

# NEWSLETTER

## of the

# American Handel Society

Volume XL, Number 3

Winter 2025

## FROM GÖTTINGEN TO NORTHAMPTON: HANDEL'S OPERAS COME TO AMERICA, 1927–1931

*Stephen Nissenbaum*

It may be surprising that the first American performance of any Handel opera took place at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts. The year was 1927, and the opera was *Julius Caesar*. The event was a direct consequence of the “Händel Renaissance” that had begun seven years earlier in Göttingen, Germany—the brainchild of the art historian Oskar Hagen, who staged four Handel operas in Göttingen between 1920 and 1924: *Rodelinde*, *Otto*, *Julius Cäsar*, and *Xerxes*.<sup>1</sup> All four operas were sung in German, and Hagen published piano-vocal scores of each one.<sup>2</sup> Performances spread like wildfire through Germany—hundreds of them within just a few years. (That unprecedented response was partly due to the bleak atmosphere of postwar Germany. With the nation’s political and military power in ruins, many Germans turned instead to its enduring cultural preeminence.)

But those operas would not have come to America except for a setback in Oskar Hagen’s own career—he was denied tenure at Göttingen, and left Germany in 1925. That year, Hagen moved to America, accepting an offer from the University of Wisconsin to establish an Art History Department there.<sup>3</sup> Never again would he stage a Handel opera. Instead, it was another recent German immigrant who introduced Hagen’s version of *Julius Caesar* to America.

The composer and pianist Werner Josten came to America in 1920 and began teaching music at Smith College in 1923. Josten knew of Hagen’s work in Göttingen, and when he presented *Julius Caesar* at Smith in 1927, it was with Hagen’s personal support (including the use of his conducting score and parts, as well as an English translation of his own German libretto, made by a colleague in Wisconsin’s German Department).<sup>4</sup> Josten’s staging garnered enthusiastic reviews from magazines and newspapers around the country. That publicity made it

1 A good brief account of Hagen’s early years and the creation of the Göttingen Händel Festival is in Abbey E. Thompson, “Revival, Revision, Rebirth: Handel Opera in Germany, 1920–1930” (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2006), 6–9. For a political account, see David Imhoof, *Becoming a Nazi Town: Culture and Politics in Göttingen Between the World Wars* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 73–90.

2 *Julius Caesar* (Leipzig: C. F. Peters, 1922); *Rodelinde* (Leipzig: C. F. Peters, 1923); *Xerxes* (Leipzig: C. F. Peters, 1924); *Otto und Theophano* (Hamburg-Bergedorf, 1927).

3 Thompson, “Revival,” 9–11.

4 For the English translation of Hagen’s German libretto, see Rachel Scott, “Home-Made from A to Z: New Documents for the Early History of Händel Opera in America,” *Fontes Artis Musicae* 67, no. 2 (2020): 144, 151–54. For Hagen’s support of Josten’s Handel productions at Smith, see pp. 154–60.

## “LET’S IMITATE HER NOTES ABOVE”: RECOMPOSING AN AIR FROM *ALEXANDER’S FEAST*

*Donald Burrows*

Many years ago, and happily in tandem with a performance that I conducted, I prepared my first music edition of a major work by Handel: *Alexander’s Feast*, soon afterwards published in the Novello Handel Edition.<sup>1</sup> This of course required investigation of the musical sources to establish details of the work’s presentation by Handel in successive seasons, in order to reconstruct the performance history under the composer. *Alexander’s Feast* marked an important stage in the transition of Handel’s career from Italian opera to English oratorio-style works. It was his first venture with a substantial text by a recognized English literary figure. John Dryden’s Cecilian Ode from 1697, originally set by Jeremiah Clarke, was re-arranged for Handel by Newburgh Hamilton through “a plain Division of it into *Airs, Recitatives, or Chorus’s*.<sup>2</sup> The Ode was in two Parts: for the first performances in 1736, Handel, recognizing that the London theater-goer might expect a more extensive evening, supplemented the Ode with two concertos and, before Part Two, the substantial Italian cantata *Cecilia, volgi un sguardo*. Hamilton also supplied the text for an “Additional Chorus” at the end: “Your voices tune” / “Let’s imitate her notes above,” derived from his own 1720 Cecilian Ode, *The Power of Music*.

The prompt for the composition of *Alexander’s Feast* towards the end of 1735 may have been almost accidental: Handel had probably planned an opera season at Covent Garden, but he had insufficient leading singers until Conti and Negri were available the following April. *Alexander’s Feast*, however, seems to have gone down well with the audience to open Handel’s season in February 1736, and he repeated it in 1737 as part of the program of his next Covent Garden season. Next, with a series beginning on St. Cecilia’s Day in November 1739 at Lincoln’s Inn Fields Theatre, he solved the “Two-Part”

1 Novello Publishing Limited, 1982. My editorial responsibilities included the keyboard reduction for the vocal score and continuo realizations throughout, as well as score and parts.

2 Hamilton’s Preface to the wordbook for the 1736 performances.

*continued on p. 4*

## IN THIS ISSUE

From Göttingen to Northampton – Stephen Nissenbaum  
“Let’s Imitate Her Notes Above” – Donald Burrows  
From the President’s Desk – Graydon Beeks  
Call for Applications, Call for Proposals & Call for Papers  
Recent Publications & Upcoming Events

*continued on p. 2*