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### **Words, Music and Irony in Handel**

In Handel's vocal compositions the music usually reflects the words to which it is set, and in his operas and oratorios it normally responds also to the emotional state of the character who sings it and to the dramatic situation in which the character is placed. This is not always the case, however, and the chance of one of these statements being untrue is increased if the music is based on a borrowing from another work. One of the movements in *Messiah* is modelled on a work of which the music had been composed to a very different text, making it hard to explain why that particular movement was borrowed. Other oratorios by Handel provide further examples of this and of a related phenomenon – music that is clearly at odds with the sentiment expressed in the words. It would be difficult to argue that such examples were casual or unintentional. It seems, on the contrary, that some examples, notably in *Theodora*, are quite deliberate and that, in them, Handel is consciously voicing his personal reaction to the words or interpreting them for the benefit of the audience. In these cases, his settings can properly be described as ironic. The few existing studies of irony in isolated works by Handel indicate that the subject would repay investigation. It is not suggested in this paper that the movement in *Messiah* is ironic, but that Handel's use of irony in his operas and oratorios deserves more attention than it has hitherto received.