

James Porter, *Beyond Fingal's Cave: Ossian in the Musical Imagination*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press ; Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2019. xx, 401 p. Eastman Studies in Music; 158. ISBN: 9781580469456. Hardback. £80.00.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century James Macpherson's literary translations, or reconstructions, of Ossianic texts are well known to scholars of literature and cultural history. Furthermore, musicologists of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century music – whether strictly 'classical' or more in the Celtic, traditional realm – may well have come across Macpherson's publications, en passant if not centre stage. Macpherson rocked the literary world in the 1760s, with his prose-poems about the legendary exploits of the bard Ossian, all written in what to us nowadays is reminiscent of the language in the King James Bible. Macpherson declared that the poetry was translated from epic Gaelic sagas that he had collected from around the Highlands and Islands.

Full of bold heroes, tragic but brave heroines, imposing landscapes and a healthy dose of misty Celtic gloom, the poetry not only set the heather alight with endless debates about its provenance and authenticity, but also provoked scholars and antiquarians to traverse the Scottish Highlands in both wishful and disbelieving search of the originals. It inspired travellers to visit the land where Ossian trod, and – as all musicians will recall – inspired the young, seasick Felix Mendelssohn to write his famous 'Fingal's Cave' overture, otherwise known as *The Hebrides Overture*. Take a sightseeing trip to Fingal's Cave on the island of Staffa today, and the skipper of the boat can be guaranteed to play 'Fingal's Cave' as you approach the landing-stage. (Two hundred years ago, you'd have gone in a rowing-boat, taking a piper with you so that you could enjoy the effect of an awe-inspiring racket inside the equally awe-inspiring caves.)

The Ossian tales are not entirely a Scottish product – there are similar narratives in Ireland, too – but Macpherson's publications were to exert an unprecedented influence on the generations that followed him, both at home and overseas. Napoleon even took them with him in battle; Beethoven admired them; and other great names set verses to music, even if they were sometimes in further translations from Macpherson's original work.

James Porter is equally a scholar of James Macpherson the poet, of contemporary Celtic music and culture, and a musicologist of considerable standing. A leading expert, he has written extensively about Macpherson's Ossian poems and the very complex issues of authenticity and origins.

In the present monograph, he applies his astute, analytical mind to address the influence that 'Ossian' exerted upon composers, from around 1780 to pretty much the present day, with the latest musical work being one that James Macmillan published in 2013. Sixteen chapters lead a basically chronological

path through the different eras, with the opening chapters ensuring that the reader is equipped with the necessary historical and literary background to be able to follow the ensuing discussions. (Chapter 1 discusses ‘Battling Critics, Engaging Composers’, and is followed by Chapter 2, ‘On Macpherson’s Native Heath’, then Chapter 3, ‘A Culture without Writing, Settings without a Score, Haydn without Copyright, and two Oscars on Stage’.)

Midway in the narrative, we find an excursus between Chapters 8 and 9, devoted to Ossian’s effect on Mendelssohn – ‘Mendelssohn waives the Rules: Overture to the Isles of Fingal (1832) and an ‘Unfinished’ Coda’ – whilst the book ends with an Afterword (‘The “Half-Viewless Harp” – Secondary Resonances of Ossian’), in which Porter gathers further musical works not embraced in the main body of the monograph. These seem to display more tenuous but nonetheless possible signs of influence by Macpherson’s magnum opus.

The usual scholarly apparatus is, of course, evidenced in four appendices, three of which pertain to particular works, whilst Appendix 4 provides a ‘Provisional List of Musical Compositions Based on the Poems of Ossian’, before the monograph concludes with notes, a select bibliography and the index. In the preface, Porter contextualises his work as:

*a work of musical historiography rather than of abstract theory. It is intended as much for a broadly-informed readership as for specialists in music, simply because the central topic is of extensive literary and cultural interest. [xiv]*

The opening chapters, as mentioned earlier, are crucial in setting the scene for what follows, whilst the various composers and compositions that follow are invariably helpfully placed into context with a few apposite words about their place in musical and, most particularly, cultural history. Porter demonstrates the dramatic possibilities of the text for opera, devoting a lot of space to the interrogation of plot, and how the music reflects the action on stage. There are also, however, more cantata-like works, smaller vocal works, and of course there is also the potential for less literal transmediation into instrumental genres. Some tunes from the traditional fiddle repertoire also betray their composers’ or collectors’ enthusiasm for Ossianic literature.

The largest proportion of the monograph is dedicated to analyses and plentiful musical examples from literally dozens of works spanning two centuries, predominantly in Europe but also further afield – including an intriguing and moderately successful opera by Miss Harriet Wainwright, later to enjoy married life in Calcutta with Colonel John Stewart. Published in 1803, it is not the only work which might have attracted more attention had the composer not been a woman. The reader is introduced to numerous composers who are never heard of today, a fact which reinforces just how much our

knowledge is influenced by a musical education which has always heavily promoted 'the canon' of a few big names. Some of these works are still unpublished. To say that the coverage and scope is impressive is almost an understatement. As the book reaches its conclusion, Porter outlines the works which, in his opinion, either stand out head and shoulders above the rest, or at the very least, deserve more attention than they've hitherto received. Erik Chisholm and Cedric Thorpe Davie, two influential early to mid-twentieth century figures, are amongst the composers in these categories.

A thoroughly scholarly work, the monograph would find a welcome place in any university or conservatoire collection.

Karen E. McAulay

Jane Glover, *Handel in London: The Making of a Genius*. London: Pan Macmillan, 2018 ; Picador, 2019. ISBN: 9781509882083. Hardback. 448 p. £25.00. ISBN: 9781509882083. Paperback. 320 p. £9.99.

Jane Glover's study of Handel paints a picture of a composer who is well known to many of us. But there are various ways of telling a story, of course, and her success in this instance lies in depicting for her reader a figure whose great humanity and incredible industry are evenly matched. This book also offers the Handel scholar and the student alike an enlightening impression of the historic background to the composer's life and times.

Picture the scene. It is a fine summer's evening in July 1717, rather like any balmy Saturday evening in the summer just gone by. You have decided to invite all your friends (except your son and his wife, as it turns out) to a party that involves being transported by boat up the Thames to a friend's place in Chelsea. The press notices, in what might now be called the Londoner's Diary, announced that 'persons of quality' attended the event. To make things even better, you have accompanying music all the way there, at the party and on the way back. People have crowded along the river bank to cheer as boats pass by because one of the people travelling is King George I. The music being performed has become known as *Water Music* because it was performed when the party was travelling in the boats as well as at the actual event itself. The composer was, of course, the subject of the book I am talking about, who enjoyed a very successful career because of his innate ability and because of his closeness to the family of reigning monarchs in England. Indeed, Handel enjoyed favoured status even before the Hanoverians arrived, as Queen Anne, daughter of William of Orange, awarded him a pension for life, which George I quickly renewed. It was a bursary, if you like, but it was a case of correctly