The scroll of Ruth re-told through librettos and music: biblical interpretation in a new key
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CHAPTER FOUR
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ORATORIO AND OPERA FORMS

Music takes up where speech leaves off, it makes us discover in ourselves depths we had not suspected (Camille Saint Saëns)¹

Of the 12 works being treated in this thesis, I classify four classified as oratorios, based on their form:
- Damrosch's *Ruth and Naomi: A Scriptural Idyll* (German-American, 1875);
- Cowen's *Ruth, A Dramatic Oratorio* (British, 1887);
- Franck's *Ruth: Elogique Biblique* (French, 1844 revised 1872);
- Schumann's *Ruth* (German, 1908).

Goldschmidt's *Ruth, A Sacred Pastoral* (German-British, 1868) seems intended to be performed as an oratorio, though it is not defined as such. The cantata genre is closely related to oratorio, its primary difference being its brevity. Cantatas being discussed in this thesis are:
- Gaul's *Ruth, A Sacred Cantata* (British, 1880);
- Mellers' *The Song of Ruth, cantata* (British, 1950);
- Beecham's *Ruth—Cantata* (British, 1957);

Four works labelled as operas are:
- Fino's *Naomi e Ruth, Poema Biblico* (Italian, 1908);
- Rumshinsky's *Ruth, A Biblical Opera* (American, 1949);
- Berkeley's *Ruth: An Opera in Three Scenes* (British, 1956);

In this chapter I will define the oratorio, cantata, and opera forms. I will then present a brief background of their history and importance in Germany, England, France, and the U.S., the countries of origin of the composers that are the subject of this thesis.

ORATORIO

The definition of oratorio depends more on libretto and performance mode than on music. An oratorio is an extended musical setting of a sacred text composed of dramatic, narrative and contemplative elements. The root of the word is the Latin *orarc*, "pray," and the Italian *oratorio*, "prayer hall" or oratory. An oratorio historically could be presented either in public concert halls in a secular context or in churches in a sacred context, which would also include prayers and biblical readings. Apart from the religious content, oratorio differs from opera in the greater role of narrative, in its concert manner of performance, and its greater emphasis on chorus.²

In oratorio the choruses tend to be more numerous and longer than those in opera, and often more

¹ As quoted in Barzun, 258
² Historically, the attitude towards vocal music began to change during the Counter-Reformation, specifically in the "Council of Trent, a deliberative council of the Roman Church, which met in Trento, Italy, between 1545 [in Kivy, sic: 1545] and 1563" (Kivy 2002, 161). They discussed, among other things, the role and proper form of music in the Catholic service. The main issue related to vocal music was the intelligibility of the words; the clergy wanted the texts to be of primary importance, not the music. Music had become increasingly polyphonic (where several melodies are sung or played simultaneously) throughout the Renaissance, and sung texts were lost in the intertwining strands of melody. The Council considered banning polyphonic music, but in the end reached a compromise whereby polyphony would be simplified (Kivy 2002, 161-162). This change is significant inasmuch as it led to the steadily increasing importance of the libretto over the next few centuries of oratorio development.
contrapuntally complex. But the musical forms and styles of the oratorio approximate those of opera in any given period (Smither in New Grove, vol. 18, 303).

The cantata is a vocal genre for solo singers, chorus and instrumentalists based on a lyric or dramatic poetic narrative. It generally consists of several movements including recitatives, arias and ensemble numbers. Cantatas can be intimate but are usually large scale works with chorus, soloists and orchestra (Sony music and All Music Guide online glossary). It was the most ubiquitous and important form outside opera and oratorio in the Baroque period (17th-18th century). Up to the late 17th century it was mostly a secular form, but the church cantata including choruses was a major feature of Lutheran music in early 18th century Germany. The term “cantata” has been applied haphazardly to a wide variety of works whose only commonality is that they are set for chorus and orchestra [Mellers and Beecham are examples] (Boyd in New Grove, vol. 5, 84). This definition is not entirely accurate, since there are also solo cantatas.

Oratorios are based on sacred texts: biblical oratorios are based on either the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament (the latter was a more popular source in 19th century Germany, the former in Britain and America). George Frederic Handel (1685-1759) is generally believed to have created the form of the English oratorio (Sadie, in The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music [online]). His oratorios, therefore, provided the primary criteria for establishing the character of the genre, since Handel’s works served as models for later oratorio composers in England, Germany, and elsewhere. Most 19th century oratorios, especially after 1830, reflect Handel’s influence, and after his death his oratorios “dominated the genre” (Smither, 250, 18).

Handel’s oratorios were of two types, represented by the Messiah and Samson. The first, the devotional genre, has epic-lyric librettos compiled from the Bible, does not include dramatic personages, and is composed entirely of biblical quotations, mostly contemplative. The second, the dramatic type, includes dramatic-lyric librettos newly written in verse and also includes dramatic personages. The purely biblical text remained more popular in 19th-century England, possibly because of the religious view of the genre and the impression of an oratorio performance as a kind of religious service (Smither, 65, 302). The dramatic type of oratorio was popularized through Mendelssohn’s powerful example.

Mendelssohn’s influence on several composers discussed in this thesis cannot be overestimated. In the second half of the 19th century, his music was “revered in England to the point of adulation” (Longyear, 108). Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy’s (1809-1847) early conducting positions included one in Germany, where he concentrated on Handel’s oratorios. Mendelssohn’s oratorios, which have remained very popular, were inspired by Bach and Handel (Sadie, in The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music [online]).

Mendelssohn popularized the dramatic oratorio genre in his Elijah of 1846, one of the most successful and well-known oratorios of the later 19th century. This work powerfully influenced musical style in oratorio without changing or modifying the prevailing concept of the genre (Smither, 289). Mendelssohn wrote to his librettist about the importance of the dramatic element in his oratorio:

The personages should act and speak as if they were living beings—for Heaven’s sake let them not be a musical picture, but a real world, such as you find in every chapter of the Old Testament (Mendelssohn to his librettist Schubring, quoted in Smither, 167).

The librettist Schubring had the idea of ending Elijah with New Testament passages: he wanted Elijah to “help transform the old into the new covenant—that gives him his great historical
importance" (Schubring to Mendelssohn, in Smither, 173). The tendency to mix Hebrew Bible and New Testament texts in oratorio is seldom found in oratorios being discussed here; two examples are Goldschmidt (chorus sings Matt. 5:4, ch. 6, p. 109) and Berkeley (Luke 23:46 in Ruth's prayer, ch. 6, p. 195). But the inclusion of New Testament text in an oratorio based on Ruth is rare.

Prior to the development of the "dramatic" oratorio, a 19th-century oratorio libretto would not usually have designated scenes, as an opera would (Smither designates "an episode in the action of the libretto" as a scene). The common practice in 19th century oratorios was to extract phrases from widely separated parts of the Bible and stitch them together as a libretto. An oratorio would be a series of lyrical numbers, strung together with no clear dramatic connection. In other words, the sequence of events is not continuously developing, as it would in true drama (Smither, 68-9, 302). This kind of organization will be discussed further for each work (full outlines are on pp. 235ff.). I offer two examples here: in Goldschmidt's 1868 work, there is a sequence of 36 numbered scenes. Interspersed between the biblical scenes are numerous choruses and soloists singing psalms, which halt the dramatic development. In Damrosch's 1875 work, there are 16 enumerated scenes, some of which are orchestral interludes and choruses. Chapters and verses from the Scroll are divided indiscriminately into numbered scenes, but not organized into acts. This practice was satirized in an unsigned article, "The Way We Write Our Oratorios, By One of the Unperformed" which appeared in the Musical World in 1887:

You took your subject—any subject, provided it was a name mentioned in the bible;...you took your Cruden's Concordance (saved you the expense of a librettist, don't you know) and looked up all the references...and you padded it out with copious extracts from the psalms (as quoted in Smither, 302-3).

This actually sounds like a description of Goldschmidt's Ruth, but Goldschmidt explains his motivation and the care with which he chose biblical texts for his oratorio (Appendix I, p. 259).

The dramatic oratorio became more popular later in the century. Typical of this later period was Cowen's Ruth. Such works differ from most of Handel's dramatic oratorios as well as from earlier Victorian works that include personages, in the virtual absence of narrative, along with the addition of "stage" directions, printed in the libretto for the benefit of the audience. It was considered unnecessary to have the narrative recounted aloud because the audience was presumed to have prior knowledge of the biblical story (Smither, 306).

The main difference between Hebrew Bible and New Testament settings is that most Hebrew Bible librettos in the 19th century were newly written text based on, but not compiled from, the Bible. This was probably because the Hebrew Bible's greater distance from the church made freedom from the biblical text more acceptable. Also, the Hebrew Bible oratorio did not function as a vehicle for congregation worship, as the New Testament oratorio often did, for example in works based on the life of Jesus (Smither lists numerous examples, among them works by Mendelssohn and Liszt: Smither, 95, 99).

GERMANY

Three of the eight oratorio or cantata composers in this thesis are German-born (Damrosch, Goldschmidt, Schumann). The largest number of oratorios written between 1800-1915 was written in Germany; according to Smither, there were 301, versus 216 in England, 72 in America and 37 in France (Smither, 531). Though Leopold Damrosch emigrated to America,
his musical training and background were solidly in the German tradition. Otto Goldschmidt received his musical training in Germany but later emigrated to England. Georg Schumann lived all his life in Germany.

Several factors explain the development of oratorio in Germany in the 19th century, including aspects of political, social and intellectual life. Particularly important factors are the trends of romanticism and historicism; attitudes towards religion, including increased secularization; and the growing amateur choral movement (Smith, 8). The increasing interest in Handel’s oratorios in the first half of the century led to the popularity of oratorios based on the Hebrew Bible (Smith in New Grove vol. 13, 675).

The music and librettos of 19th century German oratorios reflect both traditional and new ideas. The traditional aspects were the use of the chorale (e.g. in Goldschmidt, pp. 109-110) and emphasis on the chorus (Smith in New Grove vol. 13, 674). The newer, romantic trend manifested itself in the attempts at special harmonic, orchestral, textural, and other effects designed to express extreme emotional intensity (Smith, 15). Secularization trends began in the first half of the 19th century, the same time as oratorios began to be performed in concert halls rather than churches. Writing on “The Future of Oratorio” in 1849, C. L. Hilgenfeld noted:

...what concerns oratorio in particular is that it long ago made its way out of the church into the concert hall...The original specifically church character no longer exists in the conception of oratorios (Neue Zeitschrift für Musik. 1849, as quoted in Smith, 20).

Though Enlightenment thought of the 18th century was also a movement towards secularization, it belonged to the intellectual elite, while in the 19th century the same kind of secularization could be seen in a broader segment of the population. Yet Smith believes, based on the theological and literary climate and the symbols of church music that could be found in many oratorios, that religious reactions to oratorio performances might have been common, in spite of the generally more secular attitudes of the time (Smith, 21, 25). He qualifies this statement by admitting that further research in reception history must be made before such an assumption can be more than speculation. Research is now being done to further understanding of possible audience responses to a work in the 19th century. Such research is beyond the scope of this thesis.

New trends in German education in the 19th century put a high priority on choral singing, considering it a good influence on character development (this was not unique to Germany). As a result, amateur choral societies sprang up throughout the country, and appeared in huge numbers in oratorio performances. The German choral-society movement reflected basic social, intellectual and political changes, most importantly a rapidly growing middle class culture that espoused democratic ideals. German choral festivals were influenced by the English festival tradition, which dates back to the early 18th century. Reports of these festivals were published in Germany. The cultivation of large amateur choral societies and music festivals created an oratorio market, for these choruses wanted monumental works to sing. New oratorios were composed for that market. Oratorio being one of the few large genres intended for and performed by amateur choruses. The most popular Hebrew Bible subjects for these new oratorios were Moses, Saul and David, and Abraham and Isaac (Smith, 30-31, 42, 63, 100).

BRITAIN

British oratorios and cantatas have the largest representation in this thesis, spanning both the 19th and 20th centuries (Cowen, Gaul, Mellers, and Beecham). It is impossible to exaggerate
the importance of the oratorio in 19th century Britain. The Victorians associated oratorio with their nation's history and the Handelian tradition, with religion, morality, self-improvement, and respectability. Oratorio came to symbolize the pride of the nation and empire (Smither, 249). In 19th-century Britain the cantata was second in importance only to the oratorio, and many were written [Gaul is one example] for Britain's large choral festivals (Boyd in New Grove, vol. 5, 8, 41).

In the mid-Victorian period, British musicians felt a need to compete with Germany. They wanted to create a climate that would nurture great composers and also seek greatness among the English composers of the day. This awakening resulted in what is sometimes known as the English musical renaissance of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This renaissance included the establishment of a creative English "school," comparable with those of other nations. This "school" included several of the finest oratorio composers of the period, including Cowen. By the 1880s, British oratorio composers began to adopt traits of the German romantic oratorio: a chromatic harmonic language, extensive use of leitmotifs (these elements derived from Wagner's music dramas), a continuous scene-structure rather than discreet numbers, and a flexible form (Smither, 255, 257). These will be discussed in my analysis of individual works.

Though secularization was experienced in Britain as well as Germany and all other industrialized nations of Europe, mid-Victorian England nonetheless was more religious than other nations. Vast numbers in Britain continued to attend church throughout most of the 19th century, despite increasing secularization and religious doubt. Many in the upper and middle classes who attended oratorio performances considered them religious occasions (Smither, 261). In fact, in addition to concert performances, oratorios were often performed in a sacred context in English churches, including biblical readings and prayers before and after the performance and during intervals between sections (Smither in New Grove, vol. 13, 675).

The amateur chorus was mainly a phenomenon of the 19th century in Britain as in Germany. But the movement was far larger and more widespread in Britain, both because of educational reform and the very popular sight-singing movement, a virtual mania that began in the 1840s. The reasons for promoting music education among the poor were much the same as in other countries in the 19th century: promotion of religion, and moral improvement. Vocal music with religious texts was commonly considered an instrument for the betterment of workers. In addition, musical activities in the evenings would keep workers out of the beer shops, where they might be exposed to discussions of revolutionary social and political ideas (Smither, 269-270).

An enthusiastic proponent of a French method of sight-singing devised by Guillaume Wilhelm, began training teachers in the use of this method in London in 1841. His name was John Hullah (1841-1884) and he had been trained at the Royal Academy of Music. By the end of that year, 400 teachers were enrolled and at least 50,000 children of the working classes in London were receiving instruction in sight-singing at school. The sight-singing movement, which trained such large numbers of people to sight-sing, had an enormous impact on English cultural life. This was not true only in relation to choral performance, but also for the general cultural level of the people. Within 20 years, tens of thousands from the lower and middle classes had learned to read music, as children continued to learn sight-singing in school. This provided eager and unprecedented numbers of choral singers throughout Britain, making possible choruses

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1 In spite of this general acceptance of oratorio performances as religious occasions, some church leaders felt that oratorio was too profane to be performed in churches and that admission could not be charged. The Dean of Worcester Cathedral went so far as to ban oratorios from the cathedral at the famous Three Choirs Festival in 1875 (Smither, 266).
of gargantuan size. Large numbers of choral societies were established, and membership in such a society became a status symbol and a mark of Victorian respectability by 1860. Largely because of this trend, the production of new oratorios in Britain reached its peak in the 1880s, when over 50 new oratorios were composed, more than double the average per decade in the previous 30 years (Smither, 271, 274, 288). Two representative works of this decade to be discussed in this thesis are those of Cowen and Gaul.

Over half of 19th-century English oratorios are based on Hebrew Bible subjects, part of the Handelian legacy and contrasting with the preponderance of New Testament subjects in German oratorios. The majority of librettos based on the Hebrew Bible were composed of biblical quotations, usually with modified wording (such as Damrosch). But some librettos combined newly written verse with biblical passages (Cowen), while others were completely new (Gaul).

U.S.A.

I will touch only briefly on trends in American oratorio, since the American composers represented in my thesis (only one of whom wrote an oratorio) were all emigrants and were strongly influenced by their early European training (Damrosch, Ramshinsky, and Aloni).

America experienced several large surges of population growth in the 19th century. The largest percentage, roughly 36%, was in the 1850s and 1860s, when fully one-eighth of the population was foreign-born. Germans accounted for 1.3 million and the British almost 600,000. The Germans and English brought their tradition of amateur choral singing with them. The establishment of the New York Oratorio Society (still active today) in 1875 was crucial for the history of oratorio in New York. Damrosch, who had been active as a conductor in his native Germany in the 1850s and 1860s, was its founder and principal conductor (Smither, 389, 406).

Europe was the model for choral festivals and choral repertoire in America, in spite of the differences between their cultures. The repertory of oratorios performed in 19th-century America was strongly influenced by England's, Handel's Messiah and Mendelssohn's Elijah were the most frequently performed works (Smither in New Grove, vol. 13, 675). Damrosch, one of the few American oratorio composers of the period, organized a huge musical festival in New York in 1881, inspired by London's Handel Festivals in the Crystal Palace (The first of a series of these festivals in 1857 included 2,000 choral singers: Smither, 253). The festival lasted a week and included a chorus of 1200, the nucleus of which was his own Oratorio Society's 400 members (Smither, 421).

FRANCE

Though César Franck is the only French composer represented in this thesis (Belgian by birth, he is generally considered a French composer), he is a major composer. A brief overview of oratorio development in France will create context for his oratorio Ruth, Élogie Biblique (1844, revised 1872). Other works by Franck based on the Hebrew Bible include La Tour de Babel (1865) and Rebecca (1881) (Smither in New Grove, vol. 13, 674).

Oratorio in France is distinguished from that of other nations by a Roman Catholic mystical and quasi-liturgical current that runs through much of it. French Romantic oratorios were written to be performed in public concert halls, never in churches (Smither in New Grove, vol. 13, 674). France did not experience the same amateur choral and festival movements as

4 Upon Damrosch's death in 1885, the baton was passed to his son Walter, who resigned in 1898 and passed the baton to his brother Frank, who continued in this position until 1912 (Smither, 406).
Germany, England and the U.S. For that reason, there was never the same high demand for new oratorios (Smither, 523). There was a checkered relationship between church and state in 19th century France. Despite anti-clericalism in many quarters between 1830 and 1870, this period also witnessed an increase in the return of religious orders and congregations. Not coincidentally, this period also saw a revival of French oratorio.

From 1815 to 1843, no oratorio by a French composer is known to have been performed (Smither, 517-519). From 1843 to 1870, fifteen French oratorios are known to have been composed and performed, including Franck’s Ruth in 1845. Later in the century anti-clericalism returned, yet the Church still had its supporters. This is reflected in the steady increase in the publication of religious vocal music and the proliferating performances of sacred music. A reporter in Paris in 1875 stated that “the vogue is decidedly for oratorio” (“Nouvelles Diverses,” Menestrel 41, no. 10, 7 February 1875: 78; as quoted in Smither, 528). It is probably no accident that Franck decided to revise and enlarge his 1844 Ruth oratorio in 1872.

The decision to revise Ruth may have also been due to changing musical tendencies. Solo vocal writing in French music moved from a “salon style to an increasingly operatic one” (Smither, 544), which is evident in Franck’s Ruth oratorio.

**OPERA**

There are four operas in this thesis, all dating from the 20th century (Fino, Rumshinsky, Berkeley, and Aloni). Because they are based on a biblical story, none of these fits the mold of what is usually thought of as opera—Puccini, Verdi, Wagner. In addition, only two of these fit into a mainstream tradition. Fino wrote in the *verismo* period of Italian opera at the turn of the 20th century and the equal importance he gives to solos and chorus, plus the absence of any bel canto tendencies (Roger Parker in *New Grove*, vol. 26, 478), place this opera in that category. Berkeley wrote chamber operas for the same group in which Benjamin Britten was active, and which popularized this form in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Rumshinsky, however, wrote music for the Yiddish theatre most of his life; the melodic inspiration for that genre drew upon the traditions of Jewish folk and synagogue song, and these were his primary sources for the grand opera he wrote at the end of his life (ch. 6, p. 165). Aloni was primarily a composer of liturgical works for the synagogue and his music is in a more popular vein. Though he called his work an opera, in style it is closer to musical theatre (ch. 6, p. 198).

Most narrowly conceived, opera is a drama in which the actors sing throughout; or, sing some or all of their parts. By this definition, these are all operas. Opera combines music, drama, and spectacle. The importance of Italian musicians and poets, who created and developed the form, is seen in the word *opera*, which in Italian means “work” (Parker in *New Grove*, vol. 18, 416). 

Throughout the 19th century, music became the more dominant element in opera, and the status of the librettist declined sharply. This changed in the 20th century with a greater desire for realism in opera. At this time, the singing voices of different characters became differentiated in a manner similar to vocal differences in a stage play (Parker, vol. 18, 440, 444).

The key question for an interpreter of opera is not “what does the text say?” but rather “How is the text realized in the music, how does it embed itself in the opera’s musical fabric?” (Paul Robinson, 341). In opera, two languages, the spoken and the musical, are employed by two authors, the librettist and the musician (Clément, 18). There is also a third element: the theatrical.

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1 Since the published version of the Franck work is the 1872 version, there is no way to compare his earlier with his later version.
The medium of opera is well suited for conveying and developing character. All the aesthetic media work together: music, poetry, drama, dance, and the visual arts, complement and reinforce one another (Axe, 307).

Four distinctive aspects of opera undermine any purely textual approach, according to Robinson. These four characteristics that interfere with our ability to decipher the words are:

1) Opera is usually in a foreign language;
2) Opera is sung, and much that is sung by an operatic voice cannot be understood;
3) Opera contains a lot of ensemble singing, with several voices singing at once, making the text still less intelligible.
4) Opera singing competes with a full symphony orchestra, further hindering our ability to decipher words (Paul Robinson, 328-9).

The primacy of voice in opera leads to the difficulty of comprehension and a constant tension between musical excitement and dramatic action (Kramer 1984, 132). The voice is the center for the listener's attention, drawing attention away from words, plot, character, even the music of the orchestra. In technical terms, the voice is the individual contrapuntal line of a polyphonic composition (Abbate, 10). Simply stated, this means that the voice can sing only one note at a time while the orchestra or chorus accompanying the voice can produce many notes simultaneously.

In some ways there is almost a purposeful effacement of text by voice, because a major goal of operatic singing is the disintegration of language by melisma [when one syllable of a word is sung to more than one note, melodically], tessitura [referring to the range of the music; when words are sung in a high tessitura, intelligibility is lost], and sustained tones (Kramer, 132). High notes in opera occur at the most dramatic moments, as do ensembles. Therefore opera becomes most inarticulate at those points when the most important things are being said, because it is governed by a musical, not a textual rationale. Yet ultimately, this loss of narrative explicitness is compensated in emotional resonance. The meaning of words in opera is a function of their musical embodiment; so they are a part of the listener's experience even when they are not consciously so (Paul Robinson, 338, 344). Some passages in Rumshinsky's opera illustrate this idea (ch. 6, pp. 169, 174).

Many of Robinson's observations are inaccurate, because he ignores the fact that in the past, full librettos were printed and distributed to the public at opera performances, making possible familiarity with the text being sung. In addition, most large opera houses have utilized surtitles for several years, by which means the public can read a translation of the text simultaneously with hearing it sung onstage.

The Hebrew Bible has always been much more popular than the New Testament as a subject of operas, probably due to the dramatic nature of many narratives, and possibly because the chorus could be "spiced up in the exotic costume of ancient civilizations" (Axe, 309). The "exotic" or "oriental" aspect is stressed in several works discussed here through the extensive use of oriental modes and other exoticisms (e.g., Schumann, pp. 154, 159, 161; Rumshinsky, p. 168; Mellors, p. 181; Beecham, p. 188; Aloni, p. 198).

* These are Robinson's words, and reflect an Anglo-centric view. Opera is generally performed in its original language, which may or may not be foreign in the country where it is performed. Also, in the 19th and early 20th century, it was a widespread practice to translate opera texts into the language spoken in the country where the opera was being performed.
Yet opera has specific conventions in terms of character motive which tend to predominate over the original biblical stories. With rare exceptions, the essential plot in opera remains love and betrayal of love. Biblical events often provide only a backdrop and spectacle for these themes. Sometimes the biblical characters are so altered that the opera, in addition to filling in the gaps to make the characters more real, also creates new characters, possibly more familiar and congenial and less remote ones (Axe, 309, 315, 332). This is true for operas based on Ruth, which add a love interest between Ruth and Boaz and exaggerate character traits barely hinted at in the biblical text. These are all forms of gap-filling (ch. 2, p. 46).

The libretto is written before the music, and opera expresses character through the sung words. An opera cannot be read from its libretto, because the meaning of opera is essentially musical. It has generally been assumed that the majority of opera librettos are not worthy of consideration as literature. Yet some modern scholars take issue with that attitude. As adaptations of pre-existing literary works, librettos pose questions of interest to literary scholars: intertextuality, transposition of genre, and reception history. The issue of reader response can also be explored, in reference to the librettist who is adapting the original text from a particular viewpoint. As texts for musical realization, librettos bring up issues in the relation between the two mediums and their respective traditions (Groos, Introduction, 1.10).

In the case of Ruth librettos, those represented here are very diverse in content and quality. Their primary significance is that they inspired the composers to create their oratorios, cantatas, or operas. At the same time, the texts assigned to the characters are a midrash as much as the music, and for that reason they are an integral part of the analysis of the musical works. There are several categories of libretto, based on the degree to which they are based on the Scroll or on other biblical texts (I discuss the classification of librettos in Preface to ch. 6, p. 101).

In the next chapter, I offer definitions and explanations of several important musical terms that must be understood as they apply to my analysis in chapter 6.