

June 25, 2017

In the Public Eye: the Handel and Haydn Society and Music Reviews, 1840-1860

by TERESA M. NEFF



From its first concert in 1815, the Handel and Haydn Society was a favorite topic of discussion in Boston newspapers and periodicals. Commentators were effusive in both their praise and criticism of the organization, its repertoire, and the quality of the performances. And at certain moments in the history of the Society, the board of trustees made decisions in line with published suggestions and commentaries. The purpose of this paper is to present the circumstances surrounding one particular juncture, between 1840 and 1860, and discuss how the decisions made by the board of trustees addressed public criticism of both the repertoire

and its execution in the concert hall.

After a lauded beginning, the Handel and Haydn Society encountered criticism in the press and faced serious challenges in retaining audiences at its concerts. The first review, below, expresses the elation with which the first concert was received, while the second is a harsher assessment of the Society's performances. This first review is from the (Boston) *Columbian Centinel*, December 27, 1815:

“We have no language to do justice to the feelings experienced in attending to the inimitable execution of a most judicious selection of pieces from the fathers of sacred song. We can say that those who are judges of the performance are unanimous in their declaration of the superiority to any ever given in this town. Some of the parts electrified the whole auditory, and notwithstanding the sanctity of the place [King's Chapel] and the day [Christmas Day], the excitements to loud applause were frequently irresistible. The performers amounted to about one hundred, and appeared to embrace all the musical excellence of the town and vicinity. We should not particularize, but some of the solos were sublime and animating. ... We have learnt that many persons who were desirous of being present were prevented by the engagements of Christmas. For this cause ... we hope this oratorio will be immediately announced for repetition.”

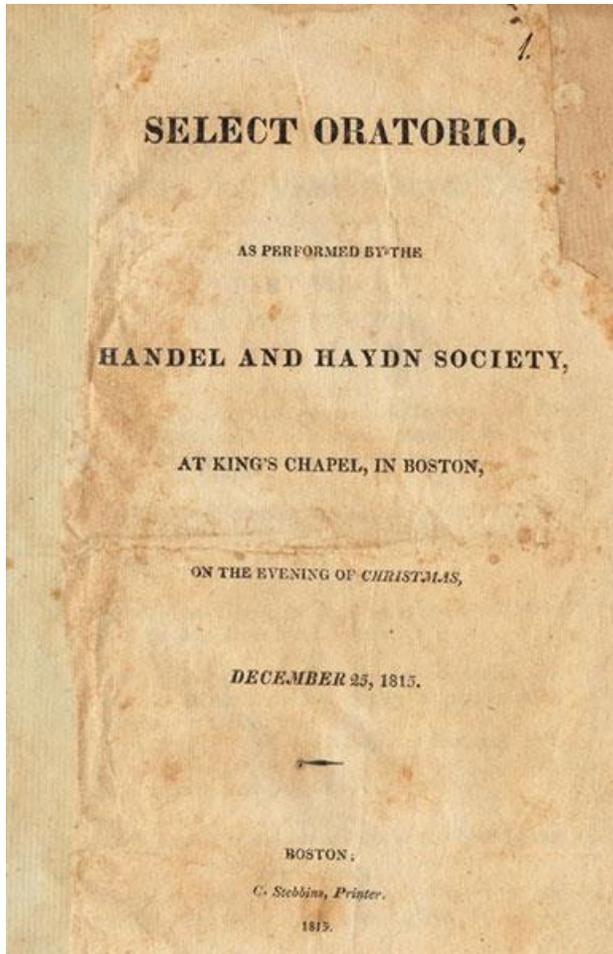


Image courtesy of H+H

Before this article was published, there is no indication that H+H intended to present a second concert; however, eight days after this article appeared in the *Centinel* H+H again requested the use of King's Chapel. The second concert took place on January 18, 1816. The audience for the first concert numbered about 950; second concert numbered about 700. [H+H archives]

Within a year and a half, a very different tone was taken in reporting on H+H concerts. This reviewer is identified only as "O."

April 17, 1817, Boston, *Columbian Centinel*, (O.)

"... defects have been great, and we are surprised they are not greater. ... Much confusion ensued in the last chorus of the Creation, when there was a clashing in time for a few bars between the instruments and voices. Some examples occurred of such excessive loudness and stress of voice as to destroy all musical tone."

Similar critiques followed H+H through its first 30 years and were matched by decreasing ticket sales, except when noted soloists, such the tenor Thomas Phillips, were featured guest artists. This precarious situation was summed up nicely by one member of the chorus who recalled that more people were often on stage than in the audience.

An unsigned article published in January 1839 in *The Musical Magazine* went beyond merely critiquing performances to commenting on decisions made by the H+H board for the 1838-1839 season and suggesting a course of action for the future: "Mr. Zeuner has been made President, [1838-1839] and the whole put under his direction; a strong and good orchestra has been engaged ... But, we are sorry to say, the Concerts have been thinly attended ... the want of rehearsals is very obvious in the Concerts. ... If the Handel and Haydn Society would every year give us only *one* new and sterling oratorio, thoroughly rehearsed, and repeat it often enough to make the audience familiar with it, we think it would do much good to the cause of music. ... Such a position we should like to see this Society occupying." [*The Musical Magazine*, v.1 (January 5, 1839), p. 15]

The Musical Magazine, or Repository of Musical Science, Literature and Intelligence was edited by H. Theodor Hach [Hatch] and T. B Hayward and published in Boston from

1839-1842. The two points raised in this commentary, execution and repertoire, were a common theme in the early years of press commentary about H+H performances. In terms of execution, the Society's long-standing reputation for poor performance was not lost on the H+H board of trustees, who had contemplated suspending all public performances in 1838, even as they elected Charles Zeuner president. [Charles Perkins, *The History of the Handel and Haydn Society*, v.1 (Boston: Alfred Mudge & Son, 1883-1893), p. 118] Zeuner's election as president was a step toward addressing the challenges of training an amateur chorus; historically, the H+H President was also the conductor, even though only 3 of the 13 presidents were trained musicians and none had experience in leading a chorus and orchestra.

Later, *The Musical Magazine* went further saying that the problems in the chorus could best be solved by separating the office of the president from that of the conductor. [*The Musical Magazine*, no. XV (July 20, 1839), p. 236] The H+H board of trustees took up that question several times after this article was published before formally separating the office of president and role of conductor in 1847. [*History*, p. 140] But it was only with the appointment of Carl Zerrahn as H+H conductor in 1854 that this particular criticism subsided.

SAMSON,
AN ORATORIO,
THE WORDS BY MILTON:
THE MUSIC COMPOSED, A. D. 1742, BY HANDEL.
TO BE PERFORMED BY THE
Handel and Haydn Society,
AT THE MELODEON,
On Sunday Evening, Oct. 12th, 1845.

<p>SAMSON. MANOAH, the Father of Samson. DALILA, his Wife. MICAH.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">THE PERSONS.</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; border-right: 1px solid black; padding-right: 5px;">HARAPHA, of Gath.</td> <td style="padding-left: 5px;">MESSENGER.</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding-right: 5px;">CHORUS OF ISRAELITES.</td> <td style="padding-left: 5px;">CHORUS OF PHILISTINES.</td> </tr> </table>	HARAPHA, of Gath.	MESSENGER.	CHORUS OF ISRAELITES.	CHORUS OF PHILISTINES.
HARAPHA, of Gath.	MESSENGER.				
CHORUS OF ISRAELITES.	CHORUS OF PHILISTINES.				

[Performance to commence at 7 o'clock.]

[The audience will please refrain from any expression of applause.]

PART I.

OVERTURE.

SCENE BEFORE THE PRISON IN GAZA.

RECITATIVE. *Samson*, (Blind and in Chains.)

This day a solemn Feast, to Dagon held,
Relieves me from my task of servile toils;
Unwillingly, their superstition yields this rest,
To breathe the heav'n's air, fresh blowing pure and sweet.

CHORUS of the Priests of Dagon. [See Coll. vol. 4, p. 147.]

Awake, awake, the Trumpet's lofty sound,
The joyful, sacred Festival comes round,
When Dagon king of all the earth is crown'd.

RECITATIVE.

Samson.—Whom have I to complain of but myself!
Who, heav'n's great trust, could not in silence keep,
But weakly to a woman must reveal it?

Micah.—Matchless in might! once Israel's glory, now her grief,
We come, (thy friends well known,) to visit thee,

Samson. Welcome my friends.

Micah.—Which shall we first bewail, thy bondage, or lost sight?

Samson. O loss of sight! of thee I most complain,
O worse than beggary, old age, or chains!
My very soul in real darkness dwells!

Repertoire was affected by the need for more effective rehearsals as well. In looking at the 25th season of 1839-40, 15 concerts were given. Of those 15, 6 concerts were devoted to Sigismund Neukomm's oratorio *David*, which H+H had sung some 30 times in the previous 4 seasons. In addition, one-third or 5 of the 15 concerts were performances of works very familiar to H+H audiences: Handel's *Messiah* (2) and Haydn's *Creation* (3); and four concerts were set aside for "Selections," meaning choruses from Handel oratorios (more-often than not the "Hallelujah" Chorus from *Messiah*) or choruses from popular collections such as the *Old Colony Collection*, or H+H's own collections of Sacred (1822) and Church Music (1823) along with solo arias featuring H+H singers. In other words, none of this music was new to either the performers or the audience. [*History*, p. (vii-viii)]

This was not a new situation for the

Handel and Haydn Society. Between December 25, 1815 and December 15, 1845, H+H presented 287 concerts. Of these, two-thirds were devoted to this same repertoire: *Messiah* and *Creation*: 70 or about 25% / "Selections:" 108 or about 38%.

With the January 1845 American premiere of Handel’s oratorio *Samson*, however, H+H approached both concert repertoire and performance differently. The events leading up to the first performance of *Samson* were essentially outlined by the editor of *The Musical Magazine* some 6 years earlier. The board approved the suggestion of H+H organist A. U. Hayter to feature Handel’s *Samson* for the second half of the 1844-1845 season. It was given 13 times between January 26 and April 20, 1845 and no other work was presented. According to the *History of the Handel and Haydn Society*, volume 1, Hayter rehearsed the chorus, soloists, and orchestra and “did everything in his power to perfect its performance.” [History, p. 136] Rehearsals were begun late in 1844, and for the performances Hayter “played the organ in such a marked manner that it held the whole mass of singers and players together.” [History, p. 137]

After the final performance of the 1845 season, Hayter was presented with a silver pitcher and pair of matching goblets in recognition of his work. The inscription read: “Presented by the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston, to A. U. Hayter, in token of their estimation of his services as organist, and his assiduous exertions in bringing so successfully before the public Handel’s oratorio of *Samson*, May 20, 1845.” [H+H Archives]

To use the words of the [1839] *Musical Magazine* article, H+H presented *Samson* “often enough to make the audience familiar with it.” Then, it was revived for no more than four performances in later seasons. When compared to the way in which H+H continually returned to Neukomm’s oratorio *David* in the 1830s – 36 times in 5 consecutive seasons for *David* and 20 times over 22 seasons for *Samson* – it is clear the Society adopted a different approach for reviving familiar music.

Samson performances, 1845- 1877	
January 26 (premiere)– April 20, 1845	13 performances
October 12 - 26, 1845	3 performances
March 22 & 29, 1846	2 performances
January 24-February 28, 1847	4 performances
February 8 – 22, 1852	3 performances
November 27, 1853	1 performance
January 1 & 8, 1854	2 performances
November 27 and December 11, 1859	2 performances
November 24, 1867	1 performance
May 5, 1868	1 performance
May 18, 1877	1 performance (4th Triennial Festival)



First Triennial Concert at the Boston Music Hall

In subsequent seasons, a similar procedure was followed and the Handel and Haydn Society embarked on a series of American and Boston premieres of Handel oratorios including *Judas Maccabaeus*, 1847; *Solomon*, 1855; *Israel in Egypt*, 1859; Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, 1848; Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, 1853; and Mozart's Requiem, 1857. Perhaps even more telling is that of the 195 concerts given by H+H between January 26, 1845 and December 30, 1860, only 11 concerts (about 6%) were "Selections." (*History*, ix-xiv)

Although not specifically mentioned in newspapers or magazines, at this same time the H+H board rethought its repeated programming of Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *Creation*, two works associated with the Society from its inception. Between the same period of January 25, 1845 and December 30, 1860, H+H programmed *Messiah* (12 times) and *Creation* (13 times) a total of 25 times representing about 13% of the concerts as opposed to presenting the same oratorios for 25% of the concerts between 1815 and 1845.

Related to this, but again not explicitly mentioned in the press, in 1854, H+H began performing *Messiah* annually on or near Christmas Day, a tradition continued to this day.

Public interest in the workings of H+H continued in the 19th century, reaching a climax in the 1890s when the board was divided over the resignation of Carl Zerrahn. In the 20th century, too, the decision to appoint Thomas Dunn, (viewed as the first steps toward historically-informed performance), was a response to a scathing review by Michael Steinberg in 1965. The influence of public discourse on the H+H board of trustees will

never be labeled as a cause-and-effect kind of relationship. However, as these brief examples show, press commentary did appear to influence decisions the H+H board made about repertoire choice, and public performance.

Teresa M. Neff, Ph.D., a Lecturer in Music at MIT and the Christopher Hogwood Historically-Informed-Performance Fellow with the Handel and Haydn Society, co-edited the book *The Handel and Haydn Society: Bringing Music to Life for 200 Years*.