MUSICALITY, ESSENTIALISM, AND THE CLOSET

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In 1968, a year before Stonewall and the emergence of gay resistance, the sociologist Mary McIntosh published a remarkable article entitled "The Homosexual Role" embracing a position that would now be called antiessentialist.\(^1\) Noting the difficulties that science had encountered in its efforts to promote the conception of homosexuality as a medical condition, she proposed that the conception and the behaviour that it supports operate as a form of social control in a society in which homosexuality is condemned. Furthermore, the uncritical acceptance of the conception by social scientists can be traced to their concern with homosexuality as a social problem. They have tended to accept the popular definition of what the problem is, and they have been implicated in the process of social control.\(^2\)

An antiessentialist approach to homosexuality was further developed in gay studies as a result of a similar thrust in the feminist criticism of gender. It received a powerful endorsement from Michel Foucault, whose position has recently been outlined by David Halperin as follows:

Foucault did for "sexuality" what feminist critics had done for "gender." That is, Foucault detached "sexuality" from the physical and biological sciences (just as feminists had detached "gender" from the facts of anatomical sex, of somatic dimorphism) and treated it, instead, as "the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment" of "a complex political technology." He divorced "sexuality" from "nature" and interpreted it, instead, as a cultural production.\(^3\)
There is of course one major problem with this approach. In an age in which public discourse surrounding homosexuality has become increasingly dominated by right-wing rhetoric, institutionalized philistinism, and AIDS panic, it seems to be a way of encouraging oppression by offering a view of gay identity, and furthermore desire, as merely a cultural production—with the implication that this production can simply be unproduced, erased, silenced. Not surprisingly there have been several attempts to find substitute terms. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, pointing to the radical condensation of sexual categories in our century to the two species homosexual and heterosexual (and more importantly to the resulting incoherence surrounding those terms), offers the terms “minoritizing” versus “universalizing” as alternatives to essentialist/constructivist because they respond to the question, “In whose lives is homo/heterosexual definition an issue of continuing centrality and difficulty?”

In a recent book Diana Fuss attempts the rehabilitation of essentialism by insisting that “interrogating essence wherever we may find it does not necessarily entail simultaneously dismissing it.” But essentialism has peculiar new dangers for gay people in a world in which the fantasy of genetic engineering threatens to become a reality: as Sedgwick points out, no medical technologist is talking positively about the proper biological conditions for gay generation. And what antessentialism has done for the gay movement is at least positively to open up broader vistas of understanding. For part of the very substance of accepting a gay identity in Western culture in our time is by implication the cultivation of that sense of difference, of not subscribing to the straight world’s tendency to project itself onto everything it encounters and to assimilate everything to its own idea of itself, but instead valuing, exploring, and trying to understand different things, people, and ideas, in terms that are closer to the way in which they perceive themselves. It is, in other words, worth the risk.

In this paper I want to compare “homosexuality,” that abstract, minoritizing, nineteenth-century label for a set of practices, to another word ending in those same three abstracting syllables—a word of which the first use recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* occurs in 1853, some twenty years before “homosexuality” itself was coined. What happens when we separate the word “musicality” from the word “music” is comparable to what happens when we separate “homosexuality” or “sexuality” from “sex.” An attribute, a social role, is filtered out of a term that has socially negotiated meanings which differ according to context. The labeling of this role can have striking consequences. To continue quoting McIntosh:

The practice of the social labelling of persons as deviant operates in two ways as a mechanism of social control. In the first place it helps to provide a clear-cut, publicized and recognizable threshold between permissible and impermissible behaviour. This means that people cannot so easily drift into deviant behaviour. Their first moves in a deviant direction immediately raise the question of a total move into a deviant role with all the sanctions that this is likely to elicit. Second, the labelling serves to segregate the deviants from the others, and this means that their deviant practices and their self-justification for these practices are contained within a relatively narrow group. The creation of a specialized, despised and punished role of homosexual keeps the bulk of society pure in rather the same way that the similar treatment of some kinds of criminals helps keep the rest of society law-abiding.

It may seem unduly provocative to propose the substitution of musicality for homosexuality in this context, for its identification and demarcation depend more on skill than behavior. Though it is highly “specialized,” and sometimes “ despised,” musicality does not denote a noticeably “punished role,” but, rather, a privileged one. I shall, however, be arguing that it is a deviant role—for all those who identify with the label, not merely for the sexual deviants who populate the various branches of its profession.

The application of a labeling perspective to musicality will moreover allow us—as a first step—to get at some of the otherwise inexplicable questions surrounding music and gay identities. These two things are often associated, and not only in the popular imagination: it is surely no coincidence that among the many code words and phrases for a homosexual man before Stonewall (and even since), “musical” (as in, “Is he ‘musical’, do you think?”) ranked with others such as “friend of Dorothy” as safe insider euphemisms. They lacked the openly oppressive hostility of “faggot,” “fairy,” “nancy-boy,” “pansy,” “poof,” “queer,” or “sissy.” In reality, and quite apart from the coincidence of these euphemisms, musicality and gay identity exist in an uneasy relation one to the other, as any politically conscious lesbian or gay man trying to make a living in the musical profession will usually admit.

Though it is not proscribed in the same way as homosexuality, music has often been considered a dangerous substance, an agent of moral ambiguity always in danger of bestowing deviant status upon its practitioners. Both Plato and Aristotle saw it in these terms. Theirs was a legacy of moral doubt that infected much of the writing about music in the West, from St. Augustine’s anguish about being moved more by the voice than by the words to the attacks of the Calvinists and the counterattacks of the various apologists of the Renaissance. Lurking beneath the objections against music, the ethical question surrounding it, is the long tradition of feeling that it is different, irrational, unaccountable.

In medieval and early modern times beauty in music was commonly described as having the effect of “ravishing” the sense or the soul. A study
of this metaphor is long overdue. With its more subjective approach, modern psychology has tended to see music as short-circuiting the defenses and making the subject more receptive to fantasy. Post-Lacanian French psychoanalysts have gone further by developing the idea of the mother’s voice as a “sonorous envelope” surrounding the newborn infant—a blanket of sound alternatively regarded as “the first model of auditory pleasure” or an “umbilical net.” Guy Rosolato suggests “that music finds its roots and its nostalgia in [this] original atmosphere, which might be called a sonorous womb, a murmuring house, or Music of the Spheres.” He goes on to outline the image of the child attempting to “harmonize” with the mother once its voice has been differentiated, and this differentiation is what ultimately stimulates the “dream of recovery” of a “lost object.” Kaja Silverman, connecting this theory with the subject’s symbolic castration, emphasizes the ambivalence with which the maternal voice is regarded. Relating it to Lacan’s category of things that are first distinguished from the subject’s self—feces, the mother’s breast, the mother’s gaze—but whose “otherness” is not strongly marked, she writes: “it is either cherished...as what can make good all lacks...or despised and jettisoned as what is most abject, most culturally intolerable—as the forced representative of everything within male subjectivity which is incompatible with the phallic function, and which threatens to expose discursive mastery as an impossible ideal.” If musical pleasure can indeed be linked to this primordial experience then here at another level is a possible explanation for patriarchal societies’ ambivalence toward it. Nonverbal even when linked to words, physically arousing in its function as initiator of dance, and resisting attempts to endow it with, or discern in it, precise meaning, it represents that part of our culture which is constructed as feminine and therefore dangerous.

I do not need to rehearse the numerous attempts to contain that danger over the ages. The notion that such efforts belong to a benighted past is potently contradicted everywhere today—from attempts to regulate the popular music record industry to Allan Bloom’s best-selling book, The Closing of the American Mind. The attempts to appropriate music for the enforcement of patriarchal order, to anesthetize listeners from its effects, and to dehumanize it, lie most notably, however, within its own domain and in particular in its educational institutions. The careful listener will have noted the customary synecdoche, which I intend ironically: my “music” refers to the dominant model in Anglo-American music education, that of Western European music. The elevation of this strain of music as “serious,” and the devaluing of other kinds of music, is of course part of the process I am talking about.

Let us look briefly at the means of self-policing. For the very reason that it does not readily convey specific meaning, music could not so easily be co-opted for a rational, masculine, heterosexist program, as, for instance, literature or drama were in the later nineteenth century. In these realms, Sue-Ellen Case, summarizing Michael Bronski, isolates “naturalism and realism as strategies that tried to save fiction from the accusation of daydream, imagination, or masturbation, and to affix a utilitarian goal to literary production—that of teaching morals.” Naturalism and realism did not work that way in music. Carl Dahlhaus’s thoughtful and thorough examination of these categories in the music of the nineteenth century fails to reveal more than a theoretical model, an “ideal type,” which assembles a number of phenomena observed haphazardly and in different combinations (such things as simple tone painting, the musical representation of speech intonation and rhythm, the development of a musical “prose,” the adoption of folk tunes or a folkslike tone, the opposition of an aesthetics of the true to that of the beautiful). None of these things, save the last, is notably utilitarian or didactic, and “the accusation of daydream, imagination, or masturbation” could be, and possibly was, leveled at an art so largely concerned with transcendence, the sublime, the sentimental, and with “that infinite yearning which is the essence of Romanticism.” to quote E. T. A. Hoffmann’s most famous phrase.

From Hoffmann and his generation stems the notion of the superiority of instrumental music, which depends precisely on a lack of specificity: “might this explain why [Beethoven’s] vocal music is less successful,” continues Hoffmann, “since it does not permit a mood of vague yearning but can only depict from the realm of the infinite those feelings capable of being described in words?” It was the spirit of Romanticism itself, then, that elevated absolute music to a pinnacle from which it was never dislodged even by Wagner’s mystical theatricalism. Realism and naturalism were therefore not available as corrective forces in music, except marginally (as in the things described by Dahlhaus and in operatic verismo). Rather, abstraction, formalism, and romanticism, given a further boost by Eduard Hanslick’s aesthetics, proved the best way to rescue music from its own irrationality. Modernism, when it arrived, simply intensified the principle of abstraction by eliminating from music all imitative “expression,” thus removing it further in the direction of pure form and pattern.

Initiation into this largely German ideology of the absolute is a very potent part of what it means to become a musician in the Western tradition. The education of musicians in our society is popularly supposed to consist of the realization of the potential of an inherent, possibly inherited quality, “talent.”
More realistically, as Henry Kingsbury has so elegantly shown, musical talent, even "musicality" itself, is inextricably linked with power relations in the conservatories where it is negotiated and, in a word, constructed. But the controlling nature of the conservatory regime, intent on preserving itself, differs little from that of other cultural institutions where young people identified as possessing "talent" are trained for some ritualized activity—spectator sports are an obvious parallel. Even more interesting is the way in which cultural values are inculcated in "academic" liberal arts music programs in such a way as to produce a certain understanding of what music is.

Let me simply point to what happens to an undergraduate in the earliest stages of the curriculum. The first courses she is liable to encounter are ones in musicianship and harmony. The exercise material in musicianship is likely to be drawn from the canon of German music (Bach to Brahms), toward which the syllabus generally leans. The acquisition of skill is dependent on the tacit understanding of the superiority of this repertory: it is here that the "masterwork" ideology is first and most effectively instilled. Teutonic abstraction is further emphasized in the harmony course, in which the chief ingredient is likely to be the four-part chorale settings of J. S. Bach. Perhaps for a moment you will indulge my view of these as questionable operations by the master upon a set of simple, defenseless tunes rendered all but unrecognizable by the often excessive harmonic detail forced upon them. Looked at this way they become a paradigm for the patriarchal appropriation of music. If this won’t do for some readers, then at least it may be allowed that in concentrating within relatively short and regular phrases a large complement of chromatic harmonies that are usually heard over a longer time span and endowed with texture to make them interesting, these works lean heavily toward abstraction. The student, who is rarely made fully aware of the historical or stylistic context of these hymn-tune arrangements, then imbues theirs as a "normal" technique rather than the concentration of elaboration that it represents and is thus encouraged to see them as miniature organisms. The stage is set for the enormities of the Schenker system, in which masterworks are, as it were, Bach chorales writ large, or "prolonged."

Ethnomusicology courses, if our undergraduate has enrolled in a department that acknowledges music as a worldwide phenomenon, are likely to come as something of a relief from the regimen of the history, theory, and composition of Western music that follows the basic instruction outlined above; and they probably are. As it stands, however, ethnomusicology is still associated in the popular imagination with the study of primitive forms and peoples. Its application to the highly developed musical traditions of, say, India or Japan therefore betokens a certain air of patronization. And however self-conscious the approach, there is always the lingering sense of appropriation and control, the hint of the postcolonial whip in the master’s hand. I begin to understand why I have resolutely ignored the dictates of musicological fashion by studying the music of my own tribes (that is, the English and homosexuals, insofar as they can be distinguished in the American imagination). In a paper on recent approaches in ethnomusicology, Bruno Nettl characterizes each by seeing how they would work if their object of study was the University of Illinois Music Department. Interestingly enough, his observer was represented as a Martian, a rhetorical ploy that seemed involuntarily to give away the game of ethnomusicology’s being something done by a superior person to an inferior one—no less than an extraterrestrial being is required to operate upon musical institutions of the U.S.A. The fetishizing of the great composer and the masterwork in historical musicology is replaced by a truly cultural perspective, but the love of transcription and glorification of fieldwork often make ethnomusicology as positivistic as historical musicology—and the frequent recourse to jargon is a sign of the desire for mystification and abstraction.

With such agendas spread across such vast areas of musical scholarship, it is no wonder that feminism, gender studies, and gay and lesbian perspectives have taken so long to surface. Even now that the ramparts of traditional musicology are constantly assailed by the trumpet call of words like “homophobia,” “misogyny,” “cross-dressing,” and “homosocial desire,” gay and lesbian studies by gay and lesbian subjects are still rare. The appearance of this work is hampered by our knowing very little about the social experience of those composers who are known or suspected to have been heavily involved sexually or emotionally with others of their own sex. At the Baltimore conference of the American Musicological Society in 1988, Maynard Solomon delineated the homosexual world and experience of Schubert in early-nineteenth-century Vienna. Susan McClary is the first to have made anything of this in relation to the music, in a paper printed in this volume. The one composer we have been allowed to "know" about in the period is Tchaikovsky. But the disclosing of the Russian composer’s sexuality and the careful covering over (or ignoring) of the tracks around Schubert surely has to do with the processing of music by scholarship as a male and predominantly German art. A Russian composer could be homosexual, indeed one so close to Teutonic mastery probably had to be homosexual, because that would allow the exotic, decadent, and effeminate quality of the music to be held up (as I remember it being held up to me in my youth) as a warning. The central German canon must at all costs be preserved in its purity. The closeting of Schubert is of a similar order as the papering over of Wagner’s anti-Semitism.

In the twentieth century homosexuality becomes such a tremendous presence in music that its obliteration by silence constitutes one of the most
crushing intellectual indictments of positivistic musical scholarship. Apart from a few high priests of modernism, such as Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Stravinsky, and Bartók, there are many important composers who have been by and large homosexual—or, as in the special case of Ives, so thoroughly saturated in homosexual panic as to be part of the same social phenomenon. And yet we had to wait until 1991 for an accurate and straightforward documentary account of Henry Cowell's sentencing to a long period of imprisonment (including hard labor) in San Quentin as a first offender in a case involving homosexual sex.21

Please note that neither Solomon, author of the Schubert paper, nor Michael Hicks, who researched the Cowell case so painstakingly, is gay. As Lawrence Mass indicated in the interview he conducted with me in *Christopher Street* in 1987, and which has recently been reprinted in one of his books,22 homosexuals, especially those who do not consider themselves so much closeted as "discreet" or who maintain the separation of "art" from "life," are likely to be among the first to dismiss such efforts as being undesirable or to pooh-pooh them as being of little importance. Indeed, one could go further. The presence of homosexuals who do not fully identify as gay in positions of power in the music profession, as the British composer Nicola LeFanu pointed out to me, one reason why alternative voices such as those of women composers have so hard a time getting heard.23 It is also one (but not the only) reason why scholarship and criticism from a gay or lesbian perspective has been so late in making an appearance in music.

In order to account for the phenomenon just described, that of the disengagement of homosexuals from questions of gay identity and homosexual and female oppression in music, we may first turn back to McIntosh. Again in quoting her I would like to substitute or bracket musical/homosexual and musicality/homosexuality:

> It is interesting to note that homosexuals themselves welcome and support the notion that homosexuality is a condition. For just as the rigid categorization deters people from drifting into deviancy, so it appears to foreclose on the possibility of drifting back into normality and thus removes the element of anxious choice. It appears to justify the deviant behaviour of the homosexual as being appropriate for him as a member of the homosexual category. The deviancy can thus be seen as legitimate for him and he can continue in it without rejecting the norms of society.24

This was in fact true of most homosexuals before Stonewall. To realize why this has not changed much since in music, why expressions of gay identity and liberation in music are confined rather to marching bands and choruses, one has only to realize how powerful has become the construction of musicality in the "classical music" world. For the musician in general, and particularly for the gay or lesbian musician, there is an involvement in a social contract that allows comforting deviance only at the sometimes bitter price of sacrificing self-determination. The situation is comparable to, though of course not identical with, that of the woman who exchanges degrees of selfhood for the authority and position afforded by marriage and motherhood in patriarchal society. Deviance from the norm and loss of selfhood, however, are not the sole items at issue. Looked at another way (along the lines of Allan Bloom), the contract also offers elite status in exchange for something more like a commodity: "Beohemia," "a respectable place for marginality...had to justify its unorthodox practices by its intellectual and artistic achievement."25 But that achievement only reached its full power and potential in its analysis (as deduced by Sedgwick) through the homoerotic/homophobic process in which desire is stimulated and simultaneously repressed: the musician is fully caught in the erotic double-binding effect of the closet.

Comforting deviance and elite status: Why do so many people willingly pay such dues for them? That surely has to do with one aspect of music that I have so far notably avoided: performance. It is performance that attracts and entices most people to become musicians in the first instance. If then later they become scholars, critics, or composers, it is rare that they start out that way without first having been drawn to music by the piano, some other instrument, or by singing. Music is a perfect field for the display of emotion. It is particularly accommodating to those who have difficulty in expressing feelings in day-to-day life, because the emotion is unspecified and unattached. The piano, let us say for example, will thus become an important means for the attempt at expression, disclosure, or communication on the part of those children who have difficulties of various kinds with one or both parents. To gay children, who often experience a shutdown of all feeling as the result of sensing their parents' and society's disapproval of a basic part of their sentient life, music appears as a veritable lifeline. But full participation in the constructed role of musician in our society can only be accomplished by recognizing its deviance and acknowledging the norms of society itself. The powerfully attractive privilege of a sentient and expressive life enabled by the more exclusive forms of artistic endeavor comes at the cost of our tacit agreement not merely "to continue in [deviancy] without rejecting the norms of society" but also to play the deviant role in such a way that those norms are tacitly reinforced: to recall the terms of my second quotation from McIntosh, our public demonstration of feeling serves the function of keeping the rest of society in a state of decorum and restraint. These terms, moreover, are not demanded exclusively of gays or lesbians in the profession. All
musicians, we must remember, are faggots in the parlance of the male locker room. Hence the immense investment by musical scholarship and by certain types of composition in competitiveness, rigor, masterfulness, and those qualities that reveal the castration anxiety that is so strong in our deviant profession. When Ned Rorem says that he feels more discriminated against as an artist than as a homosexual, this is really what he is referring to.

The prevalence of homosexual panic in musical circles must of course go deeper than the labeling perspective suggests. In her recent work on the epistemology of the closet, Sedgwick has discerned a dynamic impasse between universalizing and minoritizing views of homo/heterosexual definition (between, for instance, Freud's open view of sexual possibility and "third sex" or gay separatist models) and between separatist and transitive tropes of homosexual gender (between, for instance, the supermale gay image and the nelly queen). These ambiguities and tensions are revealed by Sedgwick in what is primarily a project of literary criticism focusing on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such a significant advance in perceiving the central importance of sexual definition (or lack of it) in modern culture needs testing in other areas, and music provides a particularly interesting field for the project. It is an enclave in our society—a sisterhood or brotherhood of lovers, music lovers, united by an unmediated form of communication that is only by imperfect analogy called a language, "the" language of feeling. In such an unspoken place, the incoherencies and dramas of the closet may be played out in particularly revealing and suggestive ways simply because of the lack of rational verbal discourse.

Let us take, as a brief example, the relation of Benjamin Britten to the phenomenon of the "open secret," which is so crucial to the tensions surrounding homosexual identity even after (one might say especially after) Stonewall. As D. A. Miller has pointed out, secrecy itself, that very instrument of the closet, can function as

the subjective practice in which the oppositions of private/public, inside/outside, subject/object are established, and the sanctity of their first term kept inviolate. And the phenomenon of the "open secret" does not, as one might think, bring about the collapse of those binaries and their ideological effects, but rather attests to their fantastic recovery. In a mechanism reminiscent of Freudian disavowal, we know perfectly well that the secret is known, but nonetheless we must persist, however ineptly, in guarding it.24

It was this phenomenon of the open secret that peculiarly pushed Britten's sexual identity into the foreground throughout his life. His not acknowledging his homosexual identity in so many words, though it was universally known by some sort of bush telegraph, allowed him to maneuver effectively in British society. It enabled him not only to live openly with Peter Pears, but also to set for Pears and perform with him songs whose texts were unambiguous in their celebration of homoeroticism. Moreover, it allowed him to return again and again in the operas to the themes of the social experience of homosexual oppression, homosocial and homosexual bonding, even man-boy love. And it gave him social and business advantages, allowing him to pursue a highly successful career as an entrepreneur, to be on warm terms with the royal family, and to collect his nation's top set of honors.

Much of what it takes to be a successful composer is bound up in a good reading of one's surroundings and an inventive response to them, whether it be a question of a Josquin learning to play with the expectations of the court patrons of the late fifteenth century or the postwar American composer trading on the obscurantism favored in academic circles in the 1950s and 1960s. Britten tapped a peculiar characteristic of British society that allows any kind of social deviance and ambiguity so long as it is not named, is not published, and does not make claims against the behavioral norm. To appreciate the fact that there was considerable tension surrounding not only Britten's homosexuality, but also the success that he enjoyed despite one, it has to dig a little deeper beneath such blatant attacks as that against "bachelor composers" in the Craft/Stravinsky conversation books.25 What is revealed is a curious set of opposite and equally loaded critical terms. On the one hand Britten's music was characterized as "mere cleverness," "devilish smart." On the other it was accused of sentimentality. Behind both attitudes, of course, lay the unspeakable fascination with Britten's homosexuality, both labels being the reverse sides of the oppositions craft/cleverness, sincerity/sentimentality, which belong among a whole plethora of binaries that Sedgwick has claimed as "epistemologically charged pairings, condensed in the figures of 'the closet' and 'coming out.'"26

Furthermore, critics also embraced a strategy of choosing an approach to the themes of Britten's operas that would mask, parry, or render ridiculous their homosexual content. What is truly amazing about the initial music critical reception of Grimes, given the lack of specific information about the internal nature of the title figure, is its failure to discern an allegory of oppression; a slightly later generation confused the issue even further by discerning a man-boy hate/love theme, all traces of which were rigorously and consciously flushed out of the libretto by the composer. When Death in Venice appeared a quarter of a century later, however, allegorization became the only way to neutralize Aschenbach's potent cry to Tadzio of "I love you" at the climax of act 1; and so music critics fell over themselves to adopt and
Well, Benjamin Britten & Peter Pears first met when they were quite young... & as they got on quite well, they decided to go into partnership & work together. This lasted quite a long time. When Lord Britten died the Queen sent Sir Peter a telegram of sympathy...

Issued as a postcard by the Organisation for Lesbian and Gay Action (OLGA), with the following caption: “Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill states that: local authorities cannot fund or ‘intentionally promote’ homosexuality, and that state schools cannot promote ‘the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.”

elaborate upon the Apollonian/Dionysian allegory with which Mann himself had clouded some central questions. Such a strategy has not, however, survived Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1988. In a stroke that demonstrated how simple it is to short-circuit the wiring of the open secret, the Kent and Sussex Education Committees canceled a performance of Death in Venice by the Glyndebourne touring company for schools because they sensed that it would be seen to promote homosexuality and thus contravene the law.

As I pointed out in an exchange of letters at the time, the authorities would in fact have been serving government extremists well by showing this opera because of the stereotypical warnings it appears to give against being gay or pederastic: that you will stoop to any indignity (such as painting your face) to lure your young prey, and will die alone, rejected and in misery. In real life, ironically, Britten was a first-rate conventional role model for the youth of Kent and East Sussex, gay, lesbian, or straight. He lived a fruitful, constructive, social, well-ordered life, with a mate who was equally productive. As a hardworking, successful, middle-class citizen who incidentally contributed not insignificantly to the invisible balance of payments, he was in all other respects than his sexuality and pacifism a model of Thatcherite citizenship. In Aschenbach, Britten created a doppelgänger—the dark side of the person he always at some level imagined himself to be. If, as many critics insist, Death in Venice is a testament, then it is a testament to the power, not of love, but of the distinctive effects on the personality of the dynamics of the closet.

To what effect did Britten tread the narrow line in order to write music that directly addressed the view of society held from the closet, one might ask; if twenty years later the collusion between the closet and the role of the musician remains virtually unchanged, save for (even in spite of) the decimating effect on our community of AIDS? What was the point of all those coded messages about homosexual oppression and pederasty if they prompted only further denial of their meaning, further entrenchment of the universalism and transcendentalism that make Western classical music a weak substitute for religion in capitalist society and dissolve it from meaning? What good is the “discretion model”? Britten maintained, and musicians still maintain today, if it merely reinforces dominant culture by confining homosexuality to the private sphere while making it obscurely present in public discourse as an unthinkable alternative? How many of us have offered something better to any musical adolescent who thinks her/himself unique in feeling different, alone, and ashamed?

These are questions for a lesbian and gay musicology not to lose sight of. There are wider implications to them than may at first appear. The collusion
of musicality and the closet has also, for example, been intensified by the essentialist myth of musical creativity as a force deriving from the "eternal feminine" in man. The appropriation of the feminine and privatization of "the muse" in the figure of the male composer, who therefore seems to exist in a special way to reflect the trope of the woman's soul trapped in a man's body (in the famous phrase of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs), often seems to demand a compensating amount of energy spent in holding up the facade of masculinity. This lethal combination in turn helps to augment the legendary misogyny of the profession, in which homosexual musicians like Aaron Copland have been especially implicated. In this light, Charles Ives perhaps deserves some small credit for at least being blatant in his abuse of European composers as homosexuals or women. The fact that the terms he uses (playing into and trading off the very gender liminality stemming from Ulrichs's "inversion" model) do not distinguish the one category from the other shows how intertwined are homophobia and misogyny, and how the struggle against the recognition of women in certain roles in music is bound up with homosexual panic.

Since striking a tiny blow at the open secret by knocking politely at the door of the Britten closet in the year of the composer's death, I have become increasingly convinced that the special dedicated role signified by the word "musicality" is comparable to, and linked with, the role of homosexuality in our societies (at least those of Britain and North America in which I have spent long periods). Neither label is up to much good. They are tools of social control dressed up in one case as "talent," in the other as "condition." And they are outmoded. "Composer," for instance, no longer has much usefulness as a contemporary label outside the institutions of classical music because of the new variety of modes of musical production and the dying force of an ideology constructed around a single (male) originating force and a concept of "art" as an elite and segregated human activity. And it is doubtful whether a "musicality" defined by a bunch of conservatory teachers will play as much part as it has in the past in the social rituals of a music dominated by personality, media, and marketing. Similarly, "homosexual," with its overtones of medicalized essentialism, no longer conveys the richness and variety of the forms of same-sex desire that are manifest in different class, race, age, and even local situations within the West. A lesbian and gay musicology will want to interrogate both terms unceasingly as it re-searches our history, proposes new theories of music, and devises a new pedagogy. It is not the evidence, but the right to interpret it, to which we have to lay claim. "The question was, and is," as Neil Bartlett says of the trial of 1895 in his moving book about Oscar Wilde, "who speaks, and when, and for whom, and why."
10. "Queer" of course has been rehabilitated for political purposes. "Faggot" is often used self-depreciatingly among gay men—but its widespread and indiscriminate use in American society as the term by which members of any group express their contempt for members of another, and vice versa, indicates the degree to which homophobia is the (often unremarked) common denominator in situations of hatred and aggression.


23. The series known as the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts, the BBC's annual free-form music festival broadcast from London's Albert Hall each summer, has not improved its abysmally low women-to-men ratio of composers.

24. Mary McIntosh, "The Homosexual Role," 34.

25. Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind, 235. I am grateful to Fred Maus for exhorting me to develop the "social contract" idea along the lines suggested by Sedgwick's analysis of Bloom, Epistemology of the Closet, 54-59.


27. Delivering an opinion on Menotti's The Last Savage, Stravinsky is represented as saying, "The predatory female idea might have possibilities, though—I am thinking of Mr. Robbin's ballet about her to the music of my String Concerto—especially to talented bachelor composers such as Britten, Henze, Tchaikovsky, and Menotti" in Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, Themes and Episodes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 100-101.


29. See the exchange between Howard Rogers and myself in the Letters section of The Musical Times 130, no. 1758 (August 1989): 450-51, and 131, no. 1763 (January 1990): 10-11. What prompted me to write was Mr. Rogers's assertion, along lines mentioned above, "that the opera is actually about the crisis in Aschenbach's creative personality, not a Teach-Yourself-Homosexuality guide" (my italics). According to British terminology, by the way, "clause" and "bill" refer to a law before it has received the Royal assent, after which those terms are replaced by "section" and "act" respectively.

30. In an appreciation of his composition teacher, Nadia Boulanger, written for Harper's Magazine (October 1960): 49-51, and reprinted in Carol Neuls-Bates, ed., Women in Music, (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), Copland states: "in so far as she composed at all she must of necessity be listed in that unenviable category of the woman composer. Everyone knows that the high achievement of women musicians as vocalists and instrumentalists has no counterpart in the field of musical composition. . . . Is it possible that there is a mysterious element in the nature of musical creativity that runs counter to the nature of the feminine mind? And yet there are more women composers than ever writing today..." (240-42). Britten, who would never have been so gratuitously nasty in print, nevertheless treated many of the women characters in his operas with little sympathy: see Ellen McDonald, "Women in Benjamin Britten's Operas," Opera Quarterly 4, no. 3 (1986): 83-101.


33. Even the BBC now has a glossy monthly (packaged with a CD)—BBC Music Magazine. The first editorial (September 1992) pointedly drew attention to "Shopfront and Diversions, which will keep you abreast of new products, music that education, jobs and so on" (5). The commercial radio station "Classic FM," also appearing in September 1992, applies British light-music disc-jockey presentation (brash chat, mispronounced foreign words) to classical music in a manner still uncommon in the United States, where announcers' affected voices and precious pronunciations underline the up-market snob appeal of the commodity.
I hear the high mezzo voice of the Enigma. Because it is the Enigma: it doesn’t explain itself, it makes itself heard.

— Helene Cixous, Tancredi Continues

The singing voice as a musical instrument is inexactley understood because its mechanism of production is invisible. Voice is vibration: an exhaled stream of air passes from lungs to larynx, where it opens muscles like valves that regulate it, resist its escape, and, vibrating, produce sound; to resonating cavities of the upper body and head; and to the pharynx, where sound and tone quality is shaped, pitched, projected—“placed” by mouth, tongue, palate, lips.

Sapphonics, this rubric I devised, has overtones and resonances in and beyond voice production and hidden vestibules of the body. I mean to use it as a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of lesbian possibility, for a range of erotic and emotional relationships among women who sing and women who listen. As an opera lover who is not a trained singer, I stage an imaginary intimacy between voices: theirs singing, being heard; mine listening and, with other listeners writing, being read. Like the writers who read Sappho of Lesbos as poetic precursor of modern lesbian identity, my act of naming claims Sappho the singer for a “lesbian continuum” of listening that itself engendered Sapphonic performances and Sapphonic operas. My sonic outing traces the history and biography of a lesbian music that,
"WAS GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL GAY?"
On Closet Questions and Cultural Politics

Gary C. Thomas

George Frideric Handel is one of the towering figures of Western music. With the possible exception of Wagner, no other composer achieved the same level of fame and mythic stature in his own lifetime. By the time of his death an apotheosis was already well underway, which in turn facilitated a rich posthumous life as a British national institution, religious icon, hero revered by a musical cult (the Handelians), font of cultural nostalgia, and, finally, as Christopher Hogwood puts it, "a complete industry." But if the romantic impulse to construct cultural heroes is human, the ironic counterimpulse to deconstruct them seems equally so: What is the reality behind the image, the truth behind the mask (inquiring minds want to know)? We thus get to enjoy our heroes twice, first in the putting on, then in the taking off, of their clothes; if anything, the latter is more pleasurable. Handel makes an especially interesting case study of our delight in dressing and undressing. For while as a public figure he has been amply documented and examined, his mythic image furbished and sufflated in the 230-odd years since his death, the man's private life has long been considered a mystery. One scholar's complaint in 1934 can stand for many:

One would expect every detail of his life to be known and recorded, his every thought to be revealed with the lucid clarity of his immortal strains. It is not so; to assemble the bare facts of Handel's life is a problem which has baffled the most laborious of his biographers, and his inward personality is more mysterious than that of any other great musician of the last two centuries.
While Handel's silence about his private or "inner" being helped ensure an exalted afterlife as mythic icon and consumer commodity, it also worked to generate a lot of "mysteries" to be pondered, "puzzles" to be solved. Questions, trifling or serious, have flourished in the vast literature of Handel scholarship over the years: Did Handel meet Bononcini in Rome? (It's a good possibility.) Was Gustave Waltz Handel's cook? (Well, he might have been, for a while.) Why did Handel borrow? (For some very good reasons.) Was Handel insane? (Are you kidding?) None has proved more insistent or troublesome, however, than the one euphemistically couched as his "relationship to women": Did Handel sleep with them? Or, in the form in which I am asking it, was Handel gay? The composer's interest, or noninterest, in the opposite ("opposite") sex has been a vexed question for biographers, music historians, and others from Handel's time to the present; it has constituted, in the words of Paul Henry Lang, a "problem [that has] puzzled his biographers for the last two hundred years."

The first part of this essay examines the origin and history of the question itself—for I am far from the first to pose it—and will locate it in its proper discursive home, the Closet. In the second section I pursue it in relation to "Handel's body" as a kind of countermythic strategy, that is, in terms of what we know of his material lived experience. In the last part, which is meant to mark the beginning of a conversation involving voices other than those of avowed (if postmodern) Handelians such as myself, I propose some points of departure for situating the "Handel question" on a larger ideological grid. My aim here is to map out some future directions for reading a denatured subject—a "homotextual Handel"—as a complex of dialectical relations involving his life, his work, and his audiences; in other words, to pose yet more questions. My project thus entails both a "deconstructive" moment (of a closed, romanticizing image) as well as a "constructive" one (of an open-endedly "multitextual" alternative), and these, like that texture of image and reality, life and work that is "Handel" himself, are inescapably political. What constitutes knowledge, who speaks for whom, and with what effects, are questions with political dimensions and consequences; language, as Foucault insisted, is linked not only to the knowing of things, but to human freedom. Finally, although I believe my arguments will make a strong case that Handel was "gay," my main concern has not been to define, but to explore. I have tried to open a field of inquiry rather than close one off, to disrupt rather than suture. And realizing it is after all Handel we are talking about, I have endeavored to pursue these many and weighty questions in the ironic and gently subversive sense of the Emersonian motto: "I unsettle all things; nothing is to me sacred, nothing profane."

The Handel Question

to my knowledge, the first open mention in scholarly discourse of handel in relation to homosexuality—where the two words "Handel" and "homosexual" stand side by side in print—is a brief reference in a 1981 article by the Enlightenment cultural historian George S. Rousseau. In a passage discussing the high number of bachelors among major and minor figures in the eighteenth century, Rousseau notes: "Of these several were apparently homosexual: Gray, Walpole, Beckford, Lord Hervey; others, like Newton, Handel, Gay, are questionable: and while one is constrained here to be speculative, one can at least say that the heterosexuality of these men has never been fully established." Four years later, in a lengthy and groundbreaking essay on homosexuality in eighteenth-century England, Rousseau returned to the issue, this time rather more directly and polemically:

When Handel replied to his sovereign's question about "the love of women" with asolem about having no time for anything but music, George II apparently was satisfied; it is surprising that Handel's recent biographers should leave the matter there in this post-Freudian age. No one should suggest that Handel was homosexual without evidence, or even that his behavior was more homosexual than the norm for the age (difficult as this norm is to gauge): the point is rather that Handel's biographers have overlooked their subject's sexuality for reasons they never explicitly state. One can understand if a critical or thematic study of Handel's music should consider the composer's sexuality extraneous; yet biography, even when judged by the most puritanical criteria set out in the eighteenth century, has the duty to reveal the whole truth about the subject's life with at least a modicum of dispassionate objectivity.

The issue was raised again the same year (the tricentennial of Handel's birth) in a new biography by Jonathan Keates, here not to pursue the question, but rather to foreclose it: "The assumption that as a lifelong bachelor [Handel] must perforce have been homosexual is untenable in an eighteenth-century context, when the vagabond life of so many musicians made marriage a distinct hindrance." However, in the absence of any previous "assumptions" of Handel's homosexuality in the literature (and leaving aside for the moment Keates's peculiar rationale for its "untenability"), we are left to wonder on what his statement is based. Where did the question come from?

We begin with Handel himself. First, what about King George II's question to Handel about "his love of women," together with its reply "I have no time for anything but music?" While the exchange is interesting and clearly to the point—more for the blunt directness of the question ("You are attracted to

...
women, aren't you?" than for Handel's evasive reply—no case will be made or broken on the basis of it. In any event, I have not been able to verify it. I should note that Handel's reply, if he did say it, would only corroborate the view put forward by others that he simply was not interested in women (though with the obligatory subtext, "Of course I'd be very interested if only I didn't have all this damned music to write"). In its absence we are left with Handel's famous silence: far more than anything the composer said or is reputed to have said, it was his silence that piqued the interest of the curious and contributed to the construction of the Secret. Handel's commentators, perhaps understandably frustrated, have only further contributed to its construction, through locutions such as: "Handel firmly... barred the doors on the subject" (Keates); "as an individual he remains hidden, his private life is rarely exposed, his letters are few and unrevealing"; he maintained an "enigmatic aloofness in matters of sex, politics, and religion" (Hogwood); "his amorous encounters were as carefully screened from view as were his political and religious inclinations" (Lang), and so forth (italics mine).

Apart from some anecdotal material, the sole references on this subject from reasonably reliable contemporaries of Handel are two statements found in the early biographies by John Mainwaring and Sir John Hawkins. Mainwaring, Handel's first biographer (he is usually credited with writing the very first biography of a famous composer) was a clergyman who may or may not have known Handel personally. Much of his information appears to have come secondhand, from conversations with John Christopher Smith, Jr., Handel's lifelong friend, protégé, and amanuensis, who of course did know him well. About Hawkins there is no doubt: he knew Handel personally, and probably quite well. Though he was thirty-four years Handel's junior, the myriad accounts contained in his mammoth *General History of the Science and Practice of Music* reveal Hawkins to have been a ubiquitous presence in the musical life of London who thus doubtless knew many who had been close to Handel during his lifetime. The statements by both men are telling, and, since there is so little else to go on from Handel's contemporaries, I intend to examine them in some detail.

Thirty pages into his *Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel*, Mainwaring feels obliged to address the question head-on. In a passage accounting for the composer's "liberty and independency," Mainwaring tells us: "In the sequel of his life he refused the highest offers from persons of the greatest distinction; nay, the highest favours from the fairest of the sex, only because he would not be cramped or confined by particular attachments." We learn here two things: Because he cherished his liberty and independence so much, Handel (1) refused to be bought off by even the wealthiest and most prestigious persons and, in like fashion, (2) refused sexual relations with even the most attractive of women. Given the eighteenth-century currency of the word "favourites" as benign vocabulary for sexual seduction it is virtually impossible to read Mainwaring as referring to anything other than physical intimacy. (This is certainly how Johann Mattheson read it, translating Mainwaring's phrase as "die schätzbarsten Winke des schönen Geschlechtes" [the most precious come-ons of the fair sex].) Further implicit is the suggestion that although Handel refused such "come-ons" he nonetheless had his share of offers. Not surprisngly, Mainwaring also seems constrained to offer a reason, and while he may simply be invoking the long-standing misogynist theme that relationships with women are invariably traps for men (especially geniuses), it is also possible to read the statement the following way: "Handel, not wanting to be confined in a relationship with one woman (marriage or something other than marriage), therefore refused to sleep with any of the women who gave him the nod." And one might be furthermore inclined, at the risk of belaboring the phrase, to point out the defensive force of Mainwaring's "only," as in "Handel refused the sexual favors of women, but lest the reader jump to unseemly conclusions let me assure him that it was only because he didn't want to be cramped or confined." We end up with a fairly curious and, depending on how one reads it, contradictory message, since refusing sex with women while not wanting to be "cramped" and "confined" with any one in particular doesn't jibe. (Mainwaring certainly doesn't mean to suggest the opposite, that the man was so promiscuous he just couldn't settle down.) Why Mainwaring would even have bothered to slip in this inevitably question-begging and strangely (un)coordinate clause in the first place is not clear. (I mean, are getting support from the rich and famous and having sex with women all that parallel?) But on to Hawkins.

Hawkins's *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* appeared in 1776, seventeen years after Handel's death. Though references to Handel are peppered liberally throughout the two large volumes, the main biographical material is contained in one of his usual "portraits," where we read the following:

His social affectations were not very strong; and to this it may be imputed that he spent his whole life in a state of celibacy; that he had no female attachments of another kind may be ascribed to a better reason. His intimate friends were few; those that seemed to possess most of his confidence were Goupÿ, the painter, and one Hunter, a scarlet-dyer at Old Ford, near Bow, who pretended a taste for music, and at a great expense had copies made for him of all the music of Handel that he could procure. He had
others in the city; but he seemed to think that the honour of his acquaintance was a reward sufficient for the kindness they expressed for him.4

A masterpiece of innuendo, and as disarming as it is suggestive, one wonders how long it took Hawkins to come up with it. But what is he trying to say? Even the most innocent attempt to read its surface brings us into difficulty: What exactly does Hawkins mean by "social affectations"? Simply that Handel didn't like socializing that much, i.e., he wasn't that drawn to people, or they to him? Or is it a reference to social propriety or formality of some sort (Oxford English Dictionary: "forced," "in fashion"), including, perhaps, concern for what other people were likely to think? Are we to read it then in this sense: Handel remained a bachelor all his life because having little inclination for social ceremony he didn't feel the need to get himself a wife? Or perhaps this: being such a boor in public, he just couldn't manage to find someone who would marry him? Another problem lies in the meaning of the word "celibate." It usually denotes "single" or "unmarried"—its Latin root denotes this, as do all of the Oxford English Dictionary entries, for example—but is, of course, often used colloquially to mean "chaste." But "chaste" (he abstained from sex with anybody) can't be what Hawkins means, since in this context he seems to be offering an explanation or justification for why Handel never married (which everyone knows and knew). He is in any case rather speculative about it ("it may be imputed"). Of obviously much greater bearing on our problem are the phrases that follow: What does Hawkins want to signify by "female attachments of another kind"? What might this better reason be? Why all the ambiguity? It is hard not to read the passage in the following sense: Handel had no inclination, for whatever social reasons, to get married; now, as far as finding women to enjoy sex with (amours, paramours, visits to or by the ubiquitous London prostitutes, etc.) he didn't do that either, because of a better reason which I won't tell you because it's not fit to print. The language certainly indicates that Hawkins "knows something" and wants to communicate that he knows it, but the "something" is information he shrinks from naming openly because it cannot be named; or perhaps: "I know it and you know it, but it's something we just don't talk about." His next sentence ("His intimate friends were few...") is no help: rather than offering us a reason why, the "better reason" so tantalizingly invoked, it merely reiterates the sense of the preceding "His social affectations were not very strong," though the elision from "better reason" to "intimate [male] friends" who are then listed (some with names, others not) might have been Hawkins's way of hinting at the "reason." Of the scant testimony we have, this comes closest to suggesting that Handel was not interested in women sexually because he was gay, and this I offer as one possible (and I think compelling) reading, since it not only explains—rather than explains away—the posed but unanswered question (and the elision that follows it), but it is also utterly consistent with the prevalent construction of homosexuality (i.e., its eighteenth-century counterparts) as the "vice that cannot be named among Christians."

That Hawkins was himself inviting this interpretation of the "better reason" receives support from two subsequent references to the passage. The first appears as one of the vignettes in William Coxe's collection of Handel lore published twenty-three years later, where, in a passage that reads essentially as a gloss on Hawkins, we get the following:

Handel contracted few intimacies, and when his early friends died, he was not solicitous of acquiring new ones. He was never married; but his celibacy must not be attributed to any deficiency of personal attractions, or to the source which Sir John Hawkins unjustly supposes, the want of social affection. On the contrary, it was owing to the independency of his disposition, which feared degradation, and dreaded confinement.1

Here, for whatever it may mean, "affectations" has become "affection." That aside, along with assuring us that Handel was an attractive, even convivial sort (he was not a boor), Coxe seems to be saying that when it came to "intimacies" Handel was basically a lone wolf, especially in his later years ("when his early friends died") and that such intimacies would have brought not only confinement but "degradation." But that this is further meant as a defense against the possible imputation of homosexuality is indicated in the continuation of the passage, where Coxe offers an anecdote (an antidote?) concerning two early marriage proposals (italic mine):

For when he was young, two of his scholars, ladies of considerable fortune, were so much enamoured of him, that each was desirous of a matrimonial alliance. The first is said to have fallen a victim to her attachment. Handel would have married her; but his pride was stung by the coarse declaration of her mother, that she never would consent to the marriage of her daughter with a fiddler; and indignant at the expression, he declined all further intercourse. After the death of the mother, the father renewed the acquaintance, and informed him that all obstacles were removed; but he replied, that the time was now past; and the young lady fell into a decline, which soon terminated her existence. The second attachment, was a lady splendidly related, whose hand he might have obtained by renouncing his profession. That condition he resolutely refused, and laudably declined the connection which was to prove a restriction on the great faculties of his mind.2
Here, as in Mainwaring, the idea resurfaces that women, marriage, or both, are millstones, confining to the spirit and degrading to the mind and that, thankfully, Handel was "resolute" in his praiseworthy refusal to be a party to it. One stumbles over the word "degradation," of course, a term that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* had roughly the same (if not more severe) connotations in the eighteenth century as today. In what sense would marriage or other liaisons with women have constituted "degradation"? And attentive Freudians would certainly be loath to let the conjunction of "degradation," "fear," and "dread" pass unremarked, and so let it be.

With the second of our two Hawkins commentators, Friedrich Chryssander, all this is preceded by a long and bizarre anecdote involving a mysterious lady admirer, a laurel wreath, and a poem, again by way of countering the imputation of "something being wrong." When he finally gets around to Hawkins's statement—whether he included it purely out of German scholarly thoroughness, or for the primary purpose of containing the threat, is hard to tell—it is first qualified by a caution, then trumped by the "rewrite" of Coxe, or rather Coxe's assumed source, Smith:

> Of course he [Hawkins] is first of all giving only his own opinion, based among other things on hearsay and a certain personal acquaintance. But the young Smith, who must have known about it, and who willingly confirms the better part of Hawkins assumption, told his own [certainly] a few things about the true circumstances and they have preserved the following account... [at which point we get a translation into German of the Coxe paragraph quoted above].

It is well worth noting that when he comes to translate the phrase "better reason," Chryssander quite significantly (and deliberately, it would seem) alters its meaning: "daß er aber keinen weiblichen Umgang von anderer Sorte hatte, darf man besseren Grundsätzen zuschreiben." "Bessere Grundsätze" can only mean "better principles," not "better reasons." He, too, must have been troubled.

I have given so much attention to this passage in Hawkins largely because Handel scholars have given so little. In fact, the most interesting thing about Hawkins's statement—more significant even than the messages it encodes—is the (chilling) fact that in all the many pages written about Handel subsequent to Coxe and Chryssander, in which, not surprisingly, references to Hawkins abound, not one single biographical or musicological work even acknowledges the existence of this passage, nor even in those whose authors complain most loudly about the lack of "evidence." Mainwaring's remark hasn't fared much better. For whatever else may be said about them, they do constitute evidence, and for the researcher pursuing the nettlesome question of Handel's "relationship to women" evidence that fairly leaps off the page.

Let us continue with, as it were, the question of the question, by surveying its configuration in the literature following Chryssander. For despite suppression of Hawkins on the subject (and Mainwaring too, for the most part), it lives on as a haunting presence, a "problem" in search of explanations. Fortunately for the gaiety of nations, such "explanations" are not lacking: even in the absence of what is inevitably demanded in the way of "hard" evidence (a notarized eyewitness account of Handel behind the scenes in flagrant delicto perhaps?), writers have labored to reach closure on the subject. What follows is a summary of four of the most common strategies for doing so.

First is what I shall call the Ladyfriend Trap, the discovery of female friends or secret affairs for men who did not otherwise seem to have or desire them. This is, of course, a strategy practiced not only by biographers, but often out of necessity and in the interests of passing (and thus surviving) by gay men themselves. But Handel's silence, the lack of documentable liaisons, and (should it have been considered) the testimony of Mainwaring and Hawkins have made this game infinitely harder to play. (And need it be said, even if heterosexual "affairs" could be documented, this might—and often does—mean nothing, especially with regard to the eighteenth century; human desire is rarely as tidy as our classifications.) Often the women remain nameless, and there is sometimes the suggestion that the interest is one-sided, as in Coxe's account of Handel's early women suitors; even when they are named the connections are tenuous. Thus Keates: "We can surmise that while in Italy he fell in love with the soprano Vittoria Tarquini, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that he may have felt attracted to certain of his leading singers such as Margherita Durastanti, Anna Strada and, in later years, Kitty Clive and Susannah Cibber." (Of course it is only "not unreasonable" if viewed under the cosmic umbrella of enforced heterosexuality.)

Paul Henry Lang tries to connect Handel erotically to at least four women, a Mme. Stülen in Germany (one casual mention in a letter; Handel probably knew her father), one Donna Laura, a "shadowy Iberian Princess" (they happened to be in the same place at the same time), in Florence the singer Vittoria Tarquini (along with Lucrezia d'André, another "Florentine belle in whom Handel became interested"), and other divas in London. Of these, only the case of Vittoria Tarquini appears to have any substance, and it is questionable. Tarquini, known as "La Bombace" (the Bomb), was originally thought to have sung in Handel's first opera *Vincer se stesso è la maggior vittoria* (known usually by its shorter title *Rodrigo*), which was staged in 1707 in Florence when Handel was twenty-two. Mainwaring, not long after the
statement about Handel's refusal of female "favours," nonetheless records that Vittoria was quite interested in him, specifically that

[s]he was a fine woman, and had for some time been much in the good graces of his Serene Highness [the Grand Duke Cosimo III of Tuscany; she was his mistress]. But, from the natural restlessness of certain hearts, so little sensible was she of her exalted situation, that she conceived a design of transferring her affections to another person. Handel's youth and comeliness, joined with his fame and abilities in Music, had made impressions on her heart. Tho' she had the art to conceal them for the present, she had not perhaps the power, certainly not the intention, to efface them.23

The passage says nothing about Handel's role here, unless the composer's was one of the "hearts" said to be "restless"; the notion that Handel was sleeping with her is based on a rumor that can be documented in a letter, recently discovered by Anthony Hicks, by the Electress Sophie of Hanover in 1710 in which is written "[Handel is] a good-looking man and the talk is that he is the lover of Victoria."24 While it is possible that Handel was Vittoria's lover, most Handel scholars dismiss the idea as far-fetched. Hogwood says simply, "it is unlikely that Handel would have engaged with her on any other than professional terms," while Newman Flower, who admittedly wants to keep Handel innocent of any physicality whatsoever and who probably could not have known of Sophie's letter (though I suspect it wouldn't have mattered to him anyway), notes dryly:

She was a woman well advanced in middle age, with nothing more than an average voice, who would probably have been the last person to make any physical impression on Handel...At this period...Handel had no interest in women. Later, when he mellowed to that tenderness towards mankind which brought out some of the best of his melodies, he had a liking for feminine society. He became the gentile gallant—never quite the courtier. But whilst at Florence, at any rate, he can be quite safely exonerated from intrigue with an actress or any other woman.25

Handel still may have been sleeping with her, despite her age and voice, as Lang notes (by way of a gentle chide): "Our eminent and strait-laced historian could not have been familiar with the traditional role middle-aged women have always played in the introduction of young men, especially artists, to the mysteries and delights of love." In any event, Lang is happy to conclude, "on this pleasant note the second Florentine visit ended..."26

Such difficulties with the Ladyfriend strategy have driven a number of writers—faute de mieux—to what we may call the Mother Alibi. Psychologists predictably have diagnosed Handel's "problem" (and Brahms's too, by the way) rather coldly as an unnatural mother fixation (with "early rejection" by women an occasional cofactor, especially in German accounts), which made him incapable of passion for other women.27 But many of the Handelians quite warmed to the idea of the composer's mother as his one and only. Waxing sentimental, if curiously incestuous, Flower, for example, writes:

The affection of Handel for this simple German woman, who had borne him, increased with the years. She was the only woman who ever held any real place in his heart. His sisters were dead. He was mildly interested in his nieces, but the old lady of Halle had supreme command of that solitary affection he had for one of the opposite sex.28

Insofar as mother fixation has figured prominently in clinical etiologies of homosexuality, the Mother Alibi, like the bottomless Ladyfriend pit, far from removing the dreaded stigma, ends up again (however unintentionally) reinforcing it.29

A third strategy, the Sexless and Celibate Syndrome, is another concept added, strangely enough, to establish Handel's normalcy. As Lang notes, it is much favored by the "pure" Handelians: "Flower called Handel 'sexless and safe' while others attributed his bachelorhood to a 'moral revulsion to carnal passion.'"30 And R. A. Streatfeild wrote:

[Handel was] a man of singular personal purity. In his time obscenity of language and unchastity of life were regarded as the most venial of sins, but from the typical faults of the age Handel was entirely free, and the disgust with which he regarded the sensuality that he saw rampant around him is, I think, to be read in Samson by those that have eyes to see.31

This line of thought may be traced back to Caxton, with its attendant conflation of bachelorhood with chastity, or perhaps to the now famous statement of Charles Burney—itself rife with suggestions of sexual sublimation—namely that

Handel, with many virtues, was addicted to no vice that was injurious to society. Nature, indeed, required a great supply of sustenance to support so huge a mass, and he was rather epicurean in the choice of it; but this seems to have been the only appetite he allowed himself to gratify.32

Whatever the case, the "sexless" theory is not without its problems. Lang rejects the idea outright, as being disconcertingly abnormal in itself; with English Handelians such as Streatfeild and Flower clearly in mind, he bristles: "Many of the writers seem to regard celibacy as a higher and more spiritual
state than marriage, which is a rather curious attitude coming from English Protestants." The reference to English Protestants might well suggest that celibacy was connected in his mind—as well as in the minds of many stolid eighteenth-century Englishmen—with the Roman Catholic priesthood (i.e., not a good thing), and Handel had spent quite enough time in their company. In any event, it should be noted that the word "celibate," like "papist" and even "priest," had since the late sixteenth century functioned in the language as a pejorative synonym for sodomite. Whether this was in the minds of Flower or Streaffeld is unknown, but the attempt to preserve Handel in a state of safe (disembodied) sexlessness raises as many questions as it obviates. Handel was clearly unmarried, but was he (therefore) homosexual?

The final strategy we can call the Aesthetic Fallacy, the idea that a composer, being in love with his Muse, has therefore no time for erotic relations with real human beings. This has been a favored explanation in Handel's case (especially, if the exchange with George II should be valid, because he said so). But it does little to clarify the problem of Handel's sexuality; if anything, it, too, further obscures it. That Handelians have embraced this notion of monkish aestheticism—the holy solitude of the artist—most vigorously should hardly surprise us. Flower wrote, for example, that "[h]is art was his life. No woman could have taken its place, or even shared that place. It drew from him everything he had to give." But Percy M. Young is more skeptical, calling such a conclusion "curious," since bachelorhood "did not preclude the eighteenth-century gentleman from becoming acquainted with the delectable possibilities of female companionship. Pope, Gay, Congreve, Prior, Atterbury, and Savage were all bachelors: it was not unfashionable to avoid the rigours of matrimony." Lang, who, as we have seen, found it necessary to posit actual sexual affairs with women in order to certify Handel as "normal," finally ends up blandly eliding the two. Not women, but "solitude" must have been his mistress after all: "One might say that he simply did not have time for serious engagement with women. Solitude for him was...his deepest inspiration...He saw no place for a woman in his scheme of things..." "How," asks Lang with disturbing misogynist overtones, "would any woman understand the single-minded pursuit of any idea that took possession of him?" It might be noted parenthetically that Handel's inspired solitude did not preclude his spending an awful lot of time on banking and financial speculation, as well as eating and drinking—another of Burney's anecdotes tells of Handel leaving the table and the company of a friend to eat choice French dishes and swill fine wine in an adjoining room—and fussing over his collection of exotic houseplants, a passion he shared with his friend Telemann. But Lang is not finished: apparently needing to reconcile this lofty notion with his insistence that Handel was a man of red-blooded passion he continues by arguing (with an admittedly oblique austerity, but at least veering toward the right track) that music is a form of sex: "There is a certain kinship," he declares, "between Eros and musical poetry. It is the urge, the creative urge that drives the composer to work, and the pleasure he experiences while so engaged is akin to erotic experience." It hardly needs remarking that the notion of men taking erotic refuge in art has had in itself strongly homosexualizing connotations, particularly in the nineteenth century. Because of such social codings—whether embedded in the discourse of Freudian psychopathology or Romantic aestheticism—Handel ends up here as well reinvigorated in an association from which these authors presumably sought to extricate him.

At this point we have ample evidence if not to "answer" our question then at least to locate, on a discursive level, its origin: the Gay Closet. For despite the utter absence of the word "homosexual" (or any of its genealogical antecedents), it has been nonetheless everywhere actively present. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued, the closet is an "epistemological" space where knowledge of a certain kind is generated—of a kind held by a given social body to be somehow marked as threatening. Knowledge can be thought of as "closetworthy" in approximate proportion to its ability to threaten or contest manifest or dominant versions of the truth (some skeletons in the closet are more threatening than others). What is more, its production depends not on ordinary means but, as we have seen, on a series of specific discursive operations. On the most basic level closet knowledge depends on silence, an "absence" out of which is generated a discursively elaborated "presence," the secret. Then, as in Freud's "negation" or Foucault's "spiral"—mechanisms by which an object to be denied, repressed, or disciplined gains more, rather than less, presence and power—the secret is by the logic of "reverse discourse" further constituted and elaborated in a procession of alibis, justifications, or explanations: the "repressed," to put it in Freudian language, "returns." In other words, the question of Handel's homosexuality (Keate's "assumption") is constantly generated, not as a present surface of knowledge, but rather as an absent surfeit of it; a lack becomes an "excess"—knowledge is produced in "excess" of what is spoken, i.e., in its interstitial and subtextual spaces—everywhere, that is, except in the open. The closet is that space where silences speak, obfuscations reveal, absences signify, and negations posit. Closet knowledge, existing in the nature of a threat, must therefore be held in check, and this is the function of the closet "door" (held in check, rather than met with the force of annihilation, for the closet can be useful). What kind of a threat must homosexuality be in order to mobilize such elaborate means of containment; or in terms of our question: What is so threatening about a homosexual Handel? To grasp this we need to see that more is at
It was also the rationale of the claim that the celibacy of Roman priests was the cause of their alleged homosexual sins; the bulwark against sexual debauchery, in the minds of the Protestant reformers, was [therefore] marriage; that gone and all manner of sodomy and buggery would break forth. 44

For those seeking to understand how homosexuality could have become as heavily (even cosmically) invested a sign in Western cultures, including for example the radical sociodiscursive dimensions of the AIDS pandemic such passages are rich in suggestion. What I want to stress is, first, the notion of a unified cosmos or plenitude, and, second, the “outsider” role played by sodomy not only as sexual deviance (“confusion”), but as an incommensurable threat to this plenitude.

While such notions may seem alien to most modern folk, they are still regularly invoked in crusades against homosexuality, whether by Roman Catholics, fundamentalist Christians, or (even) government institutions: the argument against lesbians and gay men in the U.S. military, for example, rests squarely on this footing (threat to “good order”). 45 In Handel’s time such a scheme rematerialized, alongside the orthodox version, in Leibniz’s monadic Great Chain of Being, a cosmology purged of its specifically Christian trappings in the interests of promoting Enlightenment deism and Philosophical Optimism (“the best of all possible worlds”), but which shared with its antecedent the central feature of a closed plenitude, an order liable to collapse should any aspect of it (Leibniz’s “degrees” on the scale) be violated. Here is the idea in its famous versification by Alexander Pope, Handel’s early colleague during his Burlington House years:

Or in the full creation leave a void,
Where, one step broken, the great scale’s destroyed:
From Nature’s chain whatever link you strike,
Tenth or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike.

And if each system in gradation roll,
Alike essential to th’amazing Whole,
The least confusion but in one, not all
That system only, but the Whole must fall. 46

Although this “enlightened” model assigns no specific role to sexual deviance as one of these potential disrupters of the Whole, the system recuperates the notion of the Order of Nature and emphasizes the necessity of controlling the passions, especially sexual ones: of subordinating them, that is, to the complementary Order of Reason. What Bray writes concerning the function of marriage as a bulwark against “confusion” in the Renaissance was no less
potent an argument in the eighteenth century when the threat of libertine subcultures, including but not limited to homosexual ones, was perceived as becoming more virulent than ever.

Much about the “Handel question” can be explained if we see in it a microcosmic reflection of just such a tension between stability and rupture. Though different in degree, Handel’s image is constituted as a plenitude, one that as time went on got constructed increasingly in terms not only of Romantic hero (“heaven-sent genius”), but also of British national identity and religious purity. The myth could hold together, indeed be fortified by such accretions, even in the presence of minor flaws in an otherwise seamless fabric (Handel smoked and swore like a sailor? Well, who didn’t? Handel ate like a pig? Hey, he was a big man! Handel was really a foreigner who talked with a thick German accent? No matter; he was English at heart, etc.). What it could not withstand was a force capable of undoing the whole thing, specifically the one flaw so destructive and incommensurate as to be unspeakable: that Handel was or even might have been—the question itself is sufficiently disruptive—queer. And it is precisely this threat that drove and continues to drive our love-sotted but “puzzled” Handel biographers to the various suppressive and repressive strategies of the closet: so much is at stake, for Handel’s and, through any association with the question, their own public “respectability.”

Few post-Enlightenment thinkers are likely to be moved by the threat of gay men bringing about a Universal Deluge or undoing the “natural order of things,” but still fewer, I imagine, subscribe to the doctrines of Philosophical Optimism. How then to account for the continuing persistence of homosexual panic? Put another way: Why in an enlightened age wouldn’t the possibility of a gay Handel be greeted if not with enthusiasm, then with “a modicum of dispassionate objectivity”? What is missing in our explanation?

The answer is that these systems and their latter-day counterparts, together with the strategies deployed in their support, are undergirded by an even more fundamental metasystem on which all patriarchies depend, and that is, of course, gender. To return to our Handel biographers: the issue is in reality not marriage, or chastity for that matter. When Keates baldly asserts that Handel was not homosexual because “in an eighteenth-century context the vagabond life of musicians made marriage a distinct hindrance” he falters, like Young and others before him, on two grounds: first, gay men from Handel’s time through Stonewall (but especially in the eighteenth century) married more often than not, and for a variety of reasons (as a means of fulfilling social obligations, in order to pass, sometimes because they wanted a family, or because they genuinely enjoyed women); and second (and of much lesser significance) Handel’s trips to Italy and Germany hardly qualify him as an itinerant. The real question is rather, Was George Frideric Handel a man?

And this is where Lang correctly identifies the problem: masculinity. Writing in 1966 and reacting to almost two centuries’ worth of closet maneuvers intended to explain or deflect the question (but which, as we have seen, paradoxically succeeded only in more deeply reinforcing it), Lang obviously wants to clear up the “confusion” once and for all, to, as it were, tear this diseased plant out of Handel’s garden, root and branch, and sow the field with salt. He thus bravely devotes three whole pages to “Handel and Women” and although he casually admits to having no evidence for the many “peripheral love affairs” he attributes to the composer, and with Mainwaring and Hawkins safely out of sight, he does at least identify what the real issue is, which he calls a “comforting fact” (and which—significantly—explains his need for a “sexual” if “unsafe” hero): Handel, he assures us with enormous confidence, “was attracted to women in all stages of his life [because he was a] man of normal masculine constitution.” Let us turn now to the life of Handel the man.

Handel’s Body

Before reaching the too-easy conclusion that the Handel question is nothing more than the construction of biographers hopelessly afflicted with homosexual panic, that Handel is a “victim of discourse,” let us remember that while he was “given” a life, a very richly embroidered one, he also “had” a life, that is, a body. So far our considerations have involved the erasure of that body beneath the heavy layers of eighteenth-century pomp and wiggery. Let us expunge the stuffy image conveyed by those late engravings and put in their place Philipp Mercier’s portrait of a fortyish, still handsome composer in flaming cardinal-red robe and chapeau, quill in hand, leaning in relaxed pose on his harpsichord; here at least Handel, by all accounts a very attractive man (Mattheson glowingly describes him as “broad-shouldered, strapping, and muscular”), resembles a living creature with blood in his veins. Deconstruction can help us cut through the accretions of time in order to render our mythic text problematic; to reembody it we need the dialectical antidote to myth: material history. Like any human life, Handel’s was lived out within a dense web of sociocultural relations and assumptions, including many that bear on the question before us. We must therefore remove our composer from the clutches of the panic-stricken and return him to the concrete social realities of eighteenth-century London and the Continent. Not only is Handel’s public career here fairly well documented, but his private
life turns out, upon examination, to be in many respects less "mysterious" than we have been led to believe.

Not insignificantly, the span of Handel's life coincides with an important development in the conception and practice of same-sex eroticism in the West: that is, the emergence alongside ordinary and more or less random sodomitical behaviors—which included many forms of unauthorized sex acts—of a distinct social role and identity for a certain kind of homoerotic man, the so-called molly, and together with it, a corresponding social institution, the molly house. Facilitated, like the first gay bars in the U.S. after World War I, by social uprootedness attending industrialization and urbanization, the molly house provided an anonymous and convivial locus in which homoerotic men could congregate, drink, and dress up, and, in the back rooms, enjoy physical pleasure with each other, i.e., have sex. The existence of the houses helped solidify and shape a gay identity in the London scene, one that formed a part of a larger libertine subculture, and which roughly 150 years later would be taxonomized in clinical discourse as "the homosexual" or "the deviant." "Sodomy...that utterly confused category," wrote Michel Foucault, "was a category of forbidden acts [defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes]; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood....The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species." But as Alan Bray has shown, the molly represents a significant intermediate stage in this historical trajectory. If the "sodomite" was a perpetrator of forbidden acts, the "molly" was one social identity for men who engaged in such acts, in other words, an eighteenth-century gay man.

Together with the infamous London masquerades, the so-called "gentlemen's clubs," the assemblies of modish rakes, and the backstage theatrical milieu, the molly houses formed part of a rich and openly libertine subculture, a deliciously scandalous and much gossiped and written about feature of the London scene, Margaret Clap's house having been one of the more notorious. In the aggregate they earned London the reputation in the minds of the prurient of being a vast machinery of sexual gratification; in the words of one writer, a sodomitical "Hell on Earth." In the 1720s a set of ad hoc vice squads, known variously as the societies for the reformation of manners or for the prevention of vice, was formed to intimidate and terrorize the mollies, though—significantly—not to eliminate them. Intermittent pogroms were carried out, the more terroristic because random, and in the first half of the century numerous arrests and punishments took place. These included imprisonment, the pillory, and execution. (Then, as now, being gay had dangerous consequences.) With the urban molly and the molly house two essential conditions of modern homophobia and homosexual panic had been supplied: a defined social identity and a visible and more or less coherent subculture, together with an obligatory stereotype: effeminacy.

Molly houses were, however, but one manifestation of a larger social phenomenon, the coming to visibility of homosexual subcultures across a broad range of social classes. As Lawrence Stone notes:

Homosexuality was apparently becoming more common, or at any rate more open, among the upper classes...By the early eighteenth century homosexual clubs existed for the upper classes in London...It also seems possible that the higher proportion of the social elite were indeed homosexuals. What is certain is that male homosexuality was practised and talked about more openly in the eighteenth century than at any previous time.

Excluding boys' schools, churches, and monasteries, particularly Roman Catholic ones, which for centuries had been (and still are) associated with homoerotic activity, two other social institutions or milieux, in contrast to the molly house either removed from London and/or more private in character, attracted homoerotic men: the Grand Tour and the country retreat. Throughout the century the Grand Tour provided an opportunity for men of mainly the upper classes to escape the prying eyes and gossiping tongues of London polite society and indulge their passions, notably classical art and the "sodomitical vice," in the place that was thought of as synonymous with both: Italy. Though studies of travel literature including the Grand Tour abound, its erotic and especially homoerotic aspects have been overlooked or consciously suppressed, as Rousseau has shown in a recent article, "Love and Antiquities: Walpole and Gray on the Grand Tour." Here he describes one contemporary's account:

As the anonymous author of Reasons for the Growth of Sodomy in England wrote in 1729, Italy was perceived to be the mother and nurse of sodomy: the place where men kissed each other, where Englishmen first learned the unnatural vices that permitted them to become catamites and pathics (i.e., objects of sport for older and usually richer men); the place where every man could easily procure a sex partner, where every churchman and politician...could find his Ganymede of any age; the place where anus and castration were words not out of place in conversation (casti and culo). Throughout the century various English moralists warned that their country would soon rival Italy as the most sodomitical place on earth; to offer evidence the author of Reasons for the Growth of Sodomy pointed to the success in England of Italian opera and the theatre's decline into pantomime.
women, this private Arcadia can be thought of as distinctly homosocial in nature. But what evidence is there to indicate that any or all of these men were homoerotic or homosexual? This is a thorny problem for the historian and before continuing I should like to address briefly some of its dimensions.

Until now we have been left rather hanging in the matter: between, on the one hand, gay popular history (in which we find lots of gay people, and virtually everyone is suspect) and, on the other, no history (total excription, save for a few of the most "notorious"). Marion Ziegler's assertion, for example, that Gian Gastone, the last of the Medici line, was "one of the most open homosexuals in Europe in his day," like his speculation that Handel and Matteoson were probably lovers, is tendered without much in the way of supporting documentation. But does this mean it is groundless? It is a difficult question because even when honestly sought, evidence is likely to be elusive and circumstantial, and what there is of it has frequently been ignored, some of it (we are only now discovering) suppressed owing to unscholarly prejudice or cowardice. What is more, the burden of "proof" always rests with the "plaintiffs," whose claims are often dismissed under that silly catch-all rubric of "special pleading" (I daresay, "pleading" the heterosexuality of any of these men, especially the clergy, would be a much taller order). On the other side, the areas of supporting research that might help to sort out and contextualize questions such as mine by piecing together a history of homoeroticism and homosexual subcultures—Rousseau's work on sociocultural aspects of the Grand Tour, systematic studies of subcultural semiotics (code languages, systems of visual representation, etc.)—are now beginning to receive due attention. The commonplace that scores of homoerotic or homosexual men have over the centuries suffered and found refuge in the priesthood, for example, is not something one will read in an authorized church history (or in most scholarly books, for that matter); it is more likely to be a matter of insider knowledge, couched in the discourses of gossip and rumor. While such ways of speaking may be unreliable, at all events difficult to assess, they nonetheless must be taken into account when closet questions are at issue, for the simple reason that for gay people they have been among the few available avenues of communication and truth-telling. As a means by which forms of subjugated knowledge—those disqualified as inferior or otherwise "unscientific"—function to challenge those judged to be authoritative, the "corrosive discourses" of gossip and rumor indicate at the very least the presence of alternative voices and versions of reality ("the church is full of homosexuals and everybody knows it"), which must then contend with existing and culturally sanctified claims to the truth ("there are no homosexuals in the church; there are no homosexuals in history").

In any case, gossip, whatever its claims to truth or reality, is a discourse available to
be used, by someone for some purpose ("the talk is that he was the lover of Victoria"), and that purpose is in the end always political.

As it turns out, Ziegler's characterization of Gian Gastone appears to have been close to the truth: according to written accounts, the last of the Medici appears to have been a "rampant" sodomite and instigator of "bacchana-lian orgies," at least later in his life. And what of our cardinal(s)? To stay with Ottoboni: this central figure in Handel's Italian experience is described by the French diplomat de Brosses as a character "sans mœur, sans crédit, débauché, ruine, amateur des arts, grand musicien" (without morals, without repute, debauched, decadent, lover of the arts, and a fine musician). This is interesting as closet evidence, since every single one of the terms here could and in varying contexts did function as code words for gay; taken together, the meaning seems incontrovertible. Put differently: it takes a willful misreading to understand the statement to mean anything other than "here's yet another queer cardinal." But when it comes to Rome, especially in the circles of courtesans, aristocrats, and clergy, we are not entirely at the mercy of conjecture or semiotic analysis: Rome was in point of fact the site of flourishing homosexual subcultures, many of which involved the clergy and music (an anonymous Dutch traveler wrote extensively of this in a work entitled Intrigues Monastiques, ou l'Amour En.capuchonné [1739], for example), and Handel would not be the first composer whose orbit coincided with them.

Concerning Pietro Metastasio, for instance, Rousseau writes:

Joseph Spence records that he came upon the "real history" of Metasta- "sio, the greatest opera librettist of his time, while in Italy. According to Spence, Gravina, the unequivocally homoerotic Italian poet-critic, heard the eleven-year-old Metastasio playing music impromptu in the streets of Rome. On a whim he adopted the urchin as "son" and lover; nine years later he let the now twenty-year-old Metastasio a small fortune to set himself up as a librettist. Metastasio recognized his own sexuality; he gravitated to the court not only because of his vocation, but also because the court offered him economic security and sexual license.

In general, travel literature is proving an important source for the uncovering of such "real histories." And such research may eventually enable us to answer another question that arises in the case of Ottoboni: to what extent exactly was his more "private" and homosocial Arcadia also a homoerotic venue?

The question is significant because strong connections between homo- sexual subcultures and the (loosely defined) "artistic Arcadia" already exist. Although obviously not the sole property of gay people, the idea of Arcadia, that mythic-pastoral locus amoenus (pleasant place) populated by shepherds and shepherdesses has a long and richly established history of homosexual appropriation. As Jacob Stockinger notes, gay people, like those of any subculture, have created minority codes out of majority symbols, minority "speech" within a majority "language"; and this is one such instance. Rooted in classical antiquity and associated with pastoral genres (notably the eclogue) and poets (Anacreon, Theocritus, Virgil, e.g.), a cast of characters (Ganymede, Alexis, Corydon, etc.), and a whole system of poetic tropes (eating fruit, playing music, coquetry, lovemaking, and the like), "Arcadia" functioned as a literary displacement, through the playful and legitimizing disguise of the music-loving shepherd, of same-sex eroticism and desire (men do fall in love—with each other). The Arcadia was also in many instances a real social space in which homosexual men or other "libertines," including participants in the Italian Grand Tour, could congregate and pursue their common interests, especially in Rome (the "City of Sodom"). In other words, as a symbolic sign system as well as a network of social spaces, the Arcadia articulated and filled the need of a small but cohesive international subculture. Whatever else we are able to say about this institution and its semiotic code-world, none of it does anything but reinforce the network of material relations indicative of a homoerotic Handel, and this especially in light of the gaps in the historical record of these years.

When young George Frideric returned to England toward the end of 1710 he lived first with a Mr. Andrews of the London suburb of Barn-Elms (now Barnes). About this man we know very little, except that he also maintained a house in town and was possibly connected to a men's social group, the Kit-Kat Club. Then, sometime in 1713 at age twenty-eight, Handel moved into what was certainly a homoerotic milieu, Burlington House in Piccadilly, the palatial residence of the young Richard Boyle, the Earl of Burling- ton, who also had a Palladian country retreat at Chiswick, and who became his patron. With Burlington he lived for three years, mingling with other residents and visitors, including Alexander Pope and John Gay, both "homo- social" if not homoerotic, as well as the architect, landscape designer, and painter William Kent, about whom there can be no doubt. That men like Burlington, whom Lang aptly describes as an "English Arcadian," commissioned or designed these houses as in effect islands of Italian high culture, including many elements of the Italian Arcadia, is apparent not only in their architecture, but from the imagery that informs descriptions of it. Gay's poem "Trivia," published January 1716, oft-quoted in Handel literature, indeed locates it as an island of beauty and respite near to but separate from the squalor of London:
Yet Burlington’s fair Palace still remains;
Beauty within, without Proportion reigns.
Beneath his Eye declining Art revives,
The Wall with animated Picture lives;
There Hendel strikes the Strings, the melting Strain
Transports the Soul and thrills through ev’ry Vein;
There oft’ I enter (but with cleaner Shoes)
For Burlington’s belov’d by ev’ry Muse.75

What was Handel’s life like in the Burlington household? Though Hogwood describes it as “regulated,” the schedule hardly appears to have been crushing: plenty of time for composition, rest, walks in the country, gardening, music-making, and, of course, those long dinners and sparkling conversations about the arts. But this isn’t entirely a matter of conjecture either. Consider the following description, contained in a letter by Pope to his confidante, a Mrs. Teresa Blount:

I am to pass three or four days in high luxury, with some company, at my Lord Burlington’s. We are to walk, ride, ramble, dine, drink, and lie together. His gardens are delightful, his music ravishing.77

The inventory of Arcadian pleasures in these sources is noteworthy, not least for their barely coded eroticism. Present in the space between “music” and “ravishing” lies the erotic body, and is there any reason to equivocate about the meaning of “lie together”? Do we imagine Pope really to have meant something on the order of: “we are to walk, ride, ramble, dine, drink, and lie together, all except for Handel, of course, who, being thoroughly shocked at such behavior, will doubtless repair to his room to sulk and play the harpsichord”? A distinctly Arcadian ambience is corroborated by the following couplets, again from a poem by Gay, describing Burlington’s bucolic pastimes:

While you, my Lord, bid stately Piles ascend,
Or in your Chiswick Bow’s enjoy your Friend,
Where Pope unloads the Bough within his reach,
Of purple Grape, blue Plumb, and blushing Peach.76

An innocent reading of these documents as “purely metaphorical” will be difficult to sustain in view of the larger homoerotic code system that informs it. Put differently: the metaphoric conventions, especially those having to do with “ravishing music,” “enjoyment of the friend,” “the eating of fruit,” function in the sociodiscursive field of Arcadia precisely as mechanisms of homosexual concealment.78 Still, Newman Flower (always wonderful) could insist that while Burlington was a rich idler, yet, unlike most rich idlers of his time he chose a branch of art and gave his riches to it, without expectation of reward. He had not been drawn into the thrones of loose living. The ladies at the lesser theaters were common game, but not if he could help it in those productions with which he was associated. Drury Lane was a bawdy-house; the concert rooms were teeming with the mistresses of rich backers—ladies caught up for their pretty faces, and too often possessing voices which might have achieved something had they been capable of an honest pronunciation of the English tongue, or some semblance of melody. The clubs roared with merriment at the concert programmes which revealed the secret amours of those who should know better. But Burlington House was the home of the Arts, and it escaped the gibes.79

To this naive reading Lang gives his full assent when he writes in a passage as revealing as it is rife with Freudian negation: “Moreover, Burlington House and its master pass even Sir Newman Flower’s closest scrutiny; he could not find any trace of ‘loose living’ that would have made the place and the company unfit for the future composer of Messiah.” He continues, in what now must be read with at least a modicum of irony: “Handel lived there not unlike Corelli in the Ottoboni palace...”90

Biographers’ interpretation of Handel’s time in Burlington’s household (and later at Cannons), where evidence of circumstantial homosexuality is difficult to suppress, has of course varied. Hogwood’s description of their association is, for example, rather different from Flower’s. Here, in the most recent scholarly biography of the composer, the author remains either curiously neutral on the question of Handel’s homosexuality, or, as in the following passage, subtly urges the reader to form such a conclusion on his own:

As a noble amateur [the Earl of Burlington] preferred to initiate rather than execute. Amongst his circle of designers, the most favoured was William Kent, whom he met in Rome during his first Italian visit in 1714. “Kentino” moved into Burlington House on his return to England and lived with the Earl for the remainder of his life; according to John Harris [author of The Palladiana] “There is no reason not to presume a close homosexual relationship.”

Hogwood immediately continues: “The atmosphere at Burlington House must have been familiar to Handel from his first Italian residence with Ferdinando de’ Medici. His private life here, however, remains private even today; from his youth he retained an enigmatic aloofness in matters of sex, politics and religion.”91 Similarly, in his account of Handel’s second patronage at yet another place of “retirement,” this time Cannons, a Palladian palace owned by James Brydges, Earl of Carnarvon and later the Duke of Chandos, he coyly
hints at the same thing: "Cannons...was [yet] another example of the 'regulated employment' that he had found with Ruspoli and Burlington, but [this one was] even further from the public eye." Hogwood is correct in making the comparison, and the entire subject of the Grand Tour and the suburban or country retreat as sites involving homosexual subcultural activity, identity, and language is deserving of more detailed interdisciplinary study. With respect to the Handel question, the roles of plaintiff and defendant surely need to be reversed. In light of the composer's extensive and intimate association with demonstrably homosexual men and/or milieux, the question becomes this: On what basis can or ought one argue that Handel was everywhere he went an exception?

Conclusion: A Gay Handel

Whether at this point the question "Was Handel gay?" can be answered with ironclad certainty remains, finally, a matter of interpretation. Though I have tried to represent the question as more interesting and important than whatever conclusions we might arrive at, and while I appreciate the perverse advantages of leaving it open-ended as opposed to comfortably "settled," I do believe Handel "by the preponderance of the evidence" to have been a gay man, though probably, like many others of his day, a conflicted one. Not because he was single and silent; not because, in the absence of evidence of any erotic interest in women, those who knew him were silent or enigmatic about "it"; not because his commentators have filled those silences with alibi, fabrication, and prevarication, and ignored evidence; not because he chose to leave the provinces and live his life without complaint in the venues most closely associated with homoerotic men; not even because he loved opera and houseplants (history doesn't record whether he kept a cat)—not, that is, because of any one of these, each in itself perhaps subject to interpretation, but rather because of the overwhelming effect of their confluence, and because as an "explanation" it accounts without need of excuse for virtually every aspect of the composer's life (including, perhaps, that unseemly "eating problem"). Others may reach different conclusions, of course. More importantly, I hope to have removed at least the question from the closet—and perhaps all who love and want to "know" Handel, whatever their reasons, along with it—where it can be pursued openly and without dread; if not with dispassionate objectivity, then perhaps with a bit of humor. This itself would be a step in the direction of civilization.

That said, I must nonetheless confess to doubts about the question, at least about the terms in which it is framed. Like our hapless apologists who ended up reinforcing what they hoped to dismiss, by posing the question in these terms (and for whatever gains we may win by doing so—and they may be considerable), we too end up reinforcing rather than calling into question the binary logic on which it (and its closet home) depends. By attempting to decide ("yes" he was, "no" he wasn't; even "maybe" he was or wasn't) we give assent to the either/or/self/other frame that engenders ("engenders," indeed) homosexual panic and that in effect reinforces the enabling conditions of the closet itself. I realize that in arguing this way I am attempting to work both sides of the street at the same time—insisting on the one hand that a gay Handel gives us a better model, one capable of embracing rather than erasing contradiction, and of explaining, rather than explaining away, the Handel question, while now setting out to deconstruct that question. But I do in fact want it both ways: first, because a gay Handel functions at the political level to address and legitimate the urgent project of "gay history," by which I understand the history of same-sex eroticisms and behaviors, of sexual-cultural differences and resistances, the history, in a sense, of all men and women refracted through the dialectical lens of sexism, homophobia, and power—however continuous or discontinuous, however socially constructed, inflected, and materially contingent these polyvocal narratives, only now being written, in reality are. And second, because an admittedly and unapologetically essentialized gay Handel responds to the terms in which the struggles for gay liberation are being waged at this (our) moment in history, in the courts, in the voting booths, in the clinics, and in the streets. In these venues, "gay Handel" will be something of political use, a use inextricably tied up with the struggles, discursive and material, on two sides of the closet door. Someday, perhaps, when the closet no longer exists, when the impoverishing binarisms that currently define and enforce it are gone, "gay Handel" might seem a quaint anachronism. But today is not that day.

On the other hand, and looking toward a postcloset future, the concept of a gay Handel may still help us call into question the single and culturally unproblematic plenitude the composer has been made to represent. Like "homosexuality" and "musicality," Handel too needs to be approached not as a fixed and posited "entity"—to be anatomized, taxonomized, policed, and "punished"—but rather as a site of dialectical tensions and relations in culture, with contradictions and connections, consonances and dissonances; in short, not as Handel, but as "Handel," a problem (and a very interesting one) of cultural studies, as in fact what "Handel" through the open pursuit of our question has already become: a (homo)text. This homotextual Handel will take us beyond the closet questions with which so much of this essay has necessarily been preoccupied and into more engaging avenues of inquiry, notably involving what has thus far remained completely in the
background: his music. Handel’s silence ends where his music begins, and
in the operas, oratorios, and other texts, the composer has left us a rich field
of social discourse, the more powerful and effective because of its music,
a complex “body” and site of cultural conflict and (one hopes) of renewed
scholarly interest.

That a number of Handel’s commentators have sought to deflect the issue
of the composer’s relationship to women onto his music is thus to their credit
rather than otherwise. “Handel” is a relationship to women (and to many
other things) in his music. Unfortunately, their purpose has been driven by
the narrow—and futile—pursuit of a chimera, a “definitive answer” to the
question. Lang, for example, after announcing that “the solution to this mys-
tery must be sought...in the artist rather than the man,” then proceeds to
scour the operas and oratorios for “proof,” in the form of “memorable” female
characters, that Handel was attracted to women and was therefore normal.

“‘We may have no positive proof of Handel’s love affairs,” he writes, “poised
to clinch his argument, “but how could a man unacquainted with love com-
pose the wondrous idyll known as the ‘Nightingale Chorus’ (Solomon),
the litling, seductive promise of an enchanting night’?” (As though gay men
are “unacquainted” with love, or “grief” for that matter; as though precisely the
capacity to love one’s own sex unconditionally isn’t a large part of what being
lesbian or gay means.)

This same logic might have led Lang to wonder how a man unacquainted with the love of men could possibly have composed the moving lament of David over Jonathan (“For thee, my brother Jonathan” in Saul; a love described in the well-known biblical text as “surpassing the love
of women”), or why Handel could designate as “far beyond” anything in
Messiah the chorus “He saw the lovely youth” (Theodora), if he had never
been in love with one. But these escape his notice, and, anyway, what could
not be proved on this basis? Such arguments, in both directions, come and
go with the regularity of the tides. More recently, in February 1991, British
music critic Nicholas Kenyon, now controller (i.e., head) of Radio Three, the
British Broadcasting Company’s classical music, drama, and cultural affairs
station, tried to argue along similar lines, and with similar motivations:

What “Susanna” argues for—and how piercingly apposite the subject turns
out to be in the present age—is chastity. It is a portrait of virtue, of Susanna’s
unrelenting, passionately defended faithfulness in the face of ridicule
from those who believe that she has abandoned it or cannot believe that
she would wish to. (I wonder whether the scholars who debated, at the last
American Musicological Society convention, the topic, “Was George Frideric
Handel gay, and why the question matters” considered the evidence of this
work that he might have been celibate.

To which music critic Joshua Kosman fired off the tart reply: “No such evi-
dence was discussed, for one simple and obvious reason: it doesn’t exist.
‘Susanna’ no more suggests that Handel was celibate than ‘Messiah’ suggests
he was the Redeemer, or the Royal Fireworks Music that he was a Roman cand-
dle.” Kosman is clearly right in rejecting the simple equation text-equals-
life (the old biographical fallacy; and thank goodness, considering all that
goes on in Handel) as self-evidently contradictory, but especially when it is
advanced as proof of something so specific, in this case that Handel himself
lived like a monk (and, given the context, a heterosexual one at that—if there
is such a thing—and does it need to be said yet again: being gay is not coter-
minus with “having sex?”). Such arguments lead only into that proverbial
night where all cows are black. On the other hand, is it wrong to suggest that
Susanna articulates something about celibacy (also Theodora. “The meanest
of my guards with lustful joy shall triumph o’er her boasted chastity”).
And what about those love triangles, all the erotic passion and its renunciation,
the omnipresent conflicts between love and duty (in Imeneo, for example?)
Handel’s first Italian opera was titled Vincere se stesso è la maggior vittoria (to
conquer oneself is the greatest victory). What is that all about? Why was this
theme so prevalent then (and in some circles, apparently, now)?

To answer this we need to broaden and complicate the questions, and pose
new ones. As such disputes begin to demonstrate, Handel’s texts are not, or
should not be allowed to remain, a collection of dead “masterworks,” pre-
served in some (an)esthetic formaldehyde awaiting the cold metal of the
formalist’s knife; rather they are part of a whole field of social relations and
discourses that participate in a complex and open-ended historical conversa-
tion. As such they do more than “reflect” the social formation of their time;
in a tangible (sensually receivable) way, they actively produce it. We might
therefore want to pose questions such as these: What and whose ideological
interests were or are served—or subverted—by Handel’s interventions in these
larger historical conversations? How did Handel manipulate the discursi-
ave codes available to him (and for what effects on which audiences?); How
have these been used in history (by whom, and for what purposes?)
Finally, perhaps, who has permission to investigate them—only the guardi-
ans of the canon, or anyone intrepid, or foolhardy, enough to venture onto
their turf? Happily, such questions are moving toward the center of musicologi-
cal research, thanks in no small measure to the work of feminist and
cultural musicologists. With respect to Handel scholarship, though his
texts offer a veritable cornucopia of material waiting to be explored as cul-
tural discourse, with the exception of studies such as Ruth Smith’s on the
the oratorio texts (and literally scores of suggestive points of departure in
Winton Dean), Handel has remained essentially exempt.
One problem calling for attention in a New Handel Studies will clearly be the conflicted status of "Italian" opera seria, especially in relation to the rise of "English" oratorio. Although a good deal of ink has already been spilled on this, much work remains before we understand it as a complex phenomenon, including musical considerations, in larger ideological terms. I have tried to show that virtually every aspect of the Handel question, including much of the evidence of his material life, intersects with a homosexual problematic, but nowhere is it more striking than in this specific sociocultural arena. In the following I would like to sketch briefly some of the questions a homotextual reading might engage.

A vast literature documents the fascination of the English public with things Italian, including both the promiscuously libertine carnival subculture as well as, in more refined circles, the decorous pursuit of Italianate high culture. Italian opera seria occupies, however, a curious and problematic position between these two poles. Though controversial from the beginning, it was nonetheless enthusiastically embraced, in some quarters even fetishized, for roughly a quarter of a century, after which it was essentially banished in favor of "English" music drama and oratorio. Representing more than a superficial debate over language, musical form, or the vagaries of "taste," the struggle surrounding this London entertainment must be understood as the site of a much broader ideological contest, around which competing sets of discourses, cultural values, and national politics coalesced. (The opera was politicized from the outset, support for it tending to come from the Whigs, opposition for the most part from the Tories, who saw in it "evidence of a decline in national virtue and an excuse to proclaim a chauvinistic brand of patriotism." ) Embedded and conflated in these discourses—those "around" as well as "in" the musical texts themselves—and lying in many ways at their core, are issues of gender, sexuality, codes of morality and conduct, constructions of national identity, and the status of music itself (music and manhood). Handel, who in the summer of 1723 had moved into his own house in the heart of the city, and whose first artistic love for the next fifteen years was Italian opera (this even after he had been obliged—dragged kicking and screaming, as it were—to turn his creative energy to English oratorio) stood in many ways at the center of this conflict. The conflict, as I will try to show, stood at the center of him.

Let us consider first the nexus of music, gender/sexuality, and nation, that is, the construction of music, especially "Italian" music, variously as "extravagant," "decadent," "effeminate," and "un-English." Suspicion inherited from the previous century (and earlier) concerning the art of music itself as time- and energy-wasting, as an indulgent and effeminate pastime and trap—"alluring the auditorie to effeminancy," as Phillip Stubbes put it—were revived and exploited in the debates. Commingled with these suspicions were the contradictory perception of opera as a foreign and exotically attractive (but "un-English") presence in the heart of the nation's capital coupled with the xenophobic conviction that Italians (or, rather, constructions of "Italianness") were somehow to blame for the rise of sexual libertinism, in particular for the establishment of a menacing homosexual subculture. The following remark by John Dennis, an early and persistent critic of Italian opera, is typical: Italian music, he declared in 1706, was "soft and effeminate, [an art which] emasculated and dissolved the Mind." Twenty years later he was still insisting that this kind of music weakened men and damaged them as British subjects; he consequently urged British women to discourage their men from opera, or risk their husbands becoming homosexual. In the following passage, in which music and sodomy are virtually equated, Dennis rails against his music-sodden enemies of the state:

If they are so fond of the Italian Musick, why do they not take it from the Hay-Market to their Houses, and hug it like their secret Sins there?...Is there not an implicit Contract between all the People of every Nation, to espouse one another's Interest against all Foreigners whatsoever? But would not any one swear, to observe the Conduct of these Persons, that they were protected by Italians in their Liberty, their Property, and their Religion against Britons? For why else should they prefer Italian Nonsense to British Reason, the Blockheads of Italy to their own Countrymen, who have Wit; and the Luxury, and Effeminacy of the most profligate Portion of the Globe to the British Virtue? At the iconic center of this conflict, and functioning in a synecdochical relationship to it, that is, as an image in which all of these elements—xenophobia, nymphomania, and homophobia—coalesce, is the literal and metaphorical figure of the castrated male, the castrato. "In the opinion of some English," as Richard Leppert notes, "the castrati were the epitome of Italian Continental degradation, or what Lord Chesterfield was later to refer to as 'that foul sink of illiberal vices and manners.' To the carnival freak, the castrato was a heavily freighted signer, prompting highly ambivalent and conflictive reactions: as an exotic spectacle it seduced and entertained; as a gender-bending image of mutilated and sodomized Italian (non)masculinity it repulsed and threatened. One is put in mind of Aschenbach's phrase: "fascinated with loathing." When located on a larger cultural grid, the discursive nexus of Italian-homosexual-effeminate, with which constructions of opera are thoroughly saturated, can help us understand the necessity of an "English" oratorio as well as a mythical "English" Handel as antidotes. For the two are inextricable:
Handel's image was nourished on the basis not of opera, but of oratorio, or, rather, specific oratorios like Messiah and Israel in Egypt. The former represented Handel as pure Christian, his music (dis)placed in the service of an anglicized Protestant God, and the latter, Handel as manly Briton (the English being of course the "chosen people"), his music now understood as defender of the British state, or as somehow embodying Britishness per se. What this amounts to, in other words, is the appropriation of both Handel and oratorio into vast second-order signifying systems working to suppress the Italian-homosexual-effeminate in favor of its ideological opposite (and "preferred reading"): the British-heterosexual, if celibate-masculine.

That the oratorios refuse to be read this way won't be news to anyone who has studied their discourse, certainly not to Handel scholars who have rightly viewed with suspicion any attempts to make clear-cut distinctions between them and opera seria. While scholars may disagree on the reasons, or which reasons to emphasize, for the decline of opera in favor of oratorio, few dispute that Handel turned from opera seria only with great reluctance. Even Reinhard Strohm's suggestion that the composer was frustrated with its conventions to the point of working to alter them, strikes me as evidence of increasing rather than waning engagement with the form. Some have even insisted that the oratorios are "operas in disguise." Though such arguments tend to rest more on musical rather than textual considerations, there is much in the texts themselves to support the notion. Even if the oratorios draw principally from religious (mainly Old Testament) sources, and make use of large choral ensembles appealing to subsequent aspects of British tradition (communal religious singing), they nonetheless constitute, no less than opera, a powerful theater of human conflict and desire. Take for example the following remarks by Winton Dean on Semele, in which both of these ideas surface:

Semele, which Chrysander published as an oratorio though of course it is nothing of the sort, had been staged in Cambridge in 1725 but hastily returned to purdah, despite heavy bowdlerization of the words, because Handel showed uninhibited delight in the joys of sexual fulfillment. It escaped notice that the story with its punishment of hubris is unexceptionably moral.

Stratfield's reaction to the same "oratorio" demonstrates a similar contradiction. Stratfield liked Semele (a lot), not, one is surprised to read, for its moralizing "punishment of hubris," but rather for "the same lightness of touch, the same ease and gaiety of inspiration, and the same sunny background of the fresh, laughing, pagan life of old Greece [as we find in Acis and Galatea]." Stratfield was especially drawn to the choruses, which he admired for their dance measures, in particular "the ravishing love-chorus, 'Now Love, that everlasting boy.'" We have already seen how he could, on the other hand, archly move apropos of Samson to purify his hero of "obscenity of language and unchastity of life," by claiming that "the disgust with which Handel regarded the sensuality that he saw rampant around him...to be read in Samson by those that have eyes to see." Well, what was Handel, Pagan or Puritan? What do the conflicts in and about these operas and oratorios have to tell us? What do they tell us about Handel?

One of the things they remind us about Handel's music is that its (baroque) "affections" were polymorphously persuasive. Like rhetoric, the ancient practice recovered in the Renaissance and quickly appropriated by the composer's art ("what passions cannot music raise or quell"), music has no inherently determinate subject matter and is available for use by anyone for any purpose. Handel's music could take pleasure in the world of pagan sensuality, "uninhibited delight" in the joys of sex, only to turn to the "punishment of hubris." It could bewail the loss of a beloved friend through the injustices of political struggle, while elsewhere (in the Coronation anthems, say) working to make "inequality seem noble and hierarchies seem thrilling." In the same way that it is often difficult to see the difference between a baroque church and a baroque theater, it is difficult to hear the difference between opera and oratorio. That Handel's "Italian" music could be turned into an ideologically acceptable, indeed politically useful, vessel, is not therefore to be wondered at. What remains problematic are the antagonistic cultural meanings encoded there ("puritanical" aims, "pagan" means, e.g.), the socially overdetermined forces that controlled, or attempted to control, their production and later interpretation, and the political ends these processes served and continue to serve.

When viewed from a point of sufficient abstraction, affinities among the contested and culturally suspect quantities of musicality, Italianicity, and homosexuality emerge with rather striking clarity. Operating as loose correspondences in a relation of opposition (manifest image versus latent reality, control versus indeterminacy, order versus dissolution, and so forth), they stand ready for their social and ideological appropriation; musicality as an "effeminizing" and "indeterminate" property to be controlled and channeled; Italianicity, constructed from the I/eye of the English as a "confusion" of attraction and loathing, in need of a firm, anglicizing hand from above (Grand Tour as "educational experience," but also "forbidden pleasure"; country retreat as "gentlemanly retirement," but also secret Italian Arcadia, island of "loose living"; castrato as spectacle, but also threat; etc.);
homosexuality, which emerges here as perhaps the central term, linking the musical, the effeminate, and the Italian/pagan, stands in need of disciplined suppression, if not total erasure.

The ideological work performed through these discursive operations serves a single, overarching aim: the support and maintenance of (in this case) Anglopatriarchal authority and control. The mechanism involved is, in Sedgwick’s formulation, a “coercive double-bind” affecting not just gay men, but all men across the homosocial-homosexual spectrum. The double-bind is paradoxical in the sense that in order to maintain patriarchal control men must of necessity bond with each other in various competitive modalities and configurations of power (“over” women, “against” the effeminate), while not crossing the fine and often invisible line into the “dangerous,” noncompetitive, and sensual (“feminizing”) modalities of physical and emotional love. In order to accomplish this, the concept of “man”—including constructions of the manly and the masculine—must be clearly and unambiguously definable and recognizable, hence the need for a social and cultural Other (women, queers, cultural “decadents”) through and from which “real” men can identify and know themselves as different. Such feminized Others, coded variously as weak rather than strong, diseased rather than healthy, as the soft, the fluid, and the indeterminate (“hermaphroditic,” e.g.), as opposed to the hard, the solid, and the cleanly defined, etc., are at all costs to be repressed, repressed, and controlled, but also made use of—because they are needed. The confusing paradox of men who bond emotionally, lovingly, and pleasurably with other men, who are desirous of being penetrated (“raped”) as well as penetrating, that is, who disrupt received and totalizing somatic and gender boundaries, and in whom therefore the inherited scripts of the Fathers are subverted, is anathema to patriarchy; it is its shadow, the unhheimlich itself. Is this the ultimate “threat” of homosexuality (and music)—the dissolution of sacred borders and boundaries—a Universal Deluge after all?109

It is significant that modern homosexual panic, that disease of the closet, arose in conjunction with revolutionary Enlightenment challenges to the old religious and political orders. The “vacuum” created by the “death of,” or at the very least threat to, the old gods and (in most cases) monarchies would henceforth be filled by mere “men.” If the power and authority wielded by those now defunct or moribund hierarchies had been formerly “received” as a function of a divinely ordained and fixed natural order, the successive incarnations of patriarchy could no longer depend on that (now deconstructed) category of the natural (the deconstruction or demystification of which had in effect created the death). Rather, it would depend, and ever more urgently, on the discursively naturalized image of gendered power, the

image of the manly, the masculine, the heroic, etc. The modern homosexual closet, a space in which the exotic fluidity of “deviance” and “deviants” can be located and panoptically controlled, is an effect of this ongoing crisis of masculinity, of the need for continual discursive reinforcement of the categorical image. From here the amorphous threat of the “homosexual” can be displaced at will, i.e., wherever useful. As Sedgwick notes:

European society may or may not have actually “needed” for there to be homosexual men. What it did need—or, to put it less functionalistically, what its constituent interests found many ways to use—was a disproportionate leverage over the channels of bonding between all pairs of men.110

Ways, that is, of keeping them in line, creating taxonomic and social borders between “the manly” and “the unmanly” (indeed, the “masculine” in sharp contradiction to the “feminine”), and so maintaining the necessity of the closet. That is why the closet is so useful and its destruction more anxiety-provoking even than its continued maintenance. For in its deepest recesses the closet harbors its final secret and ultimate threat: that “manliness,” that always vulnerable plenitude in constant need of discursive renaturalization and reinforcement, that illusion on which modern patriarchal control is so utterly dependent, will finally be unmasked as the truly “unnatural” and “perverse” image that it is.

Handel, whose life coincided with these revolutionary paradigm shifts, whose texts are in many ways complex and eloquent negotiations of them, and who is therefore the first modern composer whose sexuality could pose a “problem” in the terms that it did, strikes me as a living simulacrum of this coercive double-bind. Like the oratorio whose musical “body” betrays the masks of its ideological appropriation, and the masculine persona whose mythic solidity belies its neurasthenic vulnerability, Handel’s physical and musical bodies impede the suture required to maintain the safe and comforting, disciplined object we’ve come to know as his image. Our own Handel cannot be Mainwaring’s, Flower’s, Lang’s, or even Hogwood’s; the past, however comfortable, is not for living in. Out of the widening spaces of a fissured closet there may, however, emerge in their stead a new polyvocal subject, a “Handel” finally more intelligible, more human, more interesting, and maybe even more amusing, than we ever imagined.
I wish to thank Susan McClary, my friend and erstwhile colleague at the University of Minnesota, for inviting me to this. Thanks also to Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Richard Leptin for valuable criticisms and suggestions, some of which have been incorporated, others perversely ignored. I hereby absolve each of them of any responsibility for the essay published here.

1. "Even in his own lifetime Handel passed from being an individual to an institution, and eventually a complete industry," Christopher Hogwood, _Handel_ (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 7.


5. This is a central theme in, e.g., Foucault's _The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences_ (New York: Vintage, 1973).

6. Footnotes explaining one's terms are by now a virtual commonplace in essays such as this, and here is mine. I realize the word "gay" in this (eighteenth-century) context is a matter of dispute, but so is the entire semantic field of same-sex desire, as well as being confused and mobile. To one, this is a happy sort of fluidity, one that may eventually lead out of the prison house of binary taxonomy altogether. In the meantime we need language in order to speak about a subject. I use a lot of the available language, impoverished though it might be, to signify various aspects of same-sex eroticism and culture, including "homosexuality" (a nineteenth century invention), "sodomite" (a biblical term), "homosocial" (twentieth-century cultural theory), etc; a helpful guide for eighteenth-century studies is to be found in footnote 1 of George S. Rousseau's "The Pursuit of Homosexuality", discussed further on. The word "gay" is used to signify homoerotic desire, that is (in this case), men desiring to bond in emotional and physical intimacy with other men, whether sexually "consummated" or not, subject to and shaped by the social conditions and discursive codes and constructions prevalent in the specific time and place of history in which they lived. Thus, just as one can speak of eighteenth-century black slaves without changing the word "blacks" or "Afro-Americans" to Negroes or niggers—both words current at that and later times—so, I believe, one can speak of gay people in eighteenth-century London, when a more or less modern conception of homosexual identity was in formation ("gay" being an acceptable and preferable alternative to the contemporary, but bluntly denigrating terms "sodomite", "catamite", "pathic", "molly", etc.). The term "gay" also has a comfortable historical bagginess about it, having probably originated in marginal bohemian subcultures ("theater people"); and, like "bohemian," it is infused with positive connotations ("unencumbered", "libertine", "creative", "outsider", etc.). I use "gay," and "queer," as words chosen from history by gay people themselves at different stages of their self-realization, and appropriated and rehabilitated for their own uses. While this usage is grounded in a post-Stonewall gay-liberation consciousness, I see no reason to limit its reference only to certain men and women (the uncloseted, for example) or to a specific period of time (1969 on). In view of the rich amorphousness of sexual desire, it is hardly surprising that rational discourse has had such a tough time of it (as opposed to music, say, which has found eloquent and differentiated means for its expression), and had I begun thinking about this topic in 1992 rather than 1990, when it was presented as a paper before the American Musicological Association, I might have chosen the word "queer" for the title. At the time "gay," at least in relation to Handel, seemed impertinent enough.


10. As his reference for the supposed exchange between Handel and King George II, Rousseau cites German musicologist Walter Serau’s _Georg Friedrich Händel. Sein Leben—Sein Werk_ (Kassel/Basel: Bareissreiter, 1956), vol. 3, 642. Although a likely vicinity in which to find such material—the section deals with Handel’s relations with both men and women—this specific reference is not there, or to my knowledge anywhere else in Serau’s three-volume work. Rousseau’s article is reprinted as "The Pursuit of Homosexuality" in _Perils of Enlightenment: Pre- and Post-Modern Discourses, Sexual Historical_ (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 2-43, a companion volume to _Enlightenment Crossings_ (noted above) and _Enlightenment Borders: Pre- and Post-Modern Discourses, Medical, Scientific_ (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).


13. In his translation of Mainwaring’s biography published one year later Johann Matthias, who knew Handel from the age of eighteen and was at pains to correct the author wherever possible (in 1761 Mainwaring’s work was still anonymous), obviously says nothing to contradict him on this issue. _Georg Friedrich Händels Lebensbeschreibung_
in other words, it might vaguely support the idea (suggested in the annotations) that Handel did have affairs with women. Keates, *Handel*, pages as noted. The assertions in the annotations themselves cannot be taken as "documentary evidence," especially the notion that Handel "scorned the advice of any but the Woman he loved"—which, by the way, Newman Flower read as "his Muse"—since this is so out of sync with the many references to Handel's independence, especially in matters professional. Though of course anything is possible, that Handel was frequently or even occasionally involved with women ("within the pale of his own profession" being a reference to singers?) seems unlikely in light of Mainwaring and Hawkins; that he was enamored to the point of taking their "advice" seems utterly bizarre given what we are told of his relationship with his singers (cf. Coker's anecdotal remark: "If Handel was little disposed to submit to the caprice of the male performers, he was not of a temper patiently to endure the disturbance arising from female squabbles for precedence; and still less, to have his age thwarted by their peevishness, or non-compliance with rules which he had thought necessary to prescribe." Coker, *Anecdotes*, 18). More important is the question of authorship: if it was the king, a case made essentially on the basis of "a remarkable similarity to [the handwriting] of a contemporary concert bill written by George III" (but undermined by other circumstances), one wonders how the king might have gained such information about the composer, who was thirty-three years his senior and who had died one year before George's accession to the throne. What is more, the king as an ardent member of the first wave of "Handelians" was not above intervening when the composer's public image was at stake. See, for example, K. S. Grant's account of George's "help" in the writing of Charles Burney's pamphlet on the 1784 celebration of Handel (An Account of the Musical Performances... in Commemoration of Handel [London, 1785]) in *Dr. Burney as Critic and Historian of Music* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 154ff. On the annotations see William C. Smith, "George III, Handel and Mainwaring," *Musical Times* 65 (1924): 789–95.


21. See Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel, a Documentary Biography* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1955), 12, 275–76, 415. Mme. Süelens was in all likelihood the daughter of Johann Wilhelm Süelen, who Deutsch surmised to have been Handel's friend and agent in Hamburg.

22. Lang, *Handel*, 84ff., 543–46. On Lucrezia: Among the cantatas of this period [first Italian journey], *La Lucretia* is by far the most accomplished—and ardent—which lends some credence to the rumoured love affair with Lucrezia d'André, a diva at the court, for whom it was composed." Lang, *Handel*, 63 and 85. Documentation for this rumor has thus far eluded me. Strangely enough, Lang fails to seize on an obscure reference in a letter of 13 July 1719 from Paolo Antonio Rolfi to the Abbate Giuseppe Riva: "The Denys woman, alias Sciarpina, has already sung twice at the Princess's [of Wales]. She is certainly helping herself along! The Man loves and hides his feelings: but *quonsum tandem*?" Quoted from Deutsch, *Handel, a Documentary Biography*, 92–93. There are two problems here: the woman is unidentified, neither the name Denys nor the alias appearing to my knowledge anywhere else in the literature; and, too, the identity of "[the Man] as Handel is not absolutely certain (Deutsch notes simply that "U'Uomo," the man, or rather the monster, usually means Handel in Rolfi's letters"). Handel commentators are in general troubled by the lack of gossip indicative of affairs with women. See Smith, "George III, Handel, and Mainwaring," 793–94, and Dent, *Handel*, 128. In an age when all operas and sonatas as well as songs and hissums seem by now to have established a fairly regular pattern...[266], where...
exception, that Handel was ever even alleged to have had an illicit love affair.

23. Mainwaring, Memoirs, 50–51.

24. Hogwood: "Further doubt is cast on Mainwaring's story by the fact that [Vittoria's] name does not appear on the cast list printed in the libretto [of Rodrigo]. But the rumour renews with the recent discovery by Anthony Hicks of a letter written in 1710 by the Electress Sophie of Hanover, referring to Handel as 'a good-looking man and the talk is that he is the lover of Victoria..." Handel, 39.


26. Lang, Handel, 86.

27. The early rejection idea is most thoroughly (if skeptically) aired in Serauky, Georg Friedrich Händel, vol. 3, 611–12.

28. Flower, Handel, 177.

29. Percy M. Young seems to have sensed this when he moved to disparage the idea: "A not unnatural affection for an estimable mother and a later aversion to the bonds of holy matrimony have been construed into psychological jargon as 'mother fixation.'" Percy M. Young, Handel (London: J. M. Dent, 1947), 5.

30. Lang, Handel, 543.


32. Charles Burney, 1785; quoted in Hogwood, Handel, 41 (note caution on Burney's representation of Handel in the 1765 Account of the Musical Performances... note 19 above).

33. Lang, Handel, 543. My guess is Lang never heard the chant "Two, four, six, eight, not all..."

34. Flower, Handel, 85.

35. Young, Handel 50 (italics mine). Curiously, Young attacks as "rude insinuation" one of the very few specific references linking Handel to a named woman; it is a fairly casual remark contained in the famous attack on Handel and Robert Walpole published under the name of Paolo Rolli in the Craftsman, 7 April 1733, in which the singer Strada del Po is named as being "much in [Handel's] favour." Deutsch, Handel a Documentary Biography, 311.

36. Lang, Handel, 544.

37. Charles Burney, quoted from Hogwood, Handel, 130.

38. Lang, Handel, 544. Italics mine.


42. Here we see also the conceptual root of the code word "disolve.


45. Philosopher Richard D. Mohr has shown that the antigay stance of the Roman Catholic Church is based wholly on the argument of natural order: "Since the thirteenth century, naturalness had been the ethical engine of Catholic doctrine. If strong popular objections to homosexuality were allowed to fade, Catholic doctrine would lose any link with ordinary morality and so would, as a mode of thought, become no more than an intellectual oddity of, at most, historical interest." Quoted from Richard Mohr, Gay/Lesbian, A Study of Ethics, Society, and Law (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 35. See also the same author's "Why the Catholic Church Can't Give Up Its Antigay Position," The Advocate 20 January, 1987, no. 464: 9.


47. Though not as few as one might hope. As of this writing a powerful backlash is underway in the U.S., including a dramatic increase in hate crimes (gay bashing) and the introduction of bills and ballot referenda that aim to reverse the hard-won legal protections of the last decade. In November 1992, for example, citizens of the State of Colorado passed a referendum prohibiting laws that protect gay people from discrimination; similar measures are being advanced in other states across the country.

48. Lang, Handel, 543–44. "Considering the extremely wide range of the characters of Handel’s heroines, and the infinite nuances in their femininity, it seems incontrovertible that he must have been a man not only of normal masculine constitution but one attracted by and sensitive to feminine charms, as is borne out by his marked predilection for the women among his friends." See also an earlier passage (63): "While some of his biographers are very much pleased that no love affair can be ascribed to Handel with absolute certainty—a pious man does not trifle with women—one notices that from Hamburg to London there are entr'actes in Handel’s busy and studious life where many signs point to the comforting fact that he was an ordinary healthy mortal." And also Hugo Leichtentritt: "Die ganze Erscheinung.Handels ämte Männlichkeit im höchsten Maße. Imponierende Würde. Macht gingen von ihm aus. Die künstlerische Arbeit war als der eigentliche Zweck seines Daseins ohne jede Möglichkeit der Mißdeutung für jedermann offensichtlich..." (Handel's whole appearance exuded manliness in the highest degree. Impressive dignity, power emanated from him. Artistic production was the true purpose of his life, obvious to everyone and without any possibility of misinterpretation) Händel (Stuttgart/Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1924), 227 (italics mine). See also (anonymous) "Manliness in Music," The Musical Times, 1 August 1889: 461, "No musician need be unmanly; and the best have almost invariably been remarkable for a robustness of mind and character, if not of physique. Travel and adventure and a love of Nature have, in a great many cases, proved powerful incentives to the genius of composers. They have often been combative, contentious, even pugnacious. There was no lack of virility in the character of Beethoven. Handel was made of sturdy stuff,"
capable of volcanic explosions of fury. His extraordinary recuperative energy may best be gauged by the fact that he wrote his finest work after a paralytic seizure. Here, surely, was no lack of physical energy.” My thanks to Malcolm Brown for calling this obscure article to my attention.

49. Foucault continues in this oft-cited passage: “Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions...written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that was singular...” Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 43 and 101.

50. Randolph Trumbach has called attention to the similarities between eighteenth- and twentieth-century gay subcultures. “That subculture bears an extraordinary resemblance to those described in the 19th century sociological literature. There are the same meetings in parks, institutes, bars and bars. There is a similar specialized word. There are similar forms of effeminacy. There is the same range of age and occupations. There is the same presence of both married and single men.” “London’s Sodomites: Homosexuality, Sexual Behavior and Western Culture in the 18th Century,” Journal of Social History 11 (1977), no. 1: 23. Evidence suggests that molly houses were frequented by men of the middle and lower classes, mainly merchants, urban bureaucrats and functionaries, and also possible in light of recent research (some of it contested) showing that certain groups of sailors and seamen on leave would also have been welcome patrons is visible in light of recent research (some of it contested) showing that certain groups of sailors and seamen on leave would also have been welcome patrons is visible in light of recent research (some of it contested) showing that certain groups of sailors and seamen on leave would also have been welcome patrons is visible in light of recent research (some of it contested) showing that certain groups of sailors and seamen on leave would also have been welcome patrons.

51. On the molly house see Rictor Norton, Mother Clap’s Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700–1830 (London: Gay Men’s Press, 1992). In terms of a broader cultural problematic, perhaps the most interesting of all these venues, however, is the masquerade. The masquerade was a site of all sorts of “unauthorized” sexual activity, “brought on” (so the antimasquerade writers of the period alleged) by the practice of transvestism, which of course also served to conceal the identities of the men and women who dressed up, whether to masquerade in London, masquerades, a lucrative business venture of his time, associate John Jacob Heidigger, is not known, though Mainwaring tells us that that he was first discovered by Domenico Scarlatti in Venice at a masquerade, while he was playing the harpsichord in his visor.” Mainwaring, Memoirs, 51. On the London masquerades see Terry Castle’s excellent Masquerade and Civilization (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986).

52. Anonymous, A Hell upon Earth, or, The Town in an Uproar...Occasion’d by the Late Horrid Scenes...of Sodommy, and Other Shocking Improprities (1729). Such tracts flourished; see G. S. Rousseau, “The Pursuit of Homosexuality,” especially 141–56.

53. “For the elaboration of secular power over male bonds, then, it made sense that the molly-house persecutions be pogromlike in nature, that the distinctly homosexual man not know whether or not to expect to be an object of legalized violence,” E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia University Press), 88.


55. Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977), 541–2. It must be noted that “openly talked about” means “in decidedly negative terms” (such as in the antisodomy tracts). Sexual deviance was not a topic of overt conversation; in most forms of social discourse it remained, well, invisible.

56. George S. Rousseau, “Love and Antiquities: Walpole and Gray on the Grand Tour,” in Perilous Enlightenment, 1750–77. This article begins to answer to Rousseau’s own challenge posed a few years earlier: “So much has been written about the grand tour that a false impression arises that all has not been said. Nothing could be further from the truth: in the homosexual domain the search has not even begun. Pudery, cowardice, and triviality have combined to deter scholars. Yet this is one field of investigation where no extant annals await to be tapped in only the scholars will dig in.” Rousseau, “Pursuit of Homosociality,” 157.

57. Like the Grand Tour, the country house or villa appears to have constituted a kind of microculture to itself, a place of "retirement", a means by which “the proprietor could physically develop the necessary dimensions of his subjectivity—the study, the music room, the art collection, the emblematic landscape. The villa as a type also provided the means by which an emerging professional and mercantile elite could spatially define their social identity as distinct from both the entrenched country establishment and urban corruption.” (John Archer, University of Minnesota, from his forthcoming study "Retirement and the Constitution of the Self: The Eighteenth-Century English Compact Villa; cited with author’s permission.) The socio-sexual aspects of this emerging identity and subjectivity are worthy of further study. One wonders, for example, about the relationship of design and execution of the Palladian house to the kind of hetero- social activities it seems to have supported.

58. See accounts in Hogwood, Handel, and Young, Handel.

59. Hamburg was known as the “Venice on the Elbe” presumably because of the water and the opera, at the head of which was the “disolute” Reinhard Keiser, Hogwood, Handel, 22.

60. C. F. Abdy Williams, roughly following Mainwaring, claims Handel went to Italy at the direct invitation of Gian Gastone in 1705, in Handel (London: J. M. Dent, 1901), 30 (though this claim is disputed: see R. Strohm, “Handel in Italia: Nuovi Contributi,” Revista italiana di musicologia 9 [1974]: 154–55). Incidentally, the reference to “von Bintitz” (not Bintitz) comes from Matheson’s account (and is not, as Hogwood claims, “ennobled by later biographers to von Bintitz”” [Handel, 31]).
61. Williams, Handel, 38.

62. Marion Ziegler, "The Great Gay Composers," in Dennis Sanders, ed., Gay Source: A Catalogue for Men (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1977), 84. Handel, who usually does not make it onto such lists (The Gay Book of Days by Martin Greif [Sewaucus, N.J.: Lyle Stuart, 1982] being an exception) is surprisingly the featured composer in this article. Ziegler believes Handel to have been the first major composer in the West whose homosexuality is not in doubt. Also identified or "suspected" in the article are the following: Mattheson, Steffani, one or both of the Smiths, Thomas Arne, Telemann, Jennens, and others. I wish to thank J. Peter Burkholder for acquainting me with Ziegler's essay.


64. This area of discourse analysis is currently among the projects of my colleague, Bruce Lincoln, whom I would like to thank here for his helpful thoughts as well as for the felicitous locution 'corroborative discourses.'


66. Quoted in Hogwood, Handel, 32.


69. See Byrne R. S. Fone, "This Other Eden: Arcadia and the Homosexual Imagination," in Stuart Kellogg, ed., Essays on Gay Literature (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1985), 13–34. Fone's article briefly surveys the literary tropes of Arcadia in a selection of literature from Richard Barnfield through E. M. Forster. He sees them as serving three main functions:

1) to suggest a place where it is safe to be gay: where gay men can be free from the outlaw status society confers upon us, where homosexuality can be revealed and spoken of without reprisal, where homosexual love can be consummated without concern for the punishment or scorn of the world; 2) to imply the presence of gay love and sensibility in a text that otherwise makes no explicit statement about homosexuality; and 3) to establish a metaphor for certain spiritual values and myths prevalent in homosexual literature and life, namely, that homosexuality is superior to heterosexuality and is a divinely sanctioned means to an understanding of the good and the beautiful, and that the search for the Ideal Friend is one of the major undertakings of the homosexual life. Only in this metaphorical land can certain rituals take place, rituals that celebrate this mythology. (13)


70. As Harold Beaver notes in his article, "Homosexual Signs": "Alice is unwilling to admit that a corporate fiction can validate her private fiction; and that private fiction confronts the pervasive public fictions of social life. But all signs imply a system. It is the system alone that makes them significant. It is the system alone that sustains all subversive, or liberating, forces. So homosexual signs, too, must imply some sort of system. Plato, in the Phaedrus and the Symposium, elaborated one such system. Possibly Lacan today supplies another. Nothing else quite answers the need." In Critical Inquiry 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 114. On sociocultural aspects of Italy and the Grand Tour, see in addition G. S. Rousseau's "Love and Antiquities," and sections 6 and 7 of the same author's "Pursuit of Homosexuality," 151–61.

71. Hogwood, Handel, 56. Information about Mr. Andrews is scarce; he doesn't even seem to have a first name, though Hogwood speaks of him as a Whig social group that combined politics and the arts. Further clues to the identity of Andrews might eventually be found through this channel.


77. Cf. Fone's description of Daphnis and Corydon in Richard Barnfield's "The Affectionate Shepherd" (published anonymously in 1594): "Daphnis is far richer than Corydon, for not only does he have sheep, he has a garden plot full of herbs and sweet smelling beds of lilies, and of roses, / Which rosemery banks of lavender encloses. Multitudes of flowers will be Ganime's, as well as gifts: / sweet smelling arbours made of eglantine / Should be thy shrine, and I would be thy dove. / Cool cabinets of fresh green laurel boughs, and 'apples, cherries, peares, plumbs. / Nuts, walnuts, fribreads, chestnuts.' Indeed, Daphnis will do anything for Ganime if he will" pitie my complaint... All these and more will he give thee for thy love..." "This Other Eden," 14–15.

78. Flower, Handel, 117.

79. Lang, Handel, 127.

80. I exclude Keates. His account contains neither bibliography nor citation apparatus. By contrast, Hogwood (with the assistance of Handel scholar Anthony Hicks) endeavored to produce a new account of Handel's life based as closely as possible on primary sources, including materials recently become available to scholars, such as documents from the Ruspoli archives.

81. Hogwood, Handel, 68.
82. Hogwood, Handel, 73.

83. Cf. Bentman's description of the poet Thomas Gray: "Gray did not have the resources of the aristocrats who fled from England; or the power of Hervey, who could live in defiance of public opinion; or the wealth of Beckford, who could live in luxurious isolation. He had little choice but extreme discretion or silence to deal with his desires." "Thomas Gray and the Poetry of 'Hopeless Love'," 213.

84. Cf. Randolph Trumbach, "The history of sodomy in the eighteenth century is not simply the history of repression. It encapsulates the history of all society. It can provide a key to unlock the mysteries of the history of gender, sexuality, individual identity, human society's relationship to the physical world, and even (if it has been claimed) the mysteries of the rise of modern capitalism." "Sodemical Subcultures, Sodemical Roles, and the Gender Revolution of the Eighteenth Century: The Recent Historiography," in Maccubbin, 'The Nature of Faults', 109.

85. I hope it is clear that the burden of this essay is not, as some have alleged, to secure historical "role models" for lesbians and gay men; the issues involved in the pursuit of a gay Handel are more interesting and profound than that. At the same time we ought to be slow to dismiss the idea of "famous men and women who were gay" out of hand. For each of these is part of the complex narrative I'm calling "gay history." This is a proud and tragic history, one that has been erased, covered up, or pretrained for about long enough. If Handel belongs on the long and impressive list of queer men and women (in vast disproportion to their numbers), who have created, performed, cultivated, and adored music, I want to know about it and talk about the ways in which that might be meaningful. And if this knowledge gives one hate-mongering bigot pause, or makes one young lesbian or gay man proud, then so be it; for that alone the effort will have been worth it.

86. To my knowledge, the term "homosexuality" was first used by Stockinger in the article cited above, "Homosexuality: A Proposal."

87. Lang, Handel, 543.

88. Recounted by Thomas Morell, librettist of Theodora; quoted from Streetfield, Handel, 205.

89. Nicholas Kenyon, "Virtue All Around in Handel's Susanna," New York Times, 10 February, 1991; Joshua Kosman, letter to the editor, New York Times, 24 March, 1991. There was in fact no "debate," only the usual questions following the paper; Kenyon seems not to have wanted to dignify the exercise in any way, least of all by naming the author.


91. Ruth Smith, "Intellectual Contexts of Handel's English Oratorios," in Christopher Hogwood and Richard Luckett, eds., Music in Eighteenth Century England. Essays in Memory of Charles Cadwath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 115–34. See also the engaging line of inquiry pursued in Philip Brett and George Haggerty, "Handel and the Sentimental: The Case of 'Athaliah'," Musical Quarterly 68 (1982): 112–27. By Winton Dean see: Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques (London: Oxford University Press, 1959; reprint 1966, 1972). On Theodora for example: "Where Morell's Romans, except in their last chorus, are brutal and licentious, Handel's are carefree children of nature. His absolute refusal to find anything repulsive in their sexual appetites is one of the most striking features of the oratorio...The fact that his vision could comprehend the Christian and the pagan view of life...is a tribute to his stature as an artist. It is also a pretty sure indication that elements of both were at large in his character." (S60).


93. Winton Dean represents this view most vigorously, but the issue is far from settled. See, for example, Carole Taylor, "Handel's Disengagement from the Italian Opera," in Handel. Tercentenary Collection (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 165–81.


95. And sapping (as in Dr. Strangelove) of "precious bodily fluids"? Cf. Flower, "[Music] drew from [Handel] everything he had to give," Handel, 85.

96. Phillip Stubbes, the English pamphleteer, in The Anatomic of Abuses of 1583. The entire passage, leaning on ancient authorities, reads in full:

I Say of Musick as Plato, Aristotle, Galen, and many others have said of it; that it is very ill for young men, for a certaine kind of nice, smooth sweetnes in alluring the auditorie to nicenesse, effeminessse, puflamntie, & lothsonnes of life, so as it may not improperly be compared to a sweet ececutioun of honie, or rather to honie it self; for as honie and such like sweet things, receive into the stomach, dooth delight at the first, but afterward they make the stomach so quasie, nice and weake, that it is not able to admit meat of hard digestion: So sweet Musick at the first delighteth the eares, but afterward corrupteth and depraveth the minde... But being used in publique assemblies and private conventicles, as directories to filleth da uncouring, thorow the sweet harmonie and sweet melodie thereof, it eastrangeth the mind, stritheth up filthie lust, womanisheth the minde, ravisheth the hart, enflameth concupiscence, and bringeth in uncleanness.


97. Quoted from Leppert, "Imagery, Musical Confrontation and Cultural Difference," 337. Cf. poem, published in Steele's Miscellany and which, according to Hawkins, "bespeaks the general sentiments of the English with regard to the Italian opera and singers":

Begone, our nation's pleasure and reproach!
Britain no more with idle trills deabash,
Back to thy own unmanly Venice sail,
Where luxury and loose desires prevail;
There thy emaculating voice employ,
And taste the triumphs of the wanton boy.
Long, ah! too long the soft enchantment reign'd,
Seduc'd the wise, and ev'n the brave enchain'd.
Hence with they thrust divulging song away!
Shall British freedom turn into prey they prey;
Freedom which we so dearly used to prize.
We scorn’d to yield it—but to British eyes.
Assist ye gales, with expeditious care,
Waft this preposterous idol of the fair;
Consent ye fair, and let the triller go:
Nor bribe with wishes adverse winds to blow.
Nonsense grew pleasing by his syren arts,
And stole from Shakespeare’s self our easy hearts.


101. Cf. Donald Burrows’s review of H. C. Robbins Landon’s Handel and His World. “The tone of the chapters dealing with the 1730s suggests an old-fashioned approach: the underlying message seems to be ‘why doesn’t Handel stop writing these silly operas and get on with the oratorios as nature intended?’” Musical Times 126 (1985): 91.
102. Reinhard Strohm, “Handel and His Italian Opera Texts,” in Essays on Handel and Opera (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 78 (“In fact Handel was searching in different directions for ways of escaping from the conventions of the traditional dramma per musica”).
105. Streitfeld, Handel, 305.
106. Handelians know what is coming: “[Handel] was a good old Pagan at heart, and (till he had to yield to the fashionable Piety of England) stuck to Opera, and Cantatas, such as Acts and Galatea, Milton’s Penelope, Alexander’s Feast, etc., where he could revel and plunge without being tied down to Orthodoxy. And these are (to my mind) his really great works: these, and his Coronation anthems, where Human Pomp is to be accompanied and illustrated.” Edward Fitzgerald, Letters and Literary Remains, ed. William Aldis Wright (London: Macmillan, 1902), quoted in Hogwood, Handel 256.

The culture of the baroque is an instrument to achieve effects whose object is to act on human beings and which is designed to ensure that they behave, among themselves and with respect to the society of which they are part and the power that controls it, in such a manner that the society’s capacity for self-preservation is maintained and enhanced. In sum, the baroque is nothing but a complex of cultural media of a very diverse sort that are assembled and articulated so as to succeed practically in directing them and keeping them integrated in the social system.

109. Cf. Naomi Schenman’s perceptual analysis:

[Male] homophobia attaches with greatest force not to the general idea of sexual desire for another man but to the specific idea of being in the receptive position sexually. Given a culturally normative definition of sexuality in terms of male domination and female subordination, there is an understandable anxiety attached to a man’s imagining another man’s doing to him what men are expected to do to women: Real men are not supposed to allow themselves to be fucked. (Thus in men’s prisons, the stigma attaches not to rapists but to their victims.)

Male homophobia combines this anxiety with its corresponding desire, that of being, as we might say, ravished, or swept away. It’s notoriously difficult to speak—or think—clearly about such desires or pleasures, a difficulty made apparent by the entanglements of rape and capture (which themselves share a common Latin root) in the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of ravius.

Naomi Schenman, “Though This Be Madness. Yet There Is Madness in It: Paranoia and Liberal Epistemology,” in Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt, eds., A Mind of One’s Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993): 150–51. For a different reading of the same anxiety, see Michel Foucault:

[A neat image of homosexuality] unravels everything that can be uncomfortable in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie and companionship, things which our rather sanitized society can’t allow a place for without tearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force. I think that’s what makes homosexuality “disturbing”: the homosexual mode of life much more than the sexual act itself. To imagine a sexual act that doesn’t conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another—there’s the problem.
