

Sara Eckerson

Centro de Estudos Comparatistas - FLUL

Considerations of the Body in Handel's *Samson* (HWV 57): The Body in Performance and the Body at Absolute Distance¹

George Frideric Handel's *Samson* (HWV 57, 1743) is one of the composer's oratorios based on a work of English literature, in this case John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671). Milton did not intend the dramatic poem to be staged, as he explicitly states in the poem's preface. Handel's oratorio was performed in the manner of Handel's oratorios of the period – that is, without scenery, costumes, or enactment. The oratorio's autograph score, conducting score, and wordbook (1743A), nevertheless, provide description that suggests reflection on the narrative with material representation.

In the first scene of Act 1 of Handel's *Samson*, Samson is described in the score as follows:

Samson blind and in chains

Chorus of the priests of Dagon, celebrating his festival at a distance

These indications appear in the score and in the wordbook (1743A) read by the audience with the exception of the “at a distance” qualification (which is contained uniquely in the score). Narrative content that occurs “at a distance” appears again at the conclusion of the oratorio, and the description appears in the score and in the wordbook (1743A). This initial description at the start of the oratorio, however, points to three different problems that illustrate the disunion between the body in performance and the dramatic (or narrative) content of music performed – namely, the dissolution of a direct relationship between the

¹ The author kindly thanks Juergen Neubacher at the Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg for his assistance, and the Music and Literature group at the Centre for Comparative Studies (University of Lisbon). The author would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

performing body and the oratorio's narrative content: (1) Samson is blind and (2) in chains, and (3) there is a strong concept of bodies "at a distance." The focus of our discussion will be on the physical impediments Handel is able to overcome in the oratorio when narrative content occurs "at a distance" from the singers onstage. This is especially relevant in consideration of how Handel's oratorio performances did not portray action onstage in a normative (theatrical, or representational) way. Ultimately, we will determine how the materiality of the performing body dissolves within the notion of absolute distance in light of the content of Christian tragedy present in the Samson oratorio.

Keywords: George Frideric Handel, John Milton, Hans-Georg Gadamer, oratorio, *Samson*, *Samson Agonistes*, absolute distance, aesthetics, tragedy

The aim of the present article is to shed light on the material body in performance in George Frideric Handel's *Samson* (HWV 57, 1743). The principal thread of our investigation utilizes three sources: the stage cues written in the 1743 (A) wordbook,² the autograph score,³ and the conducting score.⁴ Our study begins by treating three questions that arise related to Samson's material body when we consider the stage cues in the wordbook and scores mentioned above: (1) Samson is blind and (2) in chains, and (3) certain parts of the oratorio take place "at a distance." We will explore the concept of distance in most detail in terms of the spectator's aesthetic appreciation, the performance onstage, and how the notion of distance emphasizes the tragedy of the Samson narrative. Scholars have focused on historical performance practice⁵ and the importance of stage indications in the wordbooks accompanying

² We have adopted Winton Dean's designation; this is the wordbook that accompanied the first performance on February 18, 1743. See Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, 349, 359.

³ Handel, *Samson* (oratorio by Newburgh Hamilton after texts by John Milton) (HWV 57), 1741, 1742. Autograph (R.M. 20.f.6: 1741-1742).

⁴ Handel, *Samson* (HWV 57), conducting score. 3 volumes. Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, MA/1048.

⁵ For example, see Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios*, 331-345.

Handel's oratorios from a general standpoint;⁶ there has been little research done, however, into the relations between the material body of the performers and the spectators' understanding of the *Samson* oratorio narrative. In this article we will explore this from a perspective of aesthetics, specifically related to questions of materialism and the body in Handel's *Samson*.

Introductory remarks

The story of Samson that we find in Handel's *Samson* oratorio corresponds loosely to the Book of Judges 16:21-31, although it retells events from the Book of Judges, Chapters 13-15. The *Samson* oratorio also draws extensively from Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671), as Milton's poem served as the basis for the oratorio. Newburgh Hamilton writes in the "Preface" of the 1743 (A) wordbook that the aim of Handel's oratorio is to bring Milton's *Samson Agonistes* to the stage in the manner of other works by Milton, which had recently been staged.⁷ What is relevant from the Samson narrative for the present article is the following: Samson was born to his parents after an angel appeared saying that his mother would bare a son who would deliver the Israelites from the Philistines.⁸ During Samson's life the "Spirit of the Lord" would come upon him and give him enormous strength, such as to tear a lion apart with his bare hands.⁹ At one point he marries a Philistine named Delilah (or "Dalila" in Milton and Handel), who implores Samson to reveal to her the locus of his strength; he eventually tells her that his strength is in his hair.¹⁰ When Samson is asleep, Delilah has his hair

⁶ See Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 23-39; Smith, "Handel's English Librettists," *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, 92-108.

⁷ [Hamilton, Newburgh], *Samson. An Oratorio*. "Preface" i-iii, Hamilton mentions the other works by Milton that have recently been brought to the stage: *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (HWV 55) with libretto prepared by Charles Jennens and based on Milton's poems "*L'Allegro*" and "*Il Penseroso*." See Handel, *Samson*, ed. Clausen, ser. I, vol. 18, xx. Hamilton, "Preface," i.

⁸ Jgs 13:3-5, 24 (AV).

⁹ Jgs 14:6, see also Jgs 14:19, Jgs 15:14 (AV).

¹⁰ The notion that Samson marries Delilah is not mentioned in AV, but is explicit in Handel's *Samson* and *Samson Agonistes*. See also Jgs. 16:4, 15-17 (AV).

shaved off.¹¹ Then a group of Philistines come upon him, take out his eyes, bind him in chains, and bring him to the prison house in Gaza.¹²

This is the point where the oratorio starts, and is also the starting point for *Samson Agonistes*: Samson is before the prison in Gaza, taking a rest because he is not forced to do work on this particular day. The Philistines are celebrating their God named Dagon, the God they believe has delivered them from Samson.¹³

In the oratorio, many characters approach Samson, including Manoa (his father), Samson’s friend Micah (an invention for the oratorio), and a chorus of Israelites. They deliberate on the situation with Samson, where the oratorio treats philosophical and theological ideas. In Act 3 of Handel’s oratorio, Samson is asked to show feats of strength to the Philistines for the sake of sport. Samson reluctantly goes, leaving Micah and Manoa on the stage together. Micah and Manoa remark about a horrible noise they hear, a noise that is at a distance from them; a messenger then comes to say Samson has died, pulling down the building where he was with the Philistines and thus killing everyone there.¹⁴

The Samson Word Cues in Question, and Performance

One particular criticism of Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, which is sometimes conveyed onto Handel’s *Samson*,¹⁵ is that it has a limited plot¹⁶ – “Samson, overthrown by the Philistines, eventually destroys

¹¹ Jgs 16:18 (AV).

¹² Jgs 16:21 (AV).

¹³ See Milton, “Samson Agonistes: a Dramatic Poem,” 457-512; see ll. 1-17 and also ll. 434-39.

¹⁴ Handel, *Samson*, Act 3, scenes 1-3.

¹⁵ “In the division of the work into acts and scenes [Newburgh Hamilton] was not particularly successful; the first act especially, which has no dramatic action at all” – Clausen, “Preface”, xix-xxx, xxvi. Charles Jennens similarly criticized Hamilton’s libretto and wrote: “Hamilton had omitted much that was necessary for the understanding of the plot,” – Clausen, “Preface,” xxiii.

¹⁶ We refer here to Dr. Samuel Johnson’s infamous criticism of *Samson Agonistes*: “The immediate parts have neither cause nor consequence, neither hasten nor

his captors.”¹⁷ It is notable that very little happens in the oratorio from a dramatic point of view (“Samson is as heroic as an immobile figure can well be”)¹⁸ as much of the intellectual weight of the work is placed on discourse between characters, which Milton (in *Samson Agonistes*) contains within Samson’s personal deliberation.¹⁹ By following Milton’s poem, the oratorio does not make extraordinary demands on the listener’s imagination because the narrative and plot do not necessarily demand it. In Winton Dean’s critical view of the plot, he writes of the overall “slowness of the action, and this stems from the inactivity of Samson himself, who is a sufferer, not an agent.”²⁰ Along this line of argument, we recognize that the one major action in the oratorio – when Samson pulls the building down upon the Philistines, killing everyone there and himself – is “at a distance”;²¹ at the beginning of the oratorio, we find Samson in chains because his hair was shaven, and the Philistines had “put out” his eyes at a time in the recent past. These elements all seem to emphasize Samson as a “sufferer.” When we consider all of the action that is external to the oratorio (but necessary for the narrative), the results of these actions (either as wounds inflicted on Samson, and finally Samson’s death) are relevant for the material significance they have for the oratorio – Samson’s body serves as a testament of what has

retard the catastrophe” – Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets, with Critical Observations on their Works*, I: 264.

¹⁷ M. E. Grenander, “*Samson’s Middle: Aristotle and Dr. Johnson*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* XXIV, no. 4, 377-389, 381. Few actions are imitated in *Samson Agonistes*, and this has led to controversy among critics over whether *Samson Agonistes* can be called a tragedy in the Aristotelian sense of the term.

¹⁸ Dean, 332.

¹⁹ We suggest that *Samson Agonistes* is, perhaps, more of a portrayal of activity of the mind than the imitation of action. Dr. Johnson may have touched on the deeper intellectual aspect of the tragedy within his criticism of Milton’s art as a playwright: “Milton would not have excelled in dramatic writing; he knew human nature only in the gross, and had never studied the shades of character, nor the combinations of concurring, or the perplexity of contending passions. He had read much, and knew what books could teach; but had mingled little in the world, and was deficient in the knowledge which experience must confer” – Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, I: 265.

²⁰ Dean, 332.

²¹ Handel, *Samson*, Act 3, scene 2.

been done and what he will do. (His activity as an agent is obscured by his suffering and deliberation for the majority of the oratorio.) The descriptions of his body in the 1743 (A) wordbook and the score supplement the lack of material identifiers in the performance, and these words work like a nod to the Samson narrative without describing what has already happened to Samson.

In the first scene of Act 1 of Handel's *Samson* oratorio, Samson is described in the score and 1743 (A) wordbook as follows:

Samson blind and in chains

*Chorus of the priests of Dagon, celebrating his festival at a distance*²²

This is how Samson is introduced in the 1743 (A) wordbook, except for the “at a distance” qualification (present in the autograph score and conducting score); they are read by the audience and interpreted in the score by the musicians and singers. It is worthy to note that the lights were generally left on during the performances so that the spectators could read along in the wordbook.²³ The description of Samson and the Chorus of the Priests of Dagon, nevertheless, illustrates a fundamental problem of the *disunion* between the body in performance and the content of the music performed – that is, the dissolution of a direct relationship or reflexivity between the performing body and the dramatic oratorio content.

This disunion in performance is, in part, the result of historical practice. We remember here that the *Samson* oratorio had similar representation in performance as Handel's other oratorios; Handel's oratorios were performed without action on the stage, costumes, or explicit scenery. Charles Burney describes a performance of Handel's

²² Handel, *Samson* (oratorio by Newburgh Hamilton after texts by John Milton) (HWV 57), 1741, 1742. Autograph (R.M. 20.f.6: 1741-1742), see folio 7 verso. Handel, *Samson* (HWV 57), conducting score. 3 volumes, see folio 7v and folio 8r. Handel, *Samson*: HWV 57, ser. I, vol. 18 [in two ‘Teilbände’], see 20, (The “Chorus of the Priests of Dagon” is not marked “at a distance” as found in the conducting score). See also [Hamilton, Newburgh]. *Samson. An Oratorio. As it is Perform'd at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden*, 1. See Appendix 1 for examples from the conducting score.

²³ Greencombe, “Wordbooks,” *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia*, 673.

oratorio *Esther*, stating that Handel had the oratorio performed in the theater in 1732 “but in *still life*, that is without action in the same manner as oratorios have been since constantly performed.”²⁴ Note that the “*still life*” representation or staging method Burney identifies is what he calls the “same manner as oratorios have been since constantly performed.” This comment has provided insight into the staging and performances of later oratorios and what contemporary staging of Handel’s oratorios probably looked like.²⁵ Some Handel scholars, however, find the lack of enactment to be circumstantial (and therefore not a defining quality of performance practice): “the idea of a necessary antithesis between oratorio and stage action ... was simply a product of local conditions in the eighteenth century, though its sources can be traced back to the Reformation.”²⁶ Scholars agree, nevertheless, that a tradition of “extended dramatic oratorio” did not exist in England before Handel arrived in 1710,²⁷ and that English oratorio was “Handel’s own creation... quite unlike anything that existed anywhere else.”²⁸ Thus

²⁴ Burney, “Fourth Performance,” *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster-Abbey, and the Pantheon, May 26th, 27th, 29th; and June the 3d, and 5th, 1784. In Commemoration of Handel*, 101. Burney’s information regarding the first performances of *Esther* come from two sources – Dr. Randal and Mr. Barrow, “who were among the original performers, when it was dramatically represented.” Burney, 100.

²⁵ Bishop Gibson did not allow Handel to stage *Esther* and “considered the opera house an immoral place” for a work based on a sacred theme. “Thus forced to compromise, Handel accepted for *Esther* the traditional continental manner of presenting oratorios. Except for the bishop’s refusal to grant permission, English oratorio might have become a staged genre.” – Smithers, *A History of the Oratorio*, Vol. 2, 197.

²⁶ Dean, 4.

²⁷ Landgraf and Vickers, “Oratorio,” *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia*, 454-457, 455.

²⁸ Dean, 3. Also, on the surface, the oratorio form takes “for its province anything from the opera to liturgy, combining the dramatic, narrative, reflective, didactic, and recreational... Oratorio meant different things at different times and places, and different things at the same time and place.” Dean, 3. Dean adds: “the early oratorio as evolved in Italy was a dramatic form, with very little that can be called either meditative or narrative. These elements came in much later from the German Passion, and even that had existed for generations without the meditative content characteristic of its best period. The original motive power behind the oratorio was didactic, to instruct with the aid of visible action.” – Dean, 4.

for the sake of our argument, we will examine specific aspects of the *Samson* oratorio narrative and the presentation of those material considerations from the point of view of contemporary performance practice – that is, in *still life*.

Therefore in accordance with the “local conditions of the eighteenth century,” Handel’s English oratorios lack the reflexivity we may find when music and narrative are paired with enactment in other musico-dramatic contexts, like opera.²⁹ The music of the oratorio, from the point of view of coherence, should support the airs and recitatives in such a way that the lack of enactment should not become a hindrance to an overall understanding of the oratorio.³⁰ Handel initially approached the oratorio form in England as an alternative, parting from a previous focus on Italian opera; Handel “quickly recognized in the English oratorio a possibility of presenting music to the public on those days in Lent when theater performances were forbidden.”³¹ This makes Handel’s oratorios an interesting case where the composer articulates narrative in large-scale compositions without enactment, coming at the heels of writing for opera. To this end, Handel

²⁹ Musical forms that were precursors of Handel’s English oratorio form *did* involve enactment. Dean notes “from the tenth to the late thirteenth centuries there flourished all over Europe a form of liturgical music drama which in its artistic aims and method of performance anticipated not only oratorio but several aspects of grand opera as well.... These dramas, which sprang from tropes interpolated into the Roman liturgy, were written in Latin and performed by the clergy in churches and cathedrals with costumes, scenery, and action, sometimes on a very elaborate scale.... Among these was Belshazzar’s Feast, enacted with astonishing elaboration in a drama (*Daniel*) written for Beauvais Cathedral about the year 1150. The writing on the wall, the lions’ den, and the battle in which Belshazzar is slain were realistically presented; and the costumes and settings, if the stage directions are to be believed, and even the orchestration, were of a spectacular brilliance.” – Dean, 5.

³⁰ Carolyn Abbate comments on the peculiar power of narration in opera, when paired with enactment and ingenious musical accompaniment: “narration conjures up its own content, demonstrating that while it enables us to *imagine* events, it can also *produce* them.” – Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, 64. See also narrative song and Romantic ballad poetry (which in the 19th century became *Lieder*), Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 69-70. We argue these forms, in Abbate’s commentary, have a parallel method to express narrative in oratorio.

³¹ Clausen, “Preface,” xix.

took care when setting the English language to effectively succeed in composing in this new form:

In the composition of the recitatives we can see ... an endeavor to adapt to the special features of the English language: a clear differentiation between note values seems to suggest an imitation of varying speeds of declamation, and a frequent use of dotted rhythms, in which a short pause can take the place of the dot, show that Handel is concerned with nuances. Everything which in the long-established tradition of Italian opera was self-evident and therefore did not have to be shown in the notation, now needed to be made clear in the newly-established English oratorio.³²

This suggests that Handel composed the music of the oratorios with a vision to inspire the listeners' imagination with respect to the dramatic situations described in the airs and recitatives, often carried out through well-articulated English in the recitatives. An example of this is the way Handel treats the continuo accompaniment for Dalila's recitatives, especially in Act 2, scene 2, in the recitative "But Who is This."³³ Handel adds depth to the presentation of Dalila's character through the inclusion of staccato and sostenuto indications in the score where normally the recitatives "were accompanied staccato."³⁴ The musical cues in the recitatives work in tandem with the narrative to produce a more complex view of the character without the use of enactment:

Dalila's many lapses from the emotional intensity indicated by the sostenuto seems to be a subtle device on Handel's part for making her motives seem questionable or to cast doubt on her honesty [...]. The distinction that modern communication psychology makes between the conscious, the verbal awareness, and the far-reaching unconscious non-verbal communication through the tone of voice, gesture and mimicry, is here reflected in the functional division between voice part and accompaniment. It is clear that Dalila cannot sustain her intention to present herself as a remorseful and at the same time seductive sinner: an unusual situation, which explains the exception nature of these indications.³⁵

³² Clausen, "Preface," xxiii.

³³ See Appendix 1, Figure 3.

³⁴ Clausen, "Preface," xxvii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xxviii.

Accordingly, each of Handel’s oratorios will have their own challenges for listeners to imagine the narrative unfolding on stage without being represented through enactment and other material aids. When we return to the case of *Samson* (and Samson’s body), the stage cues cited above (“Samson blind and in chains / Chorus of the priests of Dagon, celebrating his festival at a distance”) present three problems at the beginning of the oratorio regarding the *disunion* of the body in performance and the body in the narrative. They can be outlined as follows:

1. Samson is blind at the opening of the oratorio. Samson is not merely blind, moreover, but has no eyes at all for the entire oratorio. Here the singer’s body will undoubtedly betray that he *can* see – by reading music while singing, for example.
2. Samson is in chains, and is never unshackled onstage. This similarly shows how the body of the singer defeats the illusion of the body in the narrative – namely, the singer is not wearing chains.
3. In Act 1 and Act 3 of the oratorio, the Chorus of the Priests of Dagon and the Chorus of Philistines have the performance indication that they are “at a distance.” This *distance* in the score calls attention to the relation between bodies as proximate or remote. Bodies on Handel’s stage, however, do not move to represent space or separation in a normative theatrical reenactment of an action.

The first two items listed arguably fall into the category of wordbook stage cues, and historically “printed ‘stage directions’ often compensated for the lack of visible action.”³⁶ This suggests that certain aspects of the oratorio can be confusing for the spectator’s aesthetic comprehension unless an explicit written description accompanies the narrative while it is performed.³⁷ The physical aspects of Samson’s loss

³⁶ Smith, *Handel’s Oratorios*, 23.

³⁷ “Frequently the apportioning of text to characters had to be clarified by reference to the libretto, because soloists doubled minor and even major roles. For example, Esther Young created the roles of both Juno and Ino in *Semele* (aptly, since the plot

of eyes and being chains are material representations in the oratorio that have metaphorical significance – for example, Samson's blindness is metaphorical for his inability to understand his current predicament in relation to a broader theological narrative; the shackles can also represent Samson's bondage to his ignorance, and alternatively that Samson is bound to a specific theological destiny. Blindness and chains, nevertheless, serve as preliminary observations before the material of the body. The third element listed, the "at a distance" indication, arguably has a greater aesthetic purpose than the clarification of narrative. To determine this purpose, we will return to Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and additional aesthetic dimensions of Handel's *Samson*.

Distance as a word cue and description, in the context of *Samson* and *Samson Agonistes*

Distance is crucial in the *Samson* oratorio as distance, when conceptualized in the spectator's imagination, creates a link between the oratorio and the aim of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* as a dramatic poem "of that sort of Dramatic Poem which is call'd Tragedy."³⁸ As Milton's poem was not meant for being staged,³⁹ the word cues and description we find in the oratorio help to bridge the gap to create a more palpable understanding of the notion of tragedy both in Handel's *Samson* and Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. The angle we approach the problem from integrates the classical notion of tragedy that Milton appeals to – as found in Aristotle's *Poetics* – and the focus of the effect tragedy has on the spectator. Milton puts the idea in the preface to *Samson Agonistes*:

Tragedy, as it was antiently compos'd, hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems: therefore said by *Aristotle* to be of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such like

entails the disguising of the former as the latter); given the absence of costume and action, this doubling would have been extremely confusing to the audience but for the wordbook." – Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, 23.

³⁸ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, [preface], 461.

³⁹ "Divisions into Act and Scene referring chiefly to the Stage (to which this work never was intended) is here omitted." – *Ibid.*, 462.

passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirr'd up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated.⁴⁰

Milton describes how tragedy can carry out a cathartic effect on the spectator both through the reenactment of “those passions well imitated” and (importantly) through reading (as Aristotle also defended).⁴¹ Winton Dean mentions the model of Greek tragedy, as found in *Samson Agonistes*, to have helped Handel to tell the Samson narrative. Dean particularly emphasizes the choruses both “within and without the action” in *Samson*, that the choruses have a “gnomic flavor,” and this “is determined by the Greek principle of allowing them at intervals to sum up the physical and spiritual aspects of the situation.”⁴² Commentary and theological reinforcement of the Samson narrative through the choruses can be found throughout,⁴³ which we argue contributes to the linear development of the narrative even when it takes place in two different locations (that is, “at a distance” and not “at a distance”).

Within the context of the tragic sphere of Milton’s dramatic poem and Handel’s oratorio, the question of distance contributes to a sense of space to determine also what is onstage versus what is offstage; in *Samson* this organization of space in the listener’s imagination assists in the aesthetic appreciation of Milton’s tragedy in the oratorio. Confusion may arise (thus the printed stage cues can help in this instance) because even when the Priests of Dagon are singing near Samson onstage,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 461.

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b 23-28. See also “tragedy achieves its effect even without actors’ movements [...]; reading makes its qualities clear.” – *Poetics*, 1462b; and “tragedy’s capacity is independent of performance and actors, and, besides, the costumier’s art has more scope than the poet’s for rendering effects of spectacle.” – 1450b17-20. This aspect of Aristotle’s theory is critical for Milton, considering he did not intend *Samson Agonistes* to be staged.

⁴² Dean, *Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios*, 332.

⁴³ For example, Act 1, scene 3, Chorus, “Then round about the starry throne” – [Hamilton], *Samson*, 9; Act 2, scene 1; Air and Chorus, “Return O God of Hosts” – *ibid.*, 11; Act 2, scene 3, Chorus, “To Man God’s Universal Law” – *ibid.*, 15; Act 3, scene 1, Air and Chorus, “The Holy One of Israel” – *ibid.*, 22-23.

they must be imagined as being offstage or “at a distance.”⁴⁴ At the beginning of the oratorio, Samson is “at a distance” from the Feast to Dagon,⁴⁵ but at the end of the oratorio Samson joins the Philistines to follow his destiny (in the tragic sense) and participates in the Feast to Dagon. These “at a distance” bookends in Handel’s oratorio (in Act 1, scene 1, and Act 3, scene 2) foreshadow where Samson will have to go: from a material perspective, he will have to move himself to that place that is “at a distance;” from a psychological perspective, he must make up his mind, or deliberate on his situation, which has the effect that his deliberation renews his faith and theological convictions. And this deliberation will close up the metaphorical distance between Samson’s unwillingness to accept his destiny and his death.

The use of distance in Act 3 scene 2 is more explicit than in Act 1; moreover, the spectators will read “at a distance” twice in the 1743(A) wordbook for this purpose. This distance not only represents the metaphorical distance between the Philistines and Micah and Manoa, but it also has a fundamental role in the determination of the tragic action that will take place at a distance.

The first mention of distance in Act 3 presumably marks the time when Samson has arrived at the place of the Feast to Dagon:

AIR and Chorus of Philistines at a Distance

*Great Dagon has subdu'd our Foe,
And brought their boasted Hero low:
Sound out his Pow'r in Notes divine,
Praise him with Mirth, high Chear, and Wine.*⁴⁶

Manoa and Micah comment on this music, which indicates they can hear this sequence although perhaps not as clearly as the spectator.

⁴⁴ See conducting score stage cues, Appendix 1, Figures 1 and 2.

⁴⁵ [Hamilton], *Samson* – Samson’s recitative describes the event as the *Feast to Dagon*: “This Day, a solemn Feast to *Dagon* held / Relieves me from my Task of servile Toil,” 1. In the stage cues, the feast is also referred to as a “Festival,” see [Hamilton], *Samson*, 1.

⁴⁶ Act 3, scene 2, [Hamilton], *Samson*, 23.

In their responses, they offer an interpretation of what the music means and also provide insight into how they interpret it; for example, Manoa states: “What Joy of Noise was that?” (note, he does not say “music”):

Manoa. What Joy of Noise was that? It tore the Sky.
Micah. They shout and sing to see their dreaded Foe
Now captive, blind, delighting with his Strength.⁴⁷

After a brief dialogue between Manoa and Micah, the wordbook shows they are interrupted:

[*A Symphony here of Horror and Confusion.*]⁴⁸

Manoa. Heav’n! what Noise!?
Horribly loud, unlike the former Shout.

Chorus of Philistines at a Distance

Hear us, our God! O hear our Cry!
Death! Ruin! Fall’n! no Help is nigh:
*O Mercy, Heav’n! we sink! We die!*⁴⁹

The spectator understands that this “noise” is the continuation of what has been happening “at a distance” because Manoa uses the identical word “Noise.” (Once again, Manoa does not say “music” despite the fact that the “noise” is labeled a “Symphony” in the score and wordbook.) For Manoa, the Philistines’ music is not recognized *as* music. The distance between the Philistines and Manoa and Micah, as represented through the sequence of what is going on onstage versus offstage, becomes salient as a physical distance and as an ideological distance. The spectator understands that the climatic tragic act takes place away from where Micah and Manoa can see. Upon witnessing

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Manoa's reception of the news of Samson's death,⁵⁰ the spectator can ultimately form a bond with the characters onstage through a sense of empathy and recognition of what has happened "at a distance." The emphasis on Manoa's response to Samson's death highlights the tragic nature of the work, according to its Aristotelian determination.⁵¹

Distance in *Samson* as Absolute Distance in the Context of Christian Tragedy

At this point we call attention to two distinct notions of distance specifically related to tragedy and Handel's *Samson*: first is a notion of distance as separation between Manoa and Samson's death (that is, the event of Samson's death); second is the distance inherent to the spectator's perspective (that is, the physical distance of the spectator's body from the tragedy as it unfolds onstage). Hans-Georg Gadamer introduces a notion of distance as pivotal to understanding the spectator in the appreciation of an artwork (from the perspective of an ontological theory about a work of art). Gadamer emphasizes performative arts – that is, drama and especially music – because "the work of art cannot simply be isolated from the 'contingency' of the chance conditions in which it appears.... It itself belongs to the world to which it represents itself.... [The being of art] is a part of the event of being that occurs in presentation and belongs essentially to play as play."⁵² The spectator's distance from an artwork being performed constitutes what Gadamer calls an "absolute distance," and is integral to the aesthetic experience. As the artwork is performed, neither the biography of those involved (that is, the composer, author, or the players), nor the biography of the spectators "has any legitimacy of its own in the face of the artwork."⁵³ Gadamer continues:

⁵⁰ See Act 3, scene 3, Recitative, "Where Shall I run," [Hamilton], *Samson*, 25-26; Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 1569-1591.

⁵¹ "What tragedy must seek are cases where the sufferings occur within relationships, such as brother and brother, son and father, son and mother – when the one kills (or is about to kill) the other, or commits some other such deed." Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1453b18-22.

⁵² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 115.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 124.

What unfolds before us is so much lifted out of the ongoing course of the ordinary world and so much enclosed in its own autonomous circle of meaning that no one is prompted to seek some other future or reality behind it. The spectator is set at an absolute distance, a distance that precludes practical or goal oriented participation. But this distance is aesthetic distance in a true sense, for it signifies the distance necessary for seeing, and thus makes possible a genuine and comprehensive participation in what is presented before us [...]. For it is the truth of our own world – the religious and moral world in which we live – that is presented before us and in which we recognize ourselves.⁵⁴

The notion that the spectators forget themselves and then unite with themselves through this subjective reflection, dependent upon the artwork, becomes even clearer in Gadamer's theory when exemplified in the tragic play. The "absolute distance" (or "aesthetic distance") highlights the separation of the spectator from the tragedy onstage; it also calls our attention to how this same distance gives each spectator an opportunity to recognize what resonates with them in the tragic narrative. The aesthetic distance allows us, as spectators, to contemplate what is *like us* in the tragic content. Thus Handel's indication "at a distance" inspires the spectator to reflect on the reason why a particular part of the narrative takes place offstage, and how that relates to the spectator as an individual as well as the narrative.⁵⁵ As blindness, shackles, and distance work on the level of metaphor, and as material coordinates of the Samson narrative, the spectator is able to reconcile what is relevant within the space of the artwork with the contingencies of the spectator's own life. Therefore the spectator's aesthetic appreciation of the *Samson* oratorio is not restricted to, or exclusive to, the Samson narrative: "tragic pensiveness flows from the self-knowledge that the spectator acquires.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ "The spectator does not hold himself aloof at the distance characteristic of an aesthetic consciousness enjoying the art with which something is represented, but rather participates in the communion of being present. The real emphasis of the tragic phenomenon lies ultimately on what is presented and recognized, and to participate in it is not a matter of choice." – *Ibid.*, 128.

He finds himself again in the tragic action because what he encounters is his own story, familiar to him from religious or historical tradition.”⁵⁶

Following Gadamer’s theory, we argue that the spectator’s self-encounter happens in the oratorio because not only is the spectator presented with themes that encourage empathy (for example, the loss of a child, the idea of suicide,⁵⁷ blindness, and the idea of being imprisoned), but also through a religious or theological tone in the representation of Micah and Manoa’s reaction to Samson’s death. This is namely because their reaction is positive. The joyful turn at the conclusion of the oratorio overwhelms the grief in Manoa’s immediate response after hearing the account of how Samson died. Manoa’s reaction in this case is extraordinary for a father who has just lost his son: “Come, come; no Time for Lamentation now; / No Cause for Grief; *Samson* like *Samson* fell; / both Life and Death heroick. To his Foes / Ruin is left; to Him eternal Fame.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, the oratorio concludes with the uplifting Grand Chorus “Let the bright Seraphims”⁵⁹ based on Milton’s “At a Solemn Music,” and this imparts an exuberant ending to the tragedy. This final chorus expresses a sense of elation in the face of death; by so doing, it recalls both the religious tradition Gadamer’s spectator identifies with and introduces the notion of Christian tragedy to the oratorio.

The fact that the source of “Let the bright Seraphims” is a different Miltonic poem – that is, its provenance is not *Samson Agonistes* – may offer insight into the emphasis on the positive outcome. Gadamer

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Samson’s death as suicide is one of the more controversial aspects of the Samson narrative from a theological perspective. See Krouse, *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition*, 96.

⁵⁸ [Hamilton], *Samson*, Act 3, scene 3, recitative “Come, come no time for Lamentation Now,” 28.

⁵⁹ “Let the bright Seraphims in burning Row, / Their loud, up-lifted Angel-Trumpets blow: / Let the Cherubick Host, in tuneful Choirs, / Touch their immortal Harps with golden Wires: / Let their celestial Concerts all unite, / Ever to sound his Praise in endless Blaze of Light.” Grand Chorus, “Let the Bright Seraphims in Burning Row” – Act 3, scene 3, [Hamilton], *Samson*, 28; based on Milton’s “At a solemn Musick,” ll. 10-13; 27-8; see Milton “At a solemn Musick”, *Complete Shorter Poems*, 38-39.

describes “the idea of Christian tragedy presents a special problem since in the light of divine salvation the values of happiness and haplessness that constitute tragic action no longer determine human destiny.”⁶⁰ We understand the tragedy exposed in the Samson narrative, qualified as Christian tragedy, requires the sense of “divine salvation” in order to reconcile the horror of Samson’s death with such an uplifting conclusion. Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* also ends on a positive note; the music and words of “Let the bright Seraphims,” however, supersede the glory of Samson’s death as described in Milton.⁶¹

Concluding Remarks

Ultimately, we argue that part of the success of Handel’s *Samson* rests on how Samson’s death takes place “at a distance,” and this implies a sense of the locus of Samson’s body. The distance of the tragic action we find in Handel’s oratorio, as in Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, is at a variance with the story of Samson’s death in the Old Testament. In Judges 16, the reader can see and hear Samson in the moments prior to his death. The reader is not learning of Samson’s death through a second-hand account, as is the case in *Samson Agonistes* and Handel’s *Samson*. The narrator in Judges almost offers a glimpse into Samson’s thoughts, as the passage describes what Samson says and what Samson also states in prayer:

⁶⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 127. See also Roberts: “The meaning of a really great dramatic tragedy is not all despair and doom. Despair and doom are characteristic of certain kinds of dramatic tragedy, namely the Greek and the modern skeptical.... [Christian dramatic tragedies] turn upon the theme of man’s idolatry and pretension rather than upon the themes of man’s suffering nobility or piteous abnormality. They move from fate to freedom, from defeat to victory, from doom to grace, and from tragedy to peace.” – Roberts, “A Christian Theory of Dramatic Tragedy,” *The Journal of Religion*, XXXI, 1-20, 7. Roberts determines “Christian tragedy” to be found in the Gospels, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Lost*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd*, and Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot* (see Roberts, 1).

⁶¹ See *Samson Agonistes* ll. 1740-1758.

And they called for Samson out of the prison house; and he made them sport: and they set him between the pillars. And Samson said unto the lad that held him by the hand, Suffer me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house standeth, that I may lean upon them. Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines *were* there; and *there were* upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport. And Samson called unto the Lord, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes. And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left. And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with *all his* might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that *were* therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than *they* which he slew in his life.⁶²

The retelling of Samson's act by the Officer in Handel's *Samson* mentions only that Samson brought the building down;⁶³ in the parallel passage of *Samson Agonistes*, the Messenger offers a physical description of Samson ("with head a while enclin'd / and eyes fast fixt he stood, as one who pray'd")⁶⁴ and recites the cryptic message Samson speaks⁶⁵ before pulling the building down. The physical distance between the event of Samson's death and the spectator helps the spectator to perceive the situation as a whole, and protects the spectator from the horrific scene that may overpower the aesthetic experience if it were reenacted. The focus, in any event, is not on Samson's body itself but

⁶² Judges 16:25-30, AV.

⁶³ Act 3, scene 3, "Unwounded of his Enemies he fell, / At once he did destroy, and was destroy'd. / The Edifice, where all were met to see, / Upon their Heads, and on his own he pull'd." – [Hamilton], *Samson*, 26.

⁶⁴ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 1636-37.

⁶⁵ "Hitherto, Lords, what your commands impos'd / I have perform'd, as reason was, obeying, / Not without wonder or delight beheld. / Now of my own accord such other tryal / I mean to shew you of my strength, yet greater; / As with amaze shall strike all who behold" – *Ibid.*, ll. 1640-45.

on the event that happened. The audience need not *see* the body, but believes the second-hand account.

We recall that Milton, following Aristotle, asserted that tragedy can be represented onstage or read to the same result,⁶⁶ but there is a notably different material outcome in the Samson narrative versus the tragedy Aristotle refers to as a case in point – that is, *Oedipus Rex*.⁶⁷ Critics are quick to note the parallels between *Oedipus Rex* and *Samson Agonistes* with respect to its tragic content “so far as the relation between action and representation is concerned. In both plays, a great deal of what must be considered action (and hence plot) take place outside the play.”⁶⁸ At the conclusion of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus’s mother (Jocasta) commits suicide offstage and Oedipus takes out his own eyes offstage. It is a messenger who offers a first-hand account to the chorus leader so the spectator is privy to what has happened offstage (1365).⁶⁹ Unlike *Samson*, Oedipus returns to the stage after he has blinded himself⁷⁰ much to the horrified Chorus (and presumably spectators). Here the pathos is accentuated in the material presentation when Oedipus returns to the stage; Oedipus’s presence inspires terror in those onstage.

In the *Samson* oratorio, Handel illustrates Samson’s death in music and not in represented action. Samson’s death becomes something sonorous. Samson’s body, as a material thing, is less relevant for the narrative – Samson’s death supersedes the particular body through divine assistance.⁷¹ At the conclusion, Manoa and Micah explicitly

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, “preface”, 461; Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450b17-20.

⁶⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1453b3-6.

⁶⁸ Grenander, “*Samson’s* Middle: Aristotle and Dr. Johnson,” 379.

⁶⁹ “By her own hand, but you are spared the worst, / you never had to watch ... I saw it all,” Sophocles, “Oedipus the King,” *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, 1365-6.

⁷⁰ Messenger: Look, he’ll show you himself. The great doors are opening – you are about to see a sight, a horror / even his mortal enemy would pity
Chorus: O the terror/ the suffering, for all the world to see, / the worst terror that ever met my eyes ... I pity you but I can’t bear to look (1429-39) – *Oedipus the King*, 238-239.

⁷¹ For more on the theological relevance of this aspect, see Eckerson, “The Material of the Servant: Theology and Hermeneutics in Handel’s *Samson*,” *Yale Journal of Music & Religion*, 4, Number 2.

mention Samson's body, but the comments are made in the future tense with relation to a proper burial and veneration.⁷² Further, when Handel's oratorio ends with an uplifting Final Chorus, the spectator enters into that closed arena of the oratorio as an artwork, and leaves with a sense of peace as the tragedy in *Samson* speaks to the spectator through a vehicle identified by Gadamer as Christian tragedy.

The final Chorus "Let the bright Seraphims," conveys a new narrative that is outside of the parameters of the Samson narrative and contains explicit theological imagery. There is no longer a focus on Samson's body and strength, or descriptions of his body; the final chorus is a vision of cherubs and seraphim playing trumpets and harps, with the concluding lines "Let their celestial Concerts all unite, / Ever to sound his Praise in endless Blaze of Light."⁷³ This imagery helps to pull the narrative away from the material body, the notion of the singer who represents Samson's character, and the story of Samson as an individual; instead the singular hero with a material body is transformed to represent martyrdom in accordance with theological determinations. The *Samson* oratorio at this point no longer relies on a body (that is, a body determined by blindness, shackles, and distance from the spectator) to tell its story. The distance between the body in performance and narrative content falls away in favor of an aesthetic distance. The religious tradition that houses the Samson narrative, which pairs the realization of the spectator with the idea of salvation, can be determined as the spectator's self-encounter with Christian tragedy; as so being, the material body in the oratorio serves as a metaphor to elucidate theological content before the spectator's own story in a quality of aesthetic distance.

⁷² Act 3, scene 3: "Manoa: Proceed we hence to find his Body soak'd / in vile *Philistine* Blood, with the pure Stream / and cleansing Herbs wash off the clodded Gore; Then solemnly attend him to my Tomb, / with silent Obsequies and fun'ral Train. / Micah: The Body comes; we'll meet it on the way / With Laurels ever green, and branching Palm; / Then lay it in its Monument, hung round / With all his Trophies, and great Acts enroll'd / In Verse Heroick, or sweet Lyrick Song" – [Hamilton], *Samson*, 26-7.

⁷³ Handel, *Samson*, Act III, scene 3, Grand Chorus; based on John Milton, "At a solemn Musick," ll. 10-13, 27-8.

APPENDIX 1



Figure 1. Recitative “This Day a Solemn Feast” (Act 1, scene 1), Handel, *Samson* (conducting score), Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, MA/1048, Vol. I, folio 7v. Used with kind permission from the Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg.



Figure 2. Chorus, “Awake the Trumpets lofty Sound” (Act 1, scene 1) in G. F. Handel, *Samson* (conducting score), Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, MA/1048, Vol. I, folio 8r. Used with kind permission from the Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg.



Figure 3. Recitative, “But Who is This” (Act 2, scene 2) in G. F. Handel, *Samson* (conducting score), Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, MA/1048, Vol. II, folio 15v. Used with kind permission from the Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg.

Works Cited

- Abbate, Carolyn. *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Edited and translated by Stephen Halliwell. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Burney, Charles. “Fourth Performance.” *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster-Abbey, and the Pantheon, May 26th, 27th, 29th; and June the 3^d, and 5th, 1784. In Commemoration of Handel, 90-107*. London: Printed for the Benefit of the Musical Fund; and Sold by T. Payne and Son at the Music Gate; and G. Robinson Pater-noster-row, 1785.
- Clausen, H. D. “Preface.” Translated by Terence Best. In G. F. Handel. *Samson: HWV 57, xix-xxx*. Edited by H. D. Clausen. Hallische Händel-Ausgabe, ser. I, vol. 18 [in two ‘Teilbände’]. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2011.
- Dean, Winton. *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.

- Eckerson, Sara E. "The Material of the Servant: Theology and Hermeneutics in Handel's *Samson*." *Yale Journal of Music & Religion*. Volume 4, Number 2, Article 1 (2018): 1-32. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.17132/2377-231X-1104>.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Second, revised edition. Translation revised by Joel Weinscheimer and Donald Marshall. London and New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Greencombe, John. "Wordbooks." *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia*, 673-4. Edited by Annette Landgraf and David Vickers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Grenander, M. E. "*Samson's* Middle: Aristotle and Dr. Johnson." *University of Toronto Quarterly* XXIV, no. 4 (July, 1955): 377-389.
- [Hamilton, Newburgh]. *Samson. An Oratorio. As it is Perform'd at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden. Alter'd and adapted to the Stage from the Samson Agonistes of John Milton. Set to Music by George Frederick Handel*, by George Frederick Handel, London: J and R Tonson in the Strand, 1743.
- Handel, George Frideric. *Samson* (oratorio by Newburgh Hamilton after texts by John Milton) (HWV 57), 1741, 1742. Autograph (R.M. 20.f.6: 1741- 1742).
- . *Samson* (HWV 57), conducting score. 3 volumes. Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, M A/1048.
- . *Samson*: HWV 57. Edited by H. D. Clausen. Hallische Händel-Ausgabe, ser. I, vol. 18 [in two 'Teilbände']. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2011.
- Johnson, Samuel. *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets, with Critical Observations on their Works. A New Edition, Corrected. In Four Volumes*. 4 vols. London: Printed for J. Rivington & Sons et. al, 1790.
- Krouse, F. Michael. *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition*. New York: Octagon Books, 1974.
- Landgraf, Annette, and David Vickers. "Oratorio." *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia*, 454-457. Edited by Annette Landgraf and David Vickers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Milton, John. "At a solemn Musick." *Complete Shorter Poems*, [38]-39. Edited by Stella P. Revard. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- . "Samson Agonistes: a Dramatic Poem." *Complete Shorter Poems*, 457-512. Edited by Stella P. Revard. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Roberts, Preston. "A Christian Theory of Dramatic Tragedy." *The Journal of Religion*. Volume XXXI (January 1951): 1-20.

*Eckerson: Considerations of the Body in Handel's Samson (HWV 57):
The Body in Performance and the Body at Absolute Distance*

Smith, Ruth. "Handel's English Librettists." *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, 92-108. Edited by Donald Burrows. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

———. *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Smither, Howard E. *A History of the Oratorio*. Volume 2, *The Oratorio in the Baroque Era, Protestant Germany and England*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977.

Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.