“Immortal Harps”: Milton and Musical Morality in Handel’s Samson

Katherine Hobbs
Honors Thesis in English
University of Missouri
Advisor: Prof. Anne Myers
Spring 2016
In 1743, Newburgh Hamilton, librettist to George Frideric Handel, dedicated the first printed edition of the libretto for the oratorio *Samson* to Frederick, Prince of Wales. This dedication, while appropriately obsequious in the manner of an artist trying to appeal to an influential patron, is soon overshadowed by a much longer declaration of praise by the librettist. Hamilton dedicates this second address not to any living prince, aristocrat, or governmental figure, but to a poet who is long dead, and seemingly far removed from the workings of eighteenth-century patronage politics: John Milton. This second tribute is unofficial, couched in a discussion of Hamilton’s source material and compositional process. Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* is Hamilton’s primary source text for the libretto, but Hamilton’s praise of Milton reaches beyond giving the poet credit for his words. Hamilton treats Milton as a contemporary figure and fixture of modern drama, participating in an exchange with Handel that unites “some of the finest things in the English language” with Handel’s “Solemn” and “pleasing” music:

> Several Pieces of Milton having been lately brought on the Stage with Success, particularly his *Penseroso* and *Allegro*, I was of Opinion that nothing of that Divine Poet’s wou’d appear in the Theatre with greater Propriety or Applause than his SAMSON AGONISTES. That Poem indeed never was… design’d (as he hints in his Preface) for the Stage; but given only as the Plan of a Tragedy with Chorus’s, after the manner of the Ancients. But as Mr. Handel had so happily introduc’d here *Oratorios*, a musical Drama, whose Subject must be Scriptural, and in which the Solemnity of Church-Musick is agreeably united with the most pleasing Airs of the Stage: It would have been an irretrievable Loss to have neglected the Opportunity of that great Master’s doing Justice to this Work; he having already added new Life and Spirit to some of the finest things in the English Language…

Hamilton views *Samson Agonistes* as a natural choice for adaptation into an oratorio, or unstaged musical drama on a sacred subject; as he indicates in his opening sentence, it would not be the first time Milton was brought to the eighteenth-century musical stage.

To Hamilton, the relationship between Milton and Handel is natural and organic; Handel brought *Il Penseroso* and *L’Allegro* successfully to English audiences as a musical pastoral ode,
and, following his consolidation of the English oratorio, this revered composer prepared the way for further Milton-inspired entertainments. Hamilton was correct in believing that another work combining the forces of Handel and Milton would meet with approval from the British public. *Samson*, which premiered on February 18, 1743, was remarkably successful, with eight more performances during the 1743 season alone— an unusually long lifetime for a work during this period. Handel would go on to supervise revivals during nine later seasons. Bringing Milton’s work to the stage proved to be even more successful than *Messiah*, *Samson’s* immediate predecessor and the most familiar of Handel’s works in today’s popular culture.

The plot of the oratorio *Samson*, which does not diverge in basic shape from Milton’s original, will be familiar to readers of *Samson Agonistes*. Handel’s oratorio, like Milton’s drama, chronicles the last day of Samson’s life. As in Milton, the opening scene takes place in the prison at Gaza during a Philistine festival, where Samson laments his blindness and his weakness in yielding the secret of his strength to Dalila. He meets his fellow Israelites, his father Manoa, the deceitful Dalila, and the giant, Harapha, over the course of the day. The oratorio concludes with a report of Samson’s death and, after a brief period of mourning, a resolution to celebrate. Despite this shared plot structure, Hamilton and Handel diverge from Milton when they insert new characters and merge others. For instance, they create a friend for Samson, named Micah (a

---

2 The mention of *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* alludes to Handel’s successful pastoral ode based on Milton’s early companion poems, adapted by Charles Jennens a few years earlier.


4 Handel was composing these two oratorios simultaneously for at least part of their respective composition histories. *Messiah*, a fixture of Christmas and Easter concerts today, overshadows *Samson* in our popular culture, but it is important to recognize that eighteenth-century audiences did not have the same fascination with *Messiah* at the expense of *Samson*. See Burrows, “Handel’s *Samson*” and “Handel’s Use of Soloists in *Samson*.”
male character sung by a mezzo-soprano\(^5\), delegating part of the Israelite chorus’ role to this solo voice; Harapha also performs the function of the Philistine officer. Hamilton and Handel grant Dalila an extended vocal scene, complete with a chorus of virgins. And this is not the only chorus that they choose to alter.

Perhaps even more significantly, Handel and Hamilton add a Philistine chorus to the structure of Milton’s drama, creating a counterweight to the Israelite chorus and giving voice to the heathen people who are only referred to secondhand or conveyed through such distasteful representatives as Harapha in *Samson Agonistes*. Having a chorus of heathens was not uncommon in Handelian oratorio—*Deborah*, for instance, has a Chorus of Baal’s Priests, and *Athalia* has a Chorus of Sidonian priests\(^6\)—but the addition of the heathen chorus in *Samson* deserves additional scrutiny, since it represents an enormous divergence from the source text.\(^7\)

In terms of mere plot, these changes in the chorus do not greatly alter the moral balance of *Samson Agonistes*; as in Milton’s original, Handel’s Israelites bewail Samson’s Philistine bondage, and the already morally ambiguous hero sacrifices himself in order to slaughter his enemies. The most noticeable differences instead come through Handel’s and Hamilton’s apparent attentiveness to the voices of the Philistines and the time built into *Samson*’s musical structure for them to make their voices heard. Unlike *Samson Agonistes*, we hear the opening Philistine festival that has “unwillingly” granted Samson his rest; we hear Dalila’s charms

---

\(^5\) During Handel’s time, many vocal parts in this range (especially in *opera seria*) would have been sung by castrati. The choice to grant this role to a mezzo-soprano, and more specifically, to an English mezzo-soprano known more as a stage actress than as a trained singer, indicates a movement away from the constraints of Italian tradition. See below for more information on the relationship between English oratorio and Italian opera.


\(^7\) According to Dean, “The Philistine pieces [in *Samson*] are exuberant and unencumbered by a jealous god, but fall below the pagan choruses of *Athalia* and *Theodora*” (Dean, *Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, 336).
firsthand; and we hear the Philistines’ death cries as Samson pulls the columns down. Thus, while Samson’s plot is only negligibly different from that of Samson Agonistes, Hamilton’s arrangement of the text and Handel’s allotment of music have the potential to alter the emphasis of the story significantly. It is this altered emphasis that I will explore here, charting the shift in musical-moral balance generated by Handel’s and Hamilton’s extended treatment of the Philistine characters.

Hamilton was prepared to admit his methods for constructing the libretto, and his preface includes an explanation of how and why he rearranged Milton’s text for this new work. In terms of the libretto’s basic structure, Hamilton did not have to reorganize far beyond separating the drama into discernible acts. The form of Milton’s tragedy, as a Greek-inspired work conducted “after the manner of the Ancients,” was apt for Handel, as English oratorio (and earlier Italian opera) used Greek tragedy as a model. After admitting these structural affinities, Hamilton describes his own erasures and emendations:

In adapting this POEM to the Stage, the Recitative is taken almost wholly from Milton, making use only of those parts in his long Work most necessary to preserve the Spirit of the Subject, and justly connect it. In the Airs and Chorus’s which I was oblig’d to add, I have interspers’d several Lines, Words, and Expressions borrowed from some of his smaller Poems, to make the whole as much of a piece as possible: Tho’ I reduced the original to so short an Entertainment, yet being thought too long for the proper Time of a Representation, some Recitative must be left out in the Performance, but printed in its Place, and mark’d to distinguish it.

Beyond the obvious formal similarities, debates over the extent to which choruses in Greek tragedy were sung helped to spur the creation of the earliest operas in Florence at the end of the sixteenth century. In Handel’s time, Greek tragedy was also held up as a model of moral entertainment. See Gretchen Ludke Finney, “Chorus in Samson Agonistes,” Modern Language Association, vol. 58, no. 3 (1943): 649-664, for a useful commentary on Greek and Italian drama in relation to Milton’s preface to Samson Agonistes; also see Ruth Smith, Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 52-70, for a thoughtful investigation of the position of Greek tragedy in eighteenth-century English culture and its relationship to the English oratorio. Dean also credits Samson Agonistes’ Greek tragedy roots as being “of conspicuous assistance to Handel [due to the] remarkable aptitude of this form for musical setting, with its choruses both within and without the action” (Dean, Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques, 332).

Recitative is a term designating the pieces in a sung-through work that would be analogous to spoken text in a play. Recitative is distinct from arias or airs in that it is meant to stand in for speech and further the progress of the plot, whereas arias pause the action of the drama so the singer can express a particular emotion or highlight a critical moment. The boundaries between recitative and aria would become increasingly blurred over the course of the following century, but in Handel’s time, they were still largely separate.

Hamilton, “Preface.”
As suggested by the plot summary, Hamilton’s recitative does follow Milton quite closely, although certain connective material is substantially abridged. Furthermore, the aria texts, even when not taken verbatim from Samson Agonistes, “preserve the Spirit of the Subject” through shared imagery or rearrangement of Milton’s words to fit a musical meter.

In this explanation, Hamilton creates the impression that his changes are merely there to streamline Samson Agonistes for performance. However, considering the addition of the Philistine chorus and many “diversionary” airs, it is necessary to take a closer look at the changes that Hamilton refers to here. Samson, in its 1743 form, was anything but “so short an Entertainment,” consisting of three acts and running well over three hours. The Philistine chorus and airs add significantly to the time of the oratorio, although, to give Hamilton due credit, they create an enticing dramatic balance. We can attempt to explain some of the rationale for these choices by going to the text of Samson Agonistes itself. John Milton is a famously musical poet; from the lighthearted, rustic music of L’Allegro to the divinely-inspired strains of “At a solemn Musick” to the choirs of angels in Paradise Lost, his poetic world is seldom

---

11 As Hamilton mentions, in the printed word-books, some of Milton’s words that did not receive musical settings remain; these are marked by inverted commas. See Donald Burrows, “The word-books for Handel’s performances of Samson,” 8, for a detailed treatment of the word-books and their evolution for different performances.

12 Dalila’s air “With Plaintive Notes” is an example of this. See below for analysis of Handel’s and Hamilton’s adaptation of Milton’s Dalila into a central character in the oratorio.

13 Dean claims that “Samson suffers from a excess of diversionary airs: no fewer than fourteen—exactly half of the total—are sung by anonymous Philistines and Israelites or by Micah. At least eight of these are better omitted if the oratorio is to retain its shape in modern performance” (Dean, Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques, 333). I would like to suggest that these “diversionary airs” are interesting precisely because they do not conform to the original “shape” of the drama, instead altering the shape and contributing to an increased musical understanding of the Philistines.

14 In revisions for subsequent seasons, Handel made cuts to accommodate smaller casts or time constraints. All citations from the libretto refer to the original 1743 published version; citations from the score also refer to the oratorio prior to cuts, as reconstructed in Donald Burrows’ New Novello Choral Edition of the score (George Frideric Handel, Samson: The New Novello Choral Edition, musical score, ed. Donald Burrows (London: Novello, 2005)).
silent.\textsuperscript{15} But \textit{Samson Agonistes} is comparatively quiet. Although it contains a Greek chorus (a literary fixture that was the subject of debate among late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century music aficionados\textsuperscript{16}) and employs the occasional musical metaphor,\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Samson Agonistes} is arguably much less inherently musical than \textit{Paradise Lost} or some of the earlier poems. Thus, it could seem strange that Hamilton and Handel would select such a text to work with in the oratorio genre, especially considering that more than one of Handel’s peers had (vainly) urged him to set \textit{Paradise Lost}.\textsuperscript{18}

It would be easy to avert this issue by claiming that musical content within a text is unimportant (or perhaps even a hindrance) in a work that is going to be set to music (after all, every event in \textit{Samson Agonistes} is conveyed musically in Handel’s oratorio form), but this argument collapses upon examination of the Milton texts that Hamilton specifically chose to add to the framework of \textit{Samson Agonistes}. In the libretto, the “smaller Poems,” carefully selected, that Hamilton alludes to in his Preface range from single-line snippets of the Psalms to more substantial borrowings from works such as the Nativity Ode, “On Time,” and, most famously, “At a solemn Musick.”\textsuperscript{19} A striking number of these excerpts allude to music or the act of music-making; in many cases, these are brief lines culled from larger poems, apparently chosen


\textsuperscript{16} Debate over whether or not Greek choruses were sung was one of the factors leading to the development of opera in late sixteenth-century Florence, where the earliest operas had close ties to Greek tragedy and were on mythological subjects (especially the story of Orpheus). Also see note 8 above.

\textsuperscript{17} For instance, the chorus’ assertion that comforting “Consolatories” often seem to a suffering person like “a tune./ Harsh, and of dissonant mood from his complaint” (\textit{SA} 661-662).

\textsuperscript{18} Smith, \textit{Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought}, 25, 135.

\textsuperscript{19} I will refer to the title of this poem with its original spelling throughout, even though most modern editions use the form “Music.” For a full diagram of Hamilton’s Miltonic borrowings in \textit{Samson}, see Dean, \textit{Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques}, 330.
because of their musical content. Through such a selection of the minor poems, Hamilton weaves more (Miltonic) music into *Samson*’s dramatic structure, editing Milton as he goes to noticeably prioritize music-related text.

Milton, judging by his own musical tendencies, might have seen admirable motives in Hamilton’s desire to unite “Voice and Verse;” with this in mind, Hamilton’s additions seem eminently loyal to the “Spirit of the Subject,” as he terms it in the Preface. But these passages, musical on multiple levels, are also troublesome. When Hamilton foregrounds Milton’s music-related text and pads it with his own contributions, he gives most of these exuberantly musical passages to the Philistines. In turn, Handel animates these passages with memorable, even transcendent settings.

The Philistine dependence on music is palpable. For the Philistines, music is more than merely the medium through which they tell their story; because of the self-conscious references to music in their texts, the Philistines’ music is also diegetic. Before the title character even gets to sing one aria, the Philistines enjoy an extended festival scene, full of Miltonic psalms and praises to Dagon through song and dance. Later in the oratorio, Dalila dominates an entire scene in which she uses characteristics of opera and dance to display the charms and magnetic power of her voice. Music and the voice, powerful tools in both Milton’s poetry and eighteenth-century culture, seem to be the province of the Philistines in this adaptation. It is only at the very end that the Israelites, the ostensible heroes, are given any references to song. In their concluding festival scene, the Israelites finally wrench musical and moral control away from the Philistines with Hamilton’s insertion of “At a solemn Musick,” transformed into the magnificent aria “Let the bright seraphim,” still one of Handel’s most well-known works.

---

20 Some of these are found in the original text of *Samson Agonistes* in the context of projected funeral songs for Samson. See lines 1734-1744.
Although Winton Dean credits Newburgh Hamilton with coming up with the subject for *Samson*, Handel certainly also played a role in the progress of the text, dictating changes to ensure the compatibility of the words with his musical resources. To some extent, the words and music changed together; for instance, in 1742, the libretto of *Samson* was revised to accommodate more solo voices. This phase also saw the insertion of the new ending (with “Let the bright seraphim”), drawn from a poem that Handel had hoped to use earlier for the conclusion of his setting of *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. Apart from making changes for singers or for the sake of the drama, Handel was not indifferent to the words he set, even if his near-industrial composition speed and tendency to recycle or borrow music sometimes suggest otherwise. Dean has observed that Handel was inspired by the English language, suggesting that Handel, even late in life, exhibited “a creative response to the stimulus of words.” Dean specifically invokes Milton to convey Handel’s vibrant relationship to the verbal: “We have only to compare the flaming response to Milton throughout *L’Allegro ed il Penseroso* with the struggles occasioned by Miller’s rebarbative abstractions in *Joseph* to see how dependent Handel

---

21 Dean, *Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, 328.
22 Ruth Smith conjectures as to Handel’s working relationship with his librettists, relying primarily on Handel’s surviving correspondence with Charles Jennens. She concedes that Handel did have some say in the words of his oratorios but emphasizes that the level of collaboration between Handel and his librettists did not reach what would become the norm in the nineteenth century. She also suggests that Handel was willing to “overrid[e] the import of the text in his musical setting of it” (Smith, *Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 1-39). David Ross Hurley argues that Smith does not give Handel and his librettists enough credit; according to Hurley, Handel “felt free to eliminate lines…and to request changes from his librettists,” and is even reported anecdotally as yelling “’D—n your Iambics’” to librettist Thomas Morell upon reading an early draft of an aria text from *Alexander Balus* (David Ross Hurley, *Handel’s Muse: Patterns of Creation in his Oratorios and Musical Dramas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168-69). The latter view appears to be more compatible with the composition history of *Samson*; Handel appreciated Milton’s text and was probably involved in the choice of subject for this libretto.

was on the initial [verbal] spark.” Handel’s *Samson*, conceived quite soon after *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, demonstrates a similar “flaming response to Milton.” In addition, the fact that this Milton-inspired oratorio was even more successful than *Messiah*, which had premiered earlier within the same year, suggests that Handel was not the only one with a positive response to Milton’s text.

Evidence exists that Handel was particularly enchanted by *Samson Agonistes* before he embarked on the composition of *Samson* in 1741. In a 1739 letter from the 4th Earl of Shaftesbury to his cousin James Harris, Shaftesbury describes a gathering following one of Handel’s performances, at which the composer was present. The primary entertainment at this social event was a reading of *Samson Agonistes*:

> I never spent an evening more to my satisfaction… Jemmy Noel read through the whole poem of Sampson Agonistes [*sic*] and whenever he rested to take breath Mr Handel (who was highly pleas’d with the peice [*sic*]) played I really think better than ever, & his harmony was perfectly adapted to the sublimity of the poem. This surely, to use Cibber’s phrase upon a former occasion, may be call’d a rational entertainment.  

Here, Handel’s contemporary, observing in a casual setting, acknowledges that the composer could be moved by Milton’s text. Even Handel’s impromptu playing is “perfectly adapted to the sublimity of the poem;” such a positive initial reaction makes it likely that Handel would have been particularly attentive to and respectful of the text of *Samson Agonistes* when integrating his own music.

---

24 Dean, *Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, 57-58. Dean goes so far as to suggest that Handel’s work improved following his “contact with Milton and Dryden in 1736-41” (64).

25 Earl of Shaftesbury, Letter to James Harris November 24, 1739. In *Music and Theatre in Handel’s World: the Family Papers of James Harris* ed. Burrows and Dunhill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 80. Burrows and Dunhill note in their commentary to this letter that “The occasion probably marked the beginning of the process which led to the composition of Handel’s *Samson* two years later: perhaps the composer soon afterwards discussed with Newburgh Hamilton how an oratorio on the subject might be developed” (80). Later, the same Earl, after hearing Handel play through *Samson*, commented, “I think I may dare venture to affirm at once hearing only, that it surpasses any of his greatest former performances…This is the best thing I ever heard any where. The whole is inexpressibly great and pathetic” (Letter to James Harris, December 23, 1742, in *Music and Theatre in Handel’s World*, 152).
Milton, of course, was not technically Handel’s librettist. One aspect that makes literary study of Handel’s oratorios in the context of both music and words difficult is that Handel is an eminently canonical figure, while his librettists, seen as practicing a “low” form of literary art, have fallen into relative obscurity. Although the moral and political questions of *Samson Agonistes* have been long and widely discussed in literary criticism, the relationship between Milton’s text and its 18th-century Handelian offspring has received considerably less attention. Recent studies have begun to address the oratorio texts, but as entities largely separate from the music. These critics frequently focus on eighteenth-century political and social contexts, an important method in recent scholarship for revealing the complexities of *Samson* and its oratorio siblings. Many have pointed out the associations of Handelian English oratorio with mid-eighteenth-century British politics, aligning Handel’s ever-present, generally heroic Israelites with the British people. This analogy, now a commonplace in cultural studies of Handel, applies on both a domestic and an international level: Linda Colley, for instance, emphasizes that the oratorios’ Israelite choruses were a cultural means of solidifying British Protestant identity against hostile French powers, and Ruth Smith accepts Colley’s basic premise while also showing that the oratorio texts could apply on a micro-level to the fragmented party politics that

---

26 Studies of Handel’s *Samson* on the musical side are plentiful; Donald Burrows has published a series of shorter pieces on the oratorio, illuminating aspects of Handel’s composition process and providing valuable insights into different manifestations of Newburgh Hamilton’s word-books, and Winton Dean dedicates a chapter to *Samson* in his monumental *Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*. As part of his musical study, Dean usefully tracks Hamilton’s borrowings from Milton, but this is more an attempt to catalogue Handel’s sources than to engage in substantive textual criticism. See Burrows, “Handel’s *Samson*,” “Handel’s Use of Soloists,” “The word-books for Handel’s performances of *Samson*,” etc., and Dean, *Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*. Other scholars, such as Berta Joncus and Jonathan Rhodes Lee, have studied the oratorios through the lens of performance practice or identities of particular actors, namely those who successfully transitioned to oratorio from the popular English stage. See Berta Joncus, “Handel at Drury Lane: Ballad Opera and the Production of Kitty Clive,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, vol. 131, no. 2 (2006): 179-226; and Jonathan Rhodes Lee, “From Amelia to Calista and Beyond: Sentimental Heroines, ‘Fallen’ Women and Handel’s Oratorio Revisions for Susanna Cibber,” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2015): 1-34.
prevailed under the Walpole ministry. Beyond using the libretti as a resource for revealing some of the social, political, and intellectual currents of mid-eighteenth-century Britain, musicologists have also employed them to piece together more practical matters such as performance history of specific works. All of these approaches have been important in gaining attention for the oratorio libretti as texts and as (previously undervalued) tools for understanding the cultural climate of Handel’s Britain. Samson and its Miltonic precedents, however, are rarely the centerpiece in these studies.

Milton’s canonicity, paired with Handel’s centrality in the history of eighteenth-century British music, can help restore the balance of words and music that so interested eighteenth-century music lovers (even if they did sometimes complain about the quality of the words they heard) and provide an object of study whose literary history, unlike some of the other libretti, is as rich as its musical history. A useful and necessary way of solving the scholarly disparity in status between the words and music of Samson is to approach the issue while keeping in mind that music and text were frequently addressed together in eighteenth-century aesthetic criticism.

Although librettists and composers in Handel’s day did not work together to the degree that later

---

27 See Linda Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 11-54. Smith’s argument, extending beyond mere political analogy emphasizes the importance of allegory and the important symbolic meanings that could be carried within the apparently simple texts of the oratorio libretti (See Smith, Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought, 173-231). Smith addresses Samson specifically as one of these politically-engaged works, but she invokes Milton’s writing as a fixture of opposition politics rather than undertaking any sustained study of his text. Smith’s historical analysis fascinatingly links the text of Samson to other dramatic works of the early 1740s and contemporary tensions between Britain and Spain (Smith 292-299). In a similar vein, Biblical scholar Deborah Rooke traces the character of Samson in the capacity of deliverer from his Biblical original to Milton’s version to the more nationalistic, warrior-like Samson of the oratorio (Deborah Rooke, Handel’s Israelite Oratorio Libretti: Sacred Drama and Biblical Exegesis (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 98-120).

28 See Burrows, “The word-books for Handel’s performances of Samson.”

29 The exception is Stella Revard, who argues that Handel’s Samson is largely apolitical, and that Handel’s musical adaptation deprived Samson Agonistes of many of its political nuances, which would only be restored in musical form with Saint-Saëns’ opera based on the same story. See Stella Revard, “Restoring the Political Context of Samson Agonistes: Milton, Handel, and Saint-Saëns,” in Milton, Rights, and Liberties, ed. Christophe Tournu and Neil Forsyth (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 379-397. Revard, along with Winton Dean, acknowledges the strange manner in which Newburgh Hamilton warps Milton’s text to give voice to the Philistines, but both pass over it in favor of other discussion. Revard, however, does give sustained attention to musical and verbal complexities of Dalila’s character; see Revard, “Restoring the Political Context,” and Section II below for further discussion of Handel’s Dalila.
artistic pairs did, responses to music as an art form and works questioning the nature of music were quick to take up the relationship between music and text as a primary category of analysis. John Milton and George Frideric Handel are particularly interesting examples of this type of analysis, as the two were frequently held up as beacons of their respective art forms and even compared to one another. Like Milton himself, who praised the type of “well measur’d Song” that could “span/ Words with just note and accent,” eighteenth-century musical commentators were deeply attentive to the relationship between music and English text and sought to elevate both art forms by putting them together. *Samson* was no exception to this trend, but it came with its own complications even as it brought together two of the most revered artists in British musical and literary history.

---

I. English-Language Entertainments: Voice, Verse, and Virtue

Tho’ I ventured to applaud so highly such musical Dramas [operas] as are founded on the tender Passions, I yet am sensible that there is another Drama of an infinitely superior Nature, I mean Oratorios… these sacred Pieces might be so contrived as to administer the most exquisite Delight we can possibly enjoy here below. In this Manner, Music would be brought back to its primitive Institution, the Praise of the Almighty, and the proclaiming of the numberless wonders of his Power. To hear the most exalted Lines in Paradise Lost, set proportionally well to Music, and duly executed, must raise an Extasy like to that hinted at in the divine Work just mentioned…

-John Lockman, “An Enquiry into the Rise and Progress of OPERAS and ORATORIOS, with some Reflections on LYRIC POETRY and MUSIC,” 1740

The Sounds which vain unmeaning Accents bear,
      May strike the Sense and play upon the Ear:
In youthful Breasts inspire a transient Flame;
      But when just reason animates the Song,
With lofty Style, in Numbers smooth and strong…
      To these the Goddess Muse shall tune her Voice:
For then the Muse directs the Master’s Choice…

The serious Mind with sudden Rapture glows;
      The Gazer sinks into sedate Repose:
And each in Silence doubts, if more to praise
      The Pow’r of Handell’s Notes, or Milton’s Lays.
One Labour yet, great Artist! We require;
      And worthy thine, as worthy Milton’s Lyre;
In Sounds adapted to his Verse to tell
How, with his Foes, the Hebrew Champion fell…

-Elizabeth Tollet, 1742

Handel’s role in the creation of the English oratorio has been extensively described by music historians. Handel, who came permanently to England from Germany (where the future

---

31 John Lockman, Rosalinda: A Musical Drama, As it is performed at HICKFORD’S Great Room, in Brewer’s Street… To which is prefixed, An Enquiry into the Rise and Progress of OPERAS and ORATORIOS, with some Reflections on LYRIC POETRY and MUSIC (London, 1740), xx-xxi.
George I was his patron) towards the end of Queen Anne’s reign, was initially known as a composer of Italian opera and court entertainments. In the 1730s, Handel began to shift from composing Italian opera seria to English oratorio, building on the successes of his earlier English anthems and masques, which included the Chandos Anthems and Acis and Galatea. While many of his oratorios had dramatic subjects, often drawn from the scriptures, these new works were not staged, and they generally allotted a more important function to the chorus than did Italian opera, which was the domain of solo singers. This shift to oratorio had both financial and cultural incentives. Italian opera was expensive to put on and was drawing increasingly smaller crowds; Handel’s operatic works around this time were also being challenged by the rising prominence of the Opera of the Nobility, the rival to the King’s Theatre in Haymarket, over which Handel presided. However, both of these opera companies experienced similar financial difficulties leading to eventual collapse. These difficulties were in large part related to the recent successes of more accessible English musical works, most notably John Gay’s and Johann Pepusch’s The Beggar’s Opera in 1728. In addition, unstaged oratorio

---

33 See Dean, Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques; Smith, Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought; Richard Taruskin, Music in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 305-340.

34 England had a strong choral tradition and many trained choristers; therefore, it was partly a practical maneuver for Handel to shift to composing in a more choir-oriented medium.

35 Oratorio as a genre is difficult to define; Handelian English oratorio is especially tricky, as it developed gradually and incorporated elements of many other genres. Winton Dean calls Handel’s invention of the English oratorio “a supreme fluke” (35). Deborah Rooke defines oratorio along these genre-fluid lines, calling oratorios “English-language compositions that merge the musical conventions of Italian opera with dramatic plots that are adaptations of Old Testament narratives,” emphasizing their theatricality and status as popular entertainment (as opposed to liturgical) (xv). William Hughes, writing during the eighteenth century on church music, called oratorio “a spiritual Opera” (apparently relying on a dictionary definition more oriented towards the practice in Italy) and classified Handel’s brand as “a strong Species of Church-Musick” (William Hughes, Remarks upon Church Musick, To which are added Several Observations Upon some of Mr. Handel’s Oratorio’s, And other Parts of his Works, 2nd ed., (Worcester: Lewis, 1763), 39). Also see Newburgh Hamilton’s definition, quoted in the excerpts of his preface above.
was not subject to the same performance restrictions as opera during the Lenten season and thus gained a financial niche within church restrictions.\textsuperscript{36}

Two aspects of this history are particularly important in the context of this investigation: Handel’s move towards English text-setting, and the controversy regarding religious music and what was or was not appropriate for the stage. While the oratorio genre had been a sometimes staged, overtly dramatic art form in seventeenth-century Italy,\textsuperscript{37} it could not maintain this form when transferred to England. England had a troubled relationship to the stage, and moral authorities worried about the mixing of religion with theatrical entertainments. Plays on Scriptural subjects had been banned since 1605 with the Blasphemy Act;\textsuperscript{38} as a result, Handel’s Scriptural works, which during the prime of his oratorio career were performed in the theatre at Covent Garden, could not have been staged even if he had intended them to be. Interestingly, such concerns resonate with Milton’s own warning that \textit{Samson Agonistes} was not intended for the stage and with his desire to observe proper decorum and uniformity of subject matter.\textsuperscript{39}

Timothy J. Burbery proposes that Milton might not have been categorically opposed to the stage, but instead suggests that he was opposed to the light, more morally questionable, Restoration


\textsuperscript{37} Dean, \textit{Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques}, 1-11. Italian oratorios were on religious subjects, but they were never meant for liturgical use. The genre derives its name from the Roman oratory, a communal space associated with the church but separate from the sanctuary. Taruskin calls the Italian oratorio “simply an \textit{opera seria} on a biblical subject, by the early eighteenth century often performed with action, although this was not always allowed” (Taruskin, 314).

\textsuperscript{38} Smith, \textit{Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth Century Thought}, 45; also see Dean, “The Oratorio and English Taste,” in \textit{Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques}, for an account of how Puritan tendencies influenced eighteenth-century literature and drama, spilling over into the territory of the oratorios. According to Dean, “[Handel’s] early oratorios made few concessions [to Puritanical taste] apart from the forced abandonment of stage action” (Dean, 133).

\textsuperscript{39} Smith notes the rise of religious closet-drama with the bans on staging, giving \textit{Samson Agonistes} as an ideal example (Smith, \textit{Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought}, 113).
This was the same type of theatre that certain members of Handel’s audiences feared would corrupt the dignity of the oratorio as a sacred entertainment.

Even with the lack of staging, some contemporaries had qualms regarding the propriety of presenting musical entertainments on Scriptural subjects in the theatres at all. Handel’s sacred oratorios were an obvious target in this debate. A letter printed in the *Universal Spectator* approximately a month after the first performance of *Samson* calls oratorios improper “as they are now perform’d,” despite the letter-writer’s professed enthusiasm for Handel as a religious composer:

> An *Oratorio* either is an *Act of Religion*, or it is not; if it is, I ask if the *Playhouse* is a fit *Temple* to perform it in, or a Company of *Players* fit *Ministers of God’s Word*, for in that Case such they are made…[I]f [oratorio] is not perform’d as an *Act of Religion*, but for *Diversion* and *Amusement* only (and indeed I believe few or none go to an Oratorio out of *Devotion*), what a *Prophanation* of God’s Name and Word is this, to make so light Use of them? … How will this appear to After-Ages, when it shall be read in History, that in such an Age the People of England were arriv’d to such a Height of *Impiety* and *Prophaneness*, that most *sacred Things* were suffer’d to be us’d as publick *Diversions*, and that in a *Place*, and by *Persons* appropriated to the Performance not only of *light* and *vain*, but too often *prophane* and *dissolute* Pieces?41

Most troubling to this commentator is the perceived mixture of the divine and the profane that threatens to occur when oratorio is performed in a secular theatre space. If an oratorio is a divine work (and this writer observes that there is “no other equal to [the composition of church music], nor any Person so capable to compose it, as Mr. *Handel*”), then it should not be performed in a venue associated with vice. Such an atmosphere might encourage people to come hear oratorios for the wrong reasons, and to derive only sensory pleasures or fleeting “diversions” from something that should be approached with solemn reverence. The writer is also troubled by the stage personnel involved in the performance of these pieces, fearing that the immorality of the

---


41 Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London: Black, 1955), 564. This letter was published under the pseudonym “Philalethes,” which Deutsch points out was affixed to several pieces appearing in this periodical.
theatre and its denizens will somehow corrupt the purity of Handel’s music and audiences alike.\footnote{This letter was not the only testimony of its kind. Quoting another writer in 1740, John Lockman heartily agrees that ‘The Stage loses all its Charms, when sacred Subjects are brought upon it; as sacred Subjects suffer greatly in the religious Opinion which ought to be entertained of them, when they are brought upon the Stage’” (Lockman, xxi). Also see Smith, \textit{Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought}, 43-51.}

This mixing of the “sacred” and “profane” inherent in the oratorio and its performance space did not diminish Handel’s popularity as a divine composer, even as moral critics expressed their reservations. The editor of \textit{The Universal Spectator} indicates the tide of public opinion when he prefixes his own comments to this abrasive 1743 letter, admitting that it will probably come across to readers as “too rigid a Censure on a Performance, which is so universally approv’d.”\footnote{Deutsch, \textit{Documentary Biography}, 563.} Likewise, John Lockman, in his 1740 essay on opera and oratorio, has to concede “the wonderful Sublimity of Mr. Handel’s Compositions” before going on to criticize “the Place [theatre] in which Oratorios are commonly performed among us, and some other circumstances [that] must necessarily lessen the Solemnity of this Entertainment…”.\footnote{Lockman, xxi.} In both of these cases, Handel is not to blame even if his venue is questionable.

Despite discomforts with the mixing of theatrical settings and perceived religious music, many took comfort in the idea of a shift to English-language entertainments on lofty subjects, exemplified by oratorio. Crucially, some of the moral pitfalls alluded to in the above letter are related to the dominance of Italian opera on the English stage. Italian opera, while wildly popular with English audiences during Handel’s time and the genre in which he made his name as a composer, was also a subject of intense controversy. Many saw Italian opera as a form of immoral entertainment, associated with dangerous sensory pleasure and even an avenue for the negative influence of (Catholic) foreigners. At the very least, Italian opera was mindless
entertainment—many audience members did not understand the language and therefore apparently came for the music and the spectacle alone. In his essay, Lockman warns of these consequences and condemns opera as “a Syren which captivated the Ear to such a Degree, that all the Faculties of the Understanding seemed to be lull’d asleep by its Incantation.” This was exactly the opposite effect to what musical moralists hoped popular musical entertainments would achieve in Britain. English-language opera, on the other hand, would help produce a distinctly British musical style and also act as a force of moral elevation, working on the intellect and the senses at the same time, in contrast to Italian opera, which catered to sense alone.

On one level, Handelian oratorio was a praiseworthy substitute for Italian opera, an antidote to the dramatic reign of the Italians in England. In a letter (from London) published in the Dublin Journal in the year of Samson’s premiere, the writer is prompted by the success of this oratorio to observe that,

…the Publick will be no longer imposed on by Italian Singers, and some wrong Headed Undertakers of bad Opera’s, but find out the Merit of Mr. Handell’s Composition and English Performances: That Gentleman is more esteemed now than ever. The new Oratorio (called SAMSON) which he composed since he left Ireland, has been performed four Times to more crowded Audiences than ever were seen; more People being turned away for Want of Room each Night than hath been at the Italian Opera.

The writer of this letter characterizes oratorio as a legitimate threat to Italian opera, its singers, and its “wrong Headed” patrons and audiences. As the writer hints, Handel’s rising career as an oratorio composer appeared to be eroding the precedence of “Italian Singers” in the favor of the public. In his oratorios, Handel most often employed English librettists and English singers,

---

45 Ruth Smith discusses the Italian opera controversy in detail and references the large number of supporters, including Aaron Hill, who urged Handel to write English operas or at least adapt English texts. See Smith, “The Purpose of Art,” in Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought. Smith observes that “Italian opera [was] mindless, because incomprehensible, and therefore degrading to an intelligent person” (71). She also notes the “Religious as well as purely political xenophobia” (72) that was an inevitable byproduct of the popularity of Italian singers.

46 Lockman, i.

47 Deutsch, Documentary Biography, 562.
eventually letting go of his dependence on Italian stars. In spite of the possible moral benefits, some connoisseurs of opera were not pleased with this development. For instance, in a frequently-quoted letter to Horace Mann, Horace Walpole, who sees the oratorio genre as something deliberately “set up… against the Operas,” testily comments that Handel “has hired all the goddesses from farces and the singers of Roast Beef from between the acts at both theatres… and so they sing, and make brave hallelujahs; and the good company encore the recitativo, if it happens to have any cadence like what they call a tune.” Here, Walpole criticizes both the performers and the audience, implying that changing the language of a musical drama does not automatically improve the intellectual quality of the performance or those listening. Interestingly, Walpole here echoes the criticisms of performers and audiences set forth in the pseudonymous 1743 Universal Spectator letter (which disparaged people for appreciating musical dramas for the wrong reasons, or for applauding a low “Company of Players” for a performances that are “light and vain,”). Walpole takes an aesthetic approach rather than a religious one, but his grievances in conjunction with those expressed in the Universal Spectator letter help illustrate just how closely these two critical lenses for musical experience could coincide.

As suggested by these comments from both the moral and aesthetic viewpoints, merely having English performers did not fix all of the moral and musical problems of the English stage; actors and actresses, for example, were often associated with immoral lifestyles. Lockman also

---

48 Ibid., 560.
49 The world of Handel’s oratorios was not very far removed from that of the English theatre and its intrigue, as evidenced by the casting of Samson. Interestingly, the two female stars of Samson, Susannah Cibber and Kitty Clive, were known as stage actresses rather than singers, and they both had their share of scandal. Cibber had recently been involved very publicly in a sex scandal that interfered with her ability to convincingly play ingénue roles, and the two women were famously involved in a row (known as the “Polly War”) over the roll of Polly in The Beggar’s Opera several years before Samson’s premiere. See Lee, “From Amelia to Calista and Beyond,” and Helen E.M. Brooks, “Negotiating Marriage and Professional Autonomy in the Careers of Eighteenth-Century Actresses,” Eighteenth-Century Life, vol. 35, no. 2 (2011): 52-53.
observes in his essay that many English dramas in recent years failed due either to the “Inability of the Composers, the Defects of the Performers, or the too prevailing Influence of the Italian Opera.” Notably, the one exception Lockman cites is Handel’s *Acis and Galatea*, which he sees as “charm[ing], to this Day, Persons of all Ranks and Capacities,” and which was an important predecessor to oratorio. Moreover, oratorio, by virtue of its being in the vernacular (not to mention a certain inclination on the part of actors and actresses to mimic and mock Italian opera), had a certain direct appeal to English audiences. Handel’s supporters were particularly delighted that a composer whom they viewed as epitomizing the religious sublime (but who also, ironically, had made his name in the genre of *opera seria* ) was finally allying his incomparable music to distinctly English verse.

These fears of Italian opera and the drive for a musical tradition in the English language might not have been so urgent if they had not been part of an even larger debate about the very nature of words and music and the interaction between these two separate but related mediums. Music throughout the Baroque era was seen as a force that could act on the affections, with certain keys or musical effects generating sympathetic feelings in the listener. For example, in his influential *Essay on Musical Expression*, published within a decade of *Samson*’s premiere, Charles Avison notes that music “is of mighty Efficacy in working both on [Man’s] Imagination and his Passions. The Force of *Harmony*, or *Melody* alone, is wonderful on the Imagination… It is [musical sounds’] peculiar and essential Property, to divest the Soul of every unquiet Passion, to pour in upon the Mind, a silent and serene Joy, beyond the Power of Words to express…and to

---

50 Lockman, iii.
51 See Hurley, *Handel’s Muse*, 3-4 for a discussion of how Handel’s pre-1743 oratorios were more distinct from opera in terms of generic choices, whereas the oratorios from *Semele* on resurrect some of the compositional characteristics of Handel’s Italian operas. Based on this trend, Hurley suggests that “Handel remained an operatic composer until the end of his life” and maintained an “abiding interest” in the genre” (5).
fix the Heart in a rational, benevolent, and happy Tranquillity.”

This was not a new view of music either. But the presence of Handel and the advent of English oratorio gave theorists greater opportunities to discuss the relationship between music and English texts.

When words were added, the relationship between sound and sense became even more difficult to navigate. Some music theorists saw preexisting analogies between speech and song. Avison himself compares musical “cadences,” “subjects,” and “passages” to their analogous figures in speech. Others saw music and text as complementary mediums, reinforcing each other and, when combined, creating an object greater than either medium could have produced alone. James Harris, an intellectual and contemporary of Handel, when comparing the respective merits of painting, music, and poetry in terms of raising the affections and accurately “imitating” objects in nature, takes such a view and sets poetry and music apart as arts that are noticeably improved in the presence of each other. Music, in Harris’ view, by acting on the affections, prepares the way for poetry to act more strongly on the intellect:

The Ideas therefore of Poetry must needs make the most sensible Impression, when the (a) Affections, peculiar to them, are already excited by the Music. For here a double Force is made to co-operate to one End. A Poet, thus assisted, finds not an Audience in a Temper, averse to the Genius of his Poem, or perhaps at best under a cool Indifference: but by the Preludes, the Symphonies, and concurrent Operation of the Music in all its Parts, roused into those very Affections, which he would most desire. …[T]hese two Arts [music and poetry] 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.”

In light of such views on the elevating potential of a combination of music and poetry, along with the movement to align English text with English music, Milton and Handel were put forward as the ideal candidates for fusion. Milton, already iconic less than a century after his death, was claimed as a literary and cultural figure by many opposing factions in eighteenth-century politics and aesthetics. Political interpretations of Milton fluctuated greatly. What all of these moral and aesthetic factions agreed on, however, was Milton’s classic, nearly divine, status, which made his name almost synonymous with the highest-quality verse in the English language. Handel filled a similar position, only ambiguously English because of his German background but also seen as an artist capable of rendering the truly “sublime.”

Lockman and Harris both repeatedly use Milton and Handel as examples in their writings about musical arts. For Lockman in particular, who is fully dedicated to the impulse for English word-setting, Milton is an example of the type of top-quality poetry that ought to be blended with similarly perfect music to create an ideal mixture that is both enjoyable and morally elevating. As we saw in Hamilton’s Preface to Samson, the librettist himself, much like his contemporaries in their

---

57 Ibid., 102.
59 For an extensive description of Handel and the “religious sublime,” see Smith, Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought, 108-140.
60 Harris employs Milton as a means of demonstrating “THAT there is a charm in Poetry, arising from its Numbers only, [which] may be made evident from the five or six first Lines of the Paradise Lost; where, without any Pomp of Phrase, Sublimity of Sentiment, or the least Degree of Imitation, every Reader must find himself to be sensibly delighted; and that, only from the graceful and simple Cadence of the Numbers, and that artful Variation of the Caesura or Pause, so essential to the Harmony of every good poem” (Harris, 92).
treatise-writing, rejoiced that “the Solemnity of Church-Musick” could be “agreeably united with the most pleasing Airs of the Stage” and that Handel could add “Life and Spirit to some of the finest things in the English Language…”  

But such a statement also indicates that the “airs of the stage” were not left behind even as the composer and librettist sought to provide a more moral or “solemn” entertainment. As indicated in the discussion of Samson’s plot and verbal and musical alterations, Handel and Hamilton also introduced aspects that complicated this potentially straightforward blend of two master artists. Hamilton, by giving some of Milton’s musically-conscious texts to the Philistines, draws attention to their more melodious and appealing qualities; Handel contributes to this moral ambiguity by writing them music that at times seems just as reverent and solemn as the sort that musical-moral reformers thought needed to be performed in a church rather than a theatre.

At a time when text and music were being so heavily scrutinized from both a moral-religious and a dramatic point of view, the decision to treat the Philistines in such a dignified manner seems an almost hostile contradiction to what musical-moral reformers such as Aaron Hill saw as Handel’s purpose in setting English texts in the first place. Of course, the Philistines and their music do not have to be accepted just because of their inviting surface qualities. On one level, the Philistines could be viewed as a parallel to the types of music that Handel-era moralists were cautioning their audiences about, namely Italian opera or music that catered too much to the sensory aspect without matching it on an intellectual level. Appropriately, Handel’s Dalila displays several important connections to the Italian operatic tradition; here, Handel could be including musical hints that she is not a character to be trusted. However, the Philistine chorus, treated in the opening of Samson with as much dignity as the Israelite chorus is given in the conclusion, presents more of a challenge. Perhaps their ultra-musical texts, despite being

---

61 Hamilton, “Preface.”
derived from Milton, indicate an obsession with music for music’s sake, full of sensory
celebration but empty of true religious content. Or perhaps Handel felt genuine sympathy for
them or aimed for simple dramatic balance.

Before questioning Handel too harshly or condemning Hamilton for recycling Milton’s
religious poetry to glorify heathen music, it is important not to forget that Milton, too, had a
dual-sided relationship to music in his poetry. While some critics have argued broadly that
music in Milton’s poetry leads to transcendence, breaking barriers between earth and heaven, Milton’s music can also be used for purposes other than divine. Particularly notable are the
“‘Dorian mood’ that accompanies the rebel angels’ march in the Hell of *Paradise Lost*” and the
vibrant but all-too-sensual music referenced during the dancing at Comus’ court. The question
of who the real victor is in *Samson Agonistes*, although not a musical question in Milton’s
original, provokes similar issues of moral ambiguity; Samson has been interpreted alternately as
a terrorist or a hero of unmatched purity, with a chorus that sometimes clarifies, sometimes
complicates the message of the drama. In a sense, the musically ambiguous Hamilton-Handel
version of *Samson* asks these questions through its blending of music and text, using Milton’s
own musical ambiguity (recaptured for *Samson* through the insertion of Milton’s musical poems

---

62 See Warren Chernaik’s article surveying Milton’s musical references, in which Chernaik argues that
music in Milton’s verse often “enable[es] a magical transformation” and has a divine, transformative agency;
“Milton’s recurrent theme is the transcendent, out-of-body experience, by which the listener is given momentary
access to a realm beyond ordinary apprehensions…” (Chernaik 27, 38).


64 Chernaik, although he deems it “morally suspect,” mitigates possible immorality in Comus’ dance by
connecting it to the “‘unreproved pleasures’” in *L’Allegro*: “As Comus presents the dance of revelry… early in the
masque, it is not only innocent but divinely sanctioned, in accordance with a universal dance linking earth and
heaven, echoing the music of the spheres” (Chernaik 29-30). Comus, like the Handel-Hamilton *Samson*, is notable
for being designed as a musical entertainment but also full of references to music in its text. Also like *Samson*, both
the virtuous and the immoral can attempt to harness the powers of music.

65 See Jane Collins, “Authorial Providence and the Dramatic Form of *Samson Agonistes,*” in *Spokesperson
Milton: Voices in Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Charles W. Durham and Kristin Pruitt (Selingsgrove: Susquehanna
Forsyth (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 333-344.
and Handel’s use of different musical styles) to explore moral ambiguity. Thus, *Samson* the oratorio would seem to have two distinct moral centers: that of the Philistines, given their own chorus and musical prowess, and that of the Israelites, the apparent victors in *Samson Agonistes* (even if this comes with its share of moral doubt). But the balance remains complex, as music and text can both reinforce or fight against one another.

Importantly, Hamilton’s version takes advantage of a plot arc implied in Milton but not developed to its full potential; the three organizing points on this arc will constitute the bases for the following discussion. In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton begins the drama by having his hero refer to a “solemn Feast” to Dagon (SA 12-13), fills the bulk of the work with meditations by Samson and meetings with his friends and enemies, and concludes with references to other “feastful days” (SA 1741), this time celebrating Samson after his death. In the Hamilton-Handel version, as outlined above, we hear the entire Philistine festival, along with the concluding jubilation of the Israelites (and the death-shouts that directly precede it). Hamilton and Handel also musically animate the center section, giving the Philistine characters notable roles. Of these individual Philistines, I will prioritize Dalila, who, with her operatic tendencies, connections to both Samson and his enemies, and position directly in the center of the oratorio balances the instances of musically-conscious celebrations on either end. In the oratorio *Samson*, the Philistine voices resonate strongly through the entire structure; only in the end do the Israelites assert their place, and even then, it is through an act of musical symmetry with their enemies.

---

66 John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*. All subsequent citations to *Samson Agonistes*, for convenience of reference, are given in the text and abbreviated *SA*. 
II. Promiscuous Psalms: The Philistine Festival

In the opening lines of *Samson Agonistes*, the title character references a “solemn Feast” to Dagon, which has allowed him to rest from his otherwise unremitting labors in the prison at Gaza:

This day a solemn Feast the people hold  
To *Dagon* their Sea-Idol, and forbid  
Laborious works, unwillingly this rest  
Their Superstition yields me; hence with leave  
Retiring from the popular noise, I seek  
This unfrequented place to find some ease… *(SA 12-17)*

This explanation for Samson’s presence in the open space outside of the prison is one of the few direct references to the Philistine celebrations in Milton’s drama. Later, Manoa worries about the “popular feast” with its “Great Pomp, and Sacrifice, and Praises loud/ To *Dagon*,” fearing that “*Dagon* shall be magnifi’d, and God…compar’d with Idols,/ [Will be] Disglorifi’d, blasphem’d, and had in scorn” *(SA 434-442)*; Samson himself is eventually summoned to this “solemn Feast” to contribute to its “Sacrifices, Triumph, Pomp, and Games” *(SA 1311-1312)*.

Milton consistently has his characters refer to the Philistine celebration in grandiose terms of “Pomp” and solemnity, and despite its heathen status, it is still classified among “Religious Rites” *(SA 1320)*. These terms, applied to the Philistine festival, leave room for a possible adaptation more merciful to the Philistines. Handel and Hamilton, as will be demonstrated, make choices in their adaptation that might support such a reading. But in Milton’s version, the Philistine feast is never part of the drama’s main action (or what would be represented onstage if the work were to be performed)—it instead exists entirely through these passing references.

Even in the climactic scene of destruction, all of the information about the Philistine festival comes secondhand. Milton minimizes the Philistine presence (and precludes any opportunity for the reader to be tempted by the “Pomp” of their festival) by relegating them as a group to the
sidelines of the drama. Individual characters such as Dalila and Harapha come forward, interacting with Samson and presenting counterarguments to his laments and insults, but the Philistines as a body remain vague, and the reader is given little opportunity to develop sympathetic ties with them.

In contrast, Handel and Hamilton dedicate ample time and musical resources to the Philistines, setting them in opposition to the Israelite chorus without noticeably prioritizing one or the other until the very last scene of the oratorio. If either side has the advantage in the first act of *Samson*, it is the Philistine one. From Milton’s brief references, Handel and Hamilton construct a vibrant festival scene, in which the “Pomp” and religious solemnity, only disdainfully referred to in Milton’s poem, take center stage. Directly after Samson’s opening recitative—and long before the Israelite chorus even makes an appearance—we are introduced to the Philistine chorus. Samson himself could not be more insignificant in the opening of the oratorio; although he utters the work’s first words, his role in the first scene is nothing more than to announce the time and place of the action:

This day, a solemn Feast to *Dagon* held
Relieves me from my Task of servile Toil;
Unwillingly their Superstition yields
This Rest! To breathe Heav’n’s Air fresh blowing,
    pure and sweet.67

Promptly following this meager recitative, hymns to Dagon and exclamations of praise for the pagan deity fill the air. This magnificent “popular noise” (*SA* 15) delays Samson’s commentary until well into the first act. The Philistines could easily be seen as the protagonists at this point in the oratorio, especially considering that festival scenes for the Israelites were not uncommon; scholars have even compared this particular scene to the opening festival in Handel’s *Saul*,

---

67 Hamilton, 1.
which, ironically, celebrates a victory over the Philistines. In Samson, the tables have turned, and the Philistines enjoy their celebratory feast, praising Dagon and presumably gloating over their successful capture of the Israelite hero.

A few general comments on the function of the Israelite chorus are necessary before embarking on a discussion of the Philistine chorus, that force so noticeably absent in Samson Agonistes but so potent in the oratorio. Israeli choruses are a common, even expected, feature of Handel’s oratorios; it will be recalled that one of the qualities that led Newburgh Hamilton to remark on the appropriateness of Samson Agonistes for oratorio adaptation was Milton’s use of a chorus. Thus, the Israelite chorus is more straightforwardly adapted from Samson Agonistes than its Philistine counterpart. Many of the chorus’ lines come directly from Milton’s drama, but they are divided in Hamilton’s text between the chorus proper and the character of Micah, who, from the perspective of plot, is merely an additional commentator, lacking any particular function separate from the chorus. As with the Philistine chorus, the Israelites’ texts do contain some borrowings from Milton’s other poetry, including the Psalms, “On Time,” and the Nativity Ode. However, while many of the Philistine texts involve song, dance, and celebration, the Israelite chorus largely speaks in terms of light and darkness, spiritual loss and spiritual guidance. This difference in textual content could provide the first hint that we are not

---

68 See, for instance, Dean, Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques. Dean suggests that “Saul was evidently [Hamilton’s] model for framing the work between a thanksgiving and an elegy” (Dean, 329).

69 Although Micah can be interpreted as a mere extension of the chorus in terms of Samson’s plot, his character does add to the texture of Samson as a musical drama. For instance, the chorus “To dust his glory” is inserted before the partial reprise of the A section of Micah’s air “Return, O God of Hosts,” dividing the air into two distinct pieces built around a choral commentary. The chorus continues to interject after Micah’s second entrance, interweaving their own melodic lines with Micah’s for the remainder of the air. The overall effect is quite dramatic, adding musical depth to the Israelite chorus without necessarily extending their role in the plot.

70 “Return, O God of Hosts,” and “To dust his glory” are among the numbers borrowed from Milton’s psalm paraphrases (Dean points to 80 and 86, although the connections in this case are very loose). See Dean, Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques, 330 for the chart of poetic borrowings. Both Philistine and Israelite choruses are included.

71 For example, two of their choruses, following tendencies in Milton’s poetry, use light metaphors to explore themes of spiritual growth and spiritual failure. In the chorus “O first created beam,” the first section, taken
necessarily supposed to take the Philistines as moral or musical role models; although the oratorio begins in their favor with the triumphant festival scene, they use music to praise music and the act of reveling, while the Israelites frequently use their choral strains to probe deeper religious issues.

But to accuse the Philistines of simply using music for shallow ends would be to ignore their important standing in the musical structure of the oratorio and their relationship to the preexisting moral ambiguities of *Samson Agonistes*. Milton’s drama, full of its own moral discomforts and competing interpretations, never unequivocally dismisses the Philistines. Although there is no Philistine chorus in *Samson Agonistes*, Milton acknowledges the human dimension of the Philistines to an extent by making Dalila a complex character\(^{72}\) and raising the possibility of a ransom for Samson’s freedom.\(^{73}\) Furthermore, existing criticism indicates that Samson’s actions do not constitute unquestionable heroism; more than one scholar have highlighted such moral disparities and questioned the need for Samson’s vicious tactics, addressing the lack of narrative authority already existent in *Samson Agonistes*. Jane Collins, for example, argues that Milton employs the dramatic form of *Samson Agonistes* to raise interpretive questions about the “interplay of human voices” and the variety of viewpoints applicable to any given moral issue, emphasizing the plurality of interpretations of the drama. In drama, there is no narrator to provide an evaluation of the correct decision (here, Samson’s slaughtering spree);

---

\(^{72}\) The chorus dismisses Dalila following her scene in *Samson Agonistes*, forcefully suggesting that she is not a desirable character, but their remarks could also be said to apply more broadly to women as a group rather than specifically to Dalila as a function of her race.

\(^{73}\) Also see Schwartz, “The Nightmare of History,” and Wood, “Gaza Mourns.”
the chorus is especially susceptible to the desire to “mythologize” and oversimplify the recent past, so their conclusions cannot all be taken at surface value. Handel’s and Hamilton’s *Samson*, too, lacks any overseeing narrator or moderator who can indicate which group is meant to have the upper hand. One could argue that Micah takes on a moderator role, providing the voice of reason and explaining away some of Samson’s faults while denigrating the Philistines, but even he is matched by Dalila, whose convincing speech in the second act hints at how easily Samson might have been outmatched by her in the first place.

Furthermore, the presence of these two opposing choruses leads to a disconcerting balance between the views of the Philistines and their Godly enemies. At the end of Act II, the two choruses even end up engaged in a shouting match, arguing over whether God or Dagon is greater. Although verbal and musical power is restored to the Israelites in the final scene, a hearer unfamiliar with the story could not necessarily be expected to know which chorus would eventually take precedence. Following these themes in the realm of musical criticism, Handel has been accused of preferring the Philistines or at least giving them equal treatment to their Christian counterparts; Dean, for instance, suggests that “[Handel] approached the story [of *Samson*] as a dramatist, without moral preconceptions; and apart from Harapha, a type he disliked, the Philistines are drawn with as much sympathy as the Israelites.”

Counter to this type of claim, Ruth Smith asserts that Handel’s contemporaries would have known to beware the enticing music of the Philistines, warning that

---

74 Collins, “Authorial Providence and the Dramatic Form of *Samson Agonistes*;” Collins also argues that rather than accepting the seventeenth-century tendency to see Old Testament heroes as convenient role-models, Milton’s drama allows the individual to search for truth and question these various voices. For another study addressing the moral discomforts of *Samson Agonistes* in relation to narrative authority, see Louis Schwartz, “The Nightmare of History.”


76 Dean, *Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, 331.
[Handel’s] Contemporaries’ juxtapositions of luxury and irreligion with frugality and virtue should adjust our view of all the oratorios’ hedonistic heathens. To modern listeners Handel’s beguiling music for them seldom suggests criticism, indeed it has encouraged the idea that Handel was a humanist with pagan tendencies, sympathising with the revelling idolators he portrays…in the case of the words such confusion cannot arise, for the librettists make heathen vice only minimally attractive.\textsuperscript{77}

Smith makes an important point in arguing that we should not be applying twentieth century moral and aesthetic expectations on Handel and his contemporaries, but her warning should taken with a grain of salt, especially in the case of Samson. Here, Smith’s claim that “the librettists make heathen vice only minimally attractive” cannot apply, because Hamilton has adopted Milton’s words for the Philistines. As we have seen, Milton had a special status in eighteenth-century musical criticism. This type of criticism in turn intersected with religious concerns, one of which was to find music and texts that would elevate each other and contribute to a moral, edifying brand of entertainment.

From the standpoint of Handel’s music, we cannot automatically dismiss this scene with claims that the musical style points to vice. Even eighteenth-century critics well-versed in the Bible and supportive of musical-moral reform could be swayed by the chorus of Philistines. William Hughes, in his Remarks upon Church Musick,\textsuperscript{78} praises the choruses of Samson without distinguishing between the Philistines and Israelites at all: “As for the whole of the Chorus’s, they are so finely adapted to the Words, that to determine in favour of one would be doing a sort

\textsuperscript{77} Smith, Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought, 266-267. Smith also quotes a comment from Charles Jennens regarding the appealing music of the Philistines in Samson: “being a little delirious with a Fever, he said he should be damn’d for preferring Dagon (a Gentleman he was very complacent to in the oratorio of Samson) before the Messiah.” She notes of this report that, “even if fictitious, it shows that at least one contemporary took the ungodly forces in the oratorios seriously, as a genuine opposition of evil to good, and felt concerned by ambiguity in Handel’s representations of them- correctly anticipating, we could say, that such ambiguity would prove subversive and liable to misinterpretation” (267).

\textsuperscript{78} The edition cited was printed in 1763, but it is labeled as a second edition, and the presence of a review of an earlier edition this work from the Monthly Review in January 1759 indicates that it was written during Handel’s lifetime. See “Art. 20. Remarks upon Church Musick. To which are added several observations upon some of Mr. Handel’s Oratorio’s, and other parts of his works. By a Lover of Harmony. Worcester printed. 8vo. 6d. Sold by Sandby in London,” Review of Hughes’ Remarks, in Monthly Review, or, Literary Journal Jan. 1759, 86-87.
of Injustice to all the rest. They touch! they strike! they animate! they warm!”

In addition to the choruses, three of the four airs and duets that Hughes considers worthy of mention belong to the Philistines. These judgments are all the more interesting when considered in the context of Hughes’ larger piece, which is a pamphlet advocating for the reform of church music. Hughes argues that it is the responsibility of the composer of religious music to attempt to align sound and sentiment so that the notes can prepare the listener to absorb the influence of the words. He takes issue with extensive use of counterpoint (because it has the potential to obscure verbal meaning) in church music but sees Handel as a composer who navigates between sound and sense in the ideal manner. Hughes accepts the oratorios as “a strong Species of Church-Musick” and sets *Samson* apart with overflowing enthusiasm as “a Work, (a Work! Let me repeat it again) which must always stand foremost in the Compositions of that great *Harmonist* [Handel].”

This is an interesting assertion in light of the many complex definitions of oratorio circulating in the eighteenth century and its troublesome position between the theatre and the church. Although Hughes leaves no comments on the verbal dimension of the Philistines, his unequivocal classification of Handel as a church composer and his choice to point to *Samson* as an example of perfectly allied words and music indicate that some contemporary observers did find analogues to true religious music in the oratorio genre even while others were lamenting its presence on the English stage. In this context, the opening Philistine festival takes on a special importance. For this festival music follows an important form of eighteenth-century Anglican musical worship, which was popular and viewed as morally uplifting: the anthem.

Although the term “anthem” is often used colloquially today to designate any inspiring song, the anthem, formally defined, is a genre of religious music that would have been subject to

---

79 Hughes, *Remarks*, 41.
80 Ibid., 39-40.
certain expectations in eighteenth-century England. Historically, anthems are choral pieces on liturgical texts or paraphrases. Derived from the Latin antiphon in Catholic churches, anthems were employed in Anglican services beginning as early as the Reformation. Unlike oratorio, anthems were meant for liturgical use. Like oratorio, however, these Anglican anthems were a genre that was both distinctly British and derived from a variety of foreign styles and precedents. By the eighteenth-century, many anthems were multiple-movement works with recitatives, arias, and choruses, influenced by the Italian style. Handel, an expert anthem composer long before the days of English oratorio, wrote in this style and composed many multi-movement verse anthems, among them the well-known Chandos Anthems of 1717-18.81

The anthems also had a special relationship to the oratorio; Smith has identified the anthem as an important formal and textual predecessor to Handelian oratorio, pointing to the fact that they were popular entertainment and “constitute[d] the bulk of Handel’s English word-setting before and besides oratorio.”82 More importantly, the anthem not only informed the development of oratorio but could be deliberately employed within this type of dramatic entertainment to bolster the musical prowess of the Israelites. Graydon Beeks tracks the use of “functional anthems”83 in Handel’s oratorios through 1741, acknowledging their popularity in England and aligning them specifically with the Israelites. Like many of the scholars studying anthems, Beeks divides these “functional anthems” into three types: “celebratory anthems,” “elegies,” and “anthems of prayer and supplication” (28). All three types that Beeks identifies are present in Samson, but not all of them belong to the Israelites.

---


82 Smith, Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought, 93; “Anglican anthems are forerunners of Handelian oratorio in that they are musical settings for soloists and choir of texts from the Old Testament, and occasionally the Apocrypha and New Testament...” Artistic considerations aside, Handel had excellent marketing reasons for absorbing his anthems and his anthem style into his oratorios: the public loved them...[published versions of the anthem texts] indicate that the existing modes of handling scriptural texts for setting as anthems provided precedents for the oratorio librettists” (93-94).

83 Graydon Beeks, “Handel’s Use of Anthems in his Oratorios to Portray the People of Israel,” Händel-Jarbuch vol. 52 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2006), 25-35. Beeks divides these “functional anthems” into three types: “celebratory anthems,” “elegies,” and “anthems of prayer and supplication” (28). All three types that Beeks identifies are present in Samson, but not all of them belong to the Israelites.
the textual dimension of the oratorios, Beeks links this “formal rejoicing by the people of Israel” to the English people and Handel’s own experience with national celebratory (or mourning) music.\textsuperscript{84} The opening, anthem-like festival in \textit{Samson} certainly constitutes “formal rejoicing;” here, however, it is the Philistines, not the Israelites, who are allowed to employ this powerful form.

The opening festival scene of \textit{Samson} is structured like an Anglican anthem, specifically a verse anthem. “Verse anthems,” or anthems alternating solo sections with choral (often contrapuntal) sections, are distinct from “full anthems,” which lack soloists.\textsuperscript{85} This particular verse anthem is made up of three solos (four if Samson’s introductory recitative is grouped with the festival for musical purposes) and three choral sections (see Table 1). \textit{Samson}’s overture could also potentially be doubling as overture to this anthem structure, considering that many of Handel’s verse anthems have a separate overture or “sinfonia” section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Musical Number</th>
<th>Type, Meter, Key, etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. “Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound”</td>
<td>SATB Chorus; D Major, 4/4 Allegro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. “Ye men of Gaza”</td>
<td>Air (soprano); A Major, 3/4 Andante</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A(1). “Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound”</td>
<td>Chorus; identical to bars 38-48 of initial chorus, ritornello function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. “Loud as the thunder’s awful voice”</td>
<td>Air (tenor); D Major, 4/4 Allegro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. “Then free from sorrow”</td>
<td>Air (soprano); B minor, 6/8 Allegro, dancelike; resembles Act II duet “My faith and truth”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A(2). “Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound”</td>
<td>Chorus; same abbreviated ritornello as above</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 28.  
\textsuperscript{85} Temperley, “Verse anthem.”  
\textsuperscript{86} See Handel, \textit{Samson: New Novello Edition}, 1-30 for further information on the musical components of this scene. The lettering/numbering of the sections in this table is my addition, meant to facilitate discussion of the scene; it is restricted to this group of musical numbers and unrelated to the layout of the oratorio as a whole or any organizational methods imposed upon it by Handel or subsequent editors.
The festival is officially introduced with the chorus, “Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound.” This chorus is typically Handelian in aesthetic and instrumentation, and would be stylistically recognizable to anyone familiar with the famous choruses of *Messiah*. A vibrant D major piece that begins in unison before dissolving into jubilant counterpoint, “Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound” employs trumpets (a moment in which Hamilton’s text is quite literally and forcefully supported by Handel’s musical choices) and lively melismatic vocal passages to convey exclamations of praise. This chorus breaks up the solos while also working them into a consistent pattern; the restatement of ten bars of “Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound” between the solo sections reinforces each solo statement, and its very repetitiveness adds to the ritualistic nature of the festival.

This repetition is important because it is one of the scene’s significant divergences from the more traditional (Handelian) Anglican anthem. In its first manifestation (A), the chorus “Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound” is polyphonic, the expected texture for the choral sections of an Anglican church anthem. As indicated, instead of new choruses, a simplified restatement of the main melodic line of “Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound” is repeated between the solo segments (A(1) and A(2)). In this way, the Philistine festival scene is distinct from the ordinary anthem structure in which the chorus would have new material to sing for each of their numbers. In addition, this repetition could be interpreted as a musical hint of the Philistines’ heathen status. In *Samson Agonistes*, Samson, Manoa, and the Chorus can barely reference the festival without complaining about the Philistines’ idol-worship. The use of repeated choral sections instead of original material for each chorus infuses the scene with a sense of ritual, as if the Philistines are observing empty rites rather than engaging in the type of spontaneous, heartfelt
musical praise that the Israelites (and Milton\textsuperscript{87}) would approve of. This return of the chorus with the same basic melodic statement could also be interpreted as a type of ritornello, loosely aligning the festival scene with a large-scale rondo.\textsuperscript{88} The rondo,\textsuperscript{89} a popular musical form, is associated with dance (and Frenchness, which had its own set of problematic resonances for the eighteenth-century British public\textsuperscript{90}), another indication that the Philistine music might be shallow or morally dangerous.\textsuperscript{91} The Philistines do sometimes appear to be more concerned with the act of celebration than with true praise of their deity—after all, the text of this makeshift anthem, calling for “trumpets,” “merry pipe[s],” and “pleasing string[s],” is as much about recreational music-making as it is about religious music-making.

But this very same text also pushes back in the opposite direction against the potentially troublesome music, reinforcing its anthem status. The Philistines are not working with pagan text. Just as they partially adopt a musical structure belonging to the English Christian church, they also adopt an English Christian text. Although they reference Dagon, the Philistines draw most of their words in this scene from Psalm 81, and more specifically, Milton’s version of Psalm 81. Continuing the theme of Anglican anthems, it is important to remember that most anthem texts did come from psalms, especially paraphrased, metrical versions catering to English

---

\textsuperscript{87} In \textit{Paradise Lost} as well as in “At a Solemn Musick,” spontaneity seems to be an important part of divine, transcendent music-making. For instance, see Book Five of \textit{Paradise Lost}, in which Adam and Eve offer God their morning prayers “in fit strains pronounced, or sung/Unmeditated; such prompt eloquence...More tuneable than needed lute or harp/To add more sweetness” (Milton, \textit{Paradise Lost}, V.148-152).

\textsuperscript{88} The sense of this scene as a rondo is intensified when the air “Loud as the thunder’s awful voice” is dropped, as in some performances; this omission eliminates the imbalance created by having two airs between the second and third statements of “Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound.”

\textsuperscript{89} Rondos are arguably associated with the Philistines more generally in this oratorio; see Dalila discussion below for comments on her dancelike scene and references to critical commentary on her extended rondo.

\textsuperscript{90} Interestingly, Linda Colley employs Handelian oratorio as a piece of evidence in her larger argument that eighteenth-century Britons sought to define their nationality in opposition to the French by stressing their Protestantism (among other tactics). See Colley, \textit{Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837}.

\textsuperscript{91} The triple meters of the two soprano solos likewise suggest dance.
congregations. Hamilton finds an already prepared psalm text in Milton’s Psalm 81, but he freely mixes up and redistributes the passages of the Psalm. Two characteristics of his adaptation are particularly noticeable: the easy replacement of “Jacob’s God” as the receiver of the praise songs with “Dagon, King of all the Earth,” and the manner in which he carefully weeds through the Psalm to select the most overtly musical text.

With its many references to music and the voice and exclamations of praise, Psalm 81 is dangerously easy to transfer to the Philistine context in the oratorio. The relevant passages from Milton’s psalm describe hymns of praise to the Israelite God, who in turn speaks of leading them “out of thrall:”

To God our strength sing loud, and clear,
Sing loud to God our King,
To Jacob’s God, that all may hear,
Loud acclamations ring.
Prepare a Hymn, prepare a Song,
The Timbrel hither bring;
The cheerful Psaltery bring along,
And Harp with pleasant string.
Blow, as is wont, in the new Moon,
With Trumpets lofty sound,
Th’ appointed time, the day wheron
Our solemn Feast comes round...  

Milton’s psalm presents a series of imperatives calling the people to praise their God; Hamilton succeeds in preserving this essential form when he adapts the psalm’s musical references for the festival scene. In this respect, Hamilton’s only substantive changes involve pulling apart the musical segments so that they can be delegated to different numbers in the anthem sequence and seamlessly substituting Dagon for the God of the Israelites.

---

92 Smith observes that “The anthem texts are overwhelmingly drawn from the Old Testament, especially the Psalms in their King James Bible and Book of Common Prayer translations...making the material of the oratorios—the history and feelings of the Israelites—familiar subjects of musical settings to anyone who attended choral services” (Smith, 95). She also notes that many of these texts would be generalized to appeal to a broader audience or somehow otherwise altered in connotation; this claim is interesting in light of the fact that Hamilton so forcefully alters the connotation of Milton’s psalms for the Philistines.

On the surface, there is no substantial difference between the praise music of the Israelites as portrayed in Milton’s psalm and the praise music of the Philistines as portrayed in the oratorio. In fact, Hamilton later mixes this psalm’s contexts even further by giving a portion of it to the Israelites for Samson’s air “Why does the God of Israel sleep,” a decision indicating that he might not have seen a functional difference between the pagan and Christian religious songs. Interestingly, Samson’s air is an angry one, calling for the destruction of the Philistines long before he completes his final act of violence. Thus, Philistine triumph and Philistine defeat are bolstered by the same source text, complicating any reading that would seek to prioritize the moral position of the Israelites. The Philistines, moreover, are able to take advantage of this text before the Israelites, and the actions of music-making represented in the original are adaptable to their celebration. For example, Hamilton takes the lines “Blow…With Trumpets lofty sound,/ Th’appointed time, the day whereon/ Our solemn Feast comes round” for the refrain of the chorus in “Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound,” but these trumpets are now lifted in praise of Dagon:

Awake the Trumpet’s lofty Sound;  
The joyful sacred Festival comes round,  
When Dagon, King of all the Earth, is crown’d”

As in Milton’s version, Hamilton’s adapted Philistine psalm issues a command for music of praise. The mention of a “solemn Feast” in Milton’s psalm is transformed into a “joyful sacred Festival” in the oratorio, but it does not disappear completely. Samson refers to the Philistine celebrations as a “solemn feast” in both Samson Agonistes and his introductory recitative in the oratorio.

---

94 Hamilton, 7-8.  
95 Ibid.
The term “solemn,” as applied to music, is a critical word to trace throughout Milton’s texts and the oratorio libretto while assessing the respective musical actions of the Philistines and Israelites. In the context of this psalm, “solemn” simply designates religious or sacred observances. Broadly, the term has both moral and aesthetic connotations, being one of the words Hamilton admiringly applied to Handel’s music in the preface to the libretto and one of the characteristics that the anonymous letter-writer to the *Universal Spectator* in 1743 worried would decline if Handel’s religious drama were brought into the theatre. Here, however, the subject being approached with “solemnity” is a Philistine worship scene, not a Christian one. For the Philistines, the word “solemn” next appears in the soprano air, “Ye men of Gaza,” in which the unmodified “hymn” and “song” mentioned in Milton’s text become a “solemn Hymn and cheerful song:”

_Ye Men of Gaza, hither bring_
_The merry Pipe and pleasing String,_
_The solemn Hymn and cheerful Song;_
_Be Dagon prais’d by ev’ry Tongue._

As in the chorus segments, Hamilton preserves the psalm’s imperatives but re-addresses them to the “Men of Gaza” in honor of Dagon. The overall effect of incorporating this Miltonic praise song to a pagan deity is to ally the Philistines intimately with religious music, a relationship reinforced by the attribution of “solemnity” to the Philistine rights.

The frequent occurrence of the word “solemn” in conjunction with Samson’s pagan enemies is worth noting because of the association of the term with eighteenth-century musical Christianity. Lockman and others linked musical “solemnity” with Handel and Milton but worried when venues or undue sentiments threatened to interfere with this ideal combination.

---

96 Ibid., 1.
Lockman, as he indicates in his essay, views oratorios as “of an infinitely superior nature [when compared to opera]…the noblest and most rapturous Kind of Music that is addressed to the Creator” and “the most exquisite Delight we can possibly enjoy here below.” To Lockman, *Paradise Lost* is a text that could produce such “exquisite Delight[s]” when set to music, but the act of performing oratorio in a theatre would detract from Milton’s divine stature and “necessarily lessen the Solemnity of this entertainment.” Problematically, “solemn hymn[s]” for much of *Samson* belong to the followers of Dagon. Therefore, Lockman’s statements on Milton and oratorio, taken in conjunction with the festival scene, raise several important questions. Can oratorio still represent the “noblest and most rapturous Kind of Music that is addressed to the Creator” when the composer and librettist direct some of their most thrilling and solemn efforts towards a deity who is not the God of the Israelites? Do Milton’s words, restructured and adapted for a heathen festival, still inspire the same “exquisite Delight” and reverent praise of God as they would have in their original form? Finally, have the boundaries between stage and sacred space altered at all when a pagan religious festival, rather than a Christian one, is portrayed musically and dramatically?

From one point of view, the use of the Philistine chorus and soloists in this scene could be ameliorating some of the religious concerns about the theatre, their presence automatically rendering the scene irreligious and thus making it more fit for the stage. But this would be an oversimplified explanation. With Milton’s words and Handel’s music, the Philistine religious festival does not differ significantly in form from the celebrations of Israelites elsewhere in the oratorio repertoire. The musical form is analogous to an anthem, while the verbal form is adopted directly from a psalm. And these borrowings were not just from any anthems or psalms, but from the works of a composer and poet who were frequently viewed as elevating their art.

97 Lockman, xx-xxi.
forms to divine status. Therefore, despite possible indications in the music that we may not be supposed to sympathize with the Philistines, Hamilton’s use of Milton’s Psalm texts and Handel’s triumphal treatment of the chorus imply otherwise, at least at the beginning. Pulled together from the sidelines and scattered references in *Samson Agonistes* into a concrete whole, the Philistine festival is the first major musical anchor of the oratorio, setting the musical and moral scene long before the Israelites have any room to contradict or intervene.

Most importantly, the Philistines have been introduced as a group of voices deserving to be heard— they are inherently musical, if perhaps too deeply dedicated to music in the context of lighthearted celebration. Their identity as a musically-oriented people will continue in the second act. This act, while lacking a large-scale celebration, does allow the Philistines an opportunity to send forth individual representatives. Here, it is not just the audience that will be forced to listen; Dalila, representative of her people but also highly individual, will come and try to persuade Samson that her voice also needs to be heard. Her scene demonstrates the vocal potential of the Philistines outside of the religious context, where they are just as fascinating in their dependence on music. Dalila has her own store of musical tricks, which also play into the discussions of eighteenth-century musical morality and tip the moral balance even further, to the point where the Israelites must finally regain control with a music of their own.
III. Dalila’s “Warbling Charms”

Although Dalila’s scene is not one of the many in which Newburgh Hamilton draws on music-related text, Dalila’s relationship to musical performance is important in a way that ties the oratorio character to her original Miltonic model. In the context of the musical-moral debates of Handel’s time, Dalila is also notable for being a conspicuously operatic character.\(^9\) In this capacity, Dalila as an individual representative uses her voice to further deepen the Philistine relationship to music and performance in the oratorio. Samson does not give in to her vocal charms a second time, but listeners are able to hear her musical potency in an extended scene that dominates the second act and balances out the chorus scenes with a strong individual voice.

Despite Dalila’s centrality to the oratorio, scholars comparing Milton’s Dalila to Hamilton’s generally highlight the simplification of her character. For instance, Winton Dean and more recently Stella Revard have suggested that Dalila is stripped of her political complexity in *Samson*’s libretto. Dean asserts that Hamilton eliminated some of Milton’s “social propaganda” and “softened and humanized Dalila,”\(^9\) while Revard makes the claim that the politically-loaded dispute between Milton’s Samson and Dalila is “reduced to a lover’s quarrel” in Handel’s oratorio.\(^1\) This “softened” Dalila is, in both Dean’s and Revard’s views, appealing as a character but lacking in dramatic significance. Other scholars read the Dalila of the oratorio through the lens of eighteenth-century theatre culture, prioritizing the role’s interpreters and the cultural-political events of Handel’s time over Milton’s text. Berta Joncus takes such an approach, arguing that eighteenth-century audiences most likely interpreted the scene as a

---

\(^9\) Harapha, too, is operatic, representing the *basso buffo* type. See Revard, “Restoring the Political Context,” 380-381, for further commentary on Handel’s operatic-style casting in *Samson*. Looking at these two characters in conjunction, it is possible to conjecture that Handel may have been using these Philistine characters to satirize Italian opera and lighten the tone of his oratorio while leaving them as antagonists.

\(^9\) Dean, *Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, 329.

\(^1\) Revard, “Restoring the Political Context,” 387-389.
political statement because Dalila was being sung by Kitty Clive, a star soprano known for her Patriot sympathies. In this interpretation, the character, although an important element of the drama, is created as much (if not more) by Mrs. Clive and her stage persona as by Milton. In all of these critical responses, Dalila’s words in the oratorio are dismissed more as a set-piece than as a viable expression of character.

From the musical perspective, critical responses to Handel’s Dalila are less uniformly negative. While Dean contends that Dalila’s music is “never profound” and that Handel “treats the Dalila scene very lightly, almost as a diversion,” he nonetheless acknowledges that the “characterization is true.” Likewise, Revard, in spite of an apparent disdain for Hamilton’s words and treatment of Dalila’s argument with Samson as a “lover’s quarrel,” responds enthusiastically to Handel’s setting. These responses to Handel’s and Hamilton’s Dalila often focus on what is lost from Milton or treat what is added musically as an entity separate from the text; however, when text and music are assessed together, Milton’s Dalila reveals herself within this apparently simplified role. Dalila’s music contributes to her moral ambiguity; the deceitful Philistine wife, with her multiplicity of verbal justifications, becomes an eighteenth-century vocalist extraordinaire, wielding many types of music to attempt to sway her betrayed husband. Dalila’s voice, simultaneously invoked through text and music, is at the center of her fascinating complexity as a character. In the Handel-Hamilton adaptation of the Dalila scene, Dalila’s words do lose much of their strength, but her voice remains central. While Hamilton condenses Dalila’s text significantly, Handel’s musical settings reveal the intelligent, problematic woman

101 Joncus, “Handel at Drury Lane,” 219-221.
102 Ibid., 220. Joncus argues that Newburgh Hamilton “compromised Milton’s characterization of Dalila to incorporate celebrated Clive tropes.”
103 Dean, Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques, 340.
104 Revard emphasizes the overpowering presence of Dalila’s music, noting her “three airs to Samson’s one,” her vocal support from a chorus of virgins, and her major-key victory over Samson, indicating that Dalila “wins the musical, if not the intellectual, debate” (Revard, “Restoring the Political Context,” 387-389).
present in Milton’s drama. Crucially, Hamilton and Handel repeatedly draw attention to Dalila’s voice as both a physical presence and an active intellectual agent.

On the surface, it is unremarkable that Dalila’s voice is the main object of attention in this scene. Because of the nature of oratorio genre as an unstaged musical drama, the aural automatically supersedes the visual with every character and event. However, music is not merely a dramatic vehicle for words in the Dalila scene. Dalila assails Samson with an astounding variety of musical styles; furthermore, verbal and musical markers work together in Act II of *Samson* to render Dalila’s voice a formidable source of power, creating a vivid sense of her role in Samson’s defeat and a multilayered portrait of her as woman and marital combatant.

Even before music is added, the voice is a central element in Milton’s characterization of Dalila in *Samson Agonistes*. Milton’s Samson, after being assailed for the second time in his life by Dalila’s “Tongue-batteries” (*SA* 404), dismisses his wife by saying that he has become immune to her “warbling charms.” Dalila in *Samson Agonistes* is a master of words, employing in turn excuses of weakness, feigned ignorance, love, and political allegiances in her attempt to extort forgiveness from Samson. Throughout this process, Dalila repeatedly uses words that highlight her voice and the act of speaking. Her voice is simultaneously a vice and a means of marital truce. Dalila’s reasoning fluctuates rapidly, but she continuously demonstrates awareness of her vocal power. In her first excuse to Samson, Dalila presents the desire to “publish” and speak of secrets as a natural corollary to feminine weakness and curiosity (*SA* 773-780). When she claims that her betrayal came out of love for Samson, she indicates that she was trying to avoid “Wailing [his] absence” (806). While expressing her political reasons, Dalila notes that she was “Solicited, commanded, threatened, urged” (852) by the authorities in her country, indicating through a list of orders and entreaties that she, too, is susceptible to the
“sieges” of verbal warfare and sees words as a weapon. Even her offer to ameliorate Samson’s situation involves questionable verbal dealings: she plans to go to the lords and “intercede, not doubting/ Their favorable ear” (920-921). Words are Dalila’s primary medium of exchange, and the voice becomes her main source of processing identity.

Dalila exudes confidence in her ability to persuade. However, she does eventually have cause to doubt one ear—that of her husband. But he, too, is aware of her formidable vocal presence. Although his blindness has left him free of her visual charms, it has left Samson just as vulnerable, if not more vulnerable, to Dalila’s speech, always her most powerful weapon. Milton’s hero, while famous for obsessively articulating his loss of sight, seems far more concerned with his sense of hearing as long as Dalila is present. Samson repeatedly processes his worries about Dalila through words that emphasize her verbal manipulations. He rejects her offer to free him from prison, fearing that if he returns to her, she will “again betray [him].”

How wouldst thou insult  
When I must live uxorious to thy will  
In perfect thraldom, how again betray me,  
Bearing my words and doings to the lords  
To gloss upon, and censuring, frown or smile?  
This jail I count the house of liberty  
To thine whose doors my feet shall never enter. (SA 944-950)

Samson’s terror of living “uxorious to [Dalila’s] will/ In perfect thraldom” has nothing to do with the type of physical slavery he currently endures at the hands of the Philistines. Instead, he fears that Dalila will “Bear [his] words…to the lords/ To gloss upon.” As in Dalila’s explanations, the vocabulary in Samson’s rebuttal foregrounds acts of speech, treating them as objects of negotiation or things that can be “borne” covertly as weapons. Dalila’s threatening speech in this passage extends to a national level with the “gloss” and “censuring” of Philistine lords, who would also have the opportunity to exert verbal power over Samson were he to leave
physical slavery and return to his wife. Samson’s assessments of his shameful servitude under “Philistian yoke” most often come in the form of laments over his lost sight. Here, however, he fears an even more “base degree” of servitude through losing his freedom of speech.

Samson has come to understand Dalila’s methods of verbal warfare, and his greatest victory in this scene is when he articulates his ability to defend himself. He icily tells Dalila that he is familiar with her “trains:” “Thy fair enchanted cup and warbling charms/ No more on me have power, their force is nulled; So much of adder’s wisdom I have learnt/ To fence my ear against thy sorceries” (S.4 932-937). In this passage, Samson gives a twofold testament to Dalila’s vocal prowess. First, he employs the language of magic to refer to her voice, calling her verbal attacks “sorceries” and suggesting that she possesses an enticing musicality with his mention of “warbling charms.” Second, he again addresses his own resistance to her words in physical terms, this time using the vocabulary of combat (“fenc[ing] his ear” against weapons whose “force is nulled”) instead of servitude.

Notably, when Dalila realizes her “Tongue-batteries” have failed, she calls Samson “implacable, more deaf/ To prayers than winds and seas” (S.4 960-961). Like Samson’s shift a few lines earlier from a sight-related conception of servitude to a speech-related one, Dalila’s accusation displaces Samson’s physical disability from his eyes to his ears. Once again, she draws attention to the fact that Samson’s still-active sense of hearing is a necessary part of his injury and continuing vulnerability. Therefore, the figurative deafness Dalila alludes to is actually equivalent not to disability, but to an extraordinary natural power, stronger than “winds and seas.” Dalila’s voice cannot be beaten easily, and it requires a selective deafness equal in magnitude to Samson’s legendary blindness.
 Appropriately, in sympathetic readings of Milton’s Dalila, critics assessing her agency frequently focus on her verbal justifications for her role in Samson’s downfall. Even scholars looking to diverse sources for the models for this impressive agency come away with similar interpretations of Dalila’s modes of speech. From the perspective of Dalila’s dramatic precedents, Revard treats Dalila as a Euripidean character and argues that Milton’s Dalila is significantly more developed than her Biblical counterpart.105 Hope Parisi, on the other hand, focuses on Dalila’s Biblical precedents, noting the distinctions between Biblical female “heroism” or active agency and seventeenth-century Protestant, patriarchal definitions of female “mediation,” dependent on humility and chastity. Blending aspects of the Biblical female “hero” and the seventeenth-century domestic mediator, Dalila, in Parisi’s view, is likely to be misinterpreted by readers who view her through only one of these lenses.106 Interestingly, both of these critics focus on the shifting meanings behind Dalila’s words and her conscious construction of verbal identities. Although these critical responses draw from source as diverse as Greek drama and the Bible, both interpret Dalila as a woman who uses her speech to assert her presence even while constrained by the speech patterns and social expectations of a patriarchal society.

When looking at Dalila as a verbal-musical character, we can take a similar approach to her words and voice, replacing the gendered constraints of the Bible or Greek tragedy with the expectations of form in eighteenth-century English opera and oratorio. Milton’s Dalila, with her

105 According to Revard, this Euripidean Dalila follows the patterns of ancient Greek heroines who, despite their lack of power are “vocal in criticizing the [patriarchal] system that controls them” and who are generally morally ambiguous, voicing complex justifications for complex motives (Stella Revard, “Dalila as Euripidean Heroine,” Papers on Language and Literature 50, no. 3-4 (2014): 366-374).

106 In this view, Dalila’s self-justifications are sincere, but she is “constrained to speak various discourses, thus seeming inconsistent to many.” This double-reading of Dalila depends on understanding the expected modes of speech surrounding seventeenth-century women; Parisi suggests that Dalila’s shift in tone from to self-deprecation and the language of love is a necessary adjustment to a “male-mediated” discourse. See Hope Parisi, “Discourse and Danger: Women’s Heroism in the Bible and Dalila’s Self-Defense,” in Spokesperson Milton: Voices in Contemporary Criticism, Edited by Charles W. Durham and Kristin Pruitt (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1994), 265-66.
“inchanting voice” and “honied words,” is not lost in Handel’s version. However, Handel’s and Hamilton’s Dalila is also confined to certain modes of discourse and tropes of the musical stage. Hamilton in the libretto for Samson drastically simplifies Dalila’s vocabulary but does so in a way that leaves intact the primacy of her voice. Her voice remains central to interpretation of the scene: it undergoes a change in register (intellectual to sensory) rather than a fundamental alteration in character. Hamilton does condense Dalila’s verbal aspect, but certain retained phrases such as “hear me” and the concept of Dalila as an enchantress who works through “warbling charms” gain impressive musical dimensions—these brief words, when allied with Handel’s setting, carry many layers of meaning.

Structurally, Dalila’s scene is one of the most overtly operatic in the oratorio. Dean and Joncus have both compared Dalila’s scene to dance, emphasizing how different dance meters contribute to her characterization, however, Dalila has operatic roots as well, especially considering the prominence of her voice. Whereas one of the distinctions between opera seria and English oratorio is the predominance of the chorus in the latter, Dalila’s scene lacks choruses, with the exception of her “virgin train.” (This chorus of virgins, however, serves a different purpose than the Israelite or even Philistine choruses because its singers sing in unison and serve mainly to echo and amplify Dalila’s voice. Handel’s famous choral counterpoint is noticeably absent here.) The scene is organized into recitative, airs, and duets, the typical configurations of opera seria. Dalila’s airs do not allow for as much ornamentation by the singer.

107 Dean calls part of Dalila’s scene “a curiously built rondo sequence, in which Dalila’s B minor air ‘My faith and truth’ becomes first a duet…and then a unison chorus, in which form it alternates with a second air for Dalila in D Major (‘To fleeting pleasures’), distinguished by its flippant Scotch snaps. The Minuet rhythm of the B minor sections, the light accompaniment with its many echoes, and the hypnotic effect of the continual alternation suggest not merely the stage but the ballet—an erotic dance of enchantment meant to ensnare Samson’s senses.” (Dean 340) Joncus notes that “dance forms are extremely common in Baroque composition” but that dance is especially important for Dalila: she has a minuet, a bourree, and the piece with a “Scotch snap,” all of which, according to Joncus, resonate with Kitty Clive’s recent role in a production of Thomas Arne’s adaptation of Comus (Joncus, “Handel at Drury Lane” 222).
as pure Italian opera would, but the organization of the scene nonetheless points to opera seria, a
genre in which the singer and vocal athletics were dominant.

This subtle structural nod to Italian opera hints that the focus of the scene will be the
voice of an individual singer. Significantly, Dalila is a soprano, one of the voice types favored
by opera seria composers. Her voice type makes her stand out against Samson, who, as a tenor,
represents a departure from the conventional casting of castrati in the heroic roles in opera seria.
Also, the particular soprano cast as Dalila in Samson’s 1743 premiere was Kitty Clive, an
English singer known for roles that parodied the conventions of Italian opera. Clive was one
of the “goddesses from farces” that Walpole referred to in his 1743 letter about Samson; in a
different letter less than a year earlier, he had included observations on a Drury Lane farce “in
which Mrs. Clive mimics the Muscovita admirably, and Beard [who sang Samson], Amorevoli
tolerably.” Here, both John Beard and Kitty Clive, Handel’s Samson and Dalila, are portrayed
as English farce-actors who exploit the ridiculous qualities of Italian opera to mock its stars, but
Clive is the one who carries this farce over into the oratorio.

Eighteenth-century listeners, along with their familiarity with Mrs. Clive, would have
been aware of the operatic tropes that distinguished Dalila. When Dalila is treated as an opera
character, Hamilton’s drastic simplification of Milton’s words is logical and seems to align with
some of the contemporary perceptions of opera seria. Italian opera, as will be recalled, was
subject to harsh criticism as a “mindless” form of entertainment despite its popularity, as few
people could understand the words. Opera was also associated with the vices of Italy and

108 Joncus, “Handel at Drury Lane.”
109 Deutsch, Documentary Biography, 549.
110 Ibid., 219. Joncus focuses on Kitty Clive’s public persona and attributes Hamilton’s cuts to Milton’s text
as an attempt to fit the part to Clive, calling the Dalila of the oratorio “an otherwise inexplicably Clive-esque
character.”
irrational fears that foreign singers would use music to promulgate their Papist ideals. Appropriately, Dalila is a pagan character attempting to exert her elaborate vocal “charms” on a figure associated with upright but besieged Christian spirituality. Moreover, her music is just as enticing as that of the popular Italian style even if her words are more “mindless” than in Milton’s original. Dalila’s use of operatic tropes may have subtly warned audiences to beware of these charms, and to not take her entreaties seriously even though (or perhaps because) they dominated the second act and were accompanied by some of the most intoxicating music in Handel’s score.

Because of Dalila’s verbal complexity in *Samson Agonistes*, her most dangerous request in Milton’s drama is for Samson to “hear [her]” (SA 766). Even with his alterations, Hamilton preserves these words in the oratorio libretto, and Handel sets them to create layers of rich musical meaning. As in Milton’s drama, both words and music in the oratorio focus on the capabilities of the voice, which in Dalila’s case can be interpreted either as a genuine mechanism of pleading or a versatile tool of deception. Hamilton and Handel transform Dalila’s plea into a sequence consisting of a recitative followed by airs, duets, and choruses that rapidly alternate between different styles and sentiments and thus parallel her many forms of excuses in Milton’s version.

Significantly, Hamilton minimizes Dalila’s guilt in the libretto text while Handel intensifies the possibility for her guilt and duplicity in the music. Dalila’s recitative before her central air makes no mention of her guilt, although it adopts the same resolutions as Milton’s drama:

> Forgive what’s done, nor think of what’s past Cure;  
> From forth this Prison-House come home to me,

---

Where with redoubled Love, and nursing Care,
(To me glad Office!) my Virgins and myself
Shall tend about thee to extremest Age.  

Here, Hamilton preserves the original blank verse structure (if not Milton’s original wording) in the recitative, conveniently referencing the group of “Virgins” who will constitute a sudden vocal presence in the following air. This air contains barely any verbal connections to Milton:

My Faith and Truth, O Samson, prove;
But hear me, hear the Voice of Love;
With Love no Mortal can be cloy’d,
All Happiness is Love enjoy’d...

The only words in this air that appear in Milton’s text are “Hear me” (or “hear her” when echoed by the second soprano soloist and chorus). Milton’s Dalila states these words as a preface for her elaborate justifications of betrayal: “Yet hear me Samson; not that I endeavor/ To lessen or extenuate my offence,/ But that… I may, if possible thy pardon find” (SA 766-771). Here, Dalila acknowledges her guilt and begs for Samson’s patience in listening to her. Hamilton’s version eliminates references to Dalila’s “offence,” still allowing Dalila to directly address her husband but substituting declarations of her “Faith and Truth” for mentions of her transgression. Along with these interpolated principles of constancy, Hamilton retains the phrase “hear me.”

However, the single instance of the words as printed in the text of Dalila’s air is misleading as to the actual effect of these words when set to music. The words “hear me,” repeated over and over in Handel’s setting, draw attention to the voice and become Dalila’s haunting, perpetual refrain. The air has an instrumental introduction, but when Dalila sings her first entrance (the first two lines of the air in the libretto), she sings a capella. Thus, a song with a text about the voice is introduced by a musical setting that prioritizes voice over

---

113 Hamilton, 13.
114 Ibid. This air shares a key (D minor) with the soprano aria “Then free from sorrow” in the Philistine festival scene; both are also in triple meter and have similar melodic lines.
accompaniment. The voice-oriented text also drives the distribution of music: when she first sings through the air alone, Dalila says the words “hear me” ten times. The first two times, Dalila sings the text as written in the libretto (“hear me, hear the voice of love”), but Handel at several points drops the qualifying phrase, setting the simpler “hear me” in sequences. In these sequences, made up of short, one-bar phrases, Dalila sings “hear me” in a descending line, without accompaniment. Each time these words appear in such a configuration in the vocal line, the orchestra continues the descending line in the same rhythm in the following bar. Here, Handel foregrounds Dalila’s voice, sounding a forceful plea in the a capella passages but gaining valuable reinforcement from the instrumental echoes.115

Dalila’s voice gains importance as the air progresses, magnified by the forces of a second soprano (who takes the place of the orchestral echoes in the second run of the air) and eventually a chorus of virgins. The accompaniment is very sparse during the passage with two sopranos, played primarily by continuo. The instrumental texture thickens again when the chorus joins in, but only after all of the sopranos have sung the original lines (“Her faith and truth O Samson prove,/ but hear her, hear the voice of love”) in unison. This gradual amplification of vocal forces, all singing Dalila’s text, steadily builds upon the already strong presence of Dalila’s voice, making it a nearly indisputable authority by the end of the song.

However, Handel incorporates musical hints that Dalila, in spite of her vocal purity and power, may not be entirely sincere. This sequence of air, duet, and chorus (“My faith and truth”), delivered in a solemn, almost religious style, is briskly interrupted by Dalila’s next aria, “To fleeting pleasures make your court.” Significantly, “To fleeting pleasures” is in D Major, the relative major of B minor (the key of the preceding chorus).116 While this close key

116 Ibid., 143-147.
relationship is on one level a transitional technique allowing Handel to alter the mood of the new aria without a jarring tonal shift, it also suggests that the roots of Dalila’s new, more hedonistic sentiments were concealed behind the penitent, wifely façade of “My faith and truth.” Handel’s Dalila is more direct in this air than Milton’s Dalila, communicating through imperatives rather than gentle, wily suggestions:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{To fleeting Pleasures make your Court,} \\
\text{No Moment lose, for Life is short;} \\
\text{The present Now’s our only time,} \\
\text{The missing That our only Crime.} \\
\text{How charming is domestick Ease!} \\
\text{A thousand ways I’ll strive to please;} \\
\text{Life is not lost, tho’ lost your Sight,} \\
\text{Let other Senses taste Delight.}
\end{align*}
\]

Hamilton transforms the main message of Dalila’s speech into a boisterous carpe diem poem, communicated in rhyming tetrameter couplets. The tetrameter, however is disrupted by a different rhythm in Handel’s music—sixteenths and dotted eighths that vividly express Dalila’s flightiness. This is the “Scotch snap” that musicologists have cited as evidence for the dance- or ballad-like qualities of the scene; this rhythm, along with the shift to major key, is responsible for creating the dizzying sense of transition that Milton gives us when Dalila jumps from excuse to excuse in Samson Agonistes. The dotted rhythms make Dalila’s mention of “fleeting pleasures” musically palpable, transferring the meaning from Dalila’s words to the manner in which she sings them.

117 Hamilton, 13-14.
118 Revard dismisses this “shameless carpe diem,” but it is one of the instances where Handel’s music and Hamilton’s text work most effectively together. Also, this air, Dalila’s final solo piece, seems to stand in opposition to the chorus of Israelites that concludes Act I. This Israelite chorus is adapted from “On Time” (Hamilton, 9) and maintains Milton’s words about leaving behind “earthy grossness” and “Triumphing over Death…and Thee, O Time” (Milton, “On Time,” 22-23). In contrast, Dalila’s air indicates that she is tied to “earthy grossness” and lives for the moment without looking towards the eternal time that the Israelites expect with their allegiance to God. This pairing, along with Dalila’s operatic characteristics, suggests her immorality while still allowing her to present a musically convincing character.
These aural effects lend to Dalila a vocal presence that reinforces the already strong musical reign of the Philistines from Act I. Although Hamilton’s text transforms several of Milton’s more subtly-turned phrases into platitudes in this scene—“The present Now’s our only time,” “How charming is domestick ease!”—these generalized sentiments are at home in an air drawing from conventions of popular dance and sung by a lighthearted soprano. This air is followed by a reprise of “Faith and Truth” by the chorus of virgins, returning to the minor and enveloping this song of praise to pleasure with the more solemn strains of Dalila’s love song. Through this musical structure, Hamilton’s flattened Dalila regains some of the dangerous versatility of Milton’s character and demonstrates that she can employ “Tongue-batteries” just as varied and effective as those of her literary predecessor. Arguably, Handel’s audience should be just as careful as Milton’s Samson to “fence [their] ears” against such convincing musical “sorcery.”

Dalila’s first air (“With plaintive Notes”), is also very operatic in nature; although this piece lacks the traditional operatic da capo, it contains multiple ornaments and trills (if anything, the musical embodiment of “warbling charms”), allowing the soprano to showcase her vocal skills. As with “To fleeting pleasures” and “My faith and truth,” Hamilton has a tendency to excise and generalize with his text. Hamilton converts Milton’s lines describing Dalila sitting “at home…full of cares and fears,/ Wailing thy absence in [her] widowed bed” (SA 105-106) to a

119 This combination of solemnity and pleasure-seeking marks the Philistine festivals as well. It is sometimes unclear whether they praise Dagon or “song and dance” itself (also see final Philistine festival below).

120 This air, another rondo, was sung in the initial performance by one of Dalila’s attendants and given to Dalila in subsequent performances because of casting cuts (See Handel, Samson: New Novello Edition, 124-130, for air; see vi-viii for different performance versions of oratorio). Dean conjectures that the air was originally meant for Dalila, and I treat it here as Dalila’s because of images borrowed from Dalila’s lines in Samson Agonistes. This positioning as a “diversionary” air brings Dalila’s scene even closer to contemporary Italian opera, as it was the custom of composers and singers to insert airs to display the powers of an individual vocalist. Here, Handel and Hamilton seem to reach a compromise between the freedom of Italian opera (for the vocalist) and the more rigid structure of English oratorio since Hamilton’s text resonates with Milton’s but nonetheless seems slightly out of context.
generalized trope of a turtledove “left alone,” “averse to each Delight/ [Wearing] the tedious widow’d Night.”

This image is reminiscent of the lyrics for the aria “As when the dove” from Handel’s pastoral masque *Acis and Galatea* (with text assembled by John Gay) decades earlier, and, combined with the operatic qualities of the air, seems to designate Dalila as the property of musical styles more secular than oratorio. Such a combination recalls the fears of moralists that oratorio in the theatres represented a dangerous mix of the sacred and the secular. While the enchanting violin ritornello and vocal trills give the listener an indication of Dalila’s vocal beauty (and arrest the hearer’s attention with the change in texture from orchestra to solo instrument), this air is little more than a display of her charms compared to the sequence (“Faith and Truth,” “Fleeting pleasures”) that follows it. Dalila’s elaborate, reasoned, argument in *Samson Agonistes* regarding her wishes to keep Samson as “Mine and Loves prisoner” (SA 808) in Handel’s and Hamilton’s hands becomes a conventionalized opera aria.

Despite its conventionality, Dalila’s air is musically enticing; interestingly, the simplification and conventionalization of Dalila’s character could still appeal to moral critics of music. In his treatise arguing for the reform of church music, William Hughes, the same critic who applauded Handel’s oratorios generally as a “strong Species of Church-Musick” but made no distinction between the Philistine and Israelite choruses, finds much to admire in *Samson*’s airs, calling them “not only pleasing but Spirituoso.” Strangely, Dalila’s music makes the elite list of this spiritual-minded music reformer. According to Hughes, “*With plaintive Notes &. Is Nature it self [sic]. My Faith and Truth &c. is an inimitable Duet.*”

---

121 Hamilton, 12.
124 Ibid., 41.
125 Ibid.
“Nature” and “sense” was one of the standards of quality for baroque composers, and Hughes, after fifty pages of criticizing composers as eminent as Purcell and Tallis in lively (and often bitter) detail, finds the perfect union of sound and sense in the air of a Handelian Philistine. Handel’s music in “With plaintive Notes” does contain admirable instances of text-painting and tone color to match Hamilton’s words (most notably the floating violin interacting with the lyrics about the dove and the trills in the vocal line suggesting the “cooing” of the bird), and Hughes’ unlikely praise suggests that the Handel-Hamilton Dalila had the potential to triumph over any type of listener with her voice.

Dalila never lets her vocal power lag, and her encounter with Samson in the oratorio ends in a feisty duet, “Traitor to Love,” another piece reminiscent of opera. Samson insists that he’ll “hear no more the charmer’s voice,”126 a line repeated multiple times and set in opposition to Dalila’s declaration that she will “sue no more for pardon scorned.”127 Significantly, the couple’s final words to each other reference voice and verbal argument, and they are carried by an allegro musical setting with a rapid sixteenth-note accompaniment in the strings, which allows the slower vocal rhythms (predominantly eighth notes with heavy downbeats) to stand out forcefully. At the conclusion of the duet, Dalila storms off abruptly, and there is no break between the duet and the following recitative from Micah to allow her any more opportunities of exerting her “warbling charms.”

Dalila provoked this final confrontation with Samson by ending her last recitative with the lines, “My Praises shall be sung at solemn Feasts,/ Who sav’d my Country from a fierce Destroyer.”128 These lines echo Milton’s Dalila, who brags that she “shall be nam’d among the famousest/ Of women, sung at solemn festivals,/ Living and dead recorded” (SA 982-985), but

---

126 Hamilton, 14.
128 Hamilton, 14.
they also act as a center-point in the oratorio between the opening scene depicting the Philistine festival to Dagon and the concluding scene in which the Israelites celebrate Samson’s life and sacrifice. Dalila, the “warbling” enchantress, remains a character anchored in the voice, whose deeds must be “sung” as a form of remembrance; although she has lost the ability to enthrall Samson, she can still charm oratorio audiences and win over listeners of varying viewpoints.

However, Dalila’s ties to opera, while dependent on this same voice, make her as morally ambiguous as her Miltonic counterpart, and Handel’s playful treatment of varying styles of music warns the wary listener of the dangers of her charms. Crucially, Dalila is not the character whose “Praises shall be sung” at the end of the oratorio—this honor goes instead to Samson, and Handel enlists a different soprano for the task, while Hamilton draws the text from Milton’s “At a solemn Musick.” Although Dalila is at the center of the oratorio, she is ultimately as “fleeting” a presence as the text of her airs suggest and as undependable as the manner in which she shifts from style to style in her music. Handel and Hamilton will soon reclaim the moral authority for the side of the Israelites, replacing Dalila’s operatic interlude with the full force of a chorus, trumpets, and all of the musical and verbal glories of a “solemn” religious festival.
IV. Death Cries and “Immortal Harps”

The Philistines soon have occasion to pick up on Dalila’s hortatory “hear me,” when, confronting their demise, they collectively utter a frantic prayer to Dagon. One of the most shocking departures from Samson Agonistes in the Handel-Hamilton Samson is this portrayal of Philistine terror that comes when Samson destroys the Philistine theatre. In Samson Agonistes, this dramatic climax, as with the mentions of the Philistine festival at the beginning, happens “offstage,” conveyed through secondhand reports alone. Like the Philistine festival in the oratorio, however, the Philistine destruction is vividly portrayed in Handel’s musical setting.
Significantly, the destruction scene marks the place where vocal and musical control begins to be returned to the Israelites, preparing the ground for the final festival.

In Samson Agonistes, the death of the Philistines presents an eerie dramatic blank. At the moment of crisis, Manoa exclaims at a “hideous noise” and the chorus returns his worry, fearing “blood, death, and deathful deeds”:

MANOA: I know your friendly minds and—O what noise!
Mercy of Heav’n what hideous noise was that!
Horribly loud unlike the former shout.

CHORUS: Noise call you it or universal groan
As if the whole inhabitation perish’d… (SA 1508-1512)

Although this sound of “ruin” and “destruction” startles the listening Israelites and immediately becomes the all-consuming topic of conversation, the noise itself goes unrepresented in Milton’s dramatic texture. This absence is yet another episode in which Milton minimizes the Philistine presence through dramatic form, confining them to offhand references made by other characters at the most crucial moments. We are given some opportunity to pity them and question Samson’s pernicious act of mass-murder and self-murder; even the Israelites call Samson’s
revenge “dearly-bought” (1660) although it was of “dire necessity” (1666). Louis Schwartz stresses the ambiguities of the conclusion of *Samson Agonistes*, noting that even the Israelites are distressed by Samson’s tactics when they hear the messenger’s report.\(^\text{129}\) But the shout remains un-rendered on the page, distancing the reader from acts of interpretive sympathy. Looking at the libretto alone, this blankness would seem to be upheld in the oratorio. The messenger’s report and description of Samson’s self-destruction are substantially abbreviated in Hamilton’s text. Hamilton preserves the line “*Gaza yet stands, but all her Sons are fall’n*,”\(^\text{130}\) but he condenses the description of Samson’s ambiguously prayer-like motions and final actions to the lines “*Unwounded of his Enemies he fell,/ At once he did destroy, and was destroy’d./ The Edifice, where all were met to see,/ Upon their Heads, and on his own he pull’d.*”\(^\text{131}\) However, it is important to keep in mind, as has been demonstrated with the Philistine festival and Dalila’s scene, that the Philistines are primarily a musical race in the milieu of the oratorio. To experience their presence at its fullest, one must investigate their music along with their text.

Upon examination of their music, it is apparent that a description of their slaughter by Samson is not lacking entirely. On the contrary, it exists all the more vividly through Handel’s setting. Moreover, the Philistine terror, not Samson’s heroism, is the focal point in Handel’s version.

Music remains a Philistine ally in Act III of the oratorio, and their festival is musically represented, notwithstanding the libretto’s instructions that these passages are to be heard “from a distance.” Handel portrays aurally what can only be mentally reconstructed in Milton’s drama by the messenger. Following a gloating but mildly uneasy air and chorus, “*Great Dagon has subdu’d our Foe,*” (and, towards the end of the previous act, another round of Philistine revels in

\(^{129}\) Schwartz, “Nightmare of History,” 203.

\(^{130}\) Hamilton, 25.

\(^{131}\) Ibid., 26.
the air “To song and dance we give the day”\(^{132}\), Manoa’s dialogue with the Chorus (and Micah) is interrupted by the Philistines’ screams, just as it is in _Samson Agonistes_. Manoa’s words are taken almost verbatim from the source text here. But where Milton inserts a dash, leaving a moment for Manoa to scream in surprise, Hamilton and Handel weave in an intense musical interlude, conveying the scene of Philistine annihilation firsthand:

```
MANOA: I know your friendly Minds, and ----
[A Symphony here of Horror and Confusion.]
Heav’n! what Noise?
Horribly loud, unlike the former Shout.
Chorus of Philistines at a Distance:

Hear us, our God! O hear our Cry!
Death! Ruin! fall’n! no Help is nigh:
O Mercy, Heav’n! we sink! we die!\(^{133}\)
```

Here, the killings at the Philistine festival have been elevated from a textual blank into a “Symphony…of Horror and Confusion,” which forcefully interrupts Manoa’s line and intrudes with a dramatic G minor interlude before he can even continue to question the noise. This orchestral passage, a presto full of furious dotted rhythms, descending sixteenth-note scales, and descending chromatic lines, creates an auditory image of the falling pillars and chaos that now prevails at the festival. It builds in intensity, breaking off for a mere three bars, where Manoa is allowed to finish his exclamations in a recitative even more paltry than that of Samson before the opening Philistine festival.

```
Although Manoa’s exclamations presumably occurs after the shouts of terror in _Samson Agonistes_, the Philistine torment has just begun when Manoa concludes his recitative in _Samson_. As he pauses, the orchestral pattern of descending scales and dotted rhythms picks up once
```

\(^{132}\) For these two numbers, see Handel, _Samson: New Novello Edition_, 235-245 and 188-199.
\(^{133}\) Hamilton., 24.
again, and this time the chorus joins. Here, the simple emotions of grief and fear take over; although the Israelites will soon occupy the moral high ground, for one horrifying interlude, no one is exempt from the “universal groan” of death. Appropriately, Handel’s contemporary James Harris saw music as most effective in imitating human sound when it was used to portray feelings of grief: “...In the Human Kind, [music] can also imitate some Motions (i) and Sounds (k); and of Sounds those most perfectly, which are expressive of Grief and Anguish (l).”¹³⁴ Note l, in which Harris explains this correlation by arguing that “this Species of Musical Imitation [grief] most nearly approaches Nature,” highlights Handel with an example parallel to the Philistine anguish in Samson. Harris points out that grief “declares itself by Sounds, which are not unlike to long Notes in the Chromatic System. Of this kind is the Chorus of Baal’s Priests in the Oratorio of Deborah, Doleful Tidings, how ye wound, &c.”¹³⁵ “Doleful tidings,” another Handelian episode of heathen defeat, resonates both musically and textually with the final Philistine chorus of Samson, employing the nearly Miltonic line “Despair and death are in that sound” and similar intervals and rhythms in Handel’s music as are in the final Philistine chorus.¹³⁶ This correlation suggests that Handel had a specific musical language for addressing grief, and that he could portray even heathen grief with an astounding poignancy. What is most notable here, however, is that Harris chooses to use a pagan chorus to highlight a grief that is, at the most fundamental level, universally human and universally musical. Whatever defeat the Philistines might be facing, this combination of characteristics ensures that they cannot be dismissed as characters or sympathetic voices on the level of human feeling.

¹³⁴ Harris, 66-67.
¹³⁵ Ibid., 67.
¹³⁶ For the words of this chorus, see Humphreys, Deborah libretto, Public Domain Opera Libretti and Other Vocal Texts, Stanford University, http://opera.stanford.edu/du/libretti/deborah.htm.
Until the very end, the Philistines remain a magnetic musical presence, and they once again draw additional attention to their voices through text. They engage in a desperate act of prayer, pleading for their God to “Hear [them].” This request was last heard in the oratorio with Dalila, when her voice was magnified through sparse accompaniment patterns and the layered voices of her virgin attendants. Here, Handel employs a similar voice-layering tactic, and the text has been broadened from Dalila’s plea to Samson into a plea on the part of the entire Philistine race to their God. The chorus is in four parts, and the basses are the first to voice this request, followed by the tenors a bar later and the sopranos and altos after another two bars. All four parts sing the words “Hear us, our God” on the same rhythmic pattern, a half note followed by two quarters and another half note (except for when the tenors and basses each interject another “hear us” in between their entrances). The result is a long, sustained cry atop a busy orchestral texture, made up of many voices and followed by more clipped vocalizations of words such as “Death!” “ruin!” and “No help is nigh.”

The Philistines’ words become increasingly incoherent and short as their music becomes increasingly frantic. While they remain focused on their voices, begging for godly assistance, they become muted as this musical number draws to a close. The lines “we sink, we die” are divided up among voice parts to musically illustrate this sinking through a descending line, and the separation of the vocal parts and the brief, quarter-note statements of these two-word clauses indicate the imminent destruction of the Philistines as a group. A dramatic falling off of dynamics, underscored by the same chromatic line in the orchestra, accompanies their final gasping of the line “O, we die.” The Philistine voices have finally been silenced, and listeners are left on a weak, unison G in the strings—all that remains of the Philistines’ former musical vibrancy. The Philistines have not easily yielded their place in the musical hierarchy of the

---

oratorio. But their god has apparently not listened to their request for him to “hear.” Although listeners may pity the Philistines at this climactic moment or be moved by the thrills contained in the “Symphony of horror and confusion,” their mass deaths could imply that their music and voices were only superficially effective.

From this point of the oratorio onwards, Hamilton and Handel gradually start to employ music, the Philistines’ greatest weapon, to purge their importance. The Israelites have their first reference to music-making after Samson’s death, when Micah suggests that they go find his body and “lay it in its Monument, hung round/ With all his Trophies, and great Acts enroll’d/ In Verse Heroick, or sweet Lyrick Song.” Manoa agrees, further hoping that the “valiant Youth” of Israel will be inspired to “matchless Valor, whilst they sing [Samson’s] praise.” These references to “Lyrick Song” and the potential of Samson’s memory to “inflame” valiant feelings in other young men are drawn exactly from Manoa’s lines in *Samson Agonistes* (1736-1740) but split into a dialogue between Manoa and Micah in Hamilton’s libretto. These lines recall the popular idea, prevalent in both Milton’s time and Handel’s, that music could cultivate the proper moral sentiments and inspire bravery or virtue in its listeners. Similar ideas have been relevant in the preceding discussions of the Philistines in the context of music and immorality (or at least moral emptiness); thus, it is useful to note here that the first reference to Israelite musicianship also has a practical moral application. More importantly, the Israelites, whose choruses have so far been dominated by laments and searching prayers, immediately follow through on their resolution to immortalize and celebrate Samson through song.

138 Hamilton, 27.
139 Ibid.
At the conclusion of *Samson*, with its triumphant soprano solo and chorus, invoking choirs of angels wielding “immortal harps,” the Israelites are allowed to acknowledge and reclaim music. Thus, it is also the point where they finally wrest moral control away from their Philistine enemies. Ruth Smith has argued that the final chorus of *Samson* is “not dramatically prepared for or appropriate to the tragic climax, but [makes] a final resounding assertion that God cares for his people.”[^140] Although Smith makes this argument in the context of eighteenth-century aesthetics and standards of epic (particularly referring to “Addison’s demand that the conclusion [of epic] leave the reader in ‘a state of Tranquility and Satisfaction’”[^141]), the final chorus of *Samson* is notable beyond fulfilling a literary formula. Arguably, the seeds of this jarring shift from grief to celebration is present in *Samson Agonistes* with Manoa’s consolatory speech and the chorus’ concluding speech, expressing plans to celebrate their hero following his death (even if they end ambiguously with their “passion spent” and not with the “endless Blaze of Light” that their counterparts in the oratorio enjoy). Schwartz, in the context of Milton’s original work, also views the final celebration as forced and notes how Milton ends *Samson Agonistes* “with a considerable amplification of this final celebration [but that the] horror [of the Philistine destruction] remains…in the language of the final celebration itself.”[^142] This “final celebration” of *Samson Agonistes* is additionally disconcerting through the manner in which it echoes and balances the earlier actions of the Philistines. In the last speech of the chorus, they indicate that now “Gaza mourns,” a parallel that cancels out the jubilant Gaza referenced in the opening lines. Furthermore, Manoa describes future tributes to Samson in language almost identical to Dalila’s assertion that she will be “sung at solemn festivals…[her] tomb/ With

[^140]: Smith, *Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 129.
[^141]: Ibid.
[^142]: Schwartz, “Nightmare of History,” 203.
odours visited and annual flowers” (SA 983-987). Funeral becomes festival in the minds of both the Philistines and the Israelites.

These parallels between the pagans and the pious are musically and dramatically reinforced in the conclusion of the Handel-Hamilton Samson, which preserves both the forceful Israelite celebration and its lingering ambiguities. Significantly, in the last act of the oratorio, “solemnity” in its musical context finally graces the Israelite people. Manoa requests his fellow Israelites to “solemnly attend [Samson] to my Tomb,” a phrase that is partially present in Samson Agonistes but is in the oratorio soon intensified by the inclusion of text from “At a solemn Musick” to celebrate Samson’s life and actions. Dalila had claimed this type of “solemn” posthumous celebration for herself in Act II; in Act III, however, Samson is mourned by a chorus of virgins and earns back all of the musical forces—complete with trumpets and soprano soloists—that belonged to the Philistines in their opening festival. The Israelite funeral festival is both an echo and a counterbalance to the Philistine celebration of Act I.

One of the most important Philistine parallels in the Israelites’ funerary celebration is Hamilton’s incorporation of Miltonic musical text, this time used to elevate the Israelites. Handel and Hamilton end their oratorio with a solo and chorus, “Let the bright seraphim,” its words drawn from Milton’s “At a solemn Musick.” Significantly, Handel had been longing to set this text for some time and had originally planned to incorporate it into his ode based on L’Allegro and Il Penseroso. Luckily for Samson’s Israelites, however, this earlier adaptation of the poem did not happen, and “At a solemn Musick” became the basis for their final chorus.

---

143 Hamilton, 27.
144 Although Handel intended for an instrumental “Dead March” to be performed at this point, it was not performed in the oratorio until 1749 and was then substantially borrowed from Saul. See Handel, Samson: New Novello Edition, xii; also see Donald Burrows, “Handel, the Dead March and a newly identified trombone movement,” Early Music vol. 18, no. 3 (1990): 408-416.
Milton’s original poem begins with a request to the “Sphere-borne harmonious sisters, Voice and Verse” to use their “mixed power” to create heavenly music, but the text from the section that Hamilton and Handel adopt is a description of a heavenly scene, a place

Where the bright Seraphim in burning row  
Their loud uplifted angel-trumpets blow,  
And the Cherubic host in thousand choirs  
Touch their immortal harps of golden wires.\textsuperscript{146}

The speaker looks forward to when people, rising above “disproportioned sin,” can experience a day when God will “To his celestial consort us unite,/ To live with him and sing in endless morn of light.”\textsuperscript{147} Throughout this poem, Milton addresses religion and music in analogous terms, and one of the work’s most effective features is the manner in which music and divinity are nearly indistinguishable both syntactically and at the level of individual words. Music is made up of “divine sounds;” a state of innocence is equivalent to “perfect diapason” in music; salvation and the act of “sing[ing] in an endless morn of light” are one and the same.

Hamilton and Handel, too, collapse music-making into the divine in their oratorio, but they have the added benefit of a musical medium to give life to the harmonies described in Milton’s words. The words themselves also change slightly, and in Hamilton’s version, Milton’s heavenly description becomes an active request:

\begin{quote}
GRAND CHORUS:  
\textit{Let the bright Seraphims in burning Row,}  
\textit{Their loud, up-lifted Angel-Trumpets blow:}  
\textit{Let the Cherubick Host, in tuneful Choirs,}  
\textit{Touch their immortal Harps with golden Wires:}  
\textit{Let their coelestial Concerts all unite,}  
\textit{Ever to sound his Praise in endless Blaze of Light.}\textsuperscript{148}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{146} Milton, “At a solemn Musick,” 10-13.  
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 19, 27-28.  
\textsuperscript{148} Hamilton, 28.
In the score, the first four lines belong to the soprano soloist, while the last two lines, adapted from the final couplet of the original poem, belong to the chorus. Like the Philistine psalms in the opening scene, the text of “Let the bright seraphim” is constituted from a series of commands. But while this sort of order for festive music was already existent in the psalm and merely switched in context to apply to Dagon in the earlier scene, Hamilton has here altered the words of “At a solemn Musick” to deliberately incorporate this sense of order. In Hamilton’s adaptation, the Israelites are not simply dreaming of such a heavenly scene—they are creating it for themselves. Even before the music is added, Hamilton changes certain words to intensify the musical experience as conveyed through the verbal dimension alone. The “thousand choirs,” already majestic in Milton’s version, become “tuneful Choirs” in Hamilton’s; here, without diminishing Milton’s majesty, Hamilton makes the text even more explicitly musical. “Morn” is also elevated to “blaze,” bringing the Israelite search for spiritual light into this triumphant musical finale and allowing their visual language to be absorbed and magnified by this valedictory musical display.

The texture of Handel’s setting of “Let the bright seraphim” underscores this musical and spiritual initiative on the part of the Israelites. However, surface-level parallels with the Philistine festival music remain. Although “Let the bright seraphim,” one of Handel’s most famous arias, is frequently excerpted today as a da capo aria, the original air does not follow this Italian-inspired structure. After the B minor second section, instead of going into a recapitulation of the A section as in modern excerpted performances, the soprano soloist in the oratorio is joined by a chorus singing “Let their celestial concerts,” once again in the key of D

---

149 See Handel, Samson: New Novello Edition, 268-279. This page range includes the measure numbers referred to in following discussion.
150 Hamilton’s 1743 libretto text and Burrows’ New Novello Choral edition of Samson both use the form “Seraphims;” due to the familiarity of this piece in modern performance contexts as “Let the Bright Seraphim,” I will refer to it in this form here.
Major. Fascinatingly, D Major is the key that was used for “Ye men of Gaza” in the opening Philistine festival. This Philistine air was performed in the original production by the same soprano as “Let the bright seraphim,” who in each number would have to demonstrate significant breath control and coloratura facility. The D Major-B minor exchange is also a device Dalila employed as she tried to convince Samson of her charms. D Major is a celebratory, martial key often associated with trumpets, which suits it in a practical sense to the opening and closing festival scenes of the oratorio, but it is impossible not to notice the musical and verbal parallels conjured by Handel’s celebratory music with this key choice and by Hamilton’s texts, which, adopted from Milton, describe songs of praise.

Despite the undeniable parallels with the Philistine music, the Israelites’ concluding air and chorus are ultimately of a different musical sort than the Philistine airs and choruses. The musical texture noticeably thickens in the finale. As in “Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound,” there is a trumpet soloist engaged in this Israelite act of musical praise. But here, the trumpet and solo voice are locked into a duet for the air’s A section, and the voice functions very instrumentally, with virtuosic leaps and thrilling melismas. The soprano and trumpet echo one another, trading off an arpeggiated fanfare motive during the intervals between the soprano’s melismatic episodes, which in turn show off the voice in its most exuberant capacities. As with Dalila, Hamilton’s excision of most of Milton’s text here does not eliminate the scene’s compositional complexity. Instead, it gives Handel the freedom to set the same text of joyous worship in several ways, allowing this “Israelite Woman” soprano soloist to offer praise that, while remaining musically intricate, sounds spontaneous and genuinely expressive of spiritual excitement.

---

151 See Burrows’ editorial comments in Handel, *Samson: New Novello Edition*; also see *Samson: an Oratorio, the Words taken from Milton, Set to Musick by Mr. Handel* (London: Walsh, 1743), which has the names of the original performers printed in place of titles for the airs.
Just as Hamilton intensified the musical references of Milton’s poem by changing some of the words, Handel’s vocal line also adds to the intensity of musical experience by imitating the musical actions described in the text. Most notable in this respect is the aforementioned relationship between voice and trumpet. For example, the line “Their loud uplifted angel trumpets blow” receives several different treatments by Handel, all of which contribute to the interweaving of the human voice into the instrumental texture of the piece. The first time the soprano sings this line, it is on the arpeggiated fanfare associated with the trumpet (bars 23-24). The second time, she sings these same words on a single pitch in a pattern of two quarter notes followed by pairs of eighth notes—another motive suggesting a trumpet—before entering into a rapid scalar sixteenth-note figure. She repeats the same quarter-and-eighth rhythm again a step higher, this time entering into an extended melisma. This same text is repeated many subsequent times in a number of different musical arrangements: Handel similarly highlights other musical words such as “harps” and “wires” by setting them on long melismatic figures. Throughout this air, Handel repeatedly aligns the voice singing the words of this already musical poem with the instruments it is describing; the music and text imitate each other, assisting the Israelites in their dramatic reclamation of music for divine purposes.

Handel employs the same tactic with the chorus, using the line “Let their celestial concerts [consorts in Milton’s version] all unite” to build up the Israelites’ musical forcefulness. When the chorus enters on these words, they sing a pattern of quarters and eighths that resembles the trumpet-like second iteration of the line “Their loud uplifted angel trumpets blow” in the soprano-trumpet duet. While the four parts of the chorus weave in and out of one another in a counterpoint structure that is thicker and more complicated than those of any of the Act I Philistine choruses, they move in rhythmic unison almost every time the line about “celestial
concerts” reoccurs, maintaining the same pattern of a quarter followed by the three pairs of eighth notes on one sustained pitch. When this figure is uttered twice in a row by the chorus, as in bars 77-80 and again in 115-118, it is a capella the first time and reinforced by orchestral accompaniment the second time. At other points, namely in bars 131-132 and 141-142, the altos and tenors sing this motive and the trumpets echo them in the two following bars. The overall result is a continuing alliance of voice, orchestra, and solo trumpets, all combined in praise of God. These musical features, especially the insistent repetition of trumpet-like patterns and brilliant variations on these calls for divine music, grant the Israelites an active role in elevating themselves musically, and, by extension, morally. The choir has created its own “perfect diapason,” ending on a full-volume D Major chord, expressing the final vocalization of “light” through the very brightness of the musical texture. Unlike in Milton’s original “At a solemn Musick,” in which the speaker discusses such perfect musical concord as something that will occur in a distant, celestial future, Handel’s Israelites forcibly create their divine musical atmosphere, commanding the trumpets to sound and raising their voices to aid the effort.

The “amplification” of the final festival that Schwarz refers to in the context of Milton’s drama has here occurred in a musical context; in addition to being an attempt to erase the horrors of the Philistine annihilation, this musical celebration is also an attempt to erase their formal musical control. The Philistine musical presence, dominant for the first two acts of the oratorio, represented a danger with its use of Miltonic texts and apparently divine music for heathen purposes. Dagon was elevated with the “solemnity” that should have been attributed to God, but this concluding musical act, bringing out Handel’s fullest orchestral forces and finest compositional techniques, reassigns musical control to the Israelites, even overshadowing Samson’s dying act. Finally, at the very end of the oratorio, the act of music-making has become
directly applicable to God. This scene musically embodies the type of “solemnity” that Hamilton and eighteenth-century music critics had hoped would result from Handel’s music being “married to [the] immortal verse” of Milton.

It is this final “solemnity” and its suggestions of immortality that allow the Israelite music to truly take precedence. Although they cannot completely cancel out the memory of the melodious Philistine festival or diminish Dalila’s charms, and although this final scene is their sole musical act, the Israelites’ musical texts suggest a far greater longevity than those of the Philistines. The text of “At a solemn Musick” employs music as a metaphor for eternity, and even while Hamilton eliminates some of the description, he allows the Israelites to maintain the mentions of “immortal harps,” meant to “Ever” sound God’s praise and to contribute to an “endless” spiritual light. In contrast, the Philistine music, beautiful and potent while it lasted, was always based on transience: Dalila, in her dancelike manner, urged Samson to pay court to “fleeting pleasures,” and the earlier requests for “every tongue” to praise Dagon could only last as long as their human agents. The Israelites, instead, turn to “celestial concerts,” effectively aligning their musical references with eternity.

The question remains as to whether Samson could be considered a truly moral entertainment for eighteenth-century England. Samson, in compliance with the scriptural restrictions of eighteenth-century theatre (and Milton’s own request that Samson Agonistes was not to be brought to the stage), remained unstaged, and by depending primarily on English singers and English texts, avoided by form some of the moral problems attached to Italian opera. Constructed from such revered materials Milton’s text and Handel’s music, Samson adheres at surface level to the guidelines set forth by musical and moral critics who wanted to meld voice
and verse in edifying ways. If Samson is assessed abstractly or quantitatively based on the sources of its music and text, a more perfect combination of aesthetic elements would be impossible. But listening to the Philistine voices in Samson shows that the relationship between music and text in English oratorio was perhaps more fluid than eighteenth-century critics were willing to give it credit for. While “sublime” music and first-rate poetry were believed theoretically to merge in a doubly divine fusion, text and music could instead push against each other (or both be applied similarly in the wrong direction) in individual cases.

If Handel’s contemporary James Harris is correct in observing that music and poetry “can never be so powerful singly, as when they are properly united,”152 and that Handel’s “Genius… being itself far the sublimest and most universal now known, has justly placed him without an Equal, or a Second,”153 then Handel has—either purposely or inadvertently—rendered the poetry of the Philistines, already elevated through their source in Milton, even more “powerful” and “sublime.” The first act features a festive anthem, complete with trumpets, chorus, and a victory celebration; this is a standard sort of scene for Handelian oratorio. But upon closer investigation, the anthem, that paragon of Anglican musical worship, is being applied to a pagan deity. The scene becomes even more troubling with the addition of Milton’s psalm text, formally perfect for pious religious observances but here twisted out of context to elevate Dagon. Dalila, too, poses a moral-musical threat. She retains many characteristics of Italian opera, and although these align with the immoral tendencies of her character, Handel ensures that the audience seriously listens to her through his vocally-oriented musical setting.

These scenes render it doubtful whether Samson is a worthy moral substitute for Italian opera or a worthy use of the edifying textual and musical potential of oratorio. However, Handel

---

152 Harris, 102.
153 Ibid., 99.
leaves musical hints to guide us: the Philistine anthem is ritualistic and less complex than its Anglican analogue would be, and Dalila could be interpreted as a harmless operatic parody in the line of Kitty Clive’s English farce roles. These musical traces of vice nonetheless do not diminish the time spent on the Philistines in Samson’s musical structure or their deep alliance with music and music-making up until the oratorio’s final scene. The Philistines, in Handel’s and Hamilton’s rendering, deserve to be heard, and deserve to be heard as humans. The Israelites, when they regain musical control, must do so quite forcefully, employing the same trumpets and festive music as their enemies, and existing in a parallel state to that of their pagan antagonists at the beginning of the work. The Israelite festival has brought the oratorio full circle; although the concluding Israelite “Grand Chorus” is more impressive in scale than that of the Philistines, echoes of the Philistine festival still ring in the listener’s memory through Handel’s exultant D Major setting of the last chorus and the resonance of Milton’s musical words in this final scene with their first appearance in the parallel celebration of Act I. The Israelites have won, but they eventually find themselves dependent on the same human “voice and verse” they had to silence in order to be victorious.
Bibliography


---. “Handel, the Dead March and a newly identified trombone movement.” Early Music vol. 18, no. 3 (1990): 408-416.


Hughes, William, *Remarks upon Church Musick, To which are added Several Observations Upon some of Mr. Handel’s Oratorio’s, And other Parts of his Works*. 2nd ed. Worcester: Lewis, 1763.


Lockman, John. Rosalinda: A Musical Drama, As it is performed at Hickford’s Great Room, in Brewer’s Street…. To which is prefixed, An Enquiry into the Rise and Progress of OPERAS and ORATORIOS, with some Reflections on LYRIC POETRY and MUSIC. London: W. Strahan, 1740.


https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/on_time/text.shtml


*Samson: an Oratorio, the Words taken from Milton, Set to Musick by Mr. Handel.* London: Walsh, 1743.


