

## The Grand Style and the Aesthetics of Terror in Eighteenth-Century Musical Performance Practices

In later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critical theory the idea of the sublime feeling refers to a limit-experience of pain and pleasure that is triggered by the idea of the infinite (the absolutely great, the immeasurable), or the idea of the terrible (death, violent destruction). As such, this complex experience of pain and pleasure has been familiarly represented as a 'delightful horror', a 'pleasing stupor', or a 'frightful wonder', as contrasted with the purely positive pleasure elicited by the beautiful. This essay explores the incursions of the discourse of the sublime in eighteenth-century music practices and criticism, focusing in particular on the Handel Commemoration Concerts in late-eighteenth-century Britain. More in particular, it shows how the loud, the voluminous, the ugly, and the monstrous became legitimate categories in musical performance through the already-available tropes of terror and might epitomizing the so-called sublime or grand style.

### Introduction

Imagine the wide lawn of the Champs de Mars during the Reign of Terror in late eighteenth-century France.<sup>1</sup> Thousands of people are packed together to participate 'universally' in one of the many festivals celebrating the cause of freedom. They sing, they shout, they merge into a massive voice. The sound of this voice alone is staggering and uncannily irresistible. Still, it grows louder as more join in, caught by the thrill of the moment or scared to openly disengage from an agitation enforcing the participation of all. This voice then seems to take on a life of its own. It is no longer a multifarious whole, louder here, dissonant there, but rather extracts itself from its parts, rising higher and higher until it becomes a voice hovering above the crowd – bodiless, de-composed, singular.

In the ears of the Jacobin rulers, this rising voice encapsulates the 'emergence of a single will from its sundry parts' – not a will of parts, but a will that rises above its sum total, no longer divisible, differentiable. Its individual voices only serve the larger totality, thus constituting a body of uniformity, or subjection: a subjection of the many to the one, of difference to an uncompromising harmony. Only consider, in this respect, the ambitious project of the 'revolutionary' composer Étienne-Nicolas Méhul to have a crowd of thousands divided into four sections sing a major chord together at one of the many festivals organized during the Terror.<sup>2</sup> Or Antoine Merlin's recommendation to divide thirteen

1 I have based this evocation on James Johnson's excellent *Listening in Paris. A Cultural History*, Berkeley 1995, Chapter 7.

2 James Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, p. 126. Designed to effectuate mass-psychological control, the festivals during the Terror were not to be trifled with. As Johnson adds here, there 'was a festival for youth and a festival for old age, a festival for virtue and one for morals. There were festivals for reason, liberty, enlightenment, and labor, of Continental Peace, of Terror, and of the Supreme Being'.

orchestra's among the masses and having them 'sing first in dialogue and then in unison' to literally perform their blending as one. 'In these times', James Johnson has remarked, 'all were performers'.<sup>3</sup>

Though typically Revolutionary in the sacrifice of the individual to the common will, this idea(l) of unanimous participation was, perhaps, not an exclusively French invention. Ironically, in the times before the Revolution, its future antagonist Edmund Burke had already pointed to the overpowering effects of the singing and 'shouting of multitudes' in his *Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. 'The sole strength of the sound' produced by a multitude of voices, Burke remarks, 'so amazes and confounds the imagination, that in this staggering, and hurry of the mind, the best established tempers can scarcely forebear being borne down, and joining in the common cry, and common resolution of the croud'.<sup>4</sup> Burke identifies both such sonorous overkill and the almost involuntary participating in a massive unison as being productive of the feeling of the sublime: of a 'great and awful sensation' that momentarily halts the mind and 'fills it with terror'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the sublime feeling boils down to a sudden, powerful transport somehow incapacitating the mind, laying it prostrate before the tremendous force of a scene or happening that briefly interrupts the ability to act or reason wilfully and voluntarily.

In the field of poetics, this idea of the sublime feeling had been 'in fashion' both in Britain and in France since the later seventeenth century. Distilled from the Classical notion of the 'grand' or 'elevated' style, which aimed at enrapturing and astounding, rather than persuading, an unsuspecting audience, the sublime was rooted to a considerable degree in rhetoric and, as such, closely tied to the art of 'moving' or 'stirring' with words. However, I will argue in the following, because eighteenth-century theorists insisted on a necessary link between the grand style and *pathos* or 'extraordinary' feeling, the sublime fashion readily migrated to the domain of music from the 1750's onwards.

### Pathos, Poetry, and Music

In the text from Antiquity ascribed to the pseudo-Longinus that kindled the eighteenth-century debate on the sublime, *Peri Hupsos* [*On the Sublime*], this link between pathos and the grand style was still optional: the latter *was very likely to* yet did not *by definition* involve an irresistible flow of feeling. However, in their reworking of *Peri Hupsos*, critics such as Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux and John Dennis were quick to argue the contrary on the basis of passages like these:

- 3 Ibidem, pp. 126-127. To put it more correctly: all were *made* to be performers. According to Johnson, the very publicity of the festivals of the Terror made private experience next to impossible. Indeed, since such private experience was considered elitist during the Terror, the aim was to eliminate the gap between actor and audience as much as possible: spectatorship was transformed into 'participatorship'. Whereas the former still allowed for an individual space in which the spectator could disengage herself from the events on stage, the latter demanded a complete involvement. See for this also, Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, Cambridge (Mass.) 1988.
- 4 Edmund Burke, *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford 1990 [1759] II, sect. XVII, p. 76.
- 5 Edmund Burke, *Enquiry* II, sect. XVII, p. 75.

'... the effect of elevated language is, not to persuade the hearers, but to entrance them; and at all times, and in every way, what transports us with wonder is more telling than what merely persuades or gratifies us. The extent to which we can be persuaded is usually under our own control, but these sublime passages exert an irresistible force and mastery, and get the upper hand with every hearer ... a well-timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and in a flash reveals the full power of the speaker.'<sup>6</sup>

As Jeroen Bons has pointed out, the text of the pseudo-Longinus indeed stands out in its focus on artistic genius and the emotive effects of 'extraordinary language' – rather than on the stylistic attributes of elevated diction alone. Nevertheless, it would take a post-Cartesian perspective to reshape this interest in the 'performative force' of unusual expressions into (what would now be called) a 'reception-aesthetic' paradigm – and place the concept of the sublime at its centre.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in his *Traité du sublime*, Boileau played down whatever reeked of prescriptive stylistics in the text of the pseudo-Longinus, highlighted its more dramatic passages, and rewrote the concept of the sublime in terms of its singular effect on human consciousness: its tendency to move the mind in astonishment, elevation, or ravishment. Similarly, John Dennis found fault with the pseudo-Longinus for granting that the sublime may be without 'Enthusiastick Passion'. This, Dennis decided, not only contradicted the 'true nature' of the sublime but also the main argument of *Peri Hupsos*:

'For he [the pseudo-Longinus] tells us in the beginning of the Treatise, that the Sublime does not so properly persuade us, as it ravishes and transports us, and produces in us a certain Admiration, mingled with Astonishment and with Surprise ...; that it gives a noble Vigour to a Discourse, an invincible Force, which commits a pleasing Rape upon the very Soul of the Reader ...'<sup>8</sup>

It was this conception of the sublime as an unexpected attack on the soul subjecting it to a pleasing astonishment, a stupefaction that disarms and disables, which was to become its dominant conception in the eighteenth century.

If the Classical *hupsos* thus became a feeling, rather than a specific use of language alone, feeling in turn infused the 'essence' of poetry in eighteenth-century criticism.

6 T.S. Dorsch (transl.), *Aristotle/Horace/Longinus. Classical Literary Criticism*, Harmondsworth 1965, p. 100.

7 Jeroen Bons, 'De receptie van Longinus' sublieme', in: *Longinus. Het sublieme*, transl. by Michiel Op De Coul, Groningen 2000, p. 111, my translation. Such a paradigm required the conception of a human consciousness as a psychic entity of 'ratio and feelings' – a human consciousness scrutinized in its reactions to events in terms of affections like fear, wonder, joy, or despair. Descartes paved the way for such an 'introspective' conception of the human mind: a psychology focused on the ways in which consciousness is affected by different emotions. The discourse of this new psychology found its way into later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century 'literary criticism', which centred increasingly on the emotive effects of poetic language on the mind.

8 John Dennis, 'The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry', in: *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, Baltimore 1939 [1704], vol. 1, p. 359. Enthusiastic passion is for Dennis a strong passion that is moved by ideas in contemplation, rather than from 'common objects' themselves.

'Passion is the characteristic mark of poetry,' Dennis claimed in *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry*: it is the 'chief thing in the body of poetry; as spirit is in the human body'. The body of poetry withers without the animating principle of passion. Its business is to move the soul; to be pathetic rather than instructive, or at least: to be instructive *by way of the pathetic*. As such, poetry becomes a vehicle of the sublime in so far as it is always already a vehicle of pathos – even if such pathos comes in various degrees of intensity. After all, a bow long bent at last waxes weak so that (as the text of the pseudo-Longinus already suggested) the body of poetry evokes the 'violent' passions in its fragments rather than its entirety, interrupting the rhythm of 'common' feeling.

Fragments, fragmentation 'itself' recalls the Longinian stroke scattering everything before it, and it is precisely this figure of breaking or bursting apart that surfaces as a performative of nigh-unbearable passion in *Peri Hupsos*. As the pseudo-Longinus quotes from an ode by Sappho of Lesbos:

A peer of the Gods he seems to me,  
The man who sits facing you, listening up close  
To your sweet voice and lovely laughter,

It is this that sets my heart fluttering in my breast.  
For if I gaze on you but for a little while,  
My voice falters and broken

Lies my tongue, a prickling flame  
Has run under my skin.  
I do not see with my eyes, my ears are whistling.

The sweat pours down me, a trembling  
Seizes me completely. I am paler than the grass.  
It is as if I am little short of dying.<sup>9</sup>

The pseudo-Longinus cites this as an example of organic unity, but, as Neil Hertz has pointed out, Sappho's ode rather presents a fragmentation and a de-fragmentation at once: the scattering of the body in erotic ecstasy and its restructuring in the body of poetry as an evocation of self-loss. The discursive act thus functions as a safety net; it reassembles the fragmented body, which filters through the intensity of *amor stupor* to the reader on the other side of the divide.

This is to say that the sublime style should allow a reader, or an audience, to experience the effect of violent emotions *as if* they were real, rather than suffering from these emotions in actual fact. Throughout the eighteenth century, such transference of intense feelings became a key issue in treatises on the sublime as an imaginative-discursive strategy. The poet-orator was presented as a medium who, under the spell of an 'ecstatic impulse', was 'able by the force of genius, or rather imagination, to conceive any emotion of the mind so perfectly as to transfer to his own feelings the instinctive passion of another, and agreeably to the nature of his subject, to express it in all its vigour' to his audience.<sup>10</sup> This promoted

9 I have based my English translation of Sappho's ode on its Dutch translation in Longinus, p. 38.

10 Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, Hildesheim 1969 [1753, 1787], lect. 17, p. 366.



the force of the sublime to an irresistible, mesmerizing ardour that verily forced an audience to feel what the might of discursive animation imposed on it.<sup>11</sup>

Already from the later seventeenth century onwards, however, critics no longer exclusively considered such animation in relation to oratory and poetry, but rather singled out the sounds of music as a more effective vehicle of the pathetic. Consider, in this respect, Thomas Mace's enthusiastic account of the agitating 'language' of music in his *Musick's Monument* (1676):

'Musick speaks so transcendently, and Communicates Its Notions so Intelligibly to the Internal ... and Incomprehensible Faculties of the Soul; so far beyond all Language of Words, that I confess and most solemnly affirm, I have been more Sensibly, Fervently, and Zealously Captivated, and drawn into Divine Raptures, and Contemplations, by those Unexpressible, Rhetorical, Uncontrollable Persuasions, and Instructions of Musick's Divine Language, than ever yet I have been, by the best Verbal Rhetorick, that came from any Man's Mouth, either in Pulpit or elsewhere.'<sup>12</sup>

Affectively, music is so overwhelmingly successful for Mace that it is beyond resistance and even beyond paraphrase for its listeners. Outwitting the emotive power of words in this respect, music easily becomes an example for verbal rhetoric in the Longinian art of instantly captivating and enrapturing an audience.

In eighteenth-century France, the Abbé Dubos had likewise emphasized the pathetic potential of instrumental music: the sounds of music, he observed, 'have a wonderful power to move us, because they are the signs of the passions that are the work of nature herself, from whence they have derived their energy. Spoken words, on the other hand are only arbitrary symbols of the passions'.<sup>13</sup> Music is the 'real' emotional thing, words but its derivative; music is directly related to nature (here used in the sense of feeling, spontaneity), words are merely arbitrary. Or, as John Neubauer has observed, for Dubos 'sounds are natural signs because they are universally understood, immediate expressions of agitations in the soul, whereas the meaning of words is defined by convention'.<sup>14</sup> It is, according to Dubos, for this reason that in the musical transference of affects 'the pleasure of the ear' becomes at once and immediately 'the pleasure of the heart'.<sup>15</sup>

11 Thus, in *The Art of Speaking* James Burgh states that a sublime discourse 'ought to hurry us out of ourselves, to engage and swallow up our whole attention; to drive everything out of our minds, besides the subject it holds forth.... The hearer finds himself as unable to resist it, as to blow out a conflagration with the breath of his mouth, or to stop the stream of a river with his hands. His passions are no longer his own. The orator has taken possession of them'. James Burgh, 'The Art of Speaking', in: Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla (eds.), *The Sublime. A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Critical Theory*, Cambridge 1996, p. 117.

12 Quoted in: Arnold Dolmetsch, *The Interpretation of the Music of the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth Centuries*, Seattle and London 1972 [1915], p. 12.

13 Dubos, 'Réflexions critiques sur la Poésie et sur la peinture', in: *Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth- and Early-Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. and transl. by Peter Le Huray and James Day, Cambridge 1981, p. 18.

14 John Neubauer, *The Emancipation of Music from Language. Departure from Mimesis in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics*, New Haven and London 1986, pp. 134-135.

15 Dubos, *Réflexions*, p. 19.

A similar claim had been made over a decade before by the man who more or less started the French polemic on the supremacy of either Italian or French opera: the Abbé François Ragueneau.<sup>16</sup> An admirer of the Italian style, with its allegedly greater sensibility 'of the passions', Ragueneau posited in his *Paralele* that the Italians, unlike the French, succeed in captivating and transporting an audience by purely musical means. In unmistakably Longinian fashion, and in almost rhapsodic rapture, Ragueneau showed how such a violent mastering of the soul could be brought about:

'If a storm, or rage, is to be describ'd in a symphony, their notes give us so natural an idea of it, that our souls can hardly receive a stronger impression from the reality than they do from the description; every thing is so brisk and piercing, so impetuous and affecting, that the imagination, the senses, the soul, and the body itself are all betray'd into a general transport; 'tis impossible not to be borne down with the rapidity of these movements. A symphony of furies shakes the soul; it undermines and overthrows it in spite of all; the violinist himself, whilst he is performing it, is seiz'd with an unavoidable agony; he tortures his violin; he racks his body; he is no longer master of himself, but is agitated like one possessed with an irresistible motion.'<sup>17</sup>

Music here enforces its listeners to lose themselves into the scene or event it evokes: the music *becomes* the rage, just as the violinist here takes on the agony relevant to it, so that the audience is made to feel as if present in the face of it.

Ragueneau, it is true, never uses the term 'sublime' in his account of Italian music. Yet, his words are clearly cast in the discourse of the sublime that – due to Boileau's influential translation and interpretation of *Peri Hupsos* – was current in later seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century France.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, as Samuel Holt Monk has claimed long ago, it was largely due to Boileau's particular rendering of *Peri Hupsos* that the sublime became so emphatically associated with the awakening of strong, as-if-real-life emotions in art. With respect to music, however, it would not be till the middle of the eighteenth century that the sublime was *explicitly* raised to the stake in terms of 'the extraordinary, the marvelous, the surprising'.<sup>19</sup> As I will show, it was particularly in eighteenth-century British concert life that the sublime thus conceived would inform and even shape the reception and performance of music with special reference to Handel and Haydn.

16 François Ragueneau had visited Rome in 1697 and, having heard the music of Corelli and Giovanni Bononcini, instantly became a propagator of Italian music. Having published his views in the *Paralele des Italiens et des François en ce qui regarde la musique et les opéra* of 1702, Jean Laurent Le Cerf de la Viéville quickly responded in 1704 with a defence of French music, to which Ragueneau again responded in turn in 1705. The controversy over the French (Lully) and Italian (Corelli) styles would last till well into the eighteenth century, issuing a wealth of treatises on the particularities, varieties, and possibilities of musical expressiveness.

17 François Ragueneau, 'A Comparison between the French and Italian Music and Operas' [1702], in: *Strunk's Source Readings in Music History. The Baroque Era*, ed. by Margaret Murata, New York 1998, p. 168.

18 See for this, Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime. A Study of English Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*, Ann Arbor 1960; and Théodore Litman, *Le sublime en France (1660-1774)*, Paris 1971.

19 Monk, *The Sublime*, p. 32.

## Handel, Haydn, and the Terrible

In a satirical pamphlet of 1751 on the 'Man-Mountain' Handel, William Hayes, professor of music at Oxford and conductor of Handel's oratorios, describes the birth of a different and particularly enervating kind of music:

'... [Handel], whilst at the Zenith of his Greatness, broached another Kind of Music; more full, more grand (as his Admirers are pleased to call it, because crowded with Parts) and, to make the Noise the greater, caused it to be performed, by at least double the Number of Voices and Instruments than ever we heard in the Theatre before: In this, he not only thought to rival our Patron God, but others also; particularly Aeolus, Neptune, and Jupiter: For at one Time, I have expected the House to be blown down with his artificial Wind; at another Time, that the Sea would have overflowed its Banks and swallowed us up: But beyond every thing, his Thunder was most intolerable – I shall never get the horrid rumbling of it out of my head.'<sup>20</sup>

Too many 'Parts' and too much force. Or rather, too much nature. Nature as might is everywhere in Hayes' description: there is noise rather than organized sound, and wild nature threatening to devour the vestiges of culture. Music here not just announces the threats of nature, but embodies them in its very effects.

Similarly, Hayes observes, the composer is here like God, and many other gods, unleashing his terrible and awesome powers, with Hayes becoming something of a Thomas Burnet confronted with the workings of chaos.<sup>21</sup> The epithet 'Man-Mountain' to Handel is, in this respect, highly significant: just as Burnet experienced a mixed sensation of pain and pleasure in the face of the post-diluvial mountains – 'ruins' – of the earth, so Hayes is at once frightened, seemingly appalled even, and impressed by Handel's 'noise'. And just as Burnet recognizes a hint of the infinite in the ruins left by the wrath of God, so Hayes recognizes this hint in the violent movements of the music of his 'God'. For the satirical tone of Hayes' pamphlet, representing the effects of the music as simply intolerable, should not delude one here. Hayes was an ardent admirer of Handel, like many of his contemporaries locating the latter in the category of the grand: to him, the Oratorio of *Israel in Egypt* was 'infinitely superior to any Thing the whole musical World hath hitherto produced'.<sup>22</sup>

In 'Giant Handel' and the Musical Sublime', Claudia Johnson has argued that such representations of Handel's music in terms of the new, the grand, the terrible, and overwhelming witnessed the birth of a specifically musical sublime in British musical practice and criticism during the 1750's.<sup>23</sup> This was paralleled during that same period by a growing, public fascination with the loud, the ugly, the massive, and intolerable. 'Giant Handel', voluminousness and thrilling, partly disconcerting effects in music became synonymous with, if not legitimized by, the idea of the sublime as already established in

20. Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel. A Documentary Biography*, London 1955, p. 715.

21. See for this, Thomas Burnet, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, ed. by Basil Wiley, London 1965 [1690-91]. Burnet's work constituted something of a landmark in the so-called natural sublime: the experience of awe and terror inspired by grand and mighty nature, such as mountains, volcanoes, oceans, tempests, thunderstorms, and earthquakes.

22. Deutsch, *Handel*, p. 733.

23. Claudia Johnson, 'Giant Handel' and the Musical Sublime', in: *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 4 (Summer 1986), pp. 515-533.

contemporary critical theory. Indeed, though eighteenth-century criticism had already implicated music in the domain of the sublime through its alignment with the pathetic, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards the musical register of 'strong feeling' narrowed down quite significantly to the two key passions of the grand style: terror and astonishment.

Already in early eighteenth century, terror claimed its place in critical theories of the sublime in so far as it was considered the *ne plus ultra* of invasive passion. Thus, in *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* Dennis argued that terror 'makes an impression which we cannot resist, and which is hardly to be defaced'.<sup>24</sup> In the hands of Joseph Addison and, most prominently, Edmund Burke, this notion of terror would evolve into a prime feature of the sublime feeling as rethought in a 'science of the senses' rather than an exclusively rhetorical framework: Burke's objective was to show how the idea of the sublime could be founded in sense-perception, and the way in which our bodily nerves react to external stimuli, instead of tracing it to rhetorical devices alone.<sup>25</sup>

Elaborating on Dennis, Burke defined terror as an apprehension of pain or danger that acted on the instinct for self-preservation: the desire to be alive, the desire to protect oneself from any possible harm. A profoundly painful experience, such terror was for Burke intimately bound up with the idea of power, which found its most supreme articulation in the al-might of the Deity:

'... whilst we contemplate so vast an object, under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him. And though a consideration of his other attributes may relieve in some measure our apprehensions; yet no conviction of the justice with which it is exercised, nor the mercy with which it is tempered, can whole remove the terror that naturally arises from a force which nothing can withstand. If we rejoice, we rejoice with trembling ....'<sup>26</sup>

Echoing the Longinian dictum that the sublime overmasters rather than ingratiate, Burke argued that pain – the pain of terror – is always inflicted or imposed by a superior power, and to that extent unavoidable or inescapable, while pleasure is willingly won. Helpless subjection typifies the experience as much as the effect of power display, the pain of dread never quite disappearing even when its immediate cause has abated. However, in more 'common' instances (which is to say, human or animal strength, institutional power, or the force of nature), the immediate impact of a terrible might could be moderated in either time (the reflecting on perils that are past) or place (the witnessing of a destructive power from a safe distance). In such cases, the pain of terror – the pain of being confronted with a violent threat – could give way to a peculiar sense of joy: 'When pain or danger press too nearly, they are ... simply terrible', but when they are 'not conversant about the present destruction of the person', when they are kept at bay, they are capable of suspending a paralyzing fear.<sup>27</sup> The pressure is lifted, and an oppressive dread makes way for the sublime relief that Burke called *delight*.

24 John Dennis, *The Grounds of Criticism*, pp. 360-361.

25 Edmund Burke, *Enquiry II*, sect. XVII, pp. 75-76.

26 *Ibidem*, II, sect. V, p. 63

27 *Ibidem*, I, sect. VII, p. 36; IV, sect. VII, p. 123.



Art constituted a likely field to channel this play of terror and terror relieved. Dreadful apprehensions here always already had an *as-if* status: threats described or evoked in poems or operas might appear frightfully real, but they were never more than fictional – which is to say, not imminently dangerous. This allowed a hearer or reader to experience spectacles of death and destruction in a virtual space that made such an experience bearable due to the moderation it provided. At the same time, however, Burke insisted that the illusion of danger be staged as convincingly as possible so that, for a brief instant, an audience could feel what it would have felt in the presence of a mortal threat – and be subsequently relieved. The greater the tension, the greater the release, the greater the ultimate delight.<sup>28</sup>

It was this marriage of the sublime and the terrible, of the grand and the gruesome, that sanctioned a taste for the monstrous and tremendous in the arts. In the name of the grand style, dramatic effects prevailed over considerations of 'good form', as the following comment by the music historian Charles Burney on the 'instable' representation of chaos in Haydn's *Creation* indicates:

'... and what should become again (may it be asked), but Chaos, when chaos is to be described? Were sounds to be arranged in harmonic & symmetric order before order was born? It struck me as the most sublime Idea in Haydn's work, his describing the birth of order by dissonance & broken phrases! – a whisper here – an effort there – a groan – an agonizing cry – personifying Nature – & supposing her in labour, how admirably has he expressed her throes! not by pure harmony & graceful melody, but by appropriate murmurs .... When dissonance is tuned, when order arises, & chaos is no more, what pleasing, ingenious and graceful melody & harmony ensue!'<sup>29</sup>

Haydn's 'Representation of Chaos' performs the same dynamic of fragmentation and de-fragmentation already encountered in Sappho's Ode: the scattered universe, the universe not yet brought into being, reconstituted in the texture of a seemingly disparate, amorphous sound world, and the subsequent tuning of this world into harmony and stability – this movement incorporates and enacts the turn from terror (tension) to relief (respite) that epitomizes the sublime feeling. Paradoxically, 'The Representation of Chaos' thus rouses chaos once more to life yet at the same time (to use Renée van de Vall's words) transfers its inchoate, destructive might to a creative, musical activity – and becomes harmless.<sup>30</sup>

28 Joseph Addison, for that matter, aptly remarked that the delight we take in 'being terrified ... by a description ... does not so properly arise from the description of what is terrible, as from the reflection we make on ourselves at the time of reading it. When we look upon such hideous objects, we are not a little pleased to think we are in no danger of them. We consider them at the same time, as dreadful and harmless; so that the more frightful appearance they make, the greater is the pleasure of our own safety. In short, we look upon the terrors of a description, with the same curiosity and satisfaction that we survey a dead monster.' Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, no. 418, June 30, 1712, in: *The Sublime. A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Critical Theory*, pp. 67-68.

29 MS letter undated, in the Osborn Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, quoted in David P. Schroeder, *Haydn and the Enlightenment. The Late Symphonies and their Audience*, Oxford 1997, p. 126.

30 Renée van de Vall, *Een subliem gevoel van plaats. Een filosofische interpretatie van het werk van Barnett Newman*, Groningen 1994, pp. 234-235.

## Loudness and the Musical Sublime: the Handel Commemoration Concerts

In music, such might was generally considered to be simulated quite adequately through clamorous and blatant sounds that momentarily reduced the subject to a helpless state of subjection. As Burke had observed in the *Enquiry*:

'Excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror. The noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery, awakens a great and awful sensation in the mind, though we can observe no nicety in this sort of music.'<sup>31</sup>

Excessive loudness, an over-saturated presence, would for Burke have been suggestive of great power and in that capacity – acting on one's sense of self-preservation – have given rise to the sublime: 'wheresoever we find strength, and in what light soever we look upon power, we shall all along observe the sublime the concomitant of terror'.<sup>32</sup> It is, for that matter, not in the least accidental that writers like Hayes (comparable to Raguenet) tried to infuse Handel's oratorios with the 'raw' sonorous might of nature, giving them the painful and frightful aspect of the sublime, rather than the pleasurable face of the beautiful.

Indeed, Johnson observes, most of the mid- and later-eighteenth-century commentators on Handel focus on the notion of 'stupefying volume' occasioned both by loudness (choirs and orchestras of extravagantly large proportions) and an intricate multitude of tones. Such voluminousness was considered 'a means of astonishment', which properly speaking was a blend of terror and wonder. Eighteenth-century listeners, Johnson states, 'did not want lucidity, distinctness, and balance from performances of Handel's music. On the contrary, because they associated Handel's music with sublime transport, they wanted from the experience of listening to his music more than their senses could assimilate'. They wanted the proverbial overflow of powerful feeling and be overwhelmed.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Johnson points to a review of the 1784 Handel Commemoration concerts for the *European Magazine*, which reported that *because* 'the immense volume and torrent of sound was almost too much for the head or the senses to bear.... We were elevated into a species of delirium'.<sup>34</sup> Charles Burney's account of the Commemoration concerts suggests a similar link between excess and ecstasy. Before the concert of May 26 in Westminster Abbey had even started, violence had already struck: 'a croud of ladies and gentlemen' waiting for the doors to open were 'every instant more and more incommoded and alarmed, by the violence of those who pressed forward': some 'screamed; others fainted; and all were dismayed and apprehensive of fatal consequences'.<sup>35</sup> The concert opened with the *Coronation Anthem*, but despite the appropriateness of this choice, Burney confessed that he could 'not help wishing, that this performance ... had opened with some piece in which every voice and every instrument might have been heard at the

31 Burke, *Enquiry* II, sect. XVII, pp. 75-76.

32 Ibidem, II, sect. V, p. 61.

33 Johnson, 'Giant Handel', pp. 530-531.

34 Ibidem, p. 516.

35 Charles Burney, *Musical Performances in Westminster-Abbey and the Pantheon in Commemoration of Handel*, unchanged reprint of the original edition, Amsterdam 1964 (1785), p. 25.

same instant'. This would have brought out the immense power of the band – one that, according to Burney, 'exceeded in abilities, as well as numbers, those of every band that has been collected in modern times'.<sup>36</sup>

Frequently alluding to the grand and awesome effects of Handel's music as performed by the Commemoration orchestra, Burney in fact surmised that 'Handel was always aspiring at *numbers* in his scores and in his Orchestra; and nothing can express his grand conceptions, but an omnipotent band'.<sup>37</sup> This was, however, at best an enthusiastic interpretation of Handel's composition and performance strategies. For it seemed that Handel's coronation as the master of grandeur and sublimity had a certain self-serving effect. As Johnson justifiably emphasizes, *because* Handel was so readily associated with overpowering and astonishing effects, eighteenth-century conductors felt that his music should be performed on the loudest and grandest of scales – louder and grander than Handel himself had probably ever imagined. Thus, the powerful effect of his music was at least partly due to the branding of Handel as the epitome of the musical sublime. As Johnson has put it:

'the movement toward gigantic performances of Handel's music in the eighteenth century is ... an authentic eighteenth-century tradition put in motion not by ill-informed masses, but by conductors, biographers, and historians alike, who associated the musical sublime with voluminousness and believed that large forces realized the sublime properties of Handel's music.'<sup>38</sup>

Significantly, these Handelian standards were extended to other composers as well. As Burney argued, the music of Geminiani and Corelli, however 'inventive' and 'rhapsodical', could not compete with the master yet might have been 'greatly sublimed' in the massive performances of the Commemoration concerts.<sup>39</sup> Seen in this light, Handel as represented by his critics and conductors inadvertently instigated the musical sublime in Britain: the 'sublime strokes' as attributed to Handel were applied to other composers, and thus perpetuated themselves in performance practices generated by those Handelian representations.

## Conclusions

According to Burney, one of the great wonders of the Commemoration concerts was the fact that 'five hundred performers, vocal and instrumental,' were 'consolidated into one body'. What struck Burney perhaps even more than the size of this body was its ability to erase its own heterogeneity:

'The totality of sound seemed to proceed from one voice, and one instrument; and its powers produced, no only new and exquisite sensations in judges and lovers of the art, but were felt by those who never received pleasure from Music before.'<sup>40</sup>

36 Charles Burney, *Musical Performances*, p. 27 (a), p. vii. In the Preface, Burney adds an overview of musical festivals since 1515, listing the size of bands and the number of singers.

37 Burney, *Musical Performances*, pp. 106-107.

38 Johnson, 'Giant Handel', p. 532.

39 Burney, *Musical Performances*, p. 106.

40 *Ibidem*, p. xi, p. 15.

Totality: one voice, one sound that scatters everything before it and absorbs all differences in its hegemonic thrust. This uniform body predated the French music festivals of the Terror but by a decade and, though paling in comparison with them, heralded a trend towards (what Andreas Huyssen has called) 'monumental seduction' in musical performance: a seduction of the masses through the uniform and unitary.<sup>41</sup> To this extent, one could conclude that the idea of the sublime – in its association with power and domination – left an indelible mark on eighteenth-century musical culture: it restructured musical experience into a mass *happening*.

Typically, such happenings were centred on a shared rejoicing, commemorating, or even rapture, and designed to overwhelm, indeed erase, the individual listener. In this respect, the strategies of the grand style would carry a most sinister echo in the music and theatrical practices of the Nazis a century and a half later: the central issue here was transport, your regular Longinian stirring of the soul, that was to make for a totalized agitation reshaping the crowd into one gigantic subject. True, it is a very long way from the Handel Commemoration concerts – if not such a very long way from the French music festivals – to the spectacles of the Nazis. Yet one should not forget that from its very beginning, the grand style has always been an instrument of (mass) psychological control: an instrument to play and manipulate an audience, to subject it with the destructive force of a thunderbolt, indeed to commit a 'pleasing rape' on it, to somehow *incapacitate* the mind in shock and stupor, to infuse this mind with passions that are not its own – to bend it to one's will. Always, there lurks a slippage in the tropes of this grand style that creates a very thin line between bombast and the philosophical wonder of astonishment.

41) Andreas Huyssen, 'Monumentale verleiding', in: *Feit & Fictie* 3 (1997) 3, p. 25.