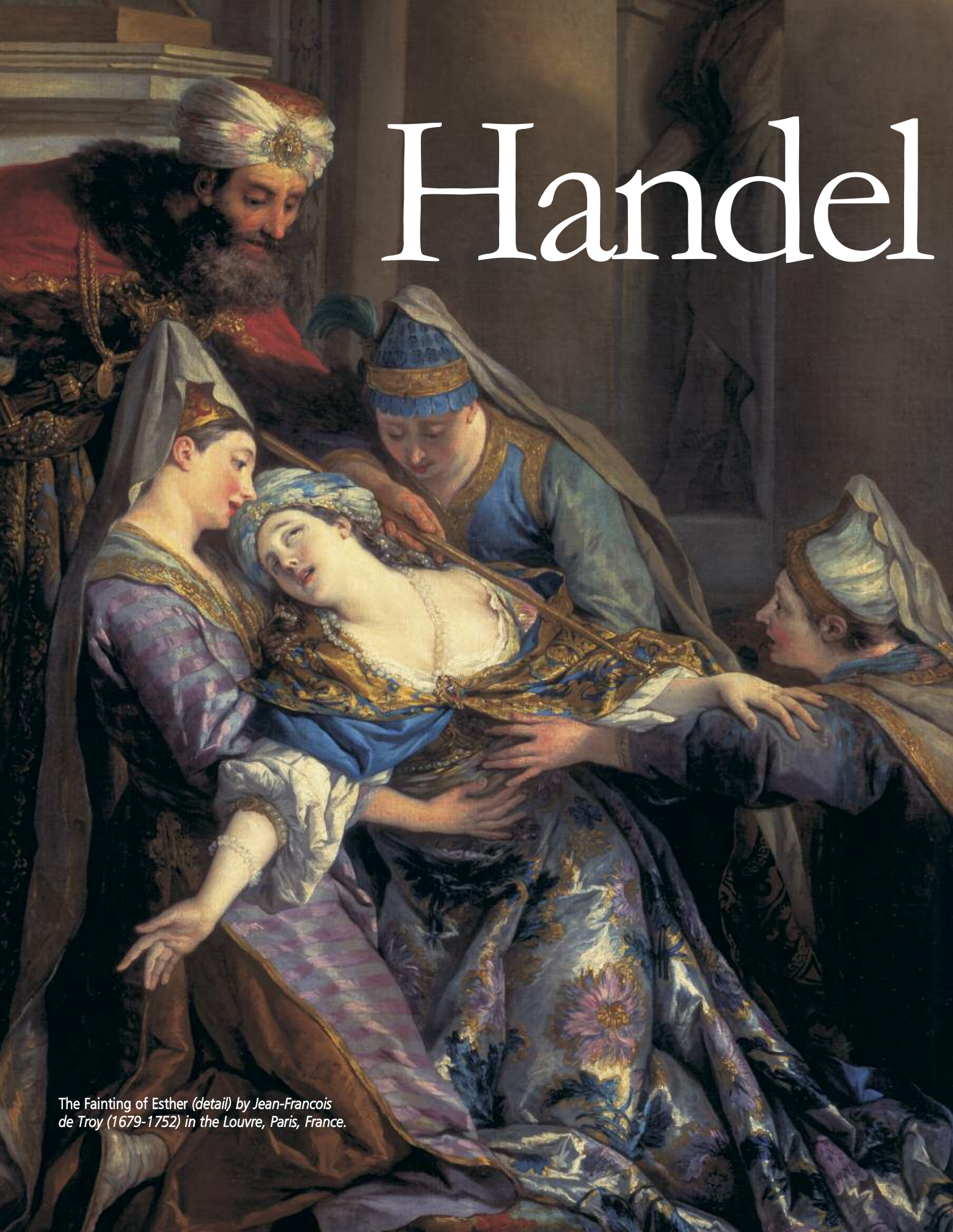


# Handel



*The Fainting of Esther (detail) by Jean-François de Troy (1679-1752) in the Louvre, Paris, France.*

# at Cannons

HANDEL CREATED his first two large-scale dramatic works with English texts, *Acis and Galatea* and *Esther*, during the brief period when he enjoyed the patronage of James Brydges (1673-1744), who was from October 1714 the Earl of Carnarvon and from April 1719 the First Duke of Chandos. Research since the composer's tercentennial in 1985 – 25 years ago – allows us to understand better the story behind the composition of these two landmark works, which will be featured at the American Handel Festival in Seattle, Washington, in March 2011 (see sidebar).

James Brydges had been Paymaster General to Queen Anne's forces abroad during the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1713), during which time he had accumulated a great fortune through dubious and almost certainly illegal means. He then invested a good deal of his fortune into converting the Tudor manor house of Cannons, near Edgware in present-day Middlesex, which he had acquired through his first wife's family, into a Palladian palace with the requisite gardens, outbuildings, and staff. Beginning in November 1715, he also began hiring musicians to make up his "Concert," starting with the cellist and composer Nicola Francesco Haym, who had previously served the Duke of Bedford. Both Brydges and his second wife, the former Cassandra Willoughby, had a genuine interest in music – he had played the flute (probably the recorder) in his youth and she had learned the harpsichord. His decision to employ a group of musicians, however, may have been dictated by his desire to live a lifestyle appropriate to his title. His decision in the spring of 1719 to expand the size of his musical ensemble and formally appoint Johann Christoph Pepusch as

his musical director was undoubtedly prompted by his acquisition of a dukedom.

Handel seems to have joined Brydges's entourage in the summer of 1717. Prior to this he had been enjoying the patronage of the young Richard Boyle, Third Earl of Burlington, and apparently living at Burlington House in London. The Earl of Burlington, like a number of young English noblemen, had returned from his Grand Tour with several Italian musicians in tow – enough to provide for regular chamber music performances. Exactly what Handel's responsibilities may have been is unclear, but he most likely lived as a sort of musician-in-residence rather than as a salaried employee. So far as can be determined, this had also been his status with the Marquis Ruspoli during his time in Rome. The Burlington circle also included the poets Alexander Pope and John Gay and their friend Dr. John Arbuthnot, the former physician to Queen Anne; Arbuthnot was also a writer.

Handel's decision to accept the patronage of Brydges in the summer of 1717 was probably related to a number of factors. In the first place, the Earl of Burlington had decided to undertake another continental visit. More importantly, the ongoing hostility between the King and the Prince of Wales had flared into open conflict culminating in November 1717 with the Prince and Princess of Wales being ejected from St. James's Palace and setting up their own rival court in Richmond. Henceforth, anyone paying court to one party was deemed *persona non grata* by the other. It was clear that the opera would not reopen for a 1717-18 season with such constraints on the members of the nobility who were its primary supporters.

The background story behind the creation of *Esther* and *Acis and Galatea*, two works to be performed at next year's American Handel Festival in Seattle

**By Graydon Beeks**



Top, George Frideric Handel as pictured in Dr. Samuel Arnold's collection. Above, Michael Dahl's portrait of James Brydges, 1st Duke of Chandos, and owner of the Cannons manor house in Middlesex.

For Handel this must have seemed a good time to get out of the firing line, and an extended visit to Cannons undoubtedly had a strong appeal. In addition, the Cannons Concert was likely to increase in size with the availability of members of the opera orchestra who were certain to be looking for employment. Finally, Handel's friend Dr. Arbuthnot, who had been one of his contacts at court and had probably also introduced him to the Earl of Burlington, was well placed to introduce him to the Earl of Carnarvon through his friendship with the Earl's brother, the Rev. Dr. George Brydges.

Handel was certainly at Cannons by September 25, 1717, when Brydges wrote to Dr. Arbuthnot to say that his guest had written four anthems and was at work on two more. These were the first six of the so-called "Chandos Anthems" (now more often termed "Cannons Anthems"). They were written specifically for the Cannons Concert, which at this time consisted of at least three violins, one or two cellos, and a single oboe, bassoon, and double bass. The singers available were a tenor, a bass, and one or more sopranos – presumably boys. Another pair of anthems

probably followed shortly.

John Roberts has argued that Handel may have made a trip to Germany in late 1717-early 1718, but he was certainly back in England by April 27, 1718, when the Rev. Brydges reported meeting him at his brother's London house. Handel composed another three "Cannons Anthems," almost certainly in the spring of 1718, together with a setting of the *Te Deum* in B-flat Major. By this time the Cannons Concert had added a couple more violins but may have lost its bassoon. There were also two and sometimes three tenor voices available, together with a trumpet for the *Te Deum*. The performers were about evenly divided between "Professors" (i.e. young professional musicians) and servants who could also turn a hand to music.

### Acis and Galatea

The most interesting reference from April 1718 is a report from Sir David Dalrymple following a visit to Cannons that "there is a little opera now a making the music...whereof the music will not be made public." He goes on to say that "the words are to be furnished by Messrs Pope and Gay, the music to be composed by Handel." This is clearly a reference to *Acis and Galatea*, which is elsewhere termed "Mr Handell's Pastoral." It was probably first performed in May or June 1718, perhaps outdoors and in a staged or semi-staged manner. Visitors to North London Collegiate Girls School, which today occupies the sight of Cannons House, are often shown the tree under which, according to local tradition, *Acis and Galatea* was originally performed.

*Acis and Galatea* tells the story, derived from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, of the river nymph Galatea who is loved by both the shepherd Acis and the hideous monster Polyphemus. Galatea rejects the advances of Polyphemus, who threatens to use force to achieve his ends. The jealous and enraged Acis challenges him to battle and is inevitably killed. The distraught Galatea, at the urging of the remaining shepherds, uses her godly powers to turn Acis into a fountain – "Thou art eternal, though thou art not mine" as she says in Handel's libretto. The characters, with their unbroken

string of *da capo* arias, may seem stylized and the action static in the first half of the work. Beginning with the entry of Polyphemus, however, heralded by the wonderful chorus “Wretched lovers” with its musical depiction of the monster’s “giant strides” and hideous “roars,” the action picks up pace. The crucial moment comes when Polyphemus interrupts the trio “The flocks shall leave the mountains” to hurl a boulder at Acis, crushing him. What follows, from Acis’s death through Galatea’s lament with the chorus’s interjections to Acis’s transformation and the concluding chorus of rejoicing, drew music from Handel that is as moving as any he ever wrote.

Brian Trowell, former Heather Professor of Music at Oxford University, has suggested that the initial idea for *Acis and Galatea* arose earlier among the Burlington circle, since neither Pope nor Gay is known to have had a direct connection with Cannons. Both poets had an interest in the pastoral genre, although Gay was more likely to have been inclined to burlesque it. The original plan was to include only the characters of Acis, Galatea, and Polyphemus, as Handel had done in his Italian serenade *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo*, written to celebrate a wedding in Naples in 1708.

With Handel’s move to Cannons the musical possibilities increased. Acis was given an advisor – the shepherd Damon, who counsels him against rash actions. The choruses – presumably sung by the soloists one-to-a-part – were expanded to five voices consisting of soprano, three tenors, and bass. At the last moment the third tenor, probably one of the servant-musicians named William Rodgers, was deemed ready to sing a solo. He was hurriedly cast as the shepherd Coridon, an advisor to Polyphemus, and given the aria “Would you gain the tender creature.” This aria is the only one in the work not preceded by a recitative, and the music is not included in the autograph score although it was almost certainly included in the now-lost performing score. The words are by the poet John Hughes and were published in a posthumous collection of his works. It has been suggested by Trowell that Hughes played a more extensive role in the libretto of *Acis and Galatea*, but since

## Handel in Seattle!

The American Handel Society, Pacific Musicworks, St. James Cathedral, and Sweet Bird Classics will bring the 30-year-old **American Handel Festival** to Seattle in March 2011. The three-week, city-wide festival will incorporate some 18 concerts and a host of lectures, symposia, and educational activities—lectures, theater works, a short course on Handel, a choral workshop, master classes, workshops for students, visual arts events, and more. Here are a few highlights:

- March 11-12** Seattle Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Nicholas McGegan
- 12-13** Gallery Concerts with soprano Julianne Baird
- 19** Seattle Recorder Society Play-in. Recorder and viol players are invited to play Handel’s *Water Music* and *Fireworks Music* in St. James Cathedral
- 19-20** Seattle Pro Musica: *Dixit Dominus*
- 20** Early Music Guild: Bach *St. John Passion* with Les Voix Baroques and the Portland Baroque Orchestra
- 23-26** Four-day Handel Chorus Workshop
- 24-27** American Handel Society Scholarly Conference at St. James Cathedral
- 25** Boston Early Music Festival: *Acis and Galatea*, directed by Stephen Stubbs and Paul O’Dette
- 26** Pacific Musicworks and Tudor Choir: *Esther*, directed by Stephen Stubbs
- 27** Seattle Baroque Orchestra, directed by Ingrid Matthews

### Other events:

Landscape Architect Paul Willen presents a slide show with music demonstrating the deep affinity between Handel’s pastoral music and the soft and mellifluous “natural” gardens that were so boldly introduced into the English landscape in the early 18th century.

*The Man in the Mirror*, an original play by Ben Bernstein about a tenor who is preparing to sing a performance of Handel’s *Messiah*. (Last season, tenor Ross Hauck sang 14 performances of *Messiah*.)

“Handel as Art Collector: Art, Connoisseurship, and Taste in Hanoverian Britain,” a talk and slide show by Thomas McGeary about Handel’s vast art collection.

The festival was founded at the University of Maryland in 1981 and held there until 2001, when it began traveling to different cities. The most recent festivals were in Danville, KY, Princeton, NJ, Santa Fe, NM, and Iowa City, IA. See [www.americanhandelfestival.org](http://www.americanhandelfestival.org) for more information.

he is not known to have been a member of either the Burlington or Cannons circles this seems to me unlikely. It may be that this was one of the texts that Hughes is known to have sent Handel in 1712 for use in the practice of setting the English language to music. The words, while appropriate to the dramatic situation in *Acis and Galatea*, are general and may apply to many pastoral situations.

The role of Galatea was probably sung by the soprano Margherita de L’Epine, one of the few Italian-speaking singers in London who was also able to sing in English. She had sung for Handel on several occasions but was most closely associated with Pepusch whom she eventually married. The role of Acis was almost certainly sung by James Blackley, for whom Handel wrote in the tenor clef while Pepusch used the alto clef. He was probably a late representative of what would have been referred to in Henry Purcell’s day as a “low countertenor” but what we would now call a high tenor with an extension. The role of Damon

was likely sung by Francis Rowe, who had a similar voice but with a somewhat higher tessitura. Rowe later sang alto in the choirs of Westminster Abbey and the Chapel Royal. The original singer of the role of Polyphemus is unknown.

For *Acis and Galatea* the Cannons Concert added a second oboe whose identity is unknown. It seems likely to have been a “guest” like Handel (who was presumably engaged on terms similar to those he had enjoyed at Burlington House) rather than an employee. One possibility would be the composer/oboist Johann Ernst Galliard, who is known to have composed some music for Cannons. The oboists both apparently doubled on recorders, including the soprano used to illustrate Polyphemus’s “pipe for my capacious mouth.” Handel’s autograph score indicates that the ensemble also included two cellos but no bassoon or double bass. Wolfgang Windszus, in editing the work for the Hallischen Händel-Ausgabe, noted that surviving manuscript copies derived



Teresa Wakim as Acis and Douglas Williams as Polyphemus in the Boston Early Music Festival's production of Handel's *Acis and Galatea*.

from the lost performing score suggest that both a bassoon and double bass joined the group before the first performance.

### Esther

The remaining major work written by Handel for Cannons is generally known today as *Esther*, but in the earliest sources was termed simply "Oratorium" or "The Oratorium." Professor John Roberts, the recently retired head of the music library at the University of California, Berkeley, who has published an extensive article on the composition of this work, suggests that Handel's original title (missing from the autograph score) was probably closer to that used in the wordbook for Bernard Gates's private performances of the work in 1732: *Esther: An Oratorio; or, Sacred Drama*. Again, the genesis of the project may go back to the Burlington circle as a

response to the publication in 1715 of Thomas Brereton's English translation of Racine's 1689 play *Esther*. Dr. Arbuthnot seems likely to have been primarily responsible for creating the libretto that Handel set, but Pope has often been credited with having a hand in the project as well.

The libretto tells the story of Esther, a member of the captive Jewish minority married to King Ahasuerus of Persia, who is unaware of her racial background. Mordecai, her advisor and countryman, offends the King's minister Haman by refusing to bow before him, and Haman orders that all Jews should be killed. At Mordecai's prompting, Esther defies a rule that no one is allowed to enter the King's presence without invitation and intercedes with

her husband. Ahasuerus forgives her intrusion, whereupon she invites Ahasuerus and Haman to a banquet. Once there she reveals that she is a Jew and asks her husband to spare her people. Ahasuerus agrees and since Mordecai had once saved the king's life, he is given Haman's position and the latter is condemned to death.

The story is generally clear and well supported by the music, and the lamenting choruses for the Jews are particularly moving. The late addition of the aria "O Beauteous Queen," with its wonderful double bassoon obbligato, means that Ahasuerus sings all his most important music in the same scene. In general the music of *Esther* is particularly memorable for Handel's varied orchestration. The aria "Tune your harps" is accompanied by pizzicato strings, leaving the first appearance of the harp for the aria "Praise the Lord." The striking appearance of the single horn in "Jehovah

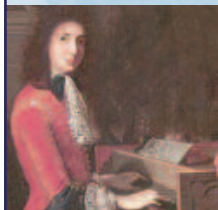
crownd" followed by the paired horns in the chorus "He comes, he comes" leads finally to the extensive trumpet obbligato in the final chorus. This chorus may be overlong and has been compared to a complete Cannons anthem added to an already substantial oratorio. Nevertheless, there is nothing quite like it in Handel's output and it deserves to

be heard in its entirety.

The date of composition for *Esther* has long been in doubt. The wordbook for Gates's performances in 1732 gives 1720. However, a manuscript copy of the complete work from the Malmesbury Collection states on the title page that it was "Composed by George Frederick Handel Esquire. In London. 1718," and its first owner added a hand-written acknowledgement of its acquisition in 1718 or 1719 (her writing is unclear). Winton Dean first noticed that the autograph score is written in two layers, the first scored for forces consistent with the

**The performance of *Esther* at the American Handel Festival in Seattle in March 2011 will be the first to take into account Roberts's discoveries and will provide the first opportunity since 1720 to hear the oratorio performed in a version as close as we are liable to get to its original form.**

*Continued on page 64*



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# Handel at Cannons

Continued from page 28

known composition of the Cannons Concert in late summer or early autumn 1718 and the second utilizing additional instruments not available until 1720. John Roberts has now established that the second layer must have been composed in 1720 because it contains borrowings from music which Handel almost certainly became acquainted with in September 1719 while on a visit to Dresden to recruit singers for the newly organized Royal Academy of Music.

Roberts has argued persuasively that *Esther* was completed (and perhaps performed) in 1718 and a copy was made for Handel's patron Elizabeth Legh, who promptly had it bound. In 1720 he returned to the work and extensively revised it, disposing of certain portions of the autograph score so that it is now not possible to reconstruct the 1718 version. A copy of the revised version was made for Elizabeth Legh, who reused the same binding and title page that had once contained the 1718 score, explaining the anomalous dating.

The 1720 revision expanded the orchestra to include viola, harp, two bassoons, two horns, and transverse flute — none of them available in 1718. Handel also wrote extensive music for an alto soloist whom Roberts argues should be called "Priest of the Israelites": the arioso "Jehovah crown'd" where the voice is paired with the first horn and the 41-bar solo in the final chorus, "Let Israel songs of joy repeat," where it is pitted against the trumpet. It seems likely that these late additions to the 1720 layer mark the arrival of Thomas Bell as a member of the Cannons Concert; a celebrated countertenor from Bristol Cathedral, he subsequently joined the Chapel Royal.

The roles of *Esther* and *Ahasuerus* were most likely composed initially for de L'Epine and Blackley, although who sang the latter in 1720 is not clear. Haman was almost certainly sung by either George Vanbrugh, later a play-



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house singer and composer, or William Perry, later a member of the Chapel Royal. These two surely sang the bass duet in the final chorus. Mordecai may have been sung by Thomas Gethin (or Gething), listed on the Cannons roster as a countertenor although he subsequently joined the Chapel Royal as a tenor. The “Israelite Boy” was undoubtedly sung by one of the three boy sopranos listed in the Cannons Roster.

The version of *Esther* edited by Howard Serwer and published in the Hallischen Händel-Ausgabe, which is often referred to as *Esther I*, generally represents the version as performed in 1720. Roberts, while acknowledging that the sources are not clear on all points, has proposed the following modifications to bring the text closer to what now appear to have been Handel’s intentions:

- The addition of a flute part to the air “Praise the Lord,” primarily doubling the right hand of the harp. This may have been done to provide for better balance against the unison violins, which are not marked *con sordini* as they were in some later versions.
- The placement of the recitative “O God, who from the suckling’s mouth” before rather than following the aria “Praise the Lord,” both to be sung by an “Israelite Boy” rather than an “Israelite Woman.”
- The deletion of the air “Sing songs of praise,” the text of which Handel had already reused in other numbers.
- The addition of a viola part to the duet “Who calls my parting soul from death.”
- The division of the work into three acts of three scenes each, instead of a single act consisting of six scenes.

The performance of *Esther* at the American Handel Festival in Seattle in March 2011 will be the first to take into account Roberts’s discoveries and will provide the first opportunity since 1720 to hear the oratorio performed in a version as close as we are likely to get to its original form. 🍷

Singer, organist, and harpsichordist Graydon Beeks is the director of music programming and facilities and a professor of music at Pomona College in California. A specialist in the music of George Frideric Handel, Beeks has received grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Council of Learned Societies and has published extensively on Handel and his contemporaries.

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