SAUL

An Oratorio in Three Acts  |  Music by George Frideric Handel  |  Libretto by Charles Jennens
Sung in English with projected English titles

OCT 25  |  OCT 27M  |  NOV 02  |  NOV 05  |  NOV 08
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Jonathan pleads with his father to spare David’s life, and he reluctantly agrees despite his unrelenting anger and jealousy toward David. Saul summons David to his court, but David does not come. Saul seeks assistance from the Witch of Endor to speak with the deceased Samuel, the former king of Israel, even though magic and necromancy has been outlawed in Israel. The ghost of Samuel comes forth and reminds Saul of his disobedience under Samuel. He then predicts Saul’s death, the death of his sons, and the defeat of his army in the next day’s battle against the Amalekites.

David learns of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, whom he loved, and orders the killing of the Amalekite soldier who told him the news. He is crowned king of Israel.

A full synopsis appears on p. 51.

**Quick Start Guide**

**Story in a Nutshell**

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**What to Listen For**

The carillon is an instrument that was first standardized in 1644, but its lineage is traced back to medieval church bell towers. While the tower bells were unpitched, used for announcements of church services and other events, the earliest carillons tuned 23 or more of these bells into distinct musical pitches to create an instrument operated with a complex series of ropes and hammers. Handel incorporated the carillon into his orchestra for Saul, the first ever scored use of the instrument: it was such an unusual sound in Baroque music that the librettist, Charles Jennens, called this idea one of the “maggots” in Handel’s head. Modern-day concert carillons are much smaller than the early, massive systems of church bells and ropes, and are operated like a piano whose hammers strike metal bars rather than piano strings. The carillon will appear in the first act while the Israelites praise David for slaying thousands of their enemies, and it will sound like a high-pitched glockenspiel.

Listen also for the scene in which our title character visits the Witch of Endor. Saul says, “If Heaven denies thee aid, seek it from Hell,” and he turns to the evil of witchcraft in his distress, wanting to raise the spirit of the prophet Samuel to seek his counsel. In a concert version of the oratorio, the roles of Saul and the Ghost of Samuel would be performed by two different singers. In this production, however, the two roles are sung by the same baritone, as the spirit of Samuel is channeled through Saul’s body. Listen for how Christopher Purves, one of the great singing actors of the stage, uses the subtleties of his voice to portray two characters at the same time.

**Fun Fact**

In Protestant London of the 1700s, religious texts—defined as any sacred text taken directly from or simply inspired by the Bible—were not allowed to be presented onstage as an opera. In order to write operas on religious texts, Handel labeled them as “oratorios.” That classification came with the genre’s structural requirement to include large, long, and complex choral numbers, giving Handel an opportunity to showcase his incredible choral writing, an opportunity not available with Italian opera seria, which did not make use of choruses.

To learn more about the English oratorio, head to p. 44.
CAST (IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE)

Michal Andriana Chuchman
Abner/High Priest/Doeg/Amalekite Keith Jameson
Saul/Ghost of Samuel Christopher Purves
David Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen †
Jonathan Paul Appleby *
Merab Pureum Jo †
Witch of Endor Chad Shelton †

CREATIVE TEAM

Conductor Patrick Summers
Margaret Alkek Williams Chair
Original Director Barrie Kosky *
Revival Director Donna Stirrup
Set and Costume Designer Katrin Lea Tag *
Original Lighting Designer Joachim Klein *
Associate Lighting Designer David Manion *
Original Choreographer Otto Pichler *
Revival Choreographer Merry Holden *
Chorus Master Richard Bado †
Sarah and Ernest Butler Chair
Musical Preparation Kirill Kuzmin †
Kyle Naig †
Ms. Kathleen R. Cross/Stephanie Larsen/
Dr. and Mrs. Migul Miro-Quesada/
Richard M. Stout Fellow
Organ Soloist Blair Salter †
Ken Cowan *
Continuo Ensemble
Patrick Summers, harpsichord
Kirill Kuzmin, harpsichord †
Barrett Sills, cello
Michael Leopold, theorbo
Kyle Naig, organ and carillon †
Dialect Coach Jim Johnson
Stage Manager Kristen Burke
Assistant Director Kaley Smith
Supertitles by Jeremy Johnson

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Supertitles called by Meredith Morse.
Performing artists, stage directors, and choreographers are represented by the American Guild of Musical Artists, the union for opera professionals in the United States.
Scenic, costume, and lighting designers and assistant designers are represented by United Scenic Artists, IATSE, Local USA-829.
Orchestral musicians are represented by the Houston Professional Musicians Association, Local #65-699, American Federation of Musicians.
Stage crew personnel provided by IATSE, Local #51.
Wardrobe personnel provided by Theatrical Wardrobe Union, Local #896.
This production is being recorded for archival purposes.

* HGO debut † HGO Studio artist ‡ Former HGO Studio artist
PART I
The Israelites give thanks to God and sing praises to David for his victory over Goliath, the Philistine giant. David is welcomed by Saul, King of Israel, his son Jonathan, his two daughters Michal and Merab, and Abner, his commander-in-chief. Jonathan swears eternal friendship to David. Saul offers David Merab's hand in marriage, but she scorns his humble origins. Her sister Michal, however, is in love with David. The women of Israel offer further tributes to David, which makes Saul furiously jealous and fearful for his crown. After he leaves, Jonathan reproaches the women for their rash words and urges David to soothe Saul by playing his harp.

Abner returns to report Saul's madness. Saul reappears venting his anger and attempts to kill David, who manages to escape unharmed. Saul commands Jonathan to destroy David, while Merab comments on her father's capricious behavior. Jonathan feels torn between his conflicting loyalties to David and to his father. The High Priest and the Israelites pray for David's safety.

The people of Israel ponder the destructive power of jealousy. Jonathan confesses to David that Saul has ordered him to kill him, but that he will never harm David. He tells David that Saul has given his daughter Merab to another man, but David is undisturbed, since he loves Michal. Jonathan urges David to escape. Saul arrives and asks Jonathan if he has obeyed his command to kill David, and Jonathan pleads with his father to spare his friend. Saul seemingly relents, asking Jonathan to summon David back to court. Jonathan welcomes David back, while Saul feigns friendship, offering David Michal's hand and appointing him commander of the Israelite army. David promises loyalty. Saul voices his secret hope that David will be slain by the Philistines. Michal and David declare their love for one another. The chorus praises David's virtue.

PART II
Upon his return from battle, David tells Michal of Saul's anger, treachery, and attempt to kill him. Michal urges him to escape. Doeg, Saul's messenger, arrives to arrest David, but David once again evades capture. Merab, who has softened toward David, expresses her fear for his safety and her faith that Jonathan will save him. At the Feast of the New Moon, Saul declares his intention to destroy David. He questions Jonathan about David's absence and reproaches him siding with his enemy. When Jonathan defends David, Saul flies into a rage and attempts to murder his own son. The Israelites warn of the dire consequences of Saul's anger.

In disguise, Saul goes to consult the Witch of Endor, whose magic he had previously outlawed. The Witch complies with Saul's request to conjure the ghost of Samuel. The ghost of Samuel tells Saul that Israel will be defeated by the Philistines, and Saul and his sons killed, after which the kingdom will pass to David. After the battle, David questions an Amalekite about its outcome and learns of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan and the defeat of the Israelites. David and Merab mourn the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. The High Priest urges the Israelites to celebrate the return of David, and the people extol David and entreat him to lead them into battle and redress the defeat of their nation.

Synopsis originally produced by Glyndebourne Festival Opera.
Leading British baritone Christopher Purves, who last appeared on the Wortham stage as Pasha Selim in The Abduction from the Seraglio and as Alberich in Göttterdammerung in 2017, marks his triumphant return to HGO this fall in the title role of Barrie Kosky’s lauded production of Handel’s Saul; a role he originated in the 2015 Glyndebourne Festival to much acclaim. The role is emotionally and physically demanding and requires the talents of an experienced opera singer able to constantly push himself out of his comfort zone.

When asked what advice he would give to young opera singers eager to eventually reach his level of expertise, Purves responded in a jocular tone.

“I would say, just wait until I finish my career, and then you can have a good career yourself,” he laughed, sounding very much like the character he brings to life onstage at HGO this fall. “I would say, watch. Invent. Use your imagination. Don’t take anything for granted. Keep questioning.”

Purves shared more thoughts with Daniel Renfrow in a late-summer phone interview conducted while the opera star was in Slovenia.

DANIEL RENFROW: What made you decide to become an opera singer?
CHRISTOPHER PURVES: I’m the fourth son of four boys. So, I’m the little one. I’m the baby of the family. And I found that the only way I could get our parents’ attention was to make a little noise. That was my preferred way. And I think it’s quite a natural path, or it felt like a natural path for me, to go from being the shouting last son to actually being paid to be loud. And I went to a British choir school, so I learned how to sing. I learned how to read music. I learned how to interpret a composer’s ideas and thoughts.

You’ve performed quite a bit of Handel. What do you enjoy most about his works?
Most of the Handel I sing is a great challenge. It’s a vocal challenge. It’s an interpretive challenge. And some of the stuff I sing requires me to sing like the tenor, then two seconds later, I’m singing right at the bottom of my voice. It’s like Handel gives you a blank canvas; I think he gives instructions, and then says to you, right, show us what you can do with this. Now, what does it mean to you? Make it personal. It’s not just a question of coming up with ornamentation or repeating a section. It’s a whole gamut of what you take from—what does this mean to you? How did it touch you? How did it make you feel? What do you think the words really mean? And for me, it’s so exciting. You can invent.

You originated the role of Saul in Barrie Kosky’s production of the opera. What was your experience like working with Kosky and working on that production in general?
It was the best time of my life. Really, it was just incredible. It was all imagination. It was all about taking what Barrie gave to me. It was an extraordinary, extraordinary company. We had six weeks of rehearsal. And in those six weeks, we charted a character. We charted a path for the character to maximize what Handel and Jennens, the librettist, had given us. I think that what we came up with was about as good as it can get—it wasn’t just about notes. It wasn’t just about standing in the right position. It was inventing this whole character, this whole descent into madness, this whole route from avenging king to the total desperation and the knowledge of this whole character. You know he’s going to die at the end, but you don’t know how he’s going to get there, and you don’t know the twists and turns. I think in order to invent something, in order to put an oratorio on stage, you have to have license. And I think he gave us that license to invent in a most colossal way.

Do you have a favorite moment in the production?
I think my favorite moment is when I’m at my sort of wit’s end, in a way; when I’m down to my shorts. I’m absolutely helpless and hopeless. There’s a line, “Where are my old supports?” He has no one on stage. It’s just me. And it’s pitiful, it’s so sad, but there’s also an intense, a really sort of courageous path that Saul tries to find—I try to find as well. It’s often pitiful, yet also courageous. It’s the realization that I’m going to have to do something rather extraordinary in order to solve this particular problem for myself.
BLENDING THE GENRES:

HANDEL’S THEATRICAL INNOVATION

BY JEREMY JOHNSON
Dramaturg
George Frideric Handel has confused many a casual classical music devotee. Was he a German composer? An Italian composer? An English composer? The truth is, he was a dazzlingly unique mix of all three. Born in 1685 in Halle, Germany, Handel grew up in the German polyphonic tradition of Protestant church music. He spent five formative years in Florence and Rome where his style was heavily influenced by the Italian Baroque. Then, in 1710, he moved to London where he would live out the rest of his life, becoming a naturalized British subject in 1727.

Handel is credited with the creation of the English oratorio, and his particular style combines elements of all three countries’ musical and cultural traditions. As an organist in Lutheran and Calvinist churches in Germany, Handel was charged with writing weekly cantatas and anthems that sparkled with choral polyphony. But it was in Italy that Handel learned about the solo voice, and the style and structure of the two large-scale Italian vocal forms: oratorio and opera.

The Italian Baroque oratorio had existed since the early 1600s, but it took a backseat to the much more popular Italian Baroque opera. While the early operas were about kings or gods, or were often based on Greek or Roman mythology, the early oratorios were based on Latin biblical texts. The word oratorio comes from the Latin verb orare, to orate, plead, or pray. Its sacred implication defined the Italian Baroque oratorio as a religious genre for the first part of the 17th century, and many of them were performed in the Catholic churches and cathedrals in Italy. By 1700, however, secular themes were woven into the Italian oratorio, and Handel’s first, in 1707, was about five of the Muses.

The more significant structural difference, however, between oratorio and opera was the chorus. The oratorio originated with a quartet of unnamed singers that represented the crowds, or who commented on the action like a Greek dramatic chorus. Over time, composers expanded the quartet into a larger and larger chorus. Italian opera, on the other hand, became characterized by its alternation between recitativo and the da capo aria, without any choruses; indeed, many Italian Baroque operas include almost nothing but arias with few, if any, duets, trios, or other ensembles. Giulio Cesare, for example, contains just two duets, while Alcina boasts a single trio; the rest of the numbers in each of these operas are solo arias. Handel, like some of the earliest Italian Baroque opera composers, might bookend his operas with choruses, but they are often sung by the soloists of the opera themselves, and not by a separate group of choristers. Consistently and throughout the plot, however, the dramatic adoption of the chorus was almost nonexistent in Italian Baroque opera.

By the time he moved to London, Handel had written two Italian oratorios and six Italian operas—some of which, interestingly, had arias in both Italian and in German, as they were first performed at the opera house in Hamburg. Once in London, Handel secured the opportunity to launch his career as a successful composer of Italian opera. He wrote five Italian operas in his first five years in London and an incredible thirty-six more over a twenty-year span after that. Toward the end of that output, however, the political and theological environment in London started to turn against Italian opera.

The English nation was unusually politically and theologically aware, the two being quite inseparable: opinionated religious and political debate dominated everyday life, while church sermons influenced every aspect of public policy and intellectualism. Early in the 18th century, “religious freethinking” was a hot topic of public debate, pitting the conservative-minded Protestants against the humanistic Deists. Many reformists in the Church of England saw religious freethinking as a form of heresy, culminating in ecclesiastical reprimands and trials of treason for the
more liberal-minded believers. Keep in mind, this is the same environment that spurred the mass migration of religious minorities from England to the Americas.

The theater found itself in the middle of this debate. Public performances influenced private behavior and were therefore considered to be matters of public concern: the theater was seen as the foremost purveyor of vice and bad habits. Many influential writers even wanted all the theaters to be closed, as the Puritans had done to the Shakespearean theaters between 1642 and 1660. Though no closure occurred, reform movement was championed for art to revitalize the nation's morals. In order for art to be more than a vice-ridden, heretical pastime, it needed to be moral, serious, and instructive, with emotional subjects that brought the viewer closer to God and the Church of England. It certainly did not help Italian opera's reputation that it came from a Catholic country.

Seeing the public appetite shifting toward religious art, Handel, the commercially minded entrepreneur, saw an opportunity for religious-themed opera. But the Blasphemy Act of 1605 had, for over a century, prohibited works based on scripture from appearing on the acted stage. Enter the English oratorio.

In 1718, Handel introduced Esther, his first English oratorio, to the London public. The oratorio form allowed Handel to compose for dramatic subjects with religious themes without the performers “acting” the drama on the stage, and he cleverly introduced this genre in the vernacular. Exploiting the patriotism woven throughout the religious debate, the phrase “Oratorio in English” was the largest font size on the posters—the language was a chief selling point. Newburgh Hamilton, a writer and later one of Handel’s librettists, commented that “Mr. Handel had so happily here introduc’d Oratorios, 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.” The solemnity of church music refers to the seriousness of style, the morality of subject, and the extensive employment of choral polyphony, while airs of the stage simply refers to the English word for the operatic aria. As Italian Baroque opera had been structured primarily with arias, Handel combined those with the anthem choruses of church music—on a sacred subject and in the English language—thereby introducing a brand-new genre of musical form.

After Esther, Handel spent the next twenty years writing almost exclusively Italian opera: he wrote only three more oratorios during this time. But as his operas’ ticket sales dropped and the Christian defense against the “Notorious Infidels” raged on, his musical ventures reached an inflection point. In 1738, he began composing Saul to a libretto by Charles Jennens, a noted landowner, writer, and patron, famous for his public opposition to “freethinking Deism.” Jennens would go on to write at least three other known libretti for Handel, including the famous Messiah. When Saul premiered in 1739, it was met with enormous enthusiasm—and, surprisingly, not only from one side of the religious debate. Despite Jennens’ personal stance, the reflective nature of the libretto, along with the requisite distillation of the biblical story into musical text, meant that none of the words argued for or against a specific “side.” It was the best of both worlds: a sacred theme that aroused the noblest of religious thoughts in the audience, set to words that were theologically moderate enough to appeal to a wider public without serious objection. Indeed, Handel was a true entrepreneur.

If Saul is Handel’s compositional inflection point, we can clearly see the change in his output. After 1739, Handel wrote only two more Italian operas, one in each of the following two years, but he wrote at least fifteen more known English oratorios over the course of his career. He solidified his reputation in 18th century London as the preeminent composer of popular music, drawing sell-out crowds to each of his English oratorios in the 1740s and 1750s, and doing so with public acclaim from traditionalists and freethinkers alike. He created the musical genre of the English oratorio: blending the Italian aria, German choral polyphony, and the English language together with the cultural backdrop of intense religious debate. Handel designed the ideal musical experience for his audience, one that has gone on to inspire generations of musicians and audiences all over the world.
A four-and-a-half octave span of the human voice, the countertenor—a voice part highlighted in our production of Handel’s *Saul* by Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen, who plays David—is the second highest for adult males. Countertenors have a range that sits between the male tenor and the female contralto, sharing some notes with both. They differ from a nearly extinct type of voice, the sopranist: a male capable of singing fully in the female soprano range. Technically, there is no such thing as a “male soprano” any more than there is a “female bass.” The singing voice has no known relationship to sexuality and is physiologically related to gender, but not to gender’s accompanying gamut of identities. The castrati reigned for nearly two centuries at the beginnings of opera and were by far its biggest stars. Scholarly books abound, but one of the greatest readings about the era of the castrati is to be found in fiction, from Anne Rice, in her gorgeous pre-vampire novel, *Cry to Heaven*.

If one combines all of the repertoire written for sopranist (like Sesto in Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito*) with that for countertenor, there is a vast amount of music, much of it unknown, and all of it conceived for preadolescent males so gifted at singing that they were castrated to prevent their voices from descending. The range of their voices was higher the younger they underwent the procedure, so the ability to identify the right time for the alteration was considered an art of its own. Castration, considered needlessly barbarous to us now, was in its time thought no more unusual than circumcision, and was similarly sanctioned by religious authorities. Opera audiences in the 18th century did not yell “bravo” to express their pleasure, they screamed, “evviva il cotello!” (“Long live the knife!”).

The last known castrato, Alessandro Moreschi, was born in 1858 and lived until 1922, and thus is the only of his voice type preserved on recording. The great Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini’s fascination with the Broadway legend Ethel Merman, who he heard several times in her famous debut musical *Girl Crazy*, by the Gershwins, was based on what he considered her similarity to Moreschi’s voice. The Merman hallmarks were all qualities of the great countertenors: unique timbre, long phrases, and clear words.

Today’s countertenors reach their success in more organic ways than their physically altered colleagues. They sing in a reinforced falsetto, about an octave higher than their modal speaking voices, which tend to be a natural baritone. Vocal range (how high and how low) and vocal resonance (how loud and how soft) are, like climate and weather, two related issues that are distinctively separate. Countertenors have discovered where their most natural resonance lies, which may or may not be where the natural range of their voice is.

The modern countertenor exists because of the early music movement, a recent phenomenon that would have been unheard of a century ago, when audiences had little interest in music outside their own time. Thanks to the numerous scholarly pioneers of the early music movement, musicians are able to bring very old music to new life on instruments both ancient and modern, and sublime works like Handel’s *Saul* are being rediscovered. Most thrillingly, great young stars like countertenor Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen can give voice to music written for their colleagues centuries ago, but whose voices were silenced by time. They live on.