When Handel "fails"

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As little as 50 years ago singers and musicians had, as a matter of course, a great variety of Baroque music in their repertoires. It was played in a broad and sonorous manner, sometimes also extremely slowly, in the style with which the musicians were conversant – the romantic style. However, that time is coming to an end. In professional circles the performing of Baroque music is increasingly being taken over by specialists who with success have recreated the tonal quality which we now regard as "genuine".

Everything would be fine, if it weren't for the fact that the composers of the day occasionally showed a lamentable lack of "Baroque correctness", thus causing controversy with today's specialists' conception of their works. A dramatic composer like G. F. Handel chooses, time and again, to disregard common standards with the sole purpose of giving the underlying text a special musical emphasis. And the point in the following will then be that it is often the text alone which can give us a logical explanation of an apparent musical inconsistency.

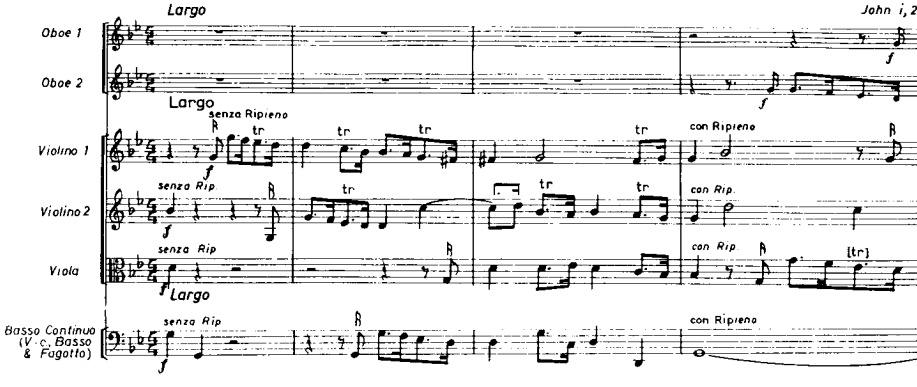
When Handel brought the oratorio from Italy to England, he retained the traditional opening for these works: a *Sinfonia* in the Italian style. Not until *Messiah* did he choose, surprisingly, to open with a sinfonia in the style of a French overture. This was not relished by his contemporaries. Especially his librettist, Charles Jennens was very discontented: ... *I have with great difficulty made him correct some of the grossest faults in the composition, but he retain'd his Overture obstinately, in which there are some passages far unworthy of Handel, but much more unworthy of the Messiah....*[1]

As is well-known, Handel kept his overture, and the characteristic "overdotting" in the opening Grave became a tradition. In the preface of Novello's 1902 edition of the vocal score of *Messiah* Ebenezer Prout comments: *It is well-known to those who have studied the subject that double dots were never, and dotted rests very seldom used in Handel's time, and that con-*

sequently the music, if played strictly to the notation, will in many places not accurately reproduce the composer's intentions. In all such cases I have felt it my duty to give the notes in this edition, not as Handel wrote them, but as he meant them to be played....

Nowadays, the opening part of the overture of *Messiah* is usually heard with pronounced dotting, and yet the esteemed Baroque connoisseur Nicolaus Harnoncourt argues: *Superficially the "Symphony" is a French overture with a dotted introduction, a fast fugal middle section and a slow final section compressed into three bars. The stereotyped rhythm of the first part is strikingly simple. I consider it highly unlikely that Handel should have intended it to have the pronounced dotted rhythm, always suggesting an element of heroism, of the French overture, and the "hopeless" key of E minor also militates against an extroverted forte brilliance.*[2] But why choose such a crude opening – moreover in a "hopeless" key – as an introduction to this elevated composition? Because he made use of dramatic effects. Only to an oppressed and bewildered audience could it have been justified to let the tenor soloist begin with the words, *Comfort ye my people!*

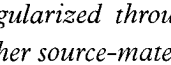
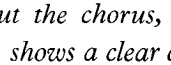
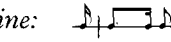
Despite Harnoncourt's reservations, the rhythmic corrections from 1902 by Ebenezer Prout are now widely accepted as the norm. Unfortunately, this also applies to the opening chorus of *Messiah*'s part II, *Behold the Lamb of God*, in which the opening quaver upbeats become pronounced semiquavers:



In the revised Novello edition (Full Score 1965) this dotting tradition was continued by the editor Watkins Shaw. His reason for doing so is the fact that the added oboe parts from John Matthews' manuscript (Dublin c.

1761!), which Shaw has included in his edition, are double-dotted in this movement. The same conviction is shared by a number of other specialists. Charles Mackerras states: *Music of a solemn or tragic character in Handel's time was usually expressed by an intensely marked rhythm, and like the overture, this chorus needs to be double-dotted....*[3]

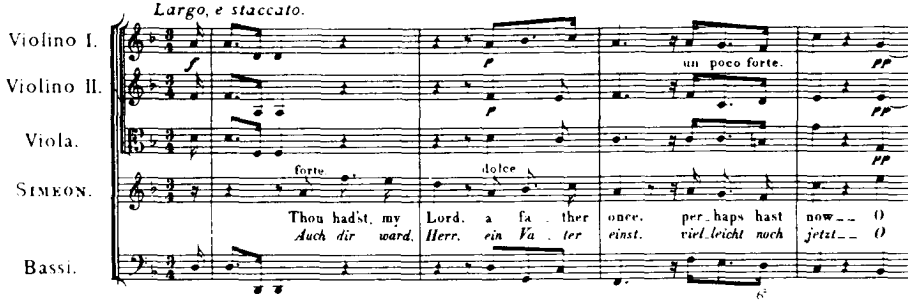
The same view is also held by Christopher Hogwood: *The mood of tragic presentiment is achieved by G minor and the rhythms of the traditional French overture.... From the conflict of dotted and undotted notation in (e.g.) bar 28 one can conclude that in Handel's time all rhythms of this movement would have been assimilated to the prevailing dotted patterns, however notated.*[4] And Harnoncourt concurs: *The melancholy of G minor is transformed into majesty (in Baroque musical rhetoric a consistent dotted rhythm always indicated an element of heroism).*[5]

It is characteristic that all our Baroque connoisseurs quoted give the reasons for their "over-dotting" in terms of subjective descriptions of the character of the music and shirk the complications brought about by such a practice. On this subject, Basil Lam writes in connection with his edition of *Messiah*, (London 1967): Behold the Lamb of God *remains, after two centuries, a matter for argument among scholars. In this chorus the up-beat is written as a quaver, but is usually taken now as a semiquaver, according to the rule "the isolated quaver is played short". This means that all such patterns must be regularized throughout the chorus, though Handel's autograph, followed by other source-material, shows a clear distinction, in bars 18-19, between* that take away  *and* the sins of the world  . *In this passage a regularizing of the dotted rhythms produces a most unHandelian syncopation of the bass line:*  . *Such points suggest strongly that the* written *value of the up-beats is, for once, correct in performance, especially when we note that Handel did sometimes write a semiquaver in such contexts and could have settled the whole question in this case by a single stroke of the pen.*

There are many indications that Lam is right. Both the designation of the movement and the notation of the music indicate that the movement should be performed as notated. The movement designation is *Largo*, which means that *Behold* should have the same tempo and character as the following aria, *He was despised.* There would hardly be any reason to give two consecutive movements the same designation if they were to be performed in strongly divergent manners. However, this is exactly what happens when *Behold* is performed in the French style. Also the actual

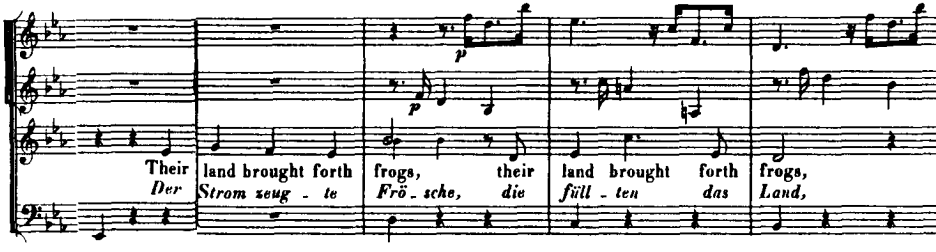
musical notation is enlightening. If Handel had intended semiquaver upbeats in this movement, he would never have let the viola in the second bar of the opening prelude play a G in a D7-chord. It would have been both legitimate and necessary to change into a tonally acceptable note of attack – such as an A or perhaps even a low D in order to maintain the characteristic octave leap. Consequently, when Handel writes G it can only mean that he expects a long upbeat and a consonant sound! Therefore, Hogwood is hardly right when he claims that, *In Handel's time all rhythms of this movement would have been assimilated to the prevailing dotted patterns, however notated.* In all probability, Handel expresses *the mood of tragic presentiment* precisely by mingling long and short upbeats.

In the oratorio *Joseph and his Brethren*, written a couple of years after *Messiah*, we find an aria *Thou had'st my Lord*, which in theme and musical character is likened to *Behold*. Here also short and long upbeats are mingled, carefully notated for both singer and orchestra. It would be absurd to perform this aria in the French style. But it shows that when the character of the text demands it, Handel departs from normal Baroque convention and emphasizes the special character of the movement by a "romantic" clash of rhythmic elements.



However, the juxtaposition of even and dotted quavers may serve other dramatic purposes. In the aria *Their land brought forth frogs*, from the oratorio *Israel in Egypt*, some of Egypt's 10 plagues are recounted: the frogs, and later pestilence, blotches and blains. The leaping frogs have inspired Handel to a string accompaniment in leaping dotted figures; but it is striking that all these are carefully notated with semiquaver rest and semiquaver upbeat, although, according to contemporary notational practice,

a quaver upbeat without rest would give exactly the same musical result. No less than 90 times does Handel choose this form of notation which, according to Prout, is *very seldom used in Handel's time.*

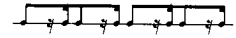
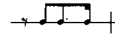


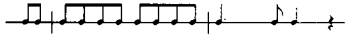
The explanation is again to be sought in the text. In contrast to the merry leaping of frogs in the accompaniment, the singing voice is initially held broadly sustained and quite free of dotted figures. It is certainly not by accident that the only figure in even quavers occurring in this section falls on the word *even* (bars 17 and 22). Not until the words *broke forth* in the continuation *blotches and blains broke forth* is there a "breaking forth" of dottings in the vocal coloratura.[6]

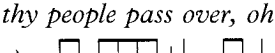
The effect of this would, of course, be reduced if the first part of the aria had not been held in sedate note-values. At the same time, this variation of even and dotted note-values in the vocal parts has forced Handel to undertake a precise notation of the dotted string movement. In addition, the confusion of notation is not lessened by the vocal part's last coloratura, and precisely the words *broke forth* are notated without dottings at all which, at this point, seems very strange. It may be assumed that this coloratura should be performed in accordance with normal Baroque practice like the one preceding. Or perhaps Handel leaves the exact presentation to the discretion of the singer as a way of introducing the following cadenza (bar 83).

The characteristic antitheses of Biblical language contribute strongly to the epic by requiring a juxtaposition of musical ideas, but they were foreign to Handel's experience. In the traditional format of an opera libretto, and in his settings of Milton and Dryden, Handel had been given a single idea or Affekt *on which to base a musical unit; Hebrew poetry commonly offered sudden contrasts rather than reiterations, and was thus at odds with Handel's own musical conditioning and with the very nature of aria form.*[7] This is how Christopher Hogwood, in his excellent book on Handel, describes the

special musical problem found precisely in *Israel* and *Messiah*. And it is characteristic that Handel nearly always chooses to describe the antithetical usage of language musically through a rhythmic contrast. Whereas in the beginning of *Israel* we see pestilence and blotches break through as dottings in the soloist's coloratura, we have at the end of the oratorio the opposite effect: where the inhabitants of Canaan are paralyzed with fear the dottings disappear.

The chorus *The people shall hear and be afraid* starts off with a staccato accompaniment in the strings describing their fear. Here it is worth noticing the meticulous rhythmic notation  where a simple notation without semiquaver rests ought to be sufficient – especially considering the fact that the movement generally is marked *staccato*. But as usual, less meticulousness is devoted to the vocal parts. The motif *and be afraid* is notated in the orchestra  , while the singers have to be content with the simpler notation  , though naturally not being performed differently to the orchestral parts because of this. However, a long upbeat should be used at the following tutti place in bar 24 at *all th'inhabitants of Canaan* inasmuch as both orchestra and choir are notated  .

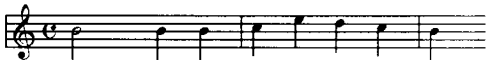
But this rhythmically pregnant phrase continues *shall melt away* and at these words, all the dottings "melt away", leaving only the even quavers behind  .

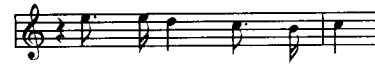
This phrase is in the greatest possible contrast to the preceding rhythmic version and at the same time it leads to the culmination of this chorus, the final part *till thy people pass over, oh Lord.* Here too the phrase is held in even quavers:  .

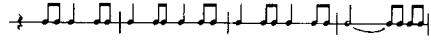
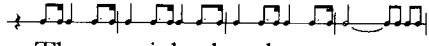
The rhythmic notation of this movement is ideally clear: the performing problem consists solely of daring to take Handel at face value and not being induced into believing that *the conflict of dotted and undotted notation* in this movement should lead to all note-values becoming *assimilated to the prevailing dotted patterns, however notated.*

In the movements exceeding the bounds of normal Baroque convention, we have seen how Handel is able to show great meticulousness in his rhythmic notation. On the other hand, we also meet a surprising unconcern for the rhythmic notation in movements following common Baroque standards. We find such an example in *Israel* in the chorus *Egypt was glad when they departed* with the afterphrase *for the fear fell upon them.* Handel depicts the contrast between *glad* and *fear* through a double fugue – the

first theme in a sedate set of note-values, the second in nervous dotted figures:





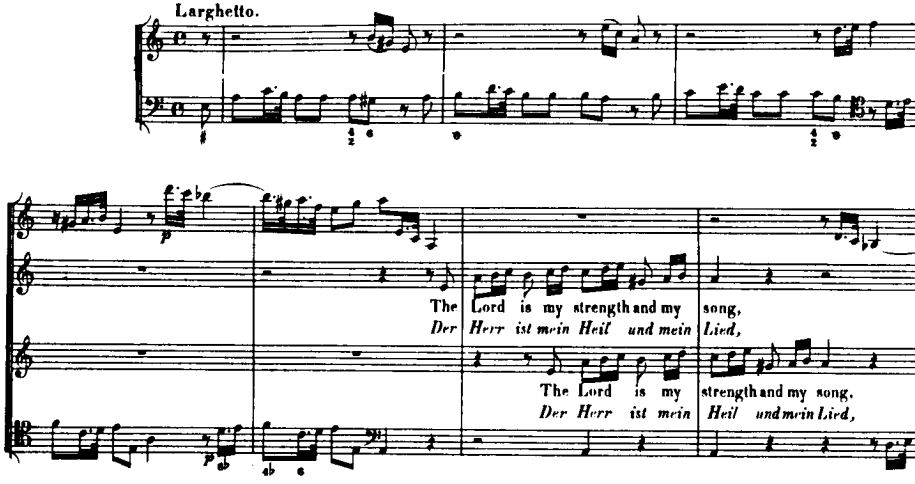
The latter theme necessitates several dotted figures throughout the movement which is simplified in the usual way with accurate notation in the orchestral parts, whereas the choir has to make do with the unrhythmicized version in even quavers – again without having to be performed differently from the orchestral parts. However, the matter is undeniably complicated when the two themes are later brought closely together. How was it possible for a singer to realize that a phrase notated  should be sung  ?

There might be three reasons explaining why the liberal notational practice of the day did not necessarily lead to chaotic performances:

Firstly, *the text itself* created a basis for the rhythmical rendition. Secondly, the singers were *rehearsed* whereas the instrumentalists, to a large extent, were expected to play at sight. And finally, this rehearsal was normally conducted by *the composer himself,* thus avoiding possible misunderstandings. Therefore, Handel is not to be blamed because he did not anticipate the chaotic situations sometimes occurring nowadays when choir leaders and singers overlook or misunderstand such notational details.

It must be granted, however, that it sometimes can be quite difficult to discover whether a rhythmic notation should be taken at face value or not. In one of Handel's most beautiful duets, *The Lord is my strength and my song,* also from *Israel,* Handel introduces in the opening orchestra ritornello two contrasting elements: a rhythmically supple motif in dotted semiquavers in the continuo and a "response motif" in even semiquavers in the obbligato violin. But the vocal parts are from beginning to end kept in even semiquavers. It does appear musically inconsistent and here one suspects the rhythmic notation in the vocal parts.

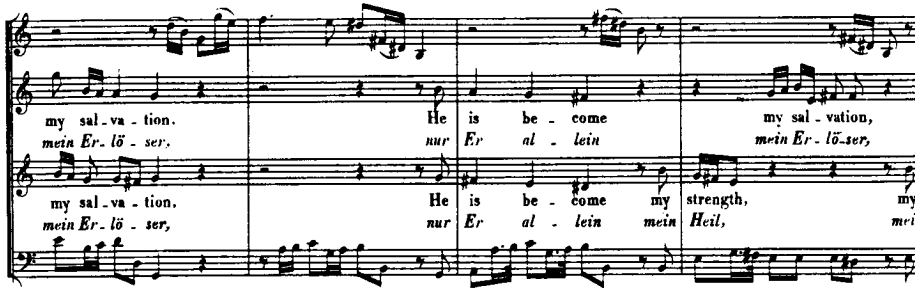
As usual, the solution is to be found in the text: *The Lord is my strength and my song. He is become my salvation.* A comparison of text and instruments clearly shows that the words *strength/song* are consistently held together by the dotted pattern, whilst *salvation* everywhere is connected



with the legato figure in even semiquavers. The conclusion must be that the vocal parts, as would also seem to be obvious, should be dotted everywhere in connection with the first line of text, whereas the second line should be sung in even semiquavers.

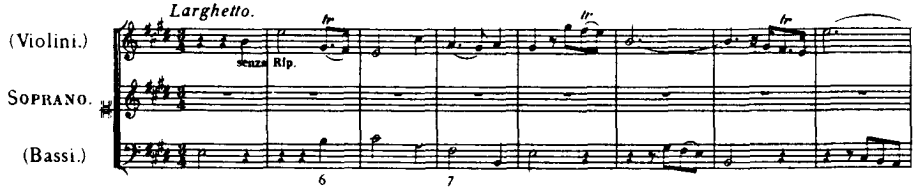
Unfortunately, also the instrumental parts in this movement are inadequately notated. A few dotted figures are lacking as are also numerous slurs, which blurs the musical intention, which Handel obviously had, that the word *Salvation* should gradually absorb the energetic dotting rhythms. This means that the final continuo cadenza is changed from an "energetic" version in the initial ritornello (bar 5) into a "soft" version later in the movement (bar 23 ff), corresponding to the superimposed obbligato voice.

The uncertainty of the rhythmical rendition is further emphasized in the final orchestral ritornello where the dotted rhythm is only sporadically



notated – in spite of the fact that the two motifs here appear simultaneously. Hopefully, the long awaited critical edition of *Hallische Händel-Ausgabe* will throw light on these problems.

Variations over a theme was a much loved and frequently used Baroque form of movement – but to let the theme undergo a metamorphic change within the same movement is, to say the least, noteworthy. With this treatment of his motif Handel introduces a romantic notion which is foreign to Baroque music. Consequently, it is only natural that discussions as to the "correct" Baroque rendition will arise in connection with such movements. This also applies to the famous aria I *know that my Redeemer liveth* from *Messiah* where the same motif is brought forward in an even as well as in a rhythmic form (bar 5 ff).



Over the years many attempts have been made to explain this apparent muddle. Some simply add the "missing" dottings. Others get around the problem by performing the movement *inégal,* whereby all figures, regardless of notation, get the same lightly dotted form. Yet others perform the movement as notated, however, with an almost audible shaking of the head due to the lack of inner logic.

But they are mistaken. When Handel "fails", according to our notions of Baroque practice, we should avoid "bessermachen" and instead seek an explanation in the score. In the aria *I know that my Redeemer liveth,* we find, as often before, the explanation in the text where the opening *liveth* is followed by the contrasting *stand.* If the text is collated with the obbligato violin, it is obvious that the dotted figure is associated with *liveth,* whereas the version in even note-values is associated with *stand.* In this way, the dotted figure becomes a symbol of living – in the aria's second part, quite concretely through *tho' worms,* and in the third part referring figuratively to *them that sleep,* however, they will arise. What seems, at first sight, to be an inadequate notation is thus shown to express a beautiful symbolism. It could be said that the musical material treated in this way is not only worthy of *Messiah,* but even more it is worthy of Handel.