

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC



The Bible in the Modern World, 54

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# THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

THE RECEPTION OF A BIBLICAL STORY IN MUSIC

Siobhán Dowling Long



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*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands.*

*Serve the Lord with gladness;*

*Come into his presence with singing.*

Ps. 100.1-2



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## ABBREVIATIONS

AcM	<i>Acta musicologica</i>
AJPh	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
AnMc	<i>Analecta musicologica</i>
BibInt	<i>Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches</i>
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BRev	<i>Bible Review</i>
CMc	<i>Current Musicology</i>
CritInq	<i>Critical Inquiry</i>
EMu	<i>Early Music</i>
FC	<i>Fathers of the Church: A New Translation</i> . Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JAMS	<i>Journal of the American Musicological Society</i>
JBQ	<i>Jewish Biblical Quarterly</i>
J ECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
JLL	<i>Journal of Language and Literature</i>
JM	<i>Journal of Musicology</i>
JMEMS	<i>Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
Le muséon	<i>Le muséon: revue d'études orientales</i>
M&L	<i>Music and Letters</i>
MP	<i>Modern Philology</i>
MQ	<i>Musical Quarterly</i>
MusR	<i>Music Review</i>
PG	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus, series graeca</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, 162 vols. Paris, 1857–1912
PL	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus, series (latina) prima</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. Paris, 1844–1864
PNM	<i>Perspectives on New Music</i>
Speculum	<i>Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies</i>
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>



## INTRODUCTION

The biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.1-19), or *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. It is a story that holds prominence in the great liturgies of Jewish and Christian traditions at Rosh Ha-Shanah and Easter, and is recalled in the daily prayers and various services of Jews and Christians alike. From earliest times, the climactic scene of the angel's dramatic intervention to stay Abraham's hand (Gen. 22.10-12) was visualized in mosaics, frescoes, standing stones and funerary art, and later, in mediaeval times it was illuminated in the manuscript tradition and dramatized as a whole (Gen. 22.1-19) in the mediaeval mystery plays. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, visual representations of the story began to appear in domestic households in needlework of tapestry and embroidery, textile, furniture and in items of jewellery and fashion accessories. Its popularity in music began only during the Counter-Reformation when it was set as a dialogue motet, and later as an *oratorio latino* in the seventeenth century by Giacomo Carissimi, also known as the Father of Oratorio. Around the same time it was illustrated by many of the great masters of painting, by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio and later, by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn among many others. During this time the story of the sacrifice of Isaac enjoyed popularity in the Viennese Habsburg court, where it was first set to music by composers of the Hofburgkapelle as a *sepolcro*. In the mid-eighteenth century, it was appropriated in a libretto, *Isaaco, figura del Redentore* (1840) (Isaac, a figure of the Redeemer), by Habsburg court poet Pietro Metastasio, where it enjoyed multiple settings as an *oratorio volgare* by some of the greatest opera and oratorio composers of the day. For this reason, the Metastasian version of the story rather than its biblical counterpart was the one known by everyone across the Holy Roman Empire and beyond. Cheryl Exum has rightly pointed out that 'what many people know or think they know about the Bible often comes more from familiar representations of biblical texts and themes in popular culture than from the study of the ancient text itself'.<sup>1</sup>

1. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Gender, Culture, Theory, 3; JSOTSup, 215; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 7.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian oratorios were performed during Lent, to Catholic audiences, in churches and/or oratories (that is, prayer halls), at a time when, owing to a papal ban, theatres were forced to close. The array of Lenten themes—suffering, sacrifice and obedience—found ready-made in Genesis 22 made it an ideal choice for settings and performances during this time. By the mid- to late-eighteenth century, however, performances of oratorio and *opera serie* moved from the church into the theatre. Josef Mysliveček (1737–81), who was known as *Il divino Boemo*, composed one such oratorio based on the Metastasian libretto for a theatre performance, and to this day, it is regarded as one of his finest works. Following the decline in oratorio settings on this theme, there were no works of any great significance produced during the nineteenth century. A revival of interest in the mid-twentieth century in the wake of World War II saw the composition and performances of works by Jewish and Christian composers, as well as settings in popular songs by songwriters and performers, Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen among them. Leading English composer Benjamin Britten composed two settings of the story, one based on the text of the mediaeval Chester mystery play *Abraham and Isaac*, Op. 51, and the other on a setting of Wilfred Owen's poem from World War I, 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' (1918), which he juxtaposed with the text of the *Mass for the Dead* (Latin: *Missa pro defunctis*). A setting by Jewish American composer Judith Lang Zaimont based on the text of the Brome mystery play, Wilfred Owen's 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' and the *Qaddish* offers an alternative interpretation of the biblical story. Despite the similarity of texts, Britten's and Zaimont's compositions present listeners with two radically different interpretations of Genesis 22.

### *The Value of Music in Biblical Studies*

Of all the stories in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.1-19) features as one of the most violent biblical stories ever written; apart from the story of Jephthah's sacrifice of his unnamed daughter (Judges 11), which bears striking similarities but also notable differences, there are none others quite like it. Depending on the tradition, this story recounts either the end of childhood (in Christian tradition) or the journey into middle age (in Jewish tradition) for Isaac, the patriarch-elect and son of Abraham and Sarah. It begins with God's communication with Abraham, depending on the version either during the middle of the night or in the early hours of the morning, and his request to Abraham to offer Isaac, his only beloved son, as a sacrificial offering (Gen. 22.2). The first part (vv. 2-10) upsets humanity's perception of the natural order in heaven and on earth: on the one hand, it is

incomprehensible as to why a loving God would request his faithful servant of old to jeopardize the life of his innocent child, and, on the other, how a loving father could suppress his paternal instinct and obey the heinous instructions without the slightest hesitation. Excluding the story's epilogue (v. 19), any meaningful interpretation is understood only in the light of its second part (vv. 11-18); but despite the so-called happy ending (vv. 10-12), the story raises more problematic questions than it answers. For this reason, it has intrigued biblical scholars, theologians, philosophers, psychoanalysts, artists, composers, dramatists and many more to grapple with its varied complex meanings. In a similar manner to their literary and artistic counterparts, composers and librettists, too, have reflected on, addressed and sought to answer many of the questions raised by the biblical text in their compositions.

Music, as I argue, has the capacity to enable listeners to 'hear' and 'see' biblical texts from new and thought-provoking perspectives; unlike any other art form, it allows listeners to hear the entire biblical story sung or chanted aloud. Whereas in a visual representation viewers see only a silent depiction of one or two episodes, the most popular being the account of Abraham and Isaac's journey to the land of Moriah (v. 6) and the angel's dramatic saving intervention (vv. 10-12), audiences listening to a musical work hear the entire story from beginning to end (vv. 1-19). The act of hearing brings the story alive and enables characters to rise up from the pages of the biblical text, onto the stage, and into the imaginations of reader-listeners who reconstruct yet more versions of the story in this space. Performances of biblical texts open up endless interpretative possibilities for individual listeners who see and hear the story played out through the eyes and ears of every biblical character, while the psychological effect of the music draws listeners into the story and invites them to participate in the action from the vantage point of their imaginations.

### *Structure, Questions and Chapter Division*

This book is divided into two parts: Part I as The Biblical Story and its Cultural Afterlife provides a useful interpretive background for the discussion in Part II, The Reception of the Biblical Story in Music. In selecting composers and compositions, I choose works of historical significance that have been influential not only in the history of music, but also present some of the most insightful and distinctive interpretations of Genesis 22. A further consideration was to explore this story's reception in a variety of genres of music, for example, *oratorio latino*, *oratorio volgare*, canticle, requiem and cantata by male and female composers. It was my intention to avoid a technical analysis of the music to enable readers from a variety of disciplines, for example,

biblical studies, musicology, teachers and students of religious education and music education, and with various levels of musical training or none, to view this biblical story (Gen. 22.1-19) through another lens, through a musical interpretation. The discussion is framed by a series of questions that appear in Parts I and II:

- What ancient sources or literary texts influenced the librettist-composer?
- How do the emphases of the libretto compare to those in the biblical story?
- Are there any significant textual omissions and/or textual additions?
- To what extent was the story appropriated, refigured, sanitized or subverted?
- How is the story structured?
- How does the plot develop?
- To what extent is the narrator's voice included or excluded?
- Of the six characters, who is omitted? How are the characters portrayed?
- What character(s), if any, knew about God's command to Abraham?
- What is the function of other biblical and/or extrabiblical characters in the story? How are they portrayed?
- What character(s) speak? To whom do they speak? When do they speak? What is the content of their speeches?
- What is the reaction of characters in the aftermath of the averted sacrifice?
- How are nuances, ambiguities and evasions (gaps) of the biblical text treated?
- What themes are emphasized or neglected?
- How does the composer sound-paint the text? What musical rhetorical devices are employed?
- What does music add to the interpretation of this biblical story?

### *Part I: The Biblical Story and its Cultural Afterlife*

The literary text of the biblical story (Gen. 22.1-19), as found in the Hebrew Bible and in the Latin Vulgate's translation, is examined in Chapter 1; since all five works draw on the Latin Vulgate's translation, the discussion focuses more on this text than any other. A literary analysis of the text highlights significant insights and other points of interest raised by the literary author(s), as well as providing the foundation for subsequent chapters dealing with the reception of this story in music. My discussion is not concerned with questions relating to the text's authorship, authorial intention, redaction or production processes, but rather, following the work of Robert Alter and Jan Fokkelman, I focus



on a *literary* analysis of the narrative. Here I attempt to draw attention to the literary subtleties and nuances of the biblical story and show how, just like the musical interpreters, the author was an artist in his own right—a literary artist. Chapter 2 surveys the story's cultural afterlife in Christian tradition. Beginning with a brief overview of the story's reception in the New Testament, followed by the homiletic writings of the church fathers, it includes an exploration of the story's rich cultural afterlife down through the centuries. The reception of the sacrifice of Isaac in the mediaeval mystery plays is surveyed in Chapter 3, in particular the Chester and Brome plays, which underscore the respective compositions of Benjamin Britten and Judith Lang Zaimont. Down through the centuries, the mystery plays, as well as plays in general, have both inspired and provided composers with storylines for many great operas and oratorios. Chapter 4 traces the reception of the biblical story in Jewish tradition. While one cannot say with any certainty if Pietro Metastasio, Joseph Mysliveček or Benjamin Britten consulted this literature, their compositions suggest a familiarity with some or many of the traditions outlined.

#### *Part II: The Reception of the Biblical Story in Music*

Chapter 5 explores the reception of Genesis 22 in a seventeenth-century *oratorio latino*, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac* (date unknown) by the Father of Oratorio, Giacomo Carissimi. It was necessary to divide Chapter 6 into two sections: the first treats the libretto, *Isacco, figura del Redentore* (1740), by the renowned Habsburg court poet Pietro Metastasio, while the second examines a setting of the Metastasian libretto in one *oratorio volgare*, *Abramo ed Isacco* (1775), by Bohemian composer Josef Mysliveček. Chapter 7 discusses the reception of the biblical story in two works by British composer Benjamin Britten in *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, Op. 51 (1952), and the *Offertorium* movement from the *War Requiem*, Op. 66 (1962). And finally, Chapter 8 challenges the traditional christological interpretation of the biblical story in *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac* (1986) by Jewish American composer Judith Lang Zaimont.



PART I

THE BIBLICAL STORY  
AND ITS CULTURAL AFTERLIFE

# 1

## THE BIBLICAL STORY

Before examining the reception of Genesis 22 in music, it is necessary to begin with a brief literary exegesis of Gen. 22.1-19, as opposed to a textual exegesis: first, to highlight significant emphases, insights and other points of interest raised by the literary author(s);<sup>1</sup> and second, as a preparation for my discussion of the reception of the literary text of Genesis 22 in the music in chapters to follow. Here I outline some of the significant features of the story as presented in the Hebrew Bible<sup>2</sup> along with any significant variations in the Latin Vulgate translation. In this chapter, I also comment on the narrative's cast of characters, outline its structure, examine the narrative's setting, discuss characters' actions and speeches, and comment on the unfolding plot in a literary exegesis of the story.

At various times, the author's use of rhetorical figured speech is also noted, particularly the emphasis on silence. Frederick Ahl points out that 'ancient poets and critics alike had very little use for forthright expression'.<sup>3</sup> Usually, the force of what was communicated lay not in what was said but in what was not said, and thus, passed over in silence. This rhetorical device requires readers and/or listeners to supply some information, to ask questions, ponder the moral issues, pass a judgment and fill in the gaps of the biblical text with more imaginative details. For ancient writers, 'emphasis' as a rhetorical device was by 'indirect suggestion', nuance and ambiguity; what was meant was not said but left to the reader or listener to discover.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the text is left incom-

1. The term 'author' refers to the person(s) or tradition responsible for constructing both the literary and grammatical text of Genesis 22, and the term 'narrator' refers to the voice who narrates details of the story.

2. For my literary exegesis of Genesis 22, I have used Alter's translation of the narrative as found in Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), pp. 103-107.

3. Frederick Ahl, 'The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome', *AJPh* 105.2 (1984), pp. 174-208 (174).

4. Frederick Ahl, 'The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome', p. 179.

plete until the audience deciphers and completes its meaning with details omitted by the author. For modern writers, however, 'emphasis' is understood in the opposite way: it proceeds by 'direct statement'<sup>5</sup> and the point proclaimed is explicit and unambiguous, leaving the reader or listener no doubt as to what is communicated and made known.

Commentators generally agree that the story in Gen. 22.1-19 possibly existed independently as an etiological cult narrative for a long time before it found its place in Genesis. Whether or not the biblical author(s) had written the original story as a polemic against child sacrifice in favour of animal sacrifice is an idea now foreign to the present narrative. E.A. Speiser<sup>6</sup> and Gerhard von Rad<sup>7</sup> point out that there is a danger of reading too much into this story: the object of the Abrahamic test had to do with something other than a protest against human sacrifice in general, or child-sacrifice in particular. Regardless of the origins of the text, it is more relevant here to pay attention to the literary characteristics of the story in its present shape rather than muse on the story's original setting and purpose. The literary-critical approaches pioneered by Robert Alter in *The Art of Biblical Literature* (1981),<sup>8</sup> and developed by Frank Kermode,<sup>9</sup> Shimon Bar-Efrat,<sup>10</sup> Jan P. Fokkelman,<sup>11</sup> among others, have focused readers' attention upon the Bible's literary artistry; approaches that are useful for enabling readers appreciate the importance of the story's characters, plot and narrative.

### *Characters*

In the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, there are six characters in total: Abraham, Isaac, God, two servant boys and an angel. There is also an omniscient narrator who possesses superior knowledge of the unfolding events of the story; sometimes he decides to share this knowledge with readers (v. 1b), and at other times he chooses to conceal it, for example, the reasons for certain happenings before (v. 1a), during (vv. 2, 3, 9, 10) and after (v. 19) the near sacrifice. The narrator lets it 'slip' that Abraham appears to know more than has been disclosed to the reader, for when

5. Frederick Ahl, 'The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome', p. 179.

6. E.A. Speiser, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday & Co, 1964), p. 165.

7. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 243.

8. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

9. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Fontana, 1989).

10. Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

11. Jan P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

he raises his eyes it appears he seems to recognise the mysterious place from afar (v. 4). Might the reader infer anything from Abraham's use of the plural form in v. 5? Did Abraham know he would return to the servant boys with Isaac? Did he know of God's test at the outset of his journey (v. 1)? At a later point in the story, readers learn that God had told Abraham of the location of the place (v. 9) without the narrator having divulged this information to the reader. The story that is told through the eyes of Abraham and the narrator<sup>12</sup> provokes reader reflection on the extent of Abraham's knowledge of God's test, Sarah's knowledge of God's command and Isaac's knowledge of unfolding events. As I illustrate in Part II librettist-composers varied in their treatments of Sarah's and Isaac's knowledge of and consent to the sacrifice.

The narrator precedes characters' direct speech with verbal cues: 'and he said', and 'he called'. The interjection 'and he said' is stated nine times in total (vv. 1, 2, 5, 7 [*bis*], 8, 11, 12, 16): on three occasions by God, three occasions by Abraham, twice by Isaac, and once by the angel. This literary device empowers the narrator as well as increases the dramatic tension of the story. The other notable interjection, 'he called', is stated three times, twice by the angel (vv. 11, 15), and once by Abraham (v. 14), and this important verb harks back to the call of Abraham in Gen. 12.1. As well as the employment of verbal cues, the narrator comments on the plot in narrated speech in Gen. 22.3, 4, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14a, 19; here, the focus remains very much on Abraham and his actions. 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.

The narrator portrays Abraham as the hero of the story; he maintains an active presence from beginning to end, and is called by name on eighteen occasions (vv. 1 [*bis*], 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 [*bis*], 13 [*bis*], 14, 15, 19 [*bis*]). To reinforce his heroic status, Abraham receives a command from God by which he can and must prove himself a hero. He embraces the challenge, as Coats points out, with an almost 'superhuman, somewhat unrealistic dress, never wavering from the course of obedience'.<sup>13</sup> Abraham never objects to or questions the command to offer his son as a sacrifice, and appears to carry out the ritual preparations without any expression of emotional distress. To fully understand Abraham's character, however, reader-listeners must read his thoughts.

12. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 238.

13. George W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 161.

The narrator reveals neither details of Isaac's age nor details of his knowledge about and consent to his sacrificial fate. He does, however, allude to Isaac's status as a youth (v. 5), and at other times, to his status as a child (v. 9). With the exception of v. 7, Isaac commands a passive role as 'an obedient and willing subject who follows his father's instructions with trustful naivety'.<sup>14</sup> Yet, despite his passivity, the narrator refers to Isaac in seventeen of the nineteen verses of Genesis 22.<sup>15</sup> While Coats notes that Isaac is 'relatively unimportant' in this story,<sup>16</sup> Mleynek summarizes Isaac's role by saying he is the one

whose existence cannot be forgotten, yet whose necessary silence prevents his active assertion of existence. For the story to work Isaac must remain silent, otherwise the unexpressed and inexpressible tragedy of the text would be made manifest through his suffering, and would consequently defeat the whole purpose of the story's construction.<sup>17</sup>

While the character of God is actively present at the beginning and end of this narrative (vv. 1b-2, 15-18), reader-listeners are in no doubt that, despite God's silence in the ensuing passages (vv. 3-14), he remains present throughout. In the two God scenes, the narrator focuses attention on the voice of God and the words that issue forth, rather than a visible appearance in bodily form. Using this literary device, the author conveys the mysterious nature of God's presence, whose voice is heard calling out under the cover of darkness. Toward the end of the narrative, the angel's voice dramatically transforms into God's voice with the revelatory transformation occurring midway between v. 15a and v. 15b. Significantly, God appears on stage for the very last time with Abraham (vv. 15-18) to make a magnificent speech, proclaiming his promises through Abraham's seed, Isaac. God's final words to Abraham in 22.15-

14. Murray J. Kohn, 'The Trauma of Isaac', *JBQ* 26 (1991), pp. 96-104 (101).

15. Here Isaac's name is mentioned five times in vv. 2, 3, 6, 7, 9. The narrator refers to Isaac as 'Isaac his son' on three occasions (vv. 3, 6, 9), 'his son' on two occasions (vv. 10, 13), and 'the youth' on two occasions (vv. 5, 12). Abraham refers to Isaac as 'my son' in vv. 7, 8. God refers to Isaac as 'your son, your only one' on three occasions (vv. 2, 12, 16), and 'your seed' on three occasions (vv. 17 [*bis*], 18). To reinforce Isaac's sonship in the narrative, Isaac calls Abraham 'Father' on one occasion (v. 7). The narrator punctuates Isaac's speech with the phrase 'Abraham his father' (v. 7). See Elizabeth Boase, 'Life in the Shadows: The Role and Function of Isaac in Genesis: Synchronic and Diachronic Readings', *VT* 51.3 (2001), pp. 312-35 (315).

16. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Criticism*, p. 161.

17. Sherryll Mleynek, 'Abraham, Aristotle and God: The Poetics of Sacrifice', *JAR* 62.1 (1994), pp. 107-21 (116).

18 mirror his first spoken words to the patriarch in Gen. 12.1-3, 7.<sup>18</sup> In general, God's role has received a variety of treatments in the musical story.

The two youths, referred to three times (Gen. 22.3, 5, 19), are Abraham's servants,<sup>19</sup> and junior members of the Abrahamic household (14.15; 15.3; 17.23).<sup>20</sup> One might infer that the boys were of a similar age to Isaac. They remain silent for the entire narrative, passively obeying Abraham by accompanying him on the mysterious journey (v. 3), obeying the command to sit and wait (v. 5), rising on their master's return from the mountain and accompanying him on the homeward journey to Beersheba (v. 19). Reader-listeners could be forgiven for forgetting about the pair; in a painting or stage production, however, spectators or an audience at a performance can observe the pair before, during, and after Isaac's near sacrifice, and they can ponder to what extent the servant boys were complicit in Isaac's near sacrifice. The Brunswick Monogrammist, an anonymous Netherlandish painter, illustrates the scene of the two servants who are not entirely passive as they hold the fire and sword for Abraham while he loads the wood on Isaac's back; they remain below with the donkey as Abraham and Isaac ascend the mountain (Fig. 1). The reference to the sword is taken from v. 6 of the Latin Vulgate translation: *portabat in manibus ignem (fire) et gladium (sword) cumque duo pergerent simul*. The servants, along with the viewer, observe not only the sight of the angel taking hold of the sword to avert the sacrifice, but see the lamb standing upright in the thicket.

18. God iterated his blessing to Abraham (22.17) as he had done in Gen. 12.2. Having promised Abraham he would become great nation in Gen. 12.2, God elaborated on this promise by revealing to Abraham his nation would become as vast as the stars in the heavens, and the granules of sand on earth (Gen. 22.17). In Gen. 12.2, God promised to make Abraham's name great; by Gen. 22.16, Abraham's name had become great through his son Isaac, through his act of obedience to God's command to offer his only son as a sacrificial offering. Through Isaac, Abraham's descendants would become victorious over the Canaanites (Gen. 12.7; 22.17), and conquer the land as God promised in Gen. 12.7. Furthermore, God promised Abraham he would bless all the nations of the earth through his son Isaac because Abraham had listened to God's voice on three significant occasions: (1) when he told Abraham to go to an undisclosed place (12.1; 22.2); (2) when he asked Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice (22.2); and (3) when he commanded Abraham to avert the sacrifice (22.12). In both episodes, Abraham built an altar to God (12.7; 22.9). Abraham could not have proved his devotion and allegiance to God, or have become a great nation without Isaac's descendants. Isaac was a necessary link in the chain, and through his son, Abraham lived up to his name.

19. Robert Alter refers to the two servants as 'lads' in *Genesis*, pp. 104, 107. This term, however, has negative connotations in present-day English and conjures up images of the servants behaving in a raucous manner. The term 'youth' is preferable as it captures more accurately the servants' adolescent stage of development.

20. Pharaoh and King Abimelech bestowed gifts on Abraham resulting from the sister-wife incident in 12.10-20 and 20.1-18. Male and female slaves were included in the bounty received from both parties 12.16; 20.14.





Fig. 1. Braunschweiger Mono-grammist, *Isaac's Sacrifice* (sixteenth century), Musée du Louvre. Photo credit: © Lessing Photo Archive.

Unusually, the pair performs no active servant-like duties in this narrative. Readers may infer that the servants' silence and inactivity point to the symbolic servant-like status of Abraham and Isaac before God. Through the symbolism, the biblical author emphasizes the passive obedience of Abraham, who silently and passively obeyed his heavenly Master, as well as the passive obedience of Isaac, who obeyed his earthly father through his 'willingness' to become a sacrificial victim. In the biblical story, the servants perform no duties; the menial tasks are performed, in a reversal of roles, by Abraham and Isaac: Abraham saddles the donkey (v. 3), splits the wood for the fire (v. 3) and carries the sacrificial implements in his hand (v. 6), while Isaac carries the heavy load of wood for the sacrificial pyre (v. 6). The pair exhibits perfect interior and exterior dispositions of model servants before their master.

Sarah is noticeably absent from Genesis 22; her name is neither mentioned nor is she present at any stage in the narrative. Her scant death notice in Gen. 23.2 raises more questions than it answers, and the reader ponders the reasons surrounding her departure from Beer-sheba and subsequent lonely death in Hebron (23.1-2). Phyllis Trible believes that patriarchy has denied Sarah her story by deliberately excluding her and glorifying Abraham.<sup>21</sup> Sarah's absence, however, empowers her more forcefully than if she had been present, and causes reader-listeners to reflect on Sarah's character and role not only in this narrative but in the entire Abrahamic cycle; consequently, her pres-

21. Phyllis Trible, "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah" in *Women in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Alice Bach; New York & London: Routledge, 1999), p. 286.

ence is brought more vividly alive in readers' imaginations. Through her deliberate exclusion, the author tricks readers into reflecting upon Sarah's presence or absence, participation or non-participation through an 'emphasis' on silence. Tribble's position fails to take account of this powerful literary tactic in bringing Sarah's presence alive in readers' imaginations. The narrator does not specify if Abraham told Sarah or contemplated telling her about the divine command. In the narrative, God neither commanded Abraham to tell Sarah nor to listen to her voice as he had done in Gen. 21.12. He knew, perhaps, that Sarah would remind Abraham of the divine words spoken in 21.12: 'through Isaac shall your seed be acclaimed'. Since the narrator neither recounts details of Sarah's emotions nor gives her a voice to speak, it is left to reader-listeners to imagine how she might have felt or reacted upon hearing the news of God's command. Some of the music discussed in later chapters includes or alludes to Sarah's participation in the near sacrifice of her only beloved son.

### *Narrative Structure*

The story in Gen. 22.1-19 is set in three acts and seven distinct scenes, and opens with a prologue and closes with an epilogue.<sup>22</sup> I have based this structure upon Fokkelman's theory of the organization of biblical scenes through character participation and their subsequent exits and entrances.<sup>23</sup> From close literary analysis, I have observed that each act is based around either a location or an event. Act 1, structured around Beersheba, comprises two scenes, the first taking place at night, and the second by day. Act 2 recounts Abraham's journey to the mysterious place and comprises two scenes, the first recounting the journey to the outskirts of the mysterious place, and the second, the mountain trek. Act 3 treats the sacrifice of Isaac in three scenes: the first records Abraham's preparations for the sacrifice; the second, the angel's first call to avert the sacrifice; and the third, the angel's second call and reiteration of the promises.

22. Commentators have grouped this narrative differently: Tribble divides it into three main sections: 22.1b-2, 3-10, 11-18. Cf. Phyllis Tribble, *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 272-79. Coats divides the plot in two parts: the Complication (vv. 1b-10) and Resolution (vv. 11-14). Cf. George W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Criticism*, p. 159. Brodie divides this narrative into five parts: Introduction 22.1-2; Trial vv. 3-10; Trial vv. 11-14; Blessing vv. 15-19; Conclusion vv. 20-24. cf. Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 271.

23. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, p. 96.

ACT	SCENE	LOCATION	CHARACTERS	VERSE
<b>PROLOGUE</b>	Announcement	Beersheba	Narrator's Voice	Gen. 22.1a
<b>ACT 1</b>	1. Night	Beersheba	1. God and Abraham	1b-2
	2. Morning		2. Abraham, the Two Servant Boys, Isaac	3a-b
<b>ACT 2</b>	1. Journey to the Place	Journey to the Mountain	1. Abraham, Isaac, Two Servants	3c-5
	2. The Mountain Trek		2. Abraham & Isaac	6-8
<b>ACT 3</b>	1. The Mountaintop Scene	Land of Moriah	1. Abraham and Isaac	9-10
	2. First Call		2. Abraham, Isaac, and the Angel	11-14
	3. Second Call		3. Abraham, Isaac, and the Angel/God	15-18
<b>EPILOGUE</b>	1. Return to Beersheba	Beersheba	1. Abraham and the Two Servant Boys	19
	2. Death of Sarah	Hebron	2. Sarah	23. 1-2

Fig. 2. Narrative Structure of Genesis 22.1–23.2.

Looking at Figure 2, one notices that at any one time two characters are actively involved in a scene and participate either in a dialogue or monologue;<sup>24</sup> other characters, such as the two servants and/or Isaac, who is active in one scene only (vv. 7-8), remain silent (vv. 3, 6, 9-14). For the entire story, Abraham remains dominant, appearing in every scene, as well as speaking the most words. The following chart (Fig. 3) illustrates this point:

24. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, p. 96.

CHARACTER/ NARRATOR	SPEECH	VERSE
Narrator	Narration	1a
God to Abraham Abraham to God	Dialogue	1b
God to Abraham	Monologue	2
Narrator	Narration	3-4
Abraham to Servants	Monologue	5
Narrator	Narration	6
Isaac to Abraham Abraham to Isaac	Dialogue	7-8
Narrator	Narration	9-10
Angel to Abraham Abraham to Angel	Dialogue	11-12
Narrator	Narration	13-15a
Angel-God to Abraham	Monologue	15b-18
Narrator	Narration	19

Fig. 3. *Speeches in Genesis 22.1-19.*

Figure 3 illustrates the monologues and dialogues that feature prominently in the discussion of the music to follow. In some works, librettists/composers elaborated on and at other times embellished the biblical text by inventing monologues and dialogues to enable characters to express emotion or to have a voice where previously they had none.

*Literary Analysis*

*Prologue*

In a rather abrupt opening to the story, within the prologue, the narrator informs the reader the purpose of the story: it is a test of Abraham (v. 1a). The narrator and reader are the only ones privy to this information; characters within the story are unaware that what is about to take place is ‘only’ a test of Abraham. At this point, the narrator provides no reason for the test, and it is left to readers’ imaginations to decipher

the meaning of the rather ambiguous transition formula<sup>25</sup> ‘after these things’ (v. 1a). If one reads the entire Abrahamic story as the backdrop to Genesis 22,<sup>26</sup> then one might consider any of the previous tests of Abraham as possible reasons for God’s command. As the narrative follows Ishmael’s sacrifice, the reader wonders if the stage is set for a ‘parallel Akedah’ of Abraham’s other son, Isaac (Fig. 4).<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 4. Nicolaes Maes, *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael* (1653). Gift of Mrs Edward Brayton, 1971. Photo credit: Image ©ARTstor Collection /The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

There is no significant reason for readers to fear for Isaac’s safety at this point, for as Coats points out, ‘the audience knows from the beginning that the subject of the story is limited to a depiction of Abraham’s faith’.<sup>28</sup> When the audience hears the divine command to Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, they know what Abraham does not know, that

25. Westermann notes that this transition formula occurs in 22.20; 39.7; 40.1; and 15.1. Cf. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1985), p. 356.

26. Laurence Turner, *Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 98.

27. I have taken the phrase ‘parallel Akedah’ from Curt Leviant, ‘Parallel Lives: The Trials and Traumas of Isaac and Ishmael’, *BR* (1999), pp. 20–25 (20).

28. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Criticism*, p. 158.

is, that God does not want Isaac to die. This information, which the narrator has 'kindly' shared with his readers, has emotionally involved them in the story.

### *Act 1*

#### *Scene 1: Night*

The biblical narrator does not state the location of the place where God appeared to Abraham (v. 1b) and refers only indirectly to the time of its occurrence (v. 3). However, one might infer from the information given that the biblical author set the first two scenes of Act 1 (vv. 1-3b) in the Abrahamic household<sup>29</sup> in Beersheba.<sup>30</sup> The first scene takes place at night<sup>31</sup> (vv. 1b-2), while the second occurs in the early hours of the morning of the next day (v. 3a-b). Scene 1 opens with a transitory section (v. 1b) that recounts the introductory conversation between God and Abraham prior to God's actual command (v. 2).<sup>32</sup> The call of Abraham by name is startling for reader-listeners, as this is the first recorded address by God of Abraham since his naming (Gen. 17.5). The repetition of Abraham's name continuously (vv. 1 [*bis*], 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 [*bis*], 13 [*bis*], 14, 15, 19 [*bis*]) is a literary device designed to evoke in readers' memories God's covenant with Abraham through his seed (Gen. 17.5-8).

In Gen. 22.1, the author focuses attention on the ethereal voice of God who, in the silence of the night, calls Abraham to attention. This is significant, since God regularly called upon Abraham (12.1-3; 15.1-21; 17.1-22; 18.1-33; 21.12-13), and as before, Abraham had no reason to be fear-

29. The biblical narrator specifies neither Abraham's whereabouts nor the time of the epiphany. We may infer from 22.3 that it happened in the middle of the night, since immediately after God's command in 22.2 the narrator informs the reader that Abraham arose early in the morning (22.3). If one is of the opinion that the epiphany had taken place in the middle of the night, one might also infer that Abraham was located in or around the family home for this occurrence.

30. Von Rad points out that Beersheba is 'the place' where Abraham starts his momentous journey (22.1) and to which he returns (22.19); he bases his opinion on the assumption that Abraham returned to the place from which he set out. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 238. The narrator fails to identify specific locations on three occasions: the location of Abraham's whereabouts in 22.1 as well as the specific location from which he sees the mysterious mountain in the distance 22.4, along with the location of the specific mountain in the Land of Moriah in 22.14. It is speculation to say that Abraham set out from Beersheba, although it appears to follow logically from 21.31-34.

31. Eugene Maly, 'Genesis', in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy; London: Chapman, 1968), p. 23. The biblical narrator does not specify if Abraham had a dream or not; however, Eugene Maly points out that E uses the medium of dreams to convey God's presence in other biblical narratives.

32. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, p. 115.

ful; ironically as the narrative unfolds (Gen. 22.12) Abraham will have to prove that he is indeed God-fearing. Abraham's 'courteous response to God's call',<sup>33</sup> echoed in his responses to his beloved son (v. 7) and to the angel (v. 11) reveal his resolute obedience to fulfil the requisites of God's command in all encounters, both human and divine. Surprisingly, although the nuance of seeing has received much attention by biblical commentators, the nuance of hearing has received very little, if any, to date. Abraham's ability to hear, and to listen attentively, enables him to understand God's commands. He listens carefully to God's call, to God's command to offer his beloved son as a sacrifice (v. 2), to Isaac's question (v. 7), to God's instruction about the location of sacrifice (v. 3), and to the first (v. 12) and second (vv. 15-18) calls of the angel of the Lord. In Sermon 41 from *Sermones super Cantica canticorum*, Bernard of Clairvaux states that hearing is a preparation for seeing; the ability to move toward vision is always preceded by an act of listening.<sup>34</sup> Faith comes first by hearing. In this way the biblical narrator focuses attention on the act of Abraham's ability to hear and to listen attentively as necessary first steps in coming to understand God's commands at the beginning and end of the biblical story. Artist Richard McBee has captured the moment of God's call to Abraham in a painting entitled *Abraham Hears God* (Fig. 5); he depicts this episode as having taken place in the Abrahamic household. Here Sarah remains sleeping by Abraham's side as news of Isaac's fate filters through. Seeing the scene depicted from a distance enables spectators to meditate on Abraham's great suffering following the revelation of God's terrifying command (Gen. 22.2). McBee captures not only the great silence of the night but the magnanimous voice of God, which pervaded that silence to change the lives of Abraham and Sarah forevermore.

In Gen. 22.2, God commands Abraham to take his son Isaac, his 'only one', whom he loves, and go to an unknown land at God's behest to offer him as a sacrifice. The divine command, according to Westermann, consists of three imperatives, which instruct Abraham to take, go, and then offer his child.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Berman<sup>36</sup> points out that God's command to Abraham is not a 'direct command', since it is preceded by the clause requesting Abraham to 'please/pray' take his son.<sup>37</sup> Brodie,

33. Speiser, *Genesis*, p. 162.

34. See Sermon 41 in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux 3: On the Song of Songs II* (trans. Kilian Walsh; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), pp. 205-206.

35. Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 357.

36. Louis Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997), p. 14.

37. Brodie lists other 'rare' biblical references where God says please: Gen. 13.14; 15.5; 13.12; Exod. 11.2. Cf. *Genesis as Dialogue*, p. 271.

citing Sacks and Hamilton, makes the point that the Hebrew 'please' is used 'in the sense of inviting someone to accept a gift'.<sup>38</sup> Contrary



Fig. 5. Richard McBee, *Abraham Hears God* (2008), 6" x 5".

From the series *Sarah's Trials* (2008).

Photo credit: © With the generous permission of Richard McBee.

to Berman and Brodie's analyses, Tribble understands the construction as a 'command of terror'. Every divine word (imperative, particle and object), according to Tribble, highlights the magnitude of the test:<sup>39</sup> Abraham took his son Isaac and his servant boys (v. 3), along with the sacrificial implements, the wood (vv. 3, 6), carried first by the donkey (v. 3) and then by Isaac (v. 6), the fire and cleaver (vv. 6, 10).

To the first command, 'take, pray, your son', the biblical author adds the Hebrew syntactic chain,<sup>40</sup> 'your only one, whom you love, Isaac' which according to Alter emphasizes the unique relationship between

38. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, p. 271.

39. Tribble, *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 272.

40. Alter, *Genesis*, p. 103.



father and son upon which the promise relies.<sup>41</sup> The reader knows that Isaac is not Abraham's 'only son', (vv. 2, 12, 16),<sup>42</sup> for in the preceding narrative in 21.14-21, his other son, Ishmael, was 'sacrificed' but survived the ordeal (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Hagar in the Wilderness* (1835). Rogers Fund, 1938. Photo credit: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

As the sole heir of his legitimate wife, Sarah, Isaac is Abraham's only one, or as Turner adds, 'his only one left'.<sup>43</sup> The biblical narrator emphasizes on three occasions that Isaac is indeed Abraham's only one (vv. 2, 12, 16). The point of tension in this clause emphasizes that the life of Isaac, as heir to the promise, is bound to the life and future of Abraham, now in jeopardy. For as the son depends on his father for life, so the father depends on his son and his descendants for a future life in name and nation. Alter, in citing Rashi, notes that the triplet in Gen. 22.2, 'take pray, your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac', echoes the triplet

41. Alter, *Genesis*, p. 103.

42. Matthews notes that the word *yehideka* is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to mourning an only son; see Jer. 6.26; Amos 8.10, and to mourning an only daughter, *yehida*, in Judg. 11.34. See Kenneth A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture. Genesis 11.27–50.26* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holdman, 2005), p. 290.

43. Turner, *Genesis*, p. 98.

in Gen. 12.2, 'your lands and your birthplace and your father's house'.<sup>44</sup> The triplet in 22.2 points to the intensity of Abraham's future bound up in his relationship with his son, the only son of the patriarchal couple. God's final test of Abraham commanded him to sacrifice his son and separate himself from a future life of promise embodied in the life of his beloved son Isaac.

In Gen. 22.2 the biblical text communicates to the reader Abraham's love of Isaac; significantly, this is the first time the verb 'to love' is mentioned in Genesis, *ait ei tolle filium tuum unigenitum quem diligis Isaac*. It is significant that the first use of this verb focuses on the love between a father and son rather than the love between a man and a woman. Tribble understands that this is where the crux of Abraham's problem lies, for the divine words to Abraham (v. 2) in Tribble's opinion suggests that Abraham idolized Isaac.<sup>45</sup> In his willingness to obey God, Abraham permanently relinquished his attachment to Isaac, and, consequently, the bonds of idolatry were broken. As evidence, Tribble points out that following the near sacrifice the biblical narrator did not record that Isaac accompanied his father down the mountain, and failed to recount that father and son ever spoke to one another again. The entire Abrahamic narrative up to this point, however, states the opposite, that is, that Abraham did not love Isaac enough, and appeared to love Ishmael more exclusively (21.11-12). Through the test, Abraham gradually realized the value of God's gift: that his future was bound up with Isaac, his child and heir. Through all the episodes of the near sacrifice, Isaac enabled Abraham to entrust his life and future unconditionally to God's call.<sup>46</sup> Contrary to Tribble's argument, Abraham's attachment to Isaac remained intact, and despite the silence of the biblical text, father and son resumed their loving relationship. The biblical story highlights Abraham's attachment to Isaac after the near sacrifice; five references in Genesis 24 explicitly refer to Abraham's acknowledgment of Isaac as 'my son' (vv. 3, 4, 6, 7, 8). Significantly in Gen. 25.5-6, Abraham acknowledges Isaac as his heir by bequeathing everything to him, and by sending rival sons by his concubines away from Isaac, to the Land of the East.

The second imperative instructs Abraham 'to go' to an unknown land to an unnamed mountain range,<sup>47</sup> *et vade in terram visionis . . . super unum montium quem monstravero tibi*. The Vulgate refers to the place as the Land of Vision, *terram visionis*. Traditional exegesis identifies

44. Alter, *Genesis*, p. 103.

45. Phyllis Tribble, *Hagar, Sarah and their Children: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 51.

46. Richard J. Clifford and Roland E. Murphy, 'Genesis', in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), pp. 8-43 (p. 25).

47. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, p. 266.

the unknown land with Jerusalem,<sup>48</sup> but the actual location remains in doubt, despite the fact that 2 Chron. 3.1 mentions Moriah with reference to Temple Hill.<sup>49</sup> The third imperative refers to the phrase 'offer him there as a holocaust', *atque offer eum ibi holocaustum*. Alter and Berman translate it as 'offer Isaac as a burnt offering', and Berman notes that God never actually commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac but instead commanded Abraham to bring Isaac to the mountain and to lay him upon the altar as a ritual offering, as though Abraham were to sacrifice him.<sup>50</sup> Alter translates God's injunction to Abraham to 'offer' Isaac as a burnt offering.<sup>51</sup> The biblical narrator omits references to Abraham's emotions and innermost thoughts; the silence of the biblical text thus ignites the emotional response of reader-listeners. Abraham, according to von Rad, is unaware that God is only testing him.<sup>52</sup> In general, librettists and composers filled in the gaps of the biblical story at this point by graphically describing in text and music Abraham's words, thoughts, and emotional responses to God's command.

### *Scene 2: Morning*

The second scene (vv. 3-4) opens either early in the morning, as in the Hebrew Bible, or as the Vulgate states, during the night, that is, before the light of dawn (*igitur Abraham de nocte consurgens*). Abraham's eagerness to obey God's command appears to be a motivating factor for the early morning preparation. Brodie points out that the scene of rising early echoes other early mornings, such as Sodom's destruction (Gen. 19.27) and the dismissal of Hagar (Gen. 21.14), references that point to bad omens.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, by remaining silent Abraham did not appeal to God to save Isaac's life as he had done previously for his other son, Ishmael (21.11), or for the people of Sodom (Gen. 18.23-33). Von Rad notes that the narrator refrains from giving readers any insight into Abraham's interior life as he reports only Abraham's external actions following the command he had received during the night.<sup>54</sup> It is left to the reader, according to Clifford and Murphy, to infer the father's feelings.<sup>55</sup> In those compositions that

48. Alter, *Genesis*, p. 104.

49. Moberly points out that elsewhere in the Old Testament the place name Mount of Yahweh refers more than likely to Jerusalem: see Ps. 24.3; Isa. 2.3; Zech. 8.3. Cf. R.W.L. Moberly, *Christ as the Key to Scripture* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994), p. 158. In the music, librettists retained the place name Moriah because of its associations with Christ's passion and death in Jerusalem.

50. Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac*, p. 14.

51. Alter, *Genesis*, p. 103.

52. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 244.

53. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, p. 267.

54. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 240.

55. Clifford and Murphy, 'Genesis', p. 25.

describe Abraham's emotional responses, composers used a variety of musical rhetorical devices to sound-paint the patriarch's thoughts and feelings at this point.

The narrator highlights Abraham's deliberate and methodical preparation for the sacrifice: 'he arose early', 'saddled his donkey', 'took his lads', and 'split wood', 'arose' and 'went'. The inclusion of animals in the story, that is, the donkey and the ram, is significant, for their presence echoes man's dominion of the animals in Gen. 1.28; the donkey in this story is subservient to his master as he carries the load of sacrificial wood for Isaac's funeral pyre. As subject, the donkey's actions (Gen. 22.3) prefigure the actions of Isaac, who carries the wood for his sacrificial pyre (v. 6); Abraham's actions toward the donkey prefigure the actions done by Abraham to Isaac: in the same way he saddles<sup>56</sup> the animal (v. 3), he binds Isaac for the sacrifice (v. 9). The biblical author placed the verbs 'to saddle' and 'to split' proleptically to prefigure Isaac's binding and slaying on the mountain. At this point in the story, three other characters arrive on the scene, Abraham's two young servants, and his son Isaac. The biblical narrator refrains from mentioning Isaac's emotions or the emotions of the two servants: there is no reason to mention it, unless, of course, Isaac and/or the servants know what the reader knows already. In music some librettists and composers filled in a gap at this point by recounting the emotional responses of Isaac following the revelation of his fate.

## *Act 2*

### *Scene 1: Journey to 'the Place'*

This scene (vv. 3c-5) recounts the journey to the outskirts of the designated place known only to God, the narrator and Abraham (v. 3c), and the reader wonders if Abraham is in possession of any other secret knowledge. The narrator does not record what had taken place during the three-day journey, or the conversations the characters might have had. Westermann points out that 'three days' is the usual length of preparatory time for important events in the OT (Gen. 34.25; 40.20; 42.18).<sup>57</sup> In this episode the author accelerates the time to the third day, and by way of contrast, on Abraham's arrival to the outskirts of the place, slows the tempo down to allow the readers to focus attention on the object of Abraham's sight, the 'place' in the distance, which they now visualize in their imaginations. Abraham's monologue to the youths in v. 5, according to Coats, foreshadows the good news of the story's climax.

56. The verb 'to bind' is used in many different ways in the MT; it can refer to the fastening of the girth around the body of a donkey (Num. 22.21; Judg. 19.10); it can also refer to the restoration of the body resulting from the binding of fractures (Ezek. 30.21).

57. Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 358.

The reader wonders if the phrase 'let us worship and return to you' is an expression of Abraham's evasiveness or a true expression of his faith. This is the first use of the verb 'worship' in the Bible, meaning 'to bow down', and implies that Abraham and Isaac would bow down in word and action to the Lord God. As noted previously, librettists down through the ages generally omitted references to the servants, and for reasons discussed later, omitted Abraham's monologue to them.

### *Scene 2: The Mountain Trek*

The last stage of the fateful journey is done alone by father and son. Von Rad notes that the tempo of the narrative has slowed down considerably.<sup>58</sup> The narrator conveys to reader-listeners Abraham's attentive love for his child by pointing out that Abraham carries the dangerous objects, the fire and cleaver. Isaac is old enough to bear the burden for his sacrificial pyre.<sup>59</sup> Down through the ages, artists have illustrated this poignant scene; in one such painting entitled *Abraham and Isaac* by Johann Heinrich Ferdinand Olivier, the spectator observes the child Isaac carrying the wood while his aged father walks alongside carrying the fire and cleaver (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Johann Heinrich Ferdinand Olivier, *Abraham and Isaac* (1817).  
Photo credit: © National Gallery of London.

58. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 240.

59. Speiser, *Genesis*, p. 164.

Then father and son set off on their ‘melancholy pilgrimage’, ‘and the two of them went together’, ‘the short and simple sentence’, according to Speiser, covers what is perhaps the most poignant of all literature.<sup>60</sup> In music Josef Mysliveček depicted this scene in an instrumental in the oratorio *Abramo ed Isacco*, and in art it was illustrated on numerous occasions, on one such occasion by Gaspard Dughet in *Landscape with Abraham and Isaac Approaching the Place of Sacrifice* (1665); here the spectator observes the poignant scene of the father and son ascending the mount in the far off distance.



Fig. 8. Gaspard Dughet, *Landscape with Abraham and Isaac Approaching the Place of Sacrifice* (1665). Photo credit: © National Gallery of London.

At this significant point in the narrative, the only recorded dialogue between Isaac and Abraham occurs, and it is initiated by Isaac, who breaks the silence (v. 7) by referring to his father affectionately as ‘my father’. Abraham replies ‘my son’; the possessive vocative signifies a mark of great tenderness, according to Tribble.<sup>61</sup> Bauks notes that Abraham’s reply has a double reference, since the Hebrew *b’ni* can represent either a vocative or a complement whose purpose is to clarify the object

60. Speiser, *Genesis*, p. 164.

61. Tribble, *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 275.

of sacrifice; if understood as a complement, Abraham's remark could mean, 'it is you, my son'.<sup>62</sup>

The dialogue between Abraham and Isaac (vv. 7-8) consists of a question and an answer. Fokkelman regards Isaac's question as a very good example of dramatic irony,<sup>63</sup> for here, Isaac speaks the truth in innocence but is unaware of what he is saying, and the reader recognizes this fact. Alter points out that in his question, Isaac omits the reference to the cleaver, the object that might have seemed 'scariest' to him;<sup>64</sup> the knife described in this verse would have been used to dismember sacrificial animals;<sup>65</sup> the noun appears twice in this story (vv. 6, 10). Isaac's seemingly innocent question evokes a sympathetic response in the audience who knows what Isaac now appears to know. Whereas the omission of this object from Isaac's speech in the biblical story increases the dramatic tension of the scene, its inclusion in the music enabled composers to sound-paint Isaac's terrifying observation.

Von Rad notes that Abraham's answer to Isaac, while ambiguous, contains a truth that Abraham is not yet aware of. It is possible, however, that Abraham's words are those of a prophet (20.7), and that his testimony to his servants is a sign of his belief in God's promise (21.12). The ambiguity to which von Rad refers is interesting, for the reader cannot help but wonder if Abraham's answer is yet another example of his evasion (22.5) or an attempt to deceive Isaac. Abraham's reputation in the past reveals him to have been guilty of acts of deception (sister-wife episodes: Gen. 12.10-20; 20.1-18); readers wonder if Abraham attempted to deceive the servant boys for fear they would obstruct the sacrifice.

### *Act 3*

#### *Scene 1: The Mountaintop*

The dialogue is over and silence pervades once again as the narrator recounts Abraham's preparatory actions with 'frightful accuracy'.<sup>66</sup> This sequence, according to Alter, is set in slow motion, with the preparation for the sacrifice once again taking place.<sup>67</sup> By way of contrast, Coats

62. Michaela Bauks, 'The Theological Implications of Child Sacrifice in and beyond the Biblical Context in Relation to Genesis 22 and Judges 11', in *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (ed. Karin Finsterbusch, K.F. Armin Lange and Diethard Römheld; Leiden Boston: Brill, 2007), p. 70.

63. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in the Bible* p. 125.

64. Alter, *Genesis*, p. 105.

65. Cf. Judg. 19.29; Prov. 30.17.

66. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 241.

67. Alter, *Genesis*, p. 105.

records that Abraham carries out the task with 'rapid strokes'.<sup>68</sup> The author does not specify if Isaac resisted or consented to his fate, whether he asked Abraham to bind him or not. Isaac appears to carry out his father's will in silent submission; unlike Ishmael, Isaac neither cries out in desperation (21.17), nor pleads with his father for mercy; there is no record of any emotion or any reference to Isaac's mother, Sarah. This scene enjoyed a variety of treatments in the music with some librettists-composers passing over Abraham's ritual preparations, and others maximizing its potential by filling in the gaps with terrifying imaginary details.

### *Scene 2: First Call of the Angel*

The tempo of the narrative slows down at the point of the descriptive pause (22.10) to enable readers to visualize Abraham holding the knife in readiness to kill Isaac. At this point, the angel intercedes to stay Abraham's hand from slaughtering Isaac by calling him with an urgent tone conveyed through the double name call, Abraham! Abraham! (v. 11). Westermann points out that the call, which had bowed Abraham down in grief, now resounds with the news of joy in v. 11b,<sup>69</sup> except that the narrator does not recount Abraham rejoicing or record any emotion at the scene, no words or actions to express affection, gratitude or relief. Many composers echo the descriptive pause of the biblical story in their music through a deceleration of musical tempo, and in the aftermath of the sacrifice some highlight Abraham and Isaac's joy upon hearing the angel's good news.

In the painting entitled *Abraham Preparing to Sacrifice Isaac* by William Blake (Fig. 9), Abraham holds his son in a loose embrace as he listens to the angel's injunction to avert the sacrifice. Abraham's long arms and large hands stand out to emphasize the angel's words not to harm the boy in any way.

Trible notes that the two prohibitions of the angel remove terror and relieve suspense: the first forbids Abraham to lift his hand against the boy, the second to do nothing to him.<sup>70</sup> The narrative illustrates that Abraham is bound to Isaac through God's promise. If God is to bind himself in covenant, Abraham must realize that he is bound to this covenant through Isaac, for without Isaac there can be no hope of a future. Abraham passed the test, since he was willing to return the gift of Isaac to God, and in so doing, proved himself to be God-fearing (v. 12).

68. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Criticism*, p. 160.

69. Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 361.

70. Tribble, *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 277.





Fig. 9. William Blake, *Abraham Preparing to Sacrifice Isaac* (Gen. 22.9-12) (c. 1783). Photo credit: © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Without any divine directive, Abraham completes the sacrifice by offering a ram as a substitute in place of Isaac (v. 13). The Vulgate states that when Abraham raised his eyes he saw a ram behind his back, clinging by its horns amid the thorn bushes (v. 13):

*levavit Abraham oculos viditque post tergum arietem inter vepres  
herentem cornibus.*

Following this action, Abraham names the place *Yhwh-yireh*, *Dominus videt* (v. 14). Whybray points out that this place name echoes Abraham's reply to Isaac's question in 22.8.<sup>71</sup> The place name refers also to Abraham's seeing, which, according to Brodie, reflects the seeing of God.<sup>72</sup> Seeing is a key concept in Gen. 22.1-19, woven into the narrative on a number of levels: the name of the 'place' – *Yhwh* sees; to the patriarch Abraham who sees visually and metaphorically; and to God who sees and is seen. Music from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries based on the Vulgate in general points to a christological understanding of the narrative; in Josef Mysliveček's oratorio *Abramo ed Isacco*, for example, Abraham sees a vision of Christ on the cross.

71. R.N. Whybray, 'Genesis', in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (ed. John Barton and John Muddiman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 54.

72. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, p. 273.



Fig. 10. *Ram in a Thicket*. From Ur, southern Iraq, about 2600–2400 BCE. Photo credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Jonathan Magonet points out that Abraham is ‘an anti-model, and can never be a model for the faithful; for what he did once should never be repeated’.<sup>73</sup> Magonet’s proposition highlights the difficulty posed by Genesis 22 on the one hand, the binding of Isaac is a monstrous story, on the other, Abraham proved his obedience by listening to the angel’s injunction to avert the sacrifice. The biblical narrator passes no moral judgment on any aspect of this story, and it is left to reader-listeners to ponder on their own the moral issues involved. Librettists and composers down through the centuries have attempted to explain the theological and/or moral significance of this narrative, and in so doing have either sanitized and/or emphasized various aspects of the story to suit a particular context and/or audience. In particular, compositions from the twentieth century have highlighted the violence of God’s command, of Abraham’s near and actual killing of Isaac, and of the effect of God’s command on Sarah and Isaac.

### *Scene 3: Second Call of the Angel/God’s Speech*

Matthews points out that the second call from heaven (v. 15) emphasizes the importance of the event.<sup>74</sup> Yet despite this observation, Walter Moberly has noted that the ‘second divine call’ rarely receives atten-

73. Jonathan Magonet, *Bible Lives* (London: SCM Press, 1992), p. 32.

74. Matthews, *The New American Commentary*, p. 296.

tion in commentaries.<sup>75</sup> This observation could also apply to its non-inclusion in artistic representations and to its occasional inclusion in music. Most art works depicting the binding of Isaac highlight only the first call by the Angel to avert the sacrifice (see Figs. 22 and 23).<sup>76</sup> In the biblical story, God significantly reaffirms his words of blessing and promise by swearing an oath to Abraham (v. 16). This promise appears in a rare form of oath.<sup>77</sup> And the oath, remembered by Israel as the basis of the divine blessing of future generations,<sup>78</sup> is the only place in Genesis where God swears by himself in the first person; other such occurrences are limited to the prophets, namely, Isa. 45.23 and Jer. 22.5; 49.13.<sup>79</sup> Moberly points out that the blessing is spelled out in three ways:<sup>80</sup> first, Abraham's descendants will become as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sand of the seashore (22.17a); the angel does not direct this blessing to Abraham personally, but significantly to Isaac and his descendants. Second, Abraham's descendants will have dominion over their enemies (22.17b). The third part of the promise (22.18), according to Moberly, is a reiteration of the initial promise to Abraham in 12.3b.

### *Epilogue*

#### *(a) The Return Journey to Beersheba*

In the so-called happy ending (v. 19), the biblical author neither mentions Isaac's name after the near sacrifice nor indicates his return journey to Beersheba with his father and the servant boys. There is no audible sound of rejoicing.<sup>81</sup> Some of the music discussed in later chapters, however, offers an alternative ending to the one told by the biblical narrator and includes a duet for Abraham and Isaac, which is sung as a joyful song to a dance rhythm.

#### *(b) Death of Sarah*

Genesis 23.2 recounts that Sarah died in Hebron. The biblical narrator refrains from telling reader-listeners the motivation for her departure

75. R.W.L. Moberly, 'The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah', *VT* 38.3 (1988), pp. 302-23 (302).

76. *The Sacrifice of Isaac*: Caravaggio (1603, Uffizi, Florence); Rembrandt (1636, Hermitage, St Petersburg); Ghiberti and Brunelleschi in the competition panels for the doors of the Florence Baptistery (1401).

77. Matthews, *The New American Commentary*, p. 297.

78. Gen. 26.3; Exod. 33.1; Num. 23; 32.11; Deut. 1.35; 7.8; 10.11; 34.4; Josh. 1.6; Judg. 2.1; Jer. 11.5.

79. Matthews, *The New American Commentary*, pp. 297-98.

80. R.W.L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 120-21.

81. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 242.

from Beersheba, where she lived previously with Abraham. Neither are they told if Isaac returned to his mother in the aftermath of the near sacrifice or if he attended her funeral with his father, Abraham. This emphasis on silence is a cause for reader-listeners to ponder the extent of Sarah's knowledge of and consent to God's command, whether or not she agreed to the sacrifice of her only beloved son, and the impact of that agreement or otherwise on her relationship with Abraham.



Fig. 11. Richard McBee, *Mourning* (2009), 24" x 20".

Photo credit: © With the generous permission of Richard McBee.

The words of an Irish lament written by Irish harper Turlough O'Carolan (Toirealach Ó Cearbhalláin) (1670–1738), come to mind as I reflect on Sarah's death, so poignantly depicted by Richard McBee in a painting entitled *Mourning*. O'Carolan had written this lament, *The Parting of Companions* (called also *Fearthlaoi*), to commemorate the death of one of his greatest friends, Charles McCabe.<sup>82</sup> It recounts the loss felt by O'Carolan, as he wept bitterly by McCabe's graveside, remembering the

82. I am very grateful to Professor Seán Ó Coileáin, Professor Emeritus of Modern Irish at University College Cork, for providing me with his translation of this poem,

long journey travelled together. The lyrics state that despite the small size of the tombstone, its size could never be a measure of the pair's friendship. This lament could speak equally of Abraham's grief over the loss of his beloved Sarah:

Is trua sin mise agus mé atuirseach i ndéidh mo shiúil,  
 Ar liag mo charad agus do mharbh sin radharc mo shúl,  
 Is é fuair mé agam agus mé ag folcadh na ndéar go húir,  
 Caoil-leac dhaingean agus leaba dhen chré bhí cúng.  
 Ní tréan mé ag labhairt, agus ní mheasaim gur cúis náire,  
 Is éan bocht scaite mé ó chaill mé mo chúl báire;  
 Níl péin,  
 níl peannaid,  
 níl galra chomh  
 tromchráite  
 Le héag na gcarad,  
 nó scaradh na gcompánach.

Pity me worn out at the end of my journey,  
 On the gravestone of my friend, a sight that has blinded my eyes;  
 What I found before me, as my tears poured to the ground,  
 Was a thin, firmly fixed flag and a narrow earthen bed.  
 I can scarcely speak – and I deem it no shame –  
 I am a poor lone bird since I have lost my defender;  
 There is no pain,  
 no affliction,  
 no disease so tormenting  
 As the death of friends  
 and the leave-taking of companions.

## 2

### THE RECEPTION OF GENESIS 22 IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Although the narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac is mentioned only briefly in the New Testament, it is a story that features prominently in Christian tradition in the writings of the church fathers as well as in visual culture, especially from the third century CE up to the present day in fresco, stone, glass, jewellery, illuminated manuscripts, paintings, tapestry, textiles, and furniture, among other artefacts. It only gained popularity in Western art music in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the Liturgy of the Word, this narrative features as one of the Old Testament readings at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night, and in Roman Catholicism, it features as the Old Testament reading for the day on the second Sunday of Lent in Year B of the three-year cycle. Although Isaac is presented as a type of Christ, the primacy of Abraham is very much in evidence in the liturgy, the homiletic writings of the church fathers and in the narrative's reception in visual and aural culture.

In the Catholic liturgy, reference to the near sacrifice features in the Canon of the Mass in Eucharistic Prayer no. 1, that is, in the Oblation/Offering after the Anamnesis: 'Look with favour on these offerings as once you accepted the gifts of your servant Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and the bread and wine offered by your priest Melchizedek'; there is a reference also in the thirteenth-century Corpus Christi sequence *Lauda Sion Salvatorem, In figures praesignatur, cum Isaac immolatur*. In the Offertory of the Mass for the Dead, *Missa pro defunctis*, the promises given to Abraham in the aftermath of the near sacrifice are alluded to in the following prayer: 'O Lord, may the holy standard-bearer Michael introduce them to the holy light which thou didst promise of old to Abraham . . .'. The promises are recalled in the *Magnificat* (Lk. 1.55) from the Liturgy of the Hours: at Vespers in Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism, Evensong in Anglicanism, and Sunday Matins in the Eastern Orthodox Church. The promises are also remembered in a prayer for the dead from the Roman Catholic Rite of Funerals: 'Let him/her pass unharmed through the gates of death to dwell with the blessed light, as you promised to Abraham and his children forever'. There are numerous musical settings of the *Offertorium* from the Req-

uiem Mass, one of which I discuss in Chapter 7, and countless settings of the *Magnificat*, too numerous to recount in this volume.

While there is no feast day set aside for Isaac, Abraham is commemorated in the liturgical calendars of many Christian Churches. For example, in Roman Catholicism where the feast day is celebrated on 9 October, the entry in the *Martyrologium romanum* presents Abraham as a man of great faith who 'did not refuse to offer in sacrifice his only son Isaac, whom the Lord had granted him when he was already old and his wife was sterile'. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this narrative featured prominently in oratorios, where it came to be regarded by many as a Roman Catholic text. While there are very few, if any, significant settings in the nineteenth century, by the twentieth century its reception in music gained prominence once again in two compositions by Anglican composer Benjamin Britten. This chapter briefly outlines the reception of the biblical story in Christian tradition, and in doing so sets the context for the music to follow in Part II.

### *New Testament: Abraham's Steadfast Faith*

New Testament exegeses on Genesis 22 influenced the reception of the biblical story in Western art music from the seventeenth century, and emphasized Abraham's steadfast faith in God: direct references to Genesis 22 are found in Jas. 2.21,<sup>1</sup> Heb. 11.17-19, and Heb. 6.13-19, while other references<sup>2</sup> reflect textual influences possibly stemming from Genesis 22. Of the direct references, the focus of attention in the epistle to James (James 2) centres primarily on the person of Abraham and his faith in God, rather than the person of Isaac and his willingness to become the sacrificial victim. With two exceptions, the focus of attention in most of the music surveyed centres primarily on Abraham's act of faith rather than the ritual near sacrifice of Isaac. James 2.21 refers to Abraham as 'Abraham our Father', a title most likely borrowed from Jewish tradition to emphasize Abraham's universal appeal to all believers, especially to those Jewish Christians for whom the letter had been written. The author used the example of Abraham's faith and good works from Genesis 22 to emphasize the central tenet of his letter that faith without good works is dead (Jas. 2.17, 24). Such was the perfection

1. This letter is one of seven known as the Catholic Epistles, 'catholic' meaning universal, and composed for the church at large. However, that being said, this letter was important for Roman Catholics during the Counter-Reformation. It was accepted as canonical from the second century onward and attributed to St James, the son of Clophas and Mary, cousin to Mary, mother of Christ. The author of this letter is commonly known as James the Less as well as the brother of the Lord. James was a prominent leader of the Jerusalem Church.

2. Rom. 3.24-25; 8.32; Jn 3.16; and Mk 1.11.

of Abraham's faith and obedience that he became justified in God's sight to become 'the friend of God' (v. 23).<sup>3</sup> The author of James highlights the universal significance of Abraham's example by stating that justification is available to those whose faith is accompanied by good works (v. 26). Luther dismissed this letter as an 'Epistle of Straw'<sup>4</sup> because it explicitly contravened his doctrine of justification by faith alone, *sola fide*. While there is no direct reference to Jas. 2.21 in any of my detailed discussions of music, it is music from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in particular that reflects this interpretation. In the Metastasian libretto, for example, Sarah's speech at the end highlights the importance of combining faith in God with good works.

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews lists Abraham's act of offering Isaac as a sacrificial victim (Heb. 11.17-18) in a catalogue of acts by other Old Testament characters who lived a life of faith, trusting in God's promise. Wilken notes that the accent in this letter is on Abraham's faith rather than Isaac's sacrificial offering.<sup>5</sup> While this is true, the biblical author acknowledges the pivotal role played by Isaac as the Son of the Promise on three occasions (vv. 17-19). In v. 19 the author makes an implicit christological parallel, pointing to Christ's resurrection, and states that Abraham was confident God had the power to raise the dead. This implies that Abraham was certain God would have resurrected Isaac had he been killed as a sacrificial offering. Since God had spared Isaac's life at the last moment, it was as though Isaac had been resurrected from the dead; in this way, Isaac's deliverance from death foreshadowed Christ's actual passion, death and resurrection. This interpretation is reflected at the end of the Metastasian libretto when Sarah alludes to Isaac's 'resurrection' upon seeing her son alive, having believed he was dead.

The other direct reference to Genesis 22 is found in Heb. 6.13-14, where the author speaks of the hope God had given Abraham when he confirmed by oath his promise of numerous descendants who would inherit the cities of their enemies and be a source of blessing to all nations (Gen. 22.16-18). Interestingly, Metastasio included a footnote with this reference to emphasize the hope God's promise would bring to Catholics. In the spirit of the Counter-Reformation, Metastasio appropriated this reference, on the one hand, to promote the political agenda of the Holy Roman Emperor, and on the other, to justify Catholic aggression in the war against Protestantism. As a sub-text, he equated the person

3. This title is found also in Isa. 41.8.

4. Luther referred to the Letter of James as an 'Epistle of Straw' at the close of his *Preface to the New Testament* 1522; later editions omitted this comment.

5. Robert L. Wilken, 'Melito, the Jewish Community at Sardis, and the Sacrifice of Isaac', *TS* 37.1 (1976), pp. 53-69 (53).



and actions of Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI (1685–1740) with Abraham, as the Father of all Nations, the Friend of God, the faithful and obedient servant, and a model of perfection for all to emulate. Furthermore, Metastasio equated Catholics with the Chosen People of Israel, and Protestants as the enemy. In this way, he used the text of Heb. 6.13–14 as propaganda to suggest that Catholic audiences were the Chosen People, and they, too, would become a blessing to all nations.

In the twentieth century, Benjamin Britten and Judith Lang Zaimont, who both based their texts partly on Wilfred Owen's 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young', subverted the message of hope found in this New Testament passage. Britten's reception of the story in the *Offertorium* enlarges the horizon of listeners' expectation to highlight the hopelessness brought about by humanity's refusal to listen to God's word. Unlike the authors of Jas. 2.21 and Hebrews 11, Zaimont's refiguration of Genesis 22 focuses primarily on Isaac's ritual sacrifice and death at his father's hands, and the sense of hopelessness and utter senselessness brought about by Abraham's murderous act.

Of the indirect references, the language of Rom. 3.24–25; 8.32; Jn 3.16 and Mk 1.11 show a possible reliance on the language of Genesis 22. In particular, terminology relating to the beloved son in Jn 3.16 and Mk 1.11, along with the language of Rom. 3.24–25 and 8.32, reflect the sacrificial terminology associated with Isaac's sacrifice (Gen. 22.2). With the exception of those compositions based on the Wilfred Owen poem, many librettists/composers incorporated terminology relating to the beloved son (Gen. 22.2). Wilken points out that St Paul makes no explicit christological parallels between Isaac's near sacrifice and Christ's actual sacrifice on the Cross.<sup>6</sup>

Sarah's knowledge of and/or consent to the sacrifice of Isaac is not commented upon in the New Testament, and while her forename is not mentioned by Paul, he refers to her in Gal. 4.21–31 as the mother of Isaac and the mother of all people born in Christ. In this allegory, Paul compares Sarah the free woman to the new covenant in Christ, and Hagar the slave to the old Mosaic covenant of the Law. Those born in Christ are like Isaac, for they too are children of the promise (v. 28), born according to the Spirit who, unlike Ishmael, was born of the flesh (v. 23a). For Paul, Sarah the free woman is the mother of those born in Christ (v. 31).

### *Early Christian Art*

While there are no extant musical interpretations of the narrative from the early centuries, its reception is evident in early Christian art from the

6. Wilken, 'Melito, the Jewish Community at Sardis, and the Sacrifice of Isaac', p. 90.

third century CE; during this time artists focused more on Isaac's deliverance and less on explicit christological parallels with Christ's passion and death. In catacomb art, for example, the theme of deliverance resonated with early Christian martyrs who suffered persecution at the hands of Roman authorities; the promise of eternal life provided them with hope for a new life beyond the grave and a deliverance from suffering, torture and death. Funerary art from the fourth century CE reflects the beginnings of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire with marble sarcophagi from this period depicting images of Abraham and Isaac in Roman attire. The sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (d. 359) is probably one of the best-known pieces of early Christian relief sculpture, but there are other noteworthy examples that I include here: the first, a column sarcophagus, dating from around the mid-fourth century, depicts three-dimensional scenes from the Old and New Testaments with a relief of the sacrifice of Isaac on the left. Abraham's head, along with the heads of other notable biblical characters, has been removed, along with Abraham's knife from his right hand, but the head of Isaac, depicted as a child, remains intact (Fig. 12). Isaac kneels with his back facing the altar with his hands bound behind his back. The hand of God, seen in the left-hand corner, along with another figure to Abraham's right, an angel whose head has been removed, averts the sacrifice as the lamb waits patiently on an altar of briars (Gen. 22.10-12). Depictions of other biblical scenes to the right illustrate the theme of deliverance from death (no. 1) danger, hunger (no. 3) and thirst (no. 4).



Fig. 12. *Column sarcophagus with scenes from the Old and New Testaments*: [L-R] sacrifice of Isaac; Moses and Aaron (?); Christ feeding the multitude; Adam and Eve; Moses striking water from the rock. Museo Arqueológico Cordoba, Spain. Photo credit: © With the generous permission of AICT/Allan T. Kohl.

The second example (Fig. 13), taken from a marble sarcophagus from the Vatican necropolis, depicts the hand of God/angel to the right of an oversized Abraham who, dressed like a Roman official, stands with a large knife in his right hand beside Isaac; depicted as a young child, Isaac's hands are bound behind his back. The pair looks

to the left perhaps to see the ram caught in the thicket. A third example from a fragment of a relief from a sixth century CE marble banister of an ambo (Fig. 14) illustrates Abraham at the climactic point of the near sacrifice (Gen. 22.10-12); Abraham turns around and looks up at a disembodied hand as the child Isaac whose hands are tied behind his back kneels on the altar and turns to see his father listening attentively to the voice of God/angel. This illustration emphasizes the themes of hearing and seeing from the biblical story. The faggots to the right of the altar remind spectators of the holocaust in the aftermath of the ritual killing.

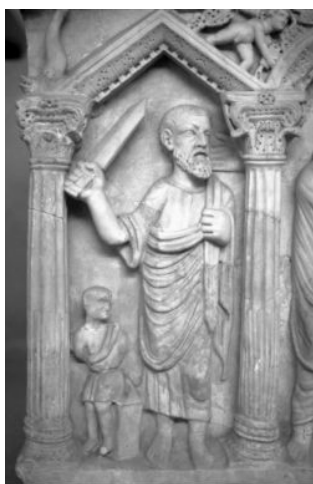


Fig. 13 (left). *Sarcophagus* from the Vatican Necropolis with scenes from the Old and New Testaments: sacrifice of Isaac, detail of first [far left] niche panel, mid-fourth century CE. Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican, Rome.

Photo credit: © With the generous permission of AICT/Allan T. Kohl.

Fig. 14 (right). *Abraham and Isaac*. Fragment of relief from marble banister of an ambo, sixth century CE. Byzantine, Ephesus Museum, Selcuk Turkey.

Photo credit: © With the generous permission of AICT/Allan T. Kohl.

There are other interesting funerary artefacts that incorporate the theme of Isaac's sacrifice: for example, a glass bowl fragment from ca. the fourth century CE (Fig. 15), found in a grave at St Severin in Cologne, Germany, illustrates the scene along with other subject matter deriving mainly from the Old Testament to highlight the theme of deliverance, most notably in scenes from the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.10-12) (bottom), Daniel in the lion's den (Dan. 6.16-22), and the fiery furnace (Daniel 3) among others.

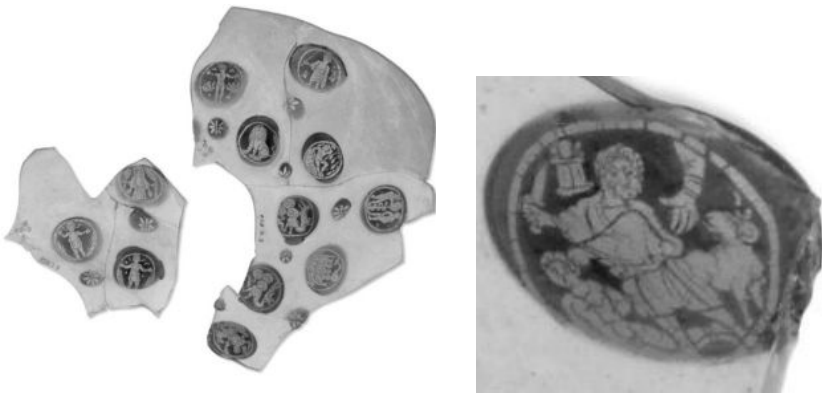


Fig. 15. *Fragment of a glass bowl with biblical scenes, late fourth century CE. Found in Cologne, Germany. Photo credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum.*

These themes were also depicted on Irish High Crosses, that is, Scripture Crosses, from the ninth–twelfth centuries CE, known also as the Golden Age of Irish art. High Crosses (Figs. 16 and 17) were constructed primarily as visual aids to teach Bible stories and Christian doctrine to a largely illiterate populace. Originating from the ninth century CE, the Tall Cross from Monasterboice, Co. Louth is one of the tallest High Crosses in Ireland, constructed in sandstone and standing 6.45 metres high. Figure 16 illustrates details of the shaft relief from the east face, with a depiction at the top of Samson destroying the Temple of Dagon (Judg. 16.25–30), David anointed by Samuel (1 Sam. 16.13), Moses striking water from the rock and at the bottom (Num. 20.11), the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.10–12); the centrepiece illustrates either David acclaimed as King of Israel (2 Sam. 5.3) or Christ in majestic glory (Jude 1.25; Heb. 1.3; Rev. 11.15; 17.14; 19.16). The west face details New Testament scenes representing the baptism of Christ (Matt. 3.13–17; Mk 1.9–11; Lk. 3.21–22; Jn 1.29–33), the crucifixion and resurrection, and in the centre, an unusual depiction of a fully clothed crucified Christ. Old Testament scenes on the east face point specifically to Christ's resurrection.

The Moone Cross, located in Co. Kildare, is the second tallest high cross in Ireland; it was constructed in the ninth century CE from granite. As on other High Crosses, the themes of deliverance and typology are featured through depictions of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3), the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.10–12), and Daniel in the lions' den (Dan. 6.16–22) among others (Fig. 18). The base of the west face depicts the twelve Apostles with various scenes of the crucifixion above. The panel of the sacrifice of



Fig. 16 (left). *West Cross* (Tall Cross), east face, detail of shaft reliefs: [T] Samson destroying the Temple of Dagon; [TC] David with the head of Goliath and David anointed by Samuel; [BC] Moses strikes water from the rock; [B] Sacrifice of Isaac. Monasterboice. Photo credit: © With the generous permission of AICT/Allan T. Kohl.

Fig. 17 (right). *West Cross* (Tall Cross), east face, detail of shaft relief: Sacrifice of Isaac. Monasterboice. Photo credit: © With the generous permission of AICT/Allan T. Kohl.

Isaac (Fig. 19) illustrates Abraham sitting on a throne in readiness to kill Isaac, who by now is aware of his fate; the image of the ram, whose body curves around the contours of Isaac's body, points to a double typology, as Isaac and the ram are each represented as a type of Christ.



Fig. 18 (left). *Moone High Cross*. Photo credit: © Megalithic Ireland, with the generous permission of Jim Dempsey.

Fig. 19 (right). *High Cross (Tall Cross)*, east face, detail of base reliefs: [T] Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; [M] sacrifice of Isaac; [B] Daniel in the lion pit, c. ninth century. Moone. Photo credit: © With the generous permission of AICT / Allan T. Kohl.

*The Fathers of the Church:  
A Christological Interpretation of Genesis 22*

A christological interpretation of Genesis 22 by the Fathers of the Church influenced the story's reception in music in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as in painting up to and beyond this time. In their writings they deal with issues such as Isaac's age in order to determine his degree of knowledge and consent to God's command, Abraham's emotional distress to illustrate his role as a loving father, the issue of Sarah's knowledge and consent to the sacrifice of her only

beloved son, and the role of the ram in the story. One of the earliest writers to make a parallel between Isaac and Christ was the author of the theological tract, the *Letter of Barnabas*.

Furthermore, when he was crucified he was given gall and sour wine to drink. Hear how the priests of the Temple foretold this. A commandment was written: 'Whoever does not fast the fast will be exterminated in death'. The Lord commanded this because he himself was about to offer the vessel of his spirit as a sacrifice for our sins, so that the type established in Isaac, who was offered on the altar, might be fulfilled (7.3).<sup>7</sup>

### *Isaac's Age*

The Fathers referenced by Metastasio understood Isaac was either a child or a youth but not yet a man as in Jewish tradition. Gregory of Nyssa suggested he was old enough for marriage,<sup>8</sup> a view reflected in Abraham's hypothetical speech from *De deitate*. Isaac's age had a christological significance for 'the near sacrifice of Isaac-the-boy was fulfilled by the actual sacrifice of Christ-the-man—a simple image that served to illustrate the fulfilment of the Old Testament by the New'.<sup>9</sup> Despite his significance as a model of Christ, the Fathers regarded Isaac's role as passive, so that 'Abraham, not Isaac, remained the model of faith par excellence',<sup>10</sup> a view that has been mediated in painting and in Western art music. In this music, Isaac is represented either as a child or as an adolescent, and in all compositions except one he is represented as passive when compared to his father, Abraham. A depiction by Bonifacio Bembo (Fig. 20) illustrates Isaac as a baby lying on the faggots; this image points to Christ's birth at the nativity (Lk. 2.7). The innocent gaze of the child draws spectators into the scene to highlight Isaac's passivity as well as the violence of God's command. Rembrandt, on the other hand, painted two contrasting renditions of the scene, one with an illustration of Isaac as a child and the other as an older adolescent. In the former, the father with hand over heart, and looking into his son's eyes, explains God's command as the child, holding the bundle of sticks for his sacrificial fate, listens attentively to every word (Fig. 21). Here, Rembrandt conceals from the spectator the violence of the story to emphasize Abraham's loving relationship with his son. In a painting from 1865, shown here as a print entitled *Abraham's Sacrifice* (Fig. 23), Isaac is represented

7. William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970), p. 15.

8. Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 107.

9. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 118.

10. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 113.

as an older adolescent; Abraham's hand obscures Isaac's face to prevent Isaac from seeing the knife and/or to avoid making eye contact with his son. This painting, in highlighting the violence of the scene, captures the moment when the angel stays Abraham's hand; the knife, depicted here suspended in air, falls from Abraham's tight grasp. In the same scene, but unlike Rembrandt's rendition, Caravaggio (Fig. 22) allows spectators to see the adolescent's terrified face as Abraham stalwartly pins his innocent son to the altar in preparation for his ritual slaughter. The head and neck of the ram to the right of the painting frames the boy's head to emphasize the connection between two innocent victims.

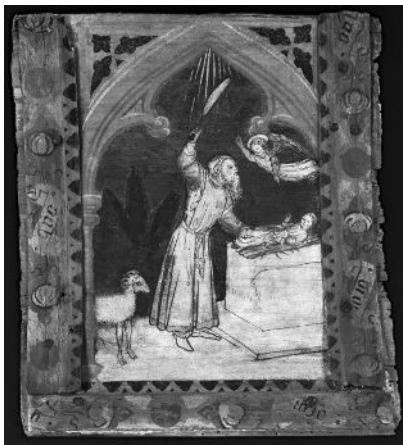


Fig. 20. (left). Bembo Bonifacio, *Sacrificio di Isacco* (fifteenth century). Photo credit: © Museo Civico 'Ala Ponzzone', Cremona, Italy.



Fig. 21. (right). Rembrandt van Rijn, print, *Abraham and Isaac, whole-length standing* (1645). Photo credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Many paintings by Christian artists highlight Isaac's passivity, a theme that is echoed also in music, and by the end of the story, Isaac fades into the background just as he does in Genesis 22. In music from the seventeenth century, librettist-composers retained the Vulgate's translation of the story with its implied christological reference to Isaac as Christ. In the eighteenth century a more direct christological interpretation occurs in the Metastasian libretto, while in music surveyed from the twentieth century, composers focused attention on Abraham's and Isaac's obedience rather than the christological significance of the story. While a christological interpretation receives mixed treatment in the music, the theme of obedience runs through all compositions. In two compositions based on Wilfred Owen's 'The Parable of the Old





Fig. 22. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Sacrifice of Isaac* (1594–96). Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi. Photo credit: © SCALA, Florence.

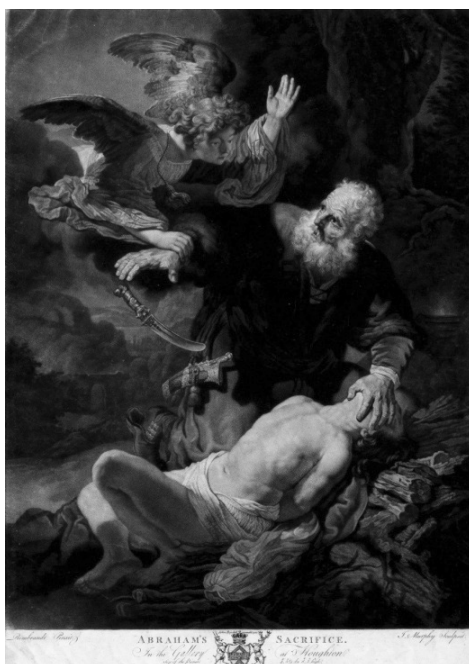


Fig. 23. Print made by Johann Gottfried Haid after Rembrandt, now in the Hermitage (1767), *Abraham's Sacrifice*. Photo credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Man and the Young' the librettist reversed this understanding to focus attention on Abraham's disobedience to the angel's second call. Britten's *Offertorium* explores a world without God and humanity's failure to recognize God's voice, while Zaimont's composition focuses more on the violence of the Christian God and his silence during the sacrificial killing of his son.

Kessler notes that the image of Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrificial pyre was one of the most frequently mentioned examples of christological interpretations found in the writings of the Fathers (Gen. 22.6-8). Metastasio incorporated this image in the storyline, along with references in the footnotes to selected works by church fathers: Tertullian's *Adversus Iudaeos* and *Adversus Marcionem*, Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, and Ambrose's *De Abrahamo*. Danielou notes that in *Adversus Iudaeos*,<sup>10</sup> the symbolism of Isaac carrying the wood is 'straightforward', typifying Christ offered by his Father and carrying his cross:<sup>11</sup>

*Itaque in primis Isaac cum a patre hostia duceretur, et lignum ipsi sibi portaret, Christi exitum jam tunc denotabat, in victimam concessi a patre, lignum passionis suae bajulantis.*<sup>12</sup>

In like manner, Ambrose highlights the christological parallel between Isaac carrying the wood and Christ carrying the cross:<sup>13</sup>

*Ligna Isaac sibi vexit, Christus sibi patibulum crucis portavit. Abraham comitabatur filium, Pater Christum. Nec Isaac solus, nec Jesus solus.*<sup>14</sup>

### *Abraham's Distress*

The Fathers consulted by Metastasio discussed Abraham's anxiety and torment in coming to terms with God's command, though a significant detail omitted by the biblical narrator. For example, Ambrose explained how Abraham's heart was tormented with recurring anxieties for the duration of the three-day journey, and how his son clung to and lay in his bosom.<sup>15</sup> Ambrose portrays Abraham as a loving father tormented

11. Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (trans. Wulstan Hibbard; London: Burns, 1960), p. 124.

12. 'Isaac, when led by his father as a victim, and himself bearing his own "wood", was even at that early period pointing to Christ's death: conceded, as he was, as a victim by the Father; carrying, as he did, the "wood" of his own Passion'; Eng. trans.: A. Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Translation of the Fathers down to AD 325 Latin Christianity: Its Founder Tertullian 3* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993).

13. Ambrose, *De Abrahamo*, PL 14; Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, PL 41.

14. 'Isaac carried the wood for himself, Christ carried the yoke of his Cross. Abraham escorted his son; the father, Christ. Neither Isaac nor Jesus was alone'; Theodosia Tomkinson, *On Abraham: St Ambrose of Milan* (Etna, CA: Centre for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2000), p. 36.

15. Ambrose, *De Abrahamo*, PL 14.

by God's command, who did not want his son to die. Gregory of Nyssa, too, includes a hypothetical speech by Abraham to God, highlighting Abraham's abhorrence at having to kill his son, along with the questions he might have addressed to God but did not.<sup>16</sup> Metastasio incorporates in the libretto a similar speech spoken by Abraham, and the composer dramatized its emotional content with appropriate musical rhetorical devices.

### *Sarah*

The Fathers embellished the sparse biblical narrative with imaginary dialogues and hypothetical speeches, and, in particular, invented Sarah's imaginary speech to Abraham upon hearing of God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Gregory of Nyssa discussed her role in the story and knowledge of God's command to offer Isaac as a sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> He concluded that Abraham had not revealed to her details of God's command for fear she might have jeopardized God's plan. To the contrary, Ephrem Syrus in his commentary on Genesis stated:

But [Abraham] did not inform Sarah [of the command to sacrifice Isaac] because he had not been commanded to inform her. She would have persuaded him to let her go and participate in his sacrifice just as she had participated in the promise of his son.<sup>18</sup>

Sarah's participation in the sacrifice is illustrated in Byzantine art, in two depictions at funerary chapels located in the principal burial ground of the oasis of Kharga—in the Chapel of the Exodus (chapel 30) in the second century CE, and in the Chapel of Peace (chapel 80) from the fifth century CE at the el-Bagawat necropolis (Fig. 24).



Fig. 24. Cemetery el-Bagawat.  
Chapel of Peace, el-Kharga  
Oasis, Egypt.  
Photo credit: © Commons  
GNU /Roland Unger.

16. Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio de deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, PG 46.

17. Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio de deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, PG 46.

18. Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis* (trans. Joseph P. Amar and Edward G. Matthews, St Ephrem the Syrian; Selected Prose Works, FC 91 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), p. 168.

In the latter, the sacrifice of Isaac is one image among many others from the Old Testament: Sarah stands to Abraham's right holding a small box in her left hand, with right hand extended as if, on the one hand, to offer her son for sacrifice, and on the other, to avert the sacrifice. To the left of Abraham, a disembodied hand, representing the hand of God or the hand of the angel appears to avert the sacrifice, while two other disembodied hands appear alongside two knives, suggestive perhaps of Sarah's and Abraham's compliance in carrying out God's command. Isaac is represented as a child and, in the same manner as his mother, holds a small box with an outstretched arm in the direction of a horned altar with a fire atop, to point perhaps to his acceptance of his fate. To the left of Abraham, a ram tethered to a bush turns its head away from the dramatic action as if to shield its gaze from the knife and lighted fire. Abraham holds Isaac's head with his left hand and the knife in his right; significantly, Isaac's body is unbound to signify his acceptance of his fate. The focus of this painting is on Abraham and Sarah's offering, Isaac's compliance, and God's saving grace. Kessler points out that as a result of 'Sarah's inclusion, the artists of El Bagawat (Fig. 25) extended the story to a whole family affair'.<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 25. *Dome Fresco*. Chapel of Peace, el-Kharga Oasis, Egypt. Photo credit: © Commons GNU /Roland Unger.

Interestingly, Metastasio extends the drama to include the whole family: here, Sarah plays an active role, and unlike the interpretation

19. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 161.

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. The libretto recounts Sarah's trauma in coming to terms with her son's near-sacrificial death while the music highlights her emotional turmoil. Portrayed as a loving mother who did not want her son to die, she proved her obedience to and faith in God through her words and actions. Metastasio includes also a role in the story for other household members, for a band of shepherds who prefigure the twelve disciples.

Metastasio's study of the Greek Fathers may have led him to the *Kontakion* of Romanos,<sup>20</sup> *On Abraham and Isaac*, as well as to the poetry and sermons of the Syriac Fathers who emphasized Sarah's role in Isaac's sacrifice;<sup>21</sup> certain similarities in his storyline suggest a familiarity with this literature. For example, the episode of Abraham's homecoming, according to Brock, was of no interest to the majority of Christian homilists,<sup>22</sup> but this episode receives attention in both Romanos's *kontakion* and in the Metastasian libretto. Romanos, according to Brock, is alone in the Greek homiletic tradition in allocating words to Sarah after the return home of father and son; similarly, Metastasio allows Sarah a voice to speak with Abraham and Isaac at this point. Harvey notes that in Syriac texts gendered speech is employed for religious instruction; female speech is employed to demonstrate right teaching, intelligent reflection, autonomy and free will, while male speech presents social convention, restrictive tradition and normative social roles.<sup>23</sup> In the same manner as Syriac writers, Metastasio permits Sarah to interpret the significance of Isaac's sacrifice and to explain that the purpose of God's test made known Abraham's greatness to future generations.

20. The *kontakia* were sermons sung before a congregation on major feast days. They offered the faithful moral instruction relating to specific biblical texts. Trypanis notes that they were similar to the early Byzantine festival sermons in prose, although the music of the *kontakia* greatly heightened the effect. See Paul Maas and C.A. Trypanis (eds.), *Sancti romani melodi cantica: Cantica genuina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 1.

21. When I consulted Calmet's *Dictionary of the Bible* in University College, Cork, I discovered references to Ephrem the Syrian. This led me to speculate that Metastasio may have consulted Syriac poetic literature on Genesis 22, since Syriac authors attributed Sarah a pivotal role in the story. I also noticed in this work that Calmet had quoted Procopius on several occasions; this fact, in all probability, explains Metastasio's inclusion of the work of Procopius in the libretto.

22. Sebastian Brock, 'Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac', *Le muséon* 87 (1974), pp. 61-129 (75).

23. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, '2000 NAPS Presidential Address: Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition', *J ECS* 9.1 (2001), pp. 105-31 (124).

*Abraham's Words to the Servants*

The Fathers discussed the meaning of Abraham's words to the two servants in Gen. 22.5. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, suggested that the words of prophecy to the servants were necessary to ensure they did not hinder Abraham's sacrifice. In *De deitate*, he conveys his general disregard for the servants:

Abraham left the slaves so that they would not plot something most low in their slavish nature and hinder the sacrifice of the child.<sup>24</sup>

Ambrose, too, understood that Abraham had spoken deceitfully to the servants for fear they too, might have hindered the sacrifice:

But he spoke deceitfully to his servants, lest his intention be known and one hinder him or cry out with tears and lamentations.<sup>25</sup>

For this reason, it is possible that Metastasio, together with Giacomo Carissimi, omitted this reference (v. 5), along with the ambiguity relating to Abraham's deception of the servants. The textual omission avoided having to explain or justify Abraham's immoral behavior, as well as misleading Christian audiences into performing similar acts of immorality.

*The Near Sacrifice of Isaac*

While the biblical narrator remains silent on Isaac's consent to the sacrifice, it is recounted in eight Greek patristic sources, including Gregory of Nyssa's *Dei deitate*;<sup>26</sup> the Fathers portrayed Isaac as consenting to his fate and remaining silent until after the sacrifice had been averted. While they acknowledged Isaac's significant action, they still regarded it as passive. Whereas Isaac is the focus of attention in the rabbinical writings, Abraham remains dominant in the writings of the church fathers; for this reason, the Fathers referred to Genesis 22 as the Sacrifice of Abraham. Composer-librettists of the music surveyed generally portrayed Isaac as consenting to his fate, although in Carissimi's *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, Isaac remains silent. Abraham's ritual preparations and binding of Isaac are recounted by Ambrose in *De Abrahamo*, but overlooked by Augustine in *De civitate Dei*. Composer-librettists, too, treated vv. 9-10 with different emphases: whereas Metastasio mentioned the building of the altar and the binding of Isaac in passing, Britten in the *War Requiem* and Zaimont in *Parable* highlighted this detail.

24. Cited in Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 95 n. 70.

25. Tomkinson, *On Abraham: St Ambrose of Milan*, p. 36.

26. M. Moskhos, 'Romanos: Hymn on the Sacrifice of Abraham: A Discussion of the Sources and a Translation', *Byzantion* 44 (1974), pp. 310-28 (315).

*The Ram*

Greek Fathers, such as Melito of Sardis, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa proposed a double typology of Christ. Origen understood that Isaac represented Christ's divinity while the ram represented his humanity: Christ like the ram suffered and died. This interpretation, according to Kessler, sought to minimize Isaac's significance, and was made in contradistinction from Jewish interpretation.<sup>27</sup> The Metastasian libretto alludes also to the double typology of Christ, referring first to Isaac's divinity as a type of Christ, and second to his humanity and subsequent ransom by the ram. In the reception of this verse in music, Carissimi and de Rossi glossed over the account of the ram and its ritual sacrifice. In twentieth-century music based on Wilfred's Owen's 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young', Isaac's ransom does not take place because of Abraham's act of disobedience, that is, 'the ram of Pride', his refusal to listen to the angel's second call to avert the sacrifice, and Abraham's subsequent murder of Isaac. Influenced by Hebrews 11, Augustine understood that God would have resurrected Isaac had he been slain. As noted previously, while Metastasio is the only librettist of the music surveyed to allude to Isaac's resurrection, in Britten's *Offertorium* from the *War Requiem*, there is a suggestion that Isaac lives in eternity surrounded by choirs of angels. Settings of the *Agnus Dei* based on Jn 1.29, too numerous to recount here, allude to the sacrificial ram/lamb of Gen. 22.13.

*Nuance of Seeing*

The Fathers interpreted the nuance of seeing from the biblical narrative in a christological light. For example, Ambrose understood that Abraham saw Christ's passion on the Cross on two occasions: first, in Abraham's sacrifice of the ram, and second, when the Lord appeared to Abraham on the mountain (Gen. 22.14) and revealed his future passion on the Cross. Ambrose understood that Abraham believed Christ would be born from his seed, offered as a sacrifice and raised from the dead. Augustine interpreted the phrase the 'Lord saw' to mean the Lord appeared, thus making himself visible to Abraham. The Metastasian libretto incorporates this textual influence by Ambrose and Augustine at the end of the story: here, God appears to Abraham in the Abrahamic household and grants him a vision of Christ's passion on the Cross. In many of the compositions surveyed, a chorus or a duet concludes each act or musical composition with religious instruction. In general, compositions emphasize either the christological and/or tropological, that is, the moral significance of the story. With the exception of those com-

27. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 151.

positions from the twentieth century, all of the compositions surveyed reflect the understanding of Ambrose: 'let us harken to the voice of our God and let us obey his precepts, if we wish to find favour with him'.<sup>28</sup>

### *The Feast of Corpus Christi*

A christological interpretation of the narrative prevailed in the Middle Ages in religious art, illuminated manuscripts, church architecture and stained-glass windows. Parallels between Isaac carrying the faggots, sometimes in the shape of a cross, and Christ carrying his cross are illustrated in examples of manuscripts and stained-glass windows below. Picture Bibles from mediaeval times illustrated the parallel scenes of Isaac's sacrifice and Christ's passion either on the road to Calvary or at the site of crucifixion itself: the *Bible moralisée* from the thirteenth century (Fig. 26); the *Biblia pauperum* (Bible of the Poor), a blockbook from the fifteenth century (Fig. 27); and the ever popular *Speculum humanae salvationis* (Mirror of Human Salvation) from the fifteenth century (Fig. 28). In Figure 28 the artist incorporated a musical instrument, a *Rauschpfeifes*, in the column to the left depicting Christ carrying his cross. This instrument was exceedingly loud and used primarily in military campaigns to strike fear in the enemy during battle. In the example shown, the instrument is played at full force into Christ's ear by a person in the crowd whose lower body is pressed inappropriately against the body of Christ, and whose right hand is placed upon Christ's buttocks. The illustration highlights the vulgarity of the scene and the violence of the crowd who accompanied Christ to the site of crucifixion. In this example, also, writing in red in the left panel details New Testament references to Christ's passion, and in the right panel to Isaac's question and Abraham's reply (Gen. 22.7-8). Parallel scenes are found also in stained-glass windows: for example, in the thirteenth-century 'Redemption Window' at Corona Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral (Fig. 29). As in the manuscript tradition, Isaac is placed upon the wood, which is bound together in the shape of a cross (see upper panel). The image of Abraham's knife depicted as a sword in Figs 27, 28 and 29 derive from the Latin Vulgate's translation.

In music, the first reference to the sacrifice of Isaac appeared around 1264 in the sequence *Lauda Sion Salvatorem*,<sup>29</sup> by Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), where the story was linked to the Eucharist. In 1264, Pope Urban IV issued the papal bull *Transiturus de hoc mundo*, which established the universal feast of Corpus Christi, designated in the present Roman Missal as the solemnity of 'The Most Holy Body and Blood of

28. Ambrose, *De Abrahamo*, PL 14.445-49.

29. To hear the sequence sung, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3b8AYnx6Qc&feature=related> (accessed 30 November 2012).





Fig. 26. Bible moralisée (mid-thirteenth century). Part 1, D1. Abraham leading Isaac to the sacrifice, and the boy carrying the faggots for his own pyre, D2. This signifies Christ carrying his cross to Calvary.

Photo credit: © Bodleian Library, The University of Oxford.



Fig. 27. *Biblia pauperum*. Print, blockbook (1460–70).  
 Photo credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 28. *Speculum humanae salvationis* (1430–50). *The Road to Calvary*. Isaac carries wood for his own sacrifice. Douce 204, fol. 22r.

Photo credit: © The Bodleian Library, The University of Oxford.



Fig. 29. [T] Sacrifice of Isaac; [C] Crucifixion; [B] Joshua's spies in Canaan (the Grapes of Eschol). Details from the 'Redemption Window', early thirteenth century (with twentieth-century restorations). Corona Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral. Photo credit: © With the generous permission of AICT/Allan T. Kohl.

Corpus Christi.

Seq.  
7.

**L** Audā Sī-on Salvatōrem, Lāuda dūcem et pastōrem,  
In hýmnis et cánti-cis. 2. Quantum pótes, tantum áude :  
Qui-a mājor ómni láude, Nec laudāre súffi-cis. 3. Lāudis thé-  
ma speci-á-lis, Pánis vívus et ví-tá-lis. Hódi-e propó-  
ni-tur. 4. Quē in sácræ ménsa coé-nae, Túrbæ frátrum

Ex. 1. Plainchant:  
*Lauda Sion* from the  
*Liber usualis*

Christ' to celebrate the institution of the sacrament of Holy Communion at the Last Supper. At Pope Urban's request, Aquinas composed the office for the new feast along with the sequences *Lauda Sion Salvatore*, *Pange lingua gloriosi*,<sup>30</sup> *Sacris solemniis*<sup>31</sup> and *Verbum supernum*. The sequences were set to music as a way of teaching Christian doctrine to the faithful. Eucharistic hymns: *Ecce panis angelorum* (Behold, the Bread of Angels), *Tantum ergo sacramentum* (Down in adoration falling. Lo! the sacred Host we hail), *Panis angelicus* (The Angelic Bread), *O salutaris hostia* (O Saving Victim), and *Adoro te devote* (I devotedly adore Thee) were shorter in length and derived from either the last, last two, three or four verses of each sequence; they were easier to memorize and have been sung down through the ages to this day by congregants attending the Corpus Christi Mass. In the *Lauda Sion Salvatore* (Ex. 1), Aquinas links Isaac's sacrifice to the reenactment of Christ's sacrifice in the Mass. Of all the mediaeval sequences, *Lauda Sion* was the only one preserved in the *Missale romanum*; it was set to an eleventh-century Gregorian melody, *Laetabundi iubilemus*, attributed to Adam of St Victor (d. 1146). It was subsequently arranged as a sacred motet, anthem and instrumental by many leading composers, including Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525/26–94), Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611), Dietrich Buxtehude

30. To hear a performance of the *Ecce Nomen Domini Emmanuel* (1929) go to the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBBmHYB7MNE&list=LPPm9AjqI4oVk&index=6&feature=plcp> (accessed 30 November 2012).

31. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PVx-dV9upY> (accessed 30 November 2012).

(c. 1637/39–1707), Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1643–1704), François Couperin (1668–1733), and Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47) among others.

*Ecce panis angelorum*, the last four stanzas of the *Lauda Sion*, was subsequently arranged by Giovanni Maria Sabino (1588–1649),<sup>32</sup> Antonio Lotti and Domenico Gaetano Maria Donizetti (1853), and Samuel Wesley; today it is popularly sung as a Eucharistic hymn (Ex. 2).<sup>33</sup>

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### Ecce Panis Angelorum (No.1)

Lauda Sion

*Andante religioso* Portuguese Melody

1. Ec-ce pa-nis An-ge-lo-rum,  
2. Lu-fi-gu-ris prae-si-gua-tur,  
Fa-ctus ei-bus vi-a-to-rum:  
Cum I-sa-ac im-mo-la-tur,  
Ve-re pa-nis fi-li-o-rum,  
A-gnus Pa-schae de-pu-ta-tur,  
Non mit-ten-dus ca-ni-bus.  
Da-tur man-na pa-tri-bus.

Ex. 2. Hymn:  
*Ecce panis angelorum*

The hymn was also set to music as an anthem by Catholic convert Samuel Wesley, known as the English Mozart, and son of Methodist hymn writer Charles Wesley. He composed it after the death of his infant daughter on 31 March 1813 (Ex. 3).

### Melchizedek

The mediaeval mystery plays, known also as the Corpus Christi Plays, and which I discuss in Chapter 3, were traditionally performed on the feast of Corpus Christi. The Chester Mystery Play, which Benjamin Brit-

32. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DruFjLTgxws> (accessed 30 November 2012).

33. [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23673/23673-h/images/N231c\\_P387.gif](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23673/23673-h/images/N231c_P387.gif) (accessed 30 November 2012).

Ex. 3. Samuel Wesley, *Ecce panis*

ten used as the basis of *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, is the only play dramatizing Abraham's meeting with Melchizedek (Gen. 14.18-20). Britten omitted this part of the play and set to music only the sacrifice of Isaac. St Cyprian of Carthage (200–53 CE), in his letter to a certain Cecil, stated that Melchizedek was a type of Christ, a type of priest, and his sacrificial offering of bread and wine to Abraham a type of Eucharist:

Also in the priest Melchisedeck [*sic*] we see the Sacrament of the Sacrifice of the Lord prefigured, in accord with that to which the Divine Scriptures testify, where it says: 'And Melchisedeck, the King of Salem, brought out bread and wine, for he was a priest of the Most High God; and he blessed Abraham'. That Melchisedeck is in fact a type of Christ is declared in the psalms by the Holy Spirit, saying to the Son, as it were from the Father: 'Before the day-star I begot You. You are a Priest forever, according to the order of Melchisedeck'.

The order certainly is that which comes from his sacrifice and which comes down from it: because Melchisedeck was a priest of the Most High God; because he offered bread; and because he blessed Abraham. And who is more a priest of the Most High God than our Lord Jesus Christ, who, when He offered sacrifice to God the Father, offered the very same which Melchisedeck had offered, namely bread and wine, which is in fact His Body and Blood (Letters 63.4).<sup>34</sup>

34. Cited in Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, p. 232.

In the canon of the Mass, Melchizedek's offering is linked to the offerings of Abel and Abraham at the oblation proper, which forms part of the prayer of consecration. This scene is depicted in the sixth-century CE Presbytery Mosaic in the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna. In the centre, the High Priest Melchizedek administers the bread and wine on the altar of the temple. On the left, Abel offers a lamb, and on the right, Abraham offers his only beloved son, Isaac; each offering is represented as a type of Christ. To the left of Melchizedek, a disembodied hand, the hand of God, accepts the sacrificial offerings.



Fig. 30. Presbytery Mosaic: *Sacrifices*. Sant' Apollinare, Classe, Ravenna.  
Photo credit: © Holly Hayes/ Art History.

### *Fifteenth Century*

While there were no musical compositions on Genesis 22 during the Renaissance, the story was prominent in Florence in 1401 when the guild of wool and cloth merchants—*Arte del Calimala*—organized a competition to design a set of bronze doors for the Baptistery in the Piazza del Duomo. Andrea Pisano (c. 1290–1348) was commissioned to design the first set of doors on the southern portal between 1330 and 1336, but owing to an economic crash and the outbreak of the Black Death (1348) the guild suspended plans for further commissions until 1401. During this time, they opened a competition requiring entrants to design a trial relief of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.1-19). Although seven finalists completed the task, only two reliefs, those by Lorenzo Ghiberti



(1378–1455) and Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446), remain extant. Ghiberti, who was the youngest competitor, won this commission—as well as a later commission to design a second set of doors—for his design, which reflected the influence of fifteenth-century humanism recalling the poise and elegance of Greco-Roman sculpture from antiquity. While Brunelleschi's design exhibited emotional intensity, vibrancy and the violence of the scene, Ghiberti's depiction enabled viewers to meditate on Abraham's serene act of obedience to God's command (Fig. 31).

Ghiberti won the commission to design a set of doors consisting of twenty-eight panels and based on scenes from the New Testament, which were originally planned for the eastern portal of the Florence Baptistery, but were eventually placed on the northern side. His second commission, which spanned over a quarter of a century (1425–52), involved the design of a set of doors in gilt bronze for the eastern portal of the baptistery with ten relief panels arranged in two columns of five panels based on Old Testament scenes, one of which includes a depiction of the sacrifice of Isaac. As masterpieces of early Renaissance art they were unlike anything that had ever been seen before, combining 'expressive power, convincing perspective, and sublime gracefulness';<sup>35</sup> they were, as Michelangelo called them, the 'Gates of Paradise', the name by which they are still known today.

### *Ad Fontes*

During the Renaissance, biblical scholars, librettists and composers returned *ad fontes*, 'to the sources' (lit. 'to the fountains'), to Greek, Hebrew and other Semitic texts; this 'new learning' brought about a renewed interest in the works of the Latin and Greek church fathers, orators, philosophers, poets, architects and music theorists, among others, from antiquity. The Renaissance led to an outpouring of musical treatises on theoretical writing about music; for example, the German Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher, who was born in the early seventeenth century (1602–80) and known as the last man of the Renaissance, was renowned for his treatise on music, *Musurgia universalis*, which was printed in 1650 (Fig. 35). It was regarded as one of the most influential and widely read musical encyclopedias of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>36</sup>

35. Andrew Butterfield, 'Art and Innovation in Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise', in *The Gates of Paradise: Lorenzo Ghiberti's Renaissance Masterpiece* (ed. Gary M. Radke; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 17.

36. Kircher had written another treatise on sound and acoustics in 1673 entitled *Phonurgia nova*, and two biblical treatises on Noah's Flood, *Arca Noë* (1675), and the Tower of Babel, *Turris Babel* (1679).



Fig. 31. *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Lorenzo Ghiberti's contribution to the competition for the Northern Doors of the Florence Baptistery. Museo dell Bargello. Photo credit: © Commons GNU/Richard Fabi.



P. ATHANASIVS KIRCHERVS FVLDENIS  
 è Societ: Iesu Anno ætatis LIII.

*Honoris et obsequiæ ergo sculpsit et D.D. C. Blaeuact Romæ 2 Maij A. 1655.*

Fig. 32. Portrait of Kircher at age 53. From *Mundus subterraneus* (1664).

Photo credit: © Commons GNU/Mattes.

Kircher was professor of physics, mathematics, and Oriental languages at the German College in 1635, where he taught Hebrew as part of the official Jesuit curriculum of the *ratio studiorum* (lit. 'Plan of Studies'). The scholarly ideal during the late Renaissance, reflected in the *ratio studiorum* was to be *trium linguarum gnarus* (lit. 'expert in three languages'), that is, expert in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Kircher knew fellow Jesuit priest and composer Giacomo Carissimi (1605–74), who also taught at the German College<sup>37</sup> from 1629, and who was *maestro di cappella* at the church of Sant' Apollinare until his death in 1674. Although the librettist to Carissimi's *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*<sup>38</sup> remains anonymous, one can speculate with a degree of certainty that it was written by a Jesuit priest from the German College, if not by Carissimi himself. Buelow notes that the German College and its church, Sant' Apollinare, became famous throughout Italy and Germany for the excellence of its musical performances.<sup>39</sup> Between 1650 and 1660 Carissimi had a working relationship also with SS Crocifisso of San Marcello (Fig. 33), which was attended by aristocratic families of Rome; many of his oratorios, including *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, were performed there during Lent.

Carissimi held a second position of considerable importance as the *maestro di cappella del concerto di camera* at the court of the exiled Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–89),<sup>40</sup> the most notable female convert to Roman Catholicism of the seventeenth century. He was appointed to the court after she attended a concert at the German College to hear a performance of his oratorios, *Il sacrificio d'Isacco* (lost) and *Giuditte*. Carissimi's oratorios echoed the theories and practices developed by the Florentine Monodists,<sup>41</sup> whose rediscovery of treatises by Marcus

37. The German College was one of the largest Jesuit colleges and was founded in 1552 following a papal bull issued by Pope Julius. It trained German seminarians, among other nationalities, with the intention they would one day return to their homeland to minister as priests as well as combat the threat of Protestantism. Of all the colleges, the German College was renowned for its musical tradition. Tomás Luis de Victoria, regarded as one of the greatest Spanish Renaissance composers, was appointed as the first *maestro di cappella* at Sant' Apollinare. Within a few years it had become a centre of liturgical music.

38. To see and hear a dramatization of this work go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmXUdHZDXZE> (accessed 12 December 2012).

39. George J. Buelow, *A History of Baroque Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 92.

40. Buelow, *A History of Baroque Music*, p. 92.

41. The Florentine Monodists were a group of sixteenth-century academics who reacted against contrapuntal styles of writing found in madrigals and motets. They replaced this type of writing with monodic writing, that is, solo voice accompanied by a basso continuo. Vincenzo Galilei (1529–91), father of Galileo, had written the first literary treatise advocating monody, *Dialogo della musica antica e della moderna* (1581). Caccini (1545–1618) had written a treatise on monody in his song collection *Le nuove musiche* (Florence, 1601). Other notable monodists include Emilio de' Cavalieri (1550–1602), Bartolomeo

Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE) and Marcus Fabius Quintilian (35–100 CE) in the sixteenth century led to an interest in musical rhetoric. Music theorists applied the principles of oratory to music in a theory known as the Doctrine of the Affections, which began in the sixteenth century, but was developed more in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Athanasius Kircher (1601–80), Andreas Werckmesiter (1645–1706), Johann Mattheson (1681–1764) and Johann David Heinichen (1683–1729). Each theorist codified different musical rhetorical devices that evoked a given emotional response in a listener. In his seminal encyclopedic treatise on music, *Musurgia universalis* (1650), Kircher discussed the power of music in rousing the affections, noting the similarities between the languages of music and oratory:

Our musical figures are and function like the embellishments, tropes, and the varied manners of speeches in rhetoric. For just as the orator moves the listener through an artful arrangement of tropes, now to laughter, now to fear, then suddenly to pity, at times to indignation and rage, occasionally to love, piety, and righteousness, or to show such contrasting affection, so too music moves the listener through an artful combination of musical phrases and passages.<sup>42</sup>

In this treatise, Kircher notes that Giacomo Carissimi was a master of musical rhetorical devices:

Carissimi . . . , through his genius and the felicity of his compositions, surpasses all others in moving the minds of listeners to whatever affection he wishes. His compositions are truly imbued with the essence and life of the spirit.<sup>43</sup>

Carissimi composed his oratorios as musical sermons ‘to sway and edify the faithful, and to exalt Christian virtues by expressive means that were both austere and profoundly moving’.<sup>44</sup>

Barbarino (b.?-1617), Jacopo Peri (1561–1633), Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643), and Alessandro Grandi (1575–1630).

42. Athanasius Kircher, *Musurgia universalis* (Rome: Haereditas F. Corbelletti, 1650), p. 633: ‘Figurae in Musurgia nostra idem sunt praestantque, quod colores, tropi, atque varii modi dicendi in Rhetorica. Quemadmodum enim Rhetor artificioso troporum contextu Auditorem movet nunc ad risum modo ad planctum; subinde ad misericordiam, nonnunquam ad indignationem & iracundiam, interdum ad amorem, pietatem & iustitiam, aliquando ad contrarios hisce affectus, ita & Musica artificioso clausularum sive periodorum harmonicarum contextu. . . . Sunt itaque duplices figurae a Musicis considerandae; Principales, & minus principales’; Eng. trans. cited in Dietrich Bartel, *Musica poetica: Musical Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 107.

43. Kircher, *Musurgia universalis* 1.1, p. 603; Eng. trans. cited in Claude Palisca, *Baroque Music* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 125.

44. Catherine Cessac, *Marc-Antoine Charpentier* (trans. E. Thomas Glasgow; Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1982), p. 268.



Fig. 33. Oratorio del Santissimo Crocifisso, Rome.  
Photo credit: © Paolo Capoccia.

### *Sixteenth Century*

While there were no musical settings of Genesis 22 by any Protestant or Catholic composer during the sixteenth century, the single most important event that impacted seventeenth-century musical settings of the biblical story was the Reformation. It began on 31 October 1517, when Martin Luther (1483–1546) posted his ninety-five theses or statements of belief on the university door at Wittenberg in which he protested

against the abuses within the Catholic Church, particularly the sale of indulgences. Two years previously, the Fifth Lateran Council met in Rome (1512–15) to discuss the abuses within the church but failed to implement any changes. In a printed sermon (August 1518), Luther questioned the historical primacy of the church in Rome; following this, he received a citation to Rome to answer the charge of heresy. Frederick the Wise (1463–1525) intercepted and asked the papal legate Cardinal Cajetan (1469–1534) to allow Luther to answer the charge in Augsburg. In October 1518, Cardinal Cajetan interviewed Luther for three days and urged him to recant his position on indulgences, justification by faith and papal infallibility. Luther refused and then fled after hearing of plans for his arrest.

On 15 June 1520, Pope Leo X issued a papal bull, *Exsurge Domine* (Arise O Lord), demanding Luther to retract forty-one heretical propositions from his ninety-five theses, and concluded with a public burning of Luther's books in Rome's Piazza Navona. Pope Leo granted Luther sixty days to recant or face excommunication; Luther reacted with the tract 'Against the Execrable Bull of the Antichrist', followed by a public burning of documents from Rome along with the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* (10 December 1520). On 3 January 1521 Pope Leo X issued the papal bull *Decet romanum pontificem* excommunicating Luther. Frederick the Wise refused to enforce the pope's decree, and encouraged the newly elected emperor and king Charles V to summon Luther to the imperial Diet of Worms to renounce his alleged errors in a debate with Johannes von Eck (1486–1543), chancellor to the archbishop of Trier. Assured of safe conduct, Luther arrived at the imperial Diet in Worms in a two-wheeled cart escorted by two thousand people. Holding steadfast to his interpretation of Scripture, Luther refused to recant and was placed under an imperial ban by the Diet of Worms, after which time Frederick III staged a kidnapping and placed him in Wartburg Castle, where he was sequestered for a year; from here Luther began translating the New Testament into German.

The adoption of Protestantism by the German princes, which manifested at the Diet of Speyer (1526) and the Diet of Augsburg (1530) – Augsburg Confession – and in alliances such as the League of Torgau (1526) and the Schmalkaldic League (1531), brought about a rift that threatened the religious and political stability of the church and empire. In 1555, the Peace of Augsburg granted the Lutheran Church official status within the Holy Roman Empire. Despite the peace, the emperor did everything in his power to retain the Catholic faithful, and so the Habsburg court sponsored the production of oratorios, among other art forms, as a means of teaching Catholic doctrine, based on the decrees of the Council of Trent, through a pleasurable musical experience.

*Council of Trent*

The Catholic Church reacted to Luther's protestations with the Council of Trent; it met for three periods over twenty-five sessions and was convened during the pontificates of three popes, none of whom attended: Paul III (sessions 1–8: Trent, 1545–47 and sessions 9–11: Bologna 1547); Julius III (sessions 12–16: Trent, 1551–52); and Pius IV (sessions 17–25: Trent, 1559–63). The council addressed the reform of the Catholic Church alongside the affirmation of Catholic doctrines in contradistinction to 'Protestant heresies'. Session four (8 April 1534) combated the principle of *sola scriptura* (by Scripture alone), known as the formal principle of the Reformation and affirmed the Latin Vulgate as the sole authorized version of the Bible. This decree was later reflected in the use of the Latin Vulgate by Catholic composers and librettists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The council affirmed the authority of the Scriptures together with the tradition, that is, the teachings of the Magisterium, in contradistinction to Luther's *sola scriptura* and the freedom of individuals to interpret the Scriptures. In the eighteenth century Metastasio footnoted his oratorio libretti with references to the Fathers of the Church, thereby emphasizing the equal authority of the Scriptures and the tradition. The council promulgated the Deuterocanonical books<sup>45</sup> as divinely inspired: Luther had previously rejected the canonicity of these books and relegated them to the Apocrypha; in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Deuterocanonical/ Apocryphal book of Judith inspired a variety of musical settings and works of art by Catholic and Protestant composers and artists alike.

At the sixth session, the council condemned the principle of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*), known as the material principle of the Reformation and decreed that salvation was attainable through human cooperation with God's offer of grace; salvation depended on faith and works, and not on faith alone. The council affirmed the authority of the priest at session twenty-two in contradistinction to Luther, who taught that God's gift of salvation was attainable through Christ alone as the only mediator; this latter doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' extended the exclusive title of priest to the laity. At this session the council also affirmed the Mass as a true and proper sacrifice offered to God: it was not only a sacrifice of praise and of thanksgiving or a bare commemoration of the sacrifice consummated

45. The Deuterocanonical books are a set of seven books found also in the Septuagint and include Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus), and Baruch; they are a second canon of inspired books since they were established later than the protocanonical books, that is, the thirty-nine books from the Hebrew Bible. The Old Testament in the Catholic Bible consists of forty-six books.

on the cross. The librettist Francesco Dario alluded to the council's decrees, to the authority of the priest and to the Eucharist as sacrifice in the oratorio *volgare*, *Il sacrificio di Abramo*. At the council's final session, it affirmed the invocation and veneration of the saints; this decree inspired a wealth of compositions and paintings by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Catholic composers and artists on the lives of the saints.

### *Sixteenth-Century Tapestry*

During this time, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac continued to be executed in paintings, manuscripts, block-books, stained-glass windows, and in needlework of tapestry and embroidery, two important art forms from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that inspired a creative wealth of work on the life of Abraham. Within the setting of the English Reformation, a series of ten tapestries,<sup>46</sup> 'Scenes from the Life of Abraham', are thought to have been commissioned (c. 1540) by Henry VIII for Hampton Court Palace. They were woven in gilt-thread in the workshop of Willem Pannemaker (1514–81) after designs by Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1502–50). The tapestries were later brought to Westminster Abbey for the coronations of subsequent kings and queens, and during the reign of William III (1650–1702) they furnished the king's bedchamber. It is thought that following King Henry's break with Rome in 1530, and the establishment of the Church of England, Henry used the story of the life of Abraham to legitimize his own God-given rule. The scene of the sacrifice of Isaac taken from *Scenes from the Lives of Abraham and Isaac* (Fig. 34) appears more Jewish than Catholic: here Isaac and the two male servants are depicted as men with beards; one of the servants points to the scene of the angel averting the sacrifice on the mountaintop in the distance, though unlike some Catholic interpretations, the servant's sight of the sacrifice illustrates that the event did not take place in secret. To the left, another scene shows Abraham and Isaac prior to the sacrifice, climbing the mount, as Isaac takes the initiative and leads the way forward carrying the pile of wood on his back. In this rendition, Isaac appears to have known and to have consented to God's command. As in Jewish tradition, which I explore in Chapter 4, Isaac is more active than his Christian counterpart. A further scene to the far centre-right illustrates Abraham and

46. The scenes depicted are the departure of Abraham; the return of Sarah; the separation of Abraham and Lot; the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek; God appears to Abraham; the circumcision of Isaac and the expulsion of Hagar; the sacrifice of Isaac; the purchase of the field of Ephron; the oath and departure of Eliezer; and Eliezer and Rebekah at the well.



Isaac kneeling at the altar as they offer the ram as a holocaust, a scene often overlooked in Christian tradition. This retelling focuses more on Abraham and Isaac's obedience to God's command than it does on christological parallels to Christ's passion and death on the cross—a theme taken up by Anglican composer Benjamin Britten in *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*.



Fig. 34. *The Sacrifice of Isaac* from the *Story of Abraham Series*. After designs of Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1543). Acquired by King Henry VIII. Photo credit: Image supplied by Royal Collection Trust/ © HM Queen Elizabeth II 2012.

I include also an image of an embroidered cushion cover (1640–70) from England (Fig. 35); the design derives from *Thesaurus sacrarum historiarum Veteris Testamenti* published by Gerard de Jode (1509–91) in Antwerp in 1585. This work represents two scenes from the life of Abraham: Isaac's birth announcement and the sacrifice of Isaac. The faggots placed upon Isaac's shoulders as he awaits his sacrificial death are shaped like a cross to point to Christ's crucifixion; dramatizations of the mediaeval mystery plays together with illustrations in mediaeval manuscripts and stained-glass windows also portrayed the faggots in this way. Another piece of embroidery executed in tent stitch entitled 'The Four Continents and Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac' (Fig. 36) represents the faggots in the shape of a cross. Of interest here, Isaac is kneeling in prayer-like submission with enlarged eyes to emphasize either his fear and/or his understanding of God's command. The illustration of a sword held in



Fig. 35. Cushion cover: *An embroidered long cushion with a landscape setting and people, angels, plants and buildings* (1640–70). Given by H.F.C. Lewin. Photo credit: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Fig. 36. Pictorial embroidery: *The Four Continents and Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac* (1649). The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection. Photo credit: © The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Abraham's hand comes from *gladium* (Gen. 22.6) of the Latin Vulgate's translation.

### *Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Artefacts*

Such was the popularity of this story in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that household items, jewellery, textiles and games among other artefacts bore the image of Isaac's sacrifice from Genesis 22. One such example is a kitchen stove with a chair attached (Fig. 37), dating from 1577; it was designed to heat a large room in a convent; painted tiles around the upper part depict scenes of the crucifixion alongside the scene of the sacrifice of Isaac. Tablecloths, such as the one shown in Fig. 39, is of Flemish origin, and made of linen damask with designs illustrating three scenes from the life of Abraham, including the scene of the sacrifice of Isaac represented at the bottom. A positive organ (c. 1627) (Fig. 38) made in Dresden and belonging to Johann Georg I, duke of Saxony and elector (1585–1656), depicts on the left inside shutter Abraham's sacrifice of Ishmael, *Agar ancilla ab Abraham dimittitur cum puero* (Agar the maid is dismissed by Abraham with her boy) and on the right, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, *Abraham parentus offeret fillium suum Isaac in sacrificium domini* (Abraham, as a parent, will offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord). A hand-coloured woodcut (1700) (Fig. 40) by Albert Schmidt, a German publisher of popular prints and playing cards from Augsburg, represented various scenes from the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac with cut-out characters; from the way the characters are portrayed, it appears that this sheet was intended to be cut up and used in performance in conjunction with a text. It is thought this item represents an early form of German toy theatre. A walnut writing desk (c. 1600) (Fig. 41) made with inlaid ivory from Pesaro in Italy includes on the inside lid a scene of the crucifixion, and on the outside six scenes from the Old Testament, including the sacrifice of Isaac; the medallions on the top were copied from engravings of biblical subjects by Etienne Delaune (1518–95). The last illustration is an item of jewellery, a clock watch of cast and pierced engraved gilt brass (Fig. 42), made in England sometime between c. 1600–1610<sup>47</sup> by T. Chamberlain; the engraving details the climactic point of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac from Gen. 22.10–12. These items highlight the importance of this biblical story in Catholic countries during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

47. This period coincides with the death of Queen Elizabeth I and the reign of King James VI and I of England, Ireland and Scotland (1603–25), who was a Roman Catholic.



Fig. 37.



Fig. 38.



Fig. 39.



Fig. 40.

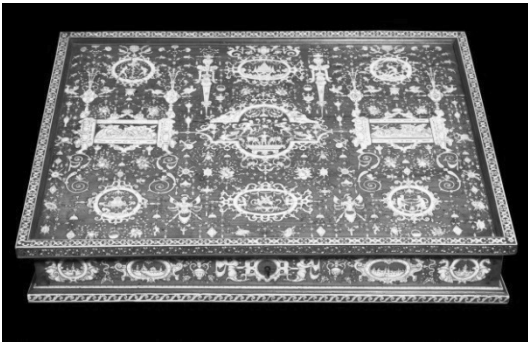


Fig. 41.



Fig. 42.

Fig. 37. Hans Kraut, *Lead-glazed earthenware stove depicting various religious and mythical scenes* (1577). Black Forest, Germany. Photo credit: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig. 38. Possibly by Gottfried Fritzsche, *Positive Organ* (1627), *Abraham, Isaac, Hagar, Ishmael*. Duke Johann Georg I of Saxony, Dresden, Germany. Photo credit: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig. 39. *Linen damask: Abraham with three scenes with sacrifice of Isaac* (1580–99). Photo credit: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig. 40. *Woodcut-printed sheet, coloured by hand, showing various people in the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac including Isaac in three different positions, Abraham in two different positions, a donkey, three angels and the ram in the thicket* (1700). Augsburg, Germany. Photo credit: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig. 41. Etienne Delaune (engraver), *Walnut writing desk inlaid with engraved bone decoration, emblazoned with arms of Francesco Maria II, duke of Urbino and decorated with grotesques and stories from the Bible* (1600). Pesaro. Photo credit: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig. 42. *Clock-watch of cast and pierced engraved gilt brass with a silver dial, engraved with 'The Sacrifice of Isaac', with a dial showing the age of the moon, days of the month and hours, movement signed John Chamberlain* (1600–10). London. Photo credit: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Sarah's death (Gen. 23.1) and its connection to the story of Isaac's sacrifice are rarely, if ever, represented in Christian art and literature, and never in Western art music. But there is one sixteenth-century artefact, an enamel casket, that is, a jewellery box (Fig. 43), which juxtaposes the scenes in two panels on one side of the case: the scene of the climactic point of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.10–12) is illustrated on the arched top alongside the scene of Sarah's burial on the lower rectangular side and based imaginatively on Gen. 23.2. The latter depicts Sarah's shrouded body being lowered into a casket as Abraham and other mourners stand by; the figure sitting to the right of the casket and whose hand covers his face is possibly Isaac. The scene in the top right-hand corner illustrates Rebekah's meeting with Isaac (Gen. 24.64–65) before their marriage (v. 67) in the aftermath of Sarah's death.

### *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*

#### *Rome*

Without the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic response to this event, that is, the Counter-Reformation, the world would be devoid of some of the greatest music ever composed. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a proliferation of music based on



Fig. 43. Attributed to Susanne de Court after Etienne Delaune (c. 1600), *Painted Limoges enamel casket*: copper, rectangular with an arched top; mounted in a modern gilt metal frame on wood; signed; painted in semi-opaque enamels over a white preparation, translucent enamels over colored foils and chalky white grisaille with details in gilding. Made of seven panels, showing scenes from the story of Abraham and Isaac as told in Genesis: Abraham and Abimelech feasting at Beersheba; Abraham's transactions with Abimelech at Gerar; birth of Esau and Jacob; casting forth of Hagar and Ishmael; sacrifice of Isaac; burial of Sara; Rebekah meeting Isaac. Photo credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

the story of the sacrifice of Isaac composed by Catholic composers and librettists, and with no musical compositions on this narrative composed by Protestant composers. Owing to a papal ban, oratorios were performed without costumes and stage-action every Friday during the Lenten season when theatres were forced to close. The content of Italian oratorios reflected some of the many reforms and doctrines of the Council of Trent (1545–63); through this medium, librettists and composers openly rejected one or more of Luther's teachings. As a musical form, the oratorio had its origins in the oratorio or prayer hall of St Philip Neri (1515–95). Known as the Apostle of Rome and one of the most influential figures of the Counter-Reformation, he enriched and renewed the

church from within with acts of practical charity to the poor, needy and infirm. Neri established the Congregation of the Oratory (Congregazione dell' Oratorio) in Rome in the oratory of S. Girolamo della Carità. This new community, made up of secular priests who lived under obedience but bound by no religious vows, was approved as a religious order by Pope Gregory XIII in 1575. On this occasion, Pope Gregory presented to the new community the dilapidated twelfth-century church of Santa Maria in Vallicella; the Oratorians rebuilt the brick oratorio beside the church to a design by architect Francesco Borromini (1637–52) (Fig. 44). When the church eventually reopened it was dubbed Chiesa Nuova (New Church), a name by which it is known today. The community met regularly in the oratory of the church, that is, the prayer hall for informal spiritual meetings or spiritual exercises for men and boys, which included prayers, scripture readings, discussion, meditation and music, that is, the singing of sacred dialogue motets and *lauda spirituale* (*laude*) composed by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–94) among others. Later, the term 'oratorio' was coined to describe the musical performances presented at such prayer meetings.



Fig. 44. Oratorio dei Filippini. Piazza della Chiesa Nuova, Rome. Photo credit: © Commons GNU/Jensens.

The earliest printed extant libretto bearing the title 'oratorio' is one based on the story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.1-19).<sup>48</sup> The poet Francesco Balducci (1579-1642)<sup>49</sup> had written this libretto, entitled *La fede: oratorio*, published posthumously in his second volume of *Rime* (Rome, 1645-47).<sup>50</sup> *La fede: oratorio* is a narrative-dramatic poem consisting of 450 lines divided in two parts labelled *Parte prima* and *Parte seconda*. The poem consists of roles for Abraham, Isaac, a narrator (*Historicus*), a chorus of virgins and a chorus of sages. Cessac notes that in this poem, Balducci gave increasing importance to the narrative part.<sup>51</sup> By the 1660s, the designation 'oratorio' had become the established term for the musical genre.<sup>52</sup> Smither defined the characteristics of Italian oratorio during this period as having a two-part structure, alternations of poetic metres intended for recitative and aria (as in *opera seria*), few choruses and ensembles, and biblical or hagiographical subject matter.<sup>53</sup> Two types of oratorio developed in Rome in the seventeenth century, the *oratorio volgare*, which had evolved from the *laudi* of Philip Neri, and the *oratorio latino*, which had evolved from the dialogue motet. The two oratorios differed in text rather than in musical expression. The poetic text of the *oratorio volgare* was written in Italian; two such examples are Camilla de Rossi's *Il sacrificio di Abramo* and Pietro Metastasio's *Isacco, figura del Redentore*. The *oratorio latino* employed narrative and dramatic texts, similar to motets, and was set predominantly in Latin prose. Anderson points out that only a learned and/or aristocratic audience would have understood Latin; for this reason, this type of oratorio was regularly performed in the Oratorio del SS Crocifisso (Fig. 33).<sup>54</sup>

There was a proliferation of paintings in Rome and elsewhere during the seventeenth century on the theme of Isaac's sacrifice, highlighting the scene from Gen. 22.10-12. Caravaggio painted two renditions, one at the end of the sixteenth century (1598) and another at the beginning of the seventeenth century (1603) (see Fig. 22), around the same time as Carissimi's *Historia Abraham et Isaac* (precise date unknown). The latter, housed in the Uffizi in Florence, was commissioned by Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, who later became Pope Urban VII in 1623 and was noted for

48. Pietro Della Valle (1586-1652) documented in a letter written in 1640 the earliest use of the term 'oratorio' to denote a musical composition.

49. Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio: Oratorio in the Classical Era* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), III, p. 7.

50. The precise date of composition remains unknown, however, Smither speculates that Balducci may have written this libretto before his death in 1642. Howard Smither, 'Carissimi's Latin Oratorio', *AnMc* 17 (1976), pp. 54-78 (65).

51. Cessac, *Marc-Antoine Charpentier*, p. 267.

52. Smither, 'Carissimi's Latin Oratorio', p. 64.

53. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio: Oratorio in the Classical Era*, III, p. 4.

54. Nicholas Anderson, *Baroque Music: From Monteverdi to Handel* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), p. 84.



his patronage of the arts and his practice of nepotism. He was responsible for bringing Athanasius Kircher to Rome and issued a papal bull for the canonization of the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola. Based on Gen. 22.10-12, Caravaggio's *Sacrifice of Isaac* highlights the violence of the scene from Isaac's perspective: his look of terror and silent scream, together with the quiet obedience of his father, Abraham, poised in readiness to kill his son, evoke an unsettling emotional response in viewers who are now witnesses to the violent scene of God's command to Abraham. This scene was painted also by Northern-Netherlandish painters on a number of occasions, by painters such as Rembrandt. Unlike Caravaggio's later rendition, Rembrandt shields Isaac's face from the viewer and allows the knife to fall from the distraught father's hand (see Fig. 23); in another depiction such as the print below, *Abraham caressing Isaac*, (Fig. 45) Rembrandt portrays Abraham as a loving father.



Fig. 45. Rembrandt van Rijn, print, *Abraham caressing Isaac*.  
 Seated old man with young boy between his knees holding apple (1637).  
 Photo credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Northern-Netherlandish painter Jan Lievens, who like Rembrandt was a student of Pieter Pieterszoon Lastman, painted a scene rarely depicted, that of Abraham and Isaac embracing in the aftermath of the sacrifice as they listen to God's voice recounting the promises (Fig. 46); the blood and partial dead remains of the ram are depicted to the left of

Abraham and Isaac, as the sacrificial fire burns in readiness to receive its remains.



Fig. 46. Jan Lievens, *Abraham's Offering* (1637).  
Photo credit: © SuperStock/Getty Images.

In the eighteenth century, David Teniers the Younger depicted Abraham and Isaac kneeling beside the alighted sacrificial offering (Fig. 47). Abraham, whose arms encircle Isaac, joins his son in a prayer of thanksgiving to God, who is represented by a ray of light, while the servant boys in the background appear oblivious to the ensuing events on Mount Moriah.

### *Jesuits*

The Jesuits, like the Oratorians, sponsored the composition and performances of oratorios for the propagation of the faith and the religious and moral instruction of the Catholic faithful. Cessac notes that the Jesuit Collegio Germanico was one of the greatest Roman Catholic educational institutions, and from the late sixteenth century onward it was also one of the major centres of the Counter-Reformation.<sup>55</sup> Based upon

55. Cessac, *Marc-Antoine Charpentier*, p. 29.

the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the Jesuits in Rome and elsewhere<sup>56</sup> attempted to engage the whole person through the combined forces of the imagination and the senses. Gosine and Oland point out that within their church-centred society, seventeenth-century Jesuits practiced ‘enculturation by adopting secular artistic practices of the culture as a means of evangelizing and exploiting the ideals of devout humanism’.<sup>57</sup> Gosine and Oland note that the three primary principles of the Ciceronian art of rhetoric were at the heart of this culture of sacred eloquence, namely, to teach (*docere*), to delight (*delectare*) and to move (*movere*);<sup>58</sup> similarly, composers sought to entice, entertain and delight the Catholic faithful while teaching them about the central tenets of Catholicism. Jesuit priests reinforced the moral significance of the biblical story through the art of pulpit rhetoric; sermons based on biblical stories emphasized the moral virtues of biblical characters, who, like their Catholic counterparts during the Reformation, faced threats to their lives and heritage.

They enticed people into churches during the Lenten season by employing children as young as six years old to recite a sermon before the singing of the oratorio. Following the ‘intermission’ between Parts I and II of a given oratorio, a Jesuit priest would give a sermon based upon the musical setting of the biblical story. Charles Burney, writing about one such Lenten service in the Chiesa Nuova, recounts the following:<sup>59</sup>

and then a little boy, not above six years old, mounted the pulpit, and delivered a discourse, by way of sermon which he had got by heart, and which was rendered ridiculous by the vehicle through which it passed. The oratorio of Abigail, set to music by Signor Casali was then performed.....

. . . Between the two parts of this oratorio, there was a sermon by a Jesuit, delivered from the same pulpit from whence the child had defended. I waited to hear the last chorus, which though it was sung by book, was as light and as unmeaning as an opera chorus. With respect to a true opera chorus in the manner of Handel’s, I heard but few all the time I was in Italy.

Catholic rhetoric found its way into images that adorned the walls of Jesuit churches; Jesuit scholars realized the powerful effects painting and music had on the imaginations of those in attendance at a concert of

56. The Jesuits educated successive generations of Holy Roman Emperors from the Habsburg court in Vienna.

57. Jane C. Gosine and Erik Oland, ‘*Docere, delectare, movere*: Marc-Antoine Charpentier and Jesuit Spirituality’, *EMu* 32.4 (2004), pp. 511–39 (513).

58. Gosine and Oland, ‘*Docere, delectare, movere*’, p. 520.

59. Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* (London: Becket & Co., 1773), pp. 375–78.



Fig. 47. Print made by Andreas Altomonte after David Teniers the Younger of paintings from a series of reproductions of the Electoral Gallery of Paintings in Vienna (1728). *Theatrum artis pictoriae, Abraham's Sacrifice*. Photo credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

music in an oratory or church when surrounded by visual images from paintings of biblical scenes.

### *France*

Carissimi's French student, Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1643–1704), who was in Rome from c. 1667 to 1669, was renowned for bringing the oratorio to France, although he never employed this term when referring to his works. Buelow notes that Charpentier was the only French composer of his generation to compose in the genre.<sup>60</sup> He was *Maître de Musique* at the principal church of the Jesuits in Paris, St Louis, and in his last five years at the Sainte Chapelle. Gosine and Oland note that in France, the Jesuits were an important force in transmitting the ideals

60. Buelow, *A History of Baroque Music*, p. 179.

and teachings of the Counter-Reformation through the combined forces of rhetoric, theatrical excitement and visual piety.<sup>61</sup> Charpentier composed two compositions based upon the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.1-19): of his fourteen *historiae*, he set to music three subjects formerly treated by Carissimi: *Extremum Dei iudicium*, *Sacrificium Abraham*, and *Judicium Salomonis*.<sup>62</sup> Charpentier also composed *Méditations pour la Carême*,<sup>63</sup> a cycle of brief motet-like works for three male voices and continuo for a performance during Lent. Hitchcock notes that these motets are a kind of musical *Via dolorosa*, recounting the story of Christ's passion and death.<sup>64</sup> Charpentier based the tenth meditation, *Tentavit Deus Abraham* (H. 389), upon the story of Abraham's sacrifice on Genesis 22 as a christological reflection on Christ's sacrificial death. This composition ends at the point of the descriptive pause (Gen. 22.10) in order to provoke listener reflection on the christological significance of Isaac's near sacrifice as an innocent victim.

### Vienna

The Habsburg court,<sup>65</sup> more than any other institution or imperial court in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries promoted a christological interpretation of Genesis 22 in music through the musical genres of *sepulcri* and oratorio. This Catholic dynasty, led by the Holy Roman Emperor, ruled for over five centuries beginning in the fifteenth century. Although its origins are traced back to Rudolph I of Germany (1218–91), Frederick III was elected king by German prince-electors in 1440 and was the first to be crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Nicholas V; his grandson Charles V, who was the last emperor to be crowned by a pope (Clement VII in Bologna), presided over the Diet of Worms (1521). Each subsequent Holy Roman Emperor was a loyal defender of the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation and

61. Gosine and Oland, 'Docere, delectare, movere', p. 513.

62. H. Wiley Hitchcock, 'The Latin Oratorios of Marc-Antoine Charpentier', *MQ* 41.1 (1955), pp. 41–65 (43).

63. First meditation: the desolation of the world; second meditation: the prayer of the sinner; third meditation: Jesus announces his imminent death to his disciples; fourth meditation: Judas's betrayal; fifth meditation: Peter's denial; sixth meditation: Jesus before Pilate; seventh meditation: death of Jesus on the cross; eighth meditation: lament of the Virgin Mary; ninth meditation: lament of Mary Magdalene; tenth meditation: the sacrifice of Abraham. Cf. Cessac, *Marc-Antoine Charpentier*, p. 256.

64. H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Marc-Antoine Charpentier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 49.

65. Schulenberg points out that under the terms of the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War in 1648, each ruler had the right to impose his or her faith on those who lived under his or her rule. The inhabitants of Austria, northern Italy, and Bohemia were Roman Catholics like the emperor who reigned over them. See David Schulenberg, *Music of the Baroque* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 4.

sponsored the production of the arts as propaganda in the war against Protestantism. The period 1705 to 1740 was a golden age for the composition and performance of oratorios in Vienna during the reigns of Holy Roman Emperors Joseph I (1705–11) and Charles VI (1711–40). Leopold I (1658–1705) was one of the first to compose a *sepolcro* on the story of the sacrifice of Isaac.

Camilla de Rossi, whose oratorio *volgare*, *Il sacrificio di Abramo*,<sup>66</sup> I discuss briefly in Chapter 6, worked at the Habsburg court during the reign of Emperor Joseph I (1705–11); not much else is known about her life, except that she was of Roman extraction. From 1707 to 1710, she had one oratorio *volgare* performed every year at the Habsburg court.<sup>67</sup> Garvey Jackson characterizes de Rossi's oratorios as having a two-part structure, both of which open with a *sinfonia*, *da capo* arias that alternate with passages of *secco recitativo*, occasional duets, a final ensemble of soloists and no chorus; many of these characteristics are found in de Rossi's *Il sacrificio di Abramo*.<sup>68</sup> Four of de Rossi's oratorios have survived along with the libretti, as printed and distributed by Cosmerovius, the court publishers.<sup>69</sup> In this oratorio, her librettist, Francesco Dario, promoted Habsburg devotion to the Eucharist.

During the late eighteenth century, fewer composers set this libretto to music, and in the nineteenth century, composers rarely set the Metastasian libretto or the text of Genesis 22 to music. New developments in musical forms and orchestral instrumentation in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed to a decrease in the composition and performance of oratorios in the Italian style in Italy and Vienna. In England, Georg Frederic Handel (1685–1759) developed the English oratorio and composed a number of oratorios on biblical themes.<sup>70</sup> I often wondered why Handel never composed an oratorio based on Genesis 22 since he would have known of the existence of the Metastasian libretto. But then, Handel was a German Lutheran from Halle, and perhaps cognizant of the appropriation of Genesis 22 by the Habsburg

66. Readers can access a recording of the oratorio at the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJ67N3mPWmY> (accessed 20 December 2012).

67. De Rossi composed the following oratorios: *Santo Beatrice D'Este* (1707); *Il sacrificio d'Abramo* (1708); *Il figliuolo prodigo* (1709); *Sant' Alessio* (1710).

68. Barbara Garvey Jackson, 'Oratorio by Command of the Emperor', *CMc* 42 (1986), pp. 7–19 (8).

69. Susanne Rydén, Ralf Popken, Jan Strömberg, liner notes to Camilla de Rossi *Il sacrificio di Abramo* (Weser-Renaissance, Classic Produktion Osnabrück, 999 371–72, CD, 1996), p. 15.

70. The complete list of oratorios are as follows: *St John's Passion* (Hamburg, 1704), *La resurrezione* (Rome, 1708), *Esther* (London, 1720), *Deborah* (1733), *Saul* (London, 1739), *Israel in Egypt* (1739), *Messiah* (Dublin, 1742), *Samson* (London, 1743), *Joseph and his Brothers* (London, 1743), *Belshazzar* (London, 1744), *Judas Maccabeus* (London, 1747), *Alexander Balus* (London, 1747), *Joshua* (London, 1747), *Solomon* (London, 1748), *Susanna* (London, 1748) and *Jephtha* (London, 1752).

court. Furthermore, in England, where Handel composed many of his oratorios, Catholics were in the minority, and their civil rights seriously curtailed, following two centuries of persecution. It is no wonder, then, that in this climate of hostility, Handel thought best to leave this text alone.

### Twentieth Century

While the narrative witnessed a general decline in nineteenth-century musical settings and artistic representations, there were two notable oratorio compositions by German composers, Wilhelm Bernard Molique (1803–69)<sup>71</sup> and Martin Traugott Wilhelm Blumner (1827–1901), based on major events in the life of Abraham. Each oratorio treated Isaac's near sacrifice at the end of the work and focused on the primacy of Abraham. In a manner similar to Carissimi's *Historia* and Metastasio's *Isacco*, Molique's *Abraham*, Op. 65,<sup>72</sup> which was rendered in English, concludes with a lively duet for Abraham and Isaac celebrating Isaac's deliverance based on Lam. 3.22, 25; Ps. 116.3, 6; and Ps. 34.6 (Ex. 4).

**Nº. 42. Duo.**

Allegro  $\text{♩} = 76$ .

Isaac.

Abraham.

PIANOFORTE.

It is of the Lord's great mer - cies that  
Die Gun.de des Her - ren ma - chet, dass

It is of the Lord's great mer - cies that we are not — con.  
Die Gun.de des Her - ren ma - chet, dass wir — noch sind — am

we are not — con, — cu, mod,  
wir noch sind — am Le ben.

Ex. 4. Wilhelm Bernard Molique, *Abraham*, no. 42, duet

71. Readers can listen to the aria 'Pour out thy heart to the Lord' from the oratorio *Abraham* at the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-ODMmD6zoA> (accessed 12 December 2012).

72. The score may be accessed at the following link: <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015023377131;page=root;view=1up;size=100;seq=216;orient=0;num=198> (accessed 12 December 2012).

During this time, there were no other works of great significance created either in music, art, textile or furniture. However, in the twentieth century, there was a revival of interest among composers in setting the story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.1-19) to music, especially in the aftermath of World War II, when approximately 73 million individuals died in the war between the Axis and Allied powers, including six million Jews in the Holocaust. Benjamin Britten was one of the first composers to set to music Wilfred Owen's war poem from World War I, 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' (1918) in the *Offertorium* movement of the *War Requiem* (1962).<sup>73</sup> This poem, which I discuss in Chapter 7, commemorates the sacrifice and death of tens of millions of young soldiers from the Great War (1914-18). But there is no composition based on Genesis 22 that commemorates the loss of life from the concentration camps; in fact, the period after the atrocities marked a great silence in general, with no compositions composed on the narrative in music or depicted in art. While six million Jews perished during the Holocaust, other victims included Catholic priests, bishops, seminarians, religious brothers and sisters, and ministers from other denominations; in Dachau, priests were housed in a 'priest block' and suffered brutal persecution at the hands of the SS; victims also perished in Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen, and Buchenwald, among other places. Maximilian Kolbe (1894-1941) and Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, known also as Edith Stein (1891-1942), both died in Auschwitz and are regarded as martyrs and saints of the Roman Catholic Church.

Britten had written the *War Requiem* for a concert marking the re-consecration of Coventry Cathedral following its destruction in an air raid attack by the Luftwaffe<sup>74</sup> on 14 November 1940. Dedicated to the memory of four friends killed in action,<sup>75</sup> the première took place in Coventry Cathedral on 30 May 1962.<sup>76</sup> As a committed pacifist, Britten had written the *Requiem* as 'a call for peace', and as a symbol of reconciliation among the nations. To represent the nations of England, Germany and Russia, Britten scored the vocal parts for the English tenor Peter

73. To hear a performance of the *Offertorium* from the *War Requiem* by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (1989) go to the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ep8-VRRdVA4> (accessed 12 December 2012).

74. The Battle of Britain was a major air campaign waged by the Luftwaffe against the RAF, fought between the 10 July and 31 October 1940; the Luftwaffe lost the battle.

75. Roger Burney, Sub-Lieutenant, Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve; Piers Dunkerley, Captain, Royal Marines; David Gill, Ordinary Seaman, Royal Navy; Michael Halliday, Lieutenant, Royal New Zealand Volunteer Reserve. Piers Dunkerley survived the war but committed suicide in 1959.

76. Britten conducted the chamber orchestra along with those performers who sang Wilfred Owen's settings, namely, tenor Peter Pears and baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, while Meredith Davies conducted the full orchestra, chorus, the boys' choir, and the soprano, Heather Harper.



Pears, German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya.<sup>77</sup> Ten years prior to this Britten had written *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac* (1952)<sup>78</sup> on the suggestion of his colleague, Eric Crozier, who had given the composer a copy of the Chester plays some years before, hoping the collection might be useful for a musical setting. A few years later Britten used this source as the basis for his libretto *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, and returned to the same source again in 1958 for the children's opera *Noye's Fludde*, Op. 59 (1957).

The reception of Genesis 22 in music during this period received a variety of treatments: with one or two exceptions, composer-librettists generally declined from interpreting the story from a christological perspective. Some subverted the account of Abraham's faithful obedience to God's command to emphasize the sacrificial nature of Isaac's death, and others over-sensationalized the story with extrabiblical details, while still others set music to the story's Hebrew text without any embellishment. The Italian composer Ildebrando Pizzetti (1880–1968), was, to my knowledge, the first composer of renown from the twentieth century to compose an *opera sacra*, *La sacra rappresentazione di Abramo ed Isac*, based upon Feo Belcari's play text by the same name. Initially he composed incidental music based on Genesis 22 for a stage production in 1926, and followed this with a sung version in 1937.

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971), who reaffirmed his Russian Orthodox faith in 1923, set the Hebrew text of Gen. 22.1–19 to music as a Sacred Ballad for Baritone and Chamber Orchestra. He completed *Abraham and Isaac* in March 1963,<sup>79</sup> and dedicated it to the people of the state of Israel, where the work premiered. The idea for the Hebrew setting of this text came initially from the Russian-born composer and friend of Stravinsky, Nicholas Nabokov (1903–78). Since Stravinsky had no knowledge of Hebrew, he sought the assistance of Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909–97). Berlin set about reading the Hebrew text to Stravinsky, transliterated it into phonetic Russian to enable Stravinsky to grasp the text's accents, stresses and pronunciation, translated it into English following the exact word order and syntax of the Hebrew, and, finally, transliterated the

77. Due to Cold War tensions, the Russian Minister of Culture refused Vishnevskaya permission to travel. Heather Harper replaced her twelve days before the concert. See Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 409.

78. To hear a performance of *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, which was recorded at Aldeburg in 1977 and performed by Peter Pears, Janet Baker and Graham Johnson, go to the following link: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkIcsT\\_fjAI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkIcsT_fjAI) (accessed 12 December 2012).

79. To hear a performance of *Abraham and Isaac* by Stravinsky go to the following link: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfDsVi1RM5Y&playnext=1&list=PL0F43E4FA6FC99D17&feature=results\\_main](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfDsVi1RM5Y&playnext=1&list=PL0F43E4FA6FC99D17&feature=results_main) (accessed 12 December 2012).

Hebrew text into phonetic English.<sup>80</sup> Despite the translation, Stravinsky stated, 'no translation of the Hebrew should ever be attempted, as the syllables, both as accentuation and timbre, are a precisely fixed and principal element of the music'.<sup>81</sup> He pointed out that the verbal and musical accentuations in his composition were identical, a rare occurrence in his music.<sup>82</sup>

Young notes that although the biblical text contains dialogue, Stravinsky had written the music in such a way that the baritone narrator did not have to impersonate the biblical characters; instead, the baritone sings in a manner similar to a Hebrew cantor, who cantillates the biblical text in a synagogue setting.<sup>83</sup> Griffiths notes that Stravinsky incorporated 'repetitions, melismas, ululations, and reiterated notes in the melodic line' to evoke the sound of 'Jewish chant'.<sup>84</sup> Changes of tessitura and dynamics distinguish the speakers throughout the composition.<sup>85</sup> God and the angel are identified by a high tessitura, and by the fact that their commands are related to the note C-sharp.<sup>86</sup> Stravinsky did not employ word painting in this composition; he did, however, highlight certain words or phrases by stating them twice, or by intentionally stressing a given note through melisma or a stress mark above the note of the word in question. In the example below, one can see that Stravinsky's musical text states 'thine only one' and 'Isaac' twice. For added emphasis, he sets Isaac's name to a melisma, along with stress marks on the second syllable of *Yitzkhak*. In this example, stress marks also highlight the following words: 'take', 'son', 'only one', 'lovest' and 'land'. Stravinsky never dramatized the text in any way for fear of distracting listeners' attention from the words of the sacred biblical text.

Susan Hulsman Bingham (b. 1944), a Christian composer from the American Episcopal Church, draws upon Midrashim in her (chancel) liturgical opera *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1980). She notes that her mini-chancel operas are suitable for use in Jewish and Christian worship, to replace the sermon in a service of worship. She suggests that performances in a Christian church might take place in the chancel, that is, the elevated area approaching the altar, between the choir stalls; and that performances in reformed synagogues might take place before the congregation near the *bima*. Bingham formed the Children's and Liturgical

80. Claudio Spies, 'Notes on Stravinsky's *Abraham and Isaac*', PNM 3.2 (1965), pp. 104-206 (104).

81. Anthony Payne, 'Stravinsky's "Abraham and Isaac" and Elegy for J.F.K.', *Tempo* 73 (1965), pp. 12-15 (13).

82. Paul Griffiths, *Stravinsky* (London: Dent, 1992), p. 185.

83. Douglas Young, '1964: Abraham and Isaac', *Tempo* 97 (1971), pp. 27-37 (28).

84. Griffiths, *Stravinsky*, p. 185.

85. Young, '1964: Abraham and Isaac', p. 29.

86. Young, '1964: Abraham and Isaac', p. 29.

Opera LLC, formerly known as the Chancel Opera Company, in 1974; it evolved from her interest in nurturing the spiritual development of children through music. Her company regularly goes on tour to schools and churches to perform these works with appropriate props, lighting and costumes. The repertoire includes eighteen sermon-like liturgical operas, several anthems, psalm settings and motets. As with the mystery plays, Bingham has drawn up a liturgical calendar for the most appropriate time for the performance of a given work. She recommends that performances of the opera based on 'The Sacrifice of Isaac' take place on Good Friday during Year A, B, and C of the church's calendar, as well as in Lent during cycle B, and for the Easter Vigil and Proper II, that is, the Sunday closest to 20 July, during cycle C. Bingham based her chancel opera 'The Sacrifice of Isaac' on Gen. 18.1-15; 21.6-7; 22.1-18, along with texts from Psalms 6; 33; 51; 127 and Hab. 3.17-19. Bingham set the work for solo voices—Sarah (mezzo-soprano), Abraham (baritone), Isaac (soprano) and three angels who sing God's words (three tenors or alternatively sopranos)—to a piano accompaniment. Bingham was more intent on setting the dramatic, violent aspect of this story with fictitious gap filling than on highlighting the tropological sense of Genesis 22 with children in mind.

The story of the sacrifice of Isaac has enjoyed many settings in popular music since the 1960s, most notably by two Jewish songwriters and performers: It was popularly set by American singer-songwriter Joan Baez (b. 1941) in *Abraham and Isaac* from the album *Play Me Backwards* (1992),<sup>87</sup> and in more recent times by Sufijan Stevens (b. 1975) in the song *Abraham* from the album *Seven Swans* (2004);<sup>88</sup> Madonna (b. 1958) in *Isaac* from the album *Confessions on a Dance Floor*;<sup>89</sup> Anais Mitchell (b. 1981) in *Abraham's Dyin' Day* from the album *Young Man in America* (2012);<sup>90</sup> and *Abraham's Daughter* by Arcade Fire from the 2012 blockbuster teen movie *The Hunger Games* and background track to the video game.<sup>91</sup> In the latter, the story is told from the imaginary perspective of Abraham's daughter, a non-biblical character invented by the songwriter, who secretly followed her father and brother up a 'lonesome hill' and raised her bow in an attempt to save Isaac's life. This recent setting of the story

87. To hear a performance of *Abraham and Isaac* by Joan Baez go to the following link: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XU5h02mWipk&playnext=1&list=PL5FBA340764B3C648&feature=results\\_video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XU5h02mWipk&playnext=1&list=PL5FBA340764B3C648&feature=results_video) (accessed 12 December 2012).

88. To hear a performance of the song *Abraham* go to the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxMFI-IARGg> (accessed 12 December 2012).

89. To hear a performance of *Isaac* go to the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQ5scNPGlwU> (accessed 20 January 2013).

90. To hear a performance of *Dyin' Day* go to the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1KG7jsaTrM> (accessed 12 December 2012).

91. To see and hear the music video go to the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKh9-ybJ7tE> (accessed 20 January 2013).

was heard across the world in cinemas, and on radio and over the Internet. In the twenty-first century, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac continues to enjoy widespread dissemination via the internet where it is easily accessed for download onto multimedia devices.

### *Conclusion*

This narrative was and is one of the most popular biblical stories in Christian tradition, in art, and music, in the Liturgy of the Word, the *Offertorium* of the *Requiem*, and in the celebration of the Mass and other liturgical services. It enjoyed a rich cultural afterlife in the manuscript tradition, in tapestry, embroidery, textile, furniture and jewellery, among other artefacts. One cannot underestimate the impact history of this story on various musical interpretations down through the centuries. In general, the primacy of Abraham is given prominence, and with the exception of one composition, Isaac is relegated to his father's shadow. Apart from a few examples in music, Sarah remains notably absent, and her death is rarely, if ever, juxtaposed to the account of Isaac's near sacrifice by his father, Abraham. The musical compositions in Part II shed interesting light on the degree to which each biblical character participated in the story, if at all. In general, the themes of obedience, faithfulness and the promise of eternal life outweigh the prominence given to the theme of violence perpetrated either by God himself or by Abraham. While some musical compositions shed light on the more problematic themes raised by the story, others continue to reflect a more traditional christological interpretation.

## THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC IN MEDIAEVAL MYSTERY PLAYS

Before the advent of oratorios and operas in the sixteenth century, the art form with the greatest emotional impact was the stage. The dramatization of the 'Sacrifice of Isaac', according to Davidson, could 'shock and disturb an audience much more than a mere picture when presented by living actors who would make the past seem as if real in the mimetic representation involved in their acting'.<sup>1</sup> This story of the sacrifice of Isaac was first dramatized in the mediaeval mystery plays<sup>2</sup> where its retelling impacted greatly on the story's reception in music down through the ages to the present day. Twentieth-century composers Benjamin Britten,<sup>3</sup> Judith Lang Zaimont, Igor Stravinsky<sup>4</sup> and Ildebrando Pizzetti based their libretti on the story of Isaac's sacrifice from mediaeval play-texts. For *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, Britten adapted Play 4, 'Abraham and Isaac', from the Chester pageant, and in a similar man-

1. Clifford Davidson, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac in Mediaeval English Drama', *JLL* 35.1 (1999), pp. 28-55 (38).

2. Plays that dramatize the stories of saints are termed miracle plays whereas plays that dramatize biblical stories are called mystery plays.

3. I am grateful to Dr Andrew Plant from the Britten-Pears Foundation for pointing out that Britten's colleague Eric Crozier had given the composer a copy of the Chester plays some years before, hoping the collection might be useful for a musical setting. A few years later Britten used this source as the basis for his libretto *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac* (1952). Britten returned to the same source in 1958 for the children's opera *Noye's Fludde*. Britten consulted Alfred W. Pollard's edition of *English Miracle Plays Moralities and Interludes: Edited with an Introduction, Notes, and Glossary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).

4. Robert Craft points out that T.S. Eliot had drawn Stravinsky's attention to the mystery plays by giving him a copy of the following paperback edition: A.C. Cawley (ed.), *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (New York: Dutton, 1959), presently included in a catalogue of the composer's books and music. In this edition, as in the chronology of Stravinsky's compositions, Abraham and Isaac follows Noah's flood. Craft speculates that Stravinsky may have used this literary source as the basis for his musical setting of 'The Flood' and 'The Sacrifice of Isaac'. See the Appendix in 'Selected Source Material from "A Catalogue of Books and Music Inscribed to and/or Autographed and Annotated by Igor Stravinsky"' compiled and annotated by Robert Craft', in Jann Pasler (ed.), *Confronting Stravinsky: Man, Musician and Modernist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948; repr. 1976), p. 352.

ner, Judith Lang Zaimont used an adaptation of text from the Brome play in *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*. Ildebrando Pizzetti set music to Feo Belcari's *La sacra rappresentazione di Abramo ed Isac* on two occasions, composing incidental music for a stage production in 1926 and an oratorio in 1937. The works of seventeenth-century Italian composer Giacomo Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, and Camilla de Rossi's *Il Sacrificio de Abramo*, suggest a familiarity with *La sacra rappresentazione di Abramo ed Isac*<sup>5</sup> by the renowned Florentine poet Feo Belcari (1410–84); this play enjoyed a wide circulation in its manuscripts and printed version between c. 1485 and 1600.<sup>6</sup> Given the striking resemblance in storyline between libretto *Isacco, figura del Redentore* and *La sacra rappresentazione di Abramo ed Isac*, one might speculate also that Pietro Metastasio was familiar with Belcari's play-text.

Mediaeval mystery plays were written in the vernacular, in verse form, and performed originally in Latin by the clergy as a dramatic way of teaching the Bible and Christian doctrine to a largely illiterate audience. The content of the cycle spanned the entire spectrum of salvation history from the fall of the angels to the Last Judgment. Leah Sinanoglou notes that for most of their history the plays were associated with the feast of Corpus Christi;<sup>7</sup> the imagery and symbolism within the Chester *Abraham and Isaac* pageant reflects this association, with its overt sacramental motifs linking Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine to the Eucharist, and the sacrifice of Isaac as Christ to the sacrifice of Christ's body and blood in the celebration of the Mass. Later, the plays became detached from the feast, and, for some unknown reason,<sup>8</sup> the performance of cycles transferred to Whitsun, with the play cycle divided into three parts. In line with this development, records<sup>9</sup> show

5. Feo Belcari dedicated this play to Giovanni, son of Cosimo di Medici.

6. Lynette Muir citing A. Cioni notes that there were twenty-two editions of Belcari's *Abramo ed Isac* during this time. See Lynette Muir, *The Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 213; A. Cioni, *Bibliografia delle sacre rappresentazioni* (Biblioteca bibliografia Italiana, 22; Florence), p. 961.

7. Whereas Sinanoglou holds that the content and orientation of the plays reflect the liturgy of the feast of Corpus Christi, Rosemary Woolf contends that originally the plays became attached not to the office but to the Corpus Christi procession. Cf. Leah Sinanoglou, 'The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the Corpus Christi Plays', *Speculum* 48.3 (1973), pp. 491–509 (500); Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 72.

8. David Mills states that it is not known why the plays were transferred to Whitsun or why they were divided into three parts. See David Mills, 'The Chester Cycle', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* (ed. Richard Beadle; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 116.

9. Records dating from 1521 show that the Chester cycle became known as the 'Whitsun playe', and subsequent records indicate that performances had taken place on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Whitsun week. See Mills, 'The Chester Cycle', p. 116.

that the Chester cycle was performed over three days, with the *Abraham and Isaac* pageant taking place on the first day.<sup>10</sup> Within this tripartite framework, Mills notes that each day focused on a specific person of the Trinity: Day One on the interventions of God the Father, Day Two the incarnation of God the Son, and Day Three on the coming of God the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

Following an edict by Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) in 1210 banning the clergy from acting in public, individual craft guilds<sup>12</sup> (see Fig. 49) sponsored the production, staging and performance of the plays in the open streets. They were mounted and staged on pageant ‘waggons’, and pulled in procession to designated ‘stations’ for a performance; in this way, the whole processional route was alive with plays depicting different dramatic episodes from the Bible (Fig. 48).



Fig. 48. *Spectators watch the arrival of the wagon carrying players of the pageant play Abraham and Isaac in Duncombe Place on Saturday.*  
Picture Credit: © The Press, York.

10. The first day's performance contained plays 1–9; the second day, plays 10–17, and on the third day, plays 18–24; Mills, 'The Chester Cycle', p. 117.

11. Mills, 'The Chester Cycle', p. 118.

12. Official records from Chester (dated 1540), for example, show that the Guild of Barber Surgeons was responsible for the production and staging of the Abraham and Isaac pageant.

Play	Craft Guild
1. The Fall of Lucifer	Barkers, Tanners
2. The Creation of the World	Drapers, Hosiers
3. Noah and his Ship	Waterleaders, Drawers in the Dee
4. Abraham and Isaac	Barber Surgeons, Waxchandlers
5. Balak and Balam	Cappers, Wiredrawers, Pinners
6. The Nativity	Wheelrights, Slaters, Tylers, Daubers, Thatchers
7. The Shepherds	Painters, Glaziers, Embroiderers
8. King Herod (Adoration of the Magi)	Vintners
9. The Three Kings	Mercers, Spicers
10. Slaughter of the Innocents	Goldsmiths, Masons
11. Purification of Our Lady	Smiths, Forbers, Pewterers
12. The Temptation and Woman Taken in Adultery	Butchers
13. Raising of Lazarus	Glovers, Parchment-makers
14. The Coming of Christ to Jerusalem	Corvisars
15. The Last Supper	Grocers, Bakers, Millers
16. The Scourging of Christ	Bowyers, Fletchers, Stringers, Coopers, Turners
17. The Coming of the Antichrist	Dyers
18. The Crucifixion	Ironmongers, Ropers
19. The Resurrection	Skinners, Plastercard-makers, Hatters, Painters, Girdlers
20. Castle of Emmaus and the Apostles	Saddlers
21. The Ascension	Tailors
22. Whitsunday Making of the Creed	Fishmongers
23. Prophets before the Day of Doom	Shermen
24. Antichrist	Hewsters, Bellfounders
25. The Last Judgment	Weavers, Walkers

Fig. 49. *Chester Mystery Play Craft Guilds*. © With the kind permission of the Chester Mystery Plays Ltd.



To audiences familiar with mute artistic biblical representations, Woolf notes that biblical scenes mounted on pageant-wagons resembled 'picture frames', which must have appeared to mediaeval audiences as 'speaking pictures' (Fig. 50).<sup>13</sup>

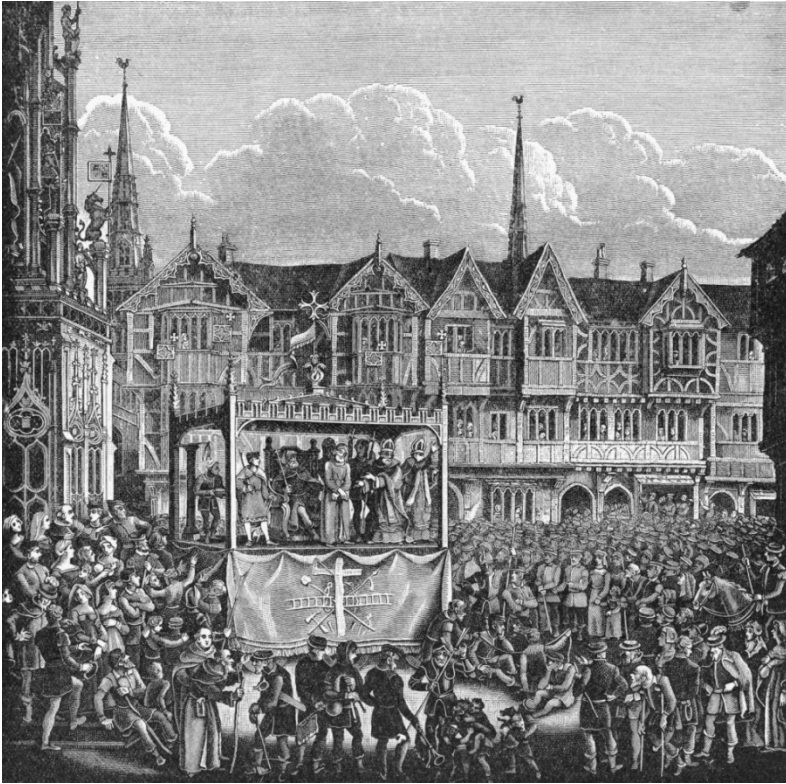


Fig. 50. *Chester Mystery Play*. Picture credit: © Lebrecht Photo Library.

The sacrifice of Isaac was one of the most popular biblical narratives dramatized for the stage in England, Italy and France; seven extant English mystery plays from the late Middle Ages, including four from the major cycles,<sup>14</sup> two non-cyclic plays,<sup>15</sup> and one of Cornish origin, based

13. Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 101.

14. The extant cycles of York, Play 10 (Parchemyners and Bokebynders), Wakefield also known as the Towneley cycle (Play 4), Chester, Play 4 (The Barber's play), N-Town also known as *Ludus Coventriae* (Play 4) have been preserved almost intact. The major cycles devoted a pageant to the story of the sacrifice of Isaac.

15. William Tydeman states that two independent plays dramatizing the story of the sacrifice of Isaac/Abraham and Isaac, namely, the Brome play and the Northampton

their storylines on the Latin Vulgate, and on the writings of the church fathers. The Chester cycle has survived intact in five manuscripts, with none dating from before 1591,<sup>16</sup> while the Brome<sup>17</sup> *Abraham and Isaac*, named after Brome Hall in Suffolk, was copied sometime after 1454. The Abraham and Isaac plays from the Brome and Chester cycle are quite similar in composition, with approximately 200 lines (out of 465 lines) of the Brome play bearing a close resemblance to corresponding lines in the Chester.<sup>18</sup> In the 1960s a debate among scholars of literature ensued to ascertain whether the Chester was the source of the Brome or vice versa;<sup>19</sup> it is now accepted, however, that the Chester *Abraham and Isaac* is a later adaptation of the Brome play.<sup>20</sup> In Italy, the Florentine poet Feo Belcari<sup>21</sup> had written a single-episode play<sup>22</sup> in the vernacular based upon Isaac's sacrifice, known as the *sacra rappresentazione*<sup>23</sup> di Abramo ed

known also as the Dublin play, are much more finished and accomplished productions than their major cycle counterparts. See Mills, 'The Chester Cycle', p. 29. John Coldewey is of the opinion that the Brome play is generally considered to be the best of all extant versions. See John Coldewey, 'The Chester Abraham and Isaac', in *Early English Drama: An Anthology* (ed. John C. Coldewey; New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993), p. 136.

16. Of the five manuscripts, three are located in the British Library, one at the Bodleian Library at Oxford, and another at the Huntington Library; see Coldewey, 'The Chester Abraham and Isaac', p. 308.

17. This manuscript is located at Yale University Library; see Coldewey, 'The Chester Abraham and Isaac', p. 136.

18. Brome: ll. 105–315 and Chester: ll. 229–420.

19. A seminal study by J. Burke Severs, 'The Relationship between the Brome and Chester Plays of Abraham and Isaac' (*MP* 42.3 [1945], pp. 137–51) highlights the similarities between the Chester and the Brome plays.

20. Mills, 'The Chester Cycle', p. 115.

21. Feo Belcari, a native of Florence, was born on 4 February 1410, and died on 16 August 1484; his body is interred in the Church of Santa Croce.

22. A manuscript found in the Florence Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale known as Magliabech VII.690, containing *La rappresentazione di Abramo ed Isac* (1449), is regarded as the single most authoritative source for Belcari's *laude* and *rappresentazioni*. See Andrew Kirkman and Dennis Slavin (eds.), *Binchois Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 221.

23. The genre of the *sacre rappresentazione*, according to Paola Ventrone, developed around the mid-1440s when a group of poets and 'men of letters', under the sponsorship of Archbishop Antonio Pierozzi, endeavoured to provide edifying exercises and examples of the good life for Florentine boys of the Compagnie di Fanciulli, who acted in the plays. Of the eight plays attributed to Feo Belcari, two of his most impressive are *La rappresentazione di Abramo ed Isac* and *La rappresentazione della Annunziatazione*. See Paola Ventrone, in *Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies* (ed. Gaetana Marrone and Paola Puppa; Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 148–50. According to Christopher Kleinhenz, the concept of plays for didactic purposes developed out of the *Laude*, vernacular hymns of praise. The *Laude* were of Umbrian origin, and sung by St Francis in the early thirteenth century. See Christopher Kleinhenz, *Medieval Italy: An Encyclopedia* (The Routledge Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages, 2; Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p. 1074.

*Isac*.<sup>24</sup> This play, first performed in 1449 in the Church of S. Maddalena in Cestelli<sup>25</sup> represents one of the earliest known *sacre rappresentazioni* in existence. It became the prototype for the new genre of *sacre rappresentazioni* to follow, and established a number of dramatic features, including the use of the hendecasyllabic eight-line stanza, stage directions with captions minutely detailed, along with the presence of an *Annunzio* (Announcement) and a *Licenza* (Valediction) delivered by an angel.<sup>26</sup> In France, the earliest surviving mediaeval drama of Isaac's sacrifice is preserved within the *Mistère du Viel Testament*,<sup>27</sup> written c. 1450. Craig notes that such was the popularity of this play among French audiences in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that two derivative plays emerged, *Sacrifice d'Abraham: La moralité du sacrifice d'Abraham* (c. 1512), and *Le sacrifice d'Abraham*; the latter was performed before King Francis I in 1539.<sup>28</sup> Theodore Beza's Protestant play, *Abraham sacrificant* (1550), translated by Arthur Golding into English (pub. 1577), is another well-known play, noted for its absence of typology. However, none of the French plays, including Golding's translation of *Abraham sacrificant*, feature as the basis for libretti underscoring any musical composition.

During the Reformation the plays were banned by the new English Church; the Chester cycle, however, was the last to concede in 1578 and became the longest running cycle in medieval times.<sup>29</sup> In 1951, they were revived for the Festival of Britain<sup>30</sup> in the cities of York,<sup>31</sup> Coventry,

24. To access the e-book *Rappresentazione di Abramo ed Isac*, go to the following link: <http://archive.org/stream/lerappresentazio00belcuoft#page/lxii/mode/2up> (accessed 15 November 2012).

25. Michael O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theatre in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 74.

26. Marrone and Puppa (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Italian Literary Studies*, p. 149.

27. The *Mistère du Viel* is a French compilation of plays from the Old Testament.

28. This play may have been produced for the arrival of Francis's sworn enemy, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V; Barbara M. Craig points out that this visit did not take until 1540. On the other hand, the play may have been revised to mark the reconciliation of Catholics and Protestants. His persecution of Protestants evoked a reaction from the pope, who reminded Francis of Christ's teaching on mercy. Francis responded by freeing Lutherans incarcerated in France, as well as allowing others to return from exile. See Barbara M. Craig, *The Evolution of a Mystery Play: A Critical Edition of Le sacrifice d'Abraham of Le ministère du Viel Testament, La moralité du sacrifice d'Abraham, and of the 1539 Version of Le sacrifice d'Abraham of Le ministère du Viel Testament* (Orlando, FL: French Literature Publication Company, 1983), p. 118 n. 8.

29. <http://www.chestermysteryplays.com/history/history/morehistory.html> (accessed 30 November 2012).

30. This festival aimed to raise the morale of English citizens in the aftermath of World War II, and, in particular, demonstrated Britain's contribution to the arts, science, technology and design in the past, present, and future. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/3/newsid\\_2481000/2481099.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/3/newsid_2481000/2481099.stm) (accessed 30 November 2010).

31. Heather Wiebe points out that Britten attended a performance of the York plays in 1954, and this may have influenced his understanding of the plays. See Heather Wiebe,

and Chester; in the post-war period they offered British citizens a way of 'remembering, preserving, and reviving an endangered religious culture'.<sup>32</sup> For the first time in four hundred years, audiences had the opportunity to view and participate in the re-enactment of the Christian story of salvation history, as well as proudly celebrate English literary culture in all its glory. Since then, the Chester cycle has been performed every five years on the grounds of Chester Cathedral.

*Dramatic Purpose of Plays: Typology or Obedience*

The dramatic purpose of the plays has been a source of interest to literary scholars. Arnold Williams, for example, argues that 'a typological interpretation muffled the pathos of Isaac's situation and blunted the struggle within Abraham': the obvious dramatic purpose of the plays was to preach obedience, not typology.<sup>33</sup> Thomas Rendall, on the other hand, points out that the plays were staged to make the narrative's typological overtones clearly present.<sup>34</sup> For example, as part of the visual spectacle Isaac would have carried a cross instead of a bundle of wood for the journey up the hill.<sup>35</sup> The Chester, York, Brome and Dublin<sup>36</sup> plays all record the binding of Christ with ropes in a similar manner to the account of Isaac's binding; in the Cornish pageant, this image formed a stage spectacle.<sup>37</sup> For the scene of the sacrifice, the Chester and Dublin plays both refer to Isaac's semi-naked appearance, thus making a parallel with the semi-naked appearance of Christ during his passion. The focus on Isaac's nakedness is taken up in the Florentine play, as Abraham undresses Isaac before placing him upon the high altar,<sup>38</sup> and after the averted sacrifice, Abraham unties his son and Isaac takes a moment to dress before dismounting.<sup>39</sup> The kerchief placed around Isaac's eyes in the Chester, the Brome, the York and the *Ludus Coventriae* alludes to the silk cloth bound around the eyes of Christ in the buffeting episodes.<sup>40</sup>

'Benjamin Britten, the "National Faith" and the Animation of History in 1950s England', *Representations* 93 (2006), pp. 76-100 (79).

32. Wiebe, 'Benjamin Britten', p. 84.

33. Arnold Williams, 'Typology and the Cycle Plays: Some Criteria', *Speculum*, 43.4 (1968), pp. 677-84 (683).

34. Thomas Rendall, 'Visual Typology in the Abraham and Isaac Plays', *MP* 81.3 (1984), pp. 221-32 (223).

35. Rendall, 'Visual Typology', p. 226.

36. The fifteenth-century Northampton Abraham is sometimes called the Dublin Abraham because the manuscript is held in Trinity College, Dublin, MS. D4.18.

37. Rendall, 'Visual Typology', p. 223.

38. <http://archive.org/stream/lerappresentazio00belcuoft#page/12/mode/2up> (accessed 12 November 2012).

39. <http://archive.org/stream/lerappresentazio00belcuoft#page/16/mode/2up> (accessed 12 November 2012).

40. Rendall, 'Visual Typology', p. 228.

All of the plays highlight the dramatic spectacle of the descriptive pause of Gen. 22.10, that is, Abraham's sword raised in readiness to kill his son. In the Brome play, Isaac utters almost all of Christ's words on the cross:

A Fader of Hevyn, to the[e] I crye, Lord reseyye me into thy hand!  
(ll. 295–6)<sup>41</sup>

In the Chester play, Isaac offers his soul to the Lord in a dramatic proclamation of consent to the sacrifice. Britten uses this play text in *Canticle II*:

Nowe, father, I see that I shall dye.  
Almighty God in majestie,  
My soule I offer unto thee.  
Lord, to yt bee kynde (ll. 417–20).<sup>42</sup>



Fig. 51. *Abraham and Isaac*  
York Pageant. Picture credit:  
© The Press, York.

From Play 4 onward in the Chester cycle, that is, Abraham and Isaac, 'a contemporary figure', the Expositor, is admitted into the historical action of the play to interpret the coded meaning of events and proph-

41. All references to the Brome Abraham and Isaac are found in 'The Brome Abraham and Isaac', in Coldewey (ed.), *Early English Drama*, pp. 138–50.

42. All references to the Chester Abraham and Isaac are found in 'The Chester Abraham and Isaac', in Coldewey (ed.), *Early English Drama*, pp. 324–42.

ecies.<sup>43</sup> Unlike the biblical narrator, however, the Expositor would have come forward centre-stage to explain the typological significance of a particular scene. In the Chester play, at the end of the story, the Expositor intercedes to tell the audience for one last time how the sacrifice of Isaac prefigures the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the New Testament (ll. 460–83). Rendall notes that of all the cycles, Chester, by means of its Expositor, makes the typological meaning of the sacrifice most explicit.<sup>44</sup>

By Abraham I may understand  
the father of heaven that cann fond  
with his Sonne's blood to breake that bond  
that the dyvell had brought us to.

By Isaack understand I maye  
Jesus that was obedyent aye,  
his Father's will to worke alwaye  
and death for to confounde. (ll. 469–76)

In the epilogue to the Brome play (written in a different metre), the 'Doctor of Theology' 'turns the play into an *exemplum* for parents who grieve excessively for their dead children'<sup>45</sup> by stressing the necessity of obedience to God in living a good Christian life. In a similar manner, at the end of the Florentine play the actors gather together to sing a choral *lauda*, after which the angel delivered a valedictory address stressing the *santa ubidienza* of the biblical story.<sup>46</sup> As mentioned earlier, Jewish American composer Judith Lang Zaimont used elements of the Brome play, along with other texts, as the basis for her libretto. She, like Britten, stripped it of its typology and invited listeners instead to reflect on the violence of the biblical story's christological interpretation, and to question why a loving God would ordain the ritual sacrifice of his only beloved son.

### *The Context for Isaac's Sacrifice*

The Chester play combines three episodes of Abraham's life, the meeting with Melchizedek following the Battle of Hobam (Gen. 14.13–24; ll. 17–144), the divine prediction of Isaac's birth (Genesis 15; ll. 145–208) and, lastly, Abraham's penultimate near sacrifice of his only son, Isaac (Gen. 22.1–19; ll. 209–91). While the references provide viewers with background information about Abraham's life and the announcement

43. Mills, 'The Chester Cycle', p. 120.

44. Rendall, 'Visual Typology', p. 224 n. 19.

45. Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 153.

46. <http://archive.org/stream/lerappresentazio00belcuoft#page/22/mode/2up> (accessed 12 November 2012).

of Isaac's birth, they point also to the concept of sacrifice in all three parts of the play. In the first episode, they point to the slaughter of the four kings; in the second, to Christ's sacrifice enacted in the Melchisedech's (*sic*) action as a priest during the consecration of the Mass; and in the third, they equate Isaac's sacrifice with Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross. In each episode the Expositor highlights the difference between the old and the new law as he understands how it played out in each biblical episode. In the playwright's opinion, the sacrifices of Abraham were now outmoded and replaced by symbolic sacrifices. For example, in the first episode he 'intrudes' to explain how animal sacrifice was replaced by the remembrance of Christ's death in the bread and the wine of the Mass.

In the owld lawe, without leasinge,  
 When these too good men were livinge,  
 Of beasts were there offeringe  
 And eke there sacramente.  
 But synce Christe dyed one roode-tree,  
 In bred and wyne his death remember wee;  
 And at his laste supper our mandee  
 Was his commandement (ll. 121–28).

In the second episode, the Expositor describes how God commanded Abraham to impose circumcision upon Isaac. Here the Expositor once again tells the audience that after the coming of Christ, circumcision was replaced by baptism. Therefore, uncircumcised Christians were not guilty of any disobedience to God since the new law replaced the old:

Lordinges all, takys intent  
 What betokens this commandment:  
 This was sometime an sacrament  
 In the ould lawe truly tane.  
 As followeth nowe verament,  
 Soe was this in the owld testamente.  
 But when Christe dyed away hit went,  
 And then beganne baptysme.  
 But when Christ dyed away hit went (ll. 193–200).

After this episode the scene of Abraham's sacrifice follows, and at the end of the story the Expositor intercedes to tell the audience for one last time that the sacrifice of Isaac prefigures the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the New Testament:

This deede yee seene done here in this place,  
 In example of Jesus done yt was,  
 That for to wyne mankinde grace  
 Was sacrificed one the roode (ll. 464–67).

*Abraham*

Abraham is represented as a type of God the Father who consents to the sacrifice of his beloved son. Rendall speculates that Abraham's appearance replicated the appearance of God the Father from mediaeval art, that is, as a white-bearded old man.<sup>47</sup> Mediaeval dramatists, according to Woolf, managed to preserve the typological consistency in the character of Abraham without turning him into a callous and unconvincing character by balancing Abraham's unfaltering willingness to sacrifice Isaac with a verbal expression of love and a show of distress.<sup>48</sup> Playwrights frequently included the language of endearment in Abraham's speeches to Isaac, thereby highlighting the loving relationship between father and son. In the Brome and Chester pageants, for example, the language of endearment is evident as Abraham refers to Isaac as 'my deare sonne Isaack' (Chester: l. 341), 'my dere darlinge' (Chester: l. 229), 'my owyn son so dere' (Brome: l. 114), 'my owyn swete chyld' (Brome: l. 236), and 'I love thee best off all the chyldryn that ever I begat' (Brome: ll. 31-32). Similarly, in the Florentine play, Abraham refers to Isaac on a number of occasions as *O dolce Isac, mio caro figliuolo*,<sup>49</sup> and *O felice figliuol*.<sup>50</sup> All the plays highlight Abraham's pathos, portraying him as a loving father who did not want his beloved son to die. In the Brome, for example, Abraham exclaims how he would gladly die in place of Isaac (ll. 72-75). In the Chester and Brome plays, Abraham reiterates how, following Isaac's death, his heart would 'break in three' (Brome: l. 155; Chester: l. 253), a reference no doubt to the Trinity. Despite omitting many of the Chester's christological details from his text, Britten included this reference in *Canticle II*.

*Isaac*

With the exception of the York play,<sup>51</sup> English playwrights generally represented Isaac as a young boy; Belcari, too, represented Isaac as a child, whom Abraham kisses affectionately.<sup>52</sup> In these accounts, Isaac verbalizes his fear of the sacrifice before Abraham reveals details of God's plan.

47. Rendall, 'Visual Typology', p. 225. Cited also in Woolf, 'The Effect of Typology on the English Mediaeval Plays of Abraham and Isaac', *Speculum* 32.4 (1957), pp. 805-25, (819).

48. Woolf, *The Effect of Typology*, p. 813.

49. <http://archive.org/stream/lerappresentazio00belcuoft#page/6/mode/2up> (accessed 12 November 2012).

50. <http://archive.org/stream/lerappresentazio00belcuoft#page/18/mode/2up> (accessed 12 November 2012).

51. This is the only play that represents Isaac as a young man of about twenty-five to thirty years of age. See Woolf, 'The Effect of Typology', p. 813.

52. <http://archive.org/stream/lerappresentazio00belcuoft#page/12/mode/2up> (accessed 15 November 2012).



Isaac's appearance, like that of Abraham's, was typologically significant in the plays, with a child or an adolescent actor playing his part to heighten the dramatic spectacle of an innocent child/adolescent led to his voluntary death. The dramatic structure of the plays, according to Woolf, focused listeners' attention on Isaac's act of consent to the sacrifice,<sup>53</sup> with the result that Isaac, not Abraham, became the hero of the story. With the exception of one English play, all others highlight Isaac's emotional distress prior to, during and after the near sacrifice,<sup>54</sup> a feature taken up in musical settings of the plays. In *Canticle II*, Benjamin Britten punctuated Isaac's melodic line with musical rests to signify him sobbing, and placed his responses to Abraham on weak beats of the measure to signify his pleas to his father to save his life. The artist Christian Wilhelm Ernst Dietrich captured this moment in a painting entitled 'The Sacrifice of Isaac', based on an engraving by Rembrandt (Fig. 52). Here Abraham points to the sacrificial pyre as he tells his son of his fate; Isaac, who is holding the sacrificial wood in his left hand, responds with an outburst of tears that are soaked up by a large handkerchief, held in his right hand, covering his eyes. The handkerchief points to a christological understanding of the story, to the silk cloth bound around Christ's eyes.



Fig. 52. Christian Wilhelm Ernst Dietrich, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Photo credit: © Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest.

53. Woolf, 'The Effect of Typology', p. 806.

54. The author of *Ludus Coventriae* is alone in making Isaac entirely unafraid and willing to die; Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 150.

In the aftermath of the sacrifice, the Brome playwright gave Isaac a voice to reflect on his experience and to recount to Abraham his terror during the ordeal on the mountain. In the Chester play, however, Isaac fades into the background as he does in the biblical story, and listener-viewers ponder his whereabouts. Benjamin Britten changed the ending of the Chester play at this point to allow father and son to reunite. Similarly, in the Florentine play, Isaac rejoices with his father in the aftermath of the averted sacrifice before returning home to Sarah prior to her lonely death in Hebron (Gen. 23.2), another feature taken up by some musical representations of the plays.

### *Angel/God*

The angel plays an important role in the Chester, Brome, and Florentine plays. In the latter, there are two angels, one who makes the announcement to the listener, and the other, who averts the sacrifice and reiterates the divine promises to Abraham. The first angel, acting as narrator, explains how God called Abraham and instructed him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22.1-2); unlike the biblical story, the audience never hears the voice of God (vv. 1-2 and v. 16). The second angelic call (which in this case features as the third call) reiterates God's promises to Abraham as in the biblical story (vv. 16-18). In the Brome play, God speaks with the angel in the heavenly court, and instructs the angel to bring news of his command to Abraham (Gen. 22.2), and to show Abraham the way to the place of sacrifice (ll. 33-46). When the angel appears to Abraham, a dialogue ensues (ll. 59-100), with Abraham proclaiming that while he loves Isaac as he does his life, he loves God much more (ll. 81-85). In the aftermath of the averted sacrifice, God appears to Abraham on the mountain (ll. 389-402) to reiterate the divine promises (Gen. 22.16-18). In this play, Isaac, unaware of the angel's second injunction, urges his father to get on with the sacrifice:

A, mercy, fader, wy smygh ye nowt?

A, smygh on, fader, onys with yowre knyffe! (ll. 337-38).

In the Chester play, God appears to Abraham, and in a dialogue (reflecting Gen. 22.1-2) issues the command to sacrifice Isaac (ll. 209-24). Without hesitation, Abraham obeys the command (ll. 217-28). Two angels are present at the near sacrifice: one averts the sacrifice (ll. 423-28) and the other brings news of the lamb for sacrifice (ll. 420-35). God appears, as in the biblical narrative, to reiterate the divine promises (ll. 444-59). As in the Florentine play, two angels appear, one to avert the sacrifice (ll. 421-28) and another to point out 'the lamb' for sacrifice (ll. 429-35). After the angel intercepts to take Abraham's sword from his hand, God appears again in person to reiterate the divine promises.



Fig. 53. *Chester Mystery Play*, Chester, 1951. Photo credit: © With the generous permission of Chester Mystery Plays Ltd.

### *Sarah*

Of all the English mystery plays, the *Northampton Abraham* (Dublin) play in particular is unique for being the only one to include the character of Sarah; she fears Isaac will catch cold, soil his clothes or fall off the horse as he accompanies Abraham on the journey.<sup>55</sup> In this story, Sarah is actively present at the beginning and end of the play. While her character is not physically present in the Brome and Chester plays, Woolf notes that she is an 'important character off-stage' as she appears in the thoughts and speeches of Abraham and Isaac.<sup>56</sup> She is of the opinion that 'Jewish tradition may well have influenced the part of Sarah in the sixteenth-century plays, where it grew to overwhelming proportion'.<sup>57</sup> In this role, mediaeval playwrights portrayed Sarah as a type of Mary, as a sorrowful mother, who lamented her son at his passion. Woolf points out that the maternal and filial relationship between Christ and his mother was emphasized in the Middle Ages.<sup>58</sup>

In the Chester play, Isaac invokes his mother's memory before the near sacrifice, as he pleads with his father to spare his life, reminding Abraham of Sarah's love and devotion for her son. Britten included this play-text in *Canticle II*:

55. Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 152.

56. Woolf, 'The Effect of Typology', p. 820.

57. Woolf, 'The Effect of Typology', p. 820.

58. Woolf, 'The Effect of Typology', pp. 820-21.

Now I would my mother were here on this hyll  
 She would kneel for me on both knees  
 To save my life (ll. 173–75).

When he eventually consents to the sacrifice, Isaac attempts to shield his mother from the grief of his death by asking Abraham to hide the truth of the sacrifice from Sarah. This text is incorporated in *Canticle II*:

But father, tell ye my mother no thing:  
 Say I am in another country dwelling (ll. 205–06)

In the Florentine play, Sarah has no knowledge of God's command. She is portrayed as a type of Mary, as a sorrowful mother, who after three days gathers her servants together to lament the loss and probable death of her only son and spouse. On the return of Abraham and Isaac to the household, Sarah lovingly embraces Isaac, and listens to his account of the pair's adventures based on Gen. 22.1–14.<sup>59</sup> In like manner, the Metastasian libretto portrays Sarah as a type of Mary, who remains at home, but in this version, she is aware of God's command to Abraham. Isaac's friend, Gamari, an invented character, returns to the household from Mount Moriah to recount to her details of the ensuing sacrifice, which increases the dramatic tension for listeners. In a similar manner to the Florentine play, Abraham and Isaac recount to Sarah their adventures on Mount Moriah. Such points of similarity in storyline, along with the portrayal of Sarah, suggest that Metastasio in all probability used elements of the Florentine play-text as the basis for his story.

### *Two Servant-Boys*

While the two servants of the biblical story (Gen. 22.3, 5, 18) have no role to play in the Chester and Brome plays, they have a role in Belcari's *Abramo ed Isac*. As in Gen. 22.3, 5, they accompany Abraham on the momentous journey and wait for him at the foot of the mountain. Echoing Gen. 22.3, Abraham refers to them affectionately as *o cari servi miei* when he tells them they will accompany him to *del monte santo* to offer a sacrifice.<sup>60</sup> Sarah's servants, too, comfort her when she learns of Abraham and Isaac's mysterious absence from the household. As in the York pageant, in the Florentine play, the servants participate in a dialogue with Sarah and Isaac. In the Dublin play they remain silent, as they do in the biblical story. In the Metastasian libretto, the servants remain silent but accompany Abraham and Isaac along with a band of

59. <http://archive.org/stream/lerappresentazio00belcuoft#page/20/mode/2up> (accessed 15 November 2012).

60. <http://archive.org/stream/lerappresentazio00belcuoft#page/6/mode/2up> (accessed 15 November 2012).

shepherds to the land of Moriah. They too are aware of Isaac's fate, and, from the instructions in the libretto, openly express their distress with tears of sadness.

### *Ram*

The Brome, Chester and Dublin plays were the only ones to incorporate into their storylines references to 'the ram' (Gen. 22.3); other English mystery plays include specific references to 'the lamb'. Echoing Gen. 22.13, the Brome, Cornish and *Ludas Coventriae* plays include a dramatic scene involving the ritual burning of the sacrificial victim on the funeral pyre.<sup>61</sup> The medieval love of pyrotechnics is well known, and the ritual fire would have created a magnificent visual spectacle during the performance. A portion of a mediaeval manuscript from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, illustrates the visual spectacle of Abraham and Isaac kneeling in prayer as the ram is engulfed in flames (Fig. 54).



Fig. 54. Border ornament from a choirbook in which is represented the sacrifice of a ram by Abraham and Isaac, Italian; c. 1500. Picture credit: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

61. Rendall, 'Visual Typology', p. 230.

In the Florentine play, Belcari included in his storyline a ram, referred to in the play-text as *uno bello montone* and *monton bellissimo*. Here Abraham shows the ram to Isaac before placing and ritually burning it on the altar. Abraham proceeds to verify the truth of his earlier response to Isaac's question that God had indeed provided a 'beautiful ram' for the sacrifice.<sup>62</sup> Father and son then recite a prayer of thanksgiving to God during the ritual burning of the sacrificial victim. Likewise in the Brome play, Abraham kneels at this point and recites a prayer of offering to God (ll. 383–88). In all plays, Abraham proves his obedience by sacrificing the ram instead of Isaac. Britten set Abraham's prayer of thanksgiving from the Chester play to music in *Canticle II*:

*Ah, lorde of heaven and kinge of blysse, Thy bidding shall be donne iwys.  
Sacrifice here mee sent ys, And all, lorde, through thy grace* (ll. 436–39).



Fig. 55. *Chester Mystery Play*, Chester, 1992.

Photo credit: © With the generous permission of Chester Mystery Plays Ltd.

While neither the Brome, Chester nor Florentine play indicates the type of prop used for this scene, Rendall points out that an entry in the

62. <http://archive.org/stream/lerappresentazio00belcuoft#page/20/mode/2up> (accessed 15 November 2012).

Dublin play indicates a 'sort of doll', resembling a ram, was used, calling to mind the *Agnus Dei* familiar to audiences of the visual arts.<sup>63</sup>

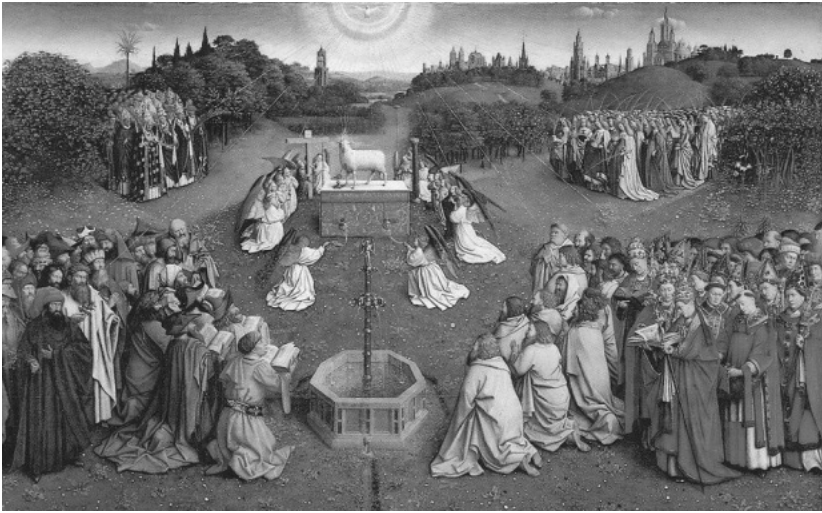


Fig. 56. Jan van Eyck (1390–1441), *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, Altarpiece. Sint Baafskathedraal, Gent. Photo credit: © Lukas Art in Flanders VZW/ photo Hugo Maertens.

### *Epilogue (a)*

#### *Jubilation of Father and Son*

Since the Chester playwright followed the biblical text closely, there is no scene of jubilation or expression of joy by father and son. In the Brome play, however, Abraham expresses his delight, 'full glad and blithe we may be' (l. 405), but Isaac, more traumatized by the experience, expresses a desire to return home to his mother. In the York play Abraham informs Isaac of his marriage to Rebekah; and as a further test of obedience, Isaac agrees to Abraham's wishes:

*Rebecca, that damosel, whose father now is gone: The daughter of Batuel, who was my brother's son.*<sup>64</sup>

In Belcari's play, father and son express their mutual jubilation on hearing the good news of the averted sacrifice. When the angel disap-

63. Rendall, 'Visual Typology', p. 230.

64. <http://www.reed.utoronto.ca/yorkplays/York10.html> (accessed 12 November 2012).

pears, Abraham happily loosens Isaac from his bonds, whereupon Isaac kneels and praises God for his ransom. After the angel reiterates the promises, Abraham performs a *basse* dance,<sup>65</sup> and upon their descent from the mountain, Isaac holds the knife and sings a song of praise to God. At the end, all characters in the play, including the angels, dance and sing together a *laude*. In this song of praise, listeners are encouraged to serve God with a pure heart to attain happiness and salvation from death. An angel closes the play with a *basse* dance and a valediction inviting listeners, once again, to observe the divine precepts, and to serve God with holy obedience. In like manner, at the end of the Chester play, the Expositor emphasizes Abraham's obedience and invites listeners to follow his example so that they, too, might live in eternal glory with God the Father. The Brome play concludes with a similar message inviting listeners to keep the commandments, to serve God and to please him, so that Jesus 'that weryt the crown of thorne' would 'bryng us all hevyn-blysse (ll. 464–65). With the exception of Britten's *Offertorium* and Zaimont's *Parable*, many compositions replicate the final scene of the plays, to recount the joy brought about by God's second command to Abraham. Carissimi incorporated a dance-like section at the end of *Historia di Abraham et Isaac* to suggest he may have been influenced by the mystery plays, perhaps the Florentine play. Britten, too, changed the end of the biblical story, as well as the end of the Chester mystery play, in *Canticle II* and included a similar dance-like section at the end of this work similar to Carissimi's dance-like section; it suggests a familiarity with Carissimi's interpretation of the biblical story from *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*.

### *Epilogue (b)*

#### *Return of Father and Son to the Abrahamic Household*

In the biblical story, the narrator omits telling listener-readers of Isaac's whereabouts in the aftermath of the sacrifice, and in like manner, the Chester playwright omits v. 19. By way of contrast in the Brome play, Isaac recounts to his father the terror during his ordeal and vows never to return to 'the hyll'. Following this avowal, Isaac looks forward to returning home to see his mother, Sarah (ll. 420–23). In his final speech, Abraham thanks God for averting the sacrifice and announces his intention to take Isaac home. In the Florentine play, when Isaac returns from the mountain with his father, he enters into conversation with a servant

65. Basse dances were very popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They are characterized by graceful gliding steps and small bows. For an example of one such dance go to the following link: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPTJTtg\\_BaM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPTJTtg_BaM) (accessed 12 January 2013).



who tells him how his deed and words were a source of great jubilation for everyone. On their journey homeward, Sarah, seeing them in the distance, runs out and embraces Isaac, her beloved son. When they finally arrive home, Isaac's speech recounts to Sarah details of their six-day adventure, whereupon Sarah gives thanks and praises God for the safe return of Isaac. Metastasio replicates the *lieto fine* (happy ending) of the Florentine play in *Isacco, figura del Redentore*.

### *Conclusion*

Mediaeval playwrights based their interpretation of Genesis 22 on the Latin Vulgate's translation and the writings of the church fathers, but unlike the Fathers, they generally assigned a greater role to Isaac, the hero of the story, and depending on the play, a role or reference to Isaac's mother, Sarah. They embellished the biblical story with dialogue imbued with emotion and portrayed Abraham as a loving father who did not want his son to die. The playwrights interpreted the biblical story typologically, both visually and aurally, and represented Isaac as a type of Christ, Abraham as a type of God the Father, and Sarah as a type of Mary. In the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, librettists and composers were influenced more by the version of the story in these plays than they were by the ancient biblical text. As well as consulting the homiletic tradition of the church fathers, I have speculated that some composers and librettists from the eighteenth and twentieth centuries were also influenced by the Jewish homiletic tradition, namely, the *Midrash Aggadah*.

## THE AKEDAH IN JEWISH TRADITION

The Akedah (Gen. 22.1-19) plays a prominent role in Jewish tradition; it is featured in the *Siddur*, the Jewish prayer book, and during the entire period of *yamin norai*, the Days of Awe, from Rosh ha-Shanah to Yom Kippur, when it is read as the Torah portion for the second day. The story begins on the first day with the account of Isaac's birth (Gen. 21.1-34), and it is central to many of the prayers recited at this time: in the *Musaf Rosh ha-Shanah* (additional service), 'remember when our father Abraham bound his son Isaac on the Altar suppressing his compassion that he might do your will wholeheartedly'; and in the *selichot*, penitential prayers, recited in preparation for Rosh ha-Shanah through to Yom Kippur: 'He who answered Abraham on Mount Moriah, may he answer us', and 'He who answered Isaac when he was bound on the altar, may He answer us'. The shofar, which frames the period of *yamin norai*, is a reminder of the Akedah, and is sounded a hundred times a day on each of the two days of Rosh ha-Shanah and at the *Neilah* service at the close of Yom Kippur. The sound emitted, comprising four variations, is a reminder to repent and to acknowledge God as king; the Akedah further calls to memory Abraham's devotion and merit that resulted in benefits for his descendants through Isaac.<sup>1</sup> In Sephardic liturgy for Rosh ha-Shanah, the piyyut<sup>2</sup> *Et Sha'arey Ratzon* ('Gates of Favor')<sup>3</sup> by twelfth-century poet Judah ibn Abbas is chanted before the sounding of the shofar.<sup>4</sup> Its haunting melody<sup>5</sup>

1. See Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah* (Burlington, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), pp. 76, 86-88.

2. A Jewish liturgical poem that is usually sung or chanted during a religious service.

3. To see a translation go to <http://www.piyut.org.il/textual/24.html> (accessed 15 June 2012).

4. To hear a performance of the chant go to <http://www.shearithisrael.org/content/et-shaarei-ratzon-rosh-hashanah> (accessed 15 June 2012). For another moving version sung by Jewish artist Victoria Hanna to viola accompaniment go to <http://www.myspace.com/video/victoria-hanna/et-sha-39-arei-ratzon-live-in-japan/44277056> (accessed 15 June 2012). This artist is known for her performances of ancient Hebrew rap, which combines hip-hop, rap and electronic music with ancient Hebrew texts.

5. Western and eastern Sephardic traditions have different tunes.

and text based on midrashic interpretations of Genesis 22 imagine the inner and outer journeys of Abraham and Isaac, their dialogues, and Sarah's imaginary reaction to the sacrifice. Judith Kaplan Eisenstein<sup>6</sup> set this text to music along with other penitential poems in a work entitled *The Sacrifice of Isaac: A Liturgical Drama* (1972). Religious songs are sung during Rosh ha-Shanah: for example, the prayer song *Oked Vane'ekad* ('Tied and Untied'), which has been popularly performed by Jewish artists Yoav Itzhak and Chaim Israel, recounts Abraham's extrabiblical song of remembrance on judgment day.<sup>7</sup> A rap song, *Shofar Callin*, which was written and performed by Prodezra Beats, along with its accompanying video on YouTube, tells the story of the binding of Isaac, and in doing so, emphasizes the spiritual meaning of the shofar's call in daily life.<sup>8</sup>

To illustrate the possible influence of Jewish tradition on music from the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, I refer to excerpts from the Jewish midrashim; the pseudepigraphal book of *Jubilees*, known also as the 'Little Genesis'; the Targums; and also writings by Philo of Alexandria; Pseudo-Philo, the anonymous author of *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* (*LAB*); and Josephus.

#### *The Test (Genesis 22.1)*

In the prerabbinic era, the book of *Jubilees*<sup>9</sup> (c. 161–140 BCE) and the *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, by Pseudo-Philo, note the reason for God's test of Abraham: in the former, it was to put Satan, 'Prince Mastema', to shame (*Jub.* 17.15), and in the latter, to silence the jealous angels (*LAB* 32.1–2):<sup>10</sup>

And all the angels were jealous of him (Isaac), God said to him, 'Kill the fruit of your body for me, and offer for me as a sacrifice what has been given to you by me'. And Abraham did not argue, but set out immediately (*LAB* 32.1–2).

The author of *Jubilees* ascribes the motivation behind Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac to the evil Prince Mastema, who prompted God to test Abraham with the charge that Abraham loved Isaac more

6. She made history by being the first woman to celebrate a Bat Mitzvah publicly in an American congregation on 18 March 1922. See <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/eisenstein-judith-kaplan> (accessed 15 June 2012).

7. <http://lyrics.eventbyme.com/song/59114/YoavItzhakChaimIsrael/OkedVaneekad.html> (accessed 15 June 2012).

8. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEOya0ZG0I0> (accessed 15 June 2012).

9. H.F.D. Sparks (ed.), 'The Book of Jubilees', in *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 3.

10. Frédéric Manns, 'The Targum of Genesis 22', in *The Sacrifice of Isaac in the Three Monotheistic Religions: Proceedings of a Symposium on the Interpretation of the Scriptures held in Jerusalem, March 16–17, 1995* (ed. Frédéric Manns; Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Analecta, 41; Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1995), p. 72.

than he loved God. The charge of idolatry, recognized to have no substance (*Jub.* 17.15-18), is echoed in more recent times in the writings of Phyllis Tribble, who understands that the divine words to Abraham in Gen. 22.2 suggest Abraham's idolatry of Isaac;<sup>11</sup> she states that in his willingness to obey God, Abraham 'permanently relinquished attachment to Isaac', with the result that 'the bonds of idolatry were broken'. Tribble cites the absence of dialogue between father and son in the aftermath of the sacrifice as evidence for her claim that the bonds of idolatry had been broken. In *Jubilees*, however, Mastema's false allegation put him to shame at the end of the story (*Jub.* 18.11-12) and the charge of idolatry was, subsequently, thrown out of the heavenly court. Similar traditions are found in the fragmentary text, 4QPseudo-Jubilees, retrieved from Qumram Cave 4 (2 i 9-10),<sup>12</sup> and a more developed account of the story in Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*,<sup>13</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 56.10 and *Tanhuma Y. Vayera* 23; *Tanhuma B. Vayera* 46.<sup>14</sup> The midrashim highlight in no uncertain terms the magnitude of Abraham's love for Isaac. Ginzberg recounts Abraham lamenting his beloved son before the sacrifice:

And God, sitting upon His throne, high and exalted, saw how the hearts of the two were the same, and tears were rolling down from the eyes of Abraham upon Isaac, and from Isaac down upon the wood, so that it was submerged in tears.<sup>15</sup>

The tradition of opposition between Isaac and Ishmael,<sup>16</sup> found in the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen. 22.1,<sup>17</sup> is another reason proposed for the test, and highlights the problem of the brothers' troublesome relationship, as well as the dispute over the measure of Abraham's love for each son: Ishmael claimed to be more beloved by his father because he had freely consented to the rite of circumcision at the age of thirteen, whereas Isaac countered Ishmael's argument by stating he had been circumcised on the eighth day. This tradition attests to the superiority of Isaac on the grounds that his circumcision had been instituted within the prescription of Jewish law (*Genesis Rabbah* 55.4.2; Targum Pseudo-

11. Phyllis Tribble, *Hagar, Sarah and their Children: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 51.

12. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac in Qumran Literature', *Biblica* 83 (2002), pp. 211-29 (215-16).

13. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), I, pp. 271-73.

14. Cited in Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 51.

15. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, p. 281.

16. Daniel Seth Kunin, 'The Death of Isaac: Structuralist Analysis of Genesis 22', *JSOT* 19/64 (1994), pp. 57-81 (49).

17. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*. (trans. Michael Maher, MSC; Minneapolis: Michael Glazier Book Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 78.

Jonathan on Gen. 22.1). In this account, Isaac maintained his right to the birthright as the son of Sarah. Maher states that no other source recounts the attribution of Isaac's sonship to Sarah.<sup>18</sup>

And it came to pass after these words that Isaac and Ishmael were in dispute. Ishmael said: 'It is right for me to be the heir of my father, since I am his first-born son'. But Isaac said: 'It is right for me to be the heir of my father, since I am the son of Sarah his wife, but you are the son of Hagar, the handmaid of my mother'. Ishmael answered and said: 'I am more righteous than you, because I was circumcised when thirteen years old; and if it had been my wish to refuse, I would have handed myself over to be circumcised'. Isaac answered and said: 'Am I not now thirty-seven years old? If the Holy One, blessed be He, demanded all my members I would not hesitate'. Immediately, these words were heard before the Lord of the universe, and immediately, the word of the Lord tested Abraham, and said unto him, 'Abraham', and he said, 'Here I am'.

In another tradition, Isaac offered to cut one of his limbs, if required, as proof of his consent to do God's will. On hearing this, God agreed to Isaac's request and consequently tested Abraham.<sup>19</sup> A variety of sources point out that Abraham loved both sons, but was told by God to take Isaac to Mount Moriah.<sup>20</sup> This idea is also reflected in Samuel Adler's oratorio *The Binding*, recounted below:

And the Lord thought to try Abraham and Isaac in this matter. And He said to Abraham, 'Take now thy son'.

Abraham: 'I have two sons, and I do not know which of them Thou commandest me to take'.

God: 'Thine only son'.

Abraham: 'The one is the only son of his mother, and the other is the only son of his mother'.

God: 'Whom thou lovest'.

Abraham: 'I love this one and I love that one'.

God: 'Even Isaac'.

In general, librettists and composers from Jewish and Christian traditions generally exclude Ishmael to emphasize the primacy of Isaac as the chosen son of the promise. But if Abraham loved Isaac so much, why did he go ahead, so readily and without question, to sacrifice Isaac? *Genesis Rabbah* 56.10 recounts that Abraham did not enter into any dispute with God because he suppressed his feelings of compassion for his son:

18. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, p. 78 n. 3.

19. This idea is found in the Babylonian Talmud: *Sanhedrin* 89b (596).

20. Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 22; Ginzberg's *Legends*, I, p. 274; *Sanhedrin* 89b; *Genesis Rabbah* 55.7.

But, God forbid, did I not do it? But I suppressed my love so as to carry out your will. May it always please you, Lord our God, that when the children of Isaac will come into trouble, you remember in their behalf that act of binding and be filled with mercy for them.<sup>21</sup>

Some rabbis, however, criticized Abraham for misunderstanding God's command. *Aggadah Bereshit* illustrates this point:

Nor did it enter my mind (Jer. 19.5) that Abraham would slaughter his son. Even though I commanded him with my mouth and said to him, 'Take your son' (Gen 22.2), yet it never entered my mind that he would slaughter him. Therefore, I will not violate my commandment (Ps. 89.35).<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, *Genesis Rabbah* 56.8 notes:

B. Said the Holy One, blessed be he, to him, 'Abraham, "My covenant I will not profane" (Ps. 89.35). "And I will establish my covenant with Isaac" (Gen. 17.21).

C. True, I commanded you, "Take now your son" (Gen..33.2). "I will not alter what has gone out of my lips" (Ps. 89.35). Did I ever tell you to kill him? No, I told you, "Bring him up".

D. Well and good! You did indeed bring him up. Now take him down'.<sup>23</sup>

The rabbis, like the church fathers, suggested that God instigated the test to highlight Abraham's faithfulness and obedience; for this reason, it provided the justification for his exaltation among the nations of the world.<sup>24</sup> Whereas composers from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries portrayed Abraham as a loving father and an example of moral perfection, composers from the twentieth century highlighted the violence of God's command and Abraham's obedience or disobedience.

### *Ten Trials*

Whereas the trials of Abraham were of little interest to the church fathers, they were of great interest to the rabbinical writers.<sup>25</sup> The number of trials varies in the tradition and with no precise agreement on what they were.<sup>26</sup> My interest in the trials stems from Metastasio's implicit reference to the trials of Abraham in the libretto *Isacco, figura del Redentore*. The rabbis list ten trials, with the Akedah counted as the final trial Abraham endured

21. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 286.

22. *Aggadah Bereshit: translated from the Hebrew with an Introduction and Notes* (trans. Lieve M. Teugels; Leiden: Brill, 2001), p. 98.

23. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 284.

24. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, pp. 55-56.

25. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 41.

26. Louis Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997), pp. 35-37.

to prove himself as patriarch of the chosen people. *Genesis Rabbah* 56.3 recounts that this trial was the last and most important of all:

A. Said R. Hanan, '... because you have done this thing ... ! It was the tenth trial and he refers to it as "this [one] thing ... ? But this also is the last, since it outweighs all the rest.'"

B. "'For if he had not accepted this last trial, he would have lost the merit of all that he had already done.'"<sup>27</sup>

Figure 57 summarizes the tradition of the trials of Abraham from three significant sources: The book of *Jubilees* (c. second century BCE), *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (c. ninth century CE) and Maimonides' commentary on *Mishnah Aboth* (twelfth century CE). *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* recounts two extrabiblical trials predating Abraham's migration from his homeland in Haran to the land of Canaan, and one recounting Abraham's vision of the enslavement of his descendants.

#### *Sarah's Knowledge of God's Command*

The rabbinical literature portrays Abraham as not having divulged the terrible news to Sarah since he knew how much she loved their son.<sup>28</sup> Berman suggests that there is not a single known midrash to suggest that Abraham consulted with Sarah or advised her of his momentous journey:<sup>29</sup> either he told her nothing or told her he was taking Isaac to study with Shem and Eber (*Tanhuma Vayera* 22; Ginzberg *Legends* 1. 274). Philo<sup>30</sup> recounts that Abraham told no one of the divine command, while Josephus notes how Abraham concealed his plan from Sarah and from others present in the household. Stressing Abraham's virtue, Josephus states that Abraham did not want anyone to hinder him from doing God's will (*Ant.* 1.225),<sup>31</sup> and recounts how Abraham rose early in the morning (Gen. 22.3) to avoid rousing the suspicions of Sarah and his household (*Ant.* 1.225). A painting by Richard McBee, entitled *Alone*, illustrates this point visually (Fig. 58). Here viewers observe Sarah sitting on the edge of the bed by herself. It is left to them to speculate whether or not Abraham told her of God's plan before he set out for the mysterious Land of Moriah. Here Sarah's bed is situated at the entrance of a tomb to suggest a connection between the Akedah and Sarah's death in Gen. 23.2: for when she roused from sleep on the morning of Abraham's departure and learned of God's command, it caused her to fall into another more eternal slumber.

27. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 288.

28. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, pp. 274-75.

29. Berman, *The Akedah*, p. 65.

30. Philo of Alexandria, *De Abrahamo* (trans. F.H. Colson; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 170.

31. Louis, H. Feldman, *Josephus: Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), III, p. 87.

	Second Century BCE Book of <i>Jubilees</i> (17.17-19.9)	Eighth Century CE <i>Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer</i> (26-31)	Twelfth Century CE The Commentary to Mishnah <i>Aboth</i> Maimonides (5.3)
1	Abraham's departure from his homeland (12.1). Command initiated by the Prince Mastema (non-biblical).	The attempted murder of the infant Abraham by men from his land. Remains hidden in a cave for thirteen years (non-biblical).	Abraham's exile from his homeland (12.1)
2	Famine in Canaan (12.10)	Imprisonment for ten years: three years in Kuthi, seven years in Budri. Cast into the fiery furnace after six years (non-biblical)	Famine in Canaan (12.10)
3	The wealth of four kings (14.21-23)	Migration from homeland (12.1)	Sister-wife episode involving Pharaoh (12.10-20)
4	Sister-wife episode involving Pharaoh (12.14-15)	Famine in Canaan (12.10)	Battle with the four kings (14)
5	Circumcision (17.10-12)	Sister-wife episode involving Pharaoh (12.10-20)	Sarah's barrenness. Taking Hagar as wife (16.1-14)
6	Expulsion of Hagar (21.9-21)	Campaign of all the kings to slay Abraham (non-biblical)	Circumcision in old age (17.11)
7	Expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar (21.14)	Abraham's vision of the future subjection of his descendants (non-biblical). Performs a sacrifice that seals the covenant of the pieces.	Sister-wife episode involving the king of Gerar (20.1-18)
8	Akedah (22.1-19)	Circumcision of Abraham (17.26)	Expulsion of Hagar (21.9-21)
9	Sarah's death (23.1-2)	Expulsion of Ishmael following his attempt to kill Isaac (21.14)	Expulsion of Ishmael (21.14.)
10	Sarah's burial ground (23.2-20)	Akedah (22.1-19)	Akedah (22.1-19)

Fig. 57. *Ten Trials of Abraham.*





Fig. 58. Richard McBee, *Alone* (2009), 24" x 20".

Photo credit: © With the kind permission of Richard McBee.

*Genesis Rabbah* 55.7.2 redeems Abraham of any deception by recounting that Mount Moriah was known as 'the place from which instruction goes forth to the world';<sup>32</sup> this text offers the possibility that Isaac went to study Torah with Shem in the aftermath of the Akedah. The rabbis, however, recount Sarah's suspicion at what was about to take place. In one tradition, Sarah smothers Isaac with maternal affection on the night before the momentous departure; the next morning, the Abrahamic family, along with the servants, is consumed with grief. A similar tradition is recorded in Ginzberg's *Legends* (1.275-76) and in the apocryphal *Book of Jasher* (23.8-19) as follows:

And Sarah took her son Isaac, and he abode with her all that night, and she kissed and embraced him, and she laid injunctions upon him till morning, and she said to Abraham: 'O my lord, I pray thee, take heed of thy son, and place thine eyes over him, for I have no other son nor daughter but him. O neglect him not. If he be hungry, give him bread, and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink; do not let him go on foot, neither let him sit in the sun, neither let him go by himself on the road, neither turn him from whatever he may desire, but do unto him as he may say to thee'.

32. *Genesis Rabbah*, pp. 272-73.



Fig. 59. Jan Victors, *Abraham and Isaac before the Sacrifice* (c. 1642). Gift of Karel Waterman and his wife, Amsterdam, 1988. Photo credit: © Collection of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

After spending the whole night in weeping on account of Isaac, she got up in the morning and selected a very fine and beautiful garment from those that Abimelech had given to her. And she dressed Isaac therewith, and she put a turban upon his head, and she fastened a precious stone in the top of the turban, and she gave them provisions for the road. And Sarah went out with them, and she accompanied them upon the road to see them off, and they said to her, 'Return to the tent'. And when Sarah heard the words of her son Isaac, she wept bitterly, and Abraham wept with her, and their son wept with them, a great weeping, also those of their servants who went with them wept greatly. And Sarah caught hold of Isaac, and she held him in her arms, and she embraced him, and continued to weep with him, and Sarah said, 'Who knoweth if I shall ever see thee again after this day?' Abraham departed with Isaac amid great weeping, while Sarah and the servants returned to the tent.

Jan Victors based his painting *Abraham and Isaac before the Sacrifice on Genesis* (Fig. 59) on Isaac's question to his father (Gen. 22.7). Isaac, placed upon the pyre, is comforted by his father: here Abraham holds his son's hand, embraces him warmly, and lovingly gazes into his eyes. Isaac is dressed in his finest attire, a luxurious red velvet tunic trimmed with a bow in the centre, leather boots with a fur interior, and groomed hair in ringlets; his exposed knees represent his childlike status, as well



Fig. 60. Richard McBee, *The Tent and the Mountain* (2001), 60" x 24".

Photo credit: © With the generous permission of Richard McBee.

as his innocence and vulnerability. *Genesis Rabbah* 51.4 alludes to Isaac's clothing made by his mother:

He said to him, 'If so, all those lovely cloakes which your mother made will be the inheritance of Ishmael, the hated one of her house'.<sup>33</sup>

In the Metastasian libretto, Sarah's suspicions are highlighted in the scene of the 'Weeping Family', recounted almost verbatim in Josef Mysliveček's textual addition to the libretto. As in Metastasio's *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, Sarah remains at home while the men attend to the sacrifice; much of the action is played out in Sarah's imagination from the location of her tent. Richard McBee's painting *The Tent and the Mountain* is a fitting illustration of the scene (Fig. 60). He juxtaposes the near sacrifice (below) with the scene of Sarah standing outside the tent

33. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 281.

(above). A black figure lying bound to the left of Sarah is an image of Isaac. MeBee depicts an image of the Akedah as it is reconstructed in Sarah's imagination from her home in Beersheba.

*Mount Moriah (Genesis 22.2, 5)*

Jewish tradition locates the place appointed by God for Isaac's sacrifice on Mount Moriah.<sup>34</sup> Grossfeld states that this designation is an anachronistic rendering, which attempts to depict Mount Moriah as a cult centre even in the patriarchal age.<sup>35</sup> In one example, the rabbis emphasized the theological connection between the Temple and Mount Moriah<sup>36</sup> by connecting words, letters, and consonants of words associated with the Temple cult, that is, instruction, sanctuary, divine speech, retribution and myrrh (*Gen. R.* 55.7.2) to the word 'Moriah'. The Targumic tradition, too, emphasizes the connection between the cult of the Temple and Mount Moriah by referring to the land of Moriah as the land of worship, thus alluding to Jerusalem as the location of the Akedah. Although Metastasio bases his retelling on the Latin Vulgate, he preferred to use 'Moriah' as the place-name rather than the 'Land of Vision'. Western music composed on the Akedah generally prefers the Latin Vulgate's rendering, although, as one might expect, Jewish composer Samuel Alder, whose libretto is based on midrashim, includes a reference to 'Moriah' as the place-name of sacrifice.

*Three-Day Journey (Genesis 22.3)*

The rabbinical writers understood the concept of Abraham's three-day (*Gen.* 22.4) journey as simply 'one more example of a life-giving miracle' and 'one verse among many found in the Bible that referred to a three-day period'.<sup>37</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 56.1 lists seven biblical references to a three-day period (*Hos.* 6.2; *Gen.* 42.18; *Exod.* 19.16; *Josh.* 2.16; *Jonah* 1.7; 3.3; *Ezra* 8.32; *Est.* 5.1) that refer to the 'fulfilment of a promise, the resurrection of the dead, and Israel's redemption'.<sup>38</sup> The purpose of the three-day journey ensured that Abraham reflected adequately on God's words so that future nations of the world understood he was lucid, responsible and sufficiently free of all psychological impediments to carry out God's command:

34. *Jubilees* 18.13; *Genesis Rabbah* 55.7 Josephus, *Ant.* 1: 224–26, *Targum Onqelos*; *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Targum Neofiti* identify the mountain with Jerusalem, where the Temple was built. Cited in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, trans. Maher, p. 78 n. 6.

35. Cited in *Targum Neofiti: Genesis*, trans. Maher, p. 117.

36. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 272.

37. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 86.

38. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 277.

the Nations of the World would not say: Out of fear did Abraham offer his son, because the Holy One appeared to him, and from fear he lost his mind and went to offer his son; if he would had one more hour, he would have changed his mind. Therefore the Holy One said: Let him suffer for three days, and search for the place, so that he will know that with his full consciousness and out of love he offered him and did not change his mind. This is what is written: On the third day.<sup>39</sup>

Kessler points out that the rabbis understood the purpose of the three-day journey was 'to afflict Abraham'. For this reason, the midrash included the character of Satan, whose function was to torment Abraham, place obstacles on his journey, and dissuade him from carrying out God's command. Satan appears on a number of occasions: either at the beginning of the narrative, on the journey to the land of Moriah,<sup>40</sup> or at the site of sacrifice or to Sarah. In all examples, the rabbis portrayed him as a master of disguise and as a manipulator who possessed an astute awareness of the vulnerabilities of every character encountered by him; but despite his disguise and shrewd attempts to avert the sacrifice, he failed to manipulate either Abraham or Isaac although he did manage to fool Sarah, which resulted in her death:

And while Abraham and Isaac were proceeding along the road, Satan came and appeared to Abraham in the figure of a very aged man, humble and of contrite spirit, and said to him: 'Art thou silly or foolish, that thou goest to do this thing to thine only son? God gave thee a son in thy latter days, in thine old age, and wilt thou go and slaughter him, who did not commit any violence, and wilt thou cause the soul of thine only son to perish from the earth? Dost thou not know and understand that this thing cannot be from the Lord? For the Lord would not do unto man such evil, to command him, Go and slaughter thy son'. Abraham, hearing these words, knew that it was Satan, who endeavoured to turn him astray from the way of the Lord, and he rebuked him that he went away. And Satan returned and came to Isaac, and he appeared unto him in the figure of a young man, comely and well-favoured, saying unto him: 'Dost thou not know that thy silly old father bringeth thee to the slaughter this day for naught? Now, my son, do not listen to him, for he is a silly old man, and let not thy precious soul and beautiful figure be lost from the earth'. And Isaac told these words to his father, but Abraham said to him, 'Take heed of him, and do not listen to his words, for he is Satan endeavouring to lead us astray from the commands of our God'. And Abraham rebuked Satan again, and Satan went from them, and, seeing he could not prevail over them,

39. *Aggadah Bereshit*, p. 99.

40. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, pp. 276-77; *Genesis Rabbah* 56.4.1. This midrash is set to music by Samuel Alder.

he transformed himself into a large brook of water in the road, and when Abraham, Isaac, and the two young men reached that place, they saw a brook large and powerful as the mighty waters. And they entered the brook, trying to pass it, but the further they went, the deeper the brook, so that the water reached up to their necks, and they were all terrified on account of the water. But Abraham recognized the place, and he knew that there had been no water there before, and he said to his son: 'I know this place, on which there was no brook nor water. Now, surely, it is Satan who doth all this to us, to draw us aside this day from the commands of God'. And Abraham rebuked Satan, saying unto him: 'The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan. Begone from us, for we go by the command of God'. And Satan was terrified at the voice of Abraham, and he went away from them, and the place became dry land again as it was at first. And Abraham went with Isaac toward the place that God had told him.<sup>41</sup>

Carol Delaney points out that the midrash portrays Satan's voice<sup>42</sup> as the voice of reason, speaking words of 'commonsense morality'.<sup>43</sup> This voice,<sup>44</sup> as Kessler notes, attempts to dissuade Abraham from sacrificing his son as future nations of the world would condemn him as a child killer.<sup>45</sup>

#### *Age of Isaac (Genesis 22.3)*

Robin M. Jensen states that later collections of the midrash, possibly dating from the Amoraic period, portray Isaac as an adult of thirty-seven years,<sup>46</sup> and, unlike his biblical depiction, as a key player in the story.<sup>47</sup> The rabbis emphasized Isaac's maturity and consequently understood his age to indicate the extent of his freedom and moral responsibility, culminating in his voluntary self-offering. In this tradition, Isaac is fully aware of the sacrifice and not only accepts the role he plays but begs Abraham to bind him more tightly lest he invali-

41. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, p. 277.

42. Samuel Adler includes the voice of Satan in his oratorio *The Binding*.

43. Carol Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 123.

44. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 87, cites *Genesis Rabbah* 56.4; *b. Sanhedrin* 89b; *Tanhuma B. Vayera* 46; *Tanhuma Y. Vayera* 22; *Pesiqta Rabbati* 40.6.

45. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 87.

46. Robin M. Jensen, 'The Offering of Isaac in Jewish and Christian Tradition: Image and Text', *BibInt* 2.1 (1994), pp. 85-110 (101). Maher notes that *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen 22.1 is the only targum to mention Isaac's age of thirty-seven years. He points out that the following midrashim give this number in relation to Isaac's age: *Tanhuma B. Vayera* 42.1.109; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31.225, cited in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, trans. Maher, p. 78 n. 5.

47. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 100.

date the sacrifice. In the targumic tradition, Isaac<sup>48</sup> is portrayed as a hero who willingly consents to the sacrifice.<sup>49</sup> Kessler states that this emphasis on Isaac's self-offering led the rabbis to associate the Akedah with Isaac rather than Abraham.<sup>50</sup>

The rabbis calculated Isaac's age from Sarah's, from having borne Isaac at the age of 90 years; they assumed she died immediately after Isaac's binding, at the age of 123 years, which implied Isaac would have been 37 years old at this time. In the *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus portrays Isaac as an adult of 25 years. Davis and Chilton point out the Dead Sea *War Scroll* indicated the age of 25 years as the minimum age for active military service; they deduced from this finding that Josephus portrayed Isaac as a martyr to his Hellenistic readers.<sup>51</sup> Emphasizing Isaac's voluntary resignation and merit, Josephus depicted Isaac as running joyfully to the altar like a martyr rushing to his death.<sup>52</sup> By way of contrast, Philo rather ambiguously, refers to Isaac as a child (*De Abrahamo* 32.175), although as Feldman points out, the use of the word 'child' in its diminutive form can refer to an adult child.<sup>53</sup> In Western music and art, Isaac is usually represented as a child or an adolescent. However, there are some exceptions: sometimes he is represented as a younger man, or, as explained in Chapter 2, as an older man (Fig. 34). In twentieth-century music, such as Britten's *Offertorium*, Isaac is represented as a young man and as a martyr to symbolize the young soldiers who lost their lives during World Wars I and II; in Zaimont's *Parable*, he is also depicted as a man in his depiction as a Christ-like figure. In both works Isaac's voice part is scored for an older voice part, that is, a tenor.

#### *The Two Servants (Gen. 22.3, 5, 19)*

The inclusion of the servants in the rabbinical literature strengthens the opposition between Isaac and the two servants. They are named Ishmael and Eliezer in *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31.9-10, *Yalkut Shim'oni* and the legend recounted by Ginzberg (1.279). The pair argues over which one would inherit Abraham's property following Isaac's death. The opposition between Isaac and Ishmael and Eliezer develops on a spiritual level as Abraham asks the servants if they see anything on the mountain. Whereas the servants see nothing, Isaac sees either a pillar of fire<sup>54</sup> or the

48. Cf. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, p. 76.

49. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 124.

50. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 124.

51. Feldman, *Josephus*, III, p. 88.

52. Manns, 'The Targum of Genesis 22', p. 73.

53. Feldman, *Josephus*, III, p. 89.

54. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen. 22.4; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31.226.

cloud<sup>55</sup> enveloping the mountain that symbolizes the *shekinah*; the rabbis thus identified the servants Ishmael and Eliezer with the donkey, and Abraham and Isaac with the divinity (*Genesis Rabbah* 56.2):

He said, 'Isaac, my son, do you see what I see?'

He said to him, 'Yes'.

He said to the two lads, 'Do you see?'

They said to him, 'No'.

He said, 'Since you do not see, "Stay here with the ass" (Gen 22.5), for you are like an ass'.

On the basis of this passage we learn that slaves are in the category of asses.<sup>56</sup>

This allegory clearly defines Isaac as Abraham's chosen son; highlighting Isaac's superiority, the midrash emphasizes that neither Ishmael nor Eliezer could take the place of Isaac as bearer of God's promise. The rabbis understood Abraham's words to his servants that 'he and the lad would return to them' (Gen. 22.5) was the result of an 'unconscious prophecy',<sup>57</sup> stemming from Abraham's designation as a prophet in Gen. 20.7. Abraham Goldfaden, who is known as the founder of Yiddish theatre, composed the biblical operetta *Akeydes Yitskhok* in 1897 based on midrashim. This is perhaps one of the only works composed which gives the servant boys, named here as Ishmael and Eliezer, a voice to speak.

'And the two of them went together' (*Genesis* 22.6, 8)

Jewish tradition emphasizes that Abraham and Isaac were of a single mind, that is, shared the same disposition as they set out on their journey to do God's will. Unlike his biblical portrayal, the tradition depicts Isaac as an active participant in the trial as he carried 'his cross'. *Genesis Rabbah* 56.3.1 notes:

It is like one who carries his own cross on his shoulder.<sup>58</sup>

Kessler regards this tradition as an exegetical encounter that parallels the interpretation of the church fathers. The term 'cross' was later removed possibly, as Kessler speculates, out of embarrassment that Jewish tradition had adopted Christian exegesis.<sup>59</sup> Isaac's act of carrying

55. *Midrash HaGadol* on *Vayera*, Gen. 22.3; *Gen. R.* 56.2.

56. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 278.

57. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 130; Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, p. 279.

58. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 280.

59. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 118.



the wood/cross points ultimately to his willingness to do God's will; this tradition makes a distinction between the different roles of father and son as well as their equal participation in the sacrifice. *Genesis Rabbah* 56.4.3 notes:

R. This one went to tie up and the other to be tied up, this one went to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered.<sup>60</sup>

Manns notes that while Abraham's faith and obedience to God's will constitutes the climax of the biblical story, the targumic literature emphasizes Isaac's readiness to offer himself as a sacrifice as the key difference.<sup>61</sup>

*The Journey to Moriah and the Building of the Altar (Genesis 22.6-9)*

Philo (*De Abrahamo* 32.172-76) and Josephus (*Ant.* 1.227) associated Isaac's question from Gen. 22.7 at the site of the Akedah and not with the journey to the place of sacrifice as in the midrashic and targumic literature. The midrash recounts that Abraham informed Isaac of his impending sacrifice: 'God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering', and if not, then 'the lamb for the burnt offering will be my son' (*Genesis Rabbah* 56.4).<sup>62</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* concludes that Isaac, although troubled, accepted Abraham's decision.<sup>63</sup> In an interpretation put forward by Josephus, however, Isaac received Abraham's words with joy (*Ant.* 1.115). In his enthusiasm to become a sacrificial victim, tradition records how Isaac built the altar with Abraham.<sup>64</sup> Josephus lauded Isaac's heroism by describing how he, and not Abraham, built the altar (*Ant.* 1.227). Tradition held that Abraham rebuilt the altar upon which Adam, Cain, and Abel, Noah and his sons had offered sacrifices,<sup>65</sup> an interpretation that suggests the sanctity of the Temple stretched back to the time of Adam.<sup>66</sup> The rabbis understood that Abraham tied Isaac's hands and legs like an animal for slaughter,<sup>67</sup> like the Tamid offering in the Temple, highlighting the link between the Akedah and the Temple cult. An image below illustrates the scene of an animal bound in the manner of the Tamid offering (Fig. 61):

60. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 281.

61. Manns, 'The Targum of Genesis 22', pp. 78-80.

62. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 281.

63. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 281.

64. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, p. 280; Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p. 135.

65. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, p. 79; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31.227.

66. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 90.

67. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31.237.

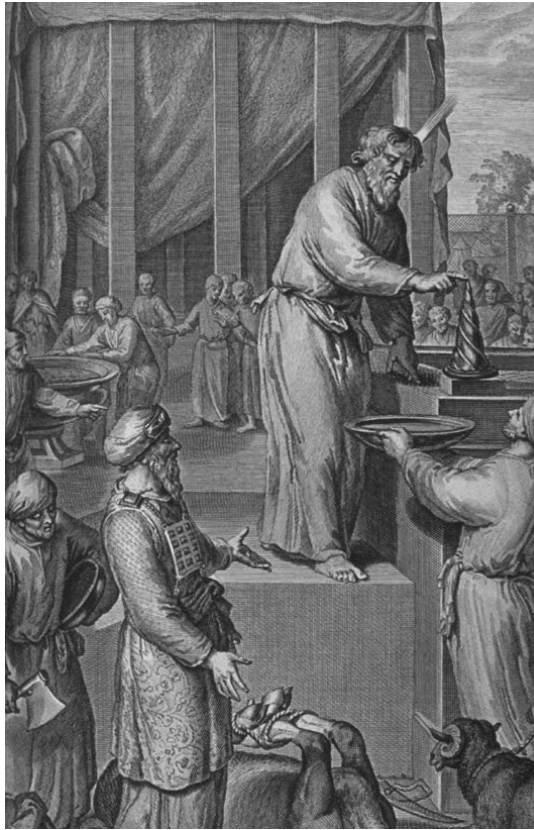


Fig. 61. *Moses Consecrates Aaron and his Sons and Offers their Sin Offering.* From *Figures de la Bible* (1728). Illustrated by Gerard Hoet et al. Photo credit: © History of Science Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries.

### *The Binding (Genesis 22.9)*

Binding a sacrificial victim prevented it from moving and eliminated the risk of involuntarily movements, such as flinching at the sight of the knife and trembling with fear, resulting in blemish or injury to the victim and leading to an invalidation of the sacrifice. The rabbis grappled with the practicalities of how the aged Abraham could have bound a man of thirty-seven years against his will, and so they deduced that Isaac must have freely consented to the sacrificial act. *Genesis Rabbah* 58.8 recounts the following:

R. Isaac said: When Abraham wished to sacrifice his son Isaac, he said to him: 'Father, I am a young man and am afraid that my body may tremble through fear of the knife and I will grieve you,

whereby the slaughter may be rendered unfit and this will not count as a real sacrifice; therefore bind me very firmly'. Forthwith, he bound Isaac. Can one bind a man of thirty-seven . . . years old? Only with his permission!<sup>68</sup>

Philo and Josephus omitted the act of binding from their retellings, for, as Feldman notes, the physical binding of Isaac might have been 'too much for a Hellenistic audience', and consequently might have incriminated Abraham.<sup>69</sup> Instead of a binding scene, Josephus introduced a homiletic address by Abraham to Isaac, whereby Abraham rationalizes God's command. Interestingly, Metastasio omitted the scene of the binding from the libretto for fear of offending his aristocratic audience, and included a dialogue at this point. The rabbis included a dialogue between Abraham and Isaac following the act of binding.<sup>70</sup> To emphasize the primacy of Isaac, the targumic tradition includes a monologue initiated by Isaac, commanding his father to 'tie him tightly' to avoid any blemish which would invalidate the sacrifice.<sup>71</sup>

#### *The Near Sacrifice (Genesis 22.10)*

The sanctity of the near sacrifice is emphasized in the tradition by the presence of angelic beings hovering above the altar. As Abraham held the knife in readiness to kill Isaac, the Targumim record Isaac's vision of the angels as he lay bound; significantly, Isaac's sight of the angels highlights his primacy over Abraham.<sup>72</sup> Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen. 27.1 attributes Isaac's blindness in old age (Gen. 27.1) to either seeing the *shekinah* or as the result of the angels' tears falling into his eyes.<sup>73</sup> The rabbinic tradition tells how, in their attempt to prevent the sacrifice, the tears of the ministering angels either blunted<sup>74</sup> or dissolved Abraham's knife (*Genesis Rabbah* 56.8.2).<sup>75</sup> The presence of angels at Isaac's death or near death is not a prominent feature of the story's retelling in the music; however, this being said, Britten incorporates an angelic choir in the *Offertorium* section of the *War Requiem* before and after Isaac's death.

Josephus understood the sacrifice in terms of returning the gift of Isaac to God (*Ant.* 1.229); this tradition is present also in Pseudo-Philo (*LAB* 32.2) and in Philo's *De Abrahamo*:

68. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 300.

69. Louis H. Feldman, 'Josephus as a Biblical Interpreter: "The "Aqedah"', *JQR* 75.3 (1985), pp. 212-52 (236).

70. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, p. 280.

71. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, p. 79; *Targum Neofiti*, p. 117.

72. Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p. 31.

73. Feldman, *Josephus*, III, p. 292.

74. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, I, p. 281.

75. *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 283.

So Isaac was saved, since God returned the gift of him and used the offering which piety rendered to Him to repay the offerer, while for Abraham the action, though not followed by the intended ending, was complete and perfect, and the record of it as such stands graven not only in the sacred books but in the minds of the readers (*De Abrahamo* 33.177).

The Metastasian libretto, too, points out the extraordinary nature of Isaac's birth and near death and emphasizes that he was a gift from God (Gen. 15.5; 17.18-19; 18.10-15; 21.1-7). God returned Isaac to Abraham as a sign that his only beloved son was indeed the chosen son of the promise who would now carry out God's mission (Gen. 12.1-3; 15.7-21; 17.1-22). At the point of death (Gen. 22.10a), Josephus highlights the mysterious nature of Isaac's birth, 'since you were born [out of the course of nature], depart now from life not in a common fashion' (*Ant.* 1.230).<sup>76</sup> In this retelling, Isaac was deemed by God to be worthy of a special form of death 'with prayers and sacrificial rites' (*Ant.* 1.231). Feldman notes the similarities between the extraordinary birth and death story of Josephus's Isaac and with the biographies of notable Greek and Roman heroes, namely, Heracles, Oedipus, Theseus and Romulus.<sup>77</sup>

The rabbis record a dialogue between Abraham and Isaac at the point prior to the near sacrifice. Isaac instructs his father to 'gather his ashes and to put them in a casket in his mother's chamber so that Sarah would always remember her son and weep' (*Midrash Tanhuma Vayera* 81; *Bereshit Rabbah* 55.90).<sup>78</sup>

#### *The Averted Sacrifice (Genesis 22.11-14)*

In the midrash as recounted by Ginzberg, God instructed the archangel Michael, who also makes an appearance in Britten's *Offertorium*, to avert the sacrifice; Michael's voice called upon Abraham with the injunction to lay not a hand upon the lad, nor do anything to him.<sup>79</sup> In Josephus's retelling (*Ant.* 32.4),<sup>80</sup> God, rather than an angel (Gen. 22.13), addresses Abraham and averts the sacrifice with the offering of a ram in place of Isaac. This tradition is found also in Philo (*De Abrahamo* 32.176) and *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31, among others. While Philo avoids mentioning the ram's appearance, Josephus refers to it only briefly.<sup>81</sup> Interestingly,

76. Feldman notes the lacuna in the Greek and adds 'out of the course of nature' to the phrase to highlight the mystery of Isaac's birth.

77. Feldman, *Josephus*, III, p. 91.

78. Cited in Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood (eds.), *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence* (JSOTSup, 400; Bible in the Twenty-First Century, 3; London: T. & T. Clark, 2003), pp. 40-41.

79. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 1: 281.

80. Feldman, *Josephus*, III, p. 92.

81. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 151.

in the music the ram is significant only as a substitute for Isaac. The midrash highlights the intimate connection between the ram and Isaac: *Midrash HaGadol* on Gen. 22.13 states that the ram was named Isaac. *Yalkut Shim'oni* 101 notes that it came from the Garden of Eden, where it had been created either before the creation of the world (*Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31; *Sifre Deut.*, 32.21) or during the six days of creation, or more precisely on the eve or twilight of the first Sabbath (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 18.125-25 and 31.228; *Tanhuma Vayera* 23.79)<sup>82</sup> where it had been waiting for the Akedah.<sup>83</sup> *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31.229 records that after the ram had been sacrificed, its component parts were used to good effect:

For that ram, which was created at twilight, nothing came forth which was useless. The ashes of the ram were the base which was upon the top of the inner altar. The sinews of the ram were the strings of the harp whereupon David played. The ram's skin was the girdle (around) the loins of Elijah, may he be remembered for good, as it is said, 'And they answered him, He was an hairy, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins' (2 Kgs 1.8). The horn of the ram of the left side (was the one) where He blew upon Mount Sinai as it is said, 'And it shall come to pass, that when the ram's horn soundeth long' (Josh. 6.5). The horn of the right side, which is larger than that of the left, is destined in the future to be sounded in the world to come.

Tradition records that the ram was called Isaac, and when it was sacrificed, it was as though Isaac himself had been sacrificed:<sup>84</sup> like Isaac, it is associated with *zekhut avot* (ancestral merit). The rabbis commented that when in the future Israel remembered the ram, Jewish people would benefit.<sup>85</sup>

The Targumim, according to Manns, prove quite clearly that already in the first century CE there existed a firm belief that the principal merit of the Akedah came from the force of Isaac's self-offering.<sup>86</sup> In his prayer of mercy, Abraham asks God to remember Isaac's merit when the children of Israel come before him, and prays that God will deliver the descendants of his son from trouble and pardon them from their transgressions for Isaac's sake.<sup>87</sup> Manns points out that the benefits of Isaac's merits that were experienced by the chosen people in the past are invoked in the present, and hoped for at the end of time.<sup>88</sup> As well as reciting the

82. Cited in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, p. 80 n. 27.

83. *Yalkut Reubeni*, cited in Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p. 41.

84. Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p. 41.

85. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 146.

86. Manns, 'The Targum of Genesis 22', p. 79.

87. Manns, 'The Targum of Genesis 22', p. 79.

88. Manns, 'The Targum of Genesis 22', p. 79.

prayer of merit, tradition records that Abraham gave thanks and recited the Resurrection Benediction: 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who quickenest the dead'. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31.227 tells how Isaac recited the benediction after his revival, following momentary death brought about by the fright of the knife touching his neck:<sup>89</sup>

Rabbi Jehudeh said: When the blade touched his neck the soul of Isaac fled and departed (but) when he heard His voice from between the two Cherubims saying (to Abraham) 'Lay not thine hand upon the lad' (Gen. 22.12) his soul returned to his body, and (Abraham) set him free, and Isaac stood upon his feet. And Isaac knew in this manner the dead in the future will be quickened. He opened (his mouth) and said: 'Blessed art thou, O Lord, who quickeneth the dead'.<sup>90</sup>

Prayers are often included in the librettos of musical compositions based on the Akedah, from the Requiem Mass in Christian tradition to the *Kaddish yatom* in Jewish tradition. Judith Lang Zaimont includes the *Qaddish* at the end of the *Parable* as a way of mourning Isaac following his sacrificial death.

#### *Isaac's Absence (Genesis 22.19)*

The midrashim and the Targumim filled in a gap in the biblical narrative by explaining Isaac's whereabouts after the Akedah. A variety of stories exist in the tradition: Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen. 22.19 and *Midrash HaGadol* recount how the angels brought Isaac to the Great House of Shem, where he remained for three years.<sup>91</sup> Another interpretation understood that the angels brought him to the Garden of Eden, where he was healed of the wound inflicted by Abraham.<sup>92</sup> It was also thought that Isaac remained on Mount Moriah for three years until he reached the age of forty, and afterward returned to marry Rebekah (Gen. 24.62-67).<sup>93</sup> A further interpretation links the Akedah to Isaac's first meeting with Rebekah, and explains that the sight of Isaac coming down from paradise, walking like a dead man—'head down and feet up'—caused her to fall from the camel.<sup>94</sup>

#### *Isaac's Death (Extrabiblical)*

There are several ancient traditions concerning Isaac's ashes or blood and many more that speak of his death and resurrection. *Midrash*

89. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, p. 282; Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p. 30.

90. Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, pp. 30-31.

91. Cited in Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p. 4 n. 3.

92. *Yalkut Reubeni*, *Wa-Yera* cited in Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p. 6 n. 16.

93. Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p. 6.

94. Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, p. 5.

*HaGadol* on Gen. 22.12 highlights the violence of the sacrifice; it graphically describes how Abraham implored God to allow him to proceed with Isaac's slaughter:

'Lay not your hand upon the lad'. Abraham said to the Holy One blessed be He: Lord of Heavens, shall I strangle him and bind him as a burnt offering in front of you. He said to him: 'Do not do anything to him!' Shall I cut him into pieces for you? He said to him 'Do not do anything to him'.

The act of strangling, bruising and cutting into pieces would have caused a blemish on Isaac's body, resulting in the sacrifice becoming invalid. The purpose of binding, as noted already, was to avoid such an occurrence, so the act of killing or injuring Isaac in this manner would have been futile. The violent aspects to this story are rarely, if ever, treated by the fathers of the church. While the majority of composers and librettists generally sanitize the story of its violent episodes, there are a few, most notably female, composers who highlight this troublesome aspect. In particular, they emphasize either Abraham's violent character or the violence of the sacrificial act itself. Benjamin Britten, too, highlights the violence of Abraham's act and the futility of Isaac's death in the *Offertorium* of the *War Requiem*.

In all these traditions, according to Jensen, Isaac's ashes are the symbol of his merit rather than of Abraham's.<sup>95</sup> Rashi's commentary on Gen. 22.14 notes:

The *Midrash Aggadah* (see *Genesis Rabbah* 56.9) [explains]: The Lord will see this binding to forgive Israel every year and to save them from retribution, in order that it will be said 'on this day' in all future generations. 'On this mountain of the Lord, Isaac's ashes shall be seen, heaped up and standing for atonement'.

A midrash by Simeon ben-Yohai recounts how Isaac left a quarter of his blood on the altar; this implies that Isaac's voluntary self-offering, through the shedding of blood, gained expiation for Israel. Manns is of the opinion that, from an exegetical point of view, this tradition was prompted by the association of Genesis 22 with Isaiah 53, and established by Jews independently from and prior to the New Testament. The theological framework that led to the creation of this exegetical framework, according to Manns, was martyrdom.

95. Jensen cites *b. Ta'anit* 16a; *y. Ta'anit* 2.1 (on the ashes); *Mekilta of R. Simeon b. Yohai*, on Exod. 16.2 (on the blood); Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, I, pp. 281-82, which recounts the tradition that the ram was called Isaac. See also, Jensen, 'The Offering of Isaac', p. 102 n. 23.

*Isaac's Resurrection (Extrabiblical)*

The Akedah conveys the theme of martyrdom most clearly in midrashim that modify the narrative to say that Isaac was resurrected.<sup>96</sup> Spiegel points out that the Akedah was a powerful metaphor for those who died in *Kiddush Hashem* during the Crusades in 1096, where the martyrs of the medieval European pogroms saw themselves as a type of Isaac prepared for the slaughter.<sup>97</sup> Berman notes that the story of the Maccabean martyrs finally reached Hebrew readership through *Sefer Jossipon*, a Hebrew history written in southern Italy; this story, according to Berman, guided the Jews of the Rhineland in their response to the pogroms of 1096. Despite breaching *halakha*, Jewish fathers slaughtered their children, wives and themselves rather than convert to Christianity. During the Second Crusade, the twelfth-century poet Ephraim of Bonn composed a *Book of Memoirs* and poems based on the massacres of Jews during this time.<sup>98</sup> One such poem recounts Abraham's slaughter of Isaac, his resurrection and near slaughter by his father for a second time. This poem, 'The Akedah', recounts the experiences of Jews living under the threat of persecution during the Middle Ages:

Recall to our credit the many Akedahs,  
The saints, men and women, slain for Thy sake. . . .<sup>99</sup>

Berman points out that the belief in resurrection supported the practice of martyrdom; a father would slaughter his child only if he believed his son's death was temporary. This conviction fostered a rich output of legends recounting Isaac's death and resurrection.<sup>100</sup> Manns points out that for the rabbis, Isaac was the prototype of risen man, and his sacrifice followed by resurrection was, in some way, the cause of the final resurrection of humankind.<sup>101</sup> Elie Wiesel notes that the theme of the Akedah has been used for centuries 'to describe the destruction and disappearance of countless Jewish communities everywhere. All the pogroms, crusades, persecutions and slaughters, catastrophes, massacres by sword and liquidation by fire have been an enactment of the Akedah' over and over again.<sup>102</sup> In the light of the Holocaust, this story features as the most timeless and the most relevant of this generation. Isaac, as the 'most tragic' of all the patriarchs, was the one who ulti-

96. Berman, *The Akedah*, p. 89.

97. Berman, *The Akedah*, p. 92; see also Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, pp. 17-27.

98. Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, pp. 137-38.

99. For full text of poem see Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, pp. 143-52.

100. Berman, *The Akedah*, p. 94; see also Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, pp. 132-34.

101. Manns, 'The Targum of Genesis 22', p. 79.

102. Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), pp. 95-97.



mately taught 'future survivors of Jewish history' to transform suffering into prayer and love, to live and laugh again.<sup>103</sup>

The Israeli poet Amir Gilboa (1917–84) who immigrated to Palestine before the outbreak of World War II and lost his entire family in the Holocaust was inspired to write a poem, *Isaac* (1953), based on Genesis 22. In this rendition, Isaac, like Gilboa, watches helplessly from afar as his father, Abraham, is slaughtered before his very eyes:

It is I who am being slaughtered, my son,  
And my blood is already on the leaves.  
And father's voice was stifled.  
And his voice pale.  
And I wanted to cry out writhing not to believe  
And tearing open the eyes.  
And I woke up.  
And bloodless was my right hand.<sup>104</sup>

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the Akedah has been set to music to commemorate the slaughter and persecution of innocent victims through violent persecution. It inspired Samuel Alder to compose the oratorio *The Binding*, which he based upon his father's unpublished oratorio *The Akedah* (1938), written during the Jewish persecution in Nazi Germany. However, after much research, I discovered no other oratorios or classical art songs composed on this story during this time or in the immediate aftermath of the Shoah. In the *Offertorium* of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, the slaughter of Isaac became a metaphor for the hundreds of thousands of young soldiers slaughtered in World War I; the emphasis in this composition highlights the deaths of slaughtered soldiers rather than slaughtered victims of the Shoah.

As mentioned in Chapter 3 there was a general silence about the Holocaust and the treatment of Jews during this time, which was also reflected in the music. Composer Michael Horvit, who composed an instrumental work for organ entitled *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, was commissioned by Houston's Congregation Emanu-El to compose an anthem for the fiftieth anniversary of *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass; November 1988).<sup>105</sup> Although the text of Genesis 22 is not set to music in the latter, Horvit drew inspiration from a poem that was found on a basement

103. Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, pp. 95–97.

104. [http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/lesson\\_plans/sacrifice\\_of\\_isaac.asp](http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/lesson_plans/sacrifice_of_isaac.asp) (accessed 12 June 2010).

105. *Kristallnacht* was a pogrom against the Jews in Nazi Germany and parts of Austria on the night of 9 November 1938. The SA, SS and members of the Hitler Youth ransacked and smashed the windows of Jewish homes, department stores and synagogues. While hundreds of synagogues burned, civilians and local fire departments failed to take action to stop the vandalism and spread of fire to surrounding synagogues. The amount of glass on the streets following the attacks led to the name *Kristallnacht*.



Fig. 62. Natan Nuchi, *The Binding of Isaac* (1984).  
 Spray enamel on canvas, 96" x 66". Photo credit:  
 © With the generous permission of Natan Nuchi.

wall in Cologne by Jews thought to have been hiding from the Nazis during World War II. The anthem, which is sometimes sung at *Yom Ha-Shoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day, is a statement of belief in God despite his silence during this time.

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.  
 I believe in love even when feeling it not.  
 I believe in God even when God is silent.  
 I believe.

The American Israeli artist Natan Nuchi depicted the Akedah in a painting entitled *The Binding of Isaac* (1984) (Fig. 62). Here Nuchi leaves it to viewers to decide whether the moment depicted is before Abraham receives the call from the angel or after he has 'heard' the call not to

kill his beloved son. Isaac is depicted with a 'traumatized expression, glazed eyes and a catatonic frozen body'. His 'emaciated body' and 'victimized look' calls to memory the 'Holocaust victim', while the depiction of his outstretched body on the lap of his father is reminiscent of the Christian pieta; in this way, Nuchi connects the image of the dead Christ from Christian tradition to the Holocaust victim. This pose also emphasizes Abraham's great love for his son. Nuchi highlights Buber's understanding that the Hebrew God of the Bible is portrayed as primarily audible rather than visual or tactile; for this reason, he omitted the angel that touches Abraham's hand. He also omitted the ram from the scene to enable viewers to focus more on the psychological and emotional aspects of the story rather than the metaphysical or symbolic. Isaac is alive, and he lives to become patriarch of Israel.<sup>106</sup>

In more recent times, the story of the Akedah has been set to music by Roger Ames, a non-Jew, who composed *Isaac: A Parable of 9.11.01* to commemorate the slaughter of innocent victims of the 9/11 attacks by Islamic extremists in the United States in 2001.

2

For Dr. James Jordan and the Westminster Chapel Choir  
of Westminster Choir College of Rider University

### Abraham and Isaac: A Parable of 9.11.01

Dedicated to the victims of September 11, 2001

Mixed Voices, S.A.T.B., with Piano (or Organ)

Text by  
Wilfred Owen (1893-1918):  
"The Old Man and the Young"

Music by  
ROGER AMES (ASCAP)

Vivace (♩ = 100 - 104)

*f* *ritmico, furioso*

Piano  
(or Organ)

Ex. 5. Roger Ames, *Abraham and Isaac: A Parable of 9.11.01*, mm. 1-3

Jewish composer No'am Sheriff composed *Akeda = Die Opferung Isaaks = Sacrifice of Isaac: Passacaglia für Orchester in memoriam Yitzhak Rabin* in memory of Israel's late prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin (1922-95), who was assassinated on 4 November 1995 by a right-wing Israeli extremist, Yigal Amir, who opposed Rabin for signing the Oslo Accords. Sheriff was inspired to set the text of Genesis 22 since it had been stated

106. I am very grateful to Natan Nuchi for the above explanation of his painting *The Binding of Isaac*.

by some that Yitzhak (Rabin) was sacrificed tragically on the altar of the peace process'.<sup>107</sup>

In the twentieth century, songwriters and performers Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen composed popular settings of Genesis 22 in their songs *Highway 61* (1965) from the album *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965) and the *Story of Isaac* from the album *Songs from a Room* (1969).<sup>108</sup> In the former, Dylan retells the story by situating the place of the near sacrifice not on a sacred mountain but on Highway 61, the 'Blues Highway'. It is a desolate place where natural law and order have been turned upside down and where neither a loving God nor a loving father exists. Twentieth-century Jewish settings of the story highlight the desolation of the human condition and the tragedy of lives cut short by human violence.

#### *Sarah's Death (Genesis 23.1-2)*

In the *Antiquities*, Josephus recounts a happy ending, as father and son embrace after the near sacrifice and return home to Sarah before her death in Gen. 23.1. The happy-ever-after finale, so typical of Hellenistic novels, is a textual addition<sup>109</sup> that was included as a *lieto fine* in the Metastasian libretto. Some traditions link Sarah's death with the Akedah: *Leviticus Rabbah* 20.2 and *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 32 note that the six blasts of the shofar on *Rosh Hashanah* memorialize the final three long cries and three short howls of Sarah in her death throes, making, as Sherwood notes, 'the proclamation of redemption and its subversion collide in the very same breath'.<sup>110</sup> Richard McBee illustrates this scene in a painting entitled *Sarah's Fear (after Ardon)* (2006); unlike the traditions mentioned above, he links Sarah's death throes with the sight of her dead son who was sacrificed by his father, Abraham, and then bound in a shroud; the graphic image of Sarah's hollow eyes, open mouth and hair standing on end illustrates her absolute terror upon seeing Isaac dead. The colour orange in the centre of the painting reflects not only the warmth of maternal affection but the explosion of emotion associated with this pain; most significantly, it calls to mind the image of the binding and the awaiting flames of the funeral pyre before Abraham offered Isaac as a holocaust:

107. See <http://www.noamsheriff.com/en/works/?p=1> (accessed 12 December 2012).

108. To hear a performance of this song go to the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y36zbbuX7w> (accessed 12 December 2012).

109. Feldman, *Josephus*, III, p. 94.

110. Yvonne Sherwood, 'Binding-Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the "Sacrifice of Abraham's Beloved Son"', *JAAR* 72 (2004), pp. 821-61 (853).



Fig. 63. Richard McBee, *Sarah's Fear* (after Ardon) (2006), 24" x 18".  
Photo credit: © With the generous permission of Richard McBee.

For the rabbis, Sarah's death is linked directly to the suffering and/or death of her only beloved son Isaac. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen. 22.20 and *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 32.233–344 attribute her death directly to the Akedah following Satan's misleading account of Isaac's murder by Abraham:

He (Satan) went and said to Sarah: Hast thou not heard what has happened in the world? She said to him: No. He said to her: Thy husband, Abraham, has taken thy son Isaac and slain him and offered him up as a burnt offering upon the altar. She began to weep and to cry aloud three times, corresponding to the three sustained notes (of the shophar), and she gave forth three howlings corresponding to the three disconnected short notes (of the shophar) and her soul fled and she died.

Ginzberg notes the following story in his *Legends* (1.286–87): here Satan comes before Sarah disguised as an old man to tell of her son's murder by his father:

While Abraham was engaged in the sacrifice, Satan went to Sarah, and appeared to her in the figure of an old man, very humble and meek, and said to her: 'Dost thou not know all that Abraham has done unto thine only son this day? He took Isaac, and built an altar, slaughtered him, and brought him up as a sacrifice. Isaac cried and wept before his father, but he looked not at him, neither did he have compassion upon him'. After saying these words to Sarah, Satan went away from her, and she thought him to be an old man from amongst the sons of men who had been with her son. Sarah lifted up her voice, and cried bitterly, saying: 'O my son, Isaac, my son, O that I had this day died instead of thee. It grieves me for thee! After that I have reared thee and have brought thee up, my joy is turned into mourning over thee. In my longing for a child, I cried and prayed, till I bore thee at ninety. Now hast thou served this day for the knife and the fire. But I console myself, it being the word of God, and thou didst perform the command of thy God, for who can transgress the word of our God, in whose hands is the soul of every living creature? Thou art just, O Lord our God, for all Thy works are good and righteous, for I also rejoice with the word which Thou didst command, and while mine eye weepeth bitterly, my heart rejoiceth'. And Sarah laid her head upon the bosom of one of her handmaids, and she became as still as a stone. She rose up afterward and went about making inquiries concerning her son, till she came to Hebron, and no one could tell her what had happened to her son. Her servants went to seek him in the house of Shem and Eber, and they could not find him, and they sought throughout the land, and he was not there. And, behold, Satan came to Sarah in the shape of an old man, and said unto her, 'I spoke falsely unto thee, for Abraham did not kill his son, and he is not dead', and when she heard the word, her joy was so exceedingly violent that her soul went out through joy.

When Abraham with Isaac returned to Beersheba, they sought for Sarah and could not find her, and when they made inquiries concerning her, they were told that she had gone as far as Hebron to seek them. Abraham and Isaac went to her to Hebron, and when they found that she was dead, they cried bitterly over her, and Isaac said: 'O my mother, my mother, how hast thou left me, and whither hast thou gone? O whither hast thou gone, and how hast thou left me?' And Abraham and all his servants wept and mourned over her a great and heavy mourning, even that Abraham did not pray, but spent his time in mourning and weeping over Sarah. And, indeed, he had great reason to mourn his loss, for even in her old age Sarah had retained the beauty of her youth and the innocence of her childhood.

Richard McBee illustrates the scene of Isaac's homecoming in the painting *Isaac Returns* (2008) (Fig. 65); but the shock in seeing her son alive causes Sarah to fall back and die; the white cloud behind the wall is suggestive of Sarah giving up her breath. In the next painting in the

cycle, *Abraham Mourns* (2008) Abraham sits *shiva* on a low chair, in his bare feet, beside Sarah's simple wooden casket (Fig. 66); there is a stillness and desolation of the scene with a dark cloud hovering over Abraham, the stark absence of any foliage on the tree, and darker, more muted colours. In the Metastasian libretto, Sarah, too, is overcome by shock and faints into Isaac's arms; but unlike interpretations in Jewish tradition, she eventually revives. This scene in the Metastasian libretto has led me to conclude that Metastasio may have been familiar with the story's retellings in Jewish tradition.



Fig. 64 (left). Richard McBee, *Isaac Returns* (2008), 6" x 5".

From the series *Sarah's Trials* (2008).

Photo credit: © With the generous permission of Richard McBee.



Fig. 65 (right). Richard McBee, *Abraham Mourns* (2008), 6" x 5".

From the series *Sarah's Trials* (2008).

Photo credit: © With the generous permission of Richard McBee.

*Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* on Gen. 23.1-2 recounts that following Isaac's return home Sarah gave up her breath and died upon hearing the story of his near sacrifice on Mount Moriah:

He took Isaac his son and led him up mountains and down hills. He took him up on one of the mountains, built an altar, arranged the wood, prepared the altar pile, and took the knife to slay him. Had not an angel from heaven called him, Isaac would have already been slain. There is proof that this is so, for Isaac returned to his mother and she said to him: 'Where have you been, my son?' Said he to her: 'My father took me and led me up mountains and down hills', etc. 'Alas', she said, 'for the son of a hapless woman! Had it not been for the angel you would by now have been slain!' 'Yes', he said to her.

Thereupon she uttered six cries, corresponding to the six blasts of the shofar. It has been said: She had scarcely finished speaking when she died. Hence it is written, And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her (Gen. 23.2).

Rashi's commentary on Gen. 23.2 notes that the shock of hearing about Isaac's near slaughter was enough to bring about Sarah's death:

'And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her' (Genesis 23.2): The telling of Sarah's death directly follows the binding of Isaac, because when Sarah is told about the binding of Isaac, where her son has been prepared for slaughter and then was nearly not slaughtered, her soul flew from her and she died.

### *Conclusion*

The midrash and other related writings from Jewish tradition have played an important role in influencing the reception of the Akedah in both Jewish and Christian classical art music. While one cannot say for certain if Pietro Metastasio, Joseph Mysliveček or Benjamin Britten consulted this literature, their compositions suggest a familiarity with some of the many traditions outlined above: for example, the allusion to Abraham's ten trials in the Metastasian libretto; the scene of the weeping family in Mysliveček's textual addition; and the primacy given to Isaac in Britten's *Canticle's II*, along with the choir of angels and the reference to the archangel Michael in Britten's *Offertorium*. The theme of Isaac's death, which is found in Britten's *Offertorium* and Zaimont's *Parable*, highlights, as I explain later, two different understandings of the story, from Christian and Jewish traditions. In Part II, I explore the reception of Genesis 22 in Christian and Jewish music, and, in doing so, offer a wider and more comprehensive consideration of Genesis 22.



## PART II

# RECEPTION IN MUSIC

ISAAC, A PASSIVE VICTIM IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY  
GIACOMO CARISSIMI'S *HISTORIA DI ABRAHAM ET ISAAC*

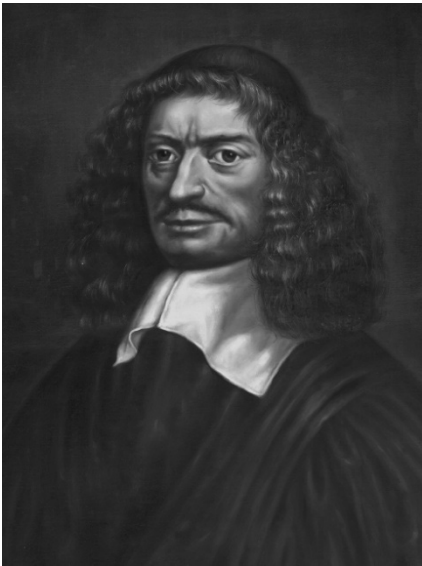


Fig. 66. *Giacomo Carissimi*.  
Photo credit: © With the generous  
permission of Naxos.

Giacomo Carissimi (1605–74), known also as the Father of Oratorio,<sup>1</sup> composed an *oratorio latino*, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*,<sup>2</sup> based on Genesis 22<sup>3</sup> for a Lenten service at the Oratorio del SS Crocifisso (see Fig. 33),

1. The renowned musicologist Lino Bianchi credits Carissimi as the ‘Father of Oratorio’ as well as the creator of this musical form. See Lino Bianchi, *Giacomo Carissimi, Stradella, Scarlatti e l’oratorio musicale* (Rome: Edizioni de Santis, 1969), pp. 99–100, 150.

2. Since no autograph manuscripts of Carissimi’s music survive, it is not possible to date with certainty his compositions.

3. The musicologist Claude Palisca notes that *Historia di Abraham et Isaac* was first performed in 1656 at the Collegio Germanico; see Claude V. Palisca, *Baroque Music* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice–Hall, 1981), p. 125. However, I think Palisca may have confused Carissimi’s *Il sacrificio d’Isacco*, now lost and known to have been performed in the Collegio Germanico in 1656, with *Historica di Abraham et Isaac*. It is possible that Carissimi might

where he worked<sup>4</sup> as a composer and conductor in the 1650s. Both types of oratorio, *oratorio latino* and the *oratorio volgare* developed as musical genres by the mid-seventeenth century, with the former employing a poetic text in Latin and the latter a prosaic text in the vernacular. The *oratorio latino*, like the motet or *rôle* dialogue, was shorter in duration and therefore more easily incorporated into the liturgical setting of a Mass; this type of oratorio was fostered almost exclusively in the services of the aristocratic Oratorio del SS Crocifisso. While the *oratorio latino* depended primarily on simple recitative (*recitative semplice*) as its chief mode of textual expression, the *oratorio volgare* was similar in structure to an opera without stage action, containing recitatives, florid da capo arias, *ritornelli*, and larger orchestral forces.

Carissimi structured his oratorios in one part only.<sup>5</sup> Cessac explains this idiosyncrasy as follows: in the oratory of San Marcello, the sermon was framed not by two parts of the same work but by two different compositions, one inspired by the Old Testament, the other by the New.<sup>6</sup> Another explanation suggests that the oratorio as a musical species evolved from the genre of sacred dramatic dialogue in Latin known also as dialogue motets.<sup>7</sup> Smither points out that Carissimi's Latin oratorios appear as 'expansions of the dialogue motet',<sup>8</sup> with their one-part structure and prose texts paraphrasing biblical stories'.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Carissimi's oratorios, in fact, seem to have developed only one stage beyond the dialogue motet, and for this reason, could

have composed *Il sacrificio d'Isacco* as a celebratory piece of music in recognition of a title bestowed upon him—*maestro di cappella del concerto di camera*—between 1655 and 1656 by the exiled queen of Sweden living in Rome. She attended a performance of *Il sacrificio di Isacco* in the Collegio Germanico in 1656 and presented Carissimi with a necklace after the performance.

4. In 1629 Carissimi became *maestro di capella* of the Collegio Germanico in Rome until 1674. As part of his duties, he was responsible for the preparation of music at the church of St Apollinare.

5. Giacomo Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac: Vir frugi et pater familias* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per la Storia della Musica, 1953), pp. viii-ix.

6. Catherine Cessac, *Marc-Antoine Charpentier* (trans. E. Thomas Glasgow (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1982), p. 267.

7. The term 'dialogue', from which the genre is named, denotes the setting of a text involving conversational exchanges between two or more characters. See David Nutter and John Whenham, 'Dialogue', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (ed. Stanley Sadie; London: Macmillan, 2nd ed., 1992), p. 282.

8. Smither states that in the seventeenth century, the term 'motet' could signify virtually any musical work with a sacred Latin text, except for settings of the Ordinary of the Mass, staged dramatic works and large two-part oratorios from late in the century. The term 'dialogue' denotes any work, sacred or secular, featuring an exchange between two or more characters and/or groups of characters. See Howard Smither, 'Carissimi's Latin Oratorio', *AnMc* 17 (1976), pp. 54-78 (61). Interestingly, Smither points out that Athanasius Kircher in his *Musurgia universalis* refers to Carissimi's oratorio *Jephtha* as a dialogue.

9. Smither, 'Carissimi's Latin Oratorio', p. 75.

be considered motets and function as motets in church during the celebration of Mass. Smither states that biblical texts form the basis for most of the dialogue texts, some of which composers used as the basis for their oratorios; nearly all the texts were written in prose and were based upon dialogues.<sup>10</sup> Carissimi's *Historia di Abraham et Isaac* possibly functioned as a 'longer' dialogue motet during a celebration of Mass at the German College.

One such example is the dialogue *Abraham* (1615) by Giovanni Francesco Capello. It is set for three characters, Abraham, Isaac, an angel, and a narrative chorus. Reflecting a monodic style of writing, the basso continuo (organ) accompanies the solo voices, Abraham (bass), an angel (tenor), and Isaac (soprano). The composition concludes with a three-part chorus, a common type of ending found in dramatic and narrative-dramatic Latin dialogues.<sup>11</sup> Capello based the text of this dialogue on the Clementine edition of the Latin Vulgate (22.1-2, 5, 7-8, 11-13). As reflected in the title, Abraham, rather than Isaac, is the focus of attention. Capello designated the chorus to sing the biblical narrator's lines. The composition opens with a *sinfonia* for twelve measures,<sup>12</sup> played by strings to a homophonic texture. In this composition, viols play the *ritornelli* between the dialogues of characters; the organ accompanies the solo voices, and strings accompany the chorus at the end.

The image shows a musical score for Giovanni Francesco Capello's *Dialogue, Abraham, Abraham*, measures 1-18. The score is written for three voices and a basso continuo. The first system is a *Sinfonia (Sinfonico)* for strings. The second system shows the vocal entries: Angelus (Tenor), Abraham (Bass), and Angelus (Soprano). The lyrics are in Latin: "A - braham, A - bra - ham! Ad - sum. Tol - le A - braham, A - bra - ham! Tolle, ich hü - re. Geh' und'." The score is in a monodic style, with each voice part having its own line of music.

Ex. 6. Giovanni Francesco Capello, *Dialogue, Abraham, Abraham*, mm. 1-18

There are notable parallels between this early dialogue and Carissimi's *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, in particular its one-part structure, and

10. Howard E. Smither, 'The Latin Dramatic Dialogue and the Nascent Oratorio', *JAMS* 20.3 (1967), p. 428.

11. Nutter and Whenham, 'Dialogue', p. 287.

12. The *symphonia* here is not to be confused with eighteenth-century *sinfonias*. The *sinfonia* is a twelve-measure introduction before the entry of the vocal part.

speeches set monodically and sung by soloists to a continuo accompaniment. But Carissimi's oratorios are more than dialogues: they are written in an expressive monodic style, mostly *recitativo semplice*, with passages in arioso style that employ 'a richer language of dissonant melodic leaps, suspensions, cross-relations, effective silences and subtle repetitions of expressive melodic phrases'.<sup>13</sup> Carissimi heightened the drama of the text even more by incorporating musical rhetorical devices; he increased the role of the narrator (*Historia*), as well as the chorus. Cessac points out that while Carissimi's oratorios remain largely faithful to the biblical text, they are free from the commentary, sentimentalizing and moralizing of later librettists.<sup>14</sup>

### Structure

The storyline is based on Gen. 22.1-3, 6-12, 15-18, and so it provides neither background information relating to the Abrahamic promises nor to Sarah's role, if any, during this time. As in Genesis 22, it does not divulge intimate details of Abraham's relationship with any other biblical character other than that of his son, Isaac. The librettist mirrored the structure of the biblical story by retelling his story in one complete section as well as retaining the same plot and sequence of events. The librettist retained two of the three monologues<sup>15</sup> (vv. 2, 16-17), and one of the three dialogues<sup>16</sup> (vv. 7-8), as well as selected narrated speech (vv. 1, 3, 10, 15). He also incorporated textual additions, including a duet following the angel's monologue (v. 12) expressing Abraham's and Isaac's mutual delight on hearing the angel's news, *O felix nuntium*, along with an extrabiblical chorus at the end with religious instruction.

### A Master of Musical Rhetorical Devices

As pointed out in Chapter 2, seventeenth-century music theorists<sup>17</sup> regarded Carissimi as a master of musical rhetoric and one who possessed the necessary power in bringing the biblical story alive to move and ultimately persuade his listeners. Carissimi maximized the use

13. George J. Buelow, *A History of Baroque Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 92.

14. Cessac, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, p. 127.

15. The three monologues include God's monologue to Abraham, v. 2; Abraham's monologue to the servants, v. 5; and God's monologue to Abraham, vv. 15b-18. The librettist omitted Abraham's monologue to the servants, v. 5.

16. The three dialogues include the dialogue between God and Abraham, v. 1; Abraham and Isaac, vv. 7-8; and Abraham and the angel, vv. 11-12. The librettist omitted two dialogues, vv. 1 and vv. 11-12.

17. Graham Dixon, *Carissimi: Oxford Studies of Composers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 13.

of word-painting (*hypotyposis*) to depict sound pictures of the biblical story. To move the affections, he incorporated emotion into the story by including dissonances (*saltus duriusculus*) and musical rests (*suspiratio*), along with contrasting major and minor tonalities, 'the mutation of mode', to reflect the moods of individual characters. To emphasize particular words from the biblical text, he incorporated a *palilogia* to reiterate a phrase, or a *multiplicatio* to stress a word through chant-like declamation on one repeated note. Carissimi also used specific tonalities to identify particular characters; identifying God's tonality as G-major, the angel's as C-major, and much of Abraham's as G-minor. Whereas the major tonality signifies that God's command was only a test (G-major), the minor tonality (G-minor) signifies that Abraham did not know the command was a test and conveys a sense of impending death, while the tonality of C-major suggests completeness and perfection.

### Characters

The work is scored for five voices (SATTB) and a five-part chorus. Carissimi scored the angel for a soprano, Isaac for an alto to represent his youth, Abraham as a tenor and God as a bass, as is typically represented in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music. As in other oratorios, Carissimi scored the omniscient narrator's part, *Historicus*, for a tenor voice. Although modern recordings of this work perform it with an orchestral accompaniment, Carissimi specified the organ as the *basso continuo* to accompany the singers. By incorporating into the libretto<sup>18</sup> the phrase *filiū tuū unigenitū* (vv. 2,<sup>19</sup> 12,<sup>20</sup> 16<sup>21</sup>) when referring to Isaac, the librettist suggested a Christological reference to Christ. However, despite this implied typology, he omitted other explicit typological references to Christ's passion, death and resurrection (vv. 3, 4, 13).<sup>22</sup>

18. Deus: Abraham! Abraham! Tolle *filiū tuū unigenitū* Isaac quem diligis . . . ; Historicus: . . . pergit ad locum quem illi Deus preceperat, cum *unigenito filio suo* . . . ; Historicus. . . et alligavit *filiū Isaac unigenitū*, arripuit gladium . . . ; Angelus; . . . cognovi enim quod times Deum, et non peperceris *unigenito filio tuo* propter me.

19. ait ei tolle *filiū tuū unigenitū* quem diligis Isaac et vade in terram Visionis atque offer eum ibi holocaustum super unum montium quem monstravero tibi.

20. dixitque ei non extendas manū tuā super puerum neque facias illi quicquam nunc cognovi quod timeas Dominum et non peperceris *filiū tuo unigenito* propter me.

21. dixitque ei non extendas manū tuā super puerum neque facias illi quicquam nunc cognovi quod timeas Dominum et non peperceris *filiū tuo unigenito* propter me.

22. The church fathers interpreted vv. 3, 4 and 13 from the Vulgate as typological references to Christ's passion: v. 3 *stravit asinum suum ducens secum duos iuvenes*; v. 4 *die autem tertio*; v. 13 *post tergum arietem inter vepres herentem cornibus quem adsumens obtulit holocaustum pro filio*.

## God's Call (Genesis 22.1)

The music opens without a *sinfonia* to set the mood; in the same manner as the biblical narrator (Gen. 22.1) the *Historicus* enters rather abruptly following a measure of music played by the continuo, singing in simple recitative, *Tentavit Deus Abraham*.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, the librettist deleted the phrase *quae postquam gesta* (22.1) to remove speculation that any misdemeanour in the past, such as Abraham's dismissal of Hagar (21.14-17), motivated God's test of Abraham. Abraham's words of response to God's call, *ille respondit adsum* (v. 1), on both occasions (vv. 1, 15) are omitted to portray Abraham as listening in silence, responding promptly and obediently to God's command. Following the narrator's announcement and in the tonality of G-major, the voice of God, sung by a bass, calls Abraham twice by name.<sup>24</sup> Carissimi based this call on an interval of a falling minor third (m. 5) followed by a rising major third (m. 6) for emphatic effect; throughout the oratorio, the interval of contrasting major and minor thirds feature to remind listeners of God's call. In this opening section, Carissimi sound-paints God's voice calling from afar through an acoustical effect in the accompaniment:

Ex. 7. Giacomo Carissimi, *Historia, Abraham, Abraham*, mm. 5-7

## God's Command (Genesis 22.2)

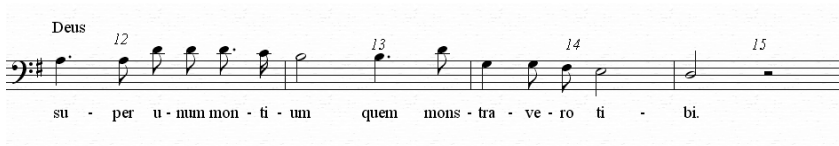
The music then modulates briefly to G-minor for the phrase *Tolle filium tuum unigenitum Isaac, quem diligis*;<sup>25</sup> this change of tonality focuses listeners' attention momentarily on Isaac, the object of God's command. The tonality returns to G-major as God instructs Abraham to go to the Land of Vision, *et vade in terram visionis, super unum montium*; here Carissimi sound-paints the shape of the mountains through an undulating

23. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 1.

24. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 1.

25. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 1.

melodic phrase. The bass voice sings his highest note on high D on *unum* and the first syllable of *montium* (m. 12), as well as the first syllable of *monstravero* (m. 13), to paint musically an image of the highest mountaintop upon which Abraham would present his offering to God.



Ex. 8. *Historia, super unum montium*, mm. 12-15

Carissimi scored the remainder of God's command, *et ibi illum offeres in holocaustum*, in G-major. The major tonality suggests that God did not want Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac or to harm him in any way. The music underscoring Abraham's words, however, is set in the minor tonality to articulate Abraham's understanding that God wanted Isaac to die.

#### *Abraham's Preparation and Journey (Genesis 22.3-5)*

Following the Vulgate's translation, the *Historicus* suggests that God's call had taken place during the night, *Abraham ergo de nocte consurgens . . .*; and in recitative style, he details Abraham's preparation at this time (mm. 19-37). The tonality modulates frequently to sound Abraham's industrious movement as he prepared for the momentous journey: to G-minor to paint the eerie darkness of the night; to G-major to express Abraham's rising in obedience to God's command;<sup>26</sup> to C-major, the angel's tonality, to tell of Abraham's preparation of the sacrificial implements, *sumpto gladio et igne, et strato apparatus*. Musically, Carissimi heightens the drama by highlighting the sacrificial implements through a monotonal repetition of notes (*multiplicatio*) on the nouns *gladio* and *igne*.



Ex. 9. *Historia, ligno, sumpto gladio et igne*, mm. 22-23

26. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 2.



The librettist clarifies an ambiguity found in v. 3 by stating that Abraham made all the necessary preparations for the journey first, before setting out with Isaac on the journey: *Abramo ergo de nocte consurgens, parato ligno, sumpto gladio et igne, et strato apparatus, pergit ad locum quem illi Deus preceperat, cum unigenito Isaac filio suo*. The change of tonality to D-major suggests Abraham's journey to the Land of Vision,<sup>27</sup> while the inclusion of a minor sixth reminds listeners of Isaac's status as an innocent victim. Modulating briefly to E-major, the music emphasizes the pronoun *suo* to focus attention on Abraham's relationship with his child. After a pause, a modulation to the minor marks the arrival of father and son to the designated place, *cumque illuc accessisset*, followed by a modulation to G-major on the phrase *tulit ligna holocausti et imposuit super Isaac* to suggest the sacrifice would not happen, to B-major on the pronoun *suum* to emphasize Abraham's relationship with his son Isaac. The music returns to the tonality of D-major in preparation for Isaac's question.<sup>28</sup>

This part of the libretto retains the ambiguity of the biblical narrative by not disclosing to listeners the location of this action, namely, at the top or at the bottom of the mountain. Since the librettist omitted the phrase *cumque duo pergerent simul* (vv. 6, 8) on two occasions, one might speculate he understood the two were already on the mountaintop when they conversed. Removing this important phrase implies the father's superiority over the son, as the focus of attention falls upon Abraham and his act of obedience and faith in God. The librettist omitted a number of textual details from vv. 3-5, including the servant boys, and, consequently, the allusion to the servile status of Abraham and Isaac. This omission eliminated the troublesome reference of Abraham's 'deception' of the two servants (v. 5), protected Abraham's moral integrity and ensured listeners would imitate only Abraham's moral actions. It also eliminated explicit christological imagery to Christ's passion, that is, to the two thieves crucified either side of Christ at the scene of the crucifixion (Lk. 23.39-43). While there is a brief allusion to the donkey, there is no explicit christological reference to the colt Christ rode on his way into Jerusalem (Jn 12.14-15) or to the length of time it took to arrive at the designated place of sacrifice (v. 4) — *die autem tertio elevatis oculis vidit locum procul*. As pointed out in Chapter 2, the church fathers understood the detail of the three days to prefigure Christ's resurrection on the third day. The nuance of seeing (v. 4) together with Abraham's naming of the place *Dominus videt* (v. 14) is absent also.

27. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 2.

28. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 3.

## Isaac's Question (Genesis 22.7)

Isaac opens this musical section with an innocent question directed to his father (mm. 38-42).<sup>29</sup> Musically, Carissimi bases Isaac's words of address, *Pater mi*, upon an interval of a falling major third, similar to the interval of a falling minor third in God's call in the opening section of the oratorio (mm. 5-6).

The image shows a musical score for a vocal part (Isaac) and piano accompaniment. The key signature is G major (one sharp). The time signature is common time (C). The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 38 and 39. Measure 38 contains the lyrics 'Pa - ter mi,' and measure 39 contains 'ec - ce i - gnis, ec - ce li - gna, ec - ce'. The second system covers measures 40, 41, and 42. Measure 40 contains 'gla - di - us et ap - pa - ra -', measure 41 contains 'tus, u - bi est ho - lo - caus - ti vic - ti - ma?', and measure 42 contains 'ma?'. The vocal line is written in a bass clef, and the piano accompaniment is written in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The music is in a simple, homophonic style with a clear melodic line for the voice.

Ex. 10. *Historia*, *Pater mi*, mm. 38-42

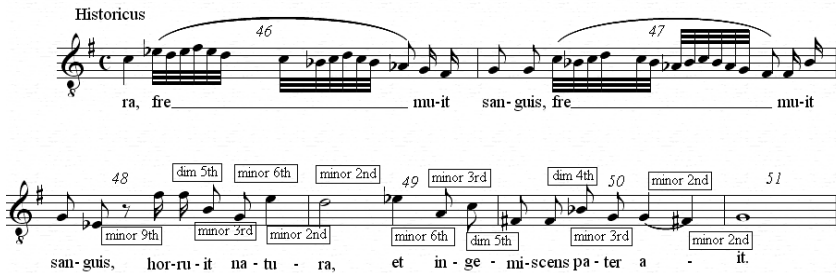
In addition, Carissimi incorporated the interval of a falling major third on the last syllable of *ecce* and the first syllable of *ignis* (m. 39) and of *ligna* (m. 39). Isaac's words, sung rather blandly in G-major, indicate his unawareness of the impending sacrifice. Isaac lists the objects for the sacrifice, noting the absence of the sacrificial victim, *ubi est holocausti victima?* There are no dissonances or changes in tonality from major to minor in the music; on the contrary, and as suggested by the major tonality, Carissimi presents Isaac's observation as unsuspecting of his fate (mm. 39-42).

On hearing this question, the narrator intervenes to describe Abraham's response to Isaac's disturbing words to music set in G-minor.<sup>30</sup> This passage contains an array of dissonant intervals set in close proximity to describe Abraham's emotional turmoil. Carissimi introduced a minor sixth between the last syllable of *obruit* and the first syllable of *dolor* to express Abraham's anguish (m. 43) on the first setting of the phrase, and

29. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 3.

30. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 3.

illustrated Abraham's growing anguish by introducing for the second time an augmented fourth on *dolor*, which is descriptive of Abraham's heartfelt pain (m. 45). Of particular interest, Carissimi employed word-painting on *fremuit* to sound-paint Abraham's quivering blood (m. 46). This phrase is repeated as a minor third lower (m. 47) for emphasis.



Ex. 11. *Historia, fremuit sanguis*, mm. 46–51

The most dissonant intervals of the entire oratorio are contained in mm. 48–51 to paint musically the psychological turmoil felt by Abraham as he reflected on his understanding of God's command (see Ex. 11).<sup>31</sup> They translate into sound Abraham's excruciating pain as he contemplated Isaac's question, as well as a portrayal of Abraham as a loving father who did not want his son to die.<sup>32</sup> Yet despite this, Abraham's speech, as in the biblical story, refrains from passing judgment on God's command; he maintains silence as an outward sign of his obedience to God.

Following this, a conversation ensues between Abraham and Isaac based upon Gen. 22.7-8. Musically, Abraham's response to Isaac is set in the key of G-minor. The melodic outline of this response, *fili mi*, based upon a falling minor third, echoes Isaac's previous address to his father, *pater mi*, in m. 38 based upon a major falling third. At this point, Carissimi employs a musical rhetorical device called *suspiratio* to represent Abraham sighing.<sup>33</sup> Dixon notes that this example of *suspiratio* is arguably one of the finest examples of the rhetorical devices in Carissimi's work.<sup>34</sup> Musical rests punctuate the melody line separating the words *Fili, mi, heu, fili mi* (mm. 52–54):

31. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, pp. 3-4.

32. The interval of a minor ninth is sung between the second syllable of *sanguis* and the first syllable of *horruit* (m. 54). A diminished fifth is sung between the second and third syllables of *horruit* (m. 54), followed by a minor sixth on the first two syllables of *natura*, falling to a minor second on the last syllable. The phrase *et ingemiscens pater ait* contains dissonances of a diminished fifth (mm. 55–56) and a diminished fourth (m. 56).

33. A *suspiratio* is a musical rhetorical device common in music of the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

34. Graham Dixon, *Carissimi*, p. 35.

Ex. 12. *Historia, Fili mi, heu*, mm. 52–54

Together with the *suspiratio*, Carissimi employs a *saltus duriusculus*,<sup>35</sup> that is, a dissonant interval of a diminished fifth between *heu* and the first syllable of *fili*, as an expression of Abraham's inner turmoil (m. 53). Other instances of this device occur in Isaac's speech during the conversation, between the syllables *sus* and *pi*, a diminished fourth, at mm. 56, 61–62.<sup>36</sup> Musically, Isaac reacts to his father's sombre mood in this section; his melodic line is set in the same minor tonality as his father's, and the melodic intervals of his vocal line echo those of Abraham's (mm. 54, 55, 59–60). In musical terms, Carissimi sound-paints Isaac's question with an imperfect cadence at mm. 57 and 62. (See Ex. 13.)

The dialogue between father and son is repeated (mm. 59–66) with variation; this time the phrases are broken up into smaller segments. Abraham repeats the words *fili mi*, while Isaac anxiously questions his father, *pater mi*, *pater mi*, *quid supiras?* (mm. 58–62). Isaac's increasingly anxious response to his father's sighs is heightened at m. 59 through Isaac's continued questioning at the top of his vocal register. Isaac's distress increases at mm. 63–65, expressed through the rising chromatic bass line, a musical rhetorical device associated with distress.<sup>37</sup> Isaac becomes more anxious, while his unawareness of unfolding events is confirmed by the major tonalities of D (m. 64) and then G-major (mm. 65–66), *pater mi*, *pater mi*, *ubi est holocausti victima?* (See Ex. 14.)

By way of contrast, Abraham replies to Isaac's question in the contrasting tonality of G-minor, *providebit Dominus holocausti victimam* (mm. 66–70).<sup>38</sup> Each word of the sentence is now broken up by crotchet and quaver rests to emphasize Abraham's intense emotional distress. Musically, he sobs on the word *holocausti*, singing only the first three syllables before picking up the melody again after a pause of two quaver rests to complete the second last, and last syllable of *holocausti* (See Ex. 14).

35. Carissimi employs another musical rhetorical device, *heterolepsis*, that is, a leap ending in discord, between *quid* and the first syllable of *suspiras*, that is, the interval of a minor seventh (mm. 56, 61).

36. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 4.

37. Graham Dixon, *Carissimi*, p. 45.

38. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 5.

Isaac  
52 53 54  
Pa-ter mi,  
Fi-li mi, heu, fi-li mi.  
55 56 57  
pa-ter mi, quid sus-pi-ras?  
58 59  
Pa-ter  
Heu, fi-li mi.  
60 61 62  
mi, pa-ter mi, quid sus-pi-ras?  
Fi-li mi, heu.

Ex. 13. *Historia, Pater mi*, mm. 52–62

63 64 65 66  
Pa-ter mi, pa-ter mi, u-bi est ho-lo-caus-ti vic-ti-ma?

Ex. 14. *Historia, Ubi est holocausti victima?* mm. 63–66

Abraham  
67 68 69 70  
Pro vi-de-bit Do-mi-nus ho-lo-caus-ti vic-ti-mam.

Ex. 15. *Historia, Providebit Dominus holocausti victimam*, mm. 67–70

Two further musical rests punctuate the musical line after *holocausti*, before Abraham completes the phrase with *victimam*. A musical ren-

dering of this phrase enables listeners to hear Abraham's emotionally choked words. Furthermore, listeners hear how Abraham points to God, *Dominus*, as the one responsible for Isaac's impending sacrifice and ultimate death. This highly emotional portrayal of Abraham removes the question of Abraham's culpability and testifies how he did not want to kill his son Isaac; yet, despite this, Abraham obeyed without question or hesitation.

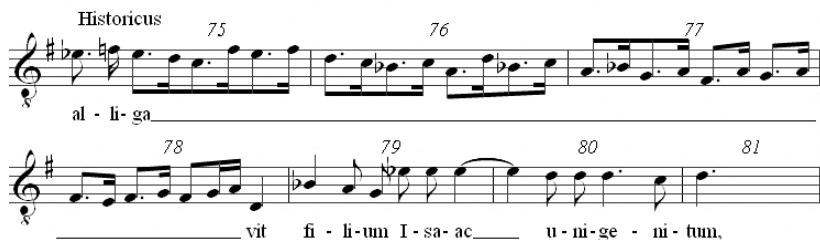
### *Sacrificial Preparations (Genesis 22.9)*

In a sombre mood accentuated by the minor tonality and slow tempo, the *Historicus* details Abraham's sacrificial preparations (mm. 71–78).<sup>39</sup> The music moves in downward stepwise movement to the phrase *cumque Abraham aedificasset altare*, and in upward stepwise movement to the phrase *ligna composuit* to sound-paint Abraham placing the sacrificial wood upon the altar.



Ex. 16. *Historia, cumque Abraham aedificasset altare*, mm. 71-74

In the next phrase, Carissimi paints a sound-picture of Abraham binding Isaac, employing musical word painting on the verb *alligavit*.<sup>40</sup>



Ex. 17. *Historia, alligavit filium Isaac unigenitum*, mm. 75-81

The effect produces in listeners' imaginations the image of Abraham winding the cord around Isaac's body in preparation for the ritual. After this episode, Carissimi employs the interval of a minor sixth between

39. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 5.

40. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 5.

*alligavit and filium* to remind listeners of Abraham's pain as he obeyed God's command to offer up his son. Carissimi employs the same interval, the minor sixth, to connect the last syllable of *filium* to the first syllable of *Isaac* (m. 79). The note values are longer in mm. 79–81, describing Isaac as Abraham's only-begotten son, and the emphasis of the beat falls upon the first syllable of *filium* and *Isaac* to enable listener reflection on the unfolding tragedy.

*The Near Sacrifice (Genesis 22.10)*

Carissimi heightens the drama at the climax of the biblical story (v. 10) by accelerating the pace of the music for a measure at *arripuit gladium* (m. 81), and slowing it down through longer note values at *extendit manum ad immolandum illum*.<sup>41</sup> At this point, the *Historicus* chants the phrase to highlight Abraham's action; the effect of this rhetorical device, *multiplicatio*, focuses listeners' attention on the tension-filled moment (mm. 82–84).



Ex. 18. *Historia, Extendit manum ad immolandum illum*, mm. 81–84

The librettist elaborated on neither the extent of Isaac's compliance nor his psychological state of mind; as in the biblical story, Isaac remained silent, and there is no detail about what he might have said or felt. Through his lack of emotional expression, the librettist communicated to listeners that Isaac, like his father, exemplified moral perfection in his compliance to his father's command. The title of the oratorio acknowledges the mutual obedience of both characters in carrying out God's command.

*The First Call of the Angel (Genesis 22.11)*<sup>42</sup>

With the image of Abraham poised with a knife in readiness to sacrifice Isaac, the *Historicus*, like the narrator of the biblical narrative, intervenes to recount the angel's call from heaven. In this retelling of the story, the angel does not delay by calling Abraham by name; his speech mirrors the angel's speech from the biblical story. Suddenly the tempo accelerates to express the urgency of the angel's arrival (m. 84). Carissimi employs word-painting to the phrase *Tunc ecce Angelus Domini*

41. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 6.

42. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, pp. 6–7.

*de caelo clamans*. A scale-like passage based largely upon G-major and punctuated with intervals of a major third and perfect fourths suggest the angel's fluttering wings; this enables listeners to imagine the angel's flight to avert the sacrifice. Carissimi employed word-painting on the verb *clamans* at the top of the *Historicus's* vocal register for three-and-a-half beats (m. 85), echoed also in the accompaniment to suggest the heavenly call from afar.



Ex. 19. *Historia*, *Tunc ecce angelus Domini*, mm. 84–86

The angel enters on the note high G at m. 87 in the key of C-major, the angel's tonality, and calls out the divine command to avert the sacrifice from taking place, *ne extendas manum tuam super Isaac*. The angel's melody is echoed in the accompaniment (m. 87) and suggests a voice calling from the far off distance. At the top end of her vocal register the soprano voice sings (mm. 88 and 89) *neque illi quid quam facias*. The music briefly modulates to G-major at *cognovi enim times Deum*, and returns to C-major for the remainder of the message, *et non pepercisti unigenito fili tuo propter me*.

#### *Dance of Jubilation*<sup>43</sup>

On hearing this news, Abraham exclaims *O!* on high E to express his surprise at God's second command to avert the sacrifice from taking place. Abraham's exclamation is interesting because it verifies that Abraham did not know he was being tested. Isaac's exclamation, a measure later and a tone lower on D, expresses the same note of surprise. The ensuing music reflects the change in mood brought about by God's second command. The metre changes to triple time, suggestive of a dance, to express joy brought about by the angel's news. The key of the duet starts out where the angel left off, in C-major, to connect Abraham's joy to the angel's message. Carissimi divided this dance-like section into three parts, A, B and C, with A and B repeated at the end.

Section A (mm. 96–108) is based upon the phrase *O felix nuntium*. In this section, Abraham's vocal part leads the singing, with Isaac following a bar behind. The rhythm of the bar *O felix* is based on three crotchets, followed by a dotted crotchet, quaver and crotchet for the phrase *nuntium*.

43. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, p. 7.



Isaac 98 99 100

Abraham

O fe - lix nun - ti - um

O fe - lix nun - ti - um

Ex. 20. *Historia, O felix nuntium*, mm. 98–100

Musically the phrase is treated imitatively (mm. 98–100), a third apart (mm. 101–102), and in contrary motion (m. 103). The variety with which Carissimi treats this short phrase expresses the jubilant mood of father and son.

Carissimi based the music for Section B (mm. 105–30) on the four-bar phrase *O dulce, o dulce gaudium* in imitative counterpoint in the key of G-major. The music is characterized by a rhythmic motif based on a minim and a crotchet; the syllable *dul (ce)* is always placed on the minim to emphasize the sweetness of God's news to Abraham and Isaac. Carissimi placed *Gaudium* at the cadence, as a dotted crotchet, quaver and a crotchet (mm. 108, 112).<sup>44</sup>

Isaac 105 106 107 108 109 110 111 112

Abraham

O dul - ce, o dul - ce gau - di - um,

O dul - ce, o dul - ce gau - di - um,

Ex. 21. *Historia, O dulce gaudium*, mm. 105–12

By way of contrast, Isaac's voice leads the singing this time (m. 105), with Abraham's voice following two bars later (m. 109). Both voices unite to sing the final phrase in homophony at mm. 128–30. Significantly, the music modulates between C-major (the angel's key) and G-major (God's key), and finally concludes in C-major (m. 130) to reflect the joy brought about by the saving words of God's second command. The joyful tune in mm. 105–12 sounds remarkably similar to the downward scale-like tune played by pealing bells on New Year's Eve.

44. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, pp. 7–8.

Section C of the song is based on the phrase *procul ignis, procul dolor, procul mors*. This section opens in the key of G-major and modulates to C-minor as the phrase *procul mors* (mm. 134–35) is sung, returning to G-major (mm. 136–37) and to D-minor at *procul mors* (mm. 138–39). The section concludes in C-major to emphasize, as before, the saving words of God’s command.

Ex. 22. *Historia, Procul ignis, procul dolor*, mm. 131–36

Carissimi divides section C into two parts (mm. 131–39 and 140–43). The music for part one is set imitatively, with Isaac’s vocal part leading at m. 131 and Abraham joining in a measure later. Intervals of a minor third, minor second, and diminished fifth, augmented fourth are also employed throughout this short section to emphasize the emotional pain of the father and son caused by the ordeal. Each time Isaac sings of sorrow, Carissimi employs the intervals of a diminished fifth (mm. 133–34) and an augmented fourth (mm. 137–38) to sound-paint the pain associated with God’s command for father and son alike. Isaac’s words relate primarily to his sacrifice: the fire (*ignis*), sorrow (*dolor*) and death (*mors*), while Abraham’s words relate to the implements associated with death: the knife (*ferrum*) and death (*mors*). The second part of Section C is a codetta in imitative style; Abraham repeats *vivit infans* four times, while Isaac responds *vivit pater*. The duet concludes with the repetition of sections A and B. The music testifies to an absence of animosity by Isaac toward his father, and to an absence of any psychological damage caused by the trauma of the sacrifice.

### *The Second Call of the Angel (Genesis 22.15-18)*<sup>45</sup>

Following the jubilation of father and son, the *Historicus* announces the angel’s second call of Abraham and the subsequent reiteration of the promises. A melisma on the noun *semen* (m. 162, 171–72) and an inversion of the melody on the same word at mm. 165–66 highlight God’s words to Abraham concerning the multiplication of Abraham’s seed.

45. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, pp. 9-10.

Angelus

161 162 163

bi, et tu-um se - - - men mul-ti - pli-

164 165 166 167 168

ca-bo, et tu-um se - - - men mul ti - pli-ca bo

Ex. 23. *Historia, Et tuum semen multiplicabo*, mm. 161–68

A repetition of *benedicentur* on three occasions (*palilogia*) emphasizes God's blessing to Abraham because of his obedience and his willingness to do God's will.

Angelus

174 175 176 177

be-ne - di - cen - tur omnes po - pu - li omnes gen - tes,

Ex. 24. *Historia, benedicentur omnes populi, omnes gentes*, mm. 174–77

The angel's words, *omnes populi*, and melody become the basis for a fugal section sung by the five-part choir in the next section.<sup>46</sup> Here the choir sings the moral of the story for listeners, *Omnes populi laudate Deum* (mm. 180–200) and *Et adorete Dominum* (mm. 200–216). The song of joy follows the reiteration of the promises to Abraham, and all nations, including members of the audience, are encouraged to praise and worship God.

46. Carissimi, *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*, pp. 10–22.

CHORUS

180 181 182 183 184

Cantus

Altus

Tenor 1

Tenor 11

Bassus

Om - nes po - pu - li

Om - nes po - pu - li laudate De - um.

Omnes po - pu - li lau - da - te De - um,

Omnes po - pu - li lau - da - te De - um,

Ex. 25. *Historia, Omnes populi laudate Deum*, mm. 180–84

The solo voices of Abraham, the angel and a mysterious bass voice sing their praises to God for redeeming Isaac from the fire, the sword, from death. They finish this section by singing in homophony of Isaac's redemption from his father's hand. The choir concludes with a return of the fugal section, *omnes populi*.

Interestingly, the librettist omitted the problematic phrase *possidebit semen tuum portas inimicorum suorum* from the promises (v. 17); this phrase could be interpreted to contravene the teaching of Jesus Christ, who instructed his followers to love their enemies (Matt. 5.43–48). The inclusion of the problematic phrase risked confusing the faithful, who on the one hand were instructed to love their enemies, while on the other encouraged them to strike vengeance. Such a reference, fraught with complications, was open to misinterpretation and might have encouraged the congregation to justify personal acts of immorality. To avoid the wrong type of religious instruction, the librettist saw fit to omit the troublesome contradiction contained within the promise. The outcome of Abraham's obedience resulted in God's blessing to all people, nations and generations. While the librettist intended these words of instruction for an implied audience of Roman Catholic nobles, his words speak also to audiences today, as indicated by the phrases *omnes populi*, *omnes gentes* and *omnes generationes*. This chorus derives from v. 18 of the biblical narrative, *et benedicentur in semine tuo omnes gentes terrae quia oboedisti voci meae*.

Following their duet, Isaac recedes into the background for the remainder of the oratorio, and the angel appears to Abraham for a second time to reiterate the promises. The meaning of this story mirrors the implied meaning of the biblical narrative: God's test of Abraham's faith. The librettist omitted v. 19, *reversus est Abraham ad pueros suos abieruntque Bersabee simul et habitavit ibi*, since it was irrelevant to his story, and the

inclusion of the two servant boys at the end would have made no sense without an exposition of their characters at the beginning. The textual omission also removes the perplexing question as to why Abraham returned to Beersheba without Isaac when he ought to have travelled to *Kiriath-arba* (Hebron) to reside with his wife, Sarah (Gen. 23.1); this verse would have portrayed Abraham in a negative light, as well as cast doubt on his marital relationship.

### *Conclusion*

Carissimi, the Father of Oratorio, was a master of musical rhetorical devices; his music enabled the story of Isaac's sacrifice to come alive in listeners' imaginations in order to move and persuade them to imitate the faithfulness and obedience of Abraham and Isaac. His librettist sanitized the biblical story by deliberately omitting many of its nuances and ambiguities to portray Abraham as a model of perfect obedience and faithfulness. For this reason, Abraham's character, like his biblical portrayal, is the main focus of attention while Isaac's character resides in his father's perpetual shadow. Carissimi employed a variety of musical rhetorical devices to convey Abraham's distress in coming to terms with God's command to emphasize that Abraham did not want his son to die.

Abraham and Isaac's duet toward the end of the oratorio, set in triple metre, reflects the mutual delight of the pair following the averted sacrifice. Three centuries later, composer Benjamin Britten applied a similar ending to his composition *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*. Given the similarities, it is reasonable to speculate that Britten may have modelled his work on Carissimi's *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*. At the very end of the *Historia*, Carissimi set the narrating chorus as a five-part fugue, to reinforce through repetition the moral of the story. This was one of the first significant compositions based on the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac; in the eighteenth century, the story became prominent in Vienna and was set on numerous occasions by composers from the Habsburg court. The next chapter turns to a discussion of another significant composition, an *oratorio volgare* by the Bohemian composer Josef Mysliveček, which was based on a libretto, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, by Habsburg court poet Pietro Metastasio.

ISAAC, A TYPE OF CHRIST IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MUSIC:  
JOSEF MYSLIVEČEK'S *ABRAMO ED ISACCO*



Fig. 67. *Pietro Metastasio*. Poet, composer, writer of melodramas. Photo credit: © Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.



Fig. 68. *Joseph Mysliveček*. Photo credit: Courtesy of Jim Stockigt.

In 1775 Joseph Mysliveček<sup>1</sup> (1737–81), known as *Il Boemo*, composed the oratorio *Isacco, figura del Redentore* for a performance in Florence<sup>2</sup> to a popular libretto by the renowned Habsburg court poet, Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782).<sup>3</sup> Two years later in 1777 Maximilian III Joseph, Elector of Bavaria (1727–1777), invited Mysliveček to Munich to stage a production of *Isacco* in the Residenz Theatre; for this performance, Mysliveček modified his Florentine score and changed its name to *Abramo ed Isacco*. The revised title suggests Abraham and Isaac played equal roles in the sacrificial test, that is, in terms of their obedience to God's command. Thirty-five years earlier (1740) the renowned poet and librettist Pietro Metastasio<sup>4</sup> had written this libretto for a performance in the Viennese Hofburgkapelle, where it was set to music by Habsburg court composer Luca Antonio Predieri (1688–1767) for a 'staged production' during Holy Week. The story of Isaac's sacrifice was popularly set to music on numerous occasions at the Habsburg court, in *sepolcri* and *oratorio volgare*, during the successive reigns of Holy Roman emperors Leopold I (r. 1658–1705), Joseph I (r. 1705–11) and Charles VI (r. 1711–40), with the most significant setting based on the Metastasian libretto. Previous settings of this story at the Habsburg Court certainly influenced Metastasio's retelling of the biblical story.

1. Mysliveček was the most prolific composer of *opere serie* in Europe during the period 1765 to 1780; his output of operas exceeded the number of oratorios composed. However, he composed six oratorios on Old Testament themes, some of which are now lost, and two oratorios on New Testament themes based on the passion of Christ. The six oratorios based on Old Testament narratives are as follows: *Il Tobia* (1769), *Giuseppe riconosciuto* (1770, lost), *La Betulia liberata* (1771, lost), *Adamo ed Eva* (1771), *La liberazione d'Israele* (1775?, lost) and *Abramo ed Isacco* (1776). His setting of Metastasio's *Isacco figura del Redentore* is regarded as his greatest work. See Daniel E. Freeman, 'Mysliveček', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (ed. Stanley Sadie; London: Macmillan, 2nd ed., 1992), XVII, p. 583.

2. James Ackerman points out that the Florentine score exists in numerous copies found in Rome, Berlin, Prague and Budapest; see Josef Mysliveček, *Isacco, figura del Redentore* (ed. James A. Ackerman; Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 2000 [original, 1776]), p. 113.

3. Metastasio was one of the most prolific writers of opera and oratorio libretti during the eighteenth century; he had written seven oratorio libretti from the period 1730 to 1740: five oratorio libretti on Old Testament narratives: *La morte d'Abele* (1732), *Il Giuseppe riconosciuto* (1733), *Betulia liberata* (1734), *Gioas re di Giuda* (1735), and finally, *Isacco, figura del Redentore* (1740). He based one libretto, *Sant' Elena al Calvario* (1731), on the hagiographical story of St Helen's search for Christ's tomb on Calvary, and another, *La passione di Gesù Cristo* (1730) on the New Testament account of the Crucifixion.

4. According to the eighteenth-century travel diary of Charles Burney, Metastasio was the most active and voluminous opera librettist who ever lived; see Charles Burney, *An Eighteenth-Century Musical Tour in Central Europe and the Netherlands* (ed. Percy A. Scholes; London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 79.

## Habsburg Court

*Sepolcri*

Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I (1640–1705) composed the first known *sepolcro* on the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, entitled *Il sacrificio di Abramo*; it was performed on Good Friday 1660 to a libretto by the Conte Caldamo.<sup>5</sup> Texts of *sepolcri* were based either on narrative accounts of Christ's passion from the New Testament or the sacrifice of Isaac from the Old Testament.



Fig. 69. Thomas Jan, Leopold I as Acis in the play 'La Galatea'.  
Photo credit: © Lessing Picture Archive.

*Sepolcri* were composed in one structural part, performed with costumes, acting and scenery, and were scored for an ensemble of four to five viols and two or more violins.<sup>6</sup> For the performance during Holy Week,<sup>7</sup> successive Habsburg emperors erected a model of Christ's

5. Howard Smither, 'Sepolcro', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, XXIII (ed. Stanley Sadie; London: Macmillan, 2nd ed., 1992), p. 89.

6. Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio: Oratorio in the Baroque Era*, 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 396.

7. As a reaction to the Reformation, successive Habsburg emperors observed the *Pietas Austriaca*; 'this was a unique moral and religious code that proclaimed to the world the dynasty's immense piety'. See Andrew Weaver, 'Music in the Service of Counter-Reformation Politics: The Immaculate Conception at the Habsburg Court of Ferdinand III (1637–57)', *M&L* 87.3 (2006), p. 363. This devotion manifested itself in the veneration of the cult of the Holy Cross, the cult of the Eucharist, the cult of the saints and the cult



sepulchre in the Hofburgkapelle.<sup>8</sup> Saunders notes that veneration of the cross and of Christ crucified assumed special prominence at the Habsburg court; emperors Ferdinand III (1608–57) and his father, Ferdinand II (1578–1637), in particular, were renowned for cultivating a devotion to the cross and to the wounds of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

During the reign of Leopold I (1658–1705), Kapellmeister Antonio Draghi (1634/35–1700) composed a *sepulcro* to a libretto by Nicolò Minato (1627–98)<sup>10</sup> entitled *Il sacrificio non impedito* (1692); it was staged against a large backdrop of a scene from Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac to a design by Ottaviano Burnacini (1636–1707), and placed alongside a model of Christ's holy sepulchre in the foreground.<sup>11</sup> During his appointment as vice Hofkapellmeister (1700–11), Marc Antonio Ziani (c. 1653–1715)<sup>12</sup> composed the *sepulcro*, *Il sacrificio d'Isacco* (1707), to a libretto by Pietro Antonio Bernardoni for a staged performance on Good Friday. Interestingly, this work incorporates a minor role for two additional characters, Abraham's wife, Sarah, and a servant of Abraham. In this story, Isaac eventually learns of his sacrificial fate on Mount Moriah (*'Della vittima il pensiero'*), and willingly accepts his death. At the climactic moment of the story (Gen. 22.10), the angel intervenes to avert the sacrifice and, unlike his biblical counterpart, instructs Isaac to sacrifice the ram caught in the thicket. Above all, this work portrays Abraham as a loving father who did not want his son to die, a major theme in the Metastasian libretto. While this genre enjoyed popularity in the seventeenth century, it disappeared following the death of Leopold I in 1705; representations of the holy sepulchre, however, continued to provide

of the Virgin Mary. The Habsburgs used popular devotion to promote the belief among the faithful that God had entrusted them with 'the divine mission of protecting the True Church against its enemies'; see Charles W. Ingrao, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1618–1815: New Approaches to European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 27. Weaver points out that the Habsburgs never lost sight of their Counter-Reformation goals: the expulsion of Protestantism and the unity of their entire realm under the banner of the Catholic Church; cf. his 'Music in the Service of Counter-Reformation Politics', p. 365.

8. Howard Smither, 'Sepulcro', p. 89.

9. Steven Saunders (ed.), *Giovanni Felice Sances: Motetti a una, due, tre, e quattro voci* (1638) (Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era, 126; Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 2003), p. xiv.

10. Minato became Viennese court poet to Emperor Leopold I in 1669.

11. See Smither, 'Sepulcro', p. 89.

12. Marc Antonio Ziani was born in Venice (c. 1653); he received music lessons from his uncle, the renowned opera composer Pietro Andrea Ziani. In 1686, Marc Antonio became *maestro di capella* at Santa Barbara in Mantua, and here he tutored the composer Antonio Caldara, who later became Kapellmeister at the Viennese Habsburg court. After some years, he moved back to Venice where he became the leading opera composer of the day. In 1700, he became *vice-maestro di capella* at the imperial court in Vienna, and in 1712, *maestro di capella*.

scenic background for the oratorios of Johann Joseph Fux (1660–1741), Antonio Caldara (1670–1736), and others.<sup>13</sup>

### *Oratorio Volgare*

The Roman composer Camilla de Rossi composed the *oratorio volgare* *Il sacrificio di Abramo* in 1708 for a performance in the Viennese Hofburgkapelle to a libretto<sup>14</sup> by the Venetian<sup>15</sup> Francesco Maria Dario. Based on Gen. 22.1–2, 7–9a, 11–13a, and 15–18, references to the son (*Figlio*) and to the ram (*L'Ariete*) are capitalized to suggest an implied christological interpretation of the story. In this work, the climactic moment of the biblical story resembles the highpoint of the Eucharistic celebration when the priest consecrates the host in the sacrament of Holy Communion; this action calls to mind Abraham's consecration and near sacrifice of his son Isaac, and God the Father's consecration and actual sacrifice of his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of sins.

Sarah has a minor role to play in this oratorio and remains on the fringes of the story; she makes only two appearances at the beginning of Parts 1 and 2 of the oratorio. Portrayed as a sorrowful mother, she fears for the safety of Abraham and Isaac; in her aria *Stráli, fulmini, tempeste* in Part 2, she petitions God to sacrifice her life in place of her spouse and son. De Rossi scored many of the arias and recitatives in the minor tonality to reflect the story's sombre mood; significant moments, however, such as Abraham's questions — *uccidero mio figlio?* and *io figlizada?* — the angel's words reiterating the promises, and Abraham and Isaac's jubilant song of praise at the end of the oratorio are all set in major tonalities to reflect Isaac's redemption in the face of death.

### *The Metastasian Libretto*

#### *Isacco, Figura del Redentore*

In 1730 the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI invited Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782) to Vienna to replace the esteemed Apostolo Zeno (1718–

13. Smither, 'Sepolcro', pp. 89–90.

14. Camilla de Rossi, *Il sacrificio di Abramo* (1708) (ed. and trans. Barbara Jackson; Fayetteville, AR: ClarNan Editions, 1984), pp. 1–8.

15. Barbara Garvey points out that the only other extant work by Dario is *La Madre Adorata, rime sacre in honore della Santissima Vergine* (Venice: Rossi, 1708). Dario dedicated this work to Emperor Joseph I. In the preface to this work, Dario refers to two other oratorio libretti he had written for the emperor, *David Penitente* (composer unknown) and *Il sacrificio di Abramo* (set to music by de Rossi). See Barbara Garvey Jackson, 'Oratorios by Command of the Emperor', *CMc* 42 (1986), pp. 7–19.

1729) as Habsburg court poet. Metastasio conformed to the religious fervour of Charles VI by writing oratorio libretti resembling musical sermons that focused primarily on the virtuous moral actions of Old Testament biblical characters. He sought to preserve and restore Catholic identity through this oratorio libretto; for this reason, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.1-19) became associated with Roman Catholicism and the zeal of the Holy Roman emperor to proselytize the faithful.



Fig. 70. Johann Gottfried Auerbach, *Charles VI*. Photo credit: © Kunst-historisches Museum Vienna.

In the polemic against Lutheranism, Metastasio equated the Holy Roman emperor with the virtuous character of Abraham, thus portraying him as the friend of God, and as the one who would ultimately conquer Protestantism, as promised by God himself (Gen. 22.17c). Through this text, Metastasio encouraged Roman Catholics to remain faithful to the emperor, and obedient to the Roman Catholic Church and its teachings. Charles Burney notes the following:


It seems as if the character and court of the Emperor Charles VI had directed the muse of Metastasio to choose a virtuous prince for the principal hero of most of the musical dramas that were represented in the Imperial Theatre. The emperor was a religious prince, and a rigid observer of decorum himself, which consequently kept licentiousness at a distance from his court. And the poet, naturally a friend to virtue and morality, seems to have established his own

feelings by conforming to the serious sentiments of his imperial patron.<sup>16</sup>

Bruno Brunelli, editor of Metastasio's works, lists at least twenty-seven composers, who, in the period from 1740 to 1812 set the Metastasian libretto to music; many were notable opera composers of the day, and through their settings they promoted the religious and political undertones of this story across the Holy Roman Empire and beyond.



**The Habsburg Monarchy and the Holy Roman Empire in 1740**

Territories of the Monarchy 


Border of the Empire 

Fig. 71. From *Haydn, Mozart and the Viennese School 1740–1780*, by Daniel Heartz. Photo credit: © 1995 by W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

16. Charles Burney, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Abate Metastasio Including Translations of his Principal Letters*, III (London, 1796; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), pp. 158–59.

For example, two years after the libretto's composition (1742) the renowned Italian reformer of opera, Nicolò Jommelli (1714–74) composed a setting of *Isacco, figura del Redentore* (1742) for a performance in Venice. Forty years later, Metastasio's goddaughter, composer and performer,<sup>17</sup> Marianna Martinez (1744–1812),<sup>18</sup> set the libretto to music in 1781. In the nineteenth century, fifteen year old Franz Schubert composed various settings of two arias for different combinations of voice—the angel's aria, *Quell' innocente figlio* ('The innocent son') D.17, and Abraham's aria, *Entra l'uomo allor che nasce* ('From the moment man is born') D.33 (1812), as assignments for his composition teacher, the eminent composer Antonio Salieri (1759–1825). Francesco Morlacchi (1784–1841) composed a setting for the Dresden court in 1817, where it was regarded as one of his finest works.<sup>19</sup>

In Ireland, the Italian composer Tommaso Giordani (1738–1806) composed the oratorio *Isaac* in 1767 based on Metastasio's libretto, which he translated and adapted to suit English-speaking audiences. It was dedicated to the Hibernian Catch Club. In England, Metastasio's dramas were edited and published in Chelsea in 1801 by London's leading teacher of Italian, Gaetano Polodori (1764–1873), as a guide for youth.<sup>20</sup> Polodori also published the first editions of poems by his grandchildren, poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti and poet Christina Rossetti.<sup>21</sup> In 1802–1803, Georgiana, duchess of Devonshire,<sup>22</sup> translated three of Metastasio's texts, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, *Giuseppe riconosciuto* and

17. Metastasio had lived with the Martinez family since he came to Vienna in 1730 to replace the esteemed Habsburg court poet Apostolo Zeno; on the death of Nicolò Martinez, Metastasio became godfather to the Martinez children. Metastasio supervised Marianna's education: she had lessons in composition and keyboard from Joseph Haydn, who lived with the family for three years, lessons in counterpoint from Giuseppe Bonno, and voice lessons with the opera composer Nicola Porpora, teacher of the most famous castrati of the eighteenth century, Farinelli (Carlo Maria Michelangelo Nicola Broschi) and Gaetano Majorano Caffarelli. Charles Burney notes that Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart attended her musical soirées, including Michael Kelly, the Irish tenor, who heard her play one of Mozart's four-hand sonatas with the composer himself. See Burney, *An Eighteenth-Century Musical Tour*.

18. Metastasio, who lived with the Martinez family, became foster-father to Marianne and her brothers when their father died. Irving Godt points out that Marianna's eldest brother knew German, Latin, Greek, Italian, French, Spanish, English, Turkish, Hebrew, Arabic, Persian and Syrian; see Irving Godt, 'Marianna in Vienna: A Martines Chronology', *JM* 16.1 (1998), p. 139.

19. Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio: Oratorio in the Classical Era*, 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 85.

20. Donald Bewley, 'Opera within Opera: Contexts for a Metastasian Interlude', in *The Plays within the Play: The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self Reflection* (ed. Gerard Fischer and Bernard Greines; Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 346.

21. Christina Rossetti had written the poem 'In the Bleak Mid-Winter', which became a Christmas carol and was famously set to music by Gustav Holst and Benjamin Britten.

22. Duchess Georgiana Spencer is a direct ancestor of the late Diana, princess of Wales.

*La morte d'Abel* into English, not as oratorio texts but as texts for reading and performance by the children of her extended family. Her translation of the *Isacco* is all the more poignant when one realizes that she was forced to sacrifice her illegitimate daughter, Eliza (Eliza Courtney, 1792–1856) by her lover, Whig politician and later prime minister Sir Charles Grey, to the Grey family. And finally, Metastasio's *Isacco* was translated into Hebrew, as a drama entitled *Akedat Yizak*, in Vienna in 1833 by Elijah Bardach. One can only speculate that in the light of the number of Jewish conversions to Roman Catholicism at this time, the Metastasian libretto was used as an instructional aid to teach Christian doctrine to Jewish converts.

### *Decline of the Metastasian Libretto*

During the second half of the eighteenth century, composers reworked the Metastasian libretto for performances as an opera during the Lenten season.<sup>23</sup> Smither points out that in the late eighteenth century two broad interrelated categories of change appeared in oratorio libretto, one offering more possibilities for musical variety and the other creating greater dramatic interest. Greater musical variety included more ensembles, trios, quartets and quintets, along with more choruses. Oratorios of this genre often began with a chorus and ended with a chorus, although some ended with ensembles or a chorus ensemble. Recitatives became shorter and the number of arias fewer, some replaced by the *cavatina*, ensembles or by more choruses. The other change brought about an increase in the dramatic interest of Italian oratorio: composers adhered less strictly to the unity of place in Metastasian librettos, which resulted in more dramatic action and less past-tense narration. Reflective and narrative recitatives became fewer, and arias, *cavatinas* and choruses were linked directly to their dramatic context. Smither notes how some of these characteristics are seen in a revision of *Isacco* (composer unknown) for a staged production at Bonn in the theatre of the elector of Cologne, Clement Augustus. Here the dramatic action takes place in five locations: the Abrahamic household; a grotto surrounded by a forest; a road that leads to the summit of Mount Moriah; a forest near Abramo's home; and a meadow. In Part I, some of the Metastasian arias and recitatives were deleted and new ones added, while in Part II much of the libretto had been rewritten for theatrical purposes.<sup>24</sup>

23. Howard Smither, 'Sepolcro', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, XVIII, p. 513.

24. Smither, *History of the Oratorio: Oratorio in the Classical Era*, III, p. 65.

During the late eighteenth century, fewer composers set this libretto to music, and in the nineteenth century, with some exceptions listed above, composers rarely set the Metastasian libretto or the text of Genesis 22 to music. New developments in musical forms and orchestral instrumentation in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed to a decrease in the composition and performance of oratorios in the Italian style in Italy and Vienna. In England, George Frideric Handel (1635–1759) developed a new type of oratorio in three parts known as the English oratorio;<sup>25</sup> despite numerous oratorios based on Old Testament stories, he refrained from composing an oratorio on Genesis 22.

### *Homiletic Tradition of the Church Fathers*

Metastasio based his interpretation of the biblical story on the homiletic tradition of the church fathers, which he referenced in footnotes attached to the libretto. He may have consulted other sources not referenced in the libretto, such as the *kontakion*, on the sacrifice of Isaac, a musical sermon by the Greek poet Romanos, together with possible Syriac sources consulted by Romanos.<sup>26</sup> He copiously footnoted the libretto<sup>27</sup> with references to the homiletic writings of the church fathers: the Athenian Christian convert Dionysius the Areopagite (Acts 17.34); Tertullian (d. after 200 CE); the Cappadocian father Gregory of Nyssa (d. after 385/386); Ambrose (d. 397); Jerome (c. 347–420); and Augustine

25. Handel's oratorios are as follows: *St John's Passion* (Hamburg, 1704), *La resurrezione* (Rome, 1708), *Esther* (London, 1720), *Deborah* (1733), *Saul* (London, 1739), *Israel in Egypt* (1739), *Messiah* (Dublin, 1742), *Samson* (London, 1743), *Joseph and his Brothers* (London, 1743), *Belshazzar* (London, 1744), *Judas Maccabeus* (London, 1747), *Alexander Balus* (London, 1747), *Joshua* (London, 1747), *Solomon* (London, 1748), *Susanna* (London, 1748) and *Jephtha* (London, 1752).

26. To distinguish between the two homilies, Brock has called them *Memra* I and *Memra* II; see Sebastian Brock, 'Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac', *Le muséon* 99 (1986).

27. The practice of attaching footnotes to the libretto highlights the influence of the Pulpit Orators, who, according to Don Neville, had written three important treatises on the art of sermon writing during the eighteenth century. One such pulpit orator, François Fenélon, set out the rules for composing a perfect sermon, and required preachers to footnote their sermons with details of the sources. Fenélon wrote: 'After the Scriptures, the knowledge of the Fathers will help a Preacher to compose good sermons'. Neville notes also how Fenélon cautioned that 'most Preachers argue but weakly: and don't instruct People sufficiently, because they do not trace things back to their sources'. Like a preacher, Metastasio verified his text with copious footnotes, as well as basing the libretto on the principle of pleasurable instruction, instructing, moving and pleasing the faithful. See Don Neville, 'Metastasio: Poet and Preacher in Vienna', in *Pietro Metastasio – uomo universale* (1698–1782) (ed. Andrea Sommer-Mattis and Elizabeth Hilscher; Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), p. 56.

(354–430 CE).<sup>28</sup> Metastasio consulted also the *Moralia of Job* by Gregory the Great (c. 540–604 CE), and then select mediaeval sermons by the Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and the Franciscan Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444). According to the evidence of footnotes, Metastasio consulted two commentaries on Genesis 22 by the eighteenth-century French biblical commentator Dom Augustin Calmet,<sup>29</sup> and the sixteenth-century Jesuit philosopher, theologian and exegete Pererius Benedictus of Valencia (1535–1610).<sup>30</sup> He modelled his libretti on the sermons of the church fathers, in particular, *De Deitate filii et spiritus sancti* by Gregory of Nyssa,<sup>31</sup> as well as consulting the commentary on Genesis 22 by the lay rhetorician Procopius of Gaza (c. 475–c. 538),<sup>32</sup>

28. Metastasio includes abbreviated references to Perer., Tirin., and Procop. Since Metastasio omitted references to specific works accompanying the abbreviated list of names, I have speculated with a degree of certainty that Procop. refers to Procopius of Gaza (465–528), a rhetorician and biblical scholar who had written a commentary on Genesis. I have speculated that Perer. is a reference to the Spanish Jesuit philosopher, theologian and biblical exegete, Pererius Benedict of Valencia (1523–1610).

29. There is evidence from the footnotes that Metastasio consulted the biblical commentary of the French Benedictine biblical exegete Dom Augustin Calmet (1672–1757), *Commentaire littéral sur tous les livres de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament*. It appeared in Paris in 1707, with a second and third edition appearing in 1714–20 and 1724–26 respectively. Such was its popularity, it was translated into Latin by Mansi (Lucca, 1730–33) and F. Vecelli (appearing in Venice and Frankfort, 1730), English (Oxford, 1726), Dutch (Rotterdam, 1728), German (Bremen, 1738, 1744, 1747), and Italian. Unlike the church fathers, Calmet interpreted Scripture in its literal sense and departed from the allegorical and tropological senses. Rationalists, such as Voltaire, derided Dom Calmet as a fundamentalist in his literal approach to Scripture. See Bertram E. Schwarzbach, 'Dom Augustin Calmet: *Homme des lumières malgré lui*', in Sylviane Albertan-Coppola and Antony McKenna (eds.), *Dix-huitième siècle* 34 (2002), pp. 451–63. Metastasio lists Calmet's name with the church fathers who were of the opinion that Sarah played a role in the sacrifice and possessed knowledge of the sacrifice.

30. Pererius entered the Society of Jesus in 1552 where he taught philosophy, theology and Sacred Scripture at the Roman College of the Jesuits. He published eight works, including a commentary on Genesis entitled *Commentariorum et disputationum in Genesim tomus quattor* (Rome 1591–99). Biblical critic Richard Simon (1638–1712) held the work of Pererius in high esteem.

31. In the footnotes, Metastasio did not specify any particular work by Gregory. However, I am of the opinion he consulted Gregory's *De deitate filii et spiritus sancti et in Abraham*. In this sermon on the divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit, Metastasio inserted the narrative of Abraham's sacrifice. Gregory omits details such as the third day, and incorporates the extrabiblical character of Sarah. Metastasio imitated Gregory by including similar details as Gregory, such as Gregory's dialogues between Abraham and Sarah. See Gregory of Nyssa, *De deitate filii et spiritus sancti et in Abraham*, PG 46.567.

32. The sophist Procopius studied in Alexandria and spent all his life in Gaza as head of the 'School of Gaza', a classical school sponsored by the church for the education of the clergy, among others. Procopius of Gaza is to be distinguished from Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500–c. 565), a Roman historian of the Emperor Justinian I, known also as the last major historian of the ancient world, and author of *De bellis*, *De aedificiis*, and *Historia arcana*. In a funeral oration dedicated to Procopius of Gaza, Choricus, Procopius's



who, in the School of Gaza instructed clergy on the art of sermon writing. In the libretto, Metastasio instructed the faithful to imitate the faithfulness and fortitude of the Abrahamic family, whose obedience, suffering and sacrifice prefigured the obedience, suffering and sacrifice of the Holy Family. The Metastasian libretto portrays Isaac as a type of Christ, whose suffering and near sacrifice prefigured the suffering and actual sacrifice of Christ. Metastasio embellished the gaps of the sparse biblical narrative with imaginative writing, inventing extrabiblical scenes, characters and dialogues not found in Genesis 22, as well as exploring the emotional and psychological effects of God's command on every character in the story.

#### *Footnotes to Biblical References*

Metastasio attached footnotes also with references to Gen. 22.1-18, to validate the truth of his story. Footnotes with references to other Old Testament passages provide background details of the Abrahamic story, including Gen. 12.1-3, 5, 7, 10ff.; 13.14-18; 14.14-16; 15.4-18; 17.1-8; 18.1-8, 10-11, 13; 20; 21.1-2. He also incorporated biblical references not directly related to the story of Isaac's sacrifice but which reinforced a point in his story from another Old Testament reference, including 1 Kgs 15.22; Lam. 1.1-2, 4, 17, 20; 2.11; 5.15; and Prov. 1.7. Footnotes with New Testament references, such as Jn 8.50, 56; 9.21; 13.23; 14.1, 3, 18, 27-28; 20.21, 26; Mk 14.27; Lk. 24.36; Acts 8.4; Heb. 6.13, 17, point to a christological understanding of Genesis 22. Metastasio portrayed Isaac as a type of Christ; Gamari as a type of John, that is, Christ's beloved disciple; Sarah as a type of Mary; and the Abrahamic family as a type of Holy Family. Furthermore, Metastasio highlighted the unique connection between Abraham and Jesus through the footnoted reference to

student, writes that his master was very skilful in the Holy Scriptures, a fact apparent from his biblical commentaries. Procopius was neither a priest nor a monk, and may have been a Christian convert. Choricus notes that had Procopius not worn civil garments, he might have been mistaken for a priest. Yakov Ashkenazi notes that Choricus recounts how Procopius used go to the theatre with his students to attract them to the love of speech and to impress the intellectuals. The theatre of Gaza was a place of popular entertainment as well as a place where sophists delivered their orations. The church at Gaza had objected to theatrical spectacles that included manifestations of admiration for the ancient gods. Ashkenazi concludes that despite the church ban on attending the theatre, the people of Gaza continued to attend the theatre, which included forbidden acts (such as, for example, adoration of the gods) as well as acts of oration delivered by the sophists. Cf. Yakov Ashkenazi, 'Sophists and Priests in Late Antiquity Gaza according to Choricus the Rhetor', in Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Aryeh Kofsky, *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 195-208. Metastasio was possibly attracted to the work of Procopius because of his skill as an orator as well as his expertise in biblical scholarship.

972 *ISACEO, FIGURA*

La serie portentosa, un tal circonda  
 Tutta l'anima mia dolce contento,  
 Che stanchezza non sento,  
 Che riposo non cura,  
 Che mi scordo di me. Tu mi rapisci  
 Negli eventi, che narri; e teco a parte  
 D'esserne giurerei. Se fido a Dio (1)  
 Lasci il terren natio, teco abbandono.  
 Le campagne Caldee; teco di Carra,  
 Teco di Palestina (2)  
 I monti, le foreste  
 Abito pellegrin. Se cibo affretto (3)  
 Lungi a cercar ti sento, io t'accompagno  
 In Gerara, in Egitto: e gelo a' rischi  
 Materni, e tuoi. Se i debellati Regi (4)  
 Incalzi vincitor, presso alle fonti  
 Seguivo del Giordano  
 La tua vittoria anch'io. Ma quando esponi  
 Le promesse di Dio, lo stabil patto (5)  
 Fra te fermato e lui, così m'ingombri  
 Della presenza sua, che odo il tenore  
 De' detti eterni, e me ne trema il core!

(1) Gen. Cap. XII, v. 1.

(2) Act. Cap. VII, v. 4.

(3) Gen. Cap. XII, v. 10, & seq. Cap. XX,  
per tot.(4) *Ibid.* Cap. XIV, v. 14, 15, & 16.(5) *Ibid.* Cap. XV, a v. 4, usque ad 18. Cap.  
XVII, a v. 1, usque ad 8.

Fig. 72. Example of footnotes  
 from the Metastasian  
 libretto.

Jn 8.53.<sup>33</sup> In the section on Isaac's return home to the Abrahamic household, specific footnotes attached to Isaac's conversation with his mother direct the reader's attention to Christ's resurrection appearance to the disciples in the upper room (Jn 20.21, 26; Lk. 24.36).

### Characters

Metastasio set his story for five characters: Abraham, Isaac, Sarah, Gamari and an angel, along with a group of shepherds. God never appears as a character onstage, and only in Abraham's imagination at the end of the libretto, where the christological significance of the sacrificial event becomes clear to Abraham. As in the biblical story, Abraham is the only character to see and hear God. Metastasio omitted the 'omniscient' narrator from the biblical story and distributed this part among the central characters; in turn, they report on past events and provide theological

33. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad.

explanations concerning Isaac's sacrifice for the benefit of the audience. Metastasio cast Gamari, Isaac's friend, in this role of reporting to Sarah the unfolding events of the sacrifice on Mount Moriah. Sarah, too, acts as a narrator toward the end of the story by explaining the meaning of the sacrificial test both to Abraham and to the audience. When Abraham and Isaac return to the Abrahamic household, they narrate the dramatic events leading up to the sacrifice on Mount Moriah in the past tense.

### *Isaac as Christ*

The tone of the entire oratorio is christological from beginning to end; as the title of the libretto suggests, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, Isaac is regarded as a type of Christ whose near sacrifice foreshadowed Christ's actual sacrifice on the cross. Metastasio footnoted the libretto with specific references to the works of Ambrose, Tertullian, Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa to highlight the christological significance of the biblical story. Isaac's words and actions in the oratorio foreshadow the words and actions of Christ at his passion; for this reason, Metastasio directed readers' attention to Bernardino of Siena's *Sermon on the Passion of Christ*. But despite Isaac's significant role as a Christ-like figure, Abraham remains the pivotal character in the drama; toward the end of the libretto, Isaac recedes into the background, as he does in Genesis 22, as Sarah and Gamari laud the perfection of Abraham's obedience.

Since most of the dramatic action is played out in Sarah's imagination, the scene of Sarah's misunderstanding of Isaac's death and resurrection from the dead alludes to the writing of the fathers in the second half of the fourth century. Ephrem, in his *Commentary on Genesis XXII*, states that Abraham stood out in two respects: because he killed his son, and yet did not kill him; and because he believed that after he was dead he would rise again. Despite the lack of footnoted references, the episode of Isaac's resurrection in the Metastasian libretto bears a striking parallel to Ephrem's<sup>34</sup> and Chrysostom's<sup>35</sup> understanding that 'Isaac was slain yet not slain' to reflect 'the only begotten Son of God who was slain and not slain, died, but did not die'.

*Prince of Peace.* When Isaac returns home following the near sacrifice, he echoes Christ's words to Sarah, 'Peace be with you'; at this point the footnotes direct readers' attention to an account of Jesus' resurrection appearances to the disciples in Jn 20.21, 26 and Lk. 24.36. In this episode, Metastasio portrays Isaac as a type of Messiah, the 'Prince of Peace' (Isa. 9.6), who would rule the people of God with justice and righteousness

34. Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis*, FC 91.168-69.

35. PG 50. 741.

(Isa. 9.7; 32.1). Since Sarah understood that Isaac had died when she saw him in the flesh, it was as though he had been resurrected. The audience, however, never gains an insight into Isaac's unique character, his thoughts or feelings; for this reason Isaac's profile as the silent, submissive son of Abraham compares with his biblical counterpart.

*Suffering Servant.* The church fathers agreed that Isaac's consent to his sacrifice was not proactive but passive.<sup>36</sup> While Metastasio reflects this view in the oratorio, Isaac's role is, nonetheless, presented as significant. As Christ, Metastasio portrayed Isaac as a type of Suffering Servant, carrying the heavy load of wood upon his back. Tertullian, in particular, was particularly fond of the image of Isaac carrying the wood on his back for the sacrificial fire, for it represented Isaac as a type of Christ bearing the cross (vv. 6-8). The image of Isaac as a type of Suffering Servant is dramatized by Gamari, who returns to Sarah, having accompanied Abraham and Isaac to the foot of the mountain, to recount details of his suffering Lord.

*Good Shepherd.* Metastasio alludes also to Isaac as a type of Good Shepherd, whose sheep had been scattered; the footnotes direct readers' attention to Mk 14.27 and Zech. 13.7. Echoes of the Messianic Secret are present in the libretto, as Isaac possesses knowledge of his sacrificial death and resurrection, which he reveals to Sarah and Gamari. Echoing Jesus' words to his disciples in the Gospel of John, Isaac assures Sarah of his return following his sacrificial death (Jn 14.18, 27-28).

### *Abraham*

In keeping with the biblical story, Metastasio portrayed Abraham as an exemplary model of obedience for Christians of all generations. While he assigns Isaac more arias than any other character, Abraham remains the subject of the action in the recitatives. In the libretto, Abraham speaks only to Isaac, Gamari and Sarah. While he speaks to the servants in the biblical story (v. 5), it is implied in Gamari's recitative in Part II that Abraham had instructed the servants and shepherds to wait at the foot of the mountain (v. 5). The Metastasian Abraham expresses more anxiety and emotional distress in coming to terms with God's command than his biblical counterpart; through Abraham's outward expression of emotion, Metastasio portrays Abraham as a loving father who did not want his son to die. Highlighting a nuance of the biblical text, Abra-

36. Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 180.

ham addresses Isaac on numerous occasions as his 'son', alluding to Isaac's title as the 'Son of the Promise'. Here Metastasio highlights the dichotomy of God's command as well as heightens the psychological tension of the biblical story. The church fathers agreed that Abraham was neither insane nor a murderer; instead, his obedience and faith distinguished him as a role model for Christians. They did not pass judgment on the morality of God's action or on Abraham in his willingness to kill his innocent child;<sup>37</sup> in like fashion, the libretto does not pass any moral judgment on the actions of God or Abraham. Metastasio omitted biblical references that told of Abraham's preparation of the altar and the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22.6-9); he treated the ritual preparation for the sacrifice offstage so that Abraham's obedience rather than the sinister elements of the sacrifice became the focus of attention for listeners. Metastasio attached a footnote with a reference to the *Moralia of Job* by Gregory the Great to illustrate how Abraham exemplified 'the virtue of obedience' by suppressing the pride of his will;<sup>38</sup> Metastasio reflects this understanding of obedience in the aria *Datti pace*, sung by Abraham, and in the aria *Sian are i nostri petti*, sung by Sarah toward the end of the story. In another footnote, Metastasio refers the reader to Chapter 17 of Augustine's *Grace and Free Will*; once more, he interpreted this chapter in light of Genesis 22 and understood that Abraham's act of obedience was borne out of love for God. Amid Abraham's suffering, God was 'co-working' within Abraham for the good, since Abraham had given up his will to follow God's command.

### God

Metastasio omitted the character of God at the beginning of the story and replaced God's voice with the voice of an angel, who acts as an envoy in bringing the news of the sacrifice to Abraham (Gen. 22.2). The angel's second call in the Metastasian libretto (that is, the angel's first call in the biblical story), averts the sacrifice from taking place as told in Gen. 22.11. The angel's third call (that is, the second call in Gen. 22.15-18) takes place in the Abrahamic household and not on the mountain; here the angel reiterates God's promises to Abraham but omits in his speech the reference to God's oath. Metastasio nevertheless alludes to God's oath in the footnotes with a reference to Heb. 6.13, 17. At the end of this speech, the character of God appears in Abraham's imagination and grants him a vision of Christ's actual sacrifice on the cross. Meta-

37. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 64.

38. Kierkegaard, who had written *Fear and Trembling* in 1845, refers to the concept of the 'teleological suspension of the ethical'. However, writing a century earlier, Metastasio incorporated this idea based on the writings of Gregory the Great, to include the suppression of Abraham and Sarah's will to carry out God's command.

stasio footnoted this section with references to Ambrose, Tertullian and Augustine, and to Jn 8.56.

### *Angels*

To explain the nature and function of angels in Genesis 22, Metastasio consulted Chapter 4 of the *Celestial Hierarchies* by Dionysius the Areopagite. Interpreting this passage in light of Genesis 22, Metastasio footnoted references to this work to illustrate how Abraham had been called by angels, led to do God's will and protected from error by averting the sacrifice; this chapter states how angels revealed to our illustrious forefathers secret visions of mysteries and prophecies. In this way, Abraham had answered Isaac's question with a prophecy foretelling God would provide the lamb for slaughter. Metastasio reflects this understanding at the end of the libretto when after the angel's revelation of the reason for God's test, Abraham has a vision of the mystery of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

### *Shepherds and Chorus*

Metastasio includes a band of shepherds, along with the two servants from the biblical story, who prefigure the twelve disciples from the New Testament. They accompany Abraham, Isaac and the servants to the mysterious land and from the outset are aware of the sacrifice of their master; they are greatly troubled by this foreknowledge, and Gamari finds them weeping before they set off for Mount Moriah.<sup>39</sup> Consuming grief causes them to disperse, like the disciples who deserted Jesus during his passion. Metastasio footnotes this section of the libretto with typological references to Mk 14.27 and Zech. 13.7. As in classical drama, the shepherds and servants of the Metastasian drama form the chorus and sing the moral of the story at the end of Parts I and II: the necessity of obedience for living a Christian life and the christological significance of Genesis 22.

### *Sarah*

The biblical author left the details of Sarah's involvement in the story, if any, to readers' imagination; her name is not mentioned, nor is she present prior to or after Isaac's near sacrifice. Interestingly, the midrashim also incorporate Sarah's character into the retelling of the

39. Metastasio, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, p. 690.

story.<sup>40</sup> Louis Berman notes how there is not a single known midrash that suggests Abraham consulted with Sarah or had advised her of his momentous journey.<sup>41</sup> Through the footnotes, Metastasio highlighted the contributions of the church fathers and others who agreed that Sarah participated in the sacrifice.<sup>42</sup> In the *avvertimento*, at the beginning of the libretto, Metastasio stated his reasons for including Sarah in the drama: theologically he was of the opinion that despite the silence of the biblical text, Sarah had a pivotal part to play in the sacrifice. Typologically, he represented Sarah as a type of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. Dramatically, her involvement in the narrative increased the emotional and psychological tension of the action.<sup>43</sup> The sacrifice of Sarah would be a fitting title for this libretto since her suffering dominates the action from start to finish. Just as Christ's passion and actual sacrifice became Mary's sacrifice, Isaac's passion and near sacrifice became Sarah's. The oratorio highlights the emotional and psychological effects of Isaac's sacrifice on Sarah, and illustrates most profoundly how she suppressed her emotions to do God's will. Don Neville notes how in the Metastasian libretto, Sarah's 'extreme suffering seems to exceed the extreme anguish of Abraham', and dominates the action from beginning to end.<sup>44</sup>

### *Gamari*

Metastasio invented the character of Gamari, Isaac's friend, whose character has a dual function in the libretto. First, he acts as a narrator to Sarah and recounts the events on Mount Moriah as he had seen them unfold; his account serves to prolong the agony of the drama, while increasing the dramatic tension for Sarah and the listener. Second, he prefigures John, Christ's favourite disciple; the footnotes refer the reader to selected passages in John's Gospel to make this parallel (Jn 13.23; 19.26; 21.20). During Isaac's sacrifice, Gamari remains faithful to his beloved friend, Isaac, by returning to Sarah and recounting to her details of the ensuing sacrifice; through this imaginative retelling, the listener relives Isaac's sacrifice through Sarah's eyes and ears.

40. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 1 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), pp. 274-75.

41. Louis Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997), p. 65.

42. Metastasio consulted Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Procopius (of Gaza), Pererius (Benedict of Valencia), Terin. (?), and Calmet.

43. Metastasio, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, p. 679.

44. Don Neville, 'Opera or Oratorio?: Metastasio's Sacred "Opere serie"', *EMu* 26.4 (1998), p. 601.

*Plot*

Metastasio based his dramatization of Isaac's sacrifice on Gen. 22.1b-3, 12-18, omitting the following: the narrator's scene of the announcement of the test (v. 1a); the scene of Isaac's question and Abraham's reply (vv. 7-8); the ritual preparations for the sacrifice (v. 9); Isaac's binding (v. 9); and the descriptive pause (v. 10). These details are, nonetheless, referenced in the footnotes, spoken about in the past tense by Gamari, and by Abraham and Isaac to Sarah in the aftermath of the sacrifice to resemble the account of the sacrifice in Gen. 22.4-13. The actual event of the sacrifice, then, is not the focus of attention in the oratorio; Metastasio deliberately treated this event 'offstage' to promote a reflective response to the near sacrifice in the imagination of his listeners. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the rules of verisimilitude and good taste rejected the tragic endings of classical literature as unworthy of the civilized state; death, if unavoidable, was to be handled with dignity and preferably offstage.<sup>45</sup>

*Setting*

Metastasio divided his story into two parts: in Part I, the action takes place in the Abrahamic household through the medium of dialogue in the present tense, and corresponds to Gen. 22.1-3. Metastasio constructed his story using details from Gen. 22.2-3, along with additional imaginative details. The story adheres to the 'Dramatic Unities' of time, place and action, and begins *in medias res* ('into the middle of things'), a literary technique coined by the Roman poet Horace in *Ars poetica* (l. 148), of beginning the story in the middle or at a later point in the action.<sup>46</sup> In this extra-biblical scene, Abraham and Isaac are engaged in intimate conversation about Abraham's past adventures; by way of contrast, the only recorded conversation between Isaac and Abraham in Genesis takes place in Gen. 22.7-8. At this point, the footnotes point the reader not only to Abraham's heroic adventures but also to significant moments when the promises were threatened. Laurence Turner points out that Genesis 22 ought to be read with the entire Abraham story as its backdrop;<sup>47</sup> in this scene Metastasio sets the story of Isaac's sacrifice against the Abrahamic story and lists seven of the ten trials set out by Maimonides (12.1; 12.10; 12.10-20; 14; 16.1; 20.1-18; 22.1-19).<sup>48</sup> Significantly, Metastasio omitted the trial con-

45. Marita P. McClymonds, 'Opera Seria', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, III (ed. Stanley Sadie; London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 698.

46. See Horace, *Satires, Epistles, Ars poetica* (trans. H. Ruston Fairclough; Loeb Classical Library; London: Heinemann, 1942), pp. 462-63.

47. Laurence Turner, *Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 98.

48. Isaac summarizes the evening's conversation of Abraham's heroic adventures by beginning with his call in Gen. 12.1. He recounts how his mother and father survived the famine (12.10), how they were forced to sojourn to Gerar and Egypt where Sarah's life was



cerning Abraham's circumcision and the two trials associated with Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion. One might speculate that he omitted the former trial because it was a Jewish ritual practice that bore no relevance to eighteenth-century Christians; in the latter trials, the deletion of references to Ishmael emphasized Isaac's status as the only beloved son of Abraham. In his conversation with Isaac, Abraham highlights how the exceptional circumstances of Isaac's birth constituted a wonder of nature; footnotes point readers to Gen. 18.11 to highlight not only the miraculous nature of Isaac's conception and birth but to make the parallel of the miraculous conception of Isaac and Christ. To heighten the dramatic tension, Metastasio incorporated into Abraham's speech the simile of the stars and sand from the angel's second call (22.17) to describe not only Isaac's numerous descendants but to emphasize the magnitude of the threat to the promise which would unfold with God's ensuing command. Following God's command (v. 2), Abraham instructs Gamari to rouse Isaac, prepare a donkey, call two servants (v. 3) and not to waken Sarah. Despite this instruction, Sarah awakens and appears on the scene wondering why everyone is departing so early (v. 3) and without her. In his attempt to make a quick exit, Abraham explains how he must go to a nearby forest to cut branches for a sacrifice. Following the revelation of God's command to Sarah, Part I concludes with the dramatic farewell scene between Sarah and Isaac and the shepherd's chorus with the moral of the story (vv. 1-3) highlighting the virtue of obedience.

The dramatic action in Part II is narrated in the past tense and takes place at the Abrahamic household: first with Gamari's return to the Abrahamic household to tell Sarah of the dramatic happenings on Mount Moriah, and second, with Abraham and Isaac's homecoming to Sarah and the pair's dramatic account to Sarah of the near sacrifice on Mount Moriah. Metastasio increased the dramatic tension by incorporating an extrabiblical scene whereby Sarah and Gamari see Abraham returning home alone, or so it seems, with a bloody knife held in his right hand. Sarah is convinced that Abraham has sacrificed Isaac and that her son is dead. Suddenly Isaac appears, and Sarah, overcome with joy, faints into her son's arms. When she revives, Abraham tells her the details of their adventure on Mount Moriah; Isaac completes the story by recounting details of the sacrifice of the ram. Following this conversation, the angel appears in a vision to Abraham to reiterate the divine promises and to bestow God's blessing upon Abraham (vv. 15-18). The chorus concludes Part II, outlining the christological significance of Isaac's near sacrifice.

threatened by the pharaoh and King Abimelech (sister-wife type scenes in 12.10-20; 20.1-7). Abraham's heroic liberation of his nephew Lot and his victory in battle with the four kings is joyfully recounted (14.14-16), along with Abraham's dilemma over the identity of the heir to the promise. God's covenant with Abraham in 15.4-8 and 17.1-8 is for Isaac, the highlight of Abraham's adventures.

## Seeing

Metastasio highlights the nuance of seeing from the biblical narrative in his libretto by focusing on 'imaginative' seeing. With the exception of one scene in the oratorio, the entire sacrifice takes place in the imaginations of Sarah, Isaac, Abraham and Gamari, Isaac's friend. When Isaac and Abraham return from Mount Moriah, they recount also to Sarah the details of the sacrifice, and in the telling relive the event in their imaginations. Listeners, too, imagine the unfolding events of the story as narrated by the characters. In Abraham's opening recitative, Isaac imagines himself journeying with his father as he travelled from the Chaldean hills to the land of Egypt and Gerar, to the lands of the defeated kings and to the land of Canaan.<sup>49</sup> Through this imaginative journeying, Isaac sees himself walking in his father's footsteps. So great is Abraham's story, Isaac remarks, he could never hope to duplicate the path of his father's life. In reality, Isaac does just that, and consequently is the subject of criticism for remaining in his father's shadow.

*Abramo ed Isacco (1776), Josef Mysliveček*

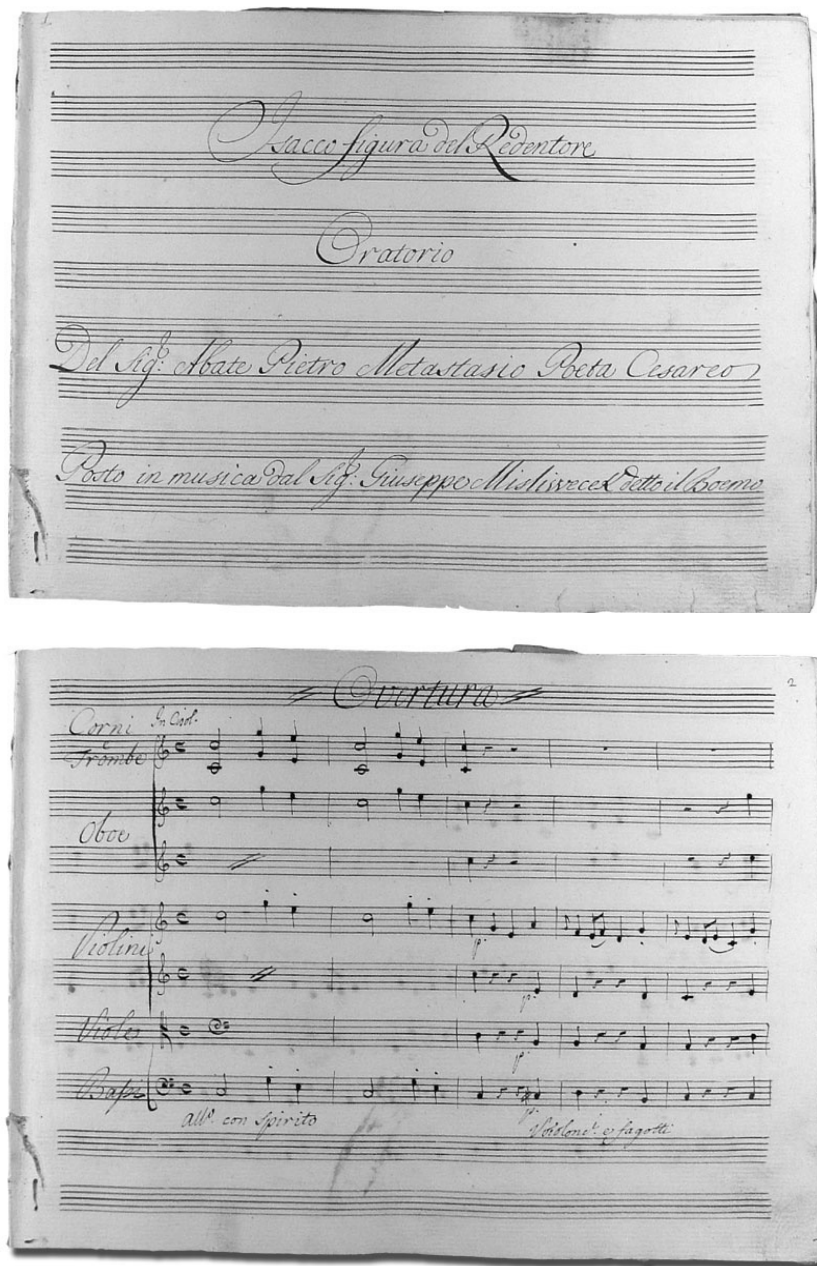
The music for *Abramo ed Isacco* by Josef Mysliveček is in *style gallant*; this is a compositional style that dominated music of the eighteenth century and was characterized by its elegance and lightness of tone.<sup>50</sup> Mysliveček employed a variety of musical devices, for example, melisma, word-painting, dissonance, chromaticism, rhythmic variation and modulation to sound-paint Metastasio's text. Recitatives that provide the medium for dialogue between characters are based upon a one-note-syllabic recitation of the text; arias are in ternary form (ABA), and, with two exceptions, begin with an orchestral *ritornello* for a number of measures before and after each vocal entry.

With two exceptions, Mysliveček set the entire oratorio in the major tonality to highlight Metastasio's christological understanding of Genesis 22. Ackerman notes that arias sharing a common dramatic idea are usually set in the same tonality.<sup>51</sup> Mysliveček associates the tonality of B-flat with the promises; the tonality of A with God's command and the virtue of obedience; and the tonality of C with Christ. While no single tonality dominates the score, Mysliveček opens the oratorio with an overture in C-major and concludes with a chorus scored also in C-major to signify Christ as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end (Rev. 1.8; 21.6; 22.13). Mysliveček set Abraham's accompanied recitative *Eterno Dio* in Part I and Sarah's aria *Deh parlate che forse tacendo* in Part

49. Metastasio, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, p. 680.

50. This manuscript is housed in Munich, *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek*.

51. Mysliveček, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, p. 81.



Ex. 26. Josef Mysliveček, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*. Oratorio di Pietro Metastasio. Esequito a Roma, Congregazione di San Filippo Neri, 1779. Used by permission of Mario Valente e comitato per la celebrazioni di Pietro Metastasio – casa natale di Pietro Metastasio, Via dei Cappellori, Roma.

II, in minor tonalities to emphasize the pair's mutual grief in coming to terms with God's command.

### *Scoring*

Myslivoček employed appropriate pitches to suit the age, profile and status of every biblical character. He conformed to the conventions of the day by assigning the principal male character, Abraham, to a tenor voice and the principal female character, Sarah, to a soprano. Isaac's vocal part is scored for a soprano to signify his youth, and Isaac's friend, Gamari, for a bass voice to signify an older adolescent. He scored the angel's vocal part for a soprano, and the shepherds, who sing the moral of the story at the end of both acts, as a chorus. Since the two servants had no spoken parts in the biblical story, they, too, also remain silent in the oratorio.

### *Myslivoček's Modifications to the Metastasian Libretto*

As noted already, from the mid-eighteenth century onward, composers modified the Metastasian libretto with textual additions and omissions. Myslivoček, too, modified the libretto by incorporating a *terzetto* (trio) for Abraham, Sarah and Isaac at the end of Part I; in addition, he included an aria sung by Isaac, *Veggo O Dio*, and omitted the shepherds' chorus, along with the scene recounting Sarah's and Gamari's sight of Abraham holding a bloody knife. He included also two instrumentals, an overture in Part I, and a march in Part II, including additional text relating to Abraham and Isaac's dialogue from Genesis 22.7-8.

### *Terzetto*

The parting scene between Sarah, Isaac and Abraham that concludes Part I is a textual addition made by Myslivoček to the Metastasian libretto; it is sung by Abraham, Sarah and Isaac.<sup>52</sup> This section is intimate and based around the family unit as all three characters sing in a combination of trio and duet; significantly, it is the only place in the oratorio where all three characters sing together. On two occasions Isaac interjects, first, to comment on his parents' weeping (mm. 31-38; 120-26), and second, to make a theological point directed at the audience (mm. 87-91).

In this section there is a parallel between the account of the weeping family (as in the rabbinical literature) and that of the sorrowful family in Myslivoček's addition to the Metastasian libretto. Unlike the biblical text, which emphasizes only the relationship between father and son, the oratorio focuses on the effect of God's command on the family unit, as well as on the extended family, that is, the shepherds and

52. Myslivoček, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, pp. 154-64.

servants. In the rabbinical literature, Sarah wept bitterly as Isaac left to be 'instructed by Shem'. Isaac wept, Abraham wept, and so did the servants who accompanied them.<sup>53</sup> In a similar fashion, Mysliveček creates a sound picture of the weeping family through the employment of minor intervals.

### *Marchia*

The scene of Abraham and Isaac's dialogue (Gen. 22.7-8), combined with an instrumental – *marchia* – and Isaac's realization that he is to become the sacrificial victim, are all textual and musical additions to the Metastasian libretto. A musical interlude creates a sound picture of father and son ascending the mountain together (v. 8b). As pointed out previously, E.A. Speiser describes this passage as the most poignant and eloquent silence in all literature.<sup>54</sup> Mysliveček highlights this nuance of the biblical text by allowing listeners time to imagine the biblical landscape;<sup>55</sup> in the hopeful key of E-flat major, the march commences as muted instruments create a lonely image of the pair ascending the mountain in the far-off distance.

### Marchia

Ex. 27. Josef Mysliveček, *Abramo ed Isacco*, *Marchia*, mm. 1-3

53. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, pp. 275-76.

54. E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 165.

55. Mysliveček, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, pp. 213-15.

While on this journey, Isaac comes to the realization that he is the intended victim; in reply, Abraham confirms his suspicions.

Doppo la Marchia  
ISACCO  
6  
La vit- ti- ma son i- o, al- fin lo veg- go pa- dre! Sì fi- glio, Id- dio la  
6  
ABRAMO

Ex. 28. *Recitativo: La vittima son io*, mm. 1-3

The march continues after this realization and confirmation; as it is composed in a major tonality, there is no suggestion of it being a funeral march. The next section highlights the scene of the averted sacrifice with the angel's call (v. 11).

ANGELO  
A- bra- mo! A- bra- mo! Ec- co- mi, san- to Di- o! Fer- ma- ti, il  
i7  
3  
4  
fi- glio non fe- rir, quan- to lo te- mi, già Dio co- nob- be ad im- mo- lar per Lui, l'u- ni-  
i6  
i4  
i6  
i4

Ex. 29. *Recitativo: Abramo! Abramo!* mm. 1-6

Abraham expresses relief and delight as he embraces Isaac and invites his son to free himself from his bonds. Abraham then sacrifices the ram instead of Isaac and thanks God for sparing Isaac's life, while at the same time asks forgiveness of Sarah, Isaac and the Lord God.

33  
Gra-zie... Sa-ra... I- sac-co... Si- gnor, per- do- na. Mi con- fon- do nel don che or mi fa- i.  
i5  
i4  
i7  
i3

Ex. 30. *Recitativo: Grazie, Sara, Isacco*, mm. 33-36

In the aria that follows, *Veggio oh Dio* ('I see, O God'), a textual addition to the Metastasian libretto, Isaac pledges obedience to God's voice for as long as he lives; this aria is set in A-major, a tonality symbolic of his obedience. There is much textual repetition on *ubbidienza ed umiltà* ('obedience and humility') to encourage listeners to imitate Isaac's obedience and humility.

*Mysliveček's Musical Setting of the Metastasian Libretto*

In this section, I briefly outline one accompanied recitative and four arias from the Metastasian libretto set to music by Mysliveček: Abraham's song of terror, *Eterno Dio*; Isaac's knowledge of his sacrificial fate, *Ah, se macchiare quest' anima*; Isaac's song of love for his mother: *Madre Amico, ah non piangete*; Sarah's anxiety, *Deh parlate che forse tacendo*; and the angel's aria of the promises, *Ne'di felici*.

*Abraham's Song of Terror: Eterno Dio*

Mysliveček highlights Abraham's emotional turmoil in the accompanied recitative *Eterno Dio*<sup>56</sup> ('Eternal God!') and employs a variety of musical devices to convey Abraham's disbelief, confusion and fear. The music opens with an orchestral *ritornello* played by strings and basso continuo in C-minor to convey an atmospheric mood of gloom, while the violins' short, sharp motif based on a rising minor second paints Abraham's mounting anxiety (mm. 1–20). Double basses play a haunting two-measure motif materializing from the depths of its register, adding to the overall atmosphere of gloom, while a four-note demi-semi quaver motif played by violins paints Abraham's sense of agitation, confusion and disbelief. Following Abraham's singing of the phrase *Eterno Dio! Che inaspettato è questo, che terribil comando!*, the music modulates to the tonality of G-minor, as double basses play the haunting two-bar motif again.

The musical score for 'Eterno Dio' (mm. 21-25) is presented in two systems. The first system (mm. 21-25) shows the vocal line and the orchestral accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a recitative-like melody. The orchestral accompaniment includes a string quartet and a basso continuo. The score shows a modulation to G minor at the end of the excerpt.

Di-ol Che in-a-spet-ta-to que-sto, che ter-ri-bil co-man-do!

Ex. 31. *Eterno Dio*, mm. 21–25

56. Mysliveček, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, pp. 63–69.

Mysliveček employed tremolos and *glissandi* in the violins to sound-paint Abraham's terror. Following modulations to various tonalities, the tonality of C-major at the end signifies Abraham's resignation as he accepts God's will (mm. 68–72). At the very end, Abraham sings at the top of his register, appealing to God to assist him with the awful task, in the tonality of G-minor. This recitative paints musically the dichotomy of God's command for Abraham, who pledges his obedience yet does not want his son to die.

*Isaac's Knowledge of his Sacrificial Fate: Ah, se macchiar quest' anima*

In his first aria, *Ah, se macchiar quest' anima* ('Ah, if he tarnishes this spirit') Isaac reveals knowledge of his sacrificial fate. Mysliveček set this aria in B-flat major to connect Isaac's knowledge with the promises. The repeated phrase *tu impetrami il morir* ('You implore me to die') emphasizes the imminent threat to the promises. In the B section, the tonality, now in D-minor, emphasizes *soffrir* (mm. 78–79; 82–83; 84–85; 86–87) to focus listener's attention on Isaac as a type of 'Suffering Servant'.

*Isaac's Love for his Mother: Madre Amico, ah non piangete*

The love of Isaac for his mother is expressed in an aria, *Madre Amico, ah non piangete* ('Mother! Friend! Oh, do not weep!').<sup>57</sup> Mysliveček scored this aria in the soothing tonality of E-flat major; by the end of section A (mm. 17–32), the tonality modulates to B-flat major, the tonality of promise. In this aria, Isaac comforts his mother and assures her of his safe return.<sup>58</sup> This aria is one of two where there is no orchestral *ritornello* preceding the vocal part; melismatic writing on *eternerò* suggests that Isaac will never leave nor abandon the one he loves.



Ex. 32. *Eternerò*, mm. 84–85

*Sarah's Anxiety: Deh parlate che forse tacendo*

Sarah's aria, *Deh parlate che forse tacendo* ('Alas, speak of what is possibly silent'), in Part II opens with a rising scale passage in D-minor played

57. Mysliveček, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, pp. 102–13.

58. Metastasio, *Isacco, figura del Redentore*, p. 689.



by strings for one measure; it expresses her rising anxiety as she awaits news of events on Mount Moriah.

Allegro con spirito

Oboe 1

Oboe 2

Horn 1, 2  
in F

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

SARA

Basso

Deh par- la- te, par- la- te, che

Ex. 33. *Deh parlate che forse tacendo*, mm. 1–4

Sarah appeals to God to speak; in anger, she accuses him of being less compassionate and more barbarous than she could ever have imagined. Woodwind and strings play the rising scale-like passage intermittently as an expression of Sara's frustration (mm. 9, 19, 21, 23, 61, 63, 71, 82, 86). As she repeats the phrase *non mi dite che'il figlio morì* ('Do not tell me that my son has died') the string accompaniment becomes more animated for dramatic effect. This aria emphasizes the dichotomy of God's command from Sarah's perspective.

#### *Angel's Aria of Promise: Ne' di felici*

Mysliveček set the angel's aria, *Ne' di felici* ('Of the happy ones'), in B-flat major. This aria focuses listeners' attention on the third part of the promise, in which God announces that Abraham's descendants would have dominion over their enemies. In the A and A1 sections, Mysliveček treats the phrase *Trionferà* ('He will triumph') melodically, sequentially, in ascending stepwise movement, and with ornamentation. In the tempo of a minuet, Mysliveček set the entire aria as a majestic statement of God's pronouncement to Isaac through his father, Abraham.

#### *Conclusion*

The Metastasian libretto *Isacco, figura del Redentore* (1740) was one of the most famous librettos of the eighteenth century. It proposed a christological interpretation of the biblical story based on the homiletic tradition of the church fathers and acknowledged Sarah's sacrifice borne

on account of God's command to Abraham. It is perhaps the only oratorio ever written to suggest Sarah's knowledge of and compliance with God's command. The appropriation of this story by the Habsburg dynasty ensured that Catholic faithful would remain obedient to the Holy Roman emperor and to the institution of the Catholic Church.

Myslivoček's oratorio *Abramo ed Isacco* is perhaps one of the best-known settings of the Metastasian libretto. Mozart, who attended the performance of *Abramo ed Isacco* in Munich, revealed in a letter to his father (dated 11 October 1777) that 'all Munich was talking about *Abramo ed Isacco*'.<sup>59</sup> Such was the greatness of this work that musicologists later misattributed it to Mozart and Haydn. Myslivoček's textual additions, one of which appears to have been influenced by Jewish tradition, enabled Isaac's role to become more active than the role ascribed to him in the Metastasian libretto and enabled Isaac to conclude he was the sacrificial victim. Abraham, too, expresses more joy than he does in the original libretto, as he embraces his son, expresses relief that God has spared Isaac and offers his apologies to Sarah, Isaac and the Lord God for any distress he might have caused. Myslivoček emphasized Metastasio's christological interpretation through major tonalities and setting the opening and closing movements in C-major. Apart from this interpretation, the oratorio sheds interesting light on the effect of God's command on every member of the Abrahamic household and the personal sacrifices each one had to make upon learning of Isaac's sacrificial fate.

59. See Emily Anderson, *The Letters of Mozart and his Family* (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 305-306. Ackerman points out that although Mozart referred to Myslivoček's work as *Abramo ed Isacco*, the title page of the Munich copy bears the title *Isacco, figura del Redentore*. See Josef Myslivoček, *Isacco, figura del Redentore* (ed. James A. Ackerman; Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 2000 [original, 1776]), p. xvii.

ISAAC, A TRAGIC HERO IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY MUSIC:  
 TALES OF HEROISM AND MURDER IN TWO  
 COMPOSITIONS BY BENJAMIN BRITTEN



Fig. 73. *Benjamin Britten working at his desk in his compositional studio in Aldeburgh (1959). Cat. PH/1/229. Photo credit: © Photographer Hans Wild. With the generous permission of the Britten-Pears Foundation.*

Benjamin Britten (1913–76), one of the most prolific English composers of the twentieth century, set music to the narrative of Genesis 22 on two occasions, and although not credited, made history by becoming the first English composer to do so. Originally, this text was coloured by the historical context of the Counter-Reformation, and identified by librettists and composers with the Holy Roman emperor’s zeal to evangelize the Catholic faithful through music.<sup>1</sup> Two hundred years later,

1. The Holy Roman Emperor in question was Charles VI (1685–1740).

Benjamin Britten changed the political landscape of this text by composing two contrasting settings of this story, the first in 1952 entitled *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, Op. 51 (1952),<sup>2</sup> hereafter called the *Canticle*, and ten years later in the *Offertorium*<sup>3</sup> of the *War Requiem*, Op. 66 (1962).

Britten based the text of the *Canticle* on the fifteenth-century Chester mystery play *Abraham and Isaac*. He adapted this text by omitting the first two episodes, 'The Meeting with Melchizedek' (Gen. 14.13-24; ll. 1-144) and the 'Divine Prediction of a Son' (Gen. 15.1-6; ll. 145-208), to focus exclusively on the third episode, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac' (Gen. 22.1-19; ll. 209-491). From this, Britten extracted approximately one hundred lines of verbatim play-text and pasted it together to form his musical text. Despite the over-reliance on this textual source, Britten interpreted Genesis 22 in his own distinctive way, by including a portion of dialogue-text from the play, as well as excluding any overt christological references from the text selected. Britten incorporated play-text highlighting Abraham and Isaac's mutual act of obedience rather than text concerned with the Christological significance of the story. However, there are occasions in the music when Britten uses musical rhetorical devices to allude to Isaac and the ram as types of Christ. Graham Elliott is, therefore, correct in his assertion that *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac* is 'essentially a parable about obedience and sacrifice'.<sup>4</sup>

In the second setting of the story, Britten juxtaposed the poetic text 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' (1918), by Welsh poet Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), with the third movement of the Latin Mass for the Dead, *Missa pro defunctis*. Owen, who died one week before the Armistice (11 November 1918), subverted the text of Genesis 22, and in so doing, retold the story of Abraham's violent murder of Isaac and its devastating effect for God's covenant with his people. This reversal of interpretation illustrates how violence, especially during times of war,

2. Britten composed four other canticles between 1947 and 1974, not as a song cycle but as separate compositions for different occasions: *Canticle I: My Beloved Is Mine*, Op. 40 (1947), based on a setting of the poem 'A Divine Rapture', by Francis Quarles; *Canticle III: Still Falls the Rain*, Op. 55 (1954), based on Edith Sitwell's poem 'The Canticle of the Rose'; *Canticle IV: The Journey of the Magi*, Op. 86 (1971), based on a poem of the same title by T.S. Eliot; *Canticle V: The Death of Narcissus*, Op. 89 (1974), based on a poem of the same title by T.S. Eliot, composed a year before Britten's death.

3. This work is a non-liturgical setting of the Requiem Mass in six movements: *Requiem aeternam*; *Dies irae*; *Offertorium*; *Sanctus*; *Agnus Dei*; *Libera me*. Britten interpolated nine poems by Wilfred Owen into the Requiem: Anthem for 'Doomed Youth'; 'But I Was Looking at the Permanent Stars'; 'The Next War'; 'On Seeing a Piece of our Heavy Artillery Brought into Action'; 'Futility'; 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young'; 'The End'; 'At a Calvary near the Ancre'; 'Strange Meeting'.

4. Graham Elliott, *Benjamin Britten: The Spiritual Dimension* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 96.

undermines God's promises for humanity. Musically, Britten incorporated motifs from the *Canticle* in the *Offertorium*, which he inverted to make the twist at the end of Owen's story all the more chilling for listeners familiar with the *Canticle's* retelling of the averted sacrifice and joyous extrabiblical finale.



Fig. 74. *Wilfred Owen*. Photo credit:  
© With the generous permission of  
Peter Owen/Wilfred Owen Estate.

Britten's decision to set music to the Chester play-text 'Abraham and Isaac' arose when his associate, Eric Crozier (1914–94), presented the composer with a copy of Pollard's edition of the Chester mystery plays;<sup>5</sup> Britten used this source as the basis for *Canticle's* text, and again in 1958 for his setting of the children's opera *Noye's Fludde* (Op. 59). Although performance of mystery cycles had been banned in England from the sixteenth century, they were revived for the Festival of Britain<sup>6</sup> (1951) in the cities of York, Coventry and Chester. Wiebe points out that the revival of the plays during the post-war period offered British citizens a way of 'remembering, preserving, and reviving an endangered reli-

5. I am grateful to Dr Andrew Plant from the Britten-Pears Foundation for pointing out that Britten consulted Alfred W. Pollard's edition of *English Miracle Plays, Moralities and Interludes: Edited with an Introduction, Notes and Glossary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).

6. This festival aimed to raise the morale of English citizens in the aftermath of World War II, and, in particular, demonstrated Britain's contribution to the arts, science, technology and design in the past, present and future; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/3/newsid\\_2481000/2481099.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/3/newsid_2481000/2481099.stm) (accessed 30 November 2010).

gious culture'.<sup>7</sup> For the first time in four hundred years, audiences had the opportunity to view the re-enactment of the Christian story of salvation history from creation to the Last Judgment, as well as proudly celebrate English literary culture in all its glory. In this context, Britten set to music a text familiar to English audiences that offered hope to those afflicted by war and instilled a renewed sense of national pride in Britain's faith and culture.

In 1958, the Coventry Festival Committee commissioned Britten to write the *War Requiem* for the reconsecration of Coventry cathedral on 30 May 1962, following its destruction on 14 November 1940 by the *Luftwaffe*.<sup>8</sup> The Cathedral of St Michael's, together with the city of Coventry,<sup>9</sup> was firebombed by 30,000 incendiary devices, 500 tons of high explosives, 50 landmines and 20 oil-mines, over a ten-hour period,<sup>10</sup> and set ablaze in a firestorm; one eyewitness account reported that on this night the city was 'ringed with leaping flames'.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 75. *Coventry Cathedral: The Cathedral in Ruins.*

Photo credit: © Coventry Cathedral.

7. Heather Wiebe, 'Benjamin Britten, the "National Faith" and the Animation of History in 1950s England', *Representations* 93 (2006), pp. 76-100 (84).

8. The Battle of Britain was a major air campaign waged by the *Luftwaffe* against the RAF, fought between 10 July and 31 October 1940.

9. The Nazis targeted the city of Coventry due to its combined high concentration of manufacturing plants, situated in residential areas, and the munition factory, which contributed greatly to the British war effort.

10. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/h2g2/beta/approved\\_entry/A32619693](http://www.bbc.co.uk/h2g2/beta/approved_entry/A32619693) (accessed 30 November 2010).

11. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/november/15/newsid\\_3522000/3522785.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/november/15/newsid_3522000/3522785.stm) (accessed 30 November 2010).

One cannot underestimate the significance of Britten's setting of Owen's paraphrase of Genesis 22 in the *Offertorium*, which in the context of the Coventry Blitz points not only to the sacrificial offering and murder of over five hundred innocent victims<sup>12</sup> but to the devastating attack on St Michael's Cathedral. On the morning after the blitz, Reverend Provost Dick Howard spoke of his vision for the rebuilding of St Michael's, stating that he wanted the project to be undertaken not as an act of retribution but in a spirit of faith, hope and reconciliation for the people of Coventry and for the world at large. In 1950, architect Sir Basil Spence (1907–76) won the competition to rebuild the cathedral with a design like no other; it incorporated the ruins of the old cathedral alongside the new building. Spence saw 'the old cathedral as standing clearly for the sacrifice' and the new building 'as standing for the triumph of the Resurrection'.<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 76. *Coventry Cathedral: The Cathedral in Ruins.*  
Photo credit: © Coventry Cathedral.

12. At least 586 people died in the Coventry Blitz.

13. Sir Basil Spence, *Phoenix at Coventry: The Building of a Cathedral* (London: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 6.

James Herbert notes that while Spence's design 'enabled the cathedral to rise out of the ashes of war, Britten's *War Requiem* allows the ashes to issue out again from the new cathedral'.<sup>14</sup> The juxtaposition of the two buildings, the ruins of the fourteenth-century St Michael's alongside the newly reconstructed cathedral, also called St Michael's, offers congregants and visitors alike a powerful symbol of hope in God's love for humanity, the triumph of good over evil, and the promise of everlasting life after death. Pointing to the fulfilment of the Old Testament in the New, Spence designed the structure so that each building would be mutually visible from within the other.<sup>15</sup> Britten reflects this theme in the *Offertorium* too, for despite Isaac's death at the end, the chorus reiterates God's promise of old, before and after the ritual slaughter, to emphasize God's faithfulness in the wake of human violence and destruction on earth.

The text from the *Offertorium* of the *Missa pro defunctis* includes a reference to St Michael the Archangel, patron saint of the old and newly reconstructed cathedral, as sung by the four-part choir:

*Sed signifer sanctus Michael repraesentet eas in lucem sanctam:  
Quam olim Abrahae promissisti et semini ejus.*

French horns, oboes, bassoons, a tenor drum and two side drums triumphantly announce 'the archangel Michael' motif, to mimic the sound of a bugle call played on the battlefield.



Ex. 34. *Offertorium*, mm. 64–65<sup>16</sup>

Saint Michael is represented visually on the cathedral's exterior east wall, in a bronze statue entitled 'St Michael's Victory over the Devil' (1958) by Jewish sculptor Sir Jacob Epstein (1880–1959). In Christianity, St. Michael is known as the patron saint of God's armies, and as

14. James D. Herbert, 'Bad Faith at Coventry: Spence's Cathedral and Britten's *War Requiem*', *CritInq* 25.3 (1999), pp. 535–65 (543).

15. <http://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/cathedrals/st-michael-devil.php#reflection> (accessed 30 November 2010).

16. All musical examples quoted from the *Offertorium* are taken from Benjamin Britten, *War Requiem* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1962).



the leader of the saved in heaven, with the latter describing his role in the *Offertorium*. In Jewish (*Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 26) and Christian traditions (Rev. 12.7), Michael is renowned for fighting Samael/Satan, and for throwing him into the bottomless pit; the Latin text of the *Offertorium* points to this great battle, as sung by the choir of angels [the boy's choir]:

*Domine Jesu Christe, Rex gloriae,  
Libera animas omnium fidelium  
defunctorum de poenis inferni  
et de profundo lacu*

This text reflects also the content of the Green Tapestry placed to the rear of the high altar, entitled 'Christ in Glory in the Tetramorph', designed by Graham Sutherland (1903–80). Inspired by Rev. 12.7, the tapestry depicts Christ's victory over death, with a giant-sized Christ clothed in a celestial white robe, surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists. A miniature Satan depicted to Christ's right, with fork, tail and flames suggests Christ's triumphant victory over the forces of evil.



Fig. 77. *Requiem at Coventry*. Photo credit:  
© Erich Auerbach/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

The *Requiem* reflects also Provost Dick Howard's vision for the newly constructed cathedral to become an icon of peace and reconciliation.<sup>17</sup> As a committed pacifist, Britten had written the *War Requiem* as 'a call for peace'. To represent the nations of England, Germany and Russia, Britten scored the vocal parts for English tenor Peter Pears, German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, and Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya.<sup>18</sup>



Fig. 78. Britten with Galina Vishnevskaya. Photo credit: © Erich Auerbach/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

Britten did not specifically refer to the countless number of Holocaust victims whose lives the Nazis brutally sacrificed in the concentration camps; this silence reflects a more general silence relating to the Holocaust among governments and churches in the 1950s and '60s. Britten dedicated the *Canticle* to 'Kathleen Ferrier and Peter Pears', and the *War Requiem* to the memory of four friends killed during World War II.<sup>19</sup>

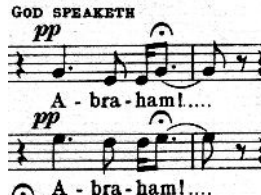
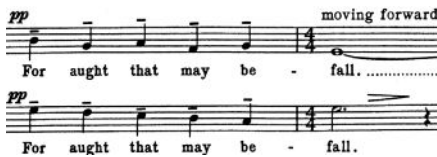
17. <http://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/about-us/our-history.php> (accessed 30 November 2010).

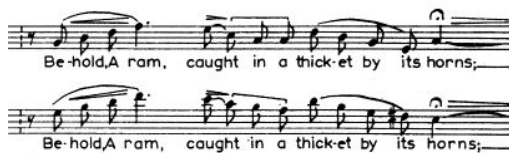
18. Due to Cold War tensions, the Russian Minister of Culture refused Vishnevskaya permission to travel; for this reason, Heather Harper replaced Vishnevskaya twelve days before the concert; see Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 409.

19. Roger Burney, Sub-Lieutenant, Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve; Piers Dunkerley, Captain, Royal Marines; David Gill, Ordinary Seaman, Royal Navy; Michael Halliday, Lieutenant, Royal New Zealand Volunteer Reserve. Piers Dunkerley survived the war but committed suicide in 1959.

## Musical Rhetorical Devices

Britten imported significant musical motifs or derivations of motifs from the *Canticle* into the *Offertorium* to include 'the divine presence', 'summons', 'sacrifice' and 'will' motifs, along with the 'folksy tune' motif in compound duple time. Britten inverted the *Canticle's* 'will motif' in the *Offertorium* to highlight Abraham's disobedience and his refusal to do God's will.

Ex. 35. *Canticle II*, m. 1Ex. 36. *Canticle II*, mm. 1-2Ex. 37. *Canticle II*, m. 4Ex. 38. *Canticle II*, m. 7Ex. 39. *Canticle II*, mm. 25-29Ex. 40. *Offertorium*, m. 58Ex. 41. *Offertorium*, m. 59

Ex. 42. *Offertorium*, m. 64Ex. 43. *Offertorium*, mm. 65-66

Ex. 44. *Offertorium*, mm. 45-48

In both compositions, Britten employed the interval<sup>20</sup> of the tritone,<sup>21</sup> one of the most dissonant intervals of the musical scale, to highlight the horrific nature of God's command, the gruesome nature of the sacrifice and the evils associated with war. In the mediaeval period, the church outlawed this interval in music because its sound was thought to invoke the devil, hence its name *diabolus in musicā*. Alan Wells points out that composers have applied the tritone in music mostly to dramatically represent duplicity, the clashing of wills, struggle and opposition.<sup>22</sup> Britten applied the tritone in this manner; in the *Canticle*, he broadly structured the work's tonal centre around the interval of the tritone, and, by analogy, represented God's divinity with the tonality of E-flat major and Abraham and Isaac's humanity with A-major, that is, two pitches of the tritone.

20. An interval consists of the measurement of sound between two notes.

21. This interval is known also as the augmented fourth or the diminished fifth depending on the musical notation applied.

22. Alan Wells, 'Music and Visual Colour: A Proposed Correlation', *Leonardo* 13 (1980), pp. 101-107 (102).

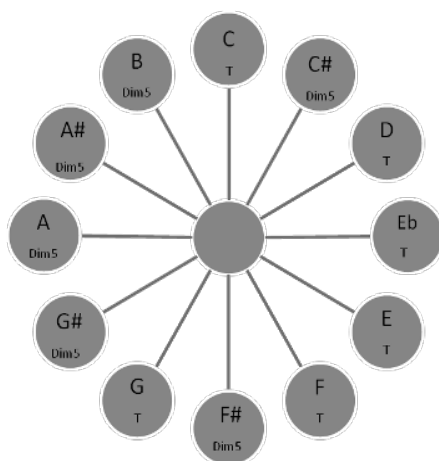
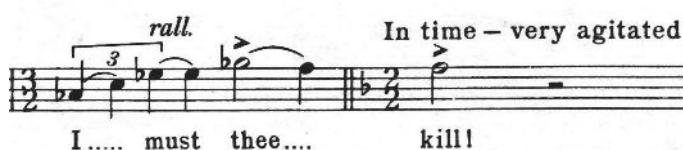


Fig. 79. Tritones (T) and Diminished Fifths (Dim5).

At other times, Britten employed this interval, or its enharmonic equivalent, the diminished fifth, to highlight the violence of the sacrifice, especially with reference to the implements of sacrifice, specifically the sword, and with references to Isaac's ritual killing (that is, C on the second note of 'I', and G-flat on 'thee').



Ex. 45. *Canticle II*, mm. 98-100<sup>23</sup>

Wells's description of the tritone as harsh, grating and menacing<sup>24</sup> is accurate, for its sound describes the horrific nature of the sacrificial act demanded of Abraham by God. James Herbert points out that the tritone's presence in the *Offertorium* 'speaks of the interminable, all too mundane, agony of men in battle'.<sup>25</sup> As in the *Canticle*, Britten broadly

23. All musical examples quoted from the *Canticle* are taken from Benjamin Britten, *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, Op. 51 for Alto, Tenor and Piano (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1952).

24. Wells, 'Music and Visual Colour', p. 102.

25. Herbert, 'Bad Faith at Coventry', p. 543.

structured the tonal centre of the *Offertorium* around the pitches of the tritone. For example, he opened movement one, the boy's choir, in C-sharp minor, and movement two, *sed signifer sanctus Michael . . .* and the fugal section *Quam olim Abrahae promisti et semini ejus*, sung by the adult chorus and accompanied by the large orchestra, in G-major. This tune and its derivations move seamlessly into the chamber orchestra for the musical arrangement of Owen's 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young'. Britten also incorporated the tritone into the melody and accompaniment lines of the *Offertorium*. For example, the tritone in the alto's melody (F-sharp – C) is especially poignant in 'Offer the Ram of Pride instead', highlighting, as it does, the sin of national pride. Owen points to government officials, officers and generals who, from a safe distance, sent millions of young men to die in the trenches, sea and air, or suffer the trauma of shell shock (PTSD) and grievous injury for the rest of their lives.



Ex. 46. *Offertorium*, mm. 65–66

The sinfulness of the 'Old Man', that is, government and military officials among others, points also to the sin of the archangel Lucifer, 'son of the morning' (Isa. 14.12),<sup>26</sup> whose sin of pride and great battle with St Michael resulted in his defeat and descent into Hell (Rev. 12.7-9). While Ezek. 28.13 is the only biblical reference to speak of Lucifer by name, the King James translation speaks of Lucifer's innate connection with music.<sup>27</sup> The presence of the tritone in the *Offertorium* and in the *War Requiem* as a whole encapsulates the image of Satan, the sin of pride and the evils of war.

Britten employed other diatonic dissonances in the two compositions to evoke, on the one hand, an ethereal sound to conjure up a mystical atmosphere associated with God's presence, and, on the other, to produce tension and to express the growing psychological and emotional agitation of Abraham and Isaac in coming to terms with God's command. In both compositions, Britten equated consonant intervals such as the major third with the divine nature of God, and the perfect fourth<sup>28</sup> with the humanity of Abraham and Isaac. Interestingly, in the *Canticle*,

26. The Vulgate translation named Lucifer as the principal fallen angel.

27. 'Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, topaz, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold: the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day that thou wast created' (Ezek. 28.13 KJV).

28. Depending on the context, the perfect fourth is either consonant or dissonant.

Britten associated flat tonalities or notation with flats with God, God's command, Abraham's obedience, Isaac's obedience to his father, Abraham, Isaac's consent to do God's will, expressions of emotion, references to Sarah, and Abraham and Isaac's song of farewell before the angel's intervention. By way of contrast, he used sharp tonalities or notation with sharps to sound-paint the command to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham's will to sacrifice Isaac, the firewood, beast and sword for sacrifice, Isaac's suspicion and fear, Abraham's blessing to Isaac before his death, the near sacrifice, and Isaac's self-offering to become the sacrificial victim. Interestingly, in the dialogue section recounting Isaac's question, and Abraham's response, Britten scored Isaac's melodic line in sharps and Abraham's melodic line in flats. For this section of the dialogue, Britten used an enharmonic equivalent,<sup>29</sup> using flats in Abraham's melody to paint Abraham's knowledge of God's command and sharps in Isaac's melody to paint his growing knowledge of the sacrifice.



Ex. 47. *Canticle II*, mm. 85-86

In the *Canticle*, Britten applied specific tonalities to characters, their emotions and to the sacrifice. He equated E-flat major with God; A-major with the humanity of Abraham and Isaac; C-sharp with sacrifice and death; C-major with the sacrifice of the Lamb, pointing to Christ; D-flat with Isaac's resignation, references to Sarah, and to Abraham and Isaac's 'Song of Farewell'. Abraham and Isaac's 'Song of Obedience' in E-flat at the end of the composition expresses the unity of the characters with each other and, most notably, with God. In the *Offertorium*, Britten set the 'divine presence motif' along with the angel's voice in the tonality of perfection, C-major.

### *Narrative Structure and Characterization*

Although the *Canticle* contains more textual embellishments than the *Offertorium*, it tends to be more attentive to the plot of Genesis 22, based broadly upon Gen. 22.2-13a. Britten composed the *Canticle* in one movement and seamlessly divided it into nine scenes, each one prefaced by

29. For example, G-sharp sounds the same as A-flat, although the two notes are notated differently on the musical staff.

a musical interlude on the piano: God's Command and Abraham's Response; Journey to the Place of Sacrifice; Abraham's Distress and Isaac's Suspicion; Isaac's Distress; the Blessing of Isaac; Acceptance and Farewell; the Sacrifice; the Averted Sacrifice; and Moral of the Tale. Britten omitted the prologue of the biblical narrative (v. 1a), that is, the narrator's announcement to the reader of Abraham's test, a reference omitted also from the Chester mystery play. He seized on the opportunity to increase the dramatic tension of his story, because now the audience is completely ignorant of the fact that the episode is 'only' a test. This omission increases the dramatic tension for listeners who now see and hear the entire episode through the eyes, ears and voices of Abraham and Isaac as opposed to the voice of the biblical narrator. Britten omitted also the epilogue from the biblical story (v. 19), to include his own version of imaginary events in the aftermath of the averted sacrifice. Following the biblical story more closely, the author of the Chester mystery play concluded his story with a reiteration of the promises by God to Abraham (vv. 16-18; ll. 443-60), and the expositor's speech explaining the moral of the story (ll. 461-76). In Britten's retelling, father and son reunite after the sacrifice and sing together the 'Song of Obedience', recited as a prayer by the expositor near the end of the play. Unlike the Chester playwright, who allowed Isaac to fade into the background at the end, Britten enabled both characters a voice to speak [sing] the expositor's words of obedience and praise. However, as pointed out previously, Britten omitted from the song the expositor's words highlighting the christological significance of the story (ll. 461-76). The music at this point expresses the joy and jubilation of the pair, whose relationship by now is closer than ever before.



Ex. 48. *Canticle II*, mm. 167-69

Britten omitted also vv. 14-18, that is, the second angelic call, from his story, along with God's reiteration of the promises to Abraham. Biblical



scholars R.W.L. Moberly<sup>30</sup> and Omri Boehm<sup>31</sup> understand that Gen. 22.1-13, 19 constituted the 'original' story, and that the episode of the second angelic speech (vv. 14-18) was a later interpolation to the original story. Whether Britten was aware of traditional criticism or not, his deliberate textual omission of vv. 15-18 resulted in a return to the 'original' story.

Britten structured the *Offertorium* in five parts, opening the movement with the boy's choir (*Domine Jesu Christe*); followed by the chorus (*Sed signifer sanctus Michael*); Owen's 'Parable'; the boy's choir (*Hostias et preces tibi Domine*); and finally, the reiteration of the promise by the chorus (*Quam olim Abrahæ promissisti, et semini ejus*). Britten inserted Owen's poetic inversion of Genesis 22 in the middle of the movement, enveloping it with a statement of God's promise to Abraham and his seed to emphasize God's faithfulness to his people, and to give hope to those afflicted by the violence of war.

### Characters

Britten included three characters from the biblical story in the *Canticle*, Abraham, Isaac and God, and omitted the character of the angel who averts the sacrifice from taking place (v. 11) and who reiterates the promises to Abraham (v. 15), along with the two servants (vv. 3, 5, 19), and the omniscient narrator's voice. The entire composition consists of dialogues sung between God and Abraham, Abraham and Isaac, and one internal monologue sung by Abraham; the structure of Britten's composition therefore rules out the necessity for narrated speech. The omission of the servant boys focuses listeners' attention exclusively on Abraham and Isaac, their loving relationship and mutual responses to God's command and, unlike a stage production of a mystery play, where the audience sees the passive servants and how their silence excludes them from participating in the drama played out in listeners' imaginations. Similarly, in the *Offertorium*, there are three characters, Abraham, Isaac and the angel, together with a choir of angels. Notable omissions in this work include the voice of God and the two servants. Unlike the *Canticle*, this work does not include any dialogues, and with the exception of Isaac's question from Owen's paraphrase of the biblical story (v. 7), there are no monologues. Since there are no spoken parts for Abraham in the poetic text, Britten scored the baritone voice to sing the narrated lines of text associated with this role, and the tenor voice to sing Isaac's question. The

30. R.W.L. Moberly, 'The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah', *VT* 38.3 (1988), pp. 314-22 (320).

31. Omri Boehm, *The Binding of Isaac: A Religious Model of Disobedience* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007), pp. 20-33.

focus in the *Offertorium* is on Abraham's actions rather than his speech, which Abraham carries out with 'military precision'.

### *Presence and Absence of God*

Whereas God is present in the *Canticle*, he is completely absent from Owen's poetic text in the *Offertorium*. In the *Canticle*, Britten equates the tonality of E-flat major with God, together with a motif played on the piano, known as the 'presence of God motif'. While musicologist David Brown refers to this motif as the 'summons motif', I prefer to keep this designation for the motif that summons Abraham by name.<sup>32</sup> The 'presence of God motif', then, consists of an ascending 'fifthless arpeggio',<sup>33</sup> alternating between an ascending major third, an octave, and a descending major third to suggest 'wing-like' movement that ascends from a low to a high E-flat. Britten uses this motif also in the *Offertorium*, transposed to the tonality of perfection, C-major, and played on the harp, to announce the arrival of the angel who comes to avert Isaac's sacrifice, but to no avail.



Ex. 49. *Offertorium*, mm. 57-58

The 'presence of God' motif is descriptive of the nature of God's presence: the interval of the major third set close together represents God's immanence, while the bare octaves set apart represent his transcendence. The motif materializes from the depths of the piano's lower register, sustained in the bass, to the dynamic markings *pp* (very soft), which gradually crescendos to announce a sustained heavenly E-flat semibreve in the treble. Played at the beginning and end of the *Canticle*, this motif represents God's nature as unchanging and forever constant.

Britten represented God's voice by combining the voices of the tenor (Abraham) and alto (Isaac), a feature incorporated in the *Offertorium*

32. David Brown, 'Britten's Three Canticles', *MusR* 21 (1960), pp. 55-65 (57).

33. Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: J.M. Dent, 1979), p. 405.

to represent the angel's voice, this time with the voices of tenor and baritone. The opening melody of *Canticle*, which Brown refers to as the 'summons motif',<sup>34</sup> is sung quietly as if in the far-off distance to a homorhythmic texture. Set syllabically, the combined voices chant the words to resemble the sound of sacred plainchant. In this motif, Britten inverts the intervals of the major third heard in the 'presence of God motif' (to form a minor sixth), and follows this interval with diatonic dissonances of a minor seventh to evoke a supernatural sound effect.



Ex. 50. *Canticle II*, mm. 1-2.

The second phrase of God's summons (1b) is similar to the first (1a). The vocal parts chant 'My servant' in parallel minor sixths (E-flat - G), while the minor tonality continues to evoke an aura of the supernatural. A *fermata* over the third syllable of 'Abraham' in both phrases allows the singers to linger, and thus to paint a supernatural sound effect. Performance indicators on the score indicate that singers are to articulate the words of the next phrase 'clearly' (1c), chanting the phrase in parallel fifths, 'Take Isaac, thy son by name, that thou lovest the best of all', to evoke a vacant, otherworldly sound reminiscent of sacred plainchant. The second motif, known as the 'sacrifice motif',<sup>35</sup> appears in measure 4 and reappears throughout the work in its totality and derivatives, as well as in the *Offertorium*. In the *Canticle*, Britten punctuates this motif at the outset by the 'presence of God motif'. He bases the melodic shape of the sacrifice motif on the dominant seventh arpeggio of E-flat major, that is, B-flat major. The harmonization of this motif at 'offer him to me' includes diatonic dissonances evoking a supernatural effect that resolves to a perfect fourth to emphasize Isaac's human nature. Britten indicates on the score that singers ought to articulate the phrase 'Offer him to me', in a 'marked' fashion, to emphasize God's request to Abraham, 'to offer' Isaac as a sacrifice. The melodic line of the next phrase, 'beyond that hill there besides thee', echoes the 'sacrificial motif' to highlight the connection between the place of sacrifice specified by God and Abraham's sacrificial offering of his son. Brown refers to the next motif as the 'will motif',<sup>36</sup> sung in this section to the

34. Brown, 'Britten's Three Canticles', p. 57.

35. Brown, 'Britten's Three Canticles', pp. 57-58.

36. Brown, 'Britten's Three Canticles', pp. 57-58.

words 'For aught that may befall'. The tenor voice descends in stepwise motion from E-flat to A-flat, concluding with a leap of a perfect fifth to cadence on E-flat, while the alto voice, in sequence, falls a minor third and rises a major second, to cadence also on E-flat; here both voices sing on unison E-flat, God's tonality. The alto part sustains this note (E-flat) for twelve and a half beats, while the piano accompaniment becomes more animated, playing the 'sacrifice motif' in its totality and derivatives. At this point, Abraham replies to God, and his note (E-flat) emerges out of God's note (alto E-flat) as he sings, 'with resolution', 'My Lord, to Thee is mine intent', signifying Abraham's unique relationship with God and his resolute obedience to do God's will. The stage directions indicate that Abraham rises, and the music, too, in the accompaniment rises in parallel octaves, to cadence on E-flat. A tritone between A-natural in the piano accompaniment and Abraham's E-flat emphasizes the occurrence of a psychological conflict within Abraham as he comes to terms with God's command. The music modulates to D-flat minor in m. 14 to reflect Abraham's resolve to be obedient, 'Ever to be obedient', and modulates once more to A-major (a sharp tonality) as Abraham pledges to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice (m. 19): 'That son that Thou to me hast sent. Offer I will to Thee'. Abraham's words, 'Thy bidding shall be done', are sung to the melodic shape of the 'will motif', sung an augmented fourth (that is, tritone) above the original melody of the 'will motif' to emphasize the grating contrast between E-flat, that is, the will of God, and A-major, the humanity and, therefore, the vulnerability of the son of the promise.

At the end of the *Canticle*, the 'presence of God motif', along with God's voice, that is, the combined voices of tenor and alto, returns to avert Isaac's sacrifice. Echoing the dramatic moment of the descriptive pause in the biblical story (Gen. 22.10), the music slows down, with notes articulated in minims. Following this, the 'presence of God' motif in E-flat major materializes very softly (*pp*) from the depths of the piano's register in the same way as before, to summon Abraham affectionately, 'my servant dear'; Isaac, too, is affectionately called 'thy dear darling'. The 'sacrifice motif' is inverted as a sign that God no longer wants Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, now sung to the words 'for thou darest me', while the remainder of the phrase is sung on three E-flats, 'well wot I'. To paint Abraham's obedience in musical terms, his melodic line 'To fulfil my bidding' consists of the 'will motif'. After God's summons, Abraham sings of his relief, 'Ah, ' and sings his praises to God, 'Lord of Heav'n and King of bliss'. The focus of attention turns now to the sacrificial ram as a substitute for Isaac, 'A horned wether here I see. Among the briars tied is he'. Abraham sings 'anon right in this place' to the 'sacrifice motif', now in C-major. In the accompaniment, the 'sacrifice motif' evolves into the 'will motif' to signify Abraham's sacrifice of the ram

and his obedience to do God's will. The motifs are played in double parallel octaves, as Abraham chants the words 'sacrifice here sent me is', on a monotone C. While Britten omitted all christological references from the text of the mystery play, the music, at this point, alludes to the sacrifice of Christ through the tonality of C-major, and by inference to the consonant C for Christ. By way of contrast in the *Offertorium*, Owen's inversion of the biblical story is characterized by the following textual omissions from the biblical text: God's communication with Abraham (vv. 1, 3, 9), Abraham's worship of God (v. 5), his expression of faith in God (v. 8), and his naming of the place in God's honour (v. 14). Owen omitted also the angel's acknowledgment of Abraham's faith in God (v. 12b) together with God's promises to Abraham (vv. 14-18). He sanitized the biblical text by placing the responsibility for violence not on God but on humanity.

#### *Omniscient Narrator*

There is no narration in the *Canticle*, and the inclusion of extrabiblical text in the form of dialogues between Abraham and Isaac, monologues and internal monologues expressing Abraham's distress add a human dimension to the story. By way of contrast in the *Offertorium*, there are no dialogues, and the combined voices of tenor and baritone clinically narrate the account of Isaac's sacrifice. Baritone and tenor voices narrate much of Owen's text associated with Abraham's and Isaac's actions. In the fugal sections, before and after Owen's 'Parable', the chorus acts as narrator to remind listeners of God's words of promise to Abraham (Gen. 12.1-3; Gen. 22.17) and to emphasize the steadfastness of God's promise for all who are willing to listen to his voice. Through this arrangement of text, Britten warns audiences of the futility of war, which begins when those in offices of responsibility abuse power, lose sight of God's eternal promise and refuse to listen to God's word.

#### *Isaac: Hero vs. Sacrificial Victim*

In the two compositions, Britten presents listeners with a contrasting profile of Isaac's character: in the *Canticle*, he scores Isaac's part for an alto, to cast him as an older child, and in the *Offertorium*, for a tenor, to portray him as a young man. In the former, Britten portrays Isaac as an active protagonist who grows in maturity, submits to his father's commands and survives the ordeal at God's behest. By way of contrast, in the *Offertorium*, the character of Isaac becomes a metaphor for the ten million soldiers sacrificed during World War I. The 'Old Man', according to Rupprecht, 'invokes the old men of Europe, politicians, generals, clerics, by whom the young', that is, the young soldiers, 'were

sacrificed'.<sup>37</sup> The unnamed mount, where Abraham sacrifices Isaac, symbolizes the Western Front. In 'Parable', Owen used language from World War I to describe the altar's structure, made from parapets<sup>38</sup> and trenches, and paraphernalia associated with war, 'belts and straps', to bind Isaac. In the biblical narrative, Abraham builds the altar first and then binds Isaac; Owen reverses this order to highlight the vulnerability of Isaac as he lay bound and waited for his father to build the sacrificial altar. The image of Isaac, bound and awaiting death, becomes a metaphor for the tens of thousands of innocent young soldiers who awaited death in the trenches before their slaughter during World War I.

The number of 'speeches' sung by Isaac in each composition determine his level of activity or passivity; for example, in the *Canticle*, Isaac's activity is marked by a constant and exuberant colloquy with his father, while in the *Offertorium* his passivity echoes his silence in the biblical narrative. In the *Canticle*, the close relationship of father and son is evident through the language of endearment from the mediaeval mystery play, and through the music, which heightens the emotional distress of Abraham as he comes to terms with God's command. By way of contrast, there is no language of endearment in the *Offertorium*; Isaac's poignant question to his father (v. 7) remains unanswered, as Abraham carries out his sacrificial act with military precision and without any hint of emotional turmoil or ethical quandary. In this rendition, Abraham's morbid silence points to an absence of relationship with his son Isaac. Employing Owen's text, Britten portrays Isaac as a gentle presence, who calls upon his father three times, 'My Father', with his third call accompanied by the dulcet tones of harp and tremolo strings. By way of contrast, the piercing sound of woodwind, percussion and horn in F accompanying Abraham's text paint a sound-picture of Abraham's sinister, self-willed nature.

Mervyn Cooke understands that Britten's rendition of Isaac's sacrifice in the *Canticle* and the subsequent reworking of that material in the *Offertorium* point to the crucifixion.<sup>39</sup> However, Britten refrains from portraying Isaac as a type of Christ, omitting, as he does, all Christological references to the third day (v. 4), the donkey (vv. 3, 5), the two servants (vv. 3, 5), Isaac carrying the wood (v. 6), and Isaac placed upon the wood for the sacrificial fire (v. 10). In the *Offertorium*, Isaac has no part to play in the story except to die as a sacrificial victim; he speaks no words to suggest his knowledge of the sacrifice or words of com-

37. Philip Rubbrecht, *Britten's Musical Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 210.

38. A 'parapet' is a defence of earth and stone made to protect and conceal troops during warfare.

39. Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: War Requiem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 67.

pliance to become the sacrificial victim, and dies alone as a victim of a heinous crime. The same is true of Abraham's character; while the final two lines of Owen's poem are often interpreted to refer to God the father (the 'Old Man') who sacrificed his son ('the Young'), Owen does not make the typology explicit, since in Christianity, the death of Christ makes sense only in the light of the resurrection. Therefore, any focus on Christ's death without reference to his resurrection rules out a Christian understanding of the story. In the *Offertorium*, Britten offers listeners a theological meditation on humanity's rejection of God in its violent quest for power.

By the end of the *Canticle*, Isaac has proved his qualities as successor to Abraham in word and action, that is, in his proclamation of obedience and act of compliance to become the sacrificial victim. Unlike in the biblical rendition of the story, Britten allows Isaac to take the initiative on several occasions, to verbalize his thoughts and feelings about his sacrificial death, and by the end of the composition, puts him on an equal footing with Abraham. Significantly, at the end of the composition, in a section entitled '*Envoi*', Isaac's vocal part leads instead of following, as it had done up to this point, and on the final note, the vocal parts of Abraham and Isaac unite to become one. Britten interpreted the biblical story as a rite of passage for Isaac, and in this story recounted Isaac's momentous journey in becoming patriarch-elect of Israel. Just as Coats points out how 'the test demonstrated Abraham's recognition that Yahweh was Lord of the Promise',<sup>40</sup> the *Canticle* demonstrates how Isaac, before and after the near sacrifice, recognized that Yahweh was indeed Lord of the Promise. The story, as Coats points out, 'emphasizes the importance of obedience for Israel by making the primary saint of obedience the father of Israel'.<sup>41</sup> Britten, too, illustrates how Isaac embodied the quality of obedience necessary to become Abraham's successor.

### *Angels*

While the angel from the biblical story is absent from the *Canticle*, angels feature prominently in the *Offertorium*. This work opens in the mournful key of C-sharp minor with a two-part choir of choristers, accompanied by organ, representing the heavenly choir of angels, who appeal to *Domine Jesu Christe* to free the souls of the faithfully departed from the fires of Hell. They chant these words with 'an archaic economy of interval'<sup>42</sup> (C-sharp – D-sharp), reminiscent of diatonic dissonant intervals from the 'summons motif' in the opening segment of the *Canticle*,

40. George W. Coats, *Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 162.

41. Coats, *Genesis*, p. 162.

42. Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 460.

beseeking Christ to deliver the souls of the dead from the fires of Hell. This choral section sets the tone for what follows and acts as a prelude to Isaac's impending death. The organ accompanies Soprano 1 to a hypnotic roulade-type figure, containing the same diatonic dissonances as the 'summons motif' (C-sharp – D-sharp). This accompaniment figure contains the unsettling sound of the tritone (C-sharp – F-double sharp), which sets the mood for the entire movement, that is, Abraham's wilful slaughter of his innocent son, Isaac. Soprano 2 answers Soprano 1 antiphonally in low, muted phrases. At the end of this section, the music of the codetta eventually fades into the distance as the angelic choir disappears, while the organ accompaniment sounds the tritone to sustained diatonic dissonances.

Owen includes the angel (v. 12) at the end of the poem, sung by the unified voices of tenor and baritone, to avert the sacrifice. Unlike the angel of the biblical story, Owen's angel directs Abraham's attention to the ram caught in the thicket and commands him to substitute it in Isaac's place. The melodic line resembles the 'sacrifice motif'. Abraham, however, chooses to ignore the angelic voice and proceeds with his plan to murder Isaac. Britten at this point juxtaposes the final two lines of Owen's 'Parable' with the text of the Latin Mass, and here the boys' choir of angels welcome the slaughtered Innocents, who have passed on 'one by one' to their heavenly abode, with the prayer *Hostias et preces tibi Domine laudis offerimus*.

#### *Abraham: Loving Father vs. Violent Murderer*

Whereas the *Offertorium* highlights the violence of Genesis 22, the *Canticle* highlights the love of Abraham for his son, the love of Isaac for his father and the love of God for the chosen people. For the text of *Canticle*, Britten included the language of endearment from the mystery play, and here, Abraham addresses Isaac as his 'sweet child', his 'son', his 'sweet son', his 'own one dear', and by name on five occasions, including the designation, 'Isaac, son of peace'. While Britten portrays Abraham as a perfect model of obedience, he balances this profile with Abraham's portrayal as a loving father who did not want his son to die. The dialogues emphasize the pair's loving relationship, while Abraham's monologue highlights the dichotomy of God's command. By way of contrast, the violence of Genesis 22 is brought to the fore in Owen's 'Parable'; there is no language of endearment to suggest any relationship between the two, and the paraphrase of Isaac's question to his father (v. 7), receives no reassuring answer (v. 8). Britten omitted the prologue of the biblical narrative from the *Offertorium*, too, because Owen's poem omits this critical verse from Genesis 22, and begins with v. 3 detailing Abraham's preparations for the sacrifice. With the omission of vv. 1-2, there is a



suggestion that Abraham has taken it upon himself to kill his son. Owen deliberately excluded any references from the poem that might otherwise have suggested Abraham's obedience to God, and so he referred to Abraham as Abram to indicate that Abraham is less wise in this version of the story. In Gen. 17.4-8, God changed Abraham's name as a sign of the covenant; in the *Offertorium*, Owen reverses this change to illustrate humanity's propensity to break the agreement through violent acts. As in the *Canticle*, Owen omits the servants (vv. 3, 5) and Abraham's speech to them in v. 5. The textual omission focuses attention on Abraham's sinister silence and his violent slaughter of Isaac. This retelling absolves God of any blame, as God did not ordain the sacrifice to take place, and, in the end, sent his angel to avert Isaac's sacrificial death. Owen's story presents listeners with a violent world devoid of hope, where human beings neither acknowledge God's existence nor listen to his voice. For this reason, there are no references to the nuances of seeing and hearing in this poem; Owen replaced Abraham's foresight and understanding in the biblical story with the patriarch's tunnel vision and self-willed act of defiance, and his ability to listen to God's voice with his refusal to listen to anyone but himself. While this rendition casts Abraham in a negative light, it highlights the plight and suffering of Isaac, murdered by his father as an innocent victim. In Owen's rendition, Abraham is guilty on three counts of disobedience: first, for disobeying the angel's command not to lay a hand against the lad (v. 12a); second, for refusing to offer the lamb as a substitute in place of Isaac; and third, for murdering Isaac.

### *Sounding the Text in Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*

#### *Journey to Place of Sacrifice*

After God's summons and command to Abraham, father and son make preparations for the sacrifice while singing a duet. While derivatives of the 'sacrifice motif' are ever present in the bass line, the 'folksy'-sounding melody lilts along in compound duple time (6/8 time) to depict the two walking together to the mysterious 'hill'.<sup>43</sup> Abraham's melodic line becomes more agitated for four bars when he sings of the sacrifice that God has commanded him to make by modulating to flat keys and to derivatives of the 'sacrifice motif' in the melodic line. When Abraham sings 'ever obedient be', the music returns to the key of A-major, but retains the melodic shape of the 'sacrifice motif'. Isaac, oblivious to God's command and his subsequent sacrifice at this point, continues singing his melody in a free-flowing stepwise movement.

43. Britten incorporated derivatives of this melody, the 'folksy' tune, in the *Offertorium* of the *War Requiem*.

In the next scene, Abraham articulates his feelings of despair, while the piano accompaniment paints his mood with a tremolo<sup>44</sup> on a succession of triads in minor tonalities. The movement of descending triads echoes the 'will motif'. Abraham sings that his heart will break in three as he resolves to do God's will.



Ex. 51. *Canticle II*, mm. 73–74

Most notable in this section is the introduction of perfect fourths at the start of each phrase on the words 'My heart', 'thy words', 'Thou wilt', 'to thee'. Evans points out that 'heavy fourths in this section depart markedly from the God-given motives' thirds in token of a human response nowhere foreshadowed in the prologue'.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, the tonality moves to A-major, as Abraham commands his son to lay down his bundle of sticks. Isaac replies in the key of A-major, but the key once again changes to the minor mode on the words 'it is here' in order to signify the pair's arrival at the place of ritual death. Enquiring of his father if anything is the matter, the tonality plummets to F-minor. Abraham sings of his pain in a flat tonality, 'Ah! Dear God! That me is woe!' In a clever enharmonic shift from D-flat to C-sharp, Isaac calls out to his father in C-sharp minor, a tonality used to illustrate Isaac's rising tension and growing awareness of his sacrificial fate. To emphasize the poignancy of Isaac's question, this melodic line is sung unaccompanied: 'where is the beast that we shall kill?' The appearance of a tritone in the melodic line reminds the listener that Isaac is indeed the sacrificial victim. After Abraham replies that there is no animal on the hill, Isaac's fear is represented musically by a sparse accompaniment, and the plaintive leap of a major sixth on the words 'I am' in the phrase 'I am full sore affeared'.

44. A trembling effect produced by voices or instruments.

45. Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 406.

A. *mf* Fa-ther, I am full sore af-feared To see you bear that drawn sword.

T. *cresc.* I - saac. son.

Ex. 52. *Canticle II*, mm. 89-91

Enharmonically, now in A-flat major (equivalent to G-sharp major), Abraham calls his son: 'Isaac, son, peace, I pray thee, Thou breakest my heart even in three'. In A-flat moving to D-flat major, Abraham calls his son by name; the interval of a perfect fourth is employed to call 'Isaac' (A-flat – D-flat). In G-major, Isaac appeals to his father to keep nothing from him; and as he asks his father what he thinks, 'But tell me what you think', the music modulates once again to G-minor. As Abraham chants Isaac's name on one note, the 'sacrifice motif' is played in loud parallel octaves in the piano; Abraham finally reveals to Isaac his terrible task; the phrase 'I must thee kill' is sung at the top of Abraham's register to the melodic shape of the 'sacrifice motif'. Abraham's reluctance to reveal this news to Isaac is indicated musically by a *rallentando* on the phrase 'I must', to the point of stalling, on a minim, 'thee', and to the final revelation on the word 'kill'.

### *Isaac's Distress*

The rhythmic acceleration of the accompaniment reflects the mutual agitation of father and son. The accompaniment consists of derivatives from the 'sacrifice motif' along with dissonances to remind the listener of God's summons; at this point, contrary motion in the accompaniment indicates the conflict of wills and resultant confusion of father and son. Listeners hear dissonances based on derivatives of the 'sacrifice motif' (C, D) throughout this episode as a reminder of the ensuing sacrificial death of Isaac. Isaac expresses his disbelief by singing elongated notes to the words: 'Alas Father, is that your will? Your own child for to spill'. Musical rests break up Isaac's words, a musical rhetorical device to paint a sound picture of the child fretting.

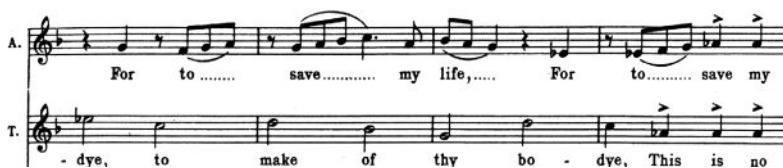
A. *pp* For I.... am but a child, For I.... am but a

T. For I.... am but a

Ex. 53. *Canticle II*, mm. 118-21

As Isaac attempts to come to terms with what will take place, he commands his father to beat him with a stick and put away his sword.

The music modulates here to major tonalities to reflect Isaac's hopeful attempt to avert the killing. To persuade his father from the ritual killing, Isaac reminds Abraham that he is only a 'child'. Abraham responds by echoing Isaac's melodic opening, with elongated notes leaping an interval of a perfect fourth, and tells Isaac he must carry out God's command. Against this backdrop, Isaac reminds Abraham that if Sarah were present, she would plead with Abraham to save his life. Abraham's melodic line is resolute, and set mostly in crotchets and minims, while Isaac's is disjointed, with phrases beginning on the weak beat and mostly in quavers. A poignant moment occurs when Abraham's determination is pronounced as he sings, 'Sacrifice, this is no nay, to make of thy bodye', in mostly minims and semibreves. Against this melodic line, Isaac's is punctuated with musical rests, to signify sobbing, and his response made on a weak beat, as he pleads with his father to save his life.



Ex. 54. *Canticle II*, mm. 134–37

Musically, Abraham ignores his son's request to save his life. Father and son sing of their conflicting views in parallel octaves; for a musical rhetorical effect the pair sing unaccompanied 'This is no (nay)', and during the singing of sustained notes, the accompaniment plays in contrary motion<sup>46</sup> to signify their mutual conflict.

### *Blessing of Isaac*

In a recitative-type section, Isaac questions Abraham if it is God's will that he is killed, and Abraham replies that it is so. The interval of a fourth is present along with the melodic shape of the 'sacrifice motif'. The piano accompaniment modulates from sharp to flattened tonalities to prepare for Isaac's unaccompanied recitative expressing his resignation. To very quiet dynamics, Isaac submits to the sacrifice on hearing it is God's will. Over sustained chords in the piano (F-major), an air of resignation and pathos is introduced into Isaac's melodic line, through the leap of the major ninth on the verb 'kneeling' and the leap of a major seventh on the pronoun 'your' ('blessing'). Abraham responds by singing a major ninth on the pronoun 'my' ('my blessing, dear son, give I thee'). When Abraham refers to Sarah's blessing, 'And thy mother's

46. The movement of two melodic lines articulated in opposite directions.

with heart free', the music shifts to flats for two bars, and returns to sharps when referring to the blessing of the Trinity. Abraham's line, 'my dear son, on thee light', the bright F-natural at the top of the tenor's register shines out amid the contrasting melody of the piano played in its lower register on A-flat. The piano, according to Elliott, makes one final affront to humanity, as it quickly sinks to a low A-flat, below the coldly obedient recitative of Abraham as he prepares for the sacrifice,<sup>47</sup> binding Isaac, 'both hands and feet'.

### *Acceptance and Farewell*

Isaac's melodic line, 'Father, do with me as you will', is a variation of the 'will motif'. Elliott points out that Isaac's words are given unbearable poignancy by the simple lullaby accompaniment in the key of D-flat major, founded on a rocking bass sequence.<sup>48</sup>

Ex. 55. *Canticle II*, mm. 79–84

Britten constructed this section in two strophes, sung by Isaac, and concluded it with a coda; here Isaac refers to his mother, Sarah, 'I come no more, no more under her wing'. His melodic line at this point comprises flat notes to illustrate the warmth of emotion associated with Sarah; the accompaniment to this melodic line, on the other hand, comprises mostly sharp notes to highlight Isaac's sacrificial fate.

### *The Near Sacrifice*

Britten constructed the farewell scene in imitative writing, with Isaac leading and singing, 'farewell forever and aye', and Abraham following and singing a sixth above, 'farewell, my sweet son of grace'. This melody is a derivative of the 'will motif' to emphasize the mutual consent of father and son to the sacrifice. Both voices conclude their final farewell on a unison C-sharp. This note becomes a dominant feature of the next section

47. Graham Elliott, *Benjamin Britten: The Spiritual Dimension* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 98.

48. Elliott, *Benjamin Britten*, p. 98.

with a low pedal C-sharp in the bass of the accompaniment resounding as a death keel, while the 'sacrifice motif', in parallel octaves, materializes from the depths of the piano's lower register. Adding to the dramatic tension, Isaac chants his last words, 'I pray you, father, turn down my face, for I am so adread', on a monotone C-sharp. Evans points out that this C-sharp that had been 'the tonic of farewell' in the previous scene is now the tonic of death.<sup>49</sup> The death knell intensifies as the C-sharp is doubled in the bass, and Abraham appeals, on C-sharp, to Jesus to have pity on him. Just before Abraham cuts off Isaac's head with his sword, the music intensifies even further; with a trebling of C-sharp in the bass, the pace quickens as semi-quavers become demi-semi quavers, and the tritone makes its notable appearance as Isaac sings, 'Almighty God in majesty. My soul I offer unto thee!' As a counter-melody, Abraham's sings, 'To do this deed I am sorrye'. Before the fatal blow, the 'will motif' is played *fortissimo* to the sound of the tritone ringing out. As the final moment approaches, a triple E-flat played by the piano accompaniment explodes in conflict,<sup>50</sup> followed by a thunderclap.<sup>51</sup>

### *Moral of the Tale*

At the end of the *Canticle*, Abraham and Isaac reflect on the meaning of God's command, a textual addition not found in the biblical narrative. In the key of E-flat major, and in imitative counterpoint, father and son sing, 'such obedience grant us, O Lord!' Descending chords, reminiscent of pealing bells, accompany Abraham and Isaac in their song of praise. Father and son unite on a unison E-flat, God's key, at the end of the work to signify their equality as father and son, and as patriarch and patriarch-elect.

Ex. 56. *Canticle II*, mm. 195–98

49. Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 407.

50. Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 407.

51. Elliott, *Benjamin Britten*, p. 99.

Both voices end on a unison E-flat, to signify their oneness with each other and with God. Significantly, Isaac has grown in maturity from the beginning of the journey and has proved himself worthy of becoming Abraham's successor. The 'presence of God motif' in the last measure signifies God's omniscient presence for all eternity. Abraham and Isaac's song, which is a textual addition to the biblical story, is an addition found also in Carissimi's *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*; it is reasonable to speculate that this work may well have influenced Britten.

### *Sounding the Text in the Offertorium*

#### *The Sacrificial Murder of Isaac*

The *Offertorium* paints a very different picture of Isaac's 'actual' sacrifice. Echoing the descriptive pause of the biblical narrative (v. 10), the music paints Abraham's deliberate movements in ascending, slow motion, painted in minims, as he takes the knife to slay his son. The tritone, present at this point (the first pitch, A on the first syllable of 'stretched', and the second, E-flat on 'slay'), highlights the horror of the sacrifice, while the melody, the 'will motif' from the *Canticle* now inverted, reflects the will of Abraham not the will of God, as he sets out to kill Isaac.

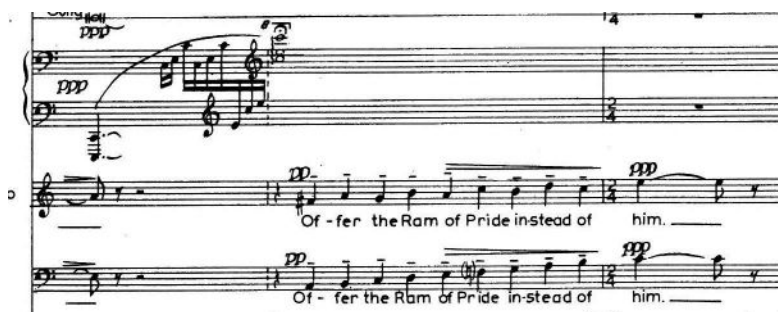


Ex. 57. *Offertorium*, mm. 50-55

Following a musical interlude, the baritone intercedes with the words 'When lo!' as an expression of surprise at the appearance of the angel. This exclamation is followed by the 'divine presence motif' from the *Canticle*, now transposed to C-major and played by a harp, gong and open harmonics on strings for a mystical effect. The unified voices of baritone and tenor enter with a narration of the angel's arrival to the melody of the 'summons motif' from the *Canticle*, followed by the angel's speech to Abraham with news of the averted sacrifice. Unlike the angel of the biblical story, Britten's angel draws Abraham's attention to the 'ram caught in the thicket', sung to the melody of the *Canticle*'s 'sacrifice motif' to emphasize God's command to sacrifice the ram in place of Isaac.

Ex. 58. *Offertorium*, mm. 57-58

Britten follows this phrase with an inverted form of the *Canticle's* 'will motif' to the words 'Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him'.

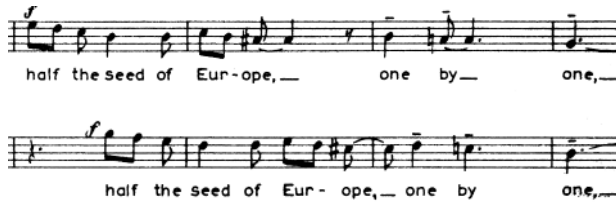
Ex. 59. *Offertorium*, mm. 65-67

The listener presumes Abraham will obey God's command, but the music appears to suggest otherwise; the inversion of the *Canticle's* 'will motif' suggests Abraham's refusal to listen to God's voice. As the tension mounts, derivatives of the *Quam olim* subject, that is, the folksy tune, are heard in the melody of the baritone solo, 'But the old man would not so, but slew his son'.

Ex. 60. *Offertorium*, mm. 75-77

The phrase 'And half the seed of Europe, one by one' is sung in canon a fourth apart by the baritone and tenor to an accompaniment of strings, set against an organ accompaniment playing diatonic dissonances for a total of thirty-five measures.



Ex. 61. *Offertorium*, mm. 90–93

Painting a picture of the battlefield, the imitative melodies of the voices mimic the sound of rifle shots, shooting soldiers one by one. The effect of the organ, as an instrument of heaven, sounds otherworldly, as is the choir of angels; after seven measures of organ playing, they sing the prayer *Hostias et preces* in metrical non-alignment to depict the choir of angels welcoming the souls of the faithfully departed soldiers into heaven. Elliott points out:

At this moment, the world and heaven are more definitely separated by the sinfulness personified in Owen's poem, and this is translated into musical terms by the apparent distancing of earth and heaven in the musical planes which represent these different dimensions.<sup>52</sup>

### *Moral of the Tale*

In the *Offertorium*, the revelation of Isaac's death is shocking for listeners, as there is no divinely instigated rebirth, no resurrection, and all future hope for Abraham's seed is at an end. In the midrashim (see Chapter 4), Isaac rises from the dead, God revives his dust and ashes using life-giving dew, or he recovers in Eden for three years before returning home to marry Rebekah. There are infinite possibilities for a happy ending, but none in the *Offertorium*. Frantzen points out that Owen's poetry makes the evil of Abraham fully apparent: 'his wilful rejection of divine authority and refusal to offer the Ram of Pride instead of his son are indicative'.<sup>53</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The reception of the sacrifice of Isaac in *Canticle II* and the *Offertorium* movement appears, at first sight, to offer listeners two very different retellings of the story. However, both compositions conclude with the

52. Elliott, *Benjamin Britten*, p. 146.

53. Allen J. Frantzen, 'Tears for Abraham: The Chester Play of Abraham and Isaac and Anti-Sacrifice in Works by Wilfred Owen, Benjamin Britten, and Derek Jarman', *JMEMS* 31 (2001), pp. 445–76 (461).

love of a non-violent God, who hears the cries of his people, and who, from the silence, intervenes on their behalf. With the inclusion of Owen's 'Parable' into the work, Britten presents listeners with the troubling side to Abraham's nature, most notably his blind obedience to authority, his tunnel vision and inability to hear any other command, thus resulting in the murder of his innocent son. This rendition puts God in a more favourable light, for as far as listeners are aware, God did not ordain the sacrifice to take place at the outset, and at the last moment, intervenes to save Isaac's life. While the theme of hearing in Genesis 22 has received little if any treatment, in biblical scholarship the two compositions highlight Abraham's capacity to hear or not to hear God's word, and the subsequent insight or lack of insight gained as a result. The reception of the biblical story in the *Offertorium* highlights, on the one hand, God's faithfulness to his promise of old, and, on the other, to humanity's wilful and violent rejection of God.

In *Canticle II*, Britten understood the story in terms of a rite of passage for Isaac, who, at the point of death, manifested the qualities necessary to become Abraham's successor as patriarch of Israel. Unlike the biblical story, Isaac neither fades into the background nor resides in his father's perpetual shadow, but becomes equal in status to Abraham as patriarch-elect, as reflected in Britten's title: *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*. This interpretation of Genesis 22 has received little, if any, treatment in biblical scholarship. Unlike any other interpretation in music, the dialogues in Britten's *Canticle* provide listeners with an insight into Abraham's and Isaac's extrabiblical thoughts and feelings prior to and after the sacrifice, and accentuate the dramatic tension of the biblical story. Most significantly, Britten portrays Abraham as a loving father who did not want his son to die.

THE DEATH OF ISAAC: A MUSICAL RETELLING  
BY JUDITH LANG ZAIMONT



Fig. 80. Judith Lang Zaimont.  
Photo credit: © Gary Zaimont

American Jewish composer Judith Lang Zaimont (1945–) retold the story of the Akedah in a cantata entitled *The Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac* (1986), hereafter called *Parable*. In formulating the libretto, she cut and pasted text from three primary sources: the fifteenth-century Brome mystery play<sup>1</sup> *Abraham and Isaac*, Wilfred Owen's poetic text from World War I, 'Parable of the Old Man and the Young' (1918), and the Jewish prayer, the *Mourner's Qaddish*. As the mother of a two-year-old son at

1. Scholars of literature classify the Brome play as a non-cycle play because it recounts no story other than the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. The text of the Brome play is based on the Vulgate's translation of Genesis 22. It takes its name from Brome Hall in Suffolk, the place from where it was copied, sometime after 1454. The dialect of this play is generally East Anglian; see John C. Coldewey, 'The Chester Abraham and Isaac', in *Early English Drama: An Anthology* (ed. John C. Coldewey; New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 136-37.

the time of writing, Zaimont<sup>2</sup> grappled with the concept of violence in this story; she wondered how a loving father could ever consider killing his only beloved son, or, as retold in the story's reception and its interpretation in Christianity, actually kill him. Zaimont embellished the biblical story with extrabiblical details to recount Isaac's 'violent' sacrifice by his 'loving' father, Abraham, now called 'Abram' to signify a person less wise than his biblical counterpart. This composition calls into question the interpretation of the Akedah in Christian tradition, alluding as it does to the actual sacrifice of another son, Jesus Christ. Zaimont's music invites listeners to reflect on the nature of this God who loved his son, yet, from afar, permitted his violent death on the sacrificial altar of the cross.

### *A Loving Father*

Zaimont emphasized Abram's/God's role as a loving father by setting to music a portion of text taken from the mystery play which she juxtaposed alongside Owen's 'Parable', which tells of Isaac's ritual sacrifice. She prefaced this poem with text from the mystery play recalling God's command from Gen. 22.2; as noted in Chapter 7, Owen eliminated this reference to remove culpability from God for Isaac's sacrificial killing and began his story instead with Abraham's meticulous preparations for the journey to Moriah (Gen. 22.3). She further subverted Owen's text by incorporating language of endearment into Abraham's speeches, which she borrowed from the mystery play to portray the patriarch as a loving father. In a Milken Archive interview<sup>3</sup> Zaimont explained how these extrabiblical dialogues enabled Abraham to express his love for his son, Isaac to plead for mercy, and the angel to point out the ram for sacrifice.

### *A Violent Sacrifice*

As noted in Chapter 7, any focus on Christ's death without reference to his resurrection rules out a Christian understanding of the story; therefore, I concluded it was not Owen's intention to make any explicit christological parallels between Abram and God, and Isaac and Christ. Zaimont, however, subverts not only the biblical story with the death of Isaac, but Owen's 'Parable' with her allusion to Abram and Isaac as a type of God the Father and Christ his son. It is plausible to speculate that for this reason she selected text from the Brome mediaeval mystery

2. <http://www.milkenarchive.org/articles/articles.taf?function=detail&ID=103> (accessed 15 June 2010).

3. <http://www.milkenarchive.org/articles/articles.taf?function=detail&ID=103> (accessed 15 June 2010).

play over texts from the midrash or aggadah. As John Coldewey points out, the Brome play makes explicit the christological parallels between the Akedah and the passion of Christ:

The parallels between Abraham and God, and between Isaac and Jesus, are underlined from the start with references to Isaac as Abraham's most-loved son. And at the heart of the play, as Abraham and Isaac make their way to the sacrificial hill, the stage action and the language unmistakably echo the events of Christ's passion.<sup>4</sup>

The author of the Brome play focused exclusively on Isaac's/Christ's passion on Mount Moriah/Golgotha by excluding other christological parallels to the three-day journey (v. 4), the donkey (v. 3, 5), and the two servant boys (vv. 3, 5). Similarly, Zaimont also omitted these details, along with the nuance of seeing, that is, Abraham's vision of the place (v. 5) and its naming *Yhwh-yireh* (v. 14); with the death of Isaac/Christ, and no mention of any resurrection, there was nothing more to see except the never-ending cycle of violence in the world. Zaimont's composition points, then, to the violence of the Christian God, who failed to save the life of his only beloved son, Jesus Christ; in this way, she allows listeners to make a comparison for themselves between the Christian God versus the Jewish God who intervened to spare the life of the son who lived on to fulfil his role as 'Son of the Promise'.

### *Structure*

Zaimont bases the story of Isaac's sacrifice loosely upon the story of Gen. 22.1b-13a; she divides the work into three sections, and these are based on God's command (mm. 1-98), the journey and dialogue (mm. 99-321), and the extrabiblical account of Isaac's sacrificial death (mm. 322-90). The first section consists of text from the Brome mystery play (ll. 59-66), which includes the divine command to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22.1). She omitted the biblical narrator's crucial reference to the test of Abraham (v.1), which now increases the dramatic tension for listeners who hear God's command (v. 2) from Abraham's perspective. Abraham and Isaac's journey to the land of Moriah is recounted in the second section; here Zaimont incorporates into her text the first six lines of Wilfred Owen's poetic text describing Abraham's preparations for the journey, along with an extrabiblical dialogue between Abraham and Isaac from the mystery play. This section loosely parallels Gen. 22.3, 7-8 with notable textual omissions (vv. 1, 4, and 5). The third section is based on Owen's 'Parable' and describes Isaac's sacrificial death following 'Abram's' refusal to listen to the angel' (extrabiblical), that is, the

4. Coldewey, 'The Chester Abraham and Isaac', pp. 136-37.

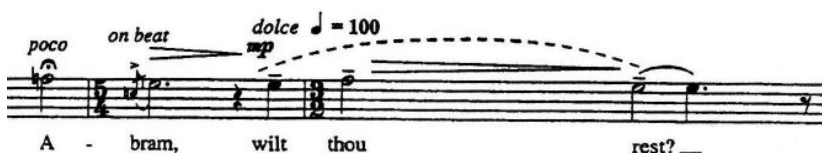
voice of reason; for this section, Zaimont incorporates, in addition to the mystery play and Owen's poetic text, the *Mourner's Qaddish*. With the emphasis on Isaac's sacrificial death, the verb 'sacrifice' features prominently in this section, along with the noun 'death' ('deh-heth'), chanted ritualistically by all vocal parts. The phrase 'the Lord commandeth thee' is sung throughout to remind listeners of God's command to Abraham, and the noun 'blood' and the implements of sacrifice, 'fire', and 'knife', are reiterated, while Isaac's speech includes the verbs 'to weep' and 'to mourn'. Following Isaac's death, a soloist recites the text of the *Mourner's Qaddish* in memory of Isaac.

### Musical Rhetorical Devices

In the notes accompanying the recording, Zaimont discusses the use of text-painting and the use of motifs that feature prominently in her musical retelling of the story:

Musically the work is dramatic, with considerable text-painting, and it is tightly knit motivically. Musical materials are derived throughout from two sources: a rising and then falling half-step (part of the angel's command, 'Abram, wilt thou rest?'), and a lyrical progression associated with Isaac. Contrasting with the highly forceful, narrative choral sections are lyric solos for Abram and Isaac in accompanied recitative style. Abram is given music that underlines the enormity of his quandary. His mood is mercurial, shifting between the desire to reassure his son and the knowledge that he must be the agent of his son's death.<sup>5</sup>

Chromatic dissonances characterize the music with occasional diatonic chords and lyrical passages woven throughout. The musical form is unified by motifs, most notably the motif of the rising and falling half-step, which permeates the entire work:



Ex. 62. Judith Lang Zaimont, *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 6–8

Another prominent motif is that of a melodic motif based on the phrase 'The Lord commandeth thee':

5. See liner notes taken from Judith Lang Zaimont, *Florilegium Chamber Choir*. Soloists and Organ. 1985. Compact disc. Leonarda. LE 328, p. 9.



sition. The soprano (angel) in the opening scene is required to sing Abraham's name 'as if far away'; in another episode, Soprano 1 is requested to 'shriek' on the noun 'knife' (m. 145) while Alto 1 and Tenor 1 are both required to 'recite' it with a strong accent (m. 145). In another episode, the choir is instructed to hush Isaac's moans with a 'ssh' sound as if to calm the child when he learns of his sacrificial fate (mm. 219–25). Text-painting features throughout, with ascending scale-like passages to sound-paint the raging flames of the funeral pyre (mm. 139–44); large intervallic leaps signify the heavens and the angel's arrival to bring the good news of the averted sacrifice (m. 291).<sup>6</sup> Trills, *glissandi*, and ripple effects add to the ethereal, yet sinister, sound of this composition; the choice of instruments in a second arrangement of the composition for string quintet and harpsichord produces a sinister effect. The tone of the first arrangement, however, scored for voices and organ accompaniment, is considerably warmer, especially during the dialogues between father and son.

Zaimont included copious performance indicators on the score to indicate the degree of intensity required during a performance. Unconventional markings such as 'punched', 'weighty', 'uneasily', 'with pent up intensity', 'acute', 'wild', and 'explosive'<sup>7</sup> are among some of the many performance indicators used to describe the emotional responses required of performers. Copious dynamic markings are included to add to the dramatic tension of the story, ranging from *p* (*piano*) to *sfz* (*sforzato*) (mm. 122, 313). There is an abundance of *tempi* markings in English and Italian and various metronome speeds to capture the dramatic tension of the story.<sup>8</sup> Time signatures constantly change within successive bars to accelerate or decelerate the pace of dramatic action played out by the music.

### *Scoring of Voices*

Zaimont scored this work for three solo voices, setting the character of Isaac for tenor voice, Abraham for baritone, and the angel for a soprano. Scoring Isaac's part for a tenor voice suggests a young man rather than a boy or an adolescent, and is more in keeping with Jewish tradition, as discussed previously in Chapter 4. Zaimont retained Abraham's pre-covenantal name, 'Abram', from Owen's poem to suggest a patriarch less wise than the biblical counterpart of the Akedah. The chorus acts as the narrator, and at the end calls out to Abraham in place of the angel to offer the ram of pride instead of Isaac. As in Britten's *Offertorium*, Abra-

6. Judith Lang Zaimont, *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Hildegard, 1986), p. 39.

7. See m. 25, m. 45, m. 71, m. 115, m. 213, m. 146, and m. 291.

8. On p. 50 of the score, there are five different metronome markings.



ham and Isaac sing in *recitativo accompagnato* style,<sup>9</sup> while the chorus (SATB *divisi*) narrates the action. Zaimont's arrangement manipulates musical textures very effectively, contrasting homophonic and contrapuntal writing, and alternating between accompanied and a *cappella* singing, together with unison singing for rhetorical emphasis.

### *The Primacy of Abraham*

Zaimont set to music only a small percentage of text from the mystery play, approximately 32 of 465 lines of text; within this selected range, she assigns Abraham 22 lines<sup>10</sup> and Isaac 10 lines of text to sing, thus making Abraham the dominant character.<sup>11</sup> That being said, she assigns Isaac a more active role than that of his biblical portrayal, and a lesser role than his portrayal in the mystery play. Isaac's speech is dependent on his father's spoken words, and, by the end of the performance, listeners have gained an insight into neither Isaac's thoughts nor his feelings. As 'the old man' of Owen's 'Parable', Abraham commands a superior role to that of his son, Isaac. As mentioned previously, Zaimont incorporated the language of endearment from the Brome play into her text: here Abraham refers to Isaac as his 'sweet son', his 'sweetest child in earth', and his 'dear child'. Like Britten, Zaimont's Abraham lovingly refers to Isaac as the best of all his children: 'Isaac I love thee best of all', an allusion to Isaac's superiority over Ishmael, Abraham's other son.

In his direct speech to Isaac (v. 8), Abraham at first conceals the full extent of the sacrificial act:

Dread thee not my child.  
Our Lord will send me and show here in this place  
Some manere of beast for to take,  
Through his sweet sond.

After he reveals Isaac's fate, Abraham professes his heartbreak at having to carry out the sacrifice, 'O! my heart will break in three, to hear thy words I have pitye'. Zaimont's allusion to Isaac as Christ invites lis-

9. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this type of recitative was used for speeches of special importance. As in the *recitativo semplice*, the music is based on speech and incorporates repeated notes. In the accompanied recitative, words of text are rarely repeated, as is the case in *Parable*.

10. From my observation of the text, Abraham speaks the following verses of text from the mystery play: ll. 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 143, 144, 145, 146, 155, 269, 270, 31, 32, 155, 156, 282, 283, 284.

11. Isaac speaks the following lines of text: ll. 138, 147, 148, 153, 154, 282, 291, 308, 337 together with 282, 245 or 306. It is not clear from which verse Zaimont extracted the noun 'mercy', which features prominently at the end of the text as Isaac's voice calling from the grave; this noun could be from any of the last three verses.

teners at this point to ponder the concept of a God who is at once loving yet violent.

### *A Submissive Victim*

Zaimont's Isaac, like Britten's Isaac in *Canticle II*, is observant, and comments upon his father's distress, 'Your weeping maketh my heart sore as mine own'; as in *Canticle II*, he eventually learns of his sacrificial fate from his father:

But child, though I mourn ne'er so fast,  
yet must I here in this place shed all thy blood.

Isaac weeps when he hears of his imminent sacrificial death, and pleads with Abraham for 'mercy', although not to the same extent as Britten's Isaac from *Canticle II*, who pleads more substantively with his father to spare his life. In Zaimont's *Parable*, as in the biblical narrative, Isaac is unaware that God has ordained the sacrifice; this position contrasts with Isaac's knowledge of God's command in *Canticle II*. Zaimont's Isaac never verbally submits to his sacrificial fate, although his actions suggest compliance. In his extrabiblical monologue, taken from the mystery play, Isaac appeals to his father for mercy and begs him to shield his face from the violence of the ensuing act:

Father, have mercy, turn down my face. Would I the stroke were done!

Isaac's final words, 'Father! Why smite ye nought? O would I the stroke were done', are spoken at the point of the descriptive pause (Gen. 22.10), but in this case, it is to no avail, for Isaac/Christ was slain.

### *Musical Retelling*

#### *1. God's Command*

Zaimont's *Parable* opens with a noted absence of a time signature, along with the inclusion of dotted barlines for the opening three measures to suggest music ungoverned by the constraints of time. While dotted barlines<sup>12</sup> illustrate a structured simple compound time division, and a metronome marking indicates a crotchet marking of 84, Zaimont's 'free rhythm' suggests an otherworldly dimension. While this idea is unique, the musical opening itself echoes Britten's 'God-motif' from *Canticle II* and in the *Offertorium*.

12. Dotted bar-lines are used by the composer to show where a bar line would have been if the original had one.

JUDITH LANG ZAMBOUR

**Molto Moderato**  
♩ = 84

*as if far away*

**Sop. Solo**  
A - bram, A - - -

I: fl. 8, 4  
II: fl. 8, 4  
Ped: pr. 16,  
8, 4  
Organ

**mp**

**5** **♩ = 92**

*poco on beat*

**1. Solo**  
- bram, A - bram, wilt thou rest? -

*dolce* ♩ = 100

**mp**

I: fl. 4  
ped: fl. 8

**p**

Ex. 65. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 1–6

The angel's call to Abraham is sung 'as if far away' to sustained notes in the accompaniment and takes place in the sacred timeless dimension. As the angel approaches the temporal dimension, Abraham's name, called a second time (mm. 6–7), is sung within the musical structure of a formal time signature. A crescendo marking together with a dynamic marking *forte* and a dynamic accent on the second syllable of Abram (m. 5) signal the angel's arrival on earth. The angel mystically chants Abram's name, 'Abram, Abram', on high F punctuated by musical rests.

The third occurrence of Abraham's name, together with the phrase 'wilt thou rest?', is characterized by the falling and rising half-step motif; this phrase is marked also by shifting changes in time signature over two measures. A *tenuto* on each word of the phrase 'wilt thou rest?' focuses listeners' attention on the fact that Abraham/God will never again have peace of mind for having killed Isaac/Christ. The accompaniment is characterized by a faster *tempo*, trills in the inner parts, arpeggiated chords and the half-step motif designed to create dissonances and false relations and to evoke a mystical atmosphere tinged with unease.



Ex. 66. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 9–10

The phrase 'for to take Isaac thy young son that thou lovest best' (mm. 21–25) is a lyrical passage associated with Isaac, and written with flat notes. References to Isaac's sacrifice, on the other hand, are set in sharps, 'and with his blood make sacrifice' (mm. 25–28). Musically, Zaimont links Isaac to the sacrifice through an enharmonic device: the phrase 'that thou lovest best' is set in D-flat (enharmonically this note sounds C-sharp), while the next phrase, 'and with his blood', is set in C-sharp (enharmonically this note sounds D-flat). The first part of the phrase 'and with his blood' is sung and played in unison, beginning on C-sharp to the dynamic marking *ff*. Reference to Isaac's blood is marked by B-flat, while references to his sacrifice incorporate mostly sharps. The phrase 'make sacrifice' is sung very loudly (*fff*) by SSAATTBB with stress marks on each syllable of sacrifice (m. 28).

Ex. 67. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 26–29

In a short space of time, the vocal range of each part spans from the lowest part of its register to the highest (mm. 21–28), which adds to the overall dramatic effect. A brief musical interlude follows for five measures, with the rising and falling half-step motif featuring prominently. A six-part choir (SSAATTB) develops the phrases 'Abram wilt thou rest'

and 'the Lord commandeth thee' for ten measures (mm. 34–44); the phrase 'Abram wilt thou rest' is repeated in homophony (mm. 42–44) with tied notes on 'rest' to sound-paint a period of repose.

41 .....  $\text{♩} = c. 116$  *ben f cresc.* *ritard.*

S 1 - thou rest? A - bram wilt thou rest?

S 2 wilt thou rest? A - bram wilt thou rest?

A 1 wilt thou rest? A - bram wilt thou rest?

A 2 wilt thou rest? A - bram wilt thou rest?

T 1 wilt thou rest? A - bram wilt thou rest?

T 2 A - - bram, A - bram wilt thou rest?

B A - bram, A - bram wilt thou rest?

Ex. 68. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 41–44

The next part (mm. 45–56) begins with the question, 'Abram wilt thou rest?' followed by God's command, 'The Lord commandeth thee for to take Isaac, thy young son that thou lovest best', and is sung in unison, with dramatic *glissandi* effects in the organ. The effect of unison singing focuses listeners' attention on God's words to Abraham. The choral texture broadens to eight parts for dramatic effect and punctuates the lines, 'with his blood make sacrifice', with musical rests, a change in tempo, crescendo markings leading to *fff*, and to a musical climax on 'sacrifice'; at the top of each vocal range, for example, high C in the soprano.

At the same time, intermittent voices chant 'sacrifice' to a rhythmic *ostinato* in the accompaniment over a pedal E. The accompaniment, based on the falling and rising half-step motif is hypnotic and paints in sound Abraham's obedience as he carries out God's command to sacrifice Isaac.

diminuendo - [Single Solo]  $\text{♩} = 92$  mp

1 55

S

2 *benf* *diminuendo*  
Sa - cri, sa - cri, sa - cri, sa - cri, sa - cri - fice, sa - cri - fice.

1 *poco f* *diminuendo*  
Sa - cri - fice, suffice, suffice, suffice, sa - cri - fice, sa -

2 mp  
Sa - cri - fice,

1 *poco f* *diminuendo* mp  
sa - cri - fice, suffice, suffice, suffice, sa - cri - fice,

T

2 *benf* *dim.* mp  
Sa - cri, sa - cri, sa - cri, sa - cri, sa - cri - fice, sa - cri - fice.

1 *benf* *dim.* mp  
Sa - cri, sa - cri, sa - cri, sa - cri, sa - cri - fice, sa - cri - fice.

B

2 mp  
Sa - cri - fice,

*diminuendo sempre*

Gen. (1)

Ex. 69. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 55-57

The choir suddenly interjects with the verb 'Go' on a unison C (m. 59), and a bar later 'Go thou' (m. 60) to the sound of the hypnotic *ostinato*.

58 Solo with Choir *f*

**S**

1 sa-cri-fice, — Go!

2 — — — — — Go!

**A**

1 cri-fice, — — — — — Go!

2 *f* sa-cri, sa-cri, sa-cri-fice, — — — — — Go!

**T**

1 *f* sa-cri-fice, sa-cri-fice, — — — — — Go!

2 *mp* — — — — — *f* Go!

**B**

1 *f* sa-cri, sa-cri-fice, — — — — — Go!

2 *f* sa-cri-fice, sa-cri-fice, — — — — — Go!

*poco p*

*f*

Ex. 70. Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac, mm. 58–59

Following a short musical interlude marked *Lento*, the soprano soloist (angel) sings a lyrical descending phrase (mm. 67–70) issuing the command to ‘go into the land of vision and offer the child as a sacrifice’. Of note here is G-sharp, sung intermittently by all voices, ‘And offer thy child’. A single G-sharp is sustained in the right hand manual of the accompaniment for nine measures (mm. 72–80) and is taken up by the left hand for eight measures (mm. 79–86) and by the pedal for four measures (mm. 85–88).

Ex. 71. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 72–75

After the choir sings ‘Go’, the soloist continues with a lyrical phrase in descending motion, ‘I shall lead thee and show also’, beginning and ending on a G-sharp, to signify the sacrifice, against which the basses sing a slightly modified version of the rhythmic *ostinato* on ‘sacrifice’. The sopranos take up this rhythmic motif for one measure at m. 85 while tenors sing ‘offer the child’ on D-sharp. A short musical interlude concludes this section. The final chord (m. 88) of the organ accompaniment consists of the note G-sharp to signify the sacrifice, C to signify the command ‘to go’, and D-sharp to signify the command ‘to offer’ Isaac as the sacrificial victim.

## 2. Journey and Dialogue

A musical interlude follows in rapid compound time (6/16) from m. 99 to m. 114 and continues in the accompaniment until m. 164. This episode anticipates Abraham’s journey to Moriah; the motif of the half-



step features prominently throughout. Following this, the choir narrates twice in unison (mm. 115–122), the first two lines of Owen's 'Parable'. 'So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went'. By the end of the second recitation all vocal parts are scored within the higher spectrum of their range and at the loudest dynamic marking (*sfz*) to highlight Abraham's obedience in his willingness to carry out God's command.

The musical score for 'Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac' (mm. 119–22) features four vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and piano accompaniment. The vocal parts are in unison, singing 'A - bram rose and clave the wood, and went,'. The piano accompaniment features a prominent ascending scale-like passage in the right hand, starting on D, which captures the effect of raging flames. The dynamic marking 'poco f' is present at the beginning of the vocal entry.

Ex. 72. Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac, mm. 119–22

Word-painting on the noun 'fire', with soprano and alto vocal parts singing ascending scale-like passages starting mostly on D, captures the effect of raging flames of the funeral pyre.

To maximize the dramatic effect, the chorus sings *a cappella* for a measure on the phrase 'and a knife' (m. 145); at this point Zaimont instructs Soprano 1 to 'shriek' on 'knife', and Tenor 1 and Alto 1 to 'recite' it, while all other parts sing allocated pitches. Following a brief musical interlude, the choir, in homophony, narrate that Abraham and Isaac sojourned together; a lyrical passage marked 'calmly', set loosely in C-minor, announces the presence of Isaac. While the accompaniment continues in D-flat, Isaac's vocal part recounts the preparations for the sacrifice in sharp notes, mostly G-sharp. His question about the lamb is scored at the higher end of his vocal range, to signify his rising tension, in flat notes (A-flat).

**THE FIRE**

138

S  
the fire, fire, fire, fire,

A  
the fire, fah - - -

T  
the fire,

B  
the fire,

Piano accompaniment includes chords and arpeggiated figures.

Ex. 73. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 138–41

155

T. Solo  
Isaac:

ther, Be - hold the pre - pa - ra - tions, fire and iron,

The musical score for measures 155-157 features a vocal line for T. Solo Isaac and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a fermata on the word 'ther,' followed by a melodic phrase for 'Be - hold the pre - pa - ra - tions, fire and iron,' with a five-measure rest indicated by a bracket. The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more complex rhythmic pattern in the left hand, including some triplets. A dynamic marking of *mp* is present in measure 156.

158

T. Solo  
Isaac

But where the lamb for this burnt

Ex. 74. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 155–60

In a recitative-like section sung *a cappella*, scored in sharp notes, Abraham reassures Isaac that God will send 'some manere of beast'. The accompaniment, now scored mostly in sharps, is set against Isaac's reply in E-flat (flats), who now expresses his terror upon seeing Abraham's drawn sword, 'but my heart shiveth', and A-minor (G-sharp), upon seeing the implement of sacrifice, 'to see thy drawn sword so'.

Ex. 75. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 172-77

Following Isaac's question, the choir enters with an incantation of 'sacrifice' repeated several times over, while the basses on one occasion remind listeners of God's command, 'the Lord commandeth thee'; the note C, signifying the divine command, is played in the organ pedals from m. 184 to m. 191. In an ariette-type section, marked 'very tender, never rushed', Abraham reflects on his love for Isaac; this section is lyrical and scored mostly in flat notes. For added poignancy, the baritone soloist sings *a cappella* 'I love thee best of all'.

Ex. 76. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 203-206

Signalling a change in mood, an agitated semiquaver pattern appears in the accompaniment for the recitative section as Abraham recounts how he must shed Isaac's blood. The baritone sings the phrases 'I mourn n'er so fast' and 'shed all thy blood' *a cappella*, and at the higher end of the vocal range to increase the dramatic effect.

215 *poco agitato*

B. Solo Abram  
child, though I mourn n'er so fast, yet must I here In this place shed all thy blood.

*colla voce*

1: pr. 8, fl. 4  
sesquialtera  
H. odd fl. 4  
ped: II off  
+1

*ben f*

*Broaden*

Ex. 77. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 215-17

As Isaac pleads for mercy, the choir anticipates Abraham's attempts to calm his son with the sound 'ssh' for seven measures.

*angushed*

T. Solo Isaac  
"Mer-cy"

*ben f*

B. Solo Abram  
Ah, Isaac sweet son, peace!

*heavy*

*Sotto f*

S Sh

A Sh

T Sh

B Sh

Ex. 78. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 219-22

### 3. Sacrifice and Death

Zaimont opens the final section with text taken from Owen's 'Parable' (ll. 7-9) to recount Isaac's binding and the building of the altar. At the point of the descriptive pause (Gen. 22.9), she incorporates text from

the mystery play to remind listeners of God's command, 'the Lord commandeth thee', together with an extrabiblical dialogue from the mystery play recounting Isaac's pleas to his father to get on with the sacrifice, 'Father, have mercy, turn down my face. Would I the stroke were done.'

Another lyrical passage ensues as Abraham pleads with Isaac to stop moaning. Isaac pleads again for mercy, but this time requests his father to mourn him no more. The choir echoes this request *a cappella*. A change of mood is heralded by a chord on G-sharp major (sacrifice), followed by an ascending cadenza passage with leaps of a seventh in the accompaniment. From m. 244 to m. 254 Tenors and Basses 1 and 2 chant 'deh-heth' on an open fifth quaver, a pulsating vacant sound, while a busy semiquaver pattern consisting of shifting chromatic descending broken triads in the manuals leads to an ascending passage in G-minor. Baird quite rightly points out that this effect resembles 'heathenistic chants accompanying sacrificial rituals'.<sup>13</sup>

The image displays a musical score for a choral and piano piece. At the top, a box labeled '251' indicates the starting measure. The vocal parts are for Tenor (T) and Bass (B). Both parts sing a rhythmic chant: 'deh - heth, deh - heth, deh - heth, death.' The piano accompaniment features a complex, fast-moving pattern in the right hand, primarily semiquavers, and a descending chromatic broken triad in the left hand. The score is written in G-minor, as indicated by the key signature of one flat (F major/C minor).

Ex. 79. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 251-54

Following a short musical interlude, the next section takes up text from Owen's 'Parable', 'Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps, And builded parapets and trenches there, And stretched out his hand to slay his son'. Unison sopranos and altos sing against unison tenors and basses a fifth apart to echo the ritualistic chanting of the previous musical episode.

Following another short musical interlude, consisting of chords a ninth apart, (mm. 273-76), the now familiar motif, 'the Lord commandeth thee', is sung by the choir. Sopranos sing the phrase beginning on G-sharp (mm. 279-82) with all parts ending on the diatonic chord of C-major to signify God's command. Over this chord, Isaac enters at the top of his range with a plea for mercy, urging his father to turn down his face.

13. Sara Lynn Baird, *The Choral Music of Judith Lang Zaimont* (PhD diss., Florida State University, 1991), p. 145.

281

T. Solo Isaac

S

A

T

B

the Lord, com-mand-eth, The Lord com-mand - eth, com - man - deth thee.

Lord, com-mand, - Lord com-mand - eth, com - man - deth thee.

Lord, com-mand, Lord com-mand - eth, com - man - deth thee.

Lord, com-mand, Lord com-mand - eth, com - man - deth thee.

l. pr. 8, 4 ft. 2, V  
ped. pr. 16, 8, 4

poco f

Ex. 80. Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac, mm. 281-85

To a section marked 'explosive', unison sopranos and altos set a fifth apart against unison tenors and basses narrate the angel's arrival. For dramatic effect, sopranos and altos sing the interval of a minor ninth at the higher end of their range, to the phrase 'When lo!' and 'of heaven'.

291

T. Solo Isaac

S

A

T

B

stroke were done!

explosive f

When lo! an an - gel called him out of heav'n Say - ing:

When lo! an an - gel called him out of heav'n Say - ing:

When lo! an an - gel called him out of heav'n Say - ing:

When lo! an an - gel called him out of heav'n Say - ing:

poco f

Ex. 81. Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac, mm. 291-94

Diatonic chords characterize this section, as the full force of the chorus, rather than the solo voice of the angel, in ascending passages instructs Abraham to avert the sacrifice. The announcement by the choir, 'Behold a ram' is sung at the upper range of each vocal part as if to warn Abraham against sacrificing Isaac.

The musical score for Ex. 82, 'Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac', measures 298-300. It features four vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'Nei - ther do an - y - thing to him. Be - hold, a ram, caught in a'. The piano part features a descending melodic line and a sustained G-minor chord. A note at the bottom left indicates 'feel half-note pulse' and 'nigh - ther'.

Ex. 82. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 298-300

References to the ram in this section are written with C-sharp major chords (mm. 300, 301, 302, 304, 305), that is, the note C signifying God's command. Isaac's voice enters at m. 308 with diatonic chords in the accompaniment. His sigh of resignation, 'O, would I the stroke were done', is painted musically by a descending melodic passage ending in G-minor (mm. 309-10), which is sustained for four measures while the choir reiterates for one last time the phrase 'Lo Abram, offer the ram of pride instead of him, instead of him'. Diatonic chords in the choral section conclude on the chord of D-major. The phrase 'But the old man would not so but slew his son' incorporates notes based around D, distributed throughout the vocal section and accompaniment to announce Abraham's decision. The second half of the phrase 'and half the seed of Europe one by one' is treated in a similar fashion to Britten's treatment of the phrase.

339

Tenor Solo  
one, one by one, one by one by one by

Bar. Solo  
one, one by one.

S. Solo  
one.

1  
one by one, by one by one by one by

2  
one by one, by one, one by one by one by

A  
one by one by one by one by one by

1  
one by one by one, one by one by one by

2  
one by one by one, one by one by one by

3  
one, one by one by

Ex. 83. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 339–43

The texture reduces to just one voice, sung by a soprano soloist (mm. 350–51), as if to point to Isaac, Abraham's only son. Interestingly, this note concludes on A-flat, enharmonically sounding G-sharp, the note of sacrifice.

349

Tenor Solo  
one.

Sop. Solo  
one by one.

Bass Chorus  
... ben

Ex. 84 *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 344–48



A faint melodic echo of Isaac's plea for mercy is played without harmony by the right hand of the organ accompaniment (mm. 356–58); this descending episode, incorporating the characteristic falling half-step motif, links to the next passage featuring the recitation of the *Qaddish* by a speaking soloist; in this section, Zaimont brings together the motifs 'Abram wilt thou rest', 'the Lord commandeth thee', and a lyrical accompaniment associated with Isaac. Significantly, each phrase of the chorus begins from the note associated with sacrifice, G-sharp (mm. 363–65, 366–70).

365

S  
A  
T  
B

thou rest? The Lord com -

B  
Solo

b'cha - yéy - chon uyvo - méy chon uvcha - yéy d'chol beys yisro - eyl, Ba - agóloh

367

S  
A  
T  
B

mand - eth thee to take thy son for

B  
Solo

uvizman kóreev; v'imru oméyn. Y'hey sh'mey

369

Ex. 85. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 365–66

Zaimont returns to Owen's 'Parable' (ll. 10–14) with text resembling Gen. 22.10–12; the choir urges Abraham 'to offer the Ram of Pride instead' of Isaac. Following a brief musical interlude, the chorus narrates the final two lines of Owen's poem:

But the old man would not so but slew his son  
and half the seed of Europe one by one.

Following the death of Isaac, Zaimont incorporates a Jewish prayer text used to mourn the passing of a loved one. The *Qaddish Yatom*, com-

monly referred to as *Qaddish Avelim*, that is, the *Mourners' Qaddish*,<sup>14</sup> is recited by mourners for eleven months following the death of a loved one; and on each successive anniversary thereafter to earn merit for a deceased father. Zaimont includes this prayer for Isaac who is not, as the midrash tells, miraculously resuscitated with dew, resurrected or taken to a celestial hospital to recuperate. While this prayer does not speak about death, its principal concept is the sanctification of God's name. Written in Aramaic and based on Ezek. 38.23, its eschatological overtones anticipate a time when the nations would sanctify God.<sup>15</sup>

May his great name be magnified and sanctified in the ages which he has created according to his pleasure. May he usher in the reign of his kingdom and bring about Redemption. . . . May the name of the Holy One be blessed, celebrated, glorified, exalted, praised, chanted and praised on high.

383

B. Oseh shalom bimromov hu ya - asheh shalom olenu v'al kol

ben *pp*

387

B. yisro - eyl: v'imru omeyn.

Ex. 86. *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*, mm. 383–90

14. While a debate ensues regarding the prayer's date of origin, Frédéric Manns notes that the core of this prayer dates back to the Second Temple period. See Frédéric Manns, *Jewish Prayer in the Time of Jesus* (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Analecta, 22; Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1994), p. 22.

15. Frédéric Manns cites Billerbeck, who is of the opinion that this prayer formed the basis of the first part of Jesus' prayer to his Father — 'Our Father'. See Manns, *Jewish Prayer in the Time of Jesus*, p. 159.

This section is marked by the repetition of the phrase 'Abram wilt thou rest?' and echoes the opening question, followed by Isaac's descending melodic line, which fades into oblivion. This question is, no doubt, directed to the Christian God: can he ever be at peace for ordaining the sacrifice of his only son? With the death of Isaac/Christ, the composition has reached its lowest ebb, symbolically ending on the organ's lowest note, C (mm. 384–89), that is C for *Christus*. The musical rests at the end of the composition signal God's silence.

### *Conclusion*

Judith Lang Zaimont challenges the traditional Christian interpretation of the Akedah in her composition *Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac*. While at first sight this work appears to replicate the structure of Britten's two compositions on the same theme, *Canticle II* and the *Offertorium* of the *War Requiem*, she presents a very different interpretation of the story. Whereas the God of the biblical story intervened to save the life of the son, the God of Christian tradition ordained the death of his only beloved son despite the call by the chorus, and not the angel, to save Isaac's life. With no account of any resurrection, the son, now slain, passes into a state of oblivion. The question posed at the beginning and end of the composition, 'Wilt thou Rest', suggests that the God of the New Testament suffers eternally for having ordained his son's sacrificial death.

## CONCLUSION

For centuries, composers have been interpreting the Bible in music, in compositions in every genre and based upon every book of the Bible; they have produced some of the finest and most popular interpretations of biblical stories and settings of biblical texts the world knows today. The story of the sacrifice of Isaac in Gen. 22.1-19 was popularly set to music in the seventeenth, eighteenth and twentieth centuries, with a profusion of compositions in the eighteenth century. For the purpose of this book, I selected five works of historical significance that presented some of the most insightful and distinctive interpretations of Genesis 22 within Western cultural tradition. The origins of the story's reception in music began in the thirteenth century with the Corpus Christi sequence *Lauda Sion* (c. 1260), written by Thomas Aquinas, which was also found in the Eucharistic hymn *Ecce panis angelorum* ('Behold the Bread of Angels')—a derivative of the sequence. In these works Isaac's immolation is linked to the re-enactment of Christ's actual sacrifice in the Mass. Both the sequence and the hymn were arranged in various works by leading composers from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century.

### *Turbulent Times: Impact History*

Ellie Wiesel's observation that Genesis 22 has been used for centuries 'to describe the destruction and disappearance of countless Jewish communities everywhere'<sup>1</sup> could apply equally to the narrative's use by Christian communities, who, like their Jewish counterparts used this story in times of threat to their religious and/or cultural identities. In music, especially, it was set during two historical periods of great turbulence: during the Counter-Reformation, which lasted well into the eighteenth century, and in the aftermath of World War II, in the twentieth century; this explains why the story was rarely set to music in the nineteenth century. During the Counter-Reformation, composers and librettists appealed to congregants to remain faithful and obedient to the institution of the Catholic Church, its teachings, and doctrines through their reception of Genesis 22 in music. In the libretto *Isacco, figura del Redentore*

1. Ellie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), pp. 95-97.

(1740) Pietro Metastasio equated the person of the Holy Roman emperor, the protector of the Catholic Church, with the virtuous character of Abraham, portraying him as the friend of God, and, by implication, as superior to Luther. Metastasio's version of the story suggested that the emperor would triumph over the enemy as promised by God himself in Gen. 22.17c. Through widespread musical dissemination across the Holy Roman Empire and beyond, the text of Genesis 22 became associated with Catholic aggression in its war against Protestantism; this is manifested by the fact that there are no extant settings by any Lutheran composers during this time. Handel, who was renowned for his oratorios on Old Testament subjects, was one such composer who thought best to leave it well alone.

In the twentieth century, however, the Anglican composer Benjamin Britten set the story to music on two occasions, in *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, which was composed during a revival in the dramatization of mystery plays in the 1950s, and ten years later in the *War Requiem*, which was commissioned to celebrate the rededication of Coventry Cathedral following its destruction during World War II. In the latter, Britten set to music Wilfred Owen's war poem, the 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' (1918), alongside text from the *Missa pro defunctis* in the *Offertorium* movement of this work. He dedicated the *Requiem* to the memory of friends killed in action during the war. Numerous composers from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including American Jewish composer Judith Lang Zaimont, followed Britten with settings of this text to music. Although Zaimont stated the composition had nothing to do with war, Naxos American Classics released<sup>2</sup> the premier recording to coincide with the observance of Veteran's Day in the United States and Armistice Day in Europe. Zaimont's *Parable*, therefore, was understood by the record label company to commemorate the war dead not only from the Great War, but also from World War II, the Korean, and Vietnam wars. In the aftermath of 9/11, Roger Ames (1944–) an American composer from New York, set the text of Owen's 'Parable' in his choral composition *Abraham and Isaac: A Parable of 9.11.01* for mixed voices with piano or organ;<sup>3</sup> this composition commemorates the slaughter of 2,976 innocent civilians who lost their lives in a series of orchestrated suicide attacks by al-Qaeda on the morning of 11 September 2001. At the end, he composed a setting of the *Kyrie* from the *Requiem Mass*.

That there were no musical settings of this story in the concentration camps or in the immediate aftermath of the Shoah/Holocaust by Jewish

2. Naxos released the recording in the United States on 15 November 2005. The recording was subsequently released internationally in May 2006. Veterans Day and Armistice Day occurs each year on 11 November.

3. <http://www.hinshawmusic.com/pdf/HMC1951.pdf> (accessed 12 December 2012).

and Christian composers is attested by the lack of any extant works.<sup>4</sup> One can understand the reluctance of twentieth-century composers to dedicate any composition based on Genesis 22 to the memory of Holocaust victims, since unlike Isaac, who was saved by the angel's intervention, innocent victims of the Shoah/Holocaust were not; they were abandoned by political<sup>5</sup> and religious<sup>6</sup> world leaders and were brutally murdered at the hands of the Nazis. A great silence in the aftermath of the atrocities is reflected by an absence of compositions based on this story until the mid-sixties, when Jewish and Christian composers of classical music began to set the text to music alongside songwriters of popular music.

### *Multiple Interpretations*

Whereas the focus of attention in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries centred both on a christological interpretation of the story and on Abraham's obedience, the emphasis in the twentieth century focused either on the violence of the story and the murder of Isaac as an innocent victim, or the perfect obedience of Abraham and Isaac. In the first place, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century composers generally sanitized the story of its violence by eliminating some or all of its contentious nuances and ambiguities that might have tainted Abraham's character. Carissimi encouraged his listeners, through a moving performance, to empathize with Abraham's plight and emulate his obedience in their religious practices and faithful allegiance to the church. Metastasio, too, eliminated the scene of Abraham's ritual sacrificial preparations for fear of offending eighteenth-century noble sentiments; he alluded to these events off-stage to focus attention on Abraham's obedience rather than the sinister aspects of his industrious sacrificial preparations. His depiction of Isaac as a type of Suffering Servant carrying his cross is painted musically by Mysliveček, who set the scene in the far-off distance to avoid any negative image of a tearful or bloodstained Isaac-Christ. Compositions during this time generally glossed over the account of the sacrifice of the ram to avoid any negative portrayal of Abraham as a barbarian who might have killed animals, not to mind his son; for the benefit of aris-

4. Shirli Gilbert, who is author of *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), told me that as far as she knows the story was not set to music in the camps. In fact, she found very little music based on the Hebrew Bible.

5. David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust* (New York: New Press, 1984).

6. See John F. Morley, *Vatican Diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939–43* (New York: Ktav, 1980), and Saul Friedlander, *Pius XII and the Third Reich: A Documentation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

tocratic audiences attending the Oratorio del Santissimo Crocifisso in Rome or the Hofburgkapelle in Vienna, Carissimi and Metastasio both neglected to retell this detail. For the same reasons, Mysliveček adapted the Metastasian libretto by omitting the scene of Sarah's and Gamari's sight of Abraham's bloody knife on his return home from Mount Moriah to avoid a negative image of the patriarch instead of one emphasizing his faithful obedience. Mysliveček reinforced Metastasio's christological interpretation by opening and closing the oratorio in the tonality of C major to signify Christ as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end (Rev. 1.8; 21.6; 22.13). With two exceptions, the entire work is scored in the major tonality to emphasize the triumph of Christ's resurrection; a melisma on *Trionferà* ('He will triumph') in the angel's aria of promise emphasizes this theme.

In the twentieth century, Britten and Zaimont based their librettos for *Canticle II* and *Parable* on English mediaeval play-texts – the Chester and Brome mystery plays – and in so doing deliberately omitted explicit references to the story's implied christological interpretation based on the Latin Vulgate. In Britten's *Offertorium* and Zaimont's *Parable*, both composers employed Wilfred Owen's poem with different emphases; the former to highlight the violence of humanity, and the latter to highlight the violence of the Christian God who killed his son, Jesus Christ. Britten set the text of Owen's 'Parable' as it was, with the omission of God's conversation to Abraham at the outset (v. 2), and in so doing removed culpability from God for Isaac's murder, for it was not God who caused or even allowed the murder to happen, but human beings. Owen points to Abraham's pride, 'the ram of pride', which he refused to sacrifice instead of his son, as the reason behind Abraham's murderous act. Isaac's character, namely 'the young', became a metaphor for the ten million soldiers sacrificed during World War I; and the 'Old Man', namely the politicians, generals, and clerics by whom the young were sacrificed. Owen's story presents listeners with a violent world, devoid of hope, where human beings neither acknowledge God's existence nor listen to his voice. While this rendition casts Abraham in a negative light, it highlights the plight and suffering of Isaac, murdered by his father as an innocent victim. God is presented in a favourable light: as a nonviolent God, who hears the cries of his people, and who, from the silence, tries to intervene on their behalf.

On the other hand, Zaimont challenged the traditional Christian interpretation of the Akedah in *Parable*. While her text appears to replicate the structure of Britten's two compositions, she presents a very different interpretation of the story to highlight the theme of violence from the biblical story and its interpretation in Christian tradition. Whereas the God of the biblical story intervened to save the life of the son, the God of Christian tradition ordained his death, despite the call by the chorus, and not the angel, to save Isaac's life. With no account of any

resurrection, the son, now slain, passes into a state of oblivion, after which a speaker recites the *Qaddish* to the phrase 'Abram wilt thou rest?' sung by the choir. This question, which is posed at the beginning and end of the composition, suggests that the Christian God suffers eternally for having ordained his son's sacrificial death.

### *Characters' Multiple Perspectives*

My discussion of the reception of this story in music illustrated the way in which music enables listeners to see and hear the biblical story from multiple perspectives, from the eyes and ears of every character. What follows is a short review of each of them.

#### *Abraham: A Loving Father or Not?*

While readers of the biblical story are told that Abraham loved Isaac, there are no explicit descriptions of any outward displays of emotion by Abraham or Isaac. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, composers filled this gap by portraying Abraham as a loving father who did not want his son to die. In particular, Carissimi incorporated word-painting and dissonances in the music to express Abraham's anguish and inner turmoil as he contemplated the divine mandate. Mysliveček, too, expressed Abraham's anguish in an accompanied recitative consisting of dissonances, tremolos and glissandi in the violins to sound-paint his terror and disbelief. Britten included in the *Canticle* the language of endearment from the Chester mystery play; here Abraham addresses Isaac as his 'sweet child', his 'son', his 'sweet son', his 'own dear', and by name on five occasions, including the designation, 'Isaac, son of peace'. While Britten portrays Abraham as a perfect model of obedience, he balances this profile with Abraham's portrayal as a loving father who did not want his son to die. The dialogues in this work emphasize the pair's loving relationship and provide listeners with an insight into Abraham's and Isaac's extrabiblical thoughts and feelings prior to and after the sacrifice.

Carissimi filled in a gap at the end of the biblical story by including a duet for Abraham and Isaac, the 'Dance of Jubilation'. It is quite possible that Britten may have been influenced by this setting, as he too concludes the *Canticle* with a duet for Abraham and Isaac, the 'Song of Obedience'. Descending chords, reminiscent of pealing bells, accompany Abraham and Isaac in their song of praise. At the end, father and son unite on a unison E-flat to signify their equality as father and son, and as patriarch and patriarch-elect. Here Britten highlights the pair's ongoing loving relationship following the traumatic event of the near sacrifice, as they pledge their obedience and faithfulness to God for all eternity.



Unlike in the biblical story, Isaac neither fades into the background nor resides in his father's perpetual shadow, but becomes equal in status to Abraham as patriarch-elect, as reflected in Britten's title: *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*. Myslivoček revised the title of his work from *Isacco* to *Abramo ed Isacco* to suggest Abraham's and Isaac's equal roles in terms of their obedience to God's command.

The reception of the story in the *Offertorium* movement of the *War Requiem*, on the other hand, differs greatly from its reception in the *Canticle* due to Britten's inclusion of Wilfred's Owen's poetic text. In this rendition, Owen subverts the biblical story by incorporating the scene of Isaac's ritual killing by his father, Abraham. He changed Abraham's name back to Abram as a reminder of the patriarch's precovenantal name and to suggest a person less wise. There is no language of endearment to suggest any relationship between the two, and the paraphrase of Isaac's question to his father (v. 7) receives no reassuring answer (v. 8). Zaimont subverted Owen's text by incorporating the language of endearment in Abraham's speeches, which she found in the Brome mystery play, to portray Abraham as a loving father. Her text raises the problematic question for Christians as to why a loving God would permit the death of his only beloved son.

#### *Isaac: A Type of Christ, Patriarch-Elect, Innocent Victim*

The character of Isaac received varied treatments in all five compositions. In music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries he is portrayed either as an older child or an adolescent but never as an adult, as in Jewish tradition. Whereas Carissimi and Britten in the *Canticle* set his voice part for an alto to suggest an adolescent, Myslivoček set it for a soprano to signify a child. In Wilfred Owen's 'Parable', Isaac is a young adult; Britten and Zaimont scored his vocal part for a tenor to symbolize a young soldier in the latter and the person of Christ in the former.

With the exception of Britten's *Canticle*, librettists and composers rarely allow listeners an insight into Isaac's thoughts and feelings prior to the sacrifice or at the climactic point of near death. While Isaac is cognizant of his sacrificial fate in Myslivoček's *Abramo ed Isacco*, he remains silent and complies with his father's wishes, as he does in the biblical story; in general, Isaac remains forever in his father's perpetual shadow, and by the end he slips into the background, as he does in Genesis 22.

In the *Canticle*, however, Britten understood the story in terms of a rite of passage for Isaac, who, at the point of death, manifested the qualities necessary to become Abraham's successor as patriarch of Israel. Britten's interpretation points to Isaac's spiritual and psychological readiness by the end of this story to become patriarch-elect. By the end, Isaac has proved himself in word and action, that is, in his proclama-

tion of obedience and act of compliance to become the next patriarch. Unlike in the biblical story, Britten allows Isaac to take the initiative on several occasions, to verbalize his thoughts and feelings about his sacrificial death, and by the end of the composition, puts him on an equal footing with Abraham. Significantly, at the end of the composition, in a section entitled *Envoi*, Isaac's vocal part leads instead of following, as it had done up to this point, and on the final note, the vocal parts of Abraham and Isaac unite to become one. By way of contrast in the *Offertorium*, Isaac remains as passive as his biblical counterpart; murdered as an innocent victim, he was deprived of any opportunity to become fully human.

### *God/Angel*

Whereas God is represented as a bass in Carissimi's *Historia*, in Mysliveček's setting he never appears as a character onstage but only in Abraham's imagination at the end of the oratorio; as in the biblical story, Abraham is the only one to hear God's voice. Britten represented God's voice in the *Canticle* by combining the voices of the tenor (Abraham) and alto (Isaac), a feature incorporated in the *Offertorium* to represent the angel's voice, this time with the voices of tenor and baritone. God is completely absent from Owen's poetic text in the *Offertorium*. The angel appears in all compositions; her voice part is scored for a soprano. In Britten's setting, the boys' choir represents the choir of angels who welcome Isaac's soul into another time dimension, together with the souls of other innocent victims. This section suggests Britten's belief in the doctrine of the resurrection of the body.

### *Narrator*

Whereas in the music the voice of the biblical narrator is distributed within the speeches of the story's characters, in Carissimi's *Historia*, the narrator, called the *Historicus*, is set for a tenor voice. Like his biblical counterpart, he intervenes to announce facts such as the following: the announcement of God's 'test' (Gen. 22.1a); Abraham's sacrificial preparations (vv. 3-5); the binding of Isaac (v. 9); the descriptive pause (v. 10); the arrival of the angel to avert the sacrifice (v. 11); and, unlike his biblical counterpart, a description of Abraham's emotional response to Isaac's question. In the twentieth century, Wilfred Owen included the narrator's voice in 'Parable'. Britten scored the baritone voice to sing the narrated lines of text associated with this role, and the tenor voice to sing Isaac's question. He set the combined voices of baritone and tenor to clinically narrate the account of Isaac's sacrifice. In Zaimont's setting, the chorus fulfils the role of the biblical narrator.

*Sarah's Sacrifice*

Sarah's absence from the biblical story empowers her more forcefully than had she been present. Her absence from the story was construed as a literary device to challenge listeners to reflect on Sarah's character and role not only in this narrative but in the entire Abrahamic cycle; as a result, her presence is brought more vividly alive in the imagination of readers. In the Metastasian libretto, Sarah, whose voice part is scored for a soprano, plays a pivotal role by re-enacting details of the sacrifice in her imagination to recount her own personal sacrifice following God's command. Guided by the homiletic tradition of the church fathers, Metastasio understood that Sarah had known about God's command, and, in the same manner as Abraham, had given her consent. The Metastasian storyline resembles also the poetic and homiletic literature of the Syriac fathers from the fourth and fifth centuries, which granted Sarah a voice and a pivotal role to play through the invention of sung speeches. Whereas in the twentieth century, Britten in the *Canticle* alludes to Sarah's knowledge of, and consent to, the sacrificial death of her beloved son, Britten and Zaimont excluded her from their later stories to accentuate the violence perpetrated against Isaac's mother. Mysliveček and Britten in the *Canticle* both highlight Sarah and Isaac's loving relationship through the inclusion of a dialogue for the pair in *Abramo ed Isacco*, and Isaac's speech to Abraham about his mother in the *Canticle*. Unlike some of the artistic representations by Richard McBea, there is no connection in any music to date between Isaac's near sacrifice and Sarah's lonely death in Hebron.

*Silence of the Servants*

In all five compositions the two servants who are given no voice to speak in the biblical story are either omitted from the story in music or given no active role to play. Whereas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this textual omission eliminated the troublesome reference of Abraham's 'deception' of the two servants (v. 5), in the twentieth century it enabled composers to focus on the words and actions of Abraham, Isaac and God.

*Moral of the Story*

In many of the compositions discussed, a chorus or a duet concludes each act or musical composition with religious instruction or words in praise of God. In oratorios from the Habsburg court, Sarah functions as a narrator of the story, and her words of religious instruction invite listeners to live a life of virtue in imitation of Abraham's obedience. All compositions emphasize either the christological and/or the moral sig-

nificance of the story; in the twentieth century, the theme of Abraham's disobedience features in works based on Wilfred Owen's 'Parable'.

### *The Libretto*

A literary study of the Metastasian libretto opened up other interpretative texts based on Genesis 22, particularly in the footnotes attached to the libretto that pointed to the primary sources used by Metastasio. This led to an investigation of the references, which included the following: literature from the homiletic tradition of the church fathers; ancient rhetoricians; seventeenth- and eighteenth-century biblical commentators; the writings of the Cistercian and Franciscan missionary fathers; and references not footnoted, such as the Syriac and Greek homiletic traditions from the fourth through sixth centuries.

The mediaeval mystery plays, too, have been a source of influence to composers down through the ages. Britten incorporated into his libretto text from the Chester mediaeval play in the *Canticle*, and Zaimont included text from the Brome. Interestingly, she employed a Christian text rather than a text from Jewish tradition to emphasize her challenge to Christians about God's sacrifice of Christ. Similarities in the storyline between Feo Belcari's *Rappresentazione di Abramo ed Isac* and the Metastasian libretto suggest a familiarity by Metastasio with the Italian mystery play text. While it cannot be proven if librettists and composers consulted the midrashim, a comparative study of this literature indicates a possible familiarity by some composers. Mysliveček's adaptation of the Metastasian libretto includes a parallel between the account of the weeping family in the rabbinical literature and the sorrowful family. Given the primacy of Isaac and the allusions to his mother's sorrow, Britten's *Canticle* appears more Jewish than Christian.

### *Concept of Hearing*

Despite extensive exegetical work on Genesis 22 by biblical commentators, this study has revealed a neglect on behalf of biblical commentators to treat the concept of 'hearing'. While the concept of seeing has received considerable attention, there is no substantive work done on the importance of hearing and its link with seeing. Sermon 41.2, from *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum* by Bernard of Clairvaux, which is not an exegesis on Genesis 22, shed light for me on the concept of hearing found within this story. Bernard explains how hearing is a preparation for seeing:

You long for the power to see, but you must first listen. To listen is to move toward vision. Listen then, bow down your ear for the pendants we are making for you, that by obedient listening you

may come to the splendour of the vision. We will make your listening a thing of joy and gladness.<sup>7</sup>

The narrator of the biblical story focuses listeners' attention on Abraham's act of hearing: Abraham hears God's call (v. 1), God's command (v. 2), details of the location (vv. 4, 9), Isaac's question (v. 7), the angel's call (v. 10), the angel's command (v. 11), the angel's second call (v. 15), and God's promises (vv. 16-18). Having listened, he understands; for hearing is a necessary first step in Abraham's growing understanding (seeing) of God's command at the outset. While this theme has received little, if any treatment in biblical scholarship, every composer from my study of the reception of Genesis 22 in music emphasized Abraham's capacity to hear or not to hear, and the subsequent insight or lack of insight gained as a result. References to the nuance of not seeing and not listening abound in the text of Britten's *Offertorium* and in the text of Zaimont's *Parable* to emphasize the loss of Abraham's vision, that is, of God's promise for humanity.

A musical interpretation of the Bible enables us as readers and listeners to see, hear, feel and think about the significance of this story for our lives and the lives of others. It challenges us to think about the story in new and exciting ways that ultimately broaden and deepen our 'horizon of expectation'.

7. 'Sermon 41', in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux 3: On the Song of Songs II* (trans. Kilian Walsh; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), pp. 205-206.

## GLOSSARY OF MUSICAL TERMS

- a cappella* singing without instrumental accompaniment
- accompanied recitative** a type of monody that imitates the accents, rhythms and declamation of spoken speech, as found in oratorios and operas, and accompanied by orchestra
- aria** a solo song with orchestral accompaniment, commonly found in an oratorio, opera or cantata
- arpeggio** the articulation of successive notes of a chord
- basso continuo* known also as the continuo, figured bass or thoroughbass. In the Baroque period, a harpsichord, double bass or cello played a bass line figured with numbers above or below to indicate specific harmonic progressions
- beat** pulse in music
- binary form** music divided into two contrasting parts (AB)
- cadence** a series of chords marking the end of a phrase, section or piece of music
- cadenza** a passage in music that occurs before the end of a composition, usually a concerto, to allow a soloist to demonstrate technical brilliance and agility
- cantata** a genre of music for voices consisting of solos, duets, recitatives and choruses sung to an instrumental accompaniment
- cavatina** a type of aria, generally slow and contemplative, designed to demonstrate the singer's breath control and legato singing
- chromatic** a half-step interval
- codetta* ('little tail', Italian)—a musical episode that concludes a section of a composition
- compound duple time** music with two beats in the bar, for example, in 6/8 time, music is divided into two groups of three beats
- contrary motion** the simultaneous movement of two melodic lines in opposite directions
- countermelody** a second melody articulated above a principal melody
- counterpoint** the art of combining two or more independent melodic lines
- crescendo* a dynamic marking indicating a gradual increase in volume
- cross-relation** known also as a false relation, that is, a type of chromatic dissonance that occurs in close proximity between two vocal parts or melodic lines, for example, G-sharp in the tenor voice and G-natural in the soprano
- crotchet** known also as a quarter note that has the value of a quarter of a semi-breve, that is, one beat.
- da capo aria** a solo song in ternary form (ABA), common during the Baroque period

- dialogue** a musical genre common in the sixteenth century and an important antecedent of seventeenth-century oratorio. A setting of dialogue text between two or more characters
- diatonic scale** a musical scale with seven pitches consisting of whole tones and semitones
- dissonance** two or more harsh tones that demand resolution to a consonance
- enharmonic** a note equivalent to another in sound but notated differently, for example, G-sharp and A-flat
- fermata** a sign placed above a note to signify 'a pause'
- flat** the lowering in pitch by a semitone as indicated by 'b' sign in the key signature or preceding the note being flattened
- fortissimo (f)** a dynamic marking meaning 'loud'
- glissandi** a sliding technique articulated by the performer up and/or down an instrument
- heterolepsis** a descending leap to a dissonance
- historicus** a term found in *oratorio latino* to signify the narrator
- homophonic** a musical texture where two or more melodic lines move together in harmony
- homorhythmic** the same rhythmic structure in all parts
- imitative counterpoint** the art of combining independent melodies to form a homogeneous texture, with the first voice leading and second and subsequent voices following at the same pitch or transposed, as in a canon or a fugue
- interval** the distance in pitch between two notes
- lento** a tempo marking meaning 'slow'
- libretto** the literary text of an oratorio and opera
- measure** synonymous with 'bar' and denoting a segment of time defined as a given number of beats of a given duration
- melisma** an ornate vocal passage sung on one syllable of text
- melodic leap** leaps within a melody comprising consonant intervals of the degree of a major/minor third, perfect fourth perfect fifth, major/minor sixth and octave, and dissonant intervals of diminished, augmented, major/minor seconds and seventh degrees of the scale
- metre** the grouping together of beats into twos, threes or fours. The time signature at the beginning of a composition indicates the number and value of beats in a bar.
- minim** known also as a half note and articulated for two beats
- modulation** a change of key(s) in a composition, for example, C-major modulating to the relative minor, that is, 'a-minor'
- monody** unaccompanied solo song of the early seventeenth century
- monophonic** where individual vocal parts in an ensemble or chorus sing one melodic line in unison
- motet** a polyphonic setting in Latin for several voices sung unaccompanied
- motif** a short musical idea developed during the composition
- multiplicatio** a splitting of dissonance through repeated tones
- octave** the interval of eight diatonic degrees between two tones of the same name, for example, C – C

- ostinato** known also as a *basso ostinato* or ground bass, A musical pattern (rhythmic or melodic) repeated in the bassline, for example, Pachelbel's *Canon*
- palilogia** the repetition of a word or phrase in succession for the sake of emphasis
- pianissimo (pp)** a dynamic marking meaning 'very soft'
- polyphonic** a musical texture consisting of two or more melodic lines set against the other
- quaver** known also as an eighth note, played and articulated for one eighth of a whole note
- recitative** known also as *recitative secco*, that is, a type of monody that imitates the accents and rhythms of spoken speech, found in oratorio and opera to the accompaniment of a basso continuo, such as a harpsichord
- rest** an interval of specified silence in music
- ritornello** an instrumental interlude added to the end of an aria
- roulade-type figure** a vocal or instrumental embellishment consisting of several short notes uniformly grouped
- saltus duriusculus** a harsh dissonant leap of a minor sixth, diminished fourth or diminished fifth.
- SATB** Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass
- semiquaver** known also as a sixteenth note and articulated for a quarter of a crotchet beat
- semitone** the smallest musical interval, known as a half step or half tone
- sforzato (sfz)** a dynamic marking meaning 'strongly accented'
- sharp** raising pitch by a semitone as indicated by a # sign in the key signature or preceding the note being raised
- stepwise movement** the fluid movement of a melodic line in ascending or descending movement by the degree of a tone or semitone
- suspiratio** a figure marked by musical rests to signify sighing or panting
- strophic** the same music for each verse of a song
- suspension** the prolongation of one or more notes of a chord into the following chord to create a dissonance
- tempi markings** markings on the score that indicate the speed of a composition
- tenuto** two meanings: a slight dynamic accent, or to indicate that a note is held for its full length
- ternary form** music divided into three parts (ABA) with a contrasting middle section
- tessitura** the consistent range of pitches found in a melodic line or vocal part — tessitura can be high, medium or low
- texture** the richness or thinness of the music — texture can be monophonic, homophonic or polyphonic
- time signature** indicates the number and value of beats in a measure of music
- tonality** the scale upon which a composition is based. In Western European art music, tonalities are major and minor
- tonic note** the key note of a composition after which a key is named, for example, in C-major, the key note is C
- tremolo** the trembling effect articulated by a musical instrument or singer
- triad** a group of three notes (root, third and fifth) a third apart played simultaneously



**tritone** known also as a diminished fifth (for example, C-G-flat), augmented fourth (for example, C-F-sharp), and in mediaeval times as the *diabolus in musicā*. This interval consisting of three whole tones is characterized by its grating, dissonant sound.

**trommelbass accompaniment** a bass part consisting of steady repeated notes (quavers or semiquavers) in ascending and descending motion employed to animate music—prominent in the middle of the eighteenth century

**versi sciolti** unrhymed iambic pentameter.

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