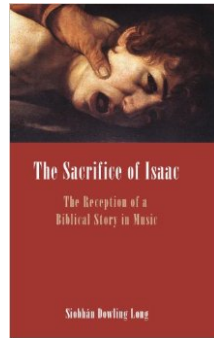


*The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Reception of a Biblical Story in Music*, by Siobhán Dowling Long

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Siobhán Dowling Long's *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Reception of a Biblical Story in Music* provides a well written and interesting account of the reception of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. In addition to an examination of its reception in music, Long details art works, Christian and Jewish traditions, and even plays. Long's breadth of knowledge is impressive. Even more impressive is the amount of information she is able to combine in a concise and interesting manner. Long emphasizes that it is the story's complex questions, for which there seem to be no answers, that attracts continual fascination (xxvii). Long writes, "The biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.1–19), or the *Akedah* in Hebrew tradition, has inspired composers, artists, writers, and dramatists down through the centuries to produce some of the greatest musical, artistic, literary and dramatic masterpieces the world knows today" (xxv).

Art allows viewers to appreciate the story with their eyes, but art can only



represent one scene at a time. Music, on the other hand, enables listeners to “hear” as well as “see” the entire story (xxvii). Long’s book is written for musicians as well as those with no musical training. To facilitate this wide range of readership, Long develops a two-part structure. The first part of the book is a retelling of the sacrifice of Isaac that Long combines with references to art and music. The second part of the book is a detailed reception of five musical compositions. Providing a reception of music on any topic is difficult. It is often too simple, so as to be uninteresting to musicians, or too difficult and therefore inaccessible to non-musicians. Long’s two-part approach makes it possible to engage both audiences.

Part 1 is comprised of four chapters. Throughout this first part, Long refers to the compositions that will be explored in depth later. Long does not add new insights into the interpretation of the story, but relies upon the work of Robert Alter and Jan Fokkeman to provide a literary analysis. Chapter 1 focuses on the Latin Vulgate translations of the story, since her musical choices draw from these translations. The second chapter traces the story through Christian tradition, as well as its cultural influence throughout the centuries. Chapter 3 addresses mediaeval mystery plays, focusing on Chester and Brome plays which underscore Long’s music selections (xxiv). And the fourth chapter traces the reception of the story within Jewish tradition.

Long tells the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in an easily accessible fashion. Readers are encouraged to be aware of “gaps” in the story and to allow these gaps to provoke questions. Focusing on its “literary artistry,” Long emphasizes the ambiguity of the story. This enables readers to imagine how the story could be adapted to various interpretations. Long paints a picture of the story using theatrical terms such as “stage,” “centre,” “verbal cues,” and “narrator” rather than simply retelling it. Her writing creatively engages the reader’s imagination. For example, Long writes,

To highlight the magnitude of God’s speech in vv.15b–18, the narrator’s voice remains silent to allow God to take centre stage and make his final proclamation before Abraham. Where composers omit the sound of the narrator’s voice, they generally heighten the dramatic tension of the story through the music.  
(4)

In addition, Long treats the story as a stage play, dividing it into three acts with seven scenes. The use of theatrical setting assists the the reader with

following the more detailed musical reception in part 2. Act 1 focuses on Beersheba in two scenes, night and day. Act 2 consists of Abraham's journey to the "outskirts of the mysterious place," and "the mountain trek" (8). Finally, Act 3 is the sacrifice in three scenes: Abraham's preparations, the angel's first call, and the angel's third call. The story in acts and scenes is accompanied with charts and paintings that help the reader follow Long's focus. Relating the story in scenes, providing questions, and suggesting musical and artistic opportunities, leaves the reader feeling confident not only to enter her musical discussion, but to engage the various compositions.

Long makes her way through centuries of music and art. A detailed history of the story in both Jewish and Christian tradition provides a cultural and historical perspective of not only the story, but the environment in which the works were created. A lengthy treatment of the character of Sarah is much appreciated. Long writes, for example:

Interestingly, Metastasio extends the drama to include the whole family: here, Sarah plays an active role, and unlike the interpretation put forward by Gregory of Nyssa, participates in the sacrifice from her home, following Abraham's revelation of God's command. Although she does not accompany Abraham and Isaac to the sacrificial mount, she is portrayed as a type of Mary, Christ's mother, who participated in the sacrifice through her knowledge of and consent to the sacrifice. (43)

This first part of the book is well worth the investment even on its own. The second part begins the in-depth discussion of the five musical compositions.

In Part 2, Long leads the reader through five compositions. Chapter 5 is a reception of seventeenth-century *oratorio latino*, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac* by the father of Oratorio, Giacomo Carissimi. Chapter 6 discusses the libretto, *Isacco, figura del Redentore* (1740), by Habsburg court poet Pietro Metastasio, and the Metastasian libretto in one *oratorio volgare*, *Abramo ed Isacco* (1775). The seventh chapter covers Benjamin Britten's *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, Op. 51 (1952), and the *Offertorium* movement from the *War Requiem*, Op 66 (1962). Long concludes with Judith Lang Zaimont's interpretation in *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac* (1986). This section of the book is captivating and challenging for those with a musical background. As a musician, the explanations were easy and interesting. I felt I needed the score in front of me to benefit fully, and would have happily done so if it were available to me. Yet Long does provide excerpts from the music.

The detailed account of music requires some facility in understanding musical terms. While a musician will find the presentation engaging, a non-musician might find it a bit difficult to decipher due simply to a lack of music vocabulary. A glossary is furnished at the back. Even if a reader cannot follow all of the musical explanations, there is enough that is otherwise engaging about Long's descriptions to maintain the reader's interest. Reading Long's book ignites an interest not only in the music composed, but in the people who wrote the music and the artists who created their work.

Long's knowledge of the story's reception is mind-boggling, yet while the citations of music and art are exhaustive, they do not feel overwhelming. Certainly a reader would not hope to get to the end and remember most of the details, but the way the book is written will leave the reader with an overall sense of the importance of the story in music and art. Long's conclusion is also well written, demanding a reading all on its own. Long has taken on an insurmountable amount of research and, through her concise and organized style of writing, writes a book that is as accessible as can be achieved given its technical details. It is certainly a book to have on the shelf regardless of one's expertise in art or music. Long does not provide a reference guide, but her work invites readers to listen to a story and hear the music.

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