

Handel in America: A Personal Account

Part I: Genesis in Boston

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The development of the appreciation of Handel's music in America has roots in many locales and venues, but perhaps the deepest roots of all are here in New England. Indeed, the year 2015 marks the 200th anniversary of Boston's Handel and Haydn Society (H+H), an organisation founded in 1815 by a group of sixteen amateur men to 'introduce into more general use the works of Handel and Haydn and other eminent composers'. H+H has performed continuously since that year, and can thus take credit as the longest-running performing arts organisation in America (although the still-active Handel Society of my alma mater, Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, was founded even earlier, in 1807, it had some extended periods of inactivity). The Handel House in Halle, Germany, displays the names of these two organisations at the head of a complete list of numerous Handel initiatives including, for example, the first two Handel Societies of Great Britain (1843-48 and 1882-1939) and The American Handel Society (AHS), founded in 1986, known especially for its regular scholarly newsletter.

In anticipation of this year's bicentennial celebration, the H+H period instrument orchestra and chorus presented two stunning performances of works by Handel in the spring of 2014. The first, in early May, was a concert performance at Boston's famed Symphony Hall of Handel's mighty oratorio *Samson*, a work that H+H had premiered in the United States in 1845. Artistic Director Harry Christophers led this revival with idiomatic fervour in a performance that was as complete and compelling as that of Boston's Emmanuel Music in 1995, led by its artistic director and founder, Craig Smith. The second performance, directed under the baton of another renowned specialist of the Baroque aesthetic, Nicholas McGegan, was Handel's delightful masque *Acis and Galatea*, not in concert form as is often the case, but in a much anticipated collaboration with The Mark Morris Dance Group. As it turns out, H+H had celebrated its 175th Jubilee season in 1990 with a concert performance of this ever-popular work at Symphony Hall under the direction of its Artistic Director at the time, the late Christopher Hogwood. H+H Artistic Director from 1986 to 2001, Maestro Hogwood contributed much to the international renown of this fine institution.

On the subject of Handel in America, and more specifically Handel's operas and oratorios in America, the place to start is certainly Boston, regarded by many as America's first city of early music. Playing a pivotal role was Emmanuel Music, founded in 1970 by Craig Smith to perform the complete cycle of sacred cantatas of J.S. Bach in the liturgical setting for which they were intended. The repertoire of Emmanuel Music soon expanded, as astute critic Richard Dyer wrote in the *Boston Globe* on the occasion of their performance of Handel's *Samson* in 1995:

It was almost 20 years ago (1979) that Emmanuel Music presented its first major Handel event, a concert performance of the opera *Atalanta*. That was the beginning of a local revival of interest in the neglected major works of this great composer, a revival to which the Boston Cecilia, the Cantata Singers, the Harvard University Choir and the Handel & Haydn Society have made important contributions; over the last 20 years Boston has experienced more operas and oratorios of Handel than any other city in the world, with the possible exception of London.

Ten years later, in 2005, Richard Dyer commented further that presenting Handel's opera *Atalanta* in 1979 was indeed 'a great adventure in those days', and that in subsequent seasons 'Emmanuel has performed at least 10 other Handel operas and oratorios, joining [the above

mentioned groups] in presenting a survey of Handel's major works probably unequaled in any other American city'.

The words proved prophetic, since the very next season (2006-07), Craig Smith and Emmanuel Music presented its concert series of Handel's three operas based on episodes from Ariosto's epic poem, *Orlando Furioso*. The series was dedicated to the memory of a life-long Emmanuel artist, 'our dear friend Lorraine Hunt Lieberson', who had so recently, and tragically, passed away. *Orlando* was the first, in the fall of 2006, followed by *Ariodante* in January, and finally *Alcina* in the spring of 2007. Famed countertenor Jeffrey Gall sang Orlando; other local favourites in the all-American cast included Dominique Labelle as Angelica. Indeed, all the performances featured exceptional young singers, but the larger point here is how Emmanuel Music focused on the discipline of performing regularly together and fostering young talent that would contribute to the further growth of the Handelian aesthetic, by now firmly established in opera houses and concert halls worldwide. Emmanuel Music continues to do so today under the capable leadership of its current Artistic Director, Ryan Turner. In 2014, Emmanuel Music presented Handel's rarely heard *Susanna*, maintaining its commitment to the tradition of presenting Handel.

If appreciation of Handel was initiated in New England through Dartmouth College and the Handel and Haydn Society, certainly Boston's Emmanuel Music provided the springboard to the current revival and popularity of Handel's works for stage both in New England and beyond in the USA. And the plethora of Handel performances has only increased in Boston in the last decades. For one thing, Boston also became home to both the internationally acclaimed semi-annual Boston Early Music Festival (BEMF), founded in 1980, and to Boston Baroque, the first permanent Baroque orchestra established in North America – according to *Fanfare Magazine*, widely regarded as 'one of the world's premiere period instrument bands'. In recent years Boston Baroque, founded in 1973 by Martin Pearlman under the name 'Banquette Musicale', has begun performing a series of highly successful semi-staged operas to complement its extensive concert programming, including, among others, meticulously idiomatic performances of such Handel operas as *Alcina* (2003) and *Giulio Cesare* (2004). This spring, following a tour to the 2015 Beethoven Festival in Poland (where it will perform its acclaimed *Messiah*), Boston Baroque will present again its recently semi-staged *Agrippina* with internationally renowned sopranos Susanna Phillips and Amanda Forsythe.

For its part, BEMF, in stark contrast with its lavish, fully staged productions, has established its distinguished international reputation by bringing together instrumental talent and vocal superstars from around the world to present one Baroque opera in each Festival. Twice, amidst many rare, historically informed Baroque offerings over the years, a Handel opera has been the central focus: *Teseo* in the Handel tri-centennial year of 1985, led by Nicholas McGegan; and most recently, in 2013, Handel's first opera, *Almira*, complete with lavish period sets and costumes, fantastic special effects, and authentic Baroque dance.

Not that any of the above organisations focus, by any means, exclusively on opera – nor just on Handel for that matter. But it seems to me (with perhaps a bit of New England bias) that their growth and influence help define what Handel opera in America during the last forty years of the Handel renaissance has been all about, with or without the contributing influence of the early music movement. One must thus add to this group the various Handel activities of such premiere Boston theatre and opera companies over these years as Harvard's American Repertory Theatre and Sarah Caldwell's once-internationally-renowned Opera Company of Boston. Isolating the landmark Handel performance of each of these two organisations is especially instructive; each involved both Craig Smith and his collaborator for many years, director Peter Sellars.

First, in 1981, the same year that BEMF presented its first Baroque opera, the American Repertory Theatre (ART) at Harvard presented some 34 performances spread over 15 weeks of Handel's magnificent magic opera, *Orlando*, the famous 'space-age' production taking us from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida to Mars. Craig Smith conducted; Peter Sellars directed. *Newsweek* called it 'an event not to be missed by lovers of drama, opera, music, the arts in general or just plain theatrical excitement and creativity'. Six years later, in 1987, the same pair oversaw the equally engaging Boston performance of *Giulio Cesare* for Sarah Caldwell's ever-inventive Opera Company of Boston, this time with a prophetic updating to one of the crisis-points in the world, the Middle East.

For me, these remain two of the most compelling performances ever of these great operas, but for many reasons other than the inventive updating. For one thing, as Peter Sellars commented in the *Orlando* programme notes: 'We are performing the opera virtually uncut, in Italian, as Handel presented it to his English-speaking audience.' Likewise *Giulio Cesare*: 'We are performing the fullest version of this masterpiece ever heard in America, including three previously unheard arias....' This in itself was a revelation. But these seminal performances also set the stage for much more to come in the development and spread of Handel opera in America. Just how, I will explore in 'Boston and Beyond', the next segment of my personal account of Handel in America.