Form and Expression in Samson
by George Friedric Handel

Mitsukazu Suwaki

The oratorio Samson was composed by Handel in the latter part of 1741, revised and expanded a year later, and first performed on February 18, 1743, at Covent Garden in London. Its reception was one of Handel's greatest triumphs. A correspondent to the Dublin Journal wrote, “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.” It was presented for nine successive seasons. Today it stands as one of Handel's greatest works.

George Bernard Shaw wrote of Samson, “it shows him in his highest, most heroic vein, at the height of his strength, decision, audacity, and mastery.”

Handel, aged fifty-eight in 1743, had grown immeasurably from the young German who had visited England in 1710, fresh from a successful sojourn of learning and composing in Italy. He made England his permanent home from 1717, providing London with fashionable operas composed in Italian style to Italian librettos. As his roots sank deep in English life, he slowly developed and forged the new form of the English oratorio. A definition of the form is provided by Handel's librettist, the herd-headed, practical-minded Newburgh Hamilton, in his preface to the word-book of Samson; “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.” But the suggestion this gives of a compromise, with its appeal to both “church music” and “theatre” among English audiences, should not be taken literally. The form was an organic one rising out of the unspoken needs of English life. It signified the change from the concept of musical theatre as an imported luxury, an entertainment in the course of which people could chatter about how well the music suited their favorite virtuosi instead of how well the singers served the music, to a kind of music drama which captured and expressed in the deepest way the hopes, feelings and moralities in terms of which the nation saw its communal life. To what extent Handel planned the oratorio form this way, in his first experiments. The concept deepened from work to work. The oratorios aroused puzzled questions. Was the theatre a place to make people think? Did England proud of its trade and prosperity, need an English music? Was it proper for the words of the Scriptures to be heard in the theatre? And from the showmanship point of view, in oratorio there was a loss of scenic spectacle and of emphasis on vocal glitter, do not make up for by the grandly majestic and movingly dramatic role that the chorus was assuming in the new form. But an art form that corresponds spiritually to its times makes its way, causing the inherited fashions to seem shallow. Handel changed the tastes of his audiences and won others to the music theatre who previously had never been near it. His victory was signalled by the reception of Samson.

A sign of Handel’s mastery at this period is the way in which each big work is a unique formal, emotional and dramatic concept.

Saul produced in 1739 that is the supreme Biblical opera, with its sharply delibrated characters, historical sweep, change of scene and vivid action. Israel in Egypt produced the same year that is a grand choral pageant. Messiah produced in Dublin in 1742, draws upon the Nativity Play and Passion Play, giving them an apotheosis in a splendid anthem framework. And Samson based on John Milton’s drama, “Samson Agonistes” that written in 1671, is music drama
cast in the Greek model, with unity of time and place, and with one ascending line. The rise of the tragic hero Samson, out of despair at his own captivity and weakness, to triumph over the enemies of his people, while sacrificing his own life.

Winton Dean, in Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques, praises Newburgh Hamilton who the librettist, for skill in reducing Milton's drama — "composed for the study" — to less than half its original length and drawing upon other Milton poems for some arias and choruses he found it necessary to add. And this becomes

Total eclipse! no sun, nomoon
All dark amidst the blaze of noon!

this text is one of the great arias in the oratorio, and if the words taken by themselves are weaker than Milton's, the music is truly in keeping with Milton's depth of feeling. In other words, the changes were practical and skillfully functional. If in the adaptation much of Milton's mighty word, music is weakened, yet the poem was meant to be complete in itself, not set to music. And in the adaptation, a new art form was made possible in which Milton's theme was illuminated by Handel's own apt and mighty music.

In using Old Testament themes for his oratorios, to give expression to raise English spiritual life, Handel was following in the way of Milton, whose Paradise Lost, written to "justify the way of God to Men," was also a justification of the great upheaval in which England had done away with the absolutism of kings. Milton's Samson Agonistes also relates deeply to Milton's own land and condition. Dean Jack H. Adamson of the University of Utah's College of Letters and Science, who is a leading authority on Milton, writes as follows about the character of Milton's hero; "Milton's Samson is not the Samson of Old Testament, a folk-hero who is good at riddles, a conventional strong man, primitive in intellect and emotions. Rather Milton touched Samson with the grandeur of Greek tragic hero. Samson Agonistes literally means 'Samson, the Wrestler,' and Milton means by this name to designate the moment of Samson's greatest
feat of strength when he wrestles the pillars of Dagon's temple to the ground. But Milton also means much more. His Samson suffers physically but he suffers even more spiritually. Milton's Samson Agonistes is a man wrestling with himself, in agony from his own inward turmoil."

Finally, Milton's play may be a symbolic commentary on the meaning of blindness. What is it, he asks, to see clearly? What does it mean to be blind? Milton's answer is clear. Samson's enemies are blind, for they do not see that arrogance and pride make men mad; they do not see that violent men call for their own destruction. And in their blindness the Philistine tyrants, in sport call for Samson who at last seen clearly what his divine calling had always been, to die for the freedom of his people.

The oratorio Samson is in one continuous, unbroken dramatic movement and the act divisions — not found in Milton — are merely for theatre convention. Act One starts, after the Overture, with a short recitative by Samson, who is blind and in chains, and then presents one of those splendid Handel "blocks" of music, choral and solo, here depicting the pagan festival of the Philistines, praising their god Dagon. In striking contrast comes the misery of Samson, expressed in the touching aria, then the recitative with Micah, and rising in intensity with Samson's great aria, "Total eclipse!". It is answered by a note of hope in the magnificent chorus, "O first created beam," with its radiant music on "Let there be light!" Manoah, Samson's father, enters, seeking his son, and has a brilliant aria, "Thy glorious deeds," which combines lament with memories of Samson's past exploits, Samson's third aria, "Why does the God of Israel sleep?" with its strong, protesting character, gives still new musical breadth to his musical portrayal. After another chorus of the Israelites, comes Samson's deeply moving accompanied recitative, "My genial spirits droop,". It is worth notice that, as Winton Dean points out, a heroic role like this given to tenor voice was an innovation on Handel's part, and created a new kind of dimension
for the voice. The sensually beautiful chorus, “Then round about the starry throne,” closes the act. If in Act One male voices have predominated, Act Two restores the balance, first with one of Handel’s most beautiful arias, Micah’s “Return, return, Oh God of hosts!” The long dramatic scene follows between Samson and Delilah, with Handel’s artful writing for Soprano voice effectively depicting Delilah’s renewed sensual temptation of Samson. The climax is the great duet, “Traitor to love!” as the rejected Delilah turns against Samson. There are choruses of the Israelites praying to Jehovah, of the Philistines joyfully expecting the renewed festivities to Dagon, and a magnificent finale, the conflictful chorus with soloists. “Fixed in his everlasting seat.” Act Three, the Israelites triumphing, although with the heroic self-sacrifice of Samson, and the pagan Philistines cast in despair with the destruction of their temple. Again Harapha is pitted against Samson, Harapha has a fine air, “Presuming slave,” Samson’s “Thus when the sun,” after Harapha leaves, very effectively reveals the change of mood in him, as he begins to see, with joy and confidence, the path before him. There is a fine aria for Micah, and again a chorus with solo, of Philistine revelry, Samson has entered the temple, presumably, to obey the demands of the priests of Dagon. Manoah sings an aria of exalted beauty expressing love for his son Samson, “How willing my paternal love.” Their short recitative is suddenly broken into by the noise of the destruction of the temple, a vivid Sinfonia followed by the despairing chorus of the Philistines. A messenger tells what has happened, and a long, grand and sublime elegy, funereal march and requiem follow; aria, recitative, and chorus with solo voices lamenting the death of Samson.

In the original version of the oratorio, written in 1741, this had ended the work. But in the revision a year later, Handel added the brilliant and since then, famous soprano aria with trumpet obbligato, “Let the bright Seraphim,” and a following chorus. One thinks of the happy finale, Mozart added to Don Giovanni, after what was spiritually the end of the work.
Act One
#1 Overture
Andante pomposo, Allegro, Menuetto. A. B. C. three parts.
A. 3/4 \( \frac{3}{4} \) \( \frac{\sqrt{76}}{2} \) using dotted rhythms.
B. 4/4 \( \frac{4}{4} \) \( \frac{\sqrt{88}}{2} \) fugue section, draws upon three different sources.
C. 3/8 \( \frac{3}{8} \) \( \frac{\sqrt{100}}{2} \) Minuet
The Overture has no thematic connection with what follows, but effectively prepares the mood of pagan festivity in which the oratorio opens. The grim of the beautiful Minuet — the first two bars — Handel lifted straight from Keiser, but he improved and developed it beyond measure.

#2 RECITATIVE (Samson) Tenor
#3 CHORUS, SATB
A. 1-16 B. 17-38 A. 39-51
Allegro 4/4 \( \frac{4}{4} \) \( \frac{\sqrt{72}}{2} \) Key D-A-G-D

#4 AIR (A Philistine Woman) Sop.
Andante, 3/4 \( \frac{3}{4} \) \( \frac{\sqrt{108}}{2} \) two parts 1-73 74-142 Key A
The melody is a commonplace of Handel's A major mood.
#5 CHORUS, SATB
Same as #3

#9 RECITATIVE (Samson) T
#13 RECITATIVE (Micah, Samson) Alto, Tenor.
#14 AIR (Samson) T.
Larghetto e staccato.
4/4 \( \frac{\sqrt{96}}{2} \) two parts 1-17 18-36 Key G-e
effective use dim. 7th chord in measure 29th.

#16 CHORUS. SATB
4/4 A tempo ordinario \( \frac{\sqrt{66}}{2} \) a-e-a
A. 1-11 A’. 12-30 B. 31-67 (Fugue)
The augmentation of the Fugue subject is not very characteristic.

#17 RECITATIVE (Manoah) Bass
#20 RECITATIVE (Manoah) Bass
#21 AIR (Manoah) Bass
Allegro. 4/4 $\text{♩} = 100$ Largo 3/4 $\text{♩} = 72$
A. 1–29 A’. 30–60 B. 61–100 Key d–F–d
No da capo, the spiritual da capo.
A triumphanty irregular piece controlled by the verbal and spiritual content.

#22 RECITATIVE (Samson) T.

#23 RECITATIVE (Samson) T.

#24 AIR (Samson) T.
Allegro. 4/4 $\text{♩} = 84$
A. 1–39 B. 40–74 A. 75–117 Key B♭–g–B♭
This air has strong adumbrations of Sonata form.

#26 CHORUS. SATB
Allegro moderato. 4/4 $\text{♩} = 88$
A. 1–21 B. 22–61 Fugue Key B♭–B♭

#27 RECITATIVE (Manoah) Bass

#28 RECITATIVE (Samson) T. Accompanied Recitative
It has a nostalgia for death.

#31 CHORUS. SATB
A tempo ordinario. 4/4 $\text{♩} = 76$
A. 1–8 9–14 B. 15–23 C. 24–51 (Fugue)
Key F–d–F
Act Two

#34 RECITATIVE (Samson, Micah)

#35 AIR Micah
Largo 4/4 $\text{♩} = 69$
A. 1–34 B. 35–50 Key E♭–c–g
One of glories of the oratorio, a typical opera song.
Extraordinarily imaginative modulations, including an enharmonic change on the word “grievs”.

#36 CHORUS. and Solo (Micah) SATB
Largo. 4/4 $\text{♩} = 69$ Key c–E♭
Handel did mark a da capo in the 1741 autograph, but cancelled it in 1742 when he wrote the present chorus.
#37 RECITATIVE (Micah) Samson
#38 AIR. Dalila
Larghetto. 4/4 \( \dot{\jmath} = 72 \)
A. 1–29 B. 30–58 Key G
The onomatopoeic comings.
#43 SOLO. (Delila)
Larghetto. 3/4 \( \dot{\jmath} = 88 \)
Key b–d and go into the next chorus. rondo sequence.
#44 CHORUS, SOLO
Key b. bring into #43 Solo.
#50 RECITATIVE (Samson)
#51 DUET Delila, Samson.
Allegro. 4/4 \( \dot{\jmath} = 88 \) Key A.
Musically this is a free quintet. Three instruments, Duet.
#54 RECITATIVE (Samson)
#55 CHORUS SATB
Grave. 4/4 \( \dot{\jmath} = 66 \) Allegro moderato. \( \dot{\jmath} = 82 \)
A. 1–12 B. 13–53 (Fugue) Key A.
Elaborate and convivial fugal setting, good chorus.
#56 RECITATIVE (Micah, Harapha-bass) Samson
#57 AIR. Harapha.
Allegro. 4/4 \( \dot{\jmath} = 92 \)
A. 1–35 B. 36–67 C. 68–94 Key B♭
Most popular song, portrays to the life this “bulk, of spirit void.”
The music is for from void., octave leaps, swashbackling rhythms, hearty unisons. Continuing development throughout the 2nd half of material vocal ornament.
#60 Recitative (Samaon, Harapha)
#61 DUET. (Samson, Harapha)
Allegro. 4/4 \( \dot{\jmath} = 160 \)
A. 1–25 B. 26–37 C. 38–63 Key a–e–C–a.
Sliding chromatic phrase makes a distinctive contribution.
#62 RECITATIVE (Micah)
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#63 CHORUS SSATTB
Grave. 4/4 $ \dot{\mathbf{J}} = 66$
The Phrygian modality is certainly impressive.

#64 RECITATIVE (Harapha)

#66 CHORUS. SATB
Allegro. 4/4 $ \dot{\mathbf{J}} = 76$ Key G.

#67 CHORUS. SSATTB
Allegro. 3/4 $ \dot{\mathbf{J}} = 84$
A. 1–69 B. 70–118 C. 119–166 (fugue)
Act Three

#68 RCITATIVE (Micah, Samson, Harapha.)
Pomposo. 3/8 $ \dot{\mathbf{J}} = 112$
A. 1–34 B. 35–109 Key c–E♭–c
This is the complement to “Honour and arms”.
Handel enforces the point by pruning away all graces, including
an orchestral preamble, and all harmony; until the two-part coda the
entire air is couched in implacable octaves.
Measure 75, this silent bars fraught with menace.

#70 RECITATIVE (Micah, Samson)
Vivace. 4/4 $ \dot{\mathbf{J}} = 76$
Swift and brilliant Cho., very good one.
One of a few da capo choruses.

#72 RECITATIVE (Samson, Micah, Harapha)

#73 AIR Samson
Andante. 4/4 $ \dot{\mathbf{J}} = 116$
A. 1–22 B. 23–36 C. 37–56
The lovely air, the violins flowing thirds superimposed on the
march of the bass quavers breathe an inner peace.

#74 RECITATIVE (Micah)
$4/4 \dot{\mathbf{J}} = 123$
A passionate recitative full of whirling scales.

#75 AIR. Micah
With the climax of the drama approaching, the movementes grow shorter and more irregular.

The pattering repeated notes of the violins impart a further trust.

The same material of #75

#77 RECITATIVE (Micah, Manoah)

#78 AIR. Dalila

Allegro, ma non presto. 3/4 \( \dot{\text{J}} = 116 \)

A. 1-20 B. 21-42

The sublime E major air, Manoah expresses his love for Samson ironical poignancy from its position.

#82 RECITATIVE (Micah, Manoah)

#83 SINFONIA

Presto. 4/4 \( \dot{\text{J}} = 120 \)

This Symphony is no conventional flourish, dramatic, good sinfonia. He uses chromatic scale figures over a pedal anticipates 12 measures.

#84 RECITATIVE (Manoah)

#85 CHORUS SATB

Presto. 4/4 \( \dot{\text{J}} = 120 \) Key g.

This is based on the dotted and chromatic figures and descending
scales of the Symphony. Effective use dim, 7th.

#86 RECITATIVE (Messenger, Micah)

#87 AIR, Micah
Largo assai. 4/4 \( \frac{\text{\textdegree}}{\text{\textdegree}} \) = 72
A. 1-12 B. 13-21 go into the next Chorus.

#88 CHORUS SATB
Largo assai. 4/4 \( \frac{\text{\textdegree}}{\text{\textdegree}} \) = 72
Small chorus, very Purcellian style.

#90 DEAD-MARCH
Grave. 4/4 \( \frac{\text{\textdegree}}{\text{\textdegree}} \) = 60 A. 1-16 B. 17-26 C. 27-36 Key D

#91 DEAD-MARCH
Grave. 4/4 \( \frac{\text{\textdegree}}{\text{\textdegree}} \) = 50
This march from “Saul”

#93 CHORUS AND SOLI
Largo. 4/4 \( \frac{\text{\textdegree}}{\text{\textdegree}} \) = 76
A. 1-6 air for Manoah, D minor
B. 7-8 duet for alto and tenor, A major
C. 9-13 accompanied recitative for Israelitish Woman, D major
D. 14-18 semichorus of virgins, modulating to G minor
E. 19-30 unaccompanied Adagio for Israelitish Woman, G minor
F. 31-35 duet, repeat of D.
G. 36-54 full chorus, expanded to nineteen bars, G minor.

One of the most touchingly beautiful episoded in all Handel, is wrought with exquisite skill, so calle “The little Requiem.”

#94 RECITATIVE (Manoah)

#95 AIR (Israelite Woman)
Andante. 4/4 \( \frac{\text{\textdegree}}{\text{\textdegree}} \) = 76
A. 1-14 B. 15-38 C. 39-59 D. 60-76
Measure 47-48 duet of the Trumpet is beautiful.

#96 CHORUS SATB
Andante. 4/4 \( \frac{\text{\textdegree}}{\text{\textdegree}} \) = 81
Effective use a Trumpet.

In this oratorio could be find that the significant points of view;
1. Handel's choice of a tenor voice for Samson is interesting, the contemporary opera seria had little use for tenors. It was probably the growing success of John Beard, who had been singing Handel's tenor parts since 1734. Samson was Handel's first great tenor part and one of the earliest in dramatic music outside France.

2. The da capo is never obtrusive, except when introduced without authority, and to the ruin of musical sense, in "Return, O God of Hosts," and "Let the bright Seraphins.

3. Although well supplied with choruses, Samson is not, despite a commonly voiced opinion, a great choral oratorio in the manner of Saul, Belshazzar, or Solomon.

4. Of the nineteen choruses (other than literal repeats, our score listed only eighteen choruses.) only two — both rapid movements in triple time — exceed seventy-five bars. Many are much shorter, and all are modest in construction, there are no complex units in several movements.

5. Six-parts chorus instead of the eight, there was no prospect of having enough altos and basses.

6. The borrowings from Porta’s Numitore. This was the opera with which Handel opened the Royal Academy of Music at the King’s theatre in April 1720. In Samson he seems to have used it as a starting motor to his imagination, very much as he was later to use Clari’s duets in Theodora and Habermann’s Masses in Jephtha.

   “Let the bright Seraphin,” “The Holy One of Israel,” “Go, baffled Coward, go.”

7. The key system of Samson is a good deal looser. The first and last scenes are firmly anchored in D major, but this is conditioned by the trumpets, which the libretto mentions in both places. Otherwise there appears to be no over-all plan.
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Bibliography

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