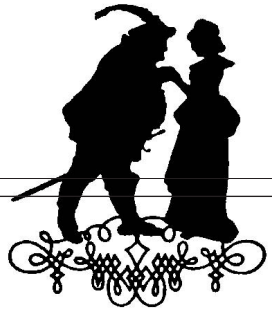
Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



A Mighty *Saul* Returns to Boston

Handel and Haydn Society, October 2025

Handel and Haydn Society opened its 211th consecutive season and 125th year at Symphony Hall on October 3rd with a compelling performance of Handel's mighty oratorio *Saul* - a highlight among the many performances of *Saul* I have attended in the last half century in Boston, both staged and in concert. Former *Boston Globe* critic Richard Dyer wrote in 2002 about two of these performances, reviewing a concert performance by Emmanuel Music, and referencing also the famous Peter Sellars staged production of 1981:

> *There is no greater composer than Handel, and Handel never composed music any greater than that which he poured into 'Saul.' The 1981 performance of this opera-oratorio by the Cantata Singers, in a staging by Peter Sellars and conducted by Craig Smith, has stood as a benchmark for musical and dramatic excitement ever since, a major event in the life of Boston's musical community and in the experience of everyone who attended it. Saturday night's concert performance, again conducted by Smith, was a similar milestone; you could not hear a better performance of a work by Handel anywhere in the world today*.

Even with a little hyperbole (in the service of truth), Mr. Dyer was correct, as I happily recall, having attended both performances. And today the recent Handel and Haydn *Saul*, conducted by its Artistic Director, Jonathan Cohen, leading his impeccable period instrument orchestra, with a greatly expanded chorus and a stunning cast, should certainly be added to the list of hard-to-be matched performances in the world today.

Not surprisingly, Handel's *Saul* has indeed marched forward in this century with many splendid performances worldwide, both home and abroad. At home, one of these, almost a decade ago in 2016, was H&H's last performance of this dramatic oratorio. Abroad, another the same year was the now-famous staging by Barrie Kosky at the 2015 Glyndebourne Festival, revived in 2018, which I then attended and reviewed. The captivatingly abstract and surreal production was far removed from Sellar's now somewhat outdated modern realism, and the acclaimed

Linard Vrielink, Jonathan; Neal Davies, Saul; Amanda Forsythe, Michal Photo: Robert Torres

production was so successful, that Glyndebourne revived it last summer with a different conductor and different singers. And the conductor was none other than Boston's own H&H Artistic Director, Jonathan Cohen. His sense of vivid theatrically showed how a concert version of the dramatic oratorio could function so impressively as "theatre of the mind," engaging the audience's imagination to a greater degree than a staged production could. Paraphrasing Mr.Dyer's words, a better performance of a work by Handel would be hard to match anywhere today.

The most important character, next to the King himself, is the chorus. Indeed, the choral scenes, so vividly staged in the Kosky production, emphasize that the oratorio is as much the chorus' story as Saul's. The same was certainly true of the H&H expanded choral forces and their panoramic positioning on the Symphony Hall stage: the H&H Orchestra and Chorus were center stage, H&H City Sing, stage left, and H&H Youth Choruses Chamber Choir, stage right. Two great choral odes frame the dramatic oratorio, the first celebrating David's slaying of Goliath, the second mourning the death of Saul and his son Jonathan. The opening expansive choral epinicion, or song of triumph for the victory over Goliath and the Philistines set the tone, as a stunning benchmark for the concert. While all three choruses contributed to the opening of the extensive tableau, "How excellent thy name, oh Lord," selective groups filled in with a solo, trio and then chamber chorus in praise of David and his heroic deed. Thus were we, the rapt audience, brought into the drama of a great king's collapse.

The cast was superb across the board and included two of the principal singers who came along with Maestro Cohen from Glyndebourne's recent *Saul*. One was the eagerly anticipated Irish soprano Sarah Brady as Saul's older daughter Merab who haughtily rejects the offer to wed the "low-born" David. Properly imperious at the outset with her gleaming voice, she softened later amidst the horror of her father's heinous behavior.

Sarah Brady, Merab Photo: Robert Torres

The other, Dutch tenor Linard Vrielink, was immensely impressive also as Saul's doomed son Jonathan, caught between affection for David and loyalty to his father (and to his father's command to have David killed.) His was a stunning characterization throughout the evening. The fine tenor was energized from the outset with his opening confrontations with Merab, later tenderly expressive and ardent in his larghetto, "No, cruel father, no!," and then eloquent in the following allegro with his determination to defend his friend David.

Linard Vrielink, Jonathan Photo: Robert Torres

Another vivid portrait was Saul's youngest daughter, the sprightly Michal, who eventually weds David and indeed saves him from the wrath of her father. Luminous soprano Amanda Forsythe, so familiar to Boston audiences for many years, happily was able to fill in for soprano Julie Roset, who was unable to perform. Ms. Forsythe, having sung the role in a 2015 tour of the Kosky production, was able to take over the assignment with ease and typical musicality.

The equally acclaimed countertenor Christopher Lowrey as David stood out for his subtle Baroque mastery right from his first eloquent, expanded legato phase "Oh king"…(thanks, but I must refuse your praise). His clarion tone and Ms. Forsythe's glowing soprano were a wonderful complement to each other, especially in their duet expressing their happiness, closing the first half of the evening (midway through Handel's Act II.)

Of course the heart of *Saul* is the tragedy of his progression from pride of power and position, through envy (of the upstart David), to madness and finally, to self-destruction. All this British bass-baritone Neal Davies portrayed with impressive conviction and intensity, from early on in the first act with expressions of his internal angst in "What do I hear…Am I then sunk so low...," juxtaposed against the jubilant, woman's chorus and vibrant carillon music praising David. This was one of the many moments where Maestro Cohen brought together a soloist, chorus, and orchestra with such effective theatricality.

Overall, the visceral impact on the audience caught the very essence of what Handel's music is all about: the complexity of human relationships and divided loyalties; the corruption wrought by power; the mental decline of a ruler and its effect on his people; and the separation of a nation from its ideals - indeed all mirroring the state of the world today. One might have thought that some kind of vivid staging, realistic or abstract, might have helped the realization of these central themes. Not so. Again, as Mr. Dyer stated, "Handel never composed music any greater than that which he poured into *Saul*." Jonathan Cohen and Boston's *Handel and Haydn Society* seemed to know that as well, bringing the powerful story of *Saul* to life with no sets or costumes, only the drama and beauty of the music.

Christopher Lowrey, David Photo: Robert Torres