

Reviews

HANDEL by Hamish Swanston. (Outstanding Christian Thinkers, ed. Brian Davies, OP.) *Geoffrey Chapman*, London, 1990. xi + 161 pp. 1990.

Handel is a surprising person to meet in an assembly of Outstanding Christian Thinkers. In Professor Swanston's pages he jostles with deist radicals like Toland, Tindal, and Collins, and with anti-deist philosophers like Joseph Butler, high church bishop of Durham, with whom he would no doubt have had more sympathy. Born at Halle where his father was a surgeon, he was baptized in the Lutheran Church on 24 February 1685, and his early religious links were with German pietists. Because of his unrivalled musical gifts he was soon to be equally at home in Italy with Roman cardinals or with Anglican bishops in the Augustan age of Georgian England. Hamish Swanston is a theologian who would be admirably qualified to hold a chair in a faculty of music. He possesses a vigorous and wide-ranging culture with a detailed knowledge of Handel's music, especially for voices—29 operas, 19 sacred oratorios, coronation and Chandos anthems, besides such gems as 'Acis and Galatea'. Throughout Swanston moves with an easy familiarity, and his book offers a careful survey in a marvellously brief space.

Juxtaposed with good descriptive writing about Handel's music, and especially his libretti, the book also offers accounts of the thought of various deists, whose notions were not reconcilable with the text of the *Messiah*. Butler's polemic against the deists also receives a penetrating account in a few pages. All this is contemporary with Handel, but not perhaps profoundly influencing him. Swanston sees a link in the deists' critical opposition to the idea that religious or philosophical truth can be conveyed through historical narratives. In Handel's oratorios, and no doubt in the minds of his audiences, biblical narratives were understood as parables or myths about salvation in a Christian context. Handel stood apart from the deists by his belief that redemption exists, and that Christian stories are about divine liberation.

As composer Handel's output was prodigious; it is not astonishing, therefore, that so often he reused material. Only one point remains to be added to Professor Swanston's account, namely that no composer had a profounder sense of the sublime or a greater technical skill in achieving it by means of extraordinary simplicity.

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