

# *From Handel's Death to the Handel Commemoration: The Lenten Oratorio Series at the London Theatres from 1760 to 1784*

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The history of English oratorio during the late eighteenth century is often summed up as a mere post-Handelian period, the only event worth noting during this time being the famous Handel Commemoration, held in Westminster Abbey in 1784. Yet the Commemoration, notable for its performances of Handel's oratorios with massive vocal and orchestral forces, was not an isolated event. In fact there was a strong performance tradition of oratorios in London even before the Commemoration, reaching back to Handel's own lifetime.

In the last decades of his life, Handel had established an annual series of oratorio performances at London's Covent Garden Theatre during Lent: starting off with occasional performances at the King's Theatre, Lincoln's Inn Fields and Covent Garden in the mid-1730s, by the 1750s these performances had developed into a regular series, with Covent Garden as the main venue. On the Wednesdays and Fridays during Lent, audiences could expect a series of oratorio performances, usually commencing on the first Friday in Lent and ending on the Friday before Holy Week, a full-length oratorio series usually consisting of eleven performances.

This pattern had not originally been planned as such, but had gradually evolved over a longer period of time. Handel's own oratorio performances in the London theatres were not as a rule confined to the Lenten period,<sup>1</sup> but eventually, as Winton Dean puts it, "gravitated towards it".<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly enough, this performance tradition was carried on by Handel's successors without even a break: His own series at Covent Garden was carried on after his death by John Christopher Smith (1712–1795) and John Stanley (1712–1786). In 1768, their most serious

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, some seasons at Lincoln's Inn Fields and the King's Theatre in the late 1730s and '40s started in November and continued until April; see Donald Burrows, *Handel*, Oxford, 1994, pp. 193–194.

<sup>2</sup> Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, London, 1959, p. 82.

rival Samuel Arnold (1740–1802) set up a series at Drury Lane, later at the Little Theatre, Haymarket, and was joined for some years by the trumpeter Edward Toms (d. 1775). After Smith retired, Stanley found a new partner in Thomas Linley (1733–1795), who, after Stanley's death, went into partnership with Arnold. Apart from these two major ventures, several other composer-cum-managers tried to set up independent series, among them Thomas Augustine Arne, Johann Christian Bach, James Hook, François Barthélemon and other leading figures of London's musical life of the time. In particularly good years, three oratorio series vied for the favour of the London public.

The purpose of the present paper is to give a general introduction to the chequered history of the London oratorio series from the time of Handel's death to the Handel Commemoration of 1784, and to show that even before this historical event, which established Handel's fame as one of the leading oratorio composers of all times, there was a continued interest in the genre, supported by the strong performance tradition of the Lenten oratorios at the London theatres. Also, it is an introduction to the history of one of the first "modern" concert series: without the help and support of wealthy patrons and subscribers, in the post-Handelian period the series depended entirely on day-to-day ticket sales. As such, it was one of the first large-scale professional profit-based concert organizations.

### Management and Organisation

Handel's own oratorio series owed its existence to a curious legal situation: with performances on the Wednesdays and Fridays in Lent, Handel took advantage of an exceptional regulation given by the Lord Chamberlain as early as 1712, which prohibited opera performances or plays on these particular days.<sup>3</sup> Since oratorios were exempt, with these works the theatres could be kept open on the otherwise "dark days". At first, Handel did not adhere too strictly to the Wednesday/Friday pattern, oratorios were occasionally given on other days of the week and, conversely, even operas or serenatas were performed on the "forbidden" days.<sup>4</sup> Indeed it seems that the rule was not enforced too

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<sup>3</sup> The relevant passage of the original text reads: "The Managers of ye Opera and Comedy are permitted to perform as often and on what days they think fitt Wednesdays and ffrydays in Lent only excepted." PRO LC 5/155, p. 159, dated 17 April 1712, quoted from Judith Milhous – Robert D. Hume, *Vice Chamberlain Coke's Theatrical Papers, 1706–1715*, Carbondale – Edwardsville, 1982, p. 184. Another regulation, issued on 11 April 1753, prohibited "Plays, Oratorios or any other Theatrical Performance in Passion Week", PRO LC 5/162, p. 2, quoted from O. E. Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography*, London, 1955, p. 740.

<sup>4</sup> See Burrows, *Handel*, pp. 193–194.

strongly, and that occasional lapses were overlooked;<sup>5</sup> understandably, contemporary observers thought this regulation rather confusing:

I have long endeavoured to find out the reason, why plays should not be performed on Wednesdays and Fridays in *Lent*, as well as on those days all through the rest of the season; [...] again, why are oratorios to be limited to this particular season? Can the time of the year render *solemnity unseasonable*?<sup>6</sup>

By mid-century, however, all confusion notwithstanding, by tradition Wednesday and Friday remained the established days for oratorio performances during Lent.

Throughout the period considered, the Lenten oratorio seasons were not organised by the managers of the theatres themselves, but both administratively and financially were run as independent enterprises. On Wednesdays and Fridays, the theatre's proprietors sublet the house to one or more oratorio managers. As independent entrepreneurs, the oratorio managers ran considerable risks, all takings were theirs, but on the other hand they also had to cover all expenses. Handsome profits were possible, but, since considerable sums had to be laid out, a few thinly attended performances could soon exhaust the financial resources of the managers. Apart from a nightly rent (which during the second half of the century ranged between about £25 and £35 per night for the two major London theatres, Covent Garden and Drury Lane<sup>7</sup>), the managers engaged and paid the vocal and instrumental soloists, the chorus and the orchestra. Additional fees had to be paid for the use of the organ (which sometimes does not seem to have been included in the general rent), as well as charges for candles, oil and coals. There were also the salaries of general personnel to be seen to, such as guards to keep the house in order, carpenters to set up the stage, as well as servants, music attenders, printers for the textbooks, music copyists and sundry other items, such as stationary and refreshments.<sup>8</sup>

The oratorio series was therefore an enterprise virtually independent of the general theatre management, an arrangement which

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, Handel's 1737 season included performances of *Giustino* and *Il Parnasso in festa*, which were also given on the Wednesdays and Fridays in Lent, see Burrows, *Handel*, p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> *The Gazetteer*, 25 February 1766.

<sup>7</sup> See Eva Zöllner, *English Oratorio after Handel: the London Oratorios Series and its Repertory*, Marburg, 2002, pp. 63–64.

<sup>8</sup> The most detailed surviving account is that of the Drury Lane 1779 season. The account book contains a very detailed list of expenses, including all personnel. (Folger Shakespeare Library W.b.319., ff. 47–60.)

suited all parties concerned: musicians and other theatre personnel were guaranteed continued employment even on the “vacant days” during Lent, the theatre management received rent from the oratorio managers, and the oratorio managers were given full use of the house, including an organ, an indispensable instrument for oratorio performances.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the oratorio managers ran high financial risks. Given the fact that only three oratorio account books are extant – Covent Garden 1761, and Drury Lane, 1779 and 1794<sup>9</sup> – detailed information about the financial success or failure of the series is scarcely available; however, performance reviews in contemporary newspapers and diaries give an indication of how the companies fared in general. In 1774, George III did not attend John Stanley’s oratorios at Drury Lane, and without the prospect of royal attendance ticket sales dropped alarmingly. The gentleman composer and oratorio enthusiast John Marsh (1752–1828) went to a performance of *Samson* at Drury Lane on 23 February 1774 and reported that, “;tho‘ the 1st Part was, I believe over, we had at going into ye Pit ye choice of several whole rows of Benches quite empty.”<sup>10</sup> The next season, when the monarch chose to favour the rival company run by Johann Christian Bach and Carl Friedrich Abel at the King’s Theatre, the results for Stanley were equally disastrous. In the end, he was unable to pay the musicians their full salary and had to rely on David Garrick, the famous actor and then manager of Drury Lane Theatre, who eventually covered his debts.<sup>11</sup> Less well-established entrepreneurs offered fewer performances, but sometimes even they had to round off the season with benefit performances “to make up [the] great Losses, sustained by performing Oratorios during this Lent”<sup>12</sup> – after a particularly disappointing 1762 season, Drury Lane’s

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<sup>9</sup> Figures from the Covent Garden 1761 account book are given in *The London Stage [The London Stage, 1660–1800. A Calendar of Plays, Entertainments & Afterpieces together with Casts, Box-receipts and Contemporary Comments]*, part 4 (1747–1776), ed. G. W. Stone (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), part 5 (1776–1800), ed. C. B. Hogan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968)], part IV, pp. 842–849, the ones for the 1794 Drury Lane season are also to be found in *The London Stage*, part V, pp. 1625–1637. For the 1779 Drury Lane account book, see the preceding footnote.

<sup>10</sup> *The John Marsh Journals: The Life and Times of a Gentleman Composer (1752–1828)*, ed. Brian Robins, Stuyvesant, NY, 1998, p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> “G.[arrick]’s Generosity to the Latter [Stanley] this Winter – was no greater than that of the Musicians. The Latter gave up their Pay first and G.’s munificence limp’d after.” Letter from Richard Brinsley Sheridan to the elder Thomas Linley, according to Cecil Price written between 3 May and 21 June 1775 (*The Letters of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, ed. Cecil Price, 3 vols., London, 1973, vol. 3, p. 305).

<sup>12</sup> *Public Advertiser* for 19 March 1762.

oratorio manager Thomas Augustine Arne was forced to resort to desperate means.

### **Repertoire and Programming**

As we have seen above, oratorio managers had to struggle hard for success: throughout the period considered, London audiences mostly had a choice between two companies, and in the early and mid-1770s, there were as many as three oratorio companies. In order to compete successfully against their rivals, oratorio managers had to be inventive and try to ensure financial stability by every available means. When John Christopher Smith and John Stanley took over Handel's established series at Covent Garden in 1760, Smith took the precaution of enlisting the help of George III, who agreed to favour the Covent Garden oratorio series. William Coxe, Smith's stepson and biographer, relates the story at some length:

Soon after the accession of his present Majesty [George III], Mr. Smith was introduced to the Royal Family. His introduction was principally occasioned by the following circumstance: Pinchbeck being employed by the Earl of Bute to construct a barrel organ of extraordinary size, requested Smith to superintend the work; which he at first declined, but, on application from his Lordship, afterwards complied. Langshaw, a very ingenious artist, was employed; and, under Smith's directions, set the barrels with so much delicacy and taste, as to convey a warm idea of the impression which the hand gives on the instrument. [...] Lord Bute was so well pleased with his success, that he was desirous of making an adequate compensation for the trouble. Smith declined all pecuniary gratification; and hinted, that he should think his pains more than amply repaid, if, through his Lordship's recommendation, the King would condescend to patronize the Oratorios. Lord Bute accordingly presented Mr. Smith in so favourable a light, that the King honoured the Oratorios with his presence; [...] which was a great support, and brought much company to the house.<sup>13</sup>

According to Coxe, in return for rather a small service Smith had been granted a favour, which actually laid the foundation of the series' lasting financial stability: the notice "By Royal Command" on the playbills announced the presence of His Majesty or members of the Royal Family. How important the support of George III was can

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<sup>13</sup> [William Coxe], *Anecdotes of George Frederick Handel and John Christopher Smith*, London, 1799, pp. 53–54.

be assessed by the failure of the 1774 and 1775 seasons run by John Christopher Smith and John Stanley, when the royal family was, exceptionally, absent.

In 1768, when Samuel Arnold first appeared on the scene, he had to compete against this “Opposition of Court interest”.<sup>14</sup> In order to hold his ground against Smith and Stanley, he lowered the ticket prices, trying to lure away audiences from Covent Garden: Smith and Stanley had always held on to the old “advanced prices” of Handel’s time, charging 10s 6d for seats in the pit and boxes, and 5s and 3s 6d for the first and second gallery respectively. In his first year at Drury Lane, however, Arnold charged just 5s for seats in the boxes, and tickets for the pit were to be had for 3s. Seats in the two galleries were only 2s (first) and 1s (second). According to notices in the London press, Arnold’s policy was highly successful. In 1769, the *Gazetteer* gratefully noted:

It is observed, with great pleasure, by the lovers of music, that an entertainment which joins to all the advantages of the Italian opera, that of full choruses, and the true pathetic in the airs, is afforded to the public at the common prices of plays. It is hoped that this will conduce to the introduction of English dramatic music, in the place of the Italian opera.<sup>15</sup>

And in his *Concert Room Anecdotes*, Thomas Busby raved:

The rate of charge had kept from [the oratorios] many lovers of the higher species of composition; and, when the Doctor [Samuel Arnold] first performed the *Messiah*, the crowd at the doors was so excessive, that when they were opened, the money-takers, unable to resist the pressure, fled from their posts.<sup>16</sup>

Comments such as those quoted above appeared in various London newspapers in the late 1760s. However, whether they can be taken at face value is the question: rather, it is to be assumed that Arnold himself “planted” many favourable advertisements in order to boost ticket sales.<sup>17</sup> After all, his pricing policy did not have the slightest effect on Smith and Stanley, who continued to charge their usual “advanced” prices.

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<sup>14</sup> *The European Magazine*, 5, 1784, pp. 371–372.

<sup>15</sup> *The Gazetteer*, 30 January 1769.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Busby, *Concert Room Anecdotes*, 2 vols., London, 1825, vol. 2, p. 102.

<sup>17</sup> Propagandist letters and so-called “puffs” (i.e. planted favourable reviews) were common in newspapers of the time; on this subject see Simon McVeigh, *London Newspapers 1750 to 1800: a Checklist and Guide for Musicologists* (= *A Handbook for Studies in 18<sup>th</sup>-century English Music* VI), Oxford, 1996, pp. 15–16.

Another vital factor to be considered was, of course, innovative programming. Putting on all-time favourites, such as Handel's omnipresent *Messiah* or *Judas Maccabaeus*, was not always a recipe for success; discriminating and demanding as they were, London audiences soon expected something more than a "continual round of *Messiah*, *Samson* and *Judas [Maccabaeus]*".<sup>18</sup> New oratorios always presented something of a risk. On the other hand, some novelty had to be provided for the sake of variety, and the companies tried their utmost to outdo their rivals and achieve the perfect all-purpose mixture. *The Gazetteer* commented on the upcoming competitive 1768 season as follows:

We hear there will be a great struggle of competition betwixt the two undertakings for the performance of Oratorios, at the Covent-Garden and the Haymarket. The first lay a stress on the presenting Handel's pieces in their original stile [sic] and mode; and, particularly, on the new Oratorio of Gideon. The others depend on their pretensions to accommodate the same composers pieces to the modern taste, by giving spirit to the airs, through the aid of more varied compound melody, as well as harmony in the accompaniments; and to entertain, by the novelty of their own new compositions, as well those which have already received the approbation of the public, as others not yet produced to the world.<sup>19</sup>

In their search for the most profitable style of programming, all managers had the same problems to face. Successful oratorio managers in the later eighteenth century had to devise a programme which included a maximum of "safe" oratorios, interspersed with some novelties. "New" oratorios were usually provided by way of pasticcios, which for the most part consisted of excerpts from Handelian oratorios; only very rarely did the managers risk putting on newly composed works. After 1784, selections from various compositions by Handel, based on the Commemoration programmes, came into play.

Looking at the programmes between 1760 and 1784, it appears that the established companies had different ways of putting this "golden rule" into practice. The following three graphics give an overview of what was performed:

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<sup>18</sup> See review by "Musicus" in the *Morning Chronicle* for 10 March 1773.

<sup>19</sup> *The Gazetteer*, 24 February 1768.

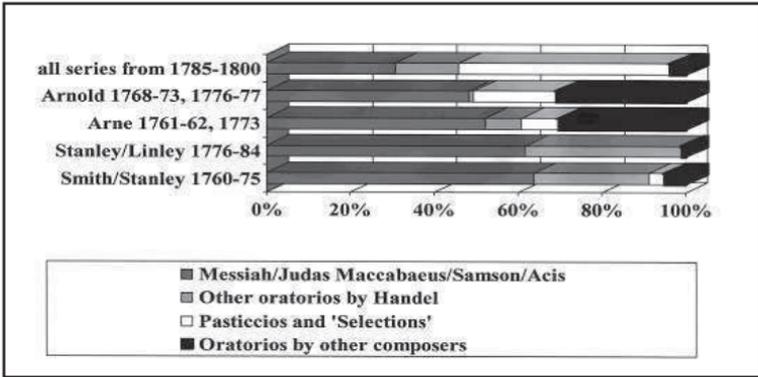


Fig.1: Programmes of the London oratorio series from 1760 to 1800

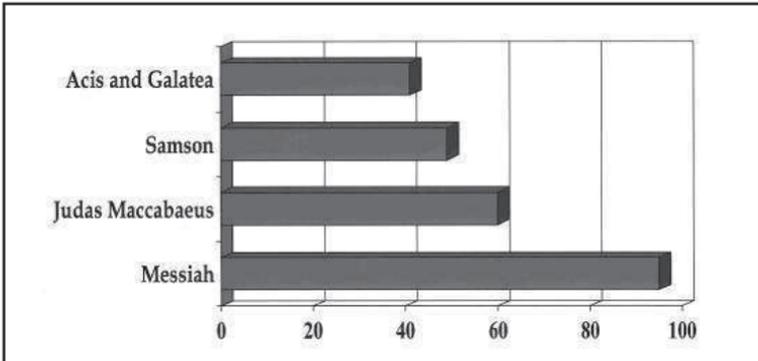


Fig. 2: The most popular Handel oratorios, performed in the London series, 1760–1784

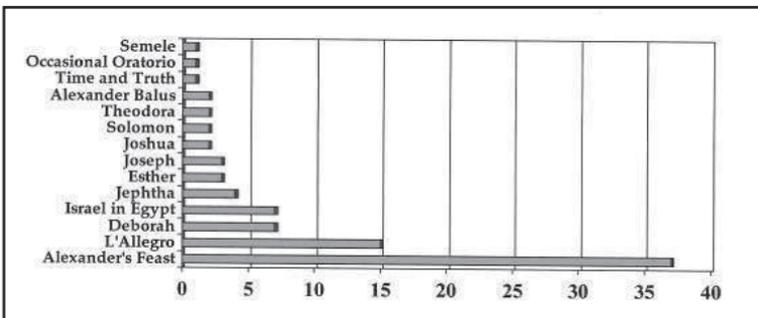


Fig. 3: Performances of "Other oratorios by Handel", as listed in Fig. 2

Continuing Handel's own Covent Garden series in an unbroken line, the company run by Stanley and Smith and later by Stanley and Linley at Covent Garden and Drury Lane Theatres can be considered as one undertaking. As shown in Fig. 1, the managers of this company put a strong emphasis on Handel's most popular oratorios, they performed only very few pasticcios (none at all after 1775), and a few new oratorios mainly by Stanley and Smith themselves. Even though a strong Handelian emphasis can be observed in the programming of the Covent Garden/later Drury Lane series, as shown in Fig. 1, it would be wrong to assume that Smith and Stanley had planned their programmes that way all along or that they could have foreseen the shape of things to come: in fact, in the early 1760s, the first years of their joint undertaking, both Smith and Stanley wrote new oratorios and included them in their programmes.

Nonetheless, rival companies such as the ones managed by Samuel Arnold and Thomas Augustine Arne were somewhat more confident in introducing new oratorios: in 1761, Arne composed and performed his *Judith*, Arnold's most successful oratorio *The Prodigal Son* dates from 1773. The programmes favoured by Smith, Stanley and Linley had a more conservative character: whereas their rival companies usually chose one or other of the top-four oratorios by Handel (see Fig. 2), they themselves tried to offer a wider variety of Handel's works, including less well-known oratorios such as *Solomon*, *Theodora* and *Jephtha*. In the years prior to the Handel Commemoration, there are only very few selections to be found in their programmes, and pasticcios only play a minor role. Samuel Arnold on the other hand was an avid compiler of pasticcios, particularly successful examples being his *Omnipotence* of 1774 and *Redemption* (1786).

Even though the managers did their utmost to provide audiences with the best, most varied oratorio programmes imaginable, by the early 1780s the interest in oratorios began to wane. The presence of the royal family still guaranteed reasonably full houses, as John Marsh noted, when he went to the performance of *L'Allegro* at Drury Lane on 15 February 1782, "finding the Pit quite full (their Majesties being at the House)",<sup>20</sup> but on 6 March, when he again went to hear *Samson*, "there was but a thin House".<sup>21</sup>

Also, during this period newspaper reviews become less favourable, even critical:

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<sup>20</sup> *The Diaries of John Marsh*, vol. 7, p. 148.

<sup>21</sup> Vol. 7, p. 155.

Once a year, indeed, a few of the Oratorios are performed; but all their thunder, majesty, and strength, is scarcely sufficient to keep the audience awake, which, to say the truth, is for the most part so thin, that it cannot be for the interest of a manager to continue these entertainments any longer.<sup>22</sup>

At that time, only Stanley and Linley continued the oratorio tradition with one series at Drury Lane. Indeed, it seems probable, as Simon McVeigh has argued, that without the Handel Commemoration, the tradition would have died altogether.<sup>23</sup> However, the impulse generated by the Commemoration led to a complete change in the focus of the Lenten oratorio programmes: from 1785 onwards, the programmes became increasingly focused on “Grand Selections” (see Fig. 1), much to the dismay of Samuel Wesley, who complained about these being “mixed and hashed up with Trash of any Sort, a common Ballad, and heterogeneous Stuff, no Matter what, raked together and issued forth in Form of a Bill pretending to announce a sacred Performance, chequered perhaps by “Robin Adair”, “The Bay of Biscay” or “Old Towler”.<sup>24</sup>

In some ways, therefore, the Handel Commemoration saved the tradition of the Lenten “oratorios”, but it also altered the programmes entirely: the full-length oratorio performances of the 1760s had by the late 1780s long been superseded by “Grand Selections” and an occasional performance of *Messiah*, the only oratorio deemed important enough to be performed complete. In this form, the Lenten oratorios series were continued until the 1830s when, after some inquiries into the exact legal position and influence of the Lord Chamberlain’s office with regard to the Lenten theatrical regulations during the 1830s, the Wednesday/Friday ban was finally lifted and the theatres were allowed to present whatever entertainment they chose throughout Lent<sup>25</sup> – and thus the major London oratorio institution, which had been continued without interruption from Handel’s day to the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign, had with this legal ruling come to an end.

Considering the history of this institution in the later eighteenth century, one major overall impression of an extremely competitive oratorio scene, a “struggle of competition” – to use the words of the *Gazetteer* correspondent, written down and published in 1768

<sup>22</sup> *Westminster Magazine*, October 1782, p. 21, quoted from William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England*, Oxford, 1992, p. 124.

<sup>23</sup> Simon McVeigh, *Concert Life from Mozart to Haydn*, Cambridge 1993, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Wesley, “Reminiscences”, c. 1835, GB-Lbl Add. 27593, f. 140r.

<sup>25</sup> A detailed account of the various proceedings which finally led to the lifting of the ban may be found in Joel Sachs’ “The End of the Oratorios”, *Music and Civilisation: Essays in Honor of Paul Henry Lang*, New York – London, 1984, pp. 168–181.

– remains. Seen in this context, it seems wrong to view the Handel Commemoration of 1784 as an isolated event. The tradition of oratorio performances in London had been carried on, by Handel's successors, sometimes successfully, sometimes less so, in an unbroken line, towards and beyond the date of the 1784 Handel Commemoration; thanks to the endurance of John Christopher Smith, John Stanley, Samuel Arnold and their colleagues, oratorio always had a firm stronghold in London's musical scene of that time.

## POVZETEK

### **Od Händlove smrti do Händlovega obeležja: serije postnih oratorijev v londonskih gledališčih v letih 1760–1784**

Članek povzema zgodovino raznih serij postnih oratorijev, ki so jih izvajali v londonskih gledališčih v letih 1760–1784. Uvodoma prinaša opis zunanjih okoliščin, ki so spremljale prireditve v največjih londonskih koncertih ustanovah. Skoraj vsi novi angleški oratoriji poznega 18. stoletja so bili namenjeni izvedbi v okviru katere izmed teh serij, ki so jih vodili pomembni skladatelji in glasbeniki, na primer Thomas Augustine Arne, John Stanley in John Christopher Smith. V posebno bogatih sezonah so bile na voljo kar tri postne glasbene serije, ki so si prizadevale pridobiti naklonjenost poslušalcev. V tem močno tekmovalnem vzdušju je bilo dobro upravljanje in skrbno načrtovanje programov bistveno za obstoj posameznih ustanov. Prispevek zato govori o načelih trženja in programske politiki pomembnejših serij, prav tako pa opisuje tudi postopne spremembe v repertoarju, ki so nastopile v drugi polovici 18. stoletja.