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Singing Handel, Then and Now

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If you attend a performance of a Handel opera or oratorio these days, the chances are it may still be billed, perhaps rather self-consciously, as being 'historically-informed' – though increasingly it is no longer considered necessary to draw attention to such exceptionality, because this has become the norm. Our ears (and eyes) are now fully acclimatised to the light and agile playing of gut-strung instruments with short, light bows; the pungent, stringy sounds of baroque oboes and bassoons; the almost reedy, piercing quality of narrow-bore, valveless trumpets and horns; and the dry crack of shallow, calf-skin headed timpani beaten with hardwood sticks. Even the harpsichord, that for a good half-century has been a standard member of the Handel orchestra, has now come into its own as a richly variegated binding agent in the overall sound-palette, rather than being just a dry, percussive clatter disturbing the seamless homogeneity of modern orchestral texture; and as often as not, it is reinforced in the continuo section by a theorbo or two. This lustrous, multi-coloured sound-tool of the 'Baroque orchestra', in the hands of skilled and committed players, steeped in the style and fully aware of role they play in the dramatic fabric of Handel's music, is one of the most exciting developments of the past 30 or so years of the aural experience of this music we love. Indeed, for many people, hearing Handel's music played on 'modern instruments', however well phrased and articulated – but with little differentiation from that of Mozart, Beethoven or Mendelssohn – feels like a distinct disappointment.

Meanwhile, however arresting the transformation in the sound of Handel's orchestral textures, what can you expect to hear from the most important people to whom you are listening – the singers? The human larynx may not have evolved over the past 300 years, but the almost infinite number of different sounds that it can produce means that there could be an equally wide range of possibilities for informed hypothesis and experimentation by 'historically-informed' singers (one only needs to listen to the huge variety of different singing styles currently in use across genres outside classical music to get a sense of what the singing voice is capable of). Surely, it would be a betrayal of the entire 'historical performance' project, and very likely to produce a strange distortion of the aural picture, if the vocal dimension of Handel's music had not been subjected to the same kind of review and renovation as has happened to the orchestra.

You may well think that this is indeed just what has occurred over the past half-century. Thus, in general, you are probably less likely to hear voices and singing styles more appropriate to Verdi, Wagner or Puccini performing Handel than you might have been in earlier times, although the pace of this change sometimes seems to be painfully halting: a case of two steps forward, one – or sometimes two – steps back. Singers with lighter and more agile voices (particularly sopranos and some tenors) who spend much of their lives performing pre-1800 music are probably more often cast in major productions of Handel's operas than they once were; although this rarely extends to the huge 19th-century metropolitan opera houses that, thanks rather ironically to the success of the Handel opera 'revival', increasingly schedule works that were written for much smaller spaces. Many managers seem to think they

have to fill the stage not only with strangely distracting productions, but also to cast singers with vocal techniques designed and honed for the sheer power and decibels necessary to get across a big orchestra and up to the back row of the upper circle.

When it comes to musical style, professional Handel singers these days are more likely to add ornamentation – usually more or less appropriate – to the *da capo* sections of arias; although very few yet do as their 18th-century predecessors did and actually improvise – or, more accurately, compose – on the spot, new melodic material in the repeats. Indeed, once you have read just a fraction of the evidence about early 18th-century professional singing technique and style contained in contemporary teaching manuals, memoirs, and scientific literature, it quickly becomes clear that (for reasons which are too complex to interrogate in detail here) while there has been a consistent and pretty rigorous approach to recovering historical instrumental sounds and playing techniques over the course of many years, vocal sound has barely budged. It remains 'the elephant in the room' of historically informed Handel performance.

Why does any of this matter? First, because of the perplexing mismatch between the vocal and the instrumental components that make up the 'new' musical soundscape. The disconnect between the orchestral and singing sounds you will normally encounter in performances of Baroque music, even those whose musical directors are particularly associated with 'historically informed' performance, is perhaps even more bewildering than some aspects of contemporary stagings of Handel opera. Among the latter is the terror many theatrical directors apparently have of allowing singers simply to stand still while performing their arias, as they did in Handel's time, enabling them and the audience to focus on the rhetorical power of the music's vocality alone to express the emotions of an arrested moment in the drama, rather than trying to make movement and business do the interpretational work.

What, then, are the main differences between the sounds of 'modern singing' and the way that singers these days learn their craft and, based on what we can surmise from the evidence, they might have been like in Handel's time? To begin with perhaps the most obvious, the pursuit of 'historicism' has not yet – thankfully – overcome the taboo against reinstating the castrati who were so essential to the whole effect of 18th-century *opera seria.* However, the typical 'solution' normally adopted for the casting of heroic male soprano roles over the past 30-40 years with male falsettists (rather anachronistically called 'counter-tenors') was largely a decision based on the priorities of theatrical realism ('men must be played by men'), rather than the likelihood that the way that modern counter-tenors produce their voices actually most closely approximates to the sound of castrati – any more than that of modern female sopranos, now increasingly being cast to play such roles, dressed in male costumes. Indeed, when it comes to vocal production in general (and this includes all voice types, from soprano down to bass), notwithstanding the earnest commitment of some musical directors to enforcing 'historically informed' style (at least in the music, as they rarely have any say in the production style), all the 'surface' effects they demand of their singers – attention to ornamentation in particular, but also matters of phrasing, articulation and dynamics – are essentially 'instrumental' effects that sidestep the fundamental, but also potentially troubling, implications of attempting reconstruction of Baroque vocal production itself, and hence its sound.

Today's professional Handel singers, especially in opera, are almost exclusively products of conservatoire vocal education, which has been progressively cemented into a fairly universal 'method'. This found its most thorough manifestation back in the mid-19th century: Manuel García the younger's *Traité complet de l'art du chant*, published in Paris in 1840 and subsequently reworked in English in 1847. García, trained in the master-apprentice system (initially taught by his father, Manuel the elder, a famous early 19th-century Mozart singer who also created roles for Rossini), exercised a commanding influence as a pedagogue, first in France and then in England, for more almost three-quarters of a century. He began teaching at the Paris Conservatoire in 1829, became professor of singing at the Royal Academy of Music in 1847, where he taught for over 50 years, and lived to the age of 102. The legacy of his method (still in use to this day) continues to dominate classical vocal training right across the world. The treatise effectively lays out the technical principles of modern classical singing: in particular, the process by which singers can consciously elongate the vocal tract by gently depressing the larynx and keeping it depressed as the voice ascends through its pitch register, at the same time lifting the soft palate and projecting the sound forwards to maximise the natural resonances of the facial cavities. With careful control, achieved through concentrated training, the effect of this is that the voice finds a particularly advantageous frequency band, known as 'the singers' formant'. This is what enables opera singers' voices to carry over big orchestras and fill large auditoria without the need for artificial amplification, and for them to maintain equal power throughout the whole vocal range, from low to high.

This production is 'mechanically' highly efficient, and when done correctly, involves little or no vocal strain. However, the downsides include the necessity to modify vowel sounds, a result of maintaining the elongation of the vocal tract particularly as the voice reaches its upper range, in order to maintain a consistent 'ring'; this is the reason why it is often difficult to hear differences between opera singers' vowels (something particularly detrimental to the pure vowels of the Italian language of Handel's operas). Another disadvantage is the relatively high sub-glottal breath pressure needed to maintain such vocal carrying power. This seriously mitigates against the natural flexibility of the larynx that is essential for achieving truly rapid coloratura, including trills and highly articulated runs – both key elements in the armoury of the vocal effects which characterised virtuoso and affective singing style from the Renaissance until at least the early 19th century. Nevertheless, even professional 'early music singers' (including, by the way, counter-tenors), employ this form of vocal production, essentially because it is the recognised 'sound of classical singing'.

By contrast, vocal training before the Romantic era was focused on a number of distinctly different priorities, which are in turn reflected in the various forms of written vocal music from the mid-16th until the mid-19th centuries, and are a particularly distinctive feature of opera and oratorio from the 'long 18th century'. If there is a counterpart to Manual García for this era, it is probably the castrato and voice teacher Pier Francesco Tosi's *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni* (1723), which effectively summarises the principal elements of vocal training going back to the mid-17th century, when Tosi learned his art. Thanks to subsequent translations and updatings of his book, these elements remained largely unchanged until well into the 19th century. Tosi describes the process of gradually and systematically developing the young singer's natural voice into a flexible and expressive instrument (he recommends starting studies aged 12, 13 or 14, although many, especially girls,

began much earlier). Instead of striving for unity of sound quality across the whole range, the aim was strong differentiation of the two registers, chest and falsetto, while making the transition between them seamless (tenors, for example, changed over into falsetto above a certain point, rather than pushing the chest voice up into the head as they do now). An exercise called *messa di voce* (literally ‘placing the voice’) focused on producing a perfect swelling of every note from very soft to loud and back again without deviation in pitch (wobble). This developed breath control and was also in itself an expressive device to be applied to all long notes in performance. Finally, the singer needed to develop *disposizione* (disposition, or skill) in order to produce trills and very fast passage-work. This requires the larynx to ‘float’ freely, the breath is kept at a very low pressure, and the coloratura is articulated in the throat (known in Italian as *cantar di gorga*); this, in turn, reduces the carrying power of the voice. Of all the technical aspects of early 18th-century singing technique, it is this latter which is perhaps most alien to almost all singers trained in the modern classical style.

So, just suppose we were to try to apply such a pedagogical programme – something that would, ironically, be particularly difficult for Handel singers already steeped in modern vocal production – how different might Handel’s vocal music actually sound? The short answer is that singers would have to undertake a lengthy process of experimentation, with completely open minds, just as players of Baroque orchestral instruments have been doing for a long time. The outcome could be a revelation.

Note

Suggestions for further reading:

Potter, J. (2012). Vocal performance in the ‘long eighteenth century’. In *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance* (eds. Lawson, C. & Stowell, R.), 506–526. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wistreich, R. (2000). Reconstructing pre-Romantic singing technique. In *The Cambridge Companion to Singing* (ed. Potter, J.), 178–191. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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