

Marc-Antoine Charpentier and *David et Jonathas*  
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When Marc-Antoine Charpentier wrote *David et Jonathas* in 1688 he was in his mid 40s and at the height of his powers. We now know that he was born in Paris in 1643 (rather than 1634, as used to be thought), and that he studied in Rome in the late 1660s, supposedly with Carissimi. On his return to Paris around 1670 he was taken into the service of Marie de Lorraine, known as the Duchesse de Guise, who had lived in Florence in her youth and was an enthusiast for Italian music. As the aunt of Louis Joseph, Duc de Guise, who married Louise XIV's cousin Isabelle d'Orléans in 1667, she maintained one of the largest and most prestigious households in Paris, with a distinguished musical ensemble, including Charpentier as *haute-contre* singer. Charpentier spent 18 years in her employment, writing an enormous amount of music of all sorts for her singers and instrumentalists, ranging from small motets to large-scale psalm settings and oratorios, as well as some secular dramatic works, including the small-scale opera *Acéon* (1683-5) – the French equivalent of *Dido and Aeneas*. The Duchesse de Guise also seems to have promoted Charpentier by introducing him to Molière, leading to him writing music for a series of productions put on by the Troupe de Roy (later the Comédie Française), culminating in *La malade imaginaire* (1673), Molière's last play.

Charpentier gained considerable experience writing theatrical music in the 1670s and 80s for the Guise household and with Molière, though his career as a dramatic composer seems to have been hampered by Lully, who as director of the Académie Royale de Musique exercised a monopoly over opera in Paris. Lully made Charpentier rewrite his music for *La malade imaginaire* three times for ever smaller forces, and seems to have prevented him from writing for the Académie. However everything changed in the spring of 1687. The Duchesse de Guise died on 3 March, followed by Lully a few weeks later, on 22 March. So Charpentier was free to find a new patron and, eventually, to write large-scale opera. His new employers were the Jesuits, at the Collège Louis-le-Grand in Paris, the foremost boys' school in France, and they soon used him to write dramatic music. Drama was an important part of the Jesuit educational programme all over Europe, as we know, for instance, from the activities at the English college at Saint-Omer earlier in the seventeenth century or Zelenka's *Melodrama de Sancto Wenceslao*, performed in Prague in 1723. Charpentier's first Jesuit opera, *Celse Martyr*, written for Louis-le-Grand in 1687, is lost, though we have the second, *David et Jonathas*, a setting of a libretto by the Jesuit priest François Bretonneau, first performed there on 28 February 1688. With Lully out of the way Charpentier eventually went on to write a full-scale opera for the Académie: *Médée*, first performed on 4 December 1693.

*David et Jonathas* was originally part of what must have been a strange and lengthy theatrical experience. There are, of course, other examples of operas on Biblical themes, such as Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto*, Verdi's *Nabucco* or Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Delila*, and we are accustomed to the mixture of speech and music in the English theatrical tradition, as in Purcell's semi-operas. But *David et Jonathas* is a full-length all-sung *tragédie en musique*, five acts with a prologue, that was originally performed entwined with *Saïl*, a complete spoken play in Latin. *Saïl* has its own self-contained and complementary action, anticipating *David et Jonathas* act by act, which means that the libretto for Charpentier's opera concentrates more on developing character and building up spectacular set-pieces than telling the story in recitative. The opera is a self-contained, full-length work with a coherent plot telling a well-known story, so luckily it does not depend on the spoken element as, say, Purcell's semi-operas do.

*David et Jonathas* deals with the tragic sequence of events in the Book of Samuel arising out of David's victory over Goliath. He is celebrated by the Israelites as a hero, causing King Saul to descend into jealousy and madness. The prologue is a highly dramatic setting of the Saul and the Witch of Endor episode, familiar to us from Purcell's trio and the scene in Handel's oratorio *Saul*, in which Saul (a baritone) visits the witch (called La Pythonisse in Charpentier's

opera, and set as an *haute-contre* role probably originally sung by the composer himself), who summons up the ghost of the prophet Samuel to foretell the future. As we might expect, the news is not good: Samuel, a low bass strikingly accompanied by a four-part consort of muted bass violins, tells the hapless king that his crimes have led God to abandon him.

The main part of the opera starts with events earlier in the story. David (another *haute-contre*, also probably sung the composer) has been forced by Saul's jealousy to defect to the Philistines and their king Achise, a bass. Act I is largely taken up with celebrations welcoming David, set in a series of dance-like set-piece numbers for a range of solo voices, choir and orchestra, though in a wonderful solo scene accompanied by the full strings, David fears that his defection will lead him to war against the Israelites and his friend Jonathas, the king's son. In Act II the Philistine general Joabel (a tenor) seethes with jealousy as David meets Jonathas (a soprano, originally a boy) and agrees a truce, culminating in a superb large-scale chaconne for soloists, choir and orchestra. In Act III the focus shifts to Saul and his jealous rages, set out in another wonderful solo scene accompanied by the strings, forcing David to flee and leaving Joabel and the Philistines to celebrate the success of his plan to provoke the two sides to resume hostilities. In Act IV the focus is on the relationship between David and Jonathas and their anguish (expressed in fine solo scenes) caused by being on opposing sides in the impending battle, which leads in Act V to successive death scenes for Jonathas and Saul, set to music of great intensity and pathos. Achise proclaims David the new king of Israel, and the opera ends with general rejoicing in an elaborate and richly scored ensemble – including another appearance of the bass violin consort.

As already mentioned, the fact that each act of *David et Jonathas* was preceded an act of the spoken play allowed Bretonneau to keep the story-telling to a minimum, and enabled Charpentier to concentrate on illuminating the character of the protagonists in expressive solo scenes, and building up a vision of the magnificence of ancient Israel in richly scored set-pieces involving a large number of soloists with the choir and the orchestra – and, presumably, dancers: the acts end respectively with a minuet, the extended chaconne, a gigue, a rigaudon and a bourée, and the dance-like final number. In this respect, the English listener will inevitably be reminded of *Dido and Aeneas* (written quite possibly in the same year as *David et Jonathas*) as well as Purcell's semi-operas. Also, Charpentier is a match for Purcell in his adventurous musical language: unlike Lully and most of his French contemporaries he was continually pushing the boundaries with rich, unexpected harmonies and wonderfully dissonant part-writing.

Like Purcell, Charpentier was also a master of the orchestra. He used the French string layout with a single violin part and the bass played by bass violins rather than violoncellos and double basses as in later practice. However, he used four-part string writing, with two viola parts, rather than the five-part scoring with three violas as used at court and by Charpentier in *Médée* and a few other works. We do not know how large his orchestra was at Louis-le-Grand, but he clearly had a sizeable string group since he wrote for four bass violins, and he exploited the distinction between the *grand choeur*, the orchestral strings with the outer parts doubled by oboes and bassoon, and the *petit choeur*, the continuo group with pairs of obbligato solo violins and recorders accompanying the solo vocal music. By contrast, *Actéon* and the other dramatic works he wrote for the Guise household are mostly scored just with two treble instruments (viols or violins and/or recorders) and continuo. However, despite there being several triumphal and/or warlike scenes in D major and C major, there are no indications for trumpets and drums in *David et Jonathas*, as there would surely have been had the work been written for the Académie Royale de Musique.

We are fortunate that Charpentier's music for *David et Jonathas* survives. There is no score in the collection of his autographs, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, though a copy was made in 1690 for the royal music library by André Danican Philidor, perhaps in connection with a planned performance at the Académie Royale. There are digital images of this available at the *Gallica* website, as well as a copy of Bretonneau's printed libretto. Philidor's score is none too

accurate, though the errors are corrected in Jean Duron's edition for CNRS, published in 1981. Duron also convincingly reconstructs two missing passages, at the end of the chaconne in Act II and the first part of the opening *ritournelle* of Act III, apparently lost because of a missing leaf in the autograph; Philidor left two pages blank at that point in his score, presumably in the hope that it would be recovered. There is also a useful though more literal modern edition by Nicolas Sceaux available at the Petrucci Website, with a full score (in original as well as modernised clefs) and a set of orchestral parts.

*David et Jonathas* was evidently successful at the time. It was revived at Louis-le-Grand on 10 February 1706 and at other schools in the French provinces well into the eighteenth century. The 1706 revival is noteworthy in that the young Jean-Philippe Rameau, newly arrived in Paris, is likely to have taken part as a continuo player, since he had been appointed organist of the school a few months before. It was presumably one of his first experiences of large-scale opera, more than a quarter of a century before he was to make his own debut as a dramatic composer. After these performances *David et Jonathas* does not seem to have been heard again, at least in its entirety, until it was put on by the English Bach Festival in performances conducted by Michael Corboz; a resulting recording was issued by Erato in 1981. There were subsequent recordings by William Christie and Les Arts Florissants (1988) and the Australian Pinchgut Opera (2010), as well as a DVD of a stage production at Aix en Provence (2012), again with Christie and Les Arts Florissants.

It is always dangerous to claim a first, but, although there have been performances in London and Edinburgh, so far as I know *David et Jonathas* has not been put on elsewhere in Britain. The performance I am directing in St Peter's, Sudbury in Suffolk on 25 May certainly seems to be the first in East Anglia, and will be a rare chance to hear this wonderful work live. The cast is led by Daniel Auchincloss taking the two *haute-contre* roles, Claire Tomlin as Jonathas, Giles Davies as Saul, with Psalmody and Essex Baroque Orchestra – including four bass violins led by Mark Caudle.