

Handel's *Samson*—Not Your Bible's Strongman

by Alan M. Rothenberg

German by birth, **George Frederic Handel** (1685-1759) found his greatest success in England. Handel settled in London in 1712, after musical training in his native Halle and then Italy. He brought with him expertise in Italian-style opera, and, capitalizing on the popularity of this form, enjoyed considerable income from his forty operas. But by 1735 the public's desire for opera had declined—Frederick the Great, the Crown Prince of Prussia and a composer of no small talent, wrote “Handel's great days are over, his inspiration is exhausted, and his taste behind the fashion.”

Nearly bankrupt and in poor health, the composer devised a plan—since performing opera during Lent was prohibited in London, he began presenting subscription concert performances. These concerts featured mainly oratorios, a newly invented form. Consisting of separate pieces—arias, choruses, recitatives—and based on biblical stories, oratorios were essentially operas without the theatrical trappings of opera. Knowing the English loved grand chorus numbers and easily understood songs (tastes that contributed to the success of Gilbert and Sullivan over one hundred years later), Handel's popularity began to rise again.

Handel finished *Messiah* in September 1741, and immediately began work on *Samson*, using a text written by Irish author Newburgh Hamilton (1691-1761). Handel finished the initial version in about five weeks. He then traveled to Ireland, a trip that included the premiere of *Messiah* in Dublin on April 13. On his return to London after its great success, he made extensive revisions to *Samson*, finishing in October 1742. The first performance took place at Covent Garden on February 18, 1743. It was a remarkable success, and was performed in London seven more times that year, despite its over three-hour length.

The oratorio quickly became a favorite. Handel himself reprised *Samson* in London each year through 1755, making revisions and cuts to suit each year's cast of singers. The original, full version of *Samson* required six soloists, a luxury he probably did not have in the subsequent performances. Just as Handel's pragmatism had led him to abandon opera for oratorio, he constantly adapted his works to fit the available forces and circumstances. To this day, published editions of the music, and performances, are invariably abridged in some manner. Tonight's performance is based on a selection of numbers that was used by Handel for later performances.

The Bible Says...

The story of Samson is found in chapters 13-16 of the book of Judges. Before he is born, an angel visits his parents, telling them that their child will be dedicated to God as a Nazarite, and he will be required to abstain from grapes and all grape products (including wine and other spirits). He must also refrain from cutting his hair. The angel tells them that their child will deliver the Israelites from the ruling Philistines.

Samson grows to become strong, and becomes involved with Philistine women, which the Bible notes was God's doing. Various events showing Samson's brute strength are recounted. He becomes Delilah's lover, and after she discovers the source of his strength has a servant cut off his hair. Captured by the Philistines, he is blinded and forced to work at a grain mill. During a festival in honor of the Philistine god Dagon, Samson is brought into the temple. Leaning against a pillar, he prays to God—the only time the text records him doing so—to restore his strength one last time. Samson pulls down the pillars and the temple collapses, killing himself and the Philistines.

Milton's Samson: Polemics in a Play

It is not clear when John Milton (1608-1674) wrote *Samson Agonistes* (“Samson the Champion”), a “closet drama” intended to be read but not performed. It was published in 1671, though a notebook dating from the 1640s indicates that Milton was considering the biblical character as the subject of a play for some time. Milton

recasts the biblical narrative into classical dramatic form, using choruses and narrators to infuse the story with his own political and theological view, particularly his despair at the effects of the 1660 restoration of the English monarchy and reestablishment of the Church of England as the official state religion.

Puritans like Milton were attacked during the Restoration because they refused to become members of the Church of England, and instead served God in what they felt was the “correct” way. According to Handel scholar Winton Dean, “The Samson of Judges is divinely inspired only in the possession of his great strength. He leads an irreligious and immoral life; all the incidents told of him involve illicit sexual relationships with women of the Philistines...The ageing Milton, blind, lonely, surrounded by the ‘Philistines’ whom the Restoration had brought to power...saw in Samson’s final plight a parallel with his own...[Milton’s text] burns with a high moral fervor reinforced by the mature potency of a great poet.”

Milton’s text begins after Samson has been captured, with the previous events being mentioned in passing. It focuses on Samson’s betrayal by women, particularly by Delilah, whom Milton has turned into Samson’s wife. (In the biblical text, Samson’s relationship with Delilah is a “dalliance.”) Milton equates women, and men’s desire for women, to idolatry against God. By betraying the source of his strength, Samson betrays God. Dean notes that Milton “laid on with a trowel the precept that by God’s universal law the male must keep the female in awe,” and Milton’s text even includes a warning about “female usurpation.”

The Bible portrays Samson as a self-confident hedonist, while Milton’s Samson is a repentant sinner, searching for a way to serve God. Milton fills out the one-dimensional biblical character, providing Samson with an inner life—he is a man concerned about his relationship with God and who understands his role as the Israelite’s deliverer.

Transforming Milton: Hamilton’s Libretto

The idea of an oratorio based on *Samson Agonisties* was, no doubt, Newburgh Hamilton’s idea, who put it to Handel at some point. Handel was already familiar with Milton’s work; we know he attended a 1739 social event where it was read, and he previously wrote an ode based on Milton’s poems “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso.” We do not know when Hamilton began working on the libretto, but when Handel was ready to start writing *Samson*, most of the libretto was there for him to use.

While Hamilton held to Milton’s overall dramatic structure and storyline, he made extensive changes to the details of the text. One would be hard pressed to find an unaltered line of Milton’s original. To turn *Samson Agonisties* into a fully formed play, Hamilton incorporated material from the Psalms and other Milton poems, created the character of Samson’s friend Micah, and divided the text into acts. Hamilton also added the voice of the Philistines, as Milton’s text only includes choruses of Israelites.

Milton’s original includes many references to song and dance, most of which Hamilton gives to the Philistines, ostensibly the “bad guys” of the piece. The oratorio even begins with an extended scene of a joyous Philistine festival to their god, Dagon. It is not until the end that the Israelites are given similar sentiments, in the aria and chorus “Let the bright seraphim,” based on Milton’s “At a solemn Musick.”

Bible scholar Deborah Rooke summarizes the transformation of the biblical story into the oratorio libretto: “The biblical Samson is a wild, uncontrolled loner who, despite being styled a national hero, is really acting in accordance with his own desires. Milton’s Samson, though still a loner, is no longer wild and impulsive, but strongly conscious of his vocation, and all of his actions are calculated as a means of fulfilling that vocation. Hamilton’s Samson is neither wild nor a loner, but is a respected national hero who has accidentally come to grief, and his motivation is to further the cause of his and his nation’s God against the god of the enemy. As such, his portrayal embodies the characteristically British ideals of resistance to tyranny and defeat of idolatrous (Catholic) religion that were so strong in the minds of Hamilton’s and Handel’s contemporaries.”

Handel's *Samson*: Synopsis

ACT ONE

The Philistines are holding a festival to honor their god Dagon, and so Samson is allowed to rest from his work milling grain. Samson's friend Micah reflects on the contrast between Samson's present situation and his former glory. Samson acknowledges that his misfortunes were caused by revealing the secret of his strength. The Israelites pray for the restoration of Samson's sight, to no avail. Samson's father Manoa arrives, bemoaning his son's situation. Samson hopes that God will use him to take revenge on the Philistines, and the Israelites declare that through this revenge, the Philistines will learn who is the true God.

ACT TWO

Micah prays for support from God, but the Israelites fear for Samson. Dalila arrives, and tries to make peace with Samson, without success. The Israelites sing of the need for men to dominate women. Harapha, a Philistine strongman, arrives to gloat about Samson's misfortune. Micah and the Israelites ask God to save them, while Harapha and the Philistine priests ask Dagon to destroy the Israelites.

ACT THREE

Harapha insists that Samson attend the festival. Samson does not want to be used as entertainment for the Philistines, but Samson agrees to go. Micah and the Israelites call on God to save Samson. The Philistines praise Dagon's defeat of Samson, while Manoa bemoans his son's fate. As the temple falls, the Philistines cry for help and then die. A messenger comes to the Israelites with news of the circumstances of Samson's death, and they lament. Manoa and Micah retrieve Samson's body, The Israelites sing of Samson's ultimate triumph, followed by praises to God for the destruction of the Philistines.

Alan M. Rothenberg

www.NotePerfectNotes.com

