

Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra, K. 622
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

The youngest member of the standard orchestra, the clarinet grew out of a 16th century recorder-like instrument with a single-reed called a *chalumeau*. As instrumental ensembles grew larger during the latter half of the 15th century, the soft-voiced chalumeau became less popular. The development of the chalumeau into the larger and louder clarinet is attributed to Johann Christoph Denner (1655-1707).

It is possible that Mozart heard early clarinets while in Salzburg, but his travels through Europe brought him into contact with newer, more capable clarinets and with very capable clarinetists. He was also encountered a lower pitched instrument called a “basset horn,” roughly equivalent to the modern alto clarinet. Mozart was particularly impressed with the clarinetists he heard during his 1777 visit to Mannheim, Germany, where the court orchestra was filled with excellent players. In a 1778 letter to his father, Mozart wrote, “If only we had clarinets, too! You cannot imagine the glorious effect of a symphony with flutes, oboes and clarinets!” He began including clarinets in his music; his first symphony to require them was the “Paris” symphony of 1778 (K. 297/300a).

Shortly after his move to Vienna in 1781, Mozart met Anton Stadler, once of the preeminent clarinet virtuosos of the time. There is little documentary evidence of how Mozart came to write both the Clarinet Quintet and the Clarinet Concerto for Stadler. All we have are some manuscript fragments that offer interesting possibilities. It is possible Mozart initially intended the quintet (1789, K. 581) for an extended-range clarinet that Stadler had modified so that it could play somewhat lower than the standard clarinet. We also know that Mozart originally started writing the Clarinet Concerto for the basset horn, as evidenced by a manuscript – in Mozart’s hand – of part of the concerto’s first movement.

Why Mozart abandoned the basset horn version will probably never be known, but there is now general agreement among musicologists that this concerto, completed in October 1791, was intended for performance on Stadler’s extended-range instrument. Stadler premiered the concerto the next month in Prague, and probably continued to perform it while touring through Europe and Russia until 1795.

While the autograph manuscript of the concerto’s final version was lost shortly after the composer’s death, in 1801 the concerto was published in an altered form that made it playable on a standard clarinet. It was in this form that the concerto became the cornerstone of the solo clarinet repertoire and has achieved great popularity. The original version for extended range clarinet was reconstructed in the 1970s, and many clarinetists now perform the concerto on a “basset clarinet,” a modern version of Stadler’s extended-range instrument.

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The Clarinet Concerto is Mozart's last completed instrumental composition, and unlike his other concertos for wind instruments, it is a substantive work, on par with the piano concertos. The range of moods and subtlety required of the soloist far exceeds any previous clarinet work. After the orchestral *tutti* at the beginning, the soloist takes center stage for almost the entire piece. The mood of the first movement is, according to Michael Steinberg, "softly lit, more intimate than festive, serene rather than impassioned... The sheer sound of this movement is of transcendent beauty." The movement also has an unusual structure – it has the typical sonata form sections (exposition, development and recapitulation), but each section ends with a restatement of a portion of the opening music.

The second movement *Adagio* is one of Mozart's most sublime. Mozart rarely wrote music in this slow tempo, and its presence here indicates a movement of considerable gravity. Yet the music sings with an almost operatic aria quality. The finale is in the blend of sonata and rondo forms Mozart created for his piano concertos, where even the rondo theme itself is subject to development. Towards the end there are brief silences that seem to indicate emotional conflict of some kind. Mozart and Haydn scholar H.C. Robbins Landon describes this movement by quoting Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* – "[The] heart dances, but not for joy."

Douze études pour piano
Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918)

In 1914 and in failing health both mentally and physically, Debussy began preparing an edition of the piano works of Chopin. The task brought on a rush of creativity that would result in the piano duet *En blanc et noir*, sonatas for Cello and Violin, and the present twelve études for solo piano. Completed in 1915, Debussy dedicated them to the memory of Chopin, perhaps inspired by the Polish composer's own études. The pieces are technically quite demanding – the composer, himself a pianist of no small ability, found parts of them quite difficult. He wrote to his publisher Durand “these études conceal a rigorous technique beneath flowers of harmony. To put it another way, you don't catch flies with vinegar!”

Divided into two sets of six, the title of each étude gives a clue to the compositional or performing technique being exercised. Yet these are not merely technical studies and, like the similarly named works of their dedicatee, their musical qualities outweigh the technical challenges. The first étude, “For the five fingers, after Mr. Czerny,” recalls the many exercises by Carl Czerny that continue to be the bane of the student pianist's existence. The next four études are each built around a particular tonal interval: thirds, fourths, sixths and octaves. The sixth piece, “For the eight fingers,” includes a footnote from the composer that “the changing position of the hands makes the use of the thumbs awkward and acrobatic in performance.”

The second set begins with the scherzo-like “For the chromatic scale,” followed by “For the ornaments.” This title refers to the practice of adding extra notes – ornaments – to melodic lines, a tradition commonly associated with French keyboard music of the Baroque era. Debussy described this étude as “a barcarolle on an Italianate sea.” “For the repeated notes” is another scherzo, and the contrapuntal “For the opposing sonorities” finds the composer bringing to the piano his sense of coloration and simultaneous timbres common in his orchestral works. The final two études, “For the written arpeggios” and “For chords” recall the works of Liszt and Chopin, and it was with these pieces Debussy ended his career as a composer for the piano.

Handel's *Judas Maccabeus*
by Alan M. Rothenberg

German by birth, **George Frederic Handel** (1685-1759) found his greatest success in England. Handel settled in London in 1712, after musical training in his native Halle and then Italy. He brought with him expertise in Italian-style opera, and, capitalizing on the popularity of this form, enjoyed the considerable income that his forty operas brought him. But by 1735 the public's desire for opera had declined – Frederick the Great, the Crown Prince of Prussia and a composer of no small talent, wrote that “Handel's great days are over, his inspiration is exhausted, and his taste behind the fashion.”

Nearly bankrupt and in poor health, the composer devised a plan – since performing opera during Lent was prohibited in London, he began presenting subscription concert performances. These concerts mainly featured oratorios, a newly invented form. Consisting of separate “numbers” – arias, choruses, recitatives – and based on Biblical stories, oratorios were essentially operas without the theatrical trappings of opera. Knowing that the English loved grand chorus numbers and easily understood songs (tastes that contributed to the success of Gilbert and Sullivan over one hundred years later), Handel's popularity began to rise again. In 1745, as his upper class subscription audience began to lose interest in oratorio, Handel – ever the smart businessman – stopped using the subscription model and began selling tickets to anyone who wanted them, opening his concerts to the rising middle-class.

Reaching Out to the Jews?

Half of Handel's twenty-six oratorios are based on Old Testament stories that are ostensibly Jewish. Was he trying to expand his listener base to the growing Jewish community in England? For many years music historians assumed this to be the case, as the number of Jews in England had risen steadily since Oliver Cromwell allowed them freedom of worship in 1656; some estimates put London's Jewish population in 1752 at about 8,000. Handel was surely aware of this potential new audience.

But Handel scholar David Hunter suggests a different reason for the large number of oratorios on Jewish subjects: “Given the very small number of Jews who could afford to attend opera or oratorio, and the even smaller number who had the interest and actually went, it seems highly improbable that the choice of libretto theme was dictated by that part of the potential audience. Rather, the significance of the portrayal of the Israelites was in conveying a story about the original chosen people, a role the English considered themselves to have rightfully inherited and upon which they could improve.” The English Protestants of the 18th century saw themselves as a modern version of the chosen people, and made a thorough study of the Old Testament, viewing it as the basis for the New Testament. Handel knew that his mainly Protestant audience would understand the parallels being drawn between their theology and the oratorio's libretto. The stories of the Jews provided Handel with, as Paul Henry Lang has noted, “Models, lessons, symbols, majestic statutes that he could apply to the [British] nation.”

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Celebrating a Victory, or Anticipating a War?

In August 1745, Prince Charles Edward of Scotland (aka “Bonnie Prince Charlie”) attempted to overthrow King George II. George’s son William, the Duke of Cumberland, repelled the attempt. To honor the victory, William’s older brother Frederick Lewis, the Prince of Wales, requested a celebratory oratorio from Handel.

Reverend Thomas Morrell, a new collaborator for the composer, wrote the libretto for *Judas Maccabeus*. It is not clear how Morrell was given this task; typically, a composer selects a librettist to create a workable text. But there is some evidence that Frederick Lewis had Morrell write the text before going to Handel with his request. In his memoirs, Morrell wrote, “the plan of *Judas Maccabeus* was designed as a compliment to the Duke of Cumberland upon returning victorious from Scotland.” There was some friction between the composer and his librettist, but as Handel wanted to stay in the good graces of the reigning family, he complied with the Prince’s wishes.

Morrell based his text on the two volumes of the Book of Maccabees, considered canonical by the Catholic Church, but considered part of the Apocrypha by the Protestant and Jewish faiths. He also included some material from the writings of Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian from the first century A.D.

Recent scholarship has suggested that Morrell viewed the story as appropriate to the times not only because it celebrated a victory, but also because it reflected some anxiety about an oncoming conflict. In her study of Handel’s oratorio texts and the contemporary British political scene, Ruth Smith observes that in *Judas Maccabeus*, almost half of the pieces “are about oppression, or the recovery of freedom, or both; nine refer to, call for, or are prayers for aid; eleven concern rededication to the service of God as the only real basis for security... [The libretto] was written soon after the official declaration of war with France, to which there was no satisfactory outcome in sight. The libretto’s anxiety reflects the devastating French inroads on the crucial defenses in the Low Countries.” Perhaps Morrell was signaling his hopes for a peaceful resolution to the War of the Austrian Succession, a conflict that would not end until 1748.

A Great Success

After receiving the libretto of *Judas Maccabeus* from Morrell, Handel wrote the music in July and August of 1746. The first performance took place on April 1, 1747 at Covent Garden, the composer conducting. It was an immediate hit, and was performed five more times that season. Before his death twelve years later, Handel presented *Judas* in London 33 times, second only to the 36 performances of *Messiah* that he led. As was his custom, he made numerous changes from one performance to another, depending on the circumstances and the available performers. He also freely borrowed from other works; the well-known chorus “See the conqu’ring hero comes” was originally from the oratorio *Joshua*, which was first performed in August 1747. There are also multiple versions of some arias. As a result, a modern performance of *Judas Maccabeus* requires selecting the particular numbers, and the version of each number, to be included.

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Ancient Rebellion, Current Threats

Judas Maccabeus is based on the Maccabean Revolt of the Second Century B.C. After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C., his empire was taken over by his generals. Ptolemy ruled Egypt, while Seleucus became king over Babylon and Syria. Judea, the land of the Jews, was initially part of Ptolemy's lands, but by 198 B.C., it was part of the Syrian empire under the rule of Antiochus the Great. Judea flourished under Antiochus, but his successor Antiochus Epiphanes (Antiochus IV) wanted to impose Greek culture and religion on the Jews. Jewish religious customs were banned, and pagan rites took place in the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Jewish priest Mattathias began a rebellion that was continued after his death by his sons, including Simon and Judas Maccabeus. Judas brought together an army that, while outnumbered, defeated Antiochus. Around 164 B.C. Judas rededicated the Temple to Jewish worship, an event that formed the basis of the modern minor Jewish holiday of Chanukah (which, coincidentally, begins tonight).

Morrell and Handel's audience surely recognized the parallels between the historical events and their own time. They saw Charles Edward of Scotland as Antiochus, and William as Judas Maccabeus. The result was a story ostensibly about religious freedom, but with predominant themes of national identity and loyalty that would resonate with a public in the midst of multiple threats to British sovereignty.