

NEWSLETTER of the American Handel Society

Volume XXXVIII, Number 2

Summer 2023

“WE MOST HEARTILY WISH TO NEVER HEAR IT AGAIN”: THE FALSETTIST IN 19TH-CENTURY PERFORMANCES OF HANDEL’S *MESSIAH*

Luke Howard

It is only somewhat facetious to claim that everything there is to know about the countertenor in the 19th century can be gleaned from the relevant Wikipedia article, which skips over the century completely.¹ Indeed, there was a noticeable decline in the employment of the male falsetto voice during that period, which was subsequently reversed in the middle of the 20th century. Tracking that arc is relatively easy. Accounting for it involves a more nuanced approach, and that is where 19th-century concert reviews of *Messiah* can help. *Messiah*’s ubiquity in the 19th century offers details of performance practice and reception that can elicit a more granular understanding of the falsetto voice’s historical trajectory.

A useful starting point might be the Westminster Abbey performances of *Messiah* in the 1780s and 90s. In 1786, for example, the chorus consisted of fifty-eight sopranos (forty-five of whom were boys), fifty-one adult male altos and, of course, all-male tenor and bass sections. Charles Knyvett (1752–1822) was the principal alto soloist on that occasion. There is no question that Knyvett sang in the alto range, but what did that actually mean in terms of his vocal production and voice type? Modern-day scholars of the high male voice, including Simon Ravens and David Rugger,² make a clear distinction between the alto falsettist, the dual-register tenor, and the natural or modal countertenor, even though all might sing in the same range. These distinctions were not always clear in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Among English tenors, both Charles Incledon (1763–1826) and John Braham (1774–1856) were dual-register tenors who used falsetto extension in their upper range. Braham had reportedly smoothed over the break so perfectly that it was impossible to tell when he switched into falsetto, leading one critic of the day to claim, “no voice can be in this respect more perfect.”³ Notwithstanding Braham’s “perfect” voice, contemporary writers noted the perpetual difficulty of switching between the modal voice and falsetto without creating jarring “yodel”-like contrasts of volume, timbre, and effect.⁴ Critics and pedagogues of the day also noticed that even though dual-register tenors occasionally employed falsetto, the most powerful execution of the technique generally came from bass singers, not tenors. Many of the male altos in cathedral choirs were natural basses singing in falsetto, which had to this point been primarily a choral and ensemble (not a solo) voice type. That distinction remained key in the future of the falsettist during the 19th century.

1 “Countertenor,” *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Countertenor>.

2 See Simon Ravens, *The Supernatural Voice: A History of High Male Singing* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2014); and David Rugger, “Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body: Countertenors, Voice Type, and Identity” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2018).

3 “Mr. Braham,” *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* 1 (January 1818): 89.

4 Ibid.

continued on p. 2

REPORT FROM HALLE 2023

Graydon Beeks

The Handel Festival in Halle took place this year from May 26 to June 11 with the theme “Opera: Dispute over Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee.” As in past years it featured a variety of concerts, operas, and special events spread over two weeks and three weekends. I was only able to attend the first week, but I hope this report will convey the flavor of the event. The weather was unusually clement for the time of year—neither too hot nor too cold, with little rain in evidence. This allowed for mingling and dining *al fresco* which lent an air of pleasant informality to the proceedings.

The Festival opened on Friday, May 26, with a performance of the new production of *Serse* at the Halle Opera. The featured singer was mezzo-soprano Anna Bonitatibus in the title role, and she gave a commanding performance. After the conclusion of the opera, she was presented with the Handel Prize of the City of Halle in honor of her distinguished international career and especially of her performances of Handel’s works, and the audience clearly endorsed the award. On Friday, June 9, she also appeared as Matilde in a concert performance of *Lotario* with the Handel Festival Orchestra, again under the direction of Attilio Cremonesi.

Countertenor Leandro Marziotte, in the role of Arsamene, *Serse*’s brother and rival for the affections of Romilda, acted convincingly but I found his voice sometimes harsh and occasionally out of tune. Soprano Franziska Krötenheerdt, who had impressed last year in the role of Angelica in *Orlando*, had unfortunately injured herself and was unable to appear as Romilda. Her replacement, Yewon Han, sang impressively from the orchestra pit while the director of the production, Louisa Proske, mimed the role on stage. Soprano Vanessa Waldhart and mezzo soprano Yulia Sokolik, memorable as Dorinda and Medoro in *Orlando*, were again impressive in the roles of Atalanta and Amastre respectively. Bass Andreas Beinhauer perhaps worked too hard attempting to be funny in the role of Elviro, Arsamene’s comic servant, while the other bass, Michael Zehe, although visibly too young for the role, acted and sang well as Romilda’s father, Ariodate. Maestro Cremonesi conducted the Handel Festival Orchestra and both were on good form. As was the case last year, there was a pleasing absence of percussion in the pit, and the organ had again been banished.

The staging, on the other hand, was at the very least questionable. It derived from a play on words generated by the opening scene of the libretto, in which the Persian tyrant *Serse* (Xerxes) is depicted as having fallen in love with a plane tree that provides him with welcome shade in a hot climate. In this production he is shown as an oil billionaire who has fallen in love with an airplane,

continued on p. 4

IN THIS ISSUE

“We Most Heartily Wish To Never Hear It Again” – Luke Howard

Report From Halle – Graydon Beeks

From the President’s Desk – Graydon Beeks

Call For Applications

Call For Papers

Recent Publications & Upcoming Events