

Carl Linnaeus, Philip Miller and the librettist of Handel's *Solomon*

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Abstract

A singular curiosity exists in the libretto of Handel's *Solomon* wherein Solomon, following Divine blessing of the recently completed Temple, transforms his humble aria of acknowledgment into an expression of contempt toward the study of botanical classification and nomenclature. Accepting Dr Ruth Smith's view, expounded in her magisterial *Handel's oratorios and eighteenth century thought*, that Handel and his librettists were deliberately presenting material for their audiences to recognise as embracing contemporaneous issues of direct social and political interest, we look for evidence of botanical controversy in London around the time of composition (1748) and first performance (1749) of *Solomon*. Such evidence is conveniently documented in Wilfrid Blunt's *Linnaeus: the compleat naturalist*, where we learn of the disruptive 1736 sojourn in England of the great Swedish taxonomist Carl Linnaeus, whose binomial naming system for species was strongly resisted by Philip Miller, director of London's Chelsea Physic Garden, both on being confronted with it by Linnaeus in person and for more than twenty years thereafter until reluctantly capitulating in the seventh edition (1759) of his celebrated *Gardener's dictionary*. Miller's resistance to the Linnaean system contrasted starkly with the almost immediate conversion of his Oxfordian counterpart, Johann Dillenius, during Linnaeus's 1736 visit to the older gardens at Oxford University. Thus, at a time when medical practice relied heavily on 'herbal remedies' for which the Chelsea Physic Garden was then the world's foremost resource, Miller's anti-Linnaean posture would have resulted in considerable controversy, both locally and internationally, as his garden became the last and most famous pocket of resistance to the all-conquering Linnaean system in Handel's time. *Solomon's* aria thus functions in the manner of a political cartoon, lampooning contemporaneous academic squabbling over botanical nomenclature; if correct, this view suggests some specific directions in which to look for the identity of the unknown librettist.

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