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PIERRE DEGOTT

Self-Celebratory Musical Acts

Cecilian Odes and Other Sung Texts as a Means of Acknowledging the Place of Music within the Arts

It is no doubt a truism that in late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century perceptions of the sister arts, music often ranked as inferior to the other arts, mainly to literature and poetry. Of course, not everyone shared such a vision, least of all musicians or poets interested in music. However, thinkers who addressed the delicate issue of connections between different art forms, in the wake of Horace's famous formula *ut pictura poesis*, tended to deny the idea that the sister arts might actually stand as equals. Basically, poetry was still regarded as the ultimate form, ranking above painting or music. Such a view, for instance, was still held in 1744 by James Harris, among others a fervent musical patron, in the concluding lines of his famous essay in which he endeavoured to compare the respective merits of painting, music and poetry: "Yet must it be remembered, in this Union [that of poetry and music], that *Poetry* ever have the *Precedence*; its *Utility*, as well as *Dignity*, being by far the more considerable."¹ The idea that music was subservient to poetry, or to use Harris's words merely "an *Ally to Poetry*,"² is probably best rendered in the following quotation. The meaning is clearly that music needs to rely on words in order to become truly expressive:

1 James Harris, *Three Treatises. The First Concerning Art. The Second Concerning Music, Painting and Poetry. The Third Concerning Happiness*, London 1744, p. 102 (original emphasis).

2 Ibid., p. 95 (original emphasis).

From what has been said it is evident, that these two Arts can never be so powerful *singly*, as when they are *properly united*. For *Poetry*, when alone, must be necessarily forced to *waste* many of its richest *Ideas*, in the mere raising of Affections, when, to have been properly relished, it should have *found* those Affections in their highest Energy. And *Music*, when alone, can only raise *Affections*, which soon *languish* and *decay*, if not maintained and fed by the nutritive Images of Poetry.³

Possibly because it was believed to be less intellectual than the other arts, which supposedly required more academic and rhetorical skills to be fully appreciated, music was often seen as an inferior form, mainly judged in its capacity to arouse emotions and to imitate things (noises, movements), accused of being devoid of autonomous sense and deprived of reasonable utility. For example, in Aaron Hill's *Tears of the Muses* (1737), it is thus the absence of purpose in instrumental music which invalidates an art form seen as only redeemable when performing a particular, useful function:

Music, when *Purpose* points her not the Road
Charms, to betray, and softens, to *corrode*.
Empty of Sense, the Soul-seducing Art
Thrills a slow Poison to the sick'ning Heart.
Soft sinks *Idea*, dissolute in Ease,
And all Life's feeble Lesson is, to *please*.
Spirit, and Taste, and generous Toil, take Flight:
And lazy Love, and indolent Delight,
And low luxurious Weariness of Pain,
Lull the soft Mind, – and all its Powers are vain.⁴

John Dennis, in his famous *Essay on the Opera's after the Italian Manner* (1706), made a similar point when he asserted that music, besides being delightful, also owed it to itself to be profitable, something that could only be attained if it was “subservient to Reason” and capable of “informing the Understanding”, that is, in all likelihood, providing a backdrop to a written text that could in turn be endowed with sense and meaning. Failing that,

³ Ibid., p. 102 (original emphasis).

⁴ Aaron Hill, *The Tears of the Muses. In a Conference between Prince Germanicus and a Male-Content Party*, London 1737, p. 24 (original emphasis).

music could only be liable to stimulate supposedly base sensual impulses and be conducive to sin, sensuality and immorality:

There is no Man living who is more convinc'd than my self of the Power of Harmony, or more penetrated by the Charms of Musick. [...] Musick may be made profitable as well as delightful, if it is subordinate to some nobler Art, and subservient to Reason; but if it presumes not only to degenerate from its ancient Severity, from its sacred Solemnity; but to set up of itself, and to grow independant, as it does in our late Opera's, it becomes a meer sensual Delight, utterly incapable of informing the Understanding, or of reforming the Will; and for that very Reason utterly unfit to be made a publick Diversion, and the more charming it grows, it becomes the more pernicious. [...] [S]oft and delicious Musick by soothing the Senses, and making a Man too much in Love with himself, makes him too little fond of the publick, so by emasculating and dissolving the mind, it shakes the very foundation of Fortitude, and so is destructive of both branches of the publick Spirit.⁵

The excesses and dangers that music could thus lead to, if wrongly channelled towards emotion, were also the staple fare of many contemporary sermons which took up the old, typical puritanical wariness towards an art form that was still seen as ambivalent in its capacity to either soothe and elevate the soul when handled in the right way, or to inflame the spirit and lead to vice and degeneracy when it was misused:

*Music is a two-edged Sword; capable, as of quelling the rebel passions, so of giving a mortal wound to virtue and religion: and therefore should always be in a sober hand. [...] What ought to kindle a devout affection, may blow up every evil desire into a flame; may be the fuel and incentive of vice.*⁶

Needless to say, this dichotomy is the very object of the demonstration carried out in John Dryden's *Alexander's Feast* (1692), a text set to music by seven composers in the course of the period under study, an epic poem that

5 John Dennis, *An Essay on the Opera's after the Italian Manner, Which Are about to Be Established on the English Stage. With Some Reflections on the Damage Which They May Bring to the Publick*, London 1706, pp. 2, 9.

6 George Lavington, *The Influence of Church-Music. A Sermon Preached in the Cathedral Church of Worcester at the Anniversary Meeting of the Choirs of Worcester, Hereford, and Gloucester, September 8. 1725*, London 31753, p. 18 (original emphasis). For an Elizabethan example of how music could be seen, when placed in the wrong hands, as an instrument of depravation, see David Baldwin, *The Chapel Royal Ancient and Modern*, London 1990, pp. 112–261.

thematizes the sharp contrast in the effects of music depending on whether it be in the hands of the astute, artful and manipulative Timotheus, or in those of divine Cecilia. In each case, is it the “Power of Musick” which, as the subtitle of the work indicates, is given pride of place; a feature that also transpires from the following extract, taken from yet another sermon on the musical art: “Musick is almost as Dangerous as ’tis Useful, *it has the Force of Gunpowder, and should be as carefully look’d after, that no unhallow’d Fire give it the power of Destroying.*”⁷

In Britain as well as on the continent, the second half of the eighteenth century, with its emphasis on feeling and sentiment, was to have less dogmatic views to the point of re-evaluating the place of music in the hierarchy of the arts, almost going so far as to rank music above its ‘sisters’ at least in its capacity to express feelings and stimulate emotions. The present paper thus aims to focus on a selection of sung texts all meant to thematise the different functions of music and to highlight its various powers in order to advance the art form. Mainly devoted to the various odes to Saint Cecilia that were performed in London throughout the long eighteenth century,⁸ this paper will pay particular attention to two aspects that seem to emerge more saliently: first, the treatment of texts that were reset and consequently partly rewritten, such as Dryden’s two Cecilian odes, and second, the issue of Englishness in music, especially as regards the representation of the figure of Cecilia at a time when English music was trying to find some new identity. In the treatment of these two aspects, this paper will give particular emphasis to George Frideric Handel’s Italian cantata *Cecilia, volgi un sguardo*, a musical piece that was inserted between the two parts of *Alexander’s Feast* (1736) on the day the well-known ode was first performed. The incongruous and paradoxical presence of this Italian cantata seems to crystallise the various tensions that were at work at a turning-point not only in Handel’s career but also in the development of English music.

7 William Dingley, *Cathedral Service Decent and Useful. A Sermon Preach’d before the University of Oxford at St Mary’s on Cecilia’s Day, 1713*, London 1713, p. 14 (original emphasis).

8 In that respect, see William H. Husk, *Musical Celebrations on St. Cecilia’s Day in the Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, to Which is Appended a Collection of Odes on St. Cecilia’s Day*, London 1857; Thomas H. Connolly, “Saint Cecilia”, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, eds. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrell, vol. 5, London 2001, pp. 330–32 and, most recently, Bryan White, *Music for St Cecilia’s Day. From Purcell to Handel*, Woodbridge 2019.

I. Cecilian Odes

For all the contextual turmoil surrounding their production in times marked by heavy political unrest, the various texts written in honour of Saint Cecilia all display a surprising number of similarities. The impression of thematic continuity given by this atypical corpus is no doubt reinforced by the fact that some of the texts set by Handel in the 1730s had already been used in Henry Purcell's time,⁹ even though they were all slightly rewritten according to the traditional modes of literary revision (expansion, extension, excision, condensation or merely verbal redistribution, etc.). The issue of rewriting takes further relevance when one considers that the corpus very much relies on the constant repetition of similar motifs and wordings, on the duplication of the same recurrent formulas.

Various scholars, from Richard Lockett or John Hollander to Ruth Smith and David Hopkins, have indeed shown how the lyrics of the various odes to Saint Cecilia display structural, thematic and rhetorical similitudes, their organisation being based on a fairly similar pattern.¹⁰ First, the performers of the ode are exhorted to play in a performative act meant to suggest the reflexive nature of the concert thus mirrored within the text itself. The next inevitable feature consists of the catalogue of musical instruments, with the description of their respective qualities and effects such as the warbling flute and lute invariably suggesting amorous passion, the trumpet leading to combative exaltation, the sprightly violin synonymous with unlimited mirth, the sound of the organ conducive to the elevation of the soul and to divine ecstasy. To the instrumental paradigm can be attached a similarly open list of biblical or mythological figures traditionally associa-

9 For a detailed account of the setting of the two Dryden odes, see Robert M. Myers, *Handel, Dryden and Milton. Being a Series of Observations on the Poems of Dryden and Milton, as Alter'd and Adapted by Various Hands, and Set to Musick by Mr Handel, to Which Are Added Authentick Texts of Several of Mr Handel's Oratorios*, London 1956. See also Percy Young, *The Concert Tradition from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, London 1965 and John D. C. Buck, "The Ascetic Banquet. The Morality of Alexander's Feast", in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 17 (1975), pp. 573–589.

10 John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky. Ideas of Music in English Poetry 1500–1700*, Princeton 1961, pp. 401–422; Richard Lockett, *The Legend of St. Cecilia and English Literature. A Study*, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge 1971; Ruth Smith, "The Arguments and Contexts of Dryden's *Alexander's Feast*", in *Studies in English Literature* 18 (1978), pp. 465–490, p. 479; Charles Henry Biklé, *The Odes for St Cecilia's Day in London (1683–1703)*, PhD thesis, University of Michigan 1982; David Hopkins, "The London Odes on St Cecilia's Day for 1686, 1695 and 1696", in *Review of English Studies New Series* 45 / 180 (1994), pp. 486–495, pp. 494–495.

ted with music, whether it be Apollo or Jubal, Orpheus or Arion, etc. Again, the declension of those parameters serves as a pretext for the evocation of the various functions traditionally attached to music. After invariably evoking the harmonizing power of music in creation, the ode usually closes on a brief, almost perfunctory, evocation of Saint Cecilia preceding a final celebration of celestial song; another way of fusing, in a reflexive act, the concert evoked in the text with the real concert taking place at the time of the performance. As has been suggested in some of the publications quoted above, many verbal formulas and rhetorical devices do actually echo one another, creating a form of poetic network apparently meant to suggest the permanence, longevity and unity of the whole corpus.

One leading thread that seems to have been overlooked by previous critics lies in the food metaphor, that is the continuous association between the musical concert and the act of sharing a meal; an analogy that seems to go beyond the fact that the initial London celebrations usually ended up in a banquet at Stationers' Hall. A report by Peter Motteux clearly establishes that music could also be heard while the meal was going on:

Whilst the Company is at Table, the Hautboys and Trumpets play successively. Mr. *Showers* hath taught the latter of late years to sound with all the softness imaginable, they plaid us some flat Tunes, made by Mr. *Finger*, with a general applause, it being a thing formerly thought impossible upon an Instrument design'd for a sharp Key.¹¹

More importantly, the very text of the odes thus draws the explicit analogy between the subtle pleasure of musical hearing and the more concrete joy of food-tasting. As early as 1683, the year of the first celebration, Christopher Fishburn's opening couplet on which Purcell's ode opens mentions the fusion of all senses: "Welcome to all the pleasures that delight / Of ev'ry sense the grateful appetite!"¹²

The lyrics of the ode given the next year, with words by John Oldham, also explicitly develop the analogy between wine and music, here called "the sweets of melody" by the poet. Beyond the repeated use of the word "tongue", which can refer both to singing and to swallowing, the poem multiplies all those metaphors linking the effects of intoxicating music to those

¹¹ Peter Motteux, *The Gentleman's Journal* 1 / 1 (1692), p. 5 (original emphasis).

¹² Quoted in Husk 1857, *Musical Celebrations on St. Cecilia's Day*, p. 143. Further quotations will refer to this edition unless otherwise stated.

of alcohol, of which the musical art seems to be nothing but a more refined, less terrestrial, form:

Music's the cordial of a troubled breast,
 The softest remedy that grief can find;
 [...]
 Music does all our joys refine,
 It gives the relish to our wine,
 'Tis that gives rapture to our love,
 And wings devotion to a pitch divine;
 'Tis our chief bliss on earth, and half our heav'n above. (146)

The end of the poem clearly associates Saint Cecilia with the consumption of wine, reminding the public of the apparently intricate nature of the two activities:¹³

Let's sing to blest Cecilia's fame,
 That grac'd this art, and gave this day its name;
 With music, wine, and mirth conspire
 To bear a concert, and make up the quire! (147)

If the vision of music as a cordial is also the theme of Thomas Yalden's ode in 1693, the text set to music in 1685 by Nahum Tate develops the same analogy, but on the pastoral mode. The poet thus associates the congregation with the flocks of sheep grazing in the fields, establishing a new link between the verbs "feed", "love" and "play", "play" being of course used to refer to musical playing:

Let your kids and lambkins rove,
 Let them sport or feed at will,
 Grace the vale, or climb the hill;
 Let them feed, or let them love,
 Let them love, or let them stray,
 Let them feed, or let them play;
 Neglect them or guide them,
 No harm shall betide them,
 On bright Cecilia's, bright Cecilia's day. (147)

13 See *ibid.*, p. 171.

In one of the several anonymous poems set by John Blow, musical instruments are explicitly associated with the “dainties” of a delicate meal, the menu of which is scrupulously detailed in the text:

Welcome, welcome, ev'ry guest,
 Welcome to the Muses' feast!
 Music is your only cheer,
 Music entertains the ear.
 The sacred Nine observe the mode,
 And bring you dainties from abroad;
 The delicious Thracian lute
 And Dodona's mellow flute,
 With Cremona's racy fruit.
 At home you have the freshest air,
 Vocal, instrumental fare;
 Our English trumpet nothing has surpast:
 The Carnival has not so rich a taste. (173)

Another ode set by Blow for the 1695 celebration, with text by Motteux, spins out even more explicitly this initial metaphor while also developing the divine function of music, seen as fuel and food to the great machine that constitutes the universe:

Hail, Music! still our Thoughts employ,
 Love's Food divine, Life's purest Joy,
 Blest Speech of the Celestial Throng,
 Thou best and universal Song,
 Thou Wing of Zeal, and ev'ry Passion's Queen,
 Thou Spring, thou Rule, and Soul of Nature's grand Machine!¹⁴

Similarly, in the text set by Nicola Matteis in 1696, the verb “to taste” is used to refer to the human enjoyment of Heaven, as only music can give a glimpse of:

What mighty Joys from Musick flow!
 Musick the greatest good we Mortals know,
 By which we taste of Heav'n below.¹⁵

14 Quoted in Hopkins 1994, “The London Odes on St Cecilia's Day”, p. 492.

15 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 493.

It would be tedious to establish a systematic list of similar occurrences but one cannot leave aside *Alexander's Feast*, a poem which uses the background of a banquet as the ideal setting for the musical concert; an event supposed to demonstrate the unlimited power of both secular and religious music. In the course of this multiple "feast", a figure of both the banquet being represented in the poetical work and the real-life concert offered to the congregation, the unexpected arrival of Saint Cecilia allows for a dialectic reflection on the moral and ethical value of the musical art but also leads, in Handel's re-setting of Dryden's text, to an interrogation on the figure of the saint herself.¹⁶

II. The celebration of English music

It is another truism that, in the context of the perception of the values attached to the figure of Cecilia, the celebration of the saint – especially at a time particularly charged in terms of politico-religious issues – was not taken for granted in all quarters. As early as 1692, the French Huguenot Peter Motteux felt obliged to mention, in an issue of *The Gentleman's Journal*, that the Roman saint was not celebrated "thro a Principle of Superstition, but to propagate the advancement of the divine science of music"¹⁷; an idea that Jonathan Swift, who in 1730 objected to the Popish connotations surrounding the celebration of a Roman Catholic saint, obviously did not share:

Grave Dean of St Patrick's, how comes it to pass,
That you know music no more than an ass,
That you who was found writing of Drapiers,
Should lend your cathedral to blowers and scrapers?
To act such an opera once in a year
Is offensive to every true Protestant ear,
With trumpets and fiddles and organs and singing,
Will sure the Pretender and popery bring in.
No Protestant prelate, his Lordship or Grace,
Dare there show his right or most reverend face;

16 See for instance Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought*, Cambridge 1995, p. 81–107 (chapter 3, "Music, Morals and Religion").

17 Peter Motteux, *The Gentleman's Journal* 1 / 1 (1692), p. 4.

How would it pollute their croziers and rochets,
To listen to minims and quavers and crochets?¹⁸

Swift's poem establishes in a fairly direct way the association between Saint Cecilia and Italian opera; an issue that may have more relevance than it seems in one of the last manifestations in honour of Saint Cecilia, Handel's resetting of *Alexander's Feast*, mainly through the adjunction of the Italian cantata *Cecilia, volgi un sguardo* – played during the first performances of Handel's work in 1736 and a piece usually dismissed as a generic oddity or more simply a mere showpiece for the singer Anna Maria Strada del Pò.¹⁹ This cantata, a reshuffling of previously performed Italian works,²⁰ will be used to show to what extent old recipes and formulas could make sense even when they were integrated within a work already based on the recycling of previous textual material.

How can one account for the reappearance or recrudescence of the figure of Saint Cecilia in the 1730s? In his *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century*, Roger Fiske establishes a possible correlation between the renewal of the odes to Saint Cecilia at the end of the first third of the eighteenth century and the fact that towards the same period English composers started re-using librettos previously set around the beginning of the century.²¹ Fiske thus mentions Thomas Augustine Arne's *Rosamund* (1733), *Comus* (1738) and *The Judgment of Paris* (1742), to say nothing of Handel's *Semele* (1744), the rewriting of which also led to a further thematisation of music.²² It is actually tempting to see in such a coincidence, at a time when English vocal music was recovering from the domination of Italian opera and looking for a new identity, a form of nostalgia for a brighter past when English music could again, after the Elizabethan golden age and the strictures of the Civil War, boast and clamour its identity and its belonging to a national tradition.

18 Jonathan Swift, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Pat Rogers, New Haven 1983, p. 435 ("The Dean to Himself on St Cecilia's Day" [1730]). For the relatively limited importance of the figure of Cecilia in the odes, see Richard Lockett, "St. Cecilia and Music", in *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 99 (1972 / 1973), pp. 15–30, pp. 28–29. Throughout his work, Bryan White repeatedly insists on the secular use of the Roman figure (see White 2019, *Music for St Cecilia's Day*, passim).

19 See Christopher Hogwood, *Handel*, London 1984, p. 131.

20 For the sources of the cantata, see for instance Annette Landgraf and David Vickers (eds.), *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia*, Cambridge 2008, pp. 130–131, 398.

21 See Roger Fiske, *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century*, London 1973, p. 180.

22 See also Pierre Degott, "Handel's *Semele*. A Dual Allegory", in *Goldberg. Early Music Magazine* 49 (2007), pp. 50–61.

One can first highlight the fact that most of these odes refer, in a direct way, to their own rendition, thereby equating the music celebrated in the text with the circumstances of its own production and giving the performance even more weight and actuality. The words for the 1683 ode already seem to welcome, for the twenty years to come, the members of the Musical Society meeting there for the celebration:

Hail, great assembly of Apollo's race!
Hail to this happy place,
This Musical assembly, that seems to be
The ark of universal harmony! (143)

Around 1690, a text written by Samuel Wesley with the allusion to the "annual tribute" also contains an explicit reference to the recurrent nature of the celebration, further reinforcing the identification of the life and blood musicians present on stage with those musicians surrounding the saint. In other words, the celebration of Saint Cecilia is actually more in the form of a self-celebration, or to take up a formulation once used by John Hollander, less "the celebration of singing" than the "singing of that celebration".²³

Begin, begin the noble song,
Call ev'ry tuneful soul into the ear,
And sweetly chain them there
With numbers soft and strong:
[...]
For these our annual tribute thus we pay,
And thus, fair Saint, we hail thy bright, thy happy day. (157)

It is another striking feature that the verbal texts of some of the seventeenth-century odes also explicitly celebrate, in some way or other, the very Britishness of their own ingredients. Such is the case, for instance, of *Hail, bright Cecilia!*, the famous ode written by Nicholas Brady for Purcell in 1692:

That thine and Music's sacred love
May make the British forest prove
As famous as Dodona's vocal grove. (162)

23 Hollander 1961, *The Untuning of the Sky*, p. 401.

In one of the texts already quoted above and set by Blow, the English trumpet duly celebrated by the poet appears as the ultimate 'dainty' surpassing all others in taste and freshness:

At home you have the freshest air,
 Vocal, instrumental fare;
 Our English trumpet nothing has surpast:
 The Carnival has not so rich a taste. (173)

Other Cecilian odes draw explicit parallels between British valour and the music inspired by Cecilia, thus presenting the saint as a national figure, not only a patroness of music but indirectly a leader in war as seems to be the case for instance of the 1695 ode written by Motteux and set by Blow:

Cecilia did our Art improve.
 Our Art encreas'd our sacred Love.
 The Charms of Music made her long
 To joyn in the Seraphic Song,
 And her Example drew the ravisht Throng.
 So, when the Trumpet sounds to Arms,
Britons, whom Native Valour warms,
 Are doubly fir'd, and doubly run to Arms.
 To Arms, they cry, and all around
 Ten thousand Braves return the welcome warlike Sound.²⁴

It may be of interest to note that Cecilia's connection with England was somehow fuelled by the probably naïve belief, as formulated in the January 1692 issue of the *The Gentleman's Journal*, that "[s]he was a Roman Lady of the Noble Family of the *Cæcilii*, from whence the *Cecils* in *England* are said to be descended."²⁵

Another ode, dating back to Queen Ann's reign, further anglicises Cecilia by linking up the saint and the monarch, again inscribing the former within a resolutely national context. Cecilia is thus presented as the only agent potentially able to assuage, in a time of war and trouble, the mind of the sorely plagued sovereign:

24 Quoted in Hopkins 1994, "The London Odes on St Cecilia's Day", p. 491 (original emphasis).

25 Peter Motteux, *The Gentleman's Journal* 1 / 1 (1692), p. 4 (original emphasis).

Thus royal and triumphant Anna's mind
From Music does its chief refreshment find;
All other pleasures pall'd by empire's care,
Neglected by her, or untasted are.
Oh may the troubles which disturb the state,
Fast as her glorious conquest grow, abate;
May fears, and violence, and party cease,
And all conspire to court a common peace. (194)

A much later ode by Christopher Smart, dating back to 1744 but not set until 1800,²⁶ goes so far as to make of Cecilia the source of Edmund Waller's poetic inspiration at Penshurst, further endowing the Roman Catholic saint with national attributes. Interestingly enough, Smart's text ends with a stanza explicitly linking Cecilia to Purcell (and not to Handel!). Both figures are apparently portrayed as the champions of a type of music presented as being forceful and meaningful, "mellifluous" yet "manly", "sweet" but "strong". In other words they are presented as a form of music combining sense and sound or as a corrective to another form of music seen as soft, degenerate and lacking in vigour – the Italian opera that was still fashionable in the 1730s and early 1740s:

But hark! the temple's hollow'd roof resounds,
And Purcell lives along the solemn sounds. –
Mellifluous, yet manly too,
He pours his strains along,
As from the lion Samson slew,
Comes sweetness from the strong.
Not like the soft Italian swains,
He trills the weak enervate strains,
Where sense and music are at strife;
His vigorous notes with meaning teem,
With fire, with force explain the theme,
And sing the subject into life.
Attend – he sings Cecilia – matchless dame!
'Tis she, 'tis she, – fond to extend her fame,
On the loud chords the notes conspire to stay,

26 See Husk 1857, *Musical Celebrations on St. Cecilia's Day*, p.76.

And sweetly swell into a long delay,
And dwell delighted on her name. (232–233)

Later in the century, the composer Philip Hayes in his *Ode to British Harmony* (1784) clearly and explicitly featured Cecilia as a guide and leader in the development of British music.²⁷

As one can see, far from being the embodiment of music in the widest possible sense, far from being the dangerous papist figure seen by the likes of Swift, Cecilia appears as an emblematic figure of British music or as the very championess of musical creation in Great Britain.

III. The special case of *Cecilia, volgi un sguardo*

In that respect, Handel's setting of *Alexander's Feast* (1736) may be particularly illuminating, especially if one considers the musical additions played during the first performance in order to pad out the programme. As is well-known, Handel not only inserted instrumental concertos to be played at dramatically appropriate places, but he also patched up two previous Italian works so as to come up with a new, original cantata meant to be sandwiched between the two parts of his own setting of Dryden's narrative poem.²⁸

Paradoxically sung in Italian, the lines of the cantata *Cecilia, volgi un sguardo* read like a true manifesto for British music at that time of its history. The verbal text does indeed present itself as an invitation for Cecilia to cast her glance on British soil so that she may see the glorious musical past of the nation, now in the process of renewing a long-lost tradition:

²⁷ See Simon Heighes, *The Lives and Works of William and Philip Hayes*, New York 1995, p. 219.

²⁸ See particularly Winton Dean, "An Unrecognized Handel Singer. Carlo Arrigoni", in *Musical Times* 118 (1977), pp. 556–58 and Donald Burrows, "The Composition and First Performance of Handel's *Alexander's Feast*", in *Music and Letters* 64 / 3–4 (1983), pp. 206–211.

| | |
|---|---|
| Cecilia volgi un sguardo | Cecilia, cast a glance |
| Verso il suolo Britanno, e scorgerai | Upon the land of Britain, and you will see |
| Che con sonori accenti | That in sonorous strains |
| Rinova in questo giorno | It renews on this day |
| Del nume tuo sì caro | The pleasing memory |
| La gradita memoria, | Of your name so dear, |
| Per celebrar della virtù la gloria. ²⁹ | To celebrate the glory of virtue. ³⁰ |

A few lines further down, the words of the cantata metonymically allude to the rich past of Great Britain, a fact that can also be seen as an invitation to consider Britain's musical past and therefore implicitly as a statement on the nation's present capacity to equal and emulate the musical glory of past centuries:

| | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Carco sempre di gloria | Always a bearer of glory |
| Fù l'altero Tamigi, | Was the proud Thames, |
| Ed emulò nella virtù nel merto | And it matched in virtue and merit |
| I secoli passati; ³¹ | past ages. |

Similarly, in the tradition of the Cecilian self-celebration, "Armonica Cecilia" is requested to allow her eminent disciples – all British we assume – to match her merits and to surpass her own achievements:

| | |
|--|---|
| Tu, Armonica Cecilia, | You, harmonious Cecilia, |
| Che rapisti col Canto, | Who ravished with your singing, |
| Che incantasti col suono, | Who enchanted with your playing, |
| Fà pur che sia concesso | Let it be granted to this gathering of your |
| A questo stuol de tuoi seguaci egregi | worthy followers |
| Imitarne i tuoi pregi, | That they may imitate your merits, |
| Perche un nobil natale | For a noble birth becomes obscure |
| Si rende oscur senza virtute Uguale. ³² | Without Virtue to match. |

Considering the artistic context of the 1730s, and taking account of Handel's aesthetic options at that time of his career, one might indeed be tempted to

29 Quoted in Myers 1956, *Handel, Dryden and Milton*, p. 95.

30 Translation by Anthony Hicks, as printed in the liner notes to the 2004 CD recording issued by Hyperion, CDA67463.

31 Quoted in Myers 1956, *Handel, Dryden and Milton*, p. 96.

32 Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 95–96.

see in this noble birth (“nobil natale”) the outcome of the new musical genre of the English oratorio (at which Handel himself had only recently tried his hand) as a genre of which *Alexander’s Feast* can be seen as a notable landmark (even though it is not an oratorio in the proper sense of the term), and to which it certainly paved the way. At a time when the composer’s musical choices seemed to flutter between his long-lasting love for Italian opera on the one hand and the temptation to give in to the general call for music set on English words on the other, the insertion of an Italian cantata devoted to the praise of British music in the midst of a resolutely British work can hardly be regarded as insignificant.

In the new context of Dryden’s ode, re-set in a musical climate very much marked by the hectic but impassioned background of the Italian opera – in 1736 the competition with the rival opera company was at its highest – the contrast between the pagan figure of the musician Timotheus, appealing to the more passionate instincts of the human mind, and that of the Christian saint, an incarnation of religious faith and spiritual aspirations, may well take up further meaning – at least if one agrees to take this opposition as an allegorical representation of the opera / oratorio dichotomy that was beginning to be an issue at that time of Handel’s career. The rather incongruous introduction of the Italian cantata, right in the middle of the pagan part of the work, thus seems to crystallise some of the aesthetic tensions inherent, at that time, to the world of English music and to add up to the many ambiguities and complexities of Dryden’s poem.³³

If Dryden’s conclusive stanza seems to point to the difficulty of making a clear-cut choice (“Let old Timotheus yield the Prize, / Or Both divide the Crown”),³⁴ the intrusion of the Italian text in praise of British music further underlines the difficulty of burning one’s old idols. In 1736, Handel, who himself was to be repeatedly compared to Timotheus,³⁵ was far from considering the possibility of giving up Italian opera. It may however be of some interest to point out that for later performances, perhaps when the praise and defence of British music was no longer regarded as a necessity, Handel’s *Alexander’s Feast* was occasionally billed with other works dealing with the difficulty of making definitive choices and opting for a single way. Such was

33 See Smith 1978, “The Arguments and Contexts of Dryden’s *Alexander’s Feast*”, pp. 465–490.

34 Quoted in Myers 1956, *Handel, Dryden and Milton*, p. 104.

35 R. J. Merrett, “England’s Orpheus. Praise of Handel in Eighteenth-Century Poetry”, in *Mosaic (Winnipeg)* 20 / 2 (1987), pp. 97–110.

the case for Handel's *Choice of Hercules*, when the new piece was presented in 1751 as "an additional New Act" to *Alexander's Feast*, sometimes even as "Act the Third",³⁶ as if it were the logical and natural continuation of the main piece. In that respect the first production of Arne's *Judgment of Paris*, given as an afterpiece to *Alexander's Feast* on 26 March 1742, also suggests new possibilities of interpretation. In all these occurrences, the rewriting of a previously set text was implicitly associated with circumstances in which making a choice was a burning issue. Whether British music was to stick to its traditional specificities or whether it was to keep on following continental trends as had been its wont in the recent past, was a problem that remained unsolved for many decades to come. In any event, in the instances that have been noted one cannot overlook the fact that rewriting and resetting previously existing texts was indirectly associated with the circumstances dealing with the issue of Britishness in music.

In his seminal study of the Augustan odes to Saint Cecilia, William Henry Husk once pointed out that the end of the Cecilian celebrations in the early eighteenth century somehow coincided with the arrival of Italian opera on the London musical scene.³⁷ If Italian opera may have ousted – at least temporarily – what we can be tempted to call the patroness of English music, the conspicuous return of the saint in the 1730s certainly marks a new stage in the development of British music, or music in Britain.³⁸ In the case of the Italian cantata, paradoxically inserted in the middle of Handel's *Alexander's Feast*, the reappearance of the Christian saint brings further dynamism to the inner contradictions of English musical life in the first half of the eighteenth century. Without going so far as to suggest that the re-emergence of the saint could be seen as an announcement of the new English oratorio, it is tempting to translate in generic terms what explicitly comes out as a pagan / Christian dichotomy. Handel's later oratorio production, with its self-contained celebrations of music and heavy musical thematisation, was also decipherable along similar lines.³⁹

36 See [John Dryden, Newburgh Hamilton and Thomas Morell], *Alexander's Feast. Or, the Power of Musick. An Ode Wrote in Honour of St. Cecilia, Written by Mr. Dryden. And an Additional New Act, Call'd The Choice of Hercules, Both Set to Music by Mr. Handel*, London 1751, p. 15.

37 Husk 1857, *Musical Celebrations on St. Cecilia's Day*, p. 55.

38 For the resurgence of Cecilian odes in the eighteenth century, see White 2019, *Music for St Cecilia's Day*, pp. 308–348.

39 See Pierre Degott, *Haendel et ses oratorios. Des mots pour les notes*, Paris 2001.

What the present paper has tried to show in any event is that the poets' attitude to music seems to have been more lenient towards the middle of the eighteenth century, even though an essayist like James Harris still advocated the idea of the superiority of poetry in the 1740s. The advent of the sentimentalist current, the very acceptance of the mere notion of emotion and above all the belief in the power of music to stimulate and to encourage such emotions were indeed parameters that brought about that remarkable change of paradigms. Similarly, the arrival of imported musical forms like the Italian opera on the English stage was also a factor that helped redefine national characteristics. If the eighteenth century has sometimes been seen as the time of the construction of the British nation, and especially of a feeling of national identity,⁴⁰ the issue of Englishness in the sister arts became more central towards the end of the period covered by the present publication.

40 See Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707–1837*, London 1992.