

SAMUEL FELSTED'S *JONAH*

— THE EARLIEST AMERICAN ORATORIO —

by Thurston Dox

THE PASSAGEWAY FROM almost total obscurity to a place in music history's hall of fame opens to few composers. Samuel Felsted of Jamaica (1743-1802) is certainly one who has traveled through that doorway in record time. Considering that absolutely nothing was known about the life of this composer until the late 1970s, his sudden rise to visibility is astounding.

In October 1789, during his inaugural tour to Boston, George Washington was honored by a concert at the Stone Chapel (then called King's Chapel) in the heart of the old city. The featured work on the program was the oratorio *Jonah* by Samuel Felsted.¹ In reporting the performance of *Jonah*, Oscar Sonneck, the godfather of American music history, could do little more than account for it as Boston's first hearing of a complete oratorio. His parenthetical anecdote, "even if it was only *Jonah*, . . . by the obscure Samuel Felsted, who seems to have been better known in America than in England," reveals the assumption that the composer of *Jonah* must have been English.² The publication of the original score of *Jonah* in London gives support to this assumption. The score, now owned by the British library and
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listed as "*Jonah*, an Oratorio, disposed for Voice and Harpsichord," was published in 1775 by Longman, Lukey and Broderip for Felsted.

Samuel Felsted was not British, however. He was Jamaican. His father, William Felsted, was an ironmonger — a hardware merchant —



who had come to Jamaica in the 1730s. William was also an amateur musician and was organist at the Parish Church of St. Andrew near the town of Kingston.³ Around 1737 he moved his hardware business to Boston where he met Joyce Weaver.⁴ They were married in Philadelphia (May 1, 1741) while en route to a permanent residency in Jamaica;

Samuel, the first of four children, was born there in 1743.

After William's death in 1767, Samuel became organist at St. Andrew, where he later composed *Jonah*. In 1783 he was appointed organist of the Kingston Parish Church, the largest and most prestigious church on the island. The previous organist, Daniel DeLuskie, had served the church for 41 years and was most likely responsible for some of Samuel's education in music. Samuel continued as organist at the Kingston Parish Church until his death in 1802.

The Felsted family was not wealthy, though they eventually owned a respectable amount of income property. This fact, along with other convincing evidence,⁵ supports the contention that Samuel Felsted *did not leave* Jamaica either for an education abroad or for any other reason. He was a native-born American composer who spent his entire life on the island of Jamaica and is now to be respected along with contemporary musicians of the northern colonies.

For almost a century the Felsted family maintained a prominent place in Jamaican musical life. Samuel's sister, Christiana, and his only son, John Lawrence, were organists at the Parish Church of St. Andrew. A second William Felsted is listed in the Feurtado manuscripts at the Institute of Jamaica Library as

"Organist, St. Catherine, 1819" (meaning, organist of the Spanish Town Cathedral, Parish of St. Catherine). Grandchildren of William and Joyce lived in Jamaica into the nineteenth century, but the family name disappears from public records after the 1830s.

Even though Samuel Felsted spent his entire life in Jamaica, his notoriety was by no means limited to the island. In 1771 his application for membership in the newly-formed American Philosophical Society was approved and he became one of a small number of applicants from the West Indies to be admitted into that select company, which included Benjamin Franklin and other colonial intellectuals. The application itself opens a much broader view of Felsted. The supporting recommendation by his sponsor, a Dr. James Smith, refers to Felsted as possessing "merit in the three sister sciences, Poetry, Painting and Music, for which he has a natural genius."⁶ In further testimony to his scholarly

interests, Felsted forwarded specimens of native Jamaican butterflies and designs for a horizontal windmill to the Society as evidence of his activities as a botanist and an inventor.⁷ Regarding his trilogity of talent in the arts, it is reasonable to assume that he was the poet-librettist for *Jonah* and was indeed a painter. The Institute of Jamaica documents that a painting of a Kingston residence by S. Felsted, dated 1778, was offered for sale to the Institute in 1947 by a London art dealer.⁸

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Two of the subscribers of the first engraving of Jonah were the famous British-American painter, Benjamin West and the engraver Francesco Bartolozzi.

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Felsted was no stranger in England. Two of the subscribers of the first engraving of *Jonah* were the famous British-American painter, Benjamin West and the engraver Francesco Bartolozzi, both of whom served the British crown during their careers. West painted the picture of *Jonah* used for the cover of the score and Bartolozzi made the engraving. Connections such as these in the cultural milieu of Felsted's world must be acknowledged as highly significant.


Felsted's oratorio, *Jonah*, represents a mixture of stylistic attitudes, although it is not nearly as benighted as one might anticipate from an eighteenth-century resident of Jamaica. The island was far more strategic as a cornerstone of colonial commerce and politics than could ever be imagined today when one considers its present international position and its more familiar role as a mecca of tourism. Eighteenth-century Jamaica played a vital part in the trade linkage with England and provided the inhabitants

continuous access to the currents of cultural life abroad. Musicians, small as their numbers were, could easily obtain published scores and instruments from Europe to remain *au courant*. All this is apparent in Felsted's writing.

Jonah is clearly an oratorio in the commonly accepted sense of the time; that is, it is an unstaged dramatic work on a biblical subject for chorus, soloists, and instrumentalists. Considering the composer's British connections, however, it is surprisingly unlike Handel's later oratorios. The single-unit structure of *Jonah* bears little relationship to the massive two- and three-part molds in which those monumental works (*Messiah*, *Judas Maccabeaus*, *Samson*, *Israel in Egypt*) were cast. Its structure — with successive recitatives and arias, and few choruses — is more like Handel's very early oratorios.

- 1) Overture
- 2) Recitative — Narrator, "Jonah, Arise! to Nineveh Repair"
- 3) Air — Jonah, "Out of the Deep, Oh God I Cry"
- 4) Air — Jonah, "Billows Foam Around My Head"
- 5) Recitative — Narrator, "The Lord Commands, With Haste the Fish Obeyes"
- 6) Air — Jonah, "My God and King, to Thee I Sing"
- 7) Recitative — Narrator, "Jonah, Arise, Again Thy Steps Prepare"
- 8) Air — Jonah, "Lord I Obey, Taught by Thy Pow'rful Hand"
- 9) Recitative — Jonah, "Repent, Ye Men of Nineveh, Repent"
- 10) Chorus of Ninevites, "Have Mercy Lord and Hear Our Plaintive Cries"
- 11) Recitative — Narrator, "God Saw Their Works, He Listen'd to Their Prayer"
- 12) Chorus, "Tune Your Harps Your Voices Raise"

Three other aspects of oratorio style also need to be considered. First, as Baroque and Classical oratorios go, *Jonah* is a relatively short work (about 40 minutes). Secondly, in addition to the narrator, there are only two roles for soloists,⁹ and there is no dramatic dialogue between them. Finally, the




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two choruses come as the *dénouement* of the drama, the first being the Ninevites' plea for mercy, and the second, a reflective chorus expressing joy and praise at God's forgiveness.

The overture to *Jonah*, an energetic Italian sinfonia in three sections (Examples 1a, 1b, and 1c), leads the narrator (tenor) into a

lengthy recitative. In 44 measures, the story moves from the point at which Jonah receives God's call to save Nineveh from destruction, through the reluctant prophet's frenzied voyage to escape responsibility, to his legendary sojourn in the belly of the whale. Rapid scales paint the text as the billows soar to the skies, the thunders roll, and the "fork-ed" lightnings play (Example 2).

In the aria, "Billows Foam Around My Head," Felsted pictures the angry sea with gushing scales and leaping broken chords (Example 3). This aria confirms that Jonah has been swallowed by the great fish, as he sings "Nor leave me longer in the tomb." Realistic dramatic sequence is no more an issue to Felsted in his libretto than it often is to the opera composer. An expression of the spirit, however, in response to a demonstration of God's awesome power is another matter. After surviving this dreadful encounter with death, Jonah responds by singing a glorious and buoyant aria

of praise and thanksgiving to the creator ("My God and King, to Thee I Sing"). In a spirit of total repentance, he reiterates the phrase "my humble voice I raise," and commits his life to praise in serving a merciful God. This aria contains several passages of zestful coloratura writing (Example 4). Perhaps the most expressive musical moments in the oratorio occur in the chorus "Have Mercy, Lord," as the Ninevites respond in penitence to Jonah's ultimatum. The tight chromatic lines of the melody are fused with the moaning sighs and wails of the accused (Example 5). Musically, this chorus is through composed, but in reuse of text and texture it adheres to the ternary design characteristic of the arias.

In the final chorus, "Tune Your Harps, Your Voices Raise," Felsted's spirited phrases send unbridled praise soaring to the heavens, Jonah joins the chorus in a brief solo passage and a rising melodic sequence seems to carry the exaltation to the throne of heaven itself (Example 6).

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the bil-lows rise, Tem-pes-tuous roar,

Example 3

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8 7 6 5
3 4 3

Example 4

sing thy

6

During the early stages of Felsted research, a recording of *Jonah* was produced on the Musical Heritage Society label (1983) through the combined efforts of the American Music Research Center, founded by Sister Mary Dominic Ray, and the Catskill Choral Society.¹³ Enough information had been uncovered by that time to complete the project with a set of record jacket notes, since used by Howard Smither as the starting point for his discussion and analysis of *Jonah* in *A History of Oratorio*.¹⁴ Smither brings the weight of his position as the world's leading authority in the field of oratorio to bear by according Felsted and *Jonah* a distinguished niche in the annals of oratorio history.

There is no doubt that Felsted's *Jonah* was the first dramatic oratorio to be composed in the New World. No evidence has appeared to suggest that the efforts of any colonial composers in the northern colonies were directed toward this genre. Religious choral music for them was in the form of tune books and anthems for service use.

At the time of Felsted's *Jonah* (1775), it was only in the prominent cities of America that even the most remote possibility existed to assemble

a chorus, soloists, and orchestra capable of adequately performing a full-length oratorio. This accounts for the popularity of *Jonah* in the states after the Revolution, as it was relatively short, could be successfully performed by a choir trained in the singing schools, and required only a small complement of instruments, or keyboard alone. The availability of *Jonah* made it possible for a small choir of determined singers to actually perform a complete oratorio. It was simply accessible.

Since Felsted rocketed from total obscurity to a secure place in music history 200 years later, one could reasonably ask why Jamaican historians appear to have overlooked him. There is a reasonable, if not somewhat humorous explanation, in that the only record of Samuel Felsted available on inquiry in the Library of the Institute of Jamaica was one that accounted for his service in the Kingston Militia during the late 1780s. For Jamaican historians, his name had never surfaced in any way which attracted researchers or linked him to the arts. In a general way, of course, Jamaican historians have had enough to consider in accounting for the mass of political, military, and

commercial history that is imbedded in the country's past. Serious inquiry into the state of the arts in colonial Jamaica, which might well have uncovered Felsted's activity, has received proportionately scant attention.

Along with the certainty that *Jonah* is the New World's first oratorio, it is truly significant in yet another way. It has suddenly thrust the musical past of this small West Indian island into the forefront of historical view. In November of 1990, a group of leaders in Jamaican cultural life, sensing a wealth of meaning for Jamaica in the re-discovery of Felsted, presented a performance of *Jonah* in the Parish Church of St. Andrew, where the oratorio was undoubtedly first performed some 215 years ago. Over 700 persons attended the concert in the presence of foreign ambassadors and numerous Jamaican dignitaries. The excitement created by this performance was the catalyst for the

Example 5

Be - hold our tears, — be - hold our tears, and
 Be - hold our tears, be - hold our tears, — and
 Be - hold our tears, be - hold our tears, — and
 Be - hold our tears, — be - hold our tears, —

Example 6

Rise — in — ho - nor to his — Name.



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acceptance of this native-born English-American colonial composer as a true Jamaican. The cultural leadership, the critical historians, and the concerned citizenry of Jamaica have received Felsted as their own—with appropriate pride and honor. The New World's first oratorio and its lost composer have returned home.

Notes

¹ Due to the illness of several singers, the actual performance of *Jonah* had to be postponed from October to December.

² Oscar Sonneck, *Early Concert-Life in America* (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1907), p. 284.

³ The inventory of William Felsted's estate, administered on April 2, 1768, mentions "a parcel of musical instruments."

⁴ A report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Records of the Boston Selectmen, 1736 to 1742 (Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, 1886), p. 28.

⁵ Dr. James Smith, a judge of the Court of Common Pleas in Kingston, wrote a letter to the American Philosophical Society in support of Felsted's application for membership (1770). He made the following comment about Felsted's education: "His education has been rather confined, but by great industry and force of native genius, he has recommended himself to the wise and learned of this island." Had Felsted left Jamaica for an education abroad, it surely would have been mentioned here. He was 27 years old at the time.

⁶ The letter of recommendation, dated September 28, 1771, is addressed to Dr. William Shippers. It is preserved in the archives of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia.

⁷ Windmills were used as a power source for the refineries on sugar plantations. The horizontal design proposed by Felsted was intended to be more efficient than customary vertical ones.

⁸ Institute of Jamaica Library, MS 1000, file 11; courtesy of Dr. Kenneth E. Ingram.

⁹ Three tenor soloists are necessary for the character delineation to be ideal, though a performance with two soloists is possible.

¹⁰ The published score (1775) does not specify instruments nor contain instrumental parts. In the opinion of the author, it is not the reduction of an orchestral score. However, instrumental doubling of lines extracted from the keyboard score was a likely performance practice as the advertisements for the Boston performance in 1789 announced, "The instrumental parts by a Society of Gentlemen, with the BAND of His Most Christian Majesty's Fleet."

¹¹ Leonardo Leo's *Abel*, Johann Hesses's *La conversione di Sant' Agostino*, Nicolo Jomelli's *La passione*, and Ferdinando Bertoni's *David poenitens* all follow this pattern. (See Smither, Howard: *A History of the Oratorio*, Volume 3.)

¹² It is highly unlikely that *Jonah* was Felsted's first composition, since it was written in his early 30s and clearly shows a seasoned understanding of compositional craft.

¹³ Samuel Felsted, *Jonah: An Oratorio*. The Catskill Choral Society, Thurston Dox, Conductor (Ocean City, N.J.: Musical Heritage Society, MHS Stereo 4870L, recorded and issued in 1983).

¹⁴ Howard E. Smither, "The Oratorio in the Classical Era" in *A History of the Oratorio*, vol. 3, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 311-327.

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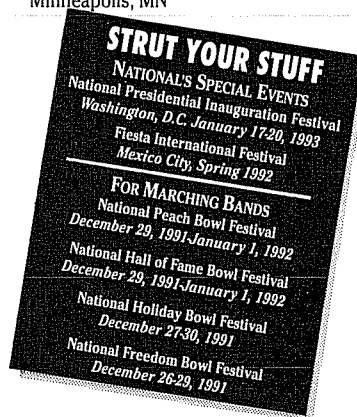
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