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THE HANDEL INSTITUTE NEWSLETTER

Happy Anniversary! 250 years have elapsed since the death of 'our' composer, and his stock continues to rise – even in these difficult times. The number and quality of Handel editions, performances, recordings and studies since his last anniversary in 1985 provide ample grounds for celebration. Information on a number of commemorative events is given in this issue, together with an account of some pioneering Handel opera productions of the 1960s. But we lead with an essay that presents new material on singers' salaries, a subject of great interest in the eighteenth century, as it is today.

Colin Timms

MRS CIBBER'S ORATORIO SALARY IN 1744-45

The stream of Handeliana pouring forth from dusty corners of England's print empire seems to be inexhaustible. A rare pamphlet, extant in eight copies (two of them in Britain), provides the latest example. The 24-page *Impartial Examen of the Present Contests between the Town and the Manager of the Theatre*, which was published in late November 1744,[1] probes a (then) recent crisis at Drury Lane theatre. Charles Fleetwood's chronic mismanagement came to a head that month with a universally protested increase in admission prices.[2] Unmoved by public outrage, Fleetwood stuck to his new policy and reaped two in-house riots, which forced him out of the enterprise. As usual, the crisis spawned partisan literature, three pieces of which, the *Impartial Examen* among them, are listed in *The London Stage*.[3]

Buried in a footnote regarding Susannah Cibber there lies a reference to Handel that I have not encountered in musicological literature:

> * This Lady's Salary, I am credibly inform'd, is 600 Guineas for playing three times a Week only part of the Season with Mr. *F———*, besides a Benefit clear of Charges; and between 3 or 400 *l.* more for singing about twenty times with Mr. *H——*; so that her Income, (without reckoning any Presents, or Gratuities, from any Particular Friends, for her Extraordinary Performances) may, by a moderate Computation, be reckon'd at 1200 *l.* for less than six Months Labour; while her Husband (who made her an Actress) and his Daughters (her Children in Law) have yearly —— 0 *l.* 0 *s.* 0 *d.*[4]

The persons named here are Mrs Cibber, Fleetwood, Handel, and Theophilus Cibber, Susannah's estranged husband, whose reputation and finances had collapsed after two infamous lawsuits in 1738-39.[5] Adding greed to marital abuse, he had asked for thousands of pounds from William Sloper for having an alleged affair with Susannah that interrupted her career and deprived the Cibbers of regular income. It would take James Quin (and Handel) to bring her back on stage in 1741-42, and this in remote Dublin. Following her success in Ireland (including the historic *Messiah* première), Mrs Cibber returned to London, joining Quin at Covent Garden

1 *The London Evening-Post*, no. 2663, Thursday 29 November-Saturday 1 December 1744, p. [2].

2 For a background to the problems, see Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, 'The Drury Lane Actors' Rebellion of 1743', *Theatre Journal*, 42 (1990), 57-80.

3 *The London Stage, 1660-1800 ... Part 3: 1729-1747*, ed. Arthur H. Scouten (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1961), 1131.

4 *An Impartial Examen of the Present Contests between the Town and the Manager of the Theatre. With some Proposals for accommodating the present Misunderstandings between the Town and the Manager, offer'd to the Consideration of Both Parties. By Mr. Neither-Side* (London: M. Cooper, 1744), p. 9, note.

5 *The Tryals of Two Causes, between Theophilus Cibber, Gent. Plaintiff, and William Sloper, Esq; Defendant. The First for Criminal Conversation. The Second, for detaining the Plaintiff's Wife* (London: T. Trott, 1740).

theatre (1742-43). Her attempts to forge a theatrical alliance between her mentor and Garrick, then at Drury Lane, came to nothing. After a sabbatical year (1743-44) spent in Bath, she unexpectedly moved to Drury Lane theatre on a lucrative contract with Fleetwood.[6] Handel himself, who was courting her for his ambitious 1744-45 season, thought she would return to Covent Garden ("I think I can obtain Mr Riches's permission"[7]). Mrs Cibber's top salary naturally compounded Drury Lane's financial problems, which led to Fleetwood's increase of admission prices and triggered the riots mentioned above. Hence the footnote in the *Impartial Examen*.

Mrs Cibber's projected income of at least £1200 'for less than six Months Labour' exceeded fourfold her pre-Dublin revenue[8] and set a record in London's theatrical annals. In 1742-43, on his triumphant début in the same venue, Garrick had earned £1130 (£630 from salary); Kitty Clive had received £816 (£525 from salary), and the other leading actresses, Mrs Pritchard and Miss Woffington, had each reached a total of £480 (£250 from salary).[9]

Mrs Cibber's Handelian remuneration of £300-400 was no less impressive, considering the length of the engagement (twenty-four nights, according to Handel's announcement) and, of course, her vocal weaknesses. In comparison, Signora Strada's salary for a regular opera season (fifty-odd nights) was £600 (1729-30) and £565 (1732-33).[10] Even Horace Walpole's remark that "the second woman never had above 400" applies to a full season.[11]

The numbers mentioned in the footnote would, of course, have been more reliable had they appeared in a signed legal document rather than in anonymous literature. Still, the author makes explicit his effort to be impartial, stresses the accuracy of his information ('I am credibly inform'd'), and is circumspect when necessary ('between 3 or 400 *l.*', 'about twenty times', 'by a moderate Computation').

This new Handelian reference is valuable, considering our scant knowledge of London's operatic salaries during the 1740s.[12] Furthermore, it sheds new light on Handel's supreme confidence in proposing an extended oratorio season for 1744-45. The composer counted on Mrs Cibber's exceptional popularity and Thespian gifts to lure crowds to the King's Theatre and to his unstaged music dramas. On the other hand, Susannah's top fee must have taxed his budget that winter. In any case, the popular understanding of Mrs Cibber as Handel's muse, now on the verge of reaching the silver screen,[13] should not obscure the professional interests underpinning their creative alliance.

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6 Mary Nash, *The Provoked Wife: The Life and Times of Susannah Cibber* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1977), 167, 195.

7 Letter to Charles Jennens, 9 June 1744: *The Letters and Writings of George Frideric Handel*, ed. Erich H. Müller (London: Cassell, 1935), 48.

8 *Tryals*, 11 [first], and 9-10 [second].

9 *The London Daily Post, and General Advertiser*, no. 2782, 15 October 1743, p. [2]; see also Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, 'David Garrick and Box-Office Receipts at Drury Lane in 1742-43', *Philological Quarterly*, 67 (1988), 323-44, at 336-7.

10 Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, 'Handel's Opera Finances in 1732-3', *Musical Times*, 125 (1984), 86-89, at 89.

11 Walpole to Sir Horace Mann, 5 November 1741, in *The Correspondence of Horace Walpole*, ed. W. S. Lewis *et al.*, 48 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1937-83), xvii, 191.

12 Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, 'Opera Salaries in Eighteenth-Century London', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 46 (1993), 26-83, at 39.

13 Dalya Alberge, 'Hallelujah! Sex life of Handel's Muse coming to Screen near you', *The Times*, 14 January 2008, p. 30.