

*Love, Lust, and Lunacy: The Stories of Saul and David in Music*, by Helen Leneman

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In *Love, Lust, and Lunacy: The Stories of Saul and David in Music*, Helen Leneman shares with us a reception history of music, specifically operas, oratorios, and librettos based on the books of Samuel. Her contention is that the three emotional or mental states—love, lust, and lunacy—are “Leitmotifs” that run through the books of Samuel and her aim is thus to “illustrate how librettos and music can alter or enhance our response to Michal’s, Jonathan’s, David’s, and possibly Abigail’s love, David’s (and in some cases, Bathsheba’s) lust, and Saul’s lunacy” (1).



Leneman draws attention to the unique ways composers choose to understand the stories and especially how they “fill in the gaps” to fit their own imaginations. As Leneman states, “the most imaginative retellings are usually based on the most ambiguous parts of the biblical text” (1). The text, she asserts in the introduction, does not anchor a composer, but serves as a sketch for the composer to speculate about and fill the gaps. She states clearly that her book does not address historical-critical issues, or social history, but only “how the biblical portraits of these characters are altered by the librettos and music from how they appear in the original narrative” (2).

Leneman suggests that music is a form of midrash or retelling of the biblical text. Music she claims, adds a dimension that moves beyond the text in its ability to delineate emotion. “Music, I will show throughout this book, is a far more effective tool for arousing feelings and emotions than language is. Opera and oratorio are still more powerful tools, because they combine music and language. In the case of opera, the theatrical element creates additional drama” (3). She also discusses various basic musical concepts such as keys, tempos, and chords, how they can evoke emotion, and how voice type influences the listener, noting the voice casting that characters have historically received. Readers would do well to be familiar with the librettos, oratorios, and operas that Leneman reviews as well as 1 and 2 Samuel and the characters in both books. The short description of voice casting is helpful, yet is so quick that a reader not familiar with musical concepts might get lost as Leneman provides lists of voice casting, operas, and composers without going into any depth of explanation concerning voice casting.

In chapter 1, Leneman sets out three questions to be addressed in the course of her analysis:

*Ambiguities:* Do the libretto and music draw our attention to particular textual inconsistencies or ambiguities, and if so, how are these resolved?

*Gaps:* Do the libretto and music highlight a specific aspect of the story or fill a gap in the original narrative?

*Message:* Can we determine what message a particular composer wanted to convey? (5)

Leneman concludes Chapter 1 with a description of the three attributes that guide her book and the influence that love, lust, and lunacy have on the various biblical characters.

Chapter 2 is an explanatory prelude, listing and summarising music and composers who address the books of Samuel and whom she will discuss in more detail in the remainder of the book. Leneman includes only one eighteenth-century piece, Georg Friedrich Handel's oratorio, *Saul* (1738), focusing on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In all, she lists sixteen works, discussing briefly first the composer and then the overall focus of the composition. This chapter provides a helpful overview of the pieces, preparing the reader for the more detailed descriptions that will occur in chapters 3–10. At the end of chapter 2, Leneman returns briefly to her initial themes of love, lust and lunacy. This three-part theme, however, was not integral throughout chapter 2 and we are left without a feeling of coherence. If these themes are woven throughout, the reader wonders why and where and is left to sort out those questions for themselves.

Each of chapters 3–10 follow the same format, providing a summary of the relevant biblical chapters, a commentary on those chapters, and a discussion of the musical works (in chronological order) that set these biblical chapters to music. These chapters are divided between select stories contained in the books of Samuel, each chapter summarizing the stories and offering examples of how composers adapted these stories to their compositions. In chapter 3, for example, Leneman summarizes 1 Samuel 8–15 verse by verse, and then offers a brief commentary. Following the commentary, Leneman discusses works that address these chapters. Chapter 10 also concludes with a very short summary.

While Leneman sets out with a noble intent of tracing how music alters our responses to love, lust, or lunacy, this intended approach gets lost in Leneman's discussion of the music and in her commentary on the text. The three themes are not so much focused on as mentioned in passing. For example, in the conclusion for chapter 3, not one of these Leitmotifs is mentioned. The conclusion in chapter 4 briefly mentions love, but again a thematic thread is not made clear.

As a musician, the musical descriptions were interesting and easy to follow. However, those with little to no musical training, despite Leneman's description of basic musical concepts in the beginning, will find it difficult to see the significance in a "cantabile duet in 3/4 time" (124), "octave jumps" (127), "6/8 time" (127), or "two successive groups of thirds sung in two different octaves" (183). Musicians, however, might find Leneman's detailed descriptions of the musical retellings of biblical narratives fascinating. Her attention to detail enables the reader to hear the text, hear the music, and

brings a new element to biblical interpretation. In addition, her analysis of the relationship between composers, their works, and the biblical texts offers a contribution to the reception history of those texts. In so doing, Leneman shows how music encompasses more than a retelling of the text, but involves the whole person, including both intellect and emotion. Biblical reception history has often dealt with art and Bible or retellings and Bible, but a still much-neglected area of research is the role of music in reception. Leneman remedies this by providing us with a depth of knowledge that at times seems inexhaustible.

It is the details though that do not permit a concise order to her information. Leneman discusses the questions of ambiguity, gaps, and message in the commentary section of each chapter and also in the section where she discusses the music. However, these questions get lost in the paragraphs; a reader has to search for comments on how composers dealt with these gaps. The reader's attention could have been brought to more focus by a different arrangement of the materials treated. Her comments on the various ways in which composers added to the story and invented scenes are indeed fascinating, but this information is lost in the larger commentary. For a reader not thoroughly familiar with the story and with the operatic works, it is all too easy to get lost in the maze of wonderful information.

Leneman's new book thus suffers from a similar disadvantage of her previous work, *The Performed Bible: The Story of Ruth in Opera and Oratorio*. In Deborah Rooke's review of Leneman's first work she states, "The book covers a lot of ground, and in the musical analysis of the chosen works there are some interesting and perceptive comments, demonstrating how music does indeed add its own dimensions to the narratives being retold. The book does, however, suffer from some problems of 'digestion': it has the sense of being both too compressed and somewhat unfocused, in that the overall purpose for the gathering of data is unclear, especially in the 'statistical analysis' chapter, and there is potential for more meaningful analysis of the material."<sup>5</sup> This analysis holds true with this, Leneman's second book. In the book's conclusion, Leneman states, "The powerful medium of music gives voices to the biblical characters in the books of Samuel. These voices suggest their conflicting emotions—their love, lust, or lunacy; their fear, hope, joy, or grief; and a myriad of other feelings." Yet rather than unify the book, love, lust, and lunacy get lost in the pages and reception history risks becoming a com-

<sup>5</sup> *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32, no. 5 (2008): 11.

pilation or listing of instances of reception rather than a sustained theoretical reflection on certain patterns of reception so as to cast light on the precursor and subsequent texts.

This weakness, however, is not enough to distract from the richness that the book does offer: a musical analysis that highlights gaps and questions in a unique and creative way giving biblical scholars yet another way into the text. The appendix sections, “Charting the Musical Settings,” an annotated music bibliography of works not included in Leneman’s discussions, and “Literary Afterlives” hold enough value alone to have this book on your shelf.

Karen Langton  
*Brite Divinity School*  
*Texas Christian University*