramas and sing religious folk songs 'praising the Virgin Mary and the saints' (Pahlen 9). Music was used in the oratories to attract people to the church for spiritual exercises as well as some musical entertainment. This was also the purpose of the sacred dramas being held in churches at the time. *Laude* was well known in the later Renaissance for being a vernacular sacred song. Vernacular songs were normally sung in the common tongue; in this case the common tongue would be Italian. These texts were narrative and put into dramatic settings with music. *Laude* gathered more popularity in oratories during the sixteenth century and were now being sung by the congregation as well as the professional church singers. It may be that the *Laude* used in oratories of the church were one of the early predecessors of the oratorio form. However, there is no doubt that other similar musical styles such as opera also played an integral part in the creation of the genre.

In Italy, the term oratorio was not used to describe a musical genre until the middle of the seventeenth century. Before this time works were listed under different names but still held some of the same characteristics as works classified under the oratorio style. The unifying elements at this time were the sacred music, texts, and lack of staging.

Oratorio and opera coincidentally began around the same time. Both used drama through music and text to bring music to life. The tendency for opera at this time was to be more secular using themes from mythology and historical figures from the past. This was the basis of *opera seria* in the early Baroque period. Opera composed during this period was also written in Italian and occasionally French. Opera was a large production requiring sets, staging, costumes and a cast that could both sing and act. This was an expensive form of entertainment for the composer. Eventually oratorio was introduced as a more cost effective way to provide entertainment that was both beautiful musically as well as spiritually educating. In Kurt Pahlen's book The World of Oratorio he so clearly defines the oratorio as 'opera without theater-- without sets, without costumes, without stage business' (ibid. 9). The only drama to be found in an oratorio at this time was the drama of the music. The text in this form of music was to be the central focus of the genre. Early forms of oratorio included *oratorio latino* and *oratorio volgare*, the difference being the language used. *Oratorio latino* used Latin text and *oratorio volgare* used the vernacular text of Italian. *Oratorio volgare* was only introduced after Latin had become an obsolete oratorio language (Larsen 29). Both of these early forms of oratorio used librettos compiled from various scriptures from the Bible and are non-dramatic. The early forms of oratorio originally flourishes with composers such as; Carissimi, Scarlatti, and Antoine Charpentier (ibid. 9).

Oratorio continually evolved from the time it was originally introduced. The genre known today is more closely related to the English oratorio composed by George Frideric Handel. A German born composer, Handel made the most out of his career in London where he excelled at writing for the genre. He made the oratorio come to life not only in private royal homes but to the public as well. Handel is mainly known today for composing oratorio, but interestingly enough, he actually began his career writing opera. However, Handel's opera's were

such a mix of triumphs and disappointments that he was almost forced to abandon it in 1740 (Larsen 15).

Handel became acquainted with the oratorio genre during his time spent in Italy during the early eighteenth century. His first written oratorio was *Il Trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* ('The Triumph of Time and Truth') written in 1708. During this time Italian oratorio was being performed with elaborate sets depicting key scenes, however, it was forbidden to be acted (Burrows 3). The reasons for this being that acting was too close to the secular theater and all of the librettos for oratorios at this time were sacred. Handel's second oratorio, *La Resurrezione*, was produced in this fashion.

Handel eventually moved to England only to find that the people were unacquainted with the musical genre. This was Handel's opportunity to not only introduce it to them but refine it specifically to his own compositional styles. The first oratorio that the composer really benefited from was *Esther*, written twelve years after his first two oratorios. This oratorio is also known as *Haman and Mordecai*. This composition was Handel's first oratorio using the vernacular English. *Esther* was first performed as a private performance but then had two other performances in a concert hall. The original chorus had been made of performers from the Chapel-Royal and Westminster Abbey. Handel originally had the oratorio staged and wanted it to be acted; however, the Bishop of London forbade the choir to do this because of growing prejudice toward the stage and Handel had to comply (Larsen 19). This occurred before England became acquainted with performances "in the manner of an oratorio" that required a more strict religious setting than that of a dramatic performance (Dean 35). Interestingly enough, most of Handel's oratorios were performed in the theater known as the Covent Garden as well as in concert halls. The only exception to this being that *Messiah* was the only oratorio composed by Handel to be performed in a sacred building, the Chapel of the Foundling Hospital (Larsen 19). The form of Handel's oratorios evolved over the years after the introduction of *Esther* in 1720.

Eventually the meaning of the English oratorio became a “three-act dramatic text based on a sacred subject; the musical setting using styles and forms of Italian opera and English sacred choral music” (Smither, “Oratorios”). The English oratorio also came to be a musically dramatic representation of Biblical scriptures. There are few oratorios created by Handel that fall outside the Biblical category. Examples of Handel's 'secular oratorios' include *Alexander's Feast*, *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*, *Semele* and *The Choice of Hercules* (Smither, “Oratorios”). Handel never introduced these pieces under the name of the oratorio genre (ibid.). For the most part Handel's oratorios fall into three subsections: heroic Biblical, anthem Biblical and narrative Biblical. Heroic and anthem will be explored in this paper.

The general theme of the heroic oratorio is described as one in which the fate of the Israelites is hanging in the balance and a hero or liberator is needed to guide the nation. Even though the subjects of these oratorios were people and their personal drama, the overall theme was that the fate of the individual or hero and the fate of his people were always in the hands of God (Larsen 24). An excellent example of this type of oratorio is *Judas Maccabaeus*. The text or libretto, written by Thomas Morell, is based on a Biblical account of 1 Maccabees which depicts an account of the Jewish war for independence under the leadership of the Maccabees two centuries before Christ (Pahlen 152). Judas Maccabaeus is the central character of this work, however then emphasis is not so much on him than it is on the Israelite people. Through unselfish acts Judas liberates the Israelites and brings peace. This is one of the many oratorios written by Handel that employed the use of Old Testament text. The Old Testament texts had a strong appeal to Handel's English audiences. “Not only were they generally acquainted with the stories, but they perceived a parallel between the Israelites and the English of their own time; both were intensely nationalistic and led by heroic figures, and both regarded themselves as being under the special protection of God” (Smither, “Oratorios”). In the case of *Judas Maccabaeus* the text is very nationalistic. Handel wrote this Old Testament story with the political situation of England in his mind. At the time the Scottish royal house of Stuart tried to

invade England to drive out the reigning house of Hanover. Handel felt close ties to the king and was inspired to write *Judas*. The work was composed to celebrate England's victory in the battle of Culloden by the Duke of Cumberland. The work was premiered on April 1, 1747 for the honoring ceremony of the Duke of Cumberland. This type of oratorio contained more “action” than the anthem. The Biblical stories were the cause for this. Though there was no actual acting going on, the dramatic connection between numbers allowed the audience to visualize the action themselves. Several of Handel's oratorios other than *Judas* have the same theme of hero's liberating their people. They outnumber the amount of anthem oratorios created by Handel. A concrete example of this is found in the table below:

Year of Composition:	Type: Heroic Oratorio	Type: Anthem Oratorio
1732	<i>Esther</i>	--
1733	<i>Deborah</i>	--
1738	<i>Saul</i>	<i>Israel in Egypt</i>
1741	--	<i>Messiah</i>
1742	<i>Samson</i>	--
1744	<i>Belshazzar</i>	--
1746	<i>Judas Maccabaeus</i>	<i>Occasional Oratorio</i>
1747	<i>Joshua, Alexander Balus</i>	--

(Larsen 22)

The anthem oratorio was quite different from the heroic. In this type of oratorio, the efforts of Man are not the theme; the general theme is that of the relation between God and Man. The content of an anthem is derived from Old Testament text, usually from Psalms. There is no

“action” in this type of oratorio as there was in the heroic. The perfect example of this type is *Messiah*. The text of *Messiah* is composed solely of material from scriptures and the text is more contemplative in nature (Lynan 4). There are no dramatic characters in contrast to *Judas Maccabaeus*. Unlike most of the other librettos of Handel's oratorios, *Messiah* has text found in the New Testament. Charles Jennens supplied the libretto for this work, compiling scriptures from the Old and New Testament to depict the birth, life, and death of the Messiah. Through this work Jennens goal was to illustrate that Jesus Christ was truly the Messiah. He did this by “subtly telling the story of Jesus's mission through the Old Testament texts” (Hicks, “George Frideric Handel”). When *Messiah* was originally produced in London theaters it didn't get excellent reviews. This could be due to where the staging of the work took place. *Messiah* was performed in a theater, a place that is not sacred. This may have been Handel's most sacred oratorio and audiences did not appreciate hearing such sacred text in a building that was not suited for it. Through both of these oratorio types Handel maintained characteristic similarities, the first of which was the aria.

The *da capo* aria form originated with Italian opera. It was a form composed in three sections consisting of an A section, a B section, and a more ornamented repetition of the A section that was used to show of the singer's vocal ability. The *da capo* was used frequently in Handel's earlier oratorios and less frequently in his later works. For example, in the first version of *Esther* nearly every aria was in *da capo* form (Larsen 40). Handel also used the *dal segno* aria form as well. The only difference being that the soloist and ensemble repeat back to a sign rather than the beginning of the piece. This form was used to cut out most of the instrumental opening to shorten the length of the aria.

The role of the *da capo* aria in oratorio is different from the role they play in operas, the main difference being that they are not dramatic. This type of aria is used in oratorio mainly to solidify the text being presented. For example, the aria “He was despised” from *Messiah* is a *da capo* aria. Not only is it a *da capo* aria but it is the only one found in Parts I and II of the oratorio. The opening text of the A section of this aria describes how the Messiah is despised

among men and is acquainted with grief and is in E flat major. This part of text originates from the New Testament of the Bible where Jesus is betrayed by Judas and is about to be crucified. The B section of the aria is in a quicker c minor and describes a passage from Matthew 27 in the Bible that explains how Roman soldiers take Jesus, strip him of his clothing, and mock him by giving him a crown of thorns and a scarlet robe. From here the soldiers proceed to spit on him and whip him. In this section Handel uses his great ability to use dramatic composition to emphasize the strength of the text. In the repeat of the A section the soloist takes the liberty to ornament the opening text to solidify its meaning with the audience. In the case of another aria from *Messiah*, “Why do the nations so furiously rage”, the *da capo* form was initially implemented. However in later versions the *da capo* section of the aria is substituted for the following chorus of “Let us break their bonds asunder” (Smither 2: 265).

The *da capo* aria is used similarly in *Judas Maccabaeus* but has some differences from the earlier oratorios. In the aria “From mighty kings he took the spoil” the opening section is in a pleasant A major and describes the victories of Judas Maccabaeus and the happiness of Judah. The B section, unlike the aria from *Messiah*, is not in a minor key but in a quicker A major. This sections text talks of Judah rejoicing which is exemplified by the runs given to the singer, the key and the allegro tempo.

The table below is an edited version of the table found in Larsen's book. The table illustrates the number of *da capo* arias in several of Handel's oratorios compared to the total number of arias. The full version of the table concludes that the number of *da capo* arias that Handel wrote in his oratorios varied from piece to piece. There seemed to be a general lull in the composition of these types of arias from the time of *Saul* to the time of *Joshua* with a few exceptions in between. This suggests that the *da capo* and *dal segno* aria forms were falling out of favor and that the composer was now looking to shorten the arias significantly while still maintaining the strength of the text. The other types of arias used in both *Judas* and *Messiah* also call for examination. Since the themes of Judas and Messiah are vastly different it is easier to

notice the contrasts in aria form. The arias in parts I and II of Judas Maccabaeus are for four voices. However, each of the soloists is an integral part to the story. In this cast we have: the main character Judas who is being sung by a tenor, Simon, his brother, portrayed by a bass, the first Israelite woman sung by a soprano, the second Israelite woman and messenger sung by an alto, and Israelite man who is sung by an alto, and finally Eupolemus, a Jewish ambassador to be sung by an alto or bass. Similarly, *Messiah* also has four soloists but the only story being told is that of the life and coming of the Messiah which is proclaimed rather than told by a series of Biblical characters.

Oratorio	<i>Da capo</i> arias	Total number of arias	Percentage
<i>Esther I</i> (1720)	9	12	75
<i>Esther II</i> (1732)	11	20	55
<i>Deborah</i> (1733)	10	21	48
<i>Saul</i> (1738)	5	30	17
<i>Israel in Egypt</i> (1738)	0	4	0
<i>Messiah</i> (1741)	1 (Part I & II only)	12	8.3
<i>Judas Maccabaeus</i> (1746)	2 (Parts I& II only, including <i>dal segno</i> aria)	15	1.3

(Larsen 39)

Oratorio choruses became more important to the genre through Handel's compositions. Before the oratorio the chorus was rarely used. Opera choruses were non-existent at this period in time and it was only until Handel began writing choruses for his oratorios that choruses began infiltrating the genre. Handel had experience writing choral music before discovering the genre of oratorio. For the first twenty years of Handel's life in England he wrote choral compositions for the church. His main centerpieces of choral composition during this time were the *Chandos Anthems*. The anthems had Biblical texts from the book of Psalms, similar to the Biblical texts of oratorios. In these works the "chorus leads to solo, solo to chorus, in the most natural of ways; the music is more akin to oratorio than to any of Handel's earlier church music" (Larsen 53). Handel kept developing his choral style throughout his oratorios. There are a variety of styles employed by Handel's writing including the anthem style, double choruses, fugues and a "freely imitative style that resembles a motet or madrigal (Smither "Oratorios"). Little by little the importance of the chorus grew in the genre, eventually coming to a pinnacle around *Messiah*.

The use of the chorus in *Messiah* is extensive. In total there are seventeen choruses in parts I and II alone. This number surpasses the number of arias in parts I and II by five. The choruses of *Messiah* stand out more than any other oratorio by Handel because of the sheer number and use. Even though the figures are different in this work, Handel maintains a gentle balance of choral passages and arias with smooth transitions between the two with a limited number of recitatives. In some instances the chorus is used as a musical continuation of the aria preceding it. Examples of this are "Oh thou that tellest good tidings to Zion" where the chorus continues the textual idea of the alto soloist. Another example of this is the chorus of "Let us break their bonds asunder" completing the aria "Why do the nations so furiously rage" (Smither 2: 261). The text of the choruses can be split into parts to further examine their meaning. Not all of the choruses of *Messiah* are examined in this paper but only those that make good example of musical and textual ideas within the piece.

In Part I of *Messiah* the text describes “the prophecy and realization of God's plans to redeem mankind by the coming of the Messiah” (Larsen 97). This describes the chorus “And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed” which is an initial chorus describing how wonderful God is and what he has in store. The second chorus “And he shall purify” speaks of God's wish to purify the souls of man through the coming of the Messiah. The fourth chorus to be introduced is “For unto us a Child is born”. This chorus splits Part I into another section to announce the birth of the Messiah. In this chorus Handel makes great use of imitative texture by giving each voice the opportunity to sing both the rhythmic and melodic lines. The joyous theme is continued by the choruses “Glory to God” and “His yoke is easy”.

Part II of *Messiah* opens with of four great choruses to depict “the accomplishment of redemption by the sacrifice of Jesus” (Larsen 97). Both “Behold the Lamb of God” and “Surely He hath borne our griefs” is the chorus’s way of mourning the fate of Jesus. In the opening of “Behold” Handel uses the opening bars to illustrate a *march funèbre* to highlight the main melodic motive of the piece. This motive is used through the chorus by all voices to solidify the heavy text. “Surely He hath borne our griefs” follows this heavy chorus with a more anguished feel with its use of strong dotted rhythms in the beginning to emphasize the contemplation of the sacrifice of Jesus (Pahlen 149). The second half of the chorus goes into a sustained lamentation of how Christ was sacrificed for the world's sins and transgressions. With the chorus “And with His stripes we are healed” it affirmed that the transgressions of the people are accepted by God and healed because of Christ’s crucifixion. The last chorus immediately following “All we like sheep” declares everyone has gone astray and has sinned. It has a happier feel than the previous three choruses with its runs and key of F major. However, at the end of the chorus there is a more reflective passage on how Jesus suffered. The following choruses of Part II coincide with arias and recitatives that precede them, usually completing the others thought. The texts of these illustrate the proclamation of the gospel among the people. The final “Hallelujah” chorus is one that uses a variety of textures to declare praise unto God, ultimately telling of the thanks to God for the forgiveness of the worlds’ sins.

Judas Maccabaeus is another excellent example of how Handel created drama in his oratorios through the relationship of the chorus and soloists. In this work there are thirteen choruses in Parts I and II, to be sung and represented by the Israelite people. Knowing this, it is easy to see the relationship between the arias of the Biblical characters and the reactions of the people. Handel uses this relationship to formulate a sort of call and response form within the parts of the work.

In both Parts I and II the chorus is used to expand upon the words of the soloists. For example, the aria "I feel the Deity within" sung by Simon describes Judah's need for a new leader and that the Lord points to Judas Maccabaeus in their time of aid. Simon then goes on to say that Judah should arm themselves for the victory that is coming, with which the chorus answers "We come, we come, in bright array, Judah, the scepter to obey". Here the choirs comes in as if just overhearing Simon's aria and give their response. Another example of this is Judas's aria "No unhallow'd desire" which tells how Judah does not gain any unbounded power but only peace. After a recitative by the Israelite man the chorus jumps in to express their though that God either give them a resolved conquest or a glorious fall. This style continues throughout the second part of the piece. The uses of duets in *Judas Maccabaeus* are much more prominent than in *Messiah*. All of the duets are done by the Israelite woman and Israelite man. A similarity between the two works is that every Part ends with a final chorus.

Both *Messiah* and *Judas Maccabaeus* were the most performed pieces during Handel's lifetime. They are excellent examples of how the Handelian oratorio evolved through type, libretto, aria form and chorus use. Though the texts of both works are vastly different they still retain Handel's great compositional techniques and dramatic musical writing. Both works have received many alterations every year that they were performed to keep up with performance demands. This paper has illustrated the features of each piece compositionally and interpretively through the examination of key sections.