

Sound Expertise

Season 2, Episode 8 – Handel and the Slave Trade with David Hunter

TRANSCRIPT prepared by Andrew Dell'Antonio

SPEAKERS

David Hunter, Will Robin

David Hunter 00:00

I don't feel any different about Messiah today than I did when I was 10 years old and sang it, one of the movements at a wedding. It's beautiful. And it speaks to a social need. And many people love it. But that doesn't mean that they need to love it without knowing its relations with the society in which it was created. Sometimes I think of this in terms of adding a public health warning on works. So -- this work brought to you in part by the history of the profits of the slave trade.

00:44

[Intro music]

Will Robin 01:05

Welcome back to Sound Expertise. I'm your host, Will Robin. And this is a podcast where I talk with my fellow music scholars about their research, and why it matters. So when I was studying music back in college, there were often these kind of like wild stories about music history and composers that would float around our practice rooms and rehearsal spaces, you know, like, did you hear about the composer who died of gangrene after he hit his foot with a giant staff while conducting? That's Jean Baptiste Lully, and that's a true story. Did you hear about the composer who wrote weird madrigals and also, you know, murdered his wife and her lover when he found them in bed together? That's Carlo Gesualdo, true story. Did you hear about the composer of quaint folk setting who was really into bondage and S&M? That's Percy Grainger, true story, you can Google it if you want to. I imagine if I was in college now I might be hearing a similarly provocative story, one that has been unearthed only recently. Did you know that the composer of the Messiah invested in the slave trade? That's George Friedrich Handel. And it's a true story. Now, of course, this fact is not merely a bit of historical trivia, it's a serious claim that we have to reckon with, as scholars and musicians and listeners, given Handel's importance in the creation of major oratorios and operas in the Baroque period, his centrality to the classical canon, and, of course, the ubiquity of Messiah performances every Christmas season. And so I wanted to talk to the source of this discovery, David Hunter, who is librarian emeritus at the University of Texas at Austin. Back in 2013, while researching a book on Handel, Dr. Hunter stumbled across a document that showed the composer's name on a list of investors in the Royal African company, one of Britain's two official slave trading companies, and a key participant in the brutality and horror that was the Middle Passage. Upon learning this information, our first reaction might be to cancel Handel, whatever that might mean. But as Dr. Hunter points out, this is not just a question of the reprehensible actions of a lone individual, but it is also one of his participation in a broader system, one that forces us to confront

the economic conditions that underpin the history of music and their links to histories of oppression, which is what we'll do now on Sound Expertise.

03:38

[opening music]

Will Robin 03:39

So let's start with the pretty significant discovery that you made in 2013, of Handel's relationship to the slave trade. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to find this out and what the path was towards making that that realization?

David Hunter 03:57

Yeah. Well, as you know, writing an academic book, you try to cover all your bases, and you are continually reviewing databases and so on. And when the deadline approaches you think – oh, I'll just do one last check. So librarians and documentation companies and so on, have put together wonderful databases of data from the 18th century -- Full Text searching of newspapers, full text searching of all publications issued during the 18th century. So I just put in a search for Handel's name in this database called 18th century Collections Online, and lo and behold, up pops this slim publication that is kept, as far as we know, survived only in a single copy, and that is held by the Graduate School of Business Library at Harvard. And it's called The Name of the Adventurers of the Royal African Company of England. And in there, it literally names 1,000 people who were at that moment, investors in the Royal African Company, which was the official slave trading company in Britain -- led, I might say, in terms of the first name on the list, by the king, King George the first. And I mean, I was completely astonished to find Handel's name in there. I mean, there's ... I think, if people had been paying attention a little earlier, they might have already gone to ... looked for this kind of publication. Because immediately prior to 1720, Handel's patron was James Bridges, the Duke of Chandos. And he, although obviously, this wasn't really paid attention to by Handel biographers, or other people who've written about the connections between Handel and Chandos, Chandos was the leading investor in the Royal African company, and was trying to make it more profitable than it actually was at the time. And so, it would have been a nice assumption for somebody to have followed up on, but they didn't. So it happened to me to find it. And you might think, Oh, well, you've got that piece of evidence. That's all you need. But I would argue that — Well, yes, that's okay. But perhaps that list was not entirely accurate. Maybe there are people on that list who shouldn't have been, maybe there were people on that list for reasons other than an actual investment? Who knows. So to verify that, I needed to go to the National Archives in London. And once I was there, I was able to call up the large ledgers that include the purchase and sale of stock in the company. And there's about three or four transfers on each page, and you get these large volumes, and they bring them out of the storage, and you go and pick them up, and there's no index to them or anything, so you just have to leaf through them looking for signatures, or looking for where the clerk wrote the name of the buyer or the seller. And so I did that, that was in July of 2013. And sure enough, there were three of the four buy and sell orders were actually signed by Handel. So I came across three original Handel signatures ...

David Hunter 05:48

Buying and selling stock?

David Hunter 08:46

Buying and selling stock in the Royal African Company in 1720. So, that's the kind of evidence that is irrefutable. [laughs]. And so I was able to pass that information along to the editorial team of the Handel complete documents project, which has been published by Cambridge University Press. And so they were able to include them in the first volume, so you can actually see them there. And then I was able to include a few pages about it in my biography, which came out two years later. So that's how it happened. I was completely stunned as anybody would be to find this out. I was able to go and talk for universities in the UK that autumn when I had a study leave in the UK, and so I was able to start to spread the word as it were. And then things have moved on slowly, since then, in terms of broadening the issue away from just Handel and his personal engagement, to a much bigger question, and one that really gets at the heart of the study of Western music, and that is, what are the economic underpinnings of the artworks that we hold in such high regard.

Will Robin 10:43

So what are the relationships between these investments in the slave trade and Handel's music making?

David Hunter 10:54

There's a line that could be drawn from the earliest oratorio that he wrote, which was commissioned by James Brydges, the Duke of Chandon, Esther, that Handel wrote for him and for performance by soloists and his private band, The Duke of Chandos's private band, a line can be drawn from that first oratorio in English, through the 1730s, up through to Messiah in 1742. You could argue that had it not been for Chandos's patronage, that Handel wouldn't not have basically invented that form with English words, setting English texts — texts in English, I should say.

Will Robin 12:08

So the patronage — Chandos's patronage, which is a direct result of the money that he is making from the slave trade, helps create Handel's interest in the oratorio to give birth to a genre that, 20 years later after this investment does not exist for Handel, he writes Messiah. So it's not a direct connection between the Messiah and the slave trade. But it's this birth of this genre you're theorizing.

David Hunter 12:35

Yes. The birth of the genre. Yes. And, what can you say? I mean, [laughs] had it not been for COVID, we would have had another Christmas season with Messiahs being performed everywhere in the Anglo world, or the English-speaking world, a work that has been in continuous widespread performance, I was going to say, since his death, just an amazingly iconic work of -- as we used to say -- Western civilization [laughs]. Such loaded terms.

Will Robin 13:23

It seems like you are arguing -- or could argue that this genre, from Esther to the Messiah, and the oratorio, is basically tainted by its associations with the slave trade. What do you... how do you hope... Maybe that's the wrong word to use. But how do you personally grapple with that as a Handel scholar, but also how do you think that the world of music should grapple with that?

David Hunter 13:50

Well, I think the world of music should grapple with the issue of ... the broader issue of how the profits of slavery have supported musical activity by exploring as much as can be known about it. But as far as individual works are concerned, I don't think that that should necessarily result in their prohibition, but I think they should come with a realistic understanding of how the works came into being, and how they have been able to be transmitted to us, through manuscript scores or printed scores, a subject that we will probably come on to a bit later. And I will also say that one of the troubles that we have had in music history is considering music only in terms of aesthetic objects. And that's a very blinkered way of looking at how music is in the -- as it were -- real world. So music is an activity; so, it involves a variety of people, not just the composer and not just groundbreaking works. It involves, and certainly not just performance, but it involves, and I would say, actually is really driven by the audience. But nobody in music history puts audiences first. [laughs] We always put the Creator, the creator first, whether it's, you know, the performer who is inspired by God, or the composer that's inspired by God. But all of the... to me, the important things are the conditions that bring a work into being, and enable it to have a continued existence. Now, some of that may be inherent to the work, but I would argue that it's actually a result of the audience having a continuing need for that particular musical work, whether it's a need of inspiration or solace, or evoking some kind of emotion, individual or collective. There are just so many ways in which different kinds of music are important to different people, and you can't say that it's just as a result of a wonderful aesthetic object, valued in aesthetic terms.

Will Robin 17:10

And you also make the point that it's not just Handel and it's not just the Duke, it's that it's32% of subscribers to the Royal Academy of Music in the 1720s were also invested in the Royal African company.

David Hunter 17:24

Yes, they were. And, you know, important people, you know, there's kind of a who's who of elite in Britain at the time, it does seem extraordinary that -- in a sense, that people have not bothered to look at the significance of the slave trade and the slave economy in the lives of important people. On the one hand, Britain has [laughs] an ideology of, Oh, you know, we abolished the slave trade in 1807. And everything was wonderful thereafter, and we never had slavery in Britain. And we, the British well, at least when I was growing up, that was a common thing. You know, the abolitionists like William Wilberforce were saints. Well, yes, they were, they accomplished a great deal. But the whole history of the previous two centuries of British engagement in the slave trade, and in fact, dominating the slave trade, transatlantic slave trade during the 18th century, and the whole heritage and the consequences of that slave trade, particularly in the United States of America... we said, Oh, well, that's not our problem. [laughs] So it's really only ... it's British scholarship over the last 20 years or so that has really brought Britain's engagement with the slave trade to the forefront of people's attention. And naturally, of course, you've got a huge amount of blowback about that, just in the same way that you saw the Trump administration object to the 1619 project that the New York Times did, and bring out this completely ridiculous report two days ago. You know, you've had people in Britain pushing back against, for example, the toppling of the statue of Edward Colson in Bristol, and saying, Oh, well, we shouldn't do that. It's not our... we shouldn't be overturning history. Well, hello! [laughs] History isn't fixed. It's

storytelling attuned to a particular time. And Britain had this story about itself that it was better than others in doing away with the slave trade -- but it totally ignored the practical realities of the preceding two centuries. And indeed the subsequent periods up to when slavery itself was abolished in British colonies in the 1830s. And compensation was paid to slave owners, not to slaves, but to slave owners, for the property that they 'lost' by the freeing of the slaves. So the amount of money that was spent to recompense slave owners in the Caribbean, or many of whom, of course, actually lived in the UK, was the largest single proportion of government expenditure in the second half of the 1830s.

Will Robin 21:23

You mentioned manuscripts, and this is another way in which we can look at the relationship between Handel's investments, the investments of wealthy British families, and the preservation of important pieces of music that we still have today. Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between the manuscript -- one of the manuscripts of the Messiah -- and the slave trade?

David Hunter 21:47

Yes. The first performing score of Messiah, the first performance was given in Dublin in April of 1742. The manuscript that Handel used on that occasion still survives to this day. And in fact, if you're in Oxford, you can go and look at it in the, what they call the treasures room, in the Weston library, which is part of the Bodleian Library, right in the middle of Oxford. And so there it is, as I've called it, a secular relic, the touchstone that links present day people and performances to that first performance on the 13th of April 1742. And what happened was that that particular manuscript of Handel's came to be part of the music trade, and came through auction houses, and was eventually ended up ended up in the Ouseley family. And the Ouseleys had ... one branch of them had plantations in the Caribbean. And what I was just talking about, the slave owners being recompensed by the British government in the 1830s, the Ouseley family received some considerable amounts of money for their slaves in St. Vincent and Tobago, and in St. Christopher's. So one of them, one of those individuals in the Ouseley family, he purchased this manuscript and it remained in his family until the founding of St. Michael's college Tenbury in Worcestershire. And then the manuscript was given to that institution and then when that closed, that's when it came to the Bodleian Library. So the Ouseley family, as I mentioned, had money based on ownership of plantations in the Caribbean. And one of them, one of those family members purchased that manuscript.

Will Robin 24:43

So basically, the profits from the slave trade facilitated the preservation of this particular Messiah score ... manuscript.

David Hunter 24:53

Yeah, there was another ... there's a much larger collection of copies of Handel manuscripts, works, that's now in the British Library that was also funded in part through the purchase ... the purchase of this collection was funded in part by money that was given by a man who came from a slave and plantation owning family. So those are the two main ways in which manuscripts of Handel works, that I've identified so far, the two ways in which the preservation of those manuscripts has been made possible by money, through the profits from the slavery in these plantations in the Caribbean.

Will Robin 26:03

So One of the things -- to move a little bit away from Handel -- that this work has opened up for you, which you mentioned, is understanding more broadly the relationship between elite culture that values music in Britain and elsewhere, and their investments in the slave trade. Can you talk a little bit about the Beckford family as an example of this, which you've written about, which has ties to Mozart and Clementi, and is also investing in both music for their children and their family as well as investing deeply in the slave trade?

David Hunter 26:37

Yes, well, the Beckford family were one of the ... possibly the wealthiest families in terms of the amount of money that they received from their plantations in Jamaica. And they were just extraordinary. William Beckford, the senior, he purchased an estate in the West of England called Fonthill, not too far from Salisbury in Wiltshire, and he built -- or had built there, a massive country house kind of thing that you might imagine from [laughs] watching British market soap operas like Downton Abbey. And he had an organ installed there, which was quite ahead of its time in terms of being able to be performed without a person at the keyboard -- in other words, as a mechanical instrument, it was apparently water driven. And it was massive, and he was so rich that when the house burned down 18 months after the organ had been installed, he just had the house rebuilt and put in a second organ, just like the first. His son who was William Thomas Bedford, he's known as an author and sort of dilettante and he was the author of Vathek, which was a sort of orientalist Gothic novel, which is still read today by people in English departments, I guess. [laughs] He supposedly had music lessons with the very young Mozart when Mozart came to London. Well, it seems pretty unlikely that that took place, but it certainly is likely that the Mozarts -- that Leopold and the two children -- did visit with the Beckfords because they were very well connected. And they're mentioned in Leopold's diary of all of the people that he met with. So there's that connection. One of the other Beckfords, Peter Beckford, went on a grand tour of Italy, as was very typical amongst the elite at that time, and while he was in Rome, he came across a young musician, Muzio Clementi, who was then 14 years old. And he literally bought -- Peter Bedford literally bought Clementi from Clementi's father, and took him home to England and installed him in his country house in Dorset. And the word "bought" is not my own characterization, but actually used by Beckford himself in his ... So the documents that were signed by Peter Beckford and Clementi's father, have survived, at least in photographic reproduction. So we actually have the facts about that. And there was a Clementi biography which mentions it just in passing. But there's no detail given about the sources of Peter Beckford's income, which were these plantations in Jamaica. Most people know Clementi today because of his works for the piano, which were ... which are still in the pedagogical repertory. But they don't know that it's only because he was brought to England thanks to money from plantation profits. Otherwise, he probably would have stayed in Italy and become a church musician there, like most of the others, and who knows what would have happened to him, but he became a piano virtuoso, and composer and a musical entrepreneur with concert series, and important production of instruments and publications. And I think, in many ways made a... has made a huge difference to piano, not just piano pedagogy, and the use of the legato style, but also to just music history, "tout court" as they say.

Will Robin 32:54

When we're talking about profits, investments, the ledgers where you see Handel's name or the Beckford family's investments, it can be quite abstract in the sense that I could buy and sell stock today

and feel pretty abstracted from what the companies that I'm investing in are actually doing on the ground. And so I'm wondering, knowing all this, how do you think about the actual brutality of the slave trade and its effects on enslaved people. How do you conceptualize the people on the other end of this system of oppression, who are undergoing this horrible set of circumstances?

David Hunter 33:35

Yes, well, this gets to -- I think -- the broader point of any kind of examination of the issues surrounding this. And that's why I'm couching my current work in terms of how the economic system that was slavery and plantations, how that modified the musical worlds of not only people in Britain, or immigrants to the North American continent and the Caribbean, but also the lives of Native Americans, and the lives, and of course the musical activities, of Africans who were enslaved and brought over to the Caribbean and North America.

Will Robin 34:40

I think it's pretty clear where you want to see scholars going to answer all these new questions that this research poses. And we kind of touched on this earlier, but I just want to return to it, there are musicians and audience members who are finding out this information either from this podcast or from stuff of yours or other scholars that they've read... And how do you hope that they respond to the knowledge of, let's say, Handel's investments, or the Beckford family? Is it not standing during the Hallelujah chorus? Is it not... How can people who are not scholars find... Or how do you imagine that they might grapple with these questions themselves?

David Hunter 35:26

Well, I think this is part of the assessment, or reassessment of our heritage, whether that is of the settlers, or of the slaves, or of the Native Americans. Oh, and I should also say that actually, there were plenty of Native Americans who were enslaved ... In fact, there were more Native American enslavements during the 17th century than there were African enslavements. So you know, slavery is not just an issue for those of African heritage. The relationship between musical works and individuals is so personal, that it is not surprising that many people feel upset when you bring, let's just say, obvious truths to their attention. I imagine that the prohibition that was put upon the works of Wagner in Israel led to discomfort amongst many people for whom the operas or other works of that composer were actually very meaningful. And that regardless of his odious opinions and friends, the works themselves conveyed a kind of ... some emotions that people have found valuable. So I think, in a sense, it is possible to divorce the ... and this is what the argument about art for art's sake is all about, is divorcing the personality of the composer or the performers, or whatever it might be, from the -- as it is sometimes known, "the work itself." I don't feel any different about Messiah today than I did when I was 10 years old, and sang it, one of the movements, at a wedding. it's beautiful, and it speaks to a social need. And many people love it. But that doesn't mean that they need to love it without knowing its relations with the society in which it was created. In the same way that we love the music of, let's say Palestrina, or Byrd, or Dufay, or whatever else, the church, or churches, in many ways have been responsible for terrible acts, whether they be sexual assault or greed or warmongering or whatever it might be. But that doesn't prevent us from listening to those works. And just because Shostakovich served in a communist country and wrote works under the communist regime doesn't mean that we're not going to listen to those works or admire them. So [laughs] sometimes I think of this in terms of

adding a public health warning on works. So -- this work brought to you in part by the history of the profits of the slave trade. And leading people to understand that musical works are just as much a part of the societies in which they were created as they are in performance today.

Will Robin 39:59

Well, thank you so much. This was a really wonderful interview and I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me.

David Hunter 40:04

you're welcome, Will!

40:09

[Outro music]

Will Robin 40:11

Many, many thanks to David Hunter, who is librarian emeritus at the University of Texas at Austin, for that wonderful conversation -- and provocative and enlightening conversation. If you're new to the podcast, you can check out our previous episodes on soundexpertise.org as well as show notes and links to Dr. Hunter's work. As always, please subscribe and tell your friends to check out Sound Expertise. If you have questions or thoughts about today's episode, you can tweet at me @seatedovation. And if you like our music and production and I hope that you do please check out the work of our amazing producer de Edward Davis on Soundcloud at [warm silence](https://www.soundcloud.com/warm-silence). Thanks as always to Andrew Dell'Antonio for transcribing our episodes to make them more accessible. Next week, we'll be talking to the amazing musicologist Laurie Stras about what it means to study very old manuscripts of very old music. Stay tuned.

41:08

[Outro music]