

RICHARD LERT'S EDITIONS OF SAUL: A ROMANTIC PERSPECTIVE

Robert McCormac

Throughout his tenure as conductor of the Pasadena Symphony Orchestra Richard Lert was popularly known as a Handel expert. The sheer number of performances of four oratorios over a span of 34 years—*Messiah* (30), *Saul* (5), *Belshazzar* (3), and *Jeptha* (2)—gave the perception that he indeed was a Handel scholar. This baffled Lert as he did not think he expended any more research and preparation than he would for any other composer, say Beethoven or Mozart. Indeed, if judged solely on research into the historical aspects and performance practices, Lert was by no means a Handel scholar. His energy was put into discovering the meaning behind the music and molding that into the performing circumstances in which he found himself. Communication of the composer's thoughts were uppermost in Lert's mind. He had no desire, nor thought it of great importance, to resurrect the same performance atmosphere that the composer worked in.

Saul held a singular fascination for Lert. Excluding *Messiah*, he performed it more than any other oratorio. Beginning with choral excerpts in 1937, Lert revived it a total of four times between the years 1938 and 1968. Looking at these editions reveal Lert both as a product of his times and as a musician reconciling those aesthetics with the changing attitudes towards Baroque performance practices. More than anything else, they show a singular unflinching view of the dramatic thrust Lert saw in the oratorio which substantially withstood the musicological revelation of new Handel research.

For the purposes of this paper, I will consider Lert's edition of 1968. Each of Lert's productions had been carefully gaged to the resources with which he was working (much as Handel did in his first production and subsequent revivals). Lert also revived the title "Saul and David" for this production. 1

The revival of Handel's operas in Germany dates from 1920, when *Rodelinda* was produced by Oskar Hagen in the city of Göttingen under the auspices of the university. Over the next few years he mounted productions of *Ottone* and *Giulio Cesare*. These and other operas were quickly adapted by many other German cities. "The Handel revival," Peter Heyworth observed, "played a predominant role in the operatic life of the Weimar Republic, both in its influence on the approach of composers to operatic forms and in the field of stage design"(1: 188). The operas were approached within the artistic outlook of their own day. They had no desire to duplicate 18th century operatic conventions. Their outlook was Romantic, or perhaps in regards to the staging, even Expressionistic. As Edward Dent pointed out, ". . . it was a style of scenery and decoration that well suited the period of performance, especially in the academic environment, for it could be done with cheap materials and simple mechanisms"(2: 175).2

The Germans approached the musical obstacles in the scores in much the same manner as they had those of the stage. Confronted with parts for castrati, they merely transposed the parts for tenors and basses. They methodically cut the da capo arias and translated the secco recitatives into German without regard for the style or rhythm of the original Italian. They rescored Handel's orchestrations with added wind and brass parts, especially in the recitatives.3 It was in this environment that a young Richard Lert was gaining experience as an opera conductor. His appointment as first conductor in Hannover in 1917 began a six year tenure in which, during the first year, he conducted nearly a hundred times, often having to go from one extreme of the repertoire to another (3: 210). It was there, on 29 October 1922, that Lert conducted his first performance of *Giulio Cesare*. His stage director was Hans Neidecken-Gebhard, one of the finest opera producers in Germany at that time. Moving on to Mannheim in 1923, Lert conducted many performances of the opera.

Hans Neidecken-Gebhard took part in the early Göttingen productions serving as stage manager for *Giulio Cesare* and *Ottone*. Neidecken-Gebhard was not only regarded for his opera productions, but was noted for pioneering work in modern dance. He served as Lert's stage director during the last two years of Lert's tenure in Hannover. Together they launched the Handel revival in Hannover primarily with the production of *Giulio Cesare*. It is entirely likely that Lert formulated not only many of his musical ideas about Handel, but also many ideas about the staging of Handel at that time. Lert's passion for opera productions was never limited to the music but spilled over to the staging as well.⁴ Lert surely must have listened very intently to Neidecken-Gebhard's ideas on staging. He certainly had many opportunities as his wife Vickie Baum noted. "Neidecken- Gebhard, "she later wrote in her autobiography, "became our closest friend, we were inseparable, he even moved into the same apartment house to be near us" (4: 242).

Neidecken-Gebhard's interest in Handel also extended to the oratorios. He produced the first known German staging of *Saul* in Hannover on 6 October 1923. Rudolf Schulz-Dornburg conducted, Lert having assumed the post of Generalmusikdirektor in Mannheim in September of that year.⁵ Alexander Balus was staged in Münster on 5 December 1926. Productions of *Hercules* were mounted in Münster (5 March 1925), Vienna (25 January 1927) and Berlin (31 March 1936).

After Hagen left Germany in 1925 for America to teach at the University of Wisconsin, Neidecken-Gebhard briefly took over the production of Handel's operas at Göttingen. His productions were singular in the heavy use of modern dance. Movement was liberally used to bridge gaps during recitatives, arias, and similar static moments deemed distracting to the audience.

Charles Jennens, Handel's librettist for *Saul*, did an admirable job of shaping a cogent account of the story in the *Book of Samuel*. Using episodes which invite dramatic treatment—David's welcome by the women, Saul throwing the javelin, the Feast of the New Moon, and above all, Saul's seeking out the Witch of Endor and the raising of Samuel—Jennens creates a vividly detailed portrait of Saul's fall from grace over jealousy of David leading to his death on Gilboa along with his son Jonathan.

Both the characters of Jonathan and David are overshadowed by Saul. David is never the hero the people honor at the beginning of the oratorio. Winton Dean finds him somewhat priggish and effeminate (though not, he is quick to point out, due to the fact that Handel cast him as a countertenor) (5: 283-84). Jonathan is sympathetically portrayed in the first act but all but disappears after the first scene of the second act. Saul's daughters are sharply portrayed. Michal is all gentleness and loyalty. Merab is haughty and proud. Next to Saul, her character is the most complex. Scornful in the beginning at the thought of marriage to David solely because of his station, Saul's consuming jealousy softens her view of him to the point of coming to his defense in the aria "Author of Peace".

Alongside the tragedy of Saul is the fate of the Jewish nation as represented by the choir. It is perhaps on an equal footing with Saul.⁶ They initiate Saul's jealousy with their praise of David and comment on his gradual destruction, much like their Greek counterparts. The choir's part in the "Epinicion" and the closing "Elegy" give us a complete portrait of a people.

Jennens gave Handel nearly a full-fledged integrated drama in which the opening "Epinicion" is balanced by the final "Elegy." The two main themes of the libretto: 1) the moral tragedy of Saul and 2) the political struggle of the Jewish people against the onslaught of their enemies are vividly etched by Jennens.

Jennens' sense of imagery and dramatic irony are exemplary in two scenes. In the scene prior to the Feast of the New Moon, Michal attempts to deceive Doeg into believing that David is ill by putting an image of him in the bed. Jennens' displays remarkably subtle irony in the third act when an Amalikite announces the death of both Saul and Jonathan, his part in aiding Saul's apparent suicide and presents Saul's crown and jewels to David only to be killed on David's orders. Saul's first disobedience to God was not killing the Amalikite

Agog at the beginning of his reign. David, by killing the Amalikite at the beginning of his reign, remains obedient to God.

Handel responded to both the characters and the dramatic aspects of the libretto with enthusiasm. With the addition of 3 trombones, 3 trumpets, timpani, 2 transverse flutes, a solo harp, and carillons to his basic orchestra of 2 oboes, strings and continuo, Handel not only wrote for his largest orchestra, but also his most colorful. The "Epinicion" culminating with the welcoming of David is Handel at his most festive and brilliant.

The music for the scene with the Witch of Endor perfectly evokes a chilling other-worldly effect. Handel uses the tonality of C to help unify the work. The overture, first and last choruses, and all five of the sinfonias are in the key of C major. Most of Saul's recitatives are either in C major or minor.

Lert's editions of Saul were based on Chrysander's *Händel Gesellschaft* edition of 1862. Recitatives and arias were prepared from the German Peters edition. The choral parts were prepared in a Lert edition dated 1/20/41 under the auspices of the Handel Society of Pasadena and funded by the WPA.⁷ This was probably used during the 6 June 1941 performance only. During the 1958 and 1968 productions, choristers used Novello scores.

To Handel's orchestra, Lert adds English horn, 2 clarinets and two horns. Strings numbered 16 first violins, 14 second violins, 8 violas, 6 cellos and 5 basses.⁸ The continuo consisted of harpsichord and cello.

Lert's conducting score is an interesting amalgam of 10, 12, 14, and 20 stave manuscript paper. It is in the hand of William Cole, a long time friend who had been accompanist for Lert in the early 1940's with the American Musical Theater. The score is in four spiral bound parts corresponding to each act of the oratorio (the third act is divided into two books). While retaining the overall dramatic structure of Jennens' libretto, Lert cuts almost half the numbers from 87 down to 47. Saul remains a towering figure. It is remarkable how much his character is revealed mainly through recitative and accompanied recitative (he only has two arias). Jonathan and Michal retain much of Jennens' characteristics. Merab, however, is cut out of the oratorio. Three numbers originally sung by her—2 recitatives and an aria—are allotted to Jonathan. Also cut is the High Priest (Handel had cut all but the first aria in Act 1 by the end of the first run in 1739).

David, perhaps, undergoes the most radical change. His countertenor is transposed to baritone. This puts him on an equal footing both vocally and dramatically with Saul.⁹ While this may seem to strengthen the part of David, it in many ways weakens Saul's motive for his jealousy. It is one thing to be jealous of an equal and quite another to be jealous of a young boy. Also, by elevating David, Lert usurps the position of the choir as Saul's only peer.

The choruses suffer from numerous cuts, especially in coloratura parts. This may have been necessary in the earlier productions due to the quality of the choristers, but by the 1968 production this was no longer the case. A far more perplexing question is Lert's reason for exchanging the positions of the final chorus of the first act ("Preserve him for the glory of thy name") and the opening chorus of the second act ("Envy, eldest born of hell"). By doing this a different moral tone is given to each of these acts. Finally, by repeating the "Hallelujah chorus" of the first act at the end of the oratorio, Lert committed what Jennens called one of Handel's "maggots". Handel had originally envisioned the chorus in this position before Jennens persuaded him against it.

The two scenes mentioned above which exhibit Jennens' imagery and dramatic irony are radically altered in the Lert edition. There is no mention of the bed (or image) during the scene before the Feast of the New Moon. Similarly, there is no mention of the Amalikite in the third act; he is merely a herald of the king. There is no reference to Saul's suicide, the Amalikite's part in it, nor to Saul's crown and jewels. In Lert's

edition, he simply announces the deaths of Saul and Jonathan which launches us into the Elegy.

Although *Saul* was never staged, staging was simulated through carefully detailed entrances and exits of the soloists. Gesture and interaction between soloists also added to the illusion of staging. These factors greatly influenced Lert's pacing of the work.¹⁰

It is clearly evident that Lert and his German colleagues were attracted to Handel by the theatricality of his operas and oratorios. It was natural they envisioned them on the stage instead of the concert hall. The changes they made in the scores went beyond merely making them palatable to their audiences. The cutting and splicing of recitatives, arias and choruses were done to "tighten" the structure perhaps in an attempt to fashion them into the contemporary Romantic opera ideal. In doing so, they completely misunderstood Handel's use of the Italian opera seria conventions.

Handel was an immensely practical man of the theater. Working largely within those conventions, he was able to shape them to his own dramatic means. Handel thought not just in terms of recitatives and aria, as Winton Dean has pointed out, but in terms of whole scenes and acts. The Germans by excising the traits of opera seria from his operas demonstrated a fatal misunderstanding of Handel's use of 18th century dramatic conventions.

If the operas suffered under them, the oratorios fared no better. Freed of much of the opera seria conventions, Handel was able to express more fully the emotional development of the characters through such devices as the accompanied recitative and the air. The expanded role of the chorus supplied the needed release of tension not available to the operas. If we take Lert's edition of *Saul* as any indication of what the Germans did to the oratorios during the 1920's and 1930's, they still misunderstood Handel's dramatic instincts.

They should not be faulted, however, for producing the works on the stage. They concurred with Handel's contention that the oratorios were meant as entertainment and not as sacred compositions. In eschewing the moralistic tone of the libretti, the characters emerge as real flesh and blood people caught in dramatic situations. The Germans' emphasis on the theatricality of Handel set off a renewed controversy over the definition and function of the Handelian oratorio that remains to this day.

Notes

1. This had been the title for the 6th Pasadena Music Festival production on 6 June 1941.
2. It is revealing that Hagen was not a musician but a Professor of Fine Art at the University of Göttingen.
3. This had been done in the German speaking countries almost immediately after the death of Handel. Mozart rescored *Messiah*, *Alexander's Feast* and *Acis and Galatea*. In a letter to Sir George Smart dated 27 March 1838, Mendelssohn laments the practice of scoring recitatives in Germany and hopes the organ might be adopted.
4. After Wagner's operas became public domain in 1913, Lert staged *The Ring* early in 1914 in Darmstadt. Later that summer he was hired by the Theatre des Westens in Berlin to not only stage *The Ring*, but to conduct it as well.
5. Lert conducted *Die Meistersinger* in Mannheim on 3 October 1923 and did not conduct again until 15 October. It is possible that he attended a performance in Hannover, but probably he attended rehearsals and discussed the work with Neidecken-Gebhard while still in Hannover.

6. Larsen disputes this. See: Handel's *Messiah* , pg. 24.
7. Also published at this time were the choral parts to *Belshazzar*.
8. As Chrysander had listed the harp as spurious, it was omitted in Lert's edition.
9. This may be the reason Lert retitled the work *Saul and David*. There is no evidence that his German counterparts ever used this title.
10. This may shed some light on the reasons behind cutting the instrumental introductions in some of the arias, e.g. Michal's aria 'No, Let the Guilty Tremble'.

Works Cited

1. Hayworth, Peter. *Otto Klemperer, His Life and Times, Vol. 1 1885-1933*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.
2. Dent, E.J. "Handel on the Stage." *Music and Letters* xvi (1935): 174-84.
3. Lomax, William. "The Biography of Richard Johannes Lert." Thesis. CSULA, 1974.
4. Baum, Vickie. *It Was All Quite Different*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1964.
5. Dean, Winton, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*. London: Oxford UP, 1959.