Rescued from the Fiery Furnace: George Frederick Bristow’s Oratorio of Daniel

by David Griggs-Janower

Contemporary accounts of the first and second performances of George Frederick Bristow’s (1825–1898) Oratorio of Daniel in late 1867 and 1868 raved about the work’s importance:

[Daniel] is by far the most masterly work that an American composer has yet produced, and we judge it will rapidly make its way into the accepted repertory. . . . That it is a remarkable opus and destined to bring the author’s name prominently into the list of those whom we delight to term “great living composers” seems clear enough.1

As the handiwork of an American composer, Daniel reflects the highest credit to our country in the realms of art, and there are few, if any, composers in Europe at the present day who are capable of writing anything equal to it.2

Several reviewers compared the work favorably to Mendelssohn’s Elijah. Thirty years later the American Art Journal summed up opinion of this work in Bristow’s obituary:

Bristow’s oratorio of Daniel is unquestionably one of the most important compositions in this form yet produced by an American composer. . . . From the production of this great work dates a new era in our musical history.3

This evaluation gains added significance in light of the large number of popular, well-written works that were produced by Americans during the latter half of the nineteenth century: Horatio Parker’s Hora novissima (1892) and Legend of St. Christopher (1897), John Knowles Paine’s St. Peter (1872) as well as his Mass in D (1867–68), and Amy Beach’s Mass in E (1891). During this year marking the centenary of Bristow’s death, choral historians might ask if the work deserves those accolades and, if so, why it has received so little notice in this century.4

Musical Career

Bristow was born in Brooklyn, New York, on December 19, 1825, into a musical family. His father, William, was a well-respected conductor, pianist, and clarinetist, and he gave his son lessons in piano, harmony, counterpoint, orchestration, and violin. George joined the first violin section of the New York Philharmonic Society orchestra in 1843 at the age of seventeen and remained there until 1879.5 The New York Philharmonic’s records indicate that he was concertmaster between 1850 and 1853.6

In the 1850s Bristow became conductor of two choral organizations, the New York Harmonic Society and the Mendelssohn Union. Later he conducted several church choirs. In 1854 he began his long career as a music educator in the public schools of New York.

Throughout his life, Bristow was a champion of American music and a nationalist in his choice of texts. The amount and quality of his choral music make Bristow a historically important choral composer.

David Griggs-Janower is Associate Professor and Director of Choral Music at the University of Albany, State University of New York. He is also the Founding Conductor and Artistic Director of Albany Pro Musica and Director of Choral Music at Skidmore College, Sarasota Springs, New York. Janower’s research on Bristow was partially funded by an ACDA research grant. Bristow’s Daniel will be published at a future date by A-R Editions in their series Recent Researches in American Music.

APRIL 1998
Bristow’s Choral Music
Bristow’s compositional output is divided into three periods: the early years,

Of the king’s wise men, only Daniel could tell Nebuchadnezzar the substance of the dream and explain its significance.

during which most of the compositions are instrumental; the middle period beginning in 1852, during which he wrote more than forty works, several of them lengthy and imposing; and the late period, beginning in 1879 with Bristow’s resignation from the New York Philharmonic. Of the 135 compositions listed in Delmer Rogers’s dissertation on Bristow’s music, one-third are choral or vocal. Seven of his choral works are choral/orchestral pieces, and twenty-seven compositions are smaller pieces, most of which were composed for church choirs that he conducted. Both the short sacred works and the large choral/orchestral compositions are evenly divided between the middle and late periods.

The Libretto of Daniel
In 1862 Bristow received a libretto from his friend William Hardenbrook for a three-part oratorio on the biblical story of the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, taken from the Book of Daniel. Bristow chose to set only the first two parts of this large-scale libretto, which he completed in 1866 and first performed the following year.

The Book of Daniel opens, in the sixth century B.C., with King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon instructing his chief eunuch to select a number of boys from among the noble Jewish families in captivity and put them through a three-year course of instruction for service at the court. The four selected were Azariah, Mishael, Hananiah, and Daniel. Three were given the Babylonian names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (though Bristow refers to Shadrach still as Azariah). The fourth refused his new name, insisting upon keeping Daniel.

Part one of the oratorio, after setting the historical stage, begins with Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a statue with head of gold, arms of silver, thighs of bronze, and feet of clay. The statue is destroyed by a stone. The next morning Nebuchadnezzar could only remember that he had a disturbing dream, but could not remember the details. Of the king’s wise men, only Daniel could tell Nebuchadnezzar the substance of the dream and explain its significance: the
great kingdom of Babylon would be destroyed, and only the kingdom of the one true God would remain. Nebuchadnezzar was so astounded and thankful that he made Daniel chief of all wise men and governor of the province of Babylon.

One day Nebuchadnezzar ordered a statue to be built of himself, ninety feet tall and covered with gold. All were required to prostrate themselves before it and whoever did not do so would be thrown “into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.” Meshach, Azariah, and Abednego, who would not worship idols, refused to do so. The angry king ordered them bound and thrown into the furnace, which was made “seven times hotter,” so hot that the servants who thrust them in were burned to death. Daniel was out of the country at the time, and it appeared no one could save them. Yet they walked about in the furnace unharmed, and with them was seen an angel of the Lord—and “the form of the fourth [was] like the Son of God.” Overwhelmed by this miracle, the king issued a decree that the God of the Hebrews be respected throughout his realm and that the Jews be allowed to worship as they pleased.

Part two begins with another ominous dream in which Nebuchadnezzar sees a tall tree with its branches cut off and its fruit scattered. Daniel explains that the tree represents the king and warns that Nebuchadnezzar must humble himself before God or his kingdom will be scattered. He will be turned into an animal and forced to eat grass like an ox for seven years. At first alarmed, Nebuchadnezzar soon becomes prouder and boastful again. An angel tells him he has lost his kingdom and turns him into a raving beast. The work ends with Nebuchadnezzar regaining his sanity and extolling the God of the Jews.

The Music of Daniel

The performing forces for Daniel are almost the same as its model, Mendelssohn’s Elijah: pairs of winds, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, strings, cymbals, and triangle. The solo requirements are exceptionally larger.

Daniel, baritone
Nebuchadnezzar, bass
Azariah, first tenor
Meshach, second tenor
Abednego, bass
Angel, soprano
Angel, mezzo-soprano

Arioch, bass
Herald, bass

Part one is seventy minutes long, and the second half is fifty minutes.

Bristow's writing for the soloists is assured, dramatic, and expressive. Azariah's first aria, which contains the oratorio's principal theme, is rich in melody, harmony, and color (Figure 1).

In movement eight Nebuchadnezzar bestows praise upon Daniel after he has interpreted the king's dream (Figure 2). In the next movement Daniel tells the king that the praise belongs to God.

In the final aria of the oratorio, Nebuchadnezzar is converted, a thrilling dramatic moment. The opening octaves in the strings are stark, and the minor tonality seems to link the evil of the king's former reign to the words of praise he professes following his conversion (Figure 3).

Much of the drama takes place in recitatives, which are melodic and metric. Orchestration plays an important role in
Aria
Allegro deciso

praise and exalt the King of Heaven, all whose works are

truth, are truth, all whose works are truth, are

truth, and his ways, judgment.

Moderato
Recit.
NEBUCHADNEZZAR

Art thou able, O Daniel, to make known to me the dream which I have

seen, and the interpretation thereof? The secret cannot the wise men show.

Figure 3. Movement twenty-seven

Figure 4. Movement eight
enhancing the drama. For example, a solo trumpeter announces the Herald, while low trombones often accompany the entrance of the King or one of his proclamations (Figure 4). Bristow, a master of colorful harmony, uses a full nineteenth-century palette for dramatic effect, as in the harmonic shift at the word "dream" in Figure 4.

The choral writing, though not musically difficult, is dramatic and vocally demanding, with high tessituras and lengthy movements. The chorus sings in six of the eighteen movements in part one and in three of the ten movements in part two, approximately one-third of the work’s duration. Each of the Daniel tales ends with a chorus of praise. The last movement of the first half demonstrates the composer's full-bodied choral style, showing the link from Handel through Mendelssohn to Bristow (Figure 5). A double fugue (Figure 6) follows the opening homophonic statements.
Figure 6. Movement eighteen

Figure 7. Movement two
The chorus also assumes dramatic roles—"in times the Jewish captives at other times the Babylonians. After an orchestral introduction titled "The Captivity," the chorus sings the Jews lament (Figure 7). One of the Jews sing a heart-felt explanation of why he and his friends cannot bow to an idol, for they must worship their God.

One of the most heart-felt moments comes when the Chaldeans inform the king that there are some Jews who will not bow down to the idol. In some of his most menacing music, Nebuchadnezzar proclaims that anyone who does not bow down will be cast into the fiery furnace (Figure 8).
Then he sings in a more dramatic fashion of his belief that their God will save them from the fire, but if not, they still will not bow down to the idol. This infuriates the king, who interrupts Azariah's explanation and demands that the furnace be made "seven times hotter." The composer raises the dramatic tension still higher. He depicts Nebuchadnezzar's anger in barely more than a single note, while the harmonies and the orchestration carry the burden of the musical drama (Figure 10).

A series of rising triplets leads to an explosion in the chorus as they shout, "Cast them into the fire!" (Figure 11). Later in the movement, after a fiery orchestral interlude, the sections of the chorus enter menacingly, growling, one at a time, then in pairs, and finally all four parts shout together, "Cast them into the fire!" (Figure 12). This, the loudest moment of the oratorio, is followed by the quietest, as the next movement begins with shimmering tremolo strings creating a halo for the angel, who appears in the midst of the furnace to save the three men. The clarinet counter-melody, marked "sempre legato," is that of the opening tenor motive, "Come, let us return unto the Lord" (Figure 13).

The oratorio ends in grand style with a majestic movement, beginning "Give unto the Lord, O ye mighty," in double-dotted
Figure 10. Movement fourteen
figures. This builds to a blisteringly fast, extended "amen" (Figure 14).

In researching his encyclopedic two-volume reference work, *American Oratorios and Cantatas*, Thurston Dox described more than four hundred oratorios and some eighteen hundred cantatas. He was convinced that the "greatest American oratorio ever written" was Bristow's *Oratorio of Daniel*. Having received only one performance in this century, this masterwork deserves many more performances during this centennial year.11

![Figure 11. Movement fifteen](image)

NOTES


4. That the work was never published is certainly the main contributing factor to its obscurity in this century. The late Thurston Dox began championing this work in the 1980s. He gave a lecture on Bristow and performed excerpts at a meeting of the Soneck Society in 1988.

5. Delmer Dalzell Rogers. *Nineteenth-Century Music in New York City as Reflected in*
the Career of George Frederick Bristow. (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1967), 70.

Rich Wander, Project Archivist for the Philharmonic, letter to the author, July 2, 1997. However, Rogers disputes this, suggesting "the error may come from the fact that members of each ... section were listed alphabetically and, since Bristow headed the list of the violinists, authors may have assumed him to be the leader." Rogers, 72.

The manuscript full score, vocal score, instrumental parts, individual vocal parts, and libretto are in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The work is scheduled for publication by AR Editions.

In the male-chorus movements involving Tschac, his part is written in treble (octave lower) clef. Later in the trios, his part is inexplicably written in bass clef and is somewhat low.

In the first performances, one bass sang the parts of Ario and The Herald. In this author’s performances Abednego covered the parts of Ario and The Herald.


For information about the performance materials and compact disc of the first twentieth-century

Figure 12. Movement fifteen

Figure 13. Movement sixteen
Figure 14. Movement twenty-eight