STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

The Hebrew Bible and Wagner, in *Saul and David*

By Patrick McCreless

Saul og David is, to say the least, not an opera that has generated mountains of critical and scholarly prose. But within that which has been published, it is difficult to find a discussion that does not make the following two points. First, in searching for a subject for his first opera, Nielsen was magnetically drawn to the Biblical story of Saul and David – the protagonists and Old Testament atmosphere of which possessed him for many months, from the time when he chose the topic until he completed the opera. And second, Nielsen's opera, composed and produced as it was (1896-1902) in the heyday of Wagnerism, is remarkably innocent of Wagnerian influence. The rejection of Wagner was by design. Who in the Nielsen community has not at least read, if not memorized, the famous words that he wrote in his diary as early as 1890, before hearing *Götterdämmerung* in Dresden on a trip around Europe: 'I admire Wagner and find that he is the greatest spirit in our century: but I do not like the way he spoon-feeds the audience. Every time a name is mentioned, even though its bearer has been dead and buried for many years, we are given his *Leitmotiv*. I find this highly naïve and it arouses a comical effect in me.' [1]

So both claims – the attraction *to* the Old Testament, and the pushing away *from* Wagner – make immediate and consummate sense, do they not? The story of the struggles of Saul and David, with its larger-than-life heroes, seems to call out for operatic treatment, and in the late 1890s there was no precedent for an extensive musical setting: the field was open to Nielsen. And Wagner? Was not Nielsen wise to strike out on his own path, operatically speaking, and to find his own voice, moving beyond Wagner, just as symphonists in the nineteenth century eventually had to move beyond Beethoven? And after all, what could possibly be further removed from the

1 Torben Schousboe (ed.), *Carl Nielsen Dagbøger og Brevveksling med Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen,* 2 vols., Copenhagen 1983, vol. 1, 14. Translation from Roger Noel Clegg, *The Writing of Carl Nielsen's* Saul og David, 2 vols., Master's thesis, University of Leeds, 1989, vol. 1, 13. See also Karen Bernard, 'The Operas of Carl Nielsen: *Saul og David* (1902) and *Maskarade* (1906)', Ph. D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 2001.

mythological mists of the *Ring,* the tragic sensuality of *Tristan,* and the *faux*-Christian piety of *Parsifal,* than a drama about the first two kings of Israel in the Hebrew Bible?[2]

We might hope to be able to engage *Saul og David* in one world, and Wagnerian music drama in another. Would our task not be clear if we had, on the one hand, a pure world of Danish opera, unsullied by Wagner – a world of Nielsen and his new and healthy approach to music and life, and of the stern and upright Old Testament, but no *Leitmotivs*; and on the other, the world of Wagner – a world of Germanic-hegemonic *Kunstreligion,* of Wagner's lush synthesis of music and drama, of Nordic saga and medieval epic, and, of course, unending webs of *Leitmotivs*? But alas, the reality of *Saul og David* is far messier. To be sure, by choosing for his opera a story from the First Book of Samuel, Nielsen (despite the fact that he was not himself religious) deliberately juxtaposed the severe Old Testament world against the sensuous (and to some, morally compromised), mythological world of Wagner, just as he renounced Wagner's most famous musical technique. Yet, if we look just below the surface, we uncover striking parallels with Wagner's works – parallels that we would hardly suspect, and that belie our instincts that *Saul og David* inhabits a world far removed from Wagner. For example, when we ask how Einar Christiansen, Nielsen's librettist, forged a coherent libretto out of the bewildering complexity of events in the original narrative, we find ourselves performing what is in fact a Wagnerian task: we're doing exactly what we would in analyzing how Wagner developed his libretti from ancient sagas and epics. We will do well to show how Wagner's solutions to the problem of creating a modern drama out of an ancient narrative provided a model for Christiansen and Nielsen; indeed, we can use scholarship on the libretti of Wagner's music dramas as a model for our work with the Saul and David story in the Hebrew Bible. Then there's the matter of the *Leitmotiv*. Nielsen did largely succeed in resisting the trap of writing a Wagner-saturated opera or music drama. For example, he makes use of a few associative references that function essentially as *Leitmotivs*, but they are in no way so omnipresent as they are in Wagner's later works. Still, there is more to Wagner than just the *Leitmotiv*. It is easy for us to think, 'No *Leitmotiv*, no Wagner!' forgetting other critical aspects of his work: not only his extraordinary gift for fashioning modern dramas out of centuries-old literature, but also his dramatic and musical pacing, his unerring sense of how musical gestures can communicate psychological and emo-

2 I will favour the term 'Hebrew Bible' over 'Old Testament' for the remainder of this paper, except in direct quotations from Nielsen, who, of course, knew only the term 'Old Testament.' Many scholars now prefer 'Hebrew Bible,' since, for the Jewish community there is no 'Old Testament,' only the *Tanakh,* or Jewish canon. 'Hebrew Bible' is not entirely without problems either, since some of the latter parts of the Jewish canon are in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. For a useful discussion of the problem and of the many difficulties associated with it, see William Safire, 'The New Old Testament,' *The New York Times,* 25.5.1997.

tional meaning, and his ability to create simple and coherent large-scale musical and dramatic forms, while at the same time making our minute-to-minute experiential time in the opera house as smooth and natural as it can be.

The purpose of this essay is to come to grips with the compelling, surprising, and productive intersection of Nielsen's operatic world in *Saul og David,* and the Wagnerian world in which he lived as he was writing it. We must begin with the vexing question of genre: was it possible in the late nineteenth century to write a Biblical opera that would not come off more as an oratorio than an opera? The first part will approach this question from the point of view of the relative roles of the *community* and the *individual,* with the oratorio focusing more on the former, the opera (and especially Wagnerian opera) on the latter. The second part, then, shows how Christiansen and Nielsen, approaching the Biblical story in a way remarkably similar to that employed by Wagner in his forging modern dramas out of myth and medieval romance, created from the original narrative a drama which is generally faithful to the source, but which imposes an intriguingly different shape upon it. In the third part we will examine the large-scale dramatic and musical structure of the opera, showing how its libretto and music create formal symmetries reminiscent of Wagnerian music drama. The fourth part shows how some of the few *Leitmotivs* that do appear are used, and it argues that we are most likely to encounter Wagner *musically* in *Saul og David* not in *Leitmotivs*, but in its musico-dramatic form and in tantalizing snippets in which we momentarily hear Wagnerian voices – Wotan, Fafner, Tristan – speaking to us improbably, but clearly, out of Nielsen's opera.

The Problem of Genre: God – Samuel, Saul, David – and the People

From the beginning, a recurrent theme in the critical reception of *Saul og David* has been that the opera is really more about Saul than about David – or, stated from a slightly different point of view, that the conflict between these two protagonists is too weak to sustain the drama. An early review says it all: 'The main emphasis is placed on the character of Saul […] and David is on the other hand too insignificant, too lyrically insipid, light, and mawkish, sweet and melodious.'[3] Few would argue with such a claim. If it is true, and if it thus constitutes a weakness in the work, so be it. Nielsen clearly wanted to contrast the first two kings of Israel, both dramatically and musically – a tortured older hero against a smooth younger one, a dramatic bass-baritone against a lyrical tenor. That is precisely what he did. Even though the title *Saul og David* suggests that the two characters are on an equal footing though, the fact is that, for better or worse, the older king does cut a stronger figure than the younger one.

3 *Socialdemokraten,* 29.11.1902. Quoted in Preface to *Carl Nielsen Works*, I/4-5, *Saul og David*, Copenhagen 2002, vol. 4, xxii.

But there is so much more here than just the tension between Saul and David. Niels Krabbe, the editor of the libretto of the opera in the *Carl Nielsen Edition,* directs us towards this *so much more* in his claim that the *real* conflict in the opera is not that between Saul and David, but that between Saul and God.[4] God, of course, is not given a role in the opera, but his earthly representative and prophet, Samuel, is. What, then, about *Saul og Gud,* or *Saul og Samuel?* These titles hardly ring true, either; even if we perceive David's role in the opera as weaker than Saul's, it is he whom God/Samuel anoints as king as Saul's successor, and he deserves his place in the title. Still, Krabbe's insight points up the crucial dramatic reality that the conflict between Saul and Samuel is in fact the conflict between Saul and God. And this conflict is played out on stage and in the music in a way that contrasts sharply with the Saul-David conflict, despite the necessity of focusing on the latter. When Saul pushes David, David does not push back – that's the whole point, and it is why the conflict that gives the opera its title is insufficient to sustain the work dramatically, lovely musical contrast though it may provide. But when Saul pushes Samuel – and through Samuel, God – Samuel and God push back, and vice versa. It is surely Christiansen and Nielsen's vivid depiction of this struggle that led early audiences to see Saul, in his battle with God, as more convincing than David. We might even suggest that there is a *conflict* between Saul and God, but only a *contrast* between Saul and David.

To identify the central dramatic tension of the work as that between Saul and God is, of course, to place it at the level of the relationship between the human and divine, rather than merely between the human and the human. To be sure, there are human conflicts here: Samuel, Saul, and David are the focal human individuals who work out, 'on the ground,' as it were, between and among themselves, a powerful and more-or-less self-contained narrative of royal succession in ancient Israel. But to acknowledge the centrality of the conflict of Saul with God is to acknowledge that this story is only one small part of a much broader story. And that story, in turn, is the whole theological and political story of the transition of the people of Israel from the settling of Canaan under Joshua (c. 1200 BCE), through the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, all the way to the fall of Jerusalem (587 BCE). Early in the story the Hebrews are a people bound tightly together religiously by a strong relationship with God, but linked together only loosely politically, as a group of tribes owing allegiance only to 'judges' (in this context, local 'rulers,' rather than legal authorities). By the time of the last judge, Samuel, they had become a people, still in a strong covenant with God, but needing the political and military power to withstand the pressures of the Phil-

4 Private conversation with the author at the conference 'Carl Nielsen: Texts and Contexts,' University of Manchester, 29-31 January, 2009. Jürgen Balzer also makes this point in 'The Dramatic Music,' in *Carl Nielsen: Centenary Essays,* ed. Jürgen Balzer, 1965, 75-102, at 81.

istines and others around them – in a word, a people in need of 'a king to govern us, like other nations' (1 Sam 8:5). The story of *[Samuel og] Saul og David* is the story of how they get such a king, and how their monarchy is established. Just as Krabbe's claim sensitizes us to the degree to which *God* is a player in the opera, and the conflict between God and Saul a central dramatic element, so can our knowledge of Biblical history sensitize us to the degree to which the *people* (one is tempted to say, the People) play a critical role as well. Samuel, Saul, and David do their work and carry on their conflicts *between* God and the people, as my subheading above suggests.

And once we thus extend our purview, we immediately realize that, in *Saul og David,* the People, as embodied in the chorus, are on stage for most of the opera, and their continual presence conditions us as to how we perceive and react both to the protagonists and to the drama as a whole. The two central musical climaxes in the work are choruses: 'Halleluja!' and 'Frydesang, Paukeklang!' in Act II, in celebration of David's victory over Goliath; and 'Herren er Vidne' in Act III, in celebration of the reconciliation of Saul and David. Whatever the most striking musico-dramatic moments in the actions or interactions of individual characters (and there are many worthy candidates – the dispute between Saul and Samuel, and Saul's cursing of God, in Act I; Jonathan's narrative of David's defeat of Goliath, and Saul's hurling of the spear, in Act II; Saul's rage after Samuel's death in Act III; and Saul's suicide in Act IV), one still comes away from listening to the work with the triumphant A major chorus of Act II and the massive C major fugue of Act III ringing in one's ears. Indeed, the People/chorus, or some part thereof, are on stage through the entirety of Acts II and III. When Act II begins, the warriors are reacting with fear and amazement at Abner's description of Goliath; then Michal's maidens comfort her in her anxieties when David goes to battle; and all the people join in the chorus of celebration; and they all watch in horror as Saul, enraged even despite David's soothing song, strikes out at him at the end of the act. In Act III, even though the warriors are asleep in Saul's camp at the outset, they are nevertheless present – to be awakened by David, and to join in as the chorus as a whole celebrates the reconciliation, kneels at David's anointing, and witnesses Saul's becoming unhinged again, this time ordering his men to seize both David and Michal. More than this, the chorus frames Acts I and IV, and thus the entire opera. The People are on stage at the rising of the opening curtain, echoing Saul's and Jonathan's question 'Kommer han?' as soon as these words are uttered. And they are on stage at the end, celebrating David's accession to the throne just before the final curtain falls.

The near omnipresence of the chorus is undoubtedly one of the factors that has led many commentators, both at the 1902 premiere and since, to suggest that *Saul og David* is more oratorio than opera. William Behrend's review in *Politiken,* for ex-

ample, warns, 'Be prepared […] to feel that you are looking more at an oratorio than a music drama.'[5] The editors of the *Carl Nielsen Edition* add that 'many other critics point out that – although without necessarily meaning that it should be understood as a weakness or flaw – *Saul og David* cannot be said to be an opera in the classical sense, but with its symphonic treatment, its cool dramatic approach, and its large choruses, [it] is more like an oratorio.'[6] Robert Simpson sternly rejects this view: '[T]he magnificence of its choruses has led to quite unfounded suggestions that *Saul and David* is more oratorio than opera; they do not hold up the drama but intensify its heights.'[7] Perhaps so. But opera – at least *tragic* opera – (comic opera is something else entirely, as are generically exceptional works such as *Parsifal*) tends to be about the interaction of individuals, while oratorios tend to be about the experience of communities – especially religious communities – or about the actions of individuals within such communities (e.g., Handel's *Saul, Deborah, Jephtha,* and other oratorios, even *Messiah*; Mendelssohn's *Elijah* and *St. Paul*). Accordingly, the community – the chorus or the People – is generally much more present in oratorios than in operas.

If, to the prominent role of the chorus, we add Nielsen's unusual choice of a Biblical topic for his opera, we can surely excuse audiences, whether in 1902 or now, for observing that *Saul og David* shares these generic features with the oratorio; and we might even forgive them for wondering if the work is more an oratorio than an opera. The generic differences of opera and oratorio are of considerable import here, and a quick summary view of the issues involved can lead us to an understanding of *Saul og David's* distinctive and exceptional position in the operatic repertory. From the time of Handel on (the history of the Italian, French, and German oratorio from the seventeenth century is complex, and not directly relevant here; by the early nineteenth century these traditions in general merge with the Handelian one),[8] three features have distinguished the oratorio: 1) a strong preference for sacred, especially scriptural, texts/librettos; 2) extensive use of a chorus, usually representing a community with which a given audience can identify; and 3) concert, rather than staged (i.e., no costumes, action, and the like) performance. Opera, on the other hand, in the same period of time has tended to involve: 1) secular texts/librettos; 2) concentration (at least in tragic opera, as noted above) on individual *dramatis personae,* and thus less use, if any, of a chorus; and 3) staged performance in the opera house.

Operas on Biblical texts have, at least after the seventeenth century, been the exception rather than the rule. The eighteenth century was reluctant, even phobic,

5 William Behrend, review of premiere of *Saul og David, Politiken,* 29.5.1902. Cited in Preface to *Carl Nielsen Works*, I/4, xx.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Robert Simpson, *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist*, New York 1979, 179.

8 See Howard E. Smither, 'Oratorio' in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 18, London 2001, 520.

about representing Biblical topics on the secular stage, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have adopted the practice only haltingly (although *sacred* topics, as opposed to specifically *Biblical* ones, seem more acceptable – one thinks of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots,* Wagner's *Tannhäuser,* and Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*), with composers overwhelmingly adopting the oratorio for Biblical stories. Limiting ourselves to the nineteenth century (up to 1902, the date of *Saul og David's* premiere), only a tiny fraction of operas, especially those by canonic and near canonic composers, have librettos on Biblical subjects: Méhul, only 1 of his 31 operas; Rossini, 2 of 40; Beethoven, Weber, Marschner, and Wagner, none at all; Verdi, 1 of 28; Saint-Säens, 1 of 10; and, of course, Nielsen, 1 of 2. Of Biblical operas that could be said to have survived to the present, we have only Méhul's *Joseph* (1807), Rossini's *Ciro in Babilonia* (1812) and *Mosè in Egitto* (1818, Paris version 1825), Verdi's *Nabucco* (1842), Saint-Säens' *Samson et Dalila* (1877), and *Saul og David.* Of these, only *Nabucco* and *Samson et Dalila* can be considered as being firmly in the canonic repertory, with *Mosè in Egitto* and *Saul og David* weighing in with at least occasional performances.

Saul og David is thus already in select company indeed, being one of only four surviving works in the period that places a Biblical, and thereby more oratorio-appropriate, story in an operatic setting. If we also take into account the fidelity of these four opera librettos to the original Biblical stories, and their use of the chorus, the list rapidly narrows down to one. Both *Mosè* and *Nabucco* are situated in real Biblical settings and employ one or more characters from the original story; in addition, both are choral operas in which the Hebrew people are major players throughout. But neither draws its actual plot from the Biblical story, depending instead on completely extraneous intrigues, perpetrated by extraneous principals, who are superimposed on the Biblical stories from the outside. *Samson et Dalila*, in contrast, follows its Biblical source, Judges 16, closely and in considerable detail; but, oddly enough, hardly uses the chorus at all, unlike oratorios on the same (e.g., Handel's *Samson*) or similar subjects. *Saul og David* then, is unique in the period, in hewing close to the Biblical story while at the same time using the chorus as much as is common practice in the oratorio.

Despite its unusually strong leanings towards oratorio, what features of *Saul og David* nevertheless confirm it as an opera? First, the chorus. Howard E. Smither, in his *New Grove* essay on the oratorio, distinguishes two types of chorus: the *dramatic,* in which the chorus actually participates in the drama; and the *contemplative,* in which the chorus steps back and comments on the drama from the outside.[9] Of the two, the dramatic chorus is more characteristic of opera, the contemplative more characteristic of oratorio – although, of course, many oratorios, and virtually all German passions, include both. In Handel's *Saul,* for example, the chorus 'Welcome, welcome mighty King,'

9 *Ibid.*

in which the people welcome David after his defeat of Goliath, is a dramatic chorus; while 'Envy! Eldestborn of Hell,' in which the chorus muses on the evil that is gradually undoing Saul, is a contemplative one. *Saul og David,* on the other hand, has only dramatic choruses; the chorus is always the people, and it consistently participates in, rather than comments on, the drama. It prays, it worships, it celebrates. Second, the vocal style and the vocal demands of the principal roles are those of opera, not those of oratorio. Oratorio soloists virtually never have to cope with the numerous high A's and B-flats demanded of both David and Michal, and even a high C for Michal. Third, as in Wagnerian music drama, Nielsen completely eliminates recitative, which has survived even into twentieth-century oratorio; he composes each act straight through virtually without breaks, portraying a continuous dramatic action through each.

An element of compositional intent comes into play here as well. From the beginning Nielsen wanted to compose an *opera,* not an oratorio, and we know that he considered a number of topics before settling on the story of Saul and David. It was the appeal of 'the dramatic in art' that spurred his operatic ambitions in the first place, and it was the distinctive character of the story of Saul and David that clinched his choice of it as his subject. Recalling, many years later, the conversation in which Einar Christiansen suggested the topic, he noted: 'In a flash I then experienced the Bible story of my childhood and was gripped by its Old Testament atmosphere. The sublime in it, all that was so far from "reality" and everyday life, captivated me in a special way.'[10] His obsession with the story was clearly that of the opera composer, not the oratorio composer. Ruth Smith has argued persuasively that all of Handel's oratorios on sacred subjects have a didactic, religious purpose, that they answer the call for 'morally ennobling, spiritually uplifting religious art.'[11] The nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century sacred oratorio retains much of the same flavour, as is abundantly evident in the oratorios of, say, Mendelssohn and Elgar. It is surely this sort of religious didacticism that the non-religious Nielsen wanted to avoid altogether. Nothing could be further from *Saul og David* than, say, Elgar's exactly contemporaneous – and, some would say, sanctimonious – oratorios *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900) and *The Apostles* (1903). Rather, Nielsen imagined Saul and David – and Samuel, God, and the People – playing out their drama, however religious in the actions it portrays, on a secular stage, in a secular opera house.

It is thus a striking paradox that he so perfectly captured the not just the 'Old Testament atmosphere' that he describes, but also an essence that we can hardly call anything but its 'religious quality': its rendering of the unfolding interactions of God

10 Cited in Preface to *Carl Nielsen Works*, I/4, xii.

11 Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought*, Cambridge and New York 1995, 170.

and the Hebrew people, via the actions of Samuel, Saul, and David. His individual characters are sharply etched, and audiences and critics seem always to be irresistibly drawn to them – especially to Saul. But his and Christiansen's telling of the story focuses our attention ineluctably on God and the people as well, to the point where it makes sense to see the opera as turning ultimately on them, though with the hard work of the drama being placed directly on the shoulders of Saul, Samuel, David, and, to a lesser extent, of Jonathan and Michal.

The Forging of the Libretto

To hammer out a musico-dramatic work, one that would be dramatically engaging and credible to modern audiences, out of the Saul and David story, was the mandate of Einar Christiansen. (To a degree it was probably Nielsen's charge as well – the complete absence of correspondence between librettist and composer makes it impossible to know the extent to which they worked together, but the eminently musical shape of the drama suggests that Nielsen may have had some influence in the crafting of the libretto). The job could not have been easy. In an odd way, it was a Wagnerian task – Wagner being, around 1900, the default model in northern Europe for dramatic works in the secular theatre. Like Wagner, Christiansen was faced with the task of turning the diegetic into the mimetic, of adapting for the stage a sprawling ancient tale in a narrative style utterly foreign to modern sensibilities. He did not have to do what Wagner did in the *Ring:* to forge a single coherent story out of an enormous mass of quasi-related mythological sagas and heroic tales. Still, his task was not unlike that with which Wagner had to cope in creating music dramas based on Gottfried von Strasbourg's *Tristan und Iseult* (and the earlier sources on which Gottfried drew) or on Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal:* to turn a medieval romance into a music drama. Of course, Biblical narrative cannot be equated with medieval romance. But there are parallels: both pose the problem that the story in question – a story crystallized and preserved in writing – is a compilation from earlier oral traditions, and possibly also from earlier written accounts that have or have not survived; both challenge us with a radically different conception of narrative time from our own, which is based on our reading of novels and short stories; both are cavalier about the repetition of incidents, which are sometimes told in different ways without one acknowledging the other; and both blithely confound our modern need to tie all details, whether the incidents in a story, its characters, or its broader themes, together into a comprehensible, 'organic' whole (the scare quotes quietly acknowledging the cultural bias embodied in such requirements).

Christiansen's task in adapting a pre-existing story into an opera libretto differed in certain regards from Wagner's. On the one hand, the heft of his literary source was much smaller: he had only to deal with twenty or so relatively short chap-

ters from the Bible, whereas Wagner had to cope with 19,000+ lines of poetry in the case of *Tristan,* c. 25,000 lines in the case of *Parsifal,* and many hundreds of pages from a wide variety of sources in the case of the *Ring.* On the other hand, unlike Wagner, Christiansen had to work with a source that was universally familiar – almost too familiar – to his audience: he had to re-tell a well-known story that had the aura of the sacred about it, and in so doing forge a stagework that would be dramatically effective, that would do justice to the Biblical source, that would not offend in the way it put a sacred story on the secular stage, and that would lend itself to a musical setting. Yet *both* Wagner and Christiansen had to wade through a superfluity of events in their sources: to make carefully calculated choices about what to include and what to leave out, and about how to shape their dramas in a way that would meet the demands of their audiences for continuity, plausibility, richness of character, and emotional depth.

There is much to be gained, in both cases, by comparing the modern drama to its ancient source – by identifying and trying to explain the particular choices that the librettist made. Deryck Cooke did this brilliantly in his study of the *Ring, I Saw the World End,* thirty years ago. He interprets *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* in the light of the particular characters, incidents, and themes that Wagner chose out of the mass of sagas and tales from which he derived the *Ring,* showing how he created a taut and coherent drama from a daunting collection of sources.[12] We can approach Christiansen's *Saul og David* in the same way: how did he create such a lean, spare, and easily comprehensible libretto from a source that is so much richer in incidents and characters, and that poses such complex problems with respect to chronology, continuity, and narrative point of view?

To Nielsen scholars, it may seem pointless to compare the libretto of *Saul og David* to the Biblical account from which it is taken. After all, hasn't this already been done, and done well? Most importantly, Roger Clegg, in his master's thesis of 1989, performed the invaluable task of identifying the sources of almost all of the passages in the libretto that are drawn directly from the Bible, either as exact quotations or paraphrases. Clegg reproduces Christiansen's published libretto of 1902, and he notes in the margins the chapter and verse of each quotation or paraphrase – and not only the passages from the narrative in 1 Samuel, but also the passages from the Song of Songs that Christiansen adapted for the love duet of David and Michal in Act I, and a few psalm verses that he used for lines of Saul and David.[13] Furthermore, both Clegg and the editors of the opera in the *Carl Nielsen Edition* give valuable narrative

12 Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End*, Oxford 1979. Cooke died before he could complete the book with readings of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung.*

13 See Clegg, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, 151-182.

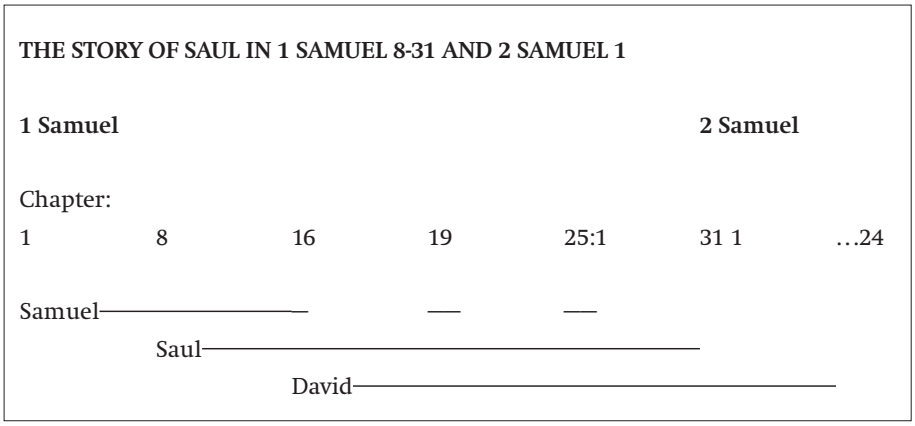


FIG. 1a: *Chart of appearance and disappearance of Samuel, Saul, and David.*

accounts, act by act, that tell us where Christiansen is following the Biblical text and which lines he is freely inventing.[14]

The availability of this excellent and useful work by other scholars frees me to build on their contributions and to go beyond where they were able to go interpretively. Neither Clegg nor Niels Krabbe, in the Preface to *Saul og David* in *Carl Nielsen Edition,* gives a sense of the broader shape of the *Biblical* version of the Saul and David story, nor how that narrative shape is altered in the libretto's dramatic transformation thereof. Nor do they show how Christiansen smoothes out the jarring features of the Biblical narrative into a plausible drama for a modern audience. And finally, although both offer insightful readings of plot and character, they leave much to be done with regard to the ramifications of the libretto's recasting of the story on how we perceive the emotional shape of the drama, and the roles of its protagonists.

Fig. 1 tracks the story of Saul and David in the Hebrew Bible. *Fig. 1a* simply charts the appearance and disappearance of the characters across 1 Samuel and the first chapter of 2 Samuel. The more detailed *Fig. 1b*, then, is a point-by-point summary of the Biblical narrative, a summary that makes it possible to see its most important events in a reasonably compact, quickly readable form. In short, the book of 1 Samuel, after the seven opening chapters on Samuel himself, begins in Chapter 8 to tell of the establishment of the monarchy, with the demand of the People for a king. It then proceeds, beginning in Chapter 9, with the story of Saul. The chapters on Saul (including the introductory Chapter 8) divide clearly into two parts, of which the second is twice as long as the first. Chapters 8-15 deal with Saul and Samuel – the demand for a king; the anointing of Saul by Samuel; Saul's missteps, which lead instantly to his rejection as king; and the leave-taking of Samuel from Saul (although, of course,

14 Clegg, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, Chapter 3, 52-72; Preface to *Carl Nielsen Works,* I/4, xxv-xxviii.

THE STORY OF SAUL IN 1 SAMUEL 8-31 AND 2 SAMUEL 1

1 Samuel*

SAMUEL ENTERS

1	The Birth of Samuel
2:1	The Song of Hannah
2:11	The corruption of the House of Eli
3	The Calling of Samuel
4-5	Battle with the Philistines; the Philistines capture the Ark
6	The return of the Ark

THE DEMAND FOR A KING; SAUL ENTERS

8	The people come to Samuel and demand a king; he consults with the Lord, and warns them against having a king; they refuse to listen, saying 'we are determined to have a king over us, so that we may also be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles' (8.19-20).
9:1	Introduction of Saul, son of Kish , a Benjaminite, 'There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else' (9:2). His father sends him to retrieve lost donkeys.
9:5	Saul travels to Zuph; meets Samuel, who has been directed by God to anoint him as king of Israel; eats with Samuel and stays overnight in his house.
10:1	Samuel anoints Saul king (private anointing).
10:9	Saul is directed by Samuel to prophesy.
10:17	Saul is found 'hiding among the baggage,' and is identified as 'Chosen One'; Samuel anoints him in presence of the people (public anointing).
11:1	Saul defeats the Ammonites – great victory.
11:15	'So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the Lord.' (second public anointing)
12	Samuel's address to the people; he takes his leave; he tells people that the Lord has given them a king; if they and the king follow the will of the Lord, all will be well; if not, 'then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king.'
13:1	Exploits of Saul; the immediate threat of the Philistines.
13:8	Saul waits for Samuel seven days, as instructed, to offer sacrifice for battle, then performs the sacrifice himself, seeing danger to his army.
13:11	Samuel denounces Saul: 'The Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom will not continue.'
14	Jonathan routs the Philistines; Saul's rash oath (to curse anyone who eats before it is evening); Jonathan eats from a honeycomb, not knowing of the threat.
14:47	'After Saul had assumed rule over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side […] wherever he turned, he routed them.'
15:1	Saul defeats, slaughters Amalekites, but spares King Agag and the best animals.
15:10	Samuel denounces Saul for not obeying God's order to destroy the Amalekites completely: 'Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king.' Saul acknowledges his sin and begs forgiveness, which Samuel does not give. Samuel kills Agag himself.
15:35	'Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.'

DAVID ENTERS

16:1	God tells Samuel that he now rejects Saul as king; he sends Samuel to Bethlehem, where Samuel encounters Jesse and his eight sons, and then anoints the youngest, David, as king ('and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward') (16:13). (first introduction of David)

FIG. 1b: *Summary of Biblical account of Saul and David story.*

16:14 'Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. And Saul's servants said to him, "See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you."' Saul sends messengers to Jesse, asking that David come play for him. David plays, the evil spirit leaves. (second introduction of David)

17 Goliath's threat to Israel; Saul calls upon David, and prepares him for battle. David defeats Goliath; after Saul sees his victory, he asks, 'Who is this boy?' (17:55) (third introduction of David)

18:1 Covenant of friendship between Jonathan and David; singing and dancing after David's victory: 'Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands[…]Saul was very angry, for this saying displeased him […] So Saul eyed David from that day on' (18:7-9). 'Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him, but had departed from Saul' (18:12).

18:10 On the next day: first hurling of spear incident, while David plays harp: 'David eluded him twice.'

18:17 Saul offers his daughters – first Merab, then Michal – in marriage to David, secretly hoping to have him killed. Saul finds that Michal loves David; he offers her if David will bring 100 foreskins of Philistines, which he does. 'But when Saul realized that the Lord was with David, and that Saul's daughter Michal loved him, Saul was still more afraid of David. So Saul was David's enemy from that time forward' (18:28-29).

19:1 Saul orders his son Jonathan to kill David; Jonathan defends David.

19:8 Second spear incident; David escapes into night.

19:11 Saul sends men to kill David in his house, but Michal helps him escape; further attempts, each more desperate, to kill David.

20:1 The friendship of Jonathan and David; Saul hurls spear at Jonathan (20:33). Jonathan ' […] was grieved for David and because his father had disgraced him' (20:34).

21:1 David asks for bread from the priest at Nob; David flees to King Achish of Gath, and pretends to be mad, to avoid recognition.

22.1 David then flees to the cave of Adullam, and to Mizpeh and Moab.

22:6 Saul learns that priests at Nob protected David; slaughters all 85.

23 David again as a fugitive; more narrow escapes.

24:1 David spares Saul's life. Saul repents ('You are more righteous than I' [24:17]) and relents ('May the Lord reward you with good' [24:19]).

25:1 'Now Samuel died, and all Israel […] mourned […].'

25:2 David and Abigail, the wife of Nabal. David marries her (25:42).

26:1 David spares Saul's life again. 'I have done wrong; come back, my son David, for I will never harm you again, because my life was precious in your sight today; I have been a fool, and have made a great mistake' (26:21).

27:1 David in the service of the Philistines.

28:3 Saul seeks out the witch of Endor before battle. She summons the ghost of Samuel, who tells Saul that the Lord has 'torn the kingdom' out of his hands and given it to David, and foretells the death of Saul and his sons in the ensuing battle.

29 David dismissed by Philistines from battle with Saul, and proceeds to Ziklag.

30 David avenges the destruction of Ziklag.

31:1 Philistines defeat Israelites, and kill Jonathan and Saul's other sons.

31:4 Saul asks his armour-bearer to kill him with his own sword. When armour-bearer refuses, Saul kills himself, and armour-bearer does the same.

2 Samuel

1:1 David learns of deaths of Saul and Jonathan

1:17 David's lamentation

* All quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

FIG. 1b continued.

Saul will encounter Samuel's ghost near the end of the story). Then Chapters 16-31 play out the relationship of Saul and David, from the introduction of David, through the fight with Goliath, through the development of Saul's growing envy, through his long and desperate pursual of David, and finally his defeat and suicide.[15]

That we can thus look synoptically at the Biblical story does not mean that, when weighed in the balance of modern standards for narrative prose, it is not, in a word, a mess. The story is full of unexplained repetitions, sudden shifts in point of view, doubling back, and outright inconsistencies, to the point that scholars have written volumes about its possible literary sources and the process of its composition, and they generally regard it as one of the most complex subjects in current Biblical study.[16] Of a host of curiosities that we might consider, I have chosen two of the type that is surely most jarring to the modern reader – narratives in the Biblical account that give different versions of the same event without explanation. For example, we are disturbed when we read three independent, unrelated accounts of the anointing of Saul, and three introductions of David as a character, with no acknowledgement in the later accounts that we are already aware of the earlier ones. We are told that Samuel anoints Saul as king in 1 Sam 10:1 (a private anointing), soon after we meet him. But then Samuel anoints him again, now in the presence of the People, at 10:17; and the People themselves 'make him king' at 11:15. The modern reader, schooled in the novel and short story, asks: which of the three anointings is the *real* anointing? Similarly, the story introduces David three separate times, with none of the three acknowledging the existence of the other two: once when God sends Samuel to Bethlehem, where he meets Jesse, David's father, and his eight sons; once when Saul's messengers come to Bethlehem asking David to play his harp for the tormented king; and once more when he is called upon to face Goliath.

What can one do with such a story? We might first consider how Wagner reacted to texts that posed these sorts of problems. His reactions to his medieval sources were not consistent, but they suggest a range of responses that will be relevant to our task with *Saul og David*. Leafing through a copy of Wolfram's *Parzifal* that Mathilde Wesendonck had sent him in May of 1859, Wagner wrote back that he was ' […]

15 The Biblical scholar Joel Rosenberg offers a concise characterization of the two books of Samuel. 'Three figures in particular form the narrative focus, and in an ascending order of elaboration: Samuel, Saul, and David. Rather than viewing the three as subjects of separate story-cycles, or even of subtly interlocked story cycles, we should understand the work as comprising three major clashes or struggles: between Samuel and Saul, between Saul and David, and between David and the combined legacy of Samuel and Saul.' See '1 and 2 Samuel,' in *The Literary Guide to the Bible,* ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, 122-145, at 123.

16 Bruce C. Birch, 'The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,' in *The New Interpreter's Bible,* 12 vols., Nashville 1998, vol. 1, 951.

utterly repelled by the poet's incompetence,' noting that he had had the same reaction to Gottfried's *Tristan.*[17] Later in the same (long) letter he acknowledges, though, the value of the poets' 'individual descriptions,' or their 'finely felt pictoriality,' even though 'each work *as a whole* remains confused and silly.'[18] Despite these dismissive comments, he softened in later years, and in 1869 spoke of both poets to Cosima in the most glowing terms: 'Then he talks to me about Wolfram von Esch[enbach] [and] Gottfried von Strass[burg], whom he calls great artists who attained great mastery.'[19] Whatever his critical opinion of his sources, his strategy in creating his libretti was to cut without mercy the superfluity of action in the myths and romances that were his original sources, and to preserve only what would effectively portray his characters and their motivations in a modern drama. In *Opera and Drama* he describes explicitly the task of creating a modern drama from a medieval romance: 'From the vast mass of outward events, which could never be sufficiently varied and diverse to please the [medieval] poet, the component parts are sorted out, and the multiple points of view condensed into an illustration of a given character.'[20]

Christiansen was faced with a text very much like that of the medieval romance – an entirely different literary tradition, to be sure, but one, like 1 Samuel, originally intended more for a listener than for a reader. Paul Borgman offers a telling description of the Biblical story of Saul and David:

> The ancient storyteller relied on techniques of repetition geared for the skilled listener, and within these various kinds of repetition were discovered the story's embedded meaning, its mysteries of character, action, and moral vision. We, however, [merely] read. […]
>
> The story's modern audience often misses answers to the central questions driving the drama of David's story because the text is read in a straightforward manner, rather than in the circular way demanded by the ancient text's dependence on patterns of repetition.[21]

The situation is not unlike the medieval romance, which uses a technique that literary scholars call *interlace,* or the 'constant shifting from one story and one set of char-

17 *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner, (*trans. and ed.) Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, New York 1987, 458.

18 *Ibid*., 459.

19 Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries,* 2 vols., ed. and annotated Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, translated by Geoffrey Skelton, New York and London 1978 (orig. German 1977), vol. 1, 124.

20 *Richard Wagner on Music and Drama,* translated by William Ashton Ellis, ed. Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn, Lincoln and London, 1992 (original publication: New York 1964), 126. Translation altered for clarity.

21 Paul Borgman, *David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story*, Oxford and New York 2008, 3-4.

acters to another, but with a "dovetail" or liaison at the point where we change.'[22] J. P. E. Harper-Scott has recently suggested that this narrative technique is characteristic not only of Wagner's medieval sources of the *Ring,* but of aspects of his narrative method in the *Ring* itself.[23]

Here the Christiansen of *Saul and David* parts ways with the Wagner of the *Ring* (though less so with the Wagner of *Tristan* and *Parsifal*). Wagner retained in the *Ring* some of the very sorts of fissures, swerves from one narrative thread to another, and repetitions that characterize his medieval sources. Indeed, his *Leitmotivic* technique arises naturally from such textual devices and – as Borgman says of 1 Samuel – their 'dependence on patterns of repetition.' *Both* Wagner and Christiansen radically condense the mass of events from their sources, and both clarify and streamline the action in favour of a more focused, modern depiction of character. And both librettists' choices of the few events to retain and the many to omit are, of course, of enormous significance. But Christiansen smoothes out the bumps in the narrative of 1 Samuel in a way that Wagner does not with respect to his many sources for the *Ring.* His story of Saul and David unfolds in an easily comprehensible chronological order, and it neither circles back to examine given events from a different point of view, nor establishes a cross-referential network of memories that accumulates meaning and seems to direct the drama as it proceeds.

Both Clegg and Krabbe (in the *Saul og David* Preface) assert that Christiansen and Nielsen's opera stays close to the Biblical story – a perfectly valid claim, particularly if the libretto is compared to those of other operas on Biblical topics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But if we directly compare the libretto and its Biblical source, we note striking differences that render *Saul og David's dramatic* time significantly different from 1 Samuel's *narrative* time, and that put the protagonists in a quite different light. The juxtaposition of the outline of 1 Samuel (*Fig. 1b*) and a similarly conceived outline of Christiansen's libretto (*Fig. 2*), shows these differences clearly. In *Fig. 2*, the left column outlines the story as told in the opera libretto (this can be compared to the Biblical version in *Fig. 1b*), and the right column notes the most important changes from the Biblical story to the libretto; many, though not all, of these changes are pointed out in either Clegg or the *Saul og David* Preface..

What Christiansen does first with the story of Samuel, Saul, and David, is to trim it radically, much as Wagner did his libretti derived from medieval romances. From the 31 chapters of 1 Samuel (plus 2 Sam 1) he chooses only a few incidents, most of which fall naturally into chronological order, and which, for a modern audience,

22 C.S. Lewis, 'Edmund Spenser, 1552-99,' in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature,* ed. Walter Hooper, Cambridge 1979, 121-145, at 133. Quoted by J. P. E. Harper-Scott in the essay noted immediately below in footnote 23.

23 J. P. E. Harper-Scott, 'Medieval Romance and Wagner's Musical Narrative in the *Ring.*' *19th-Century Music* 32/3 (2009), 211-234; C.S. Lewis quotation on 214.

pose none of the incongruities that we have noted in the Biblical account. He omits, of course, the seven initial chapters detailing Samuel's birth and calling; but he also, more surprisingly, omits the calling of Saul and all his early successes as king, so that the opera begins *in medias res,* at 1 Sam 13:8, as Saul impatiently awaits Samuel to offer the sacrifice before the battle with the Philistines. By eliminating everything previous to this incident, he easily sidesteps the problem of the three separate anointings of Saul as king. Then, of Saul's two 'sins' in 1 Sam 13:1ff. and 15:1ff. (compare *Figs. 1* and *2*), Christiansen includes the first (the premature sacrifice) but not the second (his failure to destroy the Amalekites completely), although he takes some language from Samuel's second denunciation of Saul (15:10ff.) and applies it to his earlier one (13:11-15).

Next, tellingly, he omits the first introduction of David and his anointing as king (16:1-13) (he will insert the incident much later in the libretto). But he does include, in detail, most of Chapters 16:14 to 18:10: David's first playing for Saul, the David and Goliath story, the People's triumphant chorus (trumpeting the comparison of Saul's killing of thousands with David's killing of tens of thousands), the arousal of Saul's envy, and the first spear-throwing incident. By omitting the early introduction of David and his anointing, and by removing the incongruities that accompany his second and third appearances in 1 Samuel, Christiansen makes this sequence of events entirely plausible. The next passage in the Biblical story to be included does not come until 1 Sam 24 and 26 (two similar incidents that are combined into one in the opera): the accounts of David coming upon Saul's camp, finding him asleep, having a chance to kill him, declining the chance; and Saul's response with forgiveness and (false) promises to stop seeking David's death. Immediately thereafter, Christiansen makes by far his most thoroughgoing alteration in the story – in effect, the addition of an entire new scene: 1) he adds a climactic chorus of rejoicing over the reconciliation of Saul and David, which he follows with 2) the unexpected return of Samuel, alive (in the Bible Samuel has already died at the beginning of Chapter 25), 3) another denunciation of Saul by Samuel (displaced from 15:10ff.), 4) Samuel's anointing of David (displaced from 16:13), 5) Samuel's death (displaced from Chapter 25), and 6) Saul's rage after Samuel's death (invented by Christiansen, though based loosely 1 Samuel's account of Saul's pursual of David). *All* the actions here, beginning with the chorus, are either invented by Christiansen, or are displaced from an earlier passage in the Biblical story. Finally, to conclude the drama, from Chapters 28-31 he chooses only the scene with the witch of Endor and the ghost of Samuel (Chapter 28) and the one describing the deaths of Jonathan and Saul (Chapter 31), following these with David's lamentation from 2 Sam 1.

Christiansen condenses all the above into four central stages in Saul's life: his conflict with Samuel; his early relationship with David, from harp-playing to Goliath to spear-throwing; his later relation with David, characterized by his growing insan-

ACT I (Saul's house in Gilgal)*

1. Saul, Jonathan, and people await Samuel, who is supposed to be present for ritual sacrifice before battle; Saul announces that if he doesn't come at appointed time, he (Saul) will do sacrifice himself; Jonathan tries to convince Saul to wait, but he proceeds anyway.	The opera omits all the accounts of the anointing of Saul, in Chapters 8-12, and begins only at 13:8. Neither the dialogue with Jonathan nor the words of the people here are in Biblical account.
2. Samuel arrives and denounces Saul for going ahead with sacrifice: 'God would have blessed your kingdom for ever and ever, would have done great things for Israel by your hand. But now, O Saul, it shall not endure because you broke his command […] And now shall the kingdom be given to your neighbor […] Today the Lord has rent the kingdom from you […]' Saul tries to repent, but Samuel does not allow it: 'a troubled spirit from God shall be in your soul like drought.'	1 Samuel records two acts of disobedience for which Samuel denounces Saul: his making the sacrifice before Samuel's arrival (Ch. 13), and his failing to destroy the Amalekites completely (Ch. 15). Only the first of these included in opera, although here EC (Christensen) gives Samuel some of the denunciatory language used in the later event. Dialogue here very close to Ch. 13, with a few lines from Ch. 15.
3. Saul is distraught. He curses his own people: 'Let the people perish!' His famous cursing of God: 'Could I but raise myself against you, you King of Kings! […] The Lord is evil and evil am I because evil he has made me!'	Saul's monologue is EC's invention. Clegg and CNE suggest that it might b modeled on Iago's 'Credo' in Verdi's *Otello*. 'Truly you shall be like God!' quotes the serpent's words in Genesis 3:5
4. Jonathan brings David, whose singing calms Saul. David is introduced as Jonathan's friend. Saul urges him to stay: 'I thank God for the day that you came to my house.'	In 1 Samuel, Saul's servants – not Jonathan – bring David.
5. Love duet, David and Michal	Scene invented by EC; in 1 Samuel Michal does not appear until after David kills Goliath.

ACT II (same scene as Act I)

1. David is singing and playing harp. Abner enters and reports that the Philistines are close by, that 'terror has seized your people.' He describes Goliath and tells of his threats. David volunteers to fight Goliath. Michal is horrified, and urges Saul not to send him into battle.	Description of Goliath – simply related by narrator in 1 Samuel, not spoken by Abner – is close to Ch. 17. Again, Michal not present in Biblical account.
2. Michal and her maidens await the outcome of the battle. Jonathan returns, and gives an account of David's victory.	The idea of having Michal here, and her nervously waiting with her maidens to hear outcome of fight, is entirely EC's. EC has Jonathan give account of fight, whereas in Bible the narrator relates it. Description of fight closely follows 17:44-51. EC wisely omits Saul's question regarding David's identity.
3. The people shout, 'Halleluja!' Saul: 'By David's hand the kingdom has been saved today. Wonderful are the Lord's ways, that with a stone-cast the boy has slain the giant. Praised be Jehovah for his works! Now come here with drums and with dancing […] my own daughter shall be the hero's prize.'	Both chorus's words and most Saul's announcement (except for his offering his daughter in marriage) are EC's invention.

FIG. 2: *Summary of* Saul og David *libretto*

4. Chorus: 'Frydesang, Paukeklang! […] Saul slew thousands, David tens of thousands.' Saul reacts to these lines with increasing jealousy, which finally takes him over. Jonathan stops chorus with 'The king is sick! The old affliction crowds his brow.' He asks David to play and sing again for Saul.	The words of the celebratory song about Saul's 'thousands' and David's 'ten thousands' are taken literally from 18:7, as are some of Saul's; all else is EC's.
5. This time David's singing does not calm Saul, who is enraged: 'You lie! Hypocrite! You praise the Lord but mean yourself! […] You are planning evil on my life […] Never shall the king's daughter honour your house and your bed! […] Out of my house!' He throws spear at David, who escapes.	In 1 Samuel 18 the incident of Saul's throwing the spear at David while he plays occurs on the next day. EC combines this spear incident with one at 19:8. All Saul's words are EC's invention.

ACT III (Saul's camp in the wilderness at Ziph)

1. Jonathan and Michal sing praise of the lovely night.	Episode invented by EC.
2. David and Abisaj enter, see Saul and everyone in the camp sleeping. David stands above Saul and orders Abisaj to take his spear. He then awakens the whole camp and announces to Saul, 'With a spear-cast you drove me out of your house, and your hate bays wildly in my tracks. But tonight your life was in my hands and I did not touch you.'	This incident derives from Ch. 24 and 26; it combines two similar incidents into one. David's and Saul's lines here taken mostly from these chapters.
3. Saul repents: 'David, my son, you are better than I. Evil have I dealt against you. Evil you have repaid with good. I will bless your hand which spared my life.'	Ch. 24:18-19
4. Chorus celebrates reconciliation of Saul and David: 'The Lord Is My Witness.'	This chorus invented by EC. *No* public rejoicing in 1 Samuel after temporary reconciliations.
5. Samuel is brought in, near death. Samuel announces that the Lord instructed him to go the south, find David, and anoint him king. Saul rages against Samuel, but Samuel commands the people to kneel, and he anoints David as king. Saul refuses to kneel, and rages against Samuel. Samuel dies. Saul orders his soldiers to seize David and Michal, but they escape.	Only two of the events in this scene are told in 1 Samuel, but in a completely different order and in a completely different context. In the Bible, Samuel anoints David – but when he first meets him as Jesse's eighth son, at 16'11-13. Also, Samuel dies at 1 Samuel 25:1. The idea of Samuel's returning, alive, at the end of a reconciliation scene with Saul, to anoint David, and then to die, is EC's invention, as is Saul's rage here.

ACT IV (Hut of the Witch of Endor)

1. Saul and Abner awaken the witch. Saul asks that she call up the spirit of Samuel. She does, and Samuel gives his prophecy: 'David shall inherit your kingdom because you remained firm in a spirit of obstinacy. Truly, Saul, when day breaks, the Philistines shall plunder your camp, and you and your family in the depth of the Kingdom of Death shall be gathered with me.'	This scene closely follows the account in Ch. 28.

FIG. 2: *Summary of* Saul og David *libretto continued*

Scene shifts to Mount Gilboa

2. The Philistines have taken Saul's camp. Saul enters, distraught. He asks Abner to kill him with his sword. When Abner refuses, Saul curses God once more: 'My Lord and Tempter! You eternal mocker up there; you have tormented me with endless agony, you who yourself have made your creation. You old mocker, who laughs at my agony. See, now I spatter my blood on your heaven. Wash yourself of my sin if you can!' He falls on his sword and dies.	The death of Saul by his one hand is described briefly in Ch. 31, although it is not, as in the opera, Abner who refuses to stab Saul with the sword, but the king's armour-bearer. The dialogue here is freely invented – especially Saul's last challenge to God, quoted here.
3. David enters, and finds Saul and Jonathan dead. He mourns their loss. The people hail David as their king.	In the Biblical account (2 Samuel 1) David is not present at the battle of Gilboa; he only receives the news of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan later. His lament in the opera is a paraphrase of 2 Samuel 1:17-27. But it is far shorter and utterly perfunctory – a pair of sentences, in place of nine moving poetic stanzas. The idea of turning the lamentation for Saul and Jonathan into a chorus of praise for David is EC's invention.

* Translation of quotations from Roger Clegg, *The Writing of Carl Nielsen's* Saul og David, vol. 2, 183-218.

FIG. 2: *Summary of* Saul og David *libretto continued*

ity and his repeated attempts on David's life; his visit to the Witch of Endor, followed quickly by his defeat and death. These four stages arise naturally from the account in 1 Samuel, and they almost exactly constitute the four acts of the opera, telescoping the abundance of narrative events in 1 Samuel into a taut, efficient, clearly-divided four-part drama. Why *almost?* Because even though the mapping of Saul's stages 3 and 4 to Christiansen's Acts III and IV is perfect, the mapping of his stages 1 and 2 to Acts I and II is close but not exact. Specifically, whereas we might expect Act I to be about Saul and Samuel, and Act II about Saul and David, Christiansen already introduces David midway through Act I, so that it is there that he meets Saul, rather than later, in Act II. In Act I he plays and sings for him for the first time, and even remains for his love duet with Michal to conclude the act. Why does Christiansen partition the drama in this way? We will see why later. For now, suffice it to say that the *four-stages-of-Saul's-life = four acts* conception is a valuable heuristic tool in analyzing the form and dramatic shape of the libretto, as compared to its literary source.

How does the dramatic shape of this clear, four-part dramatic realization of Saul's life tally with the narrative shape of the Biblical account from which it is derived? To answer this question, we must first note the sharp difference in 1 Samuel between the amount of narrative time devoted to the Saul-Samuel relationship (eight chapters) and that devoted to the Saul-David relationship (sixteen chapters) – a difference that entails an intriguing contrast in psychological time for readers of the

story. Whereas Chapters 8-15 offer a relatively compact account of the interaction of Saul and Samuel, Chapters 16-31 seem more loose and rambling, as the narrative goes back and forth between Saul and David, recounting many separate incidents, some of which seem only marginally related to the main story, and virtually all of which Christiansen has omitted. Saul's pursual of David seems never to end, and in reading 1 Samuel we are forced to watch him sink shamefully and inexorably into deeper and deeper levels of desperation and degradation. Christiansen drastically alters the psychological shape of the drama – first, by condensing the long and rambling story of Saul's descent into madness into a single incident (David's coming upon the sleeping Saul and his retinue, and his resisting the temptation to kill Saul when he has the chance); and second by adding the whole scene of rejoicing over the ensuing reconciliation, Samuel's return, and the anointing of David as king. It is Christiansen's telescoping of a dozen or so chapters of Saul's tracking of David into a focused third act that enables him to articulate the parallel between the four stages of Saul's life and the four acts of the opera.

Towards the Musical Setting: Dramatic Form as the Basis of Musical Form

Now a new element comes into play: form, considered in terms of both abstract shape and dramatic import. We have noted what elements and incidents of the Biblical story Christiansen chose to take and what he chose to leave out in his transformation of the ancient narrative into a modern opera. But writing a libretto from a pre-existing narrative requires not only choosing events to dramatize; it also demands disposing them formally – and dramatically, and musically – in time. It thus involves both a dramatic sense (how can one project the drama effectively when it is told in music?), and a musical/formal sense (how can one make the larger musical shape coherent and satisfying?). In the perceptive words of Eric Bentley, ' […] what the librettist needs is a command, not of great poetry, but of operatic dramaturgy.'[24]

What strikes us first about Christiansen's division of the drama into four acts is its narrative and dramatic clarity – that is the *four-stage = four-acts* idea noted above. Just as significantly, he builds into the libretto a number of features that link Acts I and II, and Acts III and IV, as pairs. Acts I and II deal with the earlier career of Saul. As noted above, the drama simply omits his early triumphs as king; it bypasses, as many tragedies do, the times when the tragic hero ruled successfully, and starts at the beginning of his fall. What we first witness in *Saul og David* is the very actions and personal vulnerabilities that will eventually bring Saul down: his running afoul of Samuel in Act I, and his insidious jealousy of David, beginning in Act II. Acts III and IV, then, deal with his later career: his mad pursual of David in Act III, and his

24 Quoted in Patrick Smith, *The Tenth Muse*, New York 1970, frontispiece.

stooping to the depths of consulting the Witch of Endor and then losing everything, including his life, in Act IV. Christiansen does all within his power to impress this 2 + 2 symmetry upon us. Most simply, perhaps, he has the first two acts take place inside Saul's house in Gilgal, and the second two outside – Act III at the encampment of Saul's army, and Act IV first at the hut of the Witch of Endor (which, though literally 'inside,' is accessed only from 'outside,' where Saul seems to be condemned to be by this point in the story), then at the battle on Mt. Gilboa.

Also taking a central role in the work's large-scale symmetry are the People – who, as we have seen, are active participants in the drama – as represented by the chorus. The chorus is on stage at the beginning and the end, and its musical numbers are symmetrically disposed with respect to the opera as a whole. Accordingly, the opening and closing acts are structured so that the chorus, usually divided into men (priests and warriors) and women, sings for the first half of Act I and the second half of Act IV, yet is not present for the second half of Act I and the first half of Act IV. More importantly, as noted earlier, the chorus is on stage for the entirety of Acts II and III, and the two climactic, celebratory choruses are placed about halfway through these two middle acts, respectively: 'Frydesang! Paukeklang!' midway through Act II, 'Herren er Vidne' midway through Act III.

We might even speculate that this symmetry was so fundamental to the entire dramatic conception that it was a motivating factor in Christiansen's free invention of those scenes not found in 1 Samuel. Surely this is an important reason for his insertion of a weighty, triumphal chorus in Act III. Of the two large choruses in the opera, the first is clearly derived from the description in 1 Samuel: 'the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments' (18:6). It is inconceivable that he would not include this chorus in the libretto, both because there has to be a public celebration of David's victory over Goliath, and especially because it is here that we hear the famous words, 'Saul has killed his thousands, but David his ten thousands' (18:17), which motivate the remainder of the drama. But what about the huge choral fugue in Act III? Nothing in the Biblical account even remotely suggests a triumphant chorus after the reconciliation of Saul and David (which is, in 1 Samuel, only a fleeting reconciliation anyway). In 1 Sam 24 and 26 (similar versions of essentially the same event) the reconciliation is purely between the two protagonists; the People are not even mentioned. It is thus hard to believe that Christiansen did not create the huge chorus as an opportunity for an even greater music climax than that of Act II – *and* as a balance, in Act III, to the chorus in Act II, the two being symmetrically disposed in the four-act structure of the opera. The Act III chorus, of course, also has a dramatic point to make: it is the point of maximum joy in the entire work, the point

at which, amazingly, everything seems to work out, and to be worthy of celebrating. If the *Ring* were to end at the C major conclusion of *Siegfried,* it would have a happy ending; we could say the same of *Saul og David,* if it ended at the conclusion of the C major 'Herren er Vidne.'

But we eventually *do* hear the ominous E♭ minor triad that begins *Götterdämmerung,* and Samuel *does* appear on the scene in Act III of *Saul og David* just at the wrong time – after the climactic chorus. And what he does upon his arrival establishes another clear connection between Acts II and III. In Act II, as the triumphant chorus proceeds, Saul becomes angrier and angrier as he hears, over and over again, the words 'Saul slog Tusinder, David ti Tusinder!' – to the point that Jonathan has to stop the chorus with his cry 'Kongen er syg!' – after which another song of David fails to pacify Saul, and the act ends with Saul's throwing of the spear. Again in Act III, after a celebratory chorus, the drama swerves from triumph to disaster: Samuel arrives on the scene, he condemns Saul yet again, he anoints David as king, Saul flies into a rage, and he drives David and Michal away. Here the connection between Acts II and III is a parallel rather than a symmetry: Saul drives out David, and later David and Michal, at parallel moments in the two acts, rather than at moments that are symmetrically disposed around the midpoint of the opera, at the juncture of Acts II and III, as is the case with the choruses.

Another of Christiansen's additions to the Biblical story consists of Saul's two monologues, in which he challenges and curses God: the famous 'The Lord is evil and evil am I' in Act I, and its shorter echo, 'My Lord and Tempter!' in Act IV. Standing as they do in the middle of Act I and late in Act IV, they serve as twin dramatic pillars in the drama, the pillars on which Saul rages against God and against the situation in which he finds himself. They, more than any other scenes in the opera, justify the claim that its central conflict is between Saul and God, rather than between Saul and David. And they, along with the opening scene in which he himself offers the sacrifice in the absence of Samuel, embody him at his strongest and most decisive. Christiansen's instinct in adding the two monologues is surely correct, both dramatically and formally: since he omits the entire first half of the Saul-Samuel chapters in the Bible (Chapters 8-12) – the chapters that show Saul as strong and forceful, and as a capable leader of the People – it is essential for him to show Saul in the opera as a larger-than-life figure, as he is depicted in those chapters, even if he shows his strength *in opposition to* God, rather than in God's service, and even if his strength turns out to be linked inextricably with his madness.

Christiansen's other freely invented scenes also have both a dramatic function and a formal one. Such is certainly the case with Michal's three major scenes. If Act I centres on Saul's cursing-of-God monologue, then we have the whole Saul/

Samuel conflict before the monologue, and David's soothing song and the David/Michal love scene after. This latter scene, which, as all commentators note, is added to the Biblical account, serves to introduce us to Michal and to present on stage her love relationship with David, to give the lovers a climactic dramatic and musical showpiece, and formally to achieve a balance, in time and content, between the pre-monologue and post-monologue parts of the act. In Act II, if the centre of the act is the 'Frydesang! Paukeklang!' chorus, then everything before the chorus – David's brief fragment of a song, Abner's desperate announcement, David's preparation for the battle with Goliath, Michal's long and anxious waiting with her maidens, and Jonathan's happy report of the outcome – serves to balance the chorus and its grim aftermath. Again, a scene with Michal, not even hinted at in the Bible, has a dramatic function (she stays involved in the drama, and her filling in the time of David's absence in battle obviates the unenviable task of staging his battle with Goliath) and a formal function (balancing the first and second parts of the act). Similarly, turning to Act III, if the 'Herren er Vidne' chorus is the focal point, the Jonathan/Michal scene that opens the act serves to develop both characters dramatically and musically and keep them close to the action, and it serves to set up the quiet, nocturnal atmosphere in which David and Abisaj will come upon Saul and his camp. At the same time, the new scene, as in Act I, helps to balance the pre-chorus and post-chorus parts of the act.

Finally, then, the new action that Christiansen invents after the Act III chorus (we must remember that the chorus itself, as well as everything that follows it, is either Christiansen's invention or a displacement of an event that occurs at an earlier point in 1 Samuel) serves a number of dramatic and formal functions. Most fundamentally, it simply keeps the celebratory chorus from having the last word; the dramatic action needs to negate the chorus – to show that it is but a mirage – a mirage that has only temporarily taken our minds off the stark reality that Saul's madness dooms him, and that a tragic end is inevitable. At the same time, it reorders two crucial Biblical events, putting them into an order more accommodating for us: Samuel anoints David *after* we've come to know him well, and after his battle with Goliath; and Samuel dies immediately thereafter, at a moment at which it makes dramatic sense for him to die. And, of course, all the action here balances the action before the chorus, and also establishes the parallel with Act II, which, as noted above, also ended with Saul in a demonic rage.

In this impressively symmetrical and easily comprehensible musical-dramatic form it is again difficult not to see Wagner in the background. Just as we have seen that Christiansen's adaptation of the sprawling Biblical narrative shares much with the way Wagner dealt with his literary sources at the level of intricate detail, so also

does the overall form of the opera remind us of Wagner's simple symmetrical, parallel, or embedded structures, on the most massive of scales, in his music dramas. We remember the structure of *Das Rheingold* (Prologue in E♭ major, plus A [Valhalla in D♭ major] – B [Nibelheim in B♭ minor] – A [Valhalla in D♭ major]), the similar structure of *Götterdämmerung* (Prologue in E♭ minor/major, plus three acts, ending in D♭ major), and the same, at a broader level, in the structure of the *Ring* as a whole (Prologue plus three operas). Or we recall the Barform-like structure of *Die Meistersinger:* two acts of comparable size, plus a third act twice as long as either.[25] There is nothing in Wagner exactly like the carefully proportioned two-acts-plus-two-acts structure of *Saul og David,* but the idea of such structures in opera is as Wagnerian as the drawing-up of librettos based on modern sensibilities regarding dramatic shape and motivation of character.

The Music

Until now we have dealt with *Saul og David* almost as though it were a spoken drama. But ultimately it is a musical work, and it is as music – or rather, as opera, or *dramma per musica* – that we must come to terms with it. How does the story come off in Christiansen and Nielsen's musical-dramatic time? A first observation might be that *Saul og David* is not a long opera. With a performance time of about 2½ hours, it weighs in at well below the 3½-hour average of the mid- to late Verdi operas, and far below the 4½-hour or more average of the Wagner music dramas; it is barely half the length of *Die Walküre, Siegfried,* or *Die Meistersinger.* It offers a relatively concentrated staging of the Saul and David story – at least a half-hour less than Handel's oratorio version, *Saul.* And it does so in the way that, as we have seen, Nielsen considered 'healthy': like Wagnerian music drama, it puts little actual action on the stage (a concern of some early reviewers); but unlike the Wagnerian model, it unfolds quickly through the dramatic present, giving its protagonists little time for reflection, and hardly ever stopping dramatic time to probe the motivation of a single character. In those few times when the dramatic clock does seem to slow or stop for a moment, it does not do so for long, and the purpose is not the narration or reflexive analysis of the past, but rather the in-real-time overflow of feeling (Saul curses God, David and Michal first express their love), or the singing of songs in what Carolyn Abbate calls 'phenomenal performance' – music 'that the onstage audience can *hear as music*'[26] (David comforts Saul with his playing and singing, the chorus celebrates David's victory in Act II, and Saul and David are reconciled in Act III).

25 For the *Ring,* see Robert Bailey, 'The Structure of the *Ring* and Its Evolution,' *19th-Century Music* 1/1 (1977), 48-61. For *Meistersinger,* see Alfred Lorenz, *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner,* 4 vols., Berlin 1924-33; vol. ii: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg.*

26 Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, Princeton 1991, 5.

On the broadest scale, we might best begin by comparing, insofar as we are able, the experience of *reading* 1 Sam 8 through 2 Sam 1, with the experience of *watching* and *listening to* the same story as it is staged and sung in the opera. We have already observed what we might call the structural rhythm, the larger sweep, of the Biblical narrative. Of the four stages of the life of Saul, it describes the misdeeds of Saul, and his denunciation by Samuel, clearly and efficiently; it then packs the action rather more densely in the initial encounters of Saul and David (harp + Goliath + spear-throwing); then, once Saul's jealousy begins to manifest itself, the narrative loses both focus and energy as it recounts incident after failed incident of Saul's trying to track down David and kill him; and finally it leads to his shameful end – he consults with the Witch of Endor, fights his last battle, sees that Jonathan has been killed, then dies upon his own sword.

Granting that we experience narrative time (as readers) and dramatic time (as opera-goers) in sharply contrasting ways, the most striking difference between the unfolding of the Biblical story and that of *Saul og David* is, by far, that between Chapters 19-27 of 1 Samuel, which recount Saul's long, jealousy-driven, crazed pursuit of David, and Act III of the opera. Whatever Christiansen and Nielsen's departures from the original story – the adding and subtracting of scenes, changes of emphasis, and the like – it is only in Act III that librettist and composer critically change the content and emotional shape of the story. What we never get in the opera is Saul's relentless harassment of David, through many incidents, through a drawn-out and not entirely focused narrative. Instead, a single Biblical scene is made to stand in for them all: David and Abisaj come upon Saul asleep in his encampment, David turns down the opportunity to kill him, they wake the camp, Saul repents, and everyone rejoices.

Biblical narrative and opera differ here on two important counts. First, the synecdochal substitution of one scene for many quite thoroughly distorts our sense of the temporal proportions of the story. Rather than 1) efficient Saul + Sam; 2) quick early-Saul + David; 3) torturous, painful, and seemingly endless later Saul + David; and 4) blunt dénouement, we get essentially Christiansen's *four-stage = four-acts* proportions, in which the Bible's excessive third stage (1 Sam 19-27) is cut down to the size of the other three. The change of proportions is crucial, since in 1 Samuel it is not a single scene, but the accumulating succession of incidents in which Saul pursues David, each more absurd than the last, that clinches our sense of who Saul really is, and that shows him to be the mere puppet of his mental derangement. Second, and even more importantly, Christiansen and Nielsen's insertion of a celebratory chorus initiates what is nothing less than a fundamental rewriting of the story. The ultimate ends of the narrative and the opera are, of course, the same: *disaster,* at least by the time Saul is reduced to visiting the Witch of Endor, if not before. But the disaster

is achieved in entirely different ways. Rather than the Hebrew Bible's incremental accrual of incidents, in each of which the screws are turned tighter and tighter on Saul (or better, he tightens the screws one by one upon himself), we get a scene of consummate triumph. In 1 Samuel, at the end of the two incidents of David's sparing Saul in his camp, Saul repents of his actions, vows his love for David, and promises to stop pursuing him – only to turn around almost instantly and begin chasing him again. In *Saul og David,* on the contrary, we are led to take Saul's repentance seriously – as though it were permanent – and, with the people, to honor and celebrate it. And not *just* to celebrate it, but to do so with the entire chorus plus five protagonists, in a massive C major fugue that is the biggest musical number in the opera, with multiple high C's by the end. The path to the disaster is not at all through the continued piling up of sad acts of insanity by Saul, but rather through the sudden twist introduced into the joyful celebration by Samuel's return, which produces the desperate results that we now know well, leading to Saul's rage at the end of the act.

What might have motivated Christiansen and/or Nielsen to make such a telling change? An initial and obvious reason is that any musical setting approximating the long sequence of events in 1 Samuel's Chapters 19-27 would threaten to be as rambling as the original narrative itself. Better a sudden turn towards disaster, efficiently delivered musically, than staging scene after depressing scene. A further reason, already noted above, is that bringing in Samuel for the anointing of David at this point straightens out some of the narrative incongruities of 1 Samuel. Nor is there a dearth of musical reasons. The new, operatic version of the story makes possible a thrilling climax that hardly any musical setting of the original version could produce. To have matters get gradually worse, musically speaking, from the 'Frydesang! Paukeklang!' chorus in Act II all the way to the end of the opera, as is the case in 1 Samuel, would surely have been deadly. Nor, indeed, is musical form, in the abstract, irrelevant here. We have already seen what advantages are gained by placing triumphant choruses symmetrically in Acts II and III; Nielsen capitalizes on these advantages by making the Act III chorus the real musical climax of the work, from which the sudden tragic swerve creates a stunning musical effect.

A second reason for the startling difference between Act III and the Biblical account involves genre: why a chorus? why the People? If opera, as opposed to oratorio, tends to focus on the experience of individuals, rather than the experience of the community, why gratuitously add a gigantic chorus at a point in the original story at which there is not even so much as a hint of a public scene? It is here that the generic distinction between opera and oratorio comes directly into play. I have claimed above that what we know about the compositional history of *Saul og David* suggests that Nielsen conceived of the work as an opera from the very beginning, that the religious

mandate implicit in the oratorio as a genre constituted a cause that he was unwilling to take on, and that he surely envisioned the work, religious subject matter or no, as a secular enterprise in a secular theatre. Yet we see him giving the chorus, the People, a huge role in the opera, and as *participants,* not as commentators: they are with us at the beginning and end of the opera, and they are onstage, with much to do, throughout the two middle acts. We can only conclude, in answering the question 'Why the People?' that Nielsen and Christiansen understood perfectly well that the interactions of Samuel, Saul, and David serve ultimately to work out the relationship of God and the People: that the musical representation of Nielsen's 'Old Testament atmosphere' depends as much on the presence of the entire community as it does on the effective musical portrayal of individual characters in the drama.

To a degree, this musical portrayal invokes tonality, as in Wagner, though by no means in so thoroughgoing a way as is the case in, say, the *Ring* and *Parsifal*. Roger Clegg devotes a single paragraph to what we now call associative tonality, simply claiming that D minor is Saul's key, C major David's, and D♭ major the key of death.[27] His claim is not without merit. It is indeed the case that Saul's extensive initial scene is solidly in D minor, that David's finally assuming the throne at the end of the opera is in C major, and that both Samuel (near the end of Act III) and Saul (late in Act IV) die in D♭ major. An intriguing formal *and* tonal relationship obtains here as well – in essence, an overlap of form and key: although, as we have seen, the opera's four acts are clearly divided into two units of two, there is at the same time a subtle tonal grouping of Acts I-III and II-IV as units of three. Thus, Saul's D minor begins Act I and ends Act III, while David's C major begins Act II (appropriately so – many commentators suggest that the famous Prelude to Act II is a portrayal of David), anchors Act III with the fugue of reconciliation, and finally concludes Act IV in the celebration of David's ascent to the throne. Nevertheless, the tonal structuring here is neither so extensive nor so multi-levelled as is the case in Wagner's later works.

Another fundamental difference between Wagner's later works and *Saul og David,* of course, involves the *Leitmotiv.* At its core, to rely on the *Leitmotiv* in a musical drama is to rely on the *memory* of the spectator/listener. To invoke Wagner's reliance on memory is tantamount to invoking his use of the *Leitmotiv,* and *vice versa.* A central element, perhaps even *the* central element, in his whole project, beginning with *Opera and Drama* – is, in fact, memory (or memory's opposite, the foreshadowing of later events by earlier ones). And whatever the denotational, connotational, semiological, and expressive purposes of the *Leitmotiv*, perhaps the most telling result of its use by Wagner was to appropriate memory as a means of creating meaning in opera, in a

27 Clegg, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, 4. Robert Simpson makes the same claim in *Carl Nielsen: Symphonist,* 178-179. For associative tonality, see Bailey, *op. cit.*, 51-60.

radical, almost overpowering new way. To experience the *Ring* is in part to experience the incremental accrual of meaning to each *Leitmotiv* as it appears, time after time, to the point that, by the end of the cycle, virtually every motive that we hear carries a musico-dramatic weight that reaches back, at the very least, to earlier moments in *Götterdämmerung,* and at most, to the opening scene of *Das Rheingold.* This is precisely what does *not* happen in *Saul og David*. And its not happening arises from the libretto before it arises from the music. What Christiansen (along with Nielsen) does not place into the libretto is the sort of narrative scene, or scene of reminiscence, that permeates Wagner's music dramas – scenes such as the narratives of Siegmund, Sieglinde, and Wotan in *Die Walküre;* or the *Tagesgespräch* in Act II of *Tristan,* to name a few. The libretto of *Saul og David* eschews such scenes altogether. When Jonathan interrupts the celebration of David's victory in Act II because of Saul's rage, and comments that 'The old affliction clouds his brow,' the libretto gives him no chance to reflect on what that 'old affliction' looked or felt like in the past – either to Jonathan himself, or to Saul or David, or even to us, the knowing audience. He identifies the affliction, and he asks David to play; David plays; and that's that. Wagner, surely, would have figured out a way to remind us of the 'old affliction' musically. Nielsen, whose ridiculing of the Wagnerian *Leitmotiv* we have already observed, deliberately does not.

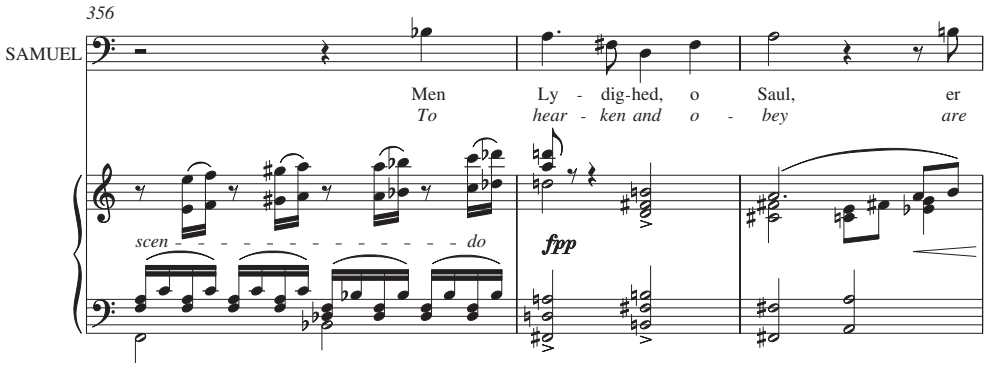
As we have seen, most modern commentators make this point, along with the disclaimer that Nielsen, after an early infatuation with Wagner, eventually, by the time of *Saul og David,* had rejected his method, which he presumably discarded in favour of his own 'healthy' way. Still, critics invariably identify a few associative motives in the opera, while commenting at the same time that Nielsen clearly employs no overriding system of cross-references. Clegg notes a short motif in Samuel's second phrase, soon after he enters (*Ex. 1*), observing that it recurs a number of times soon thereafter (see Act 1, bb. 413-422): when he tells Saul that God is removing his scepter from his hand, and his spirit from his mind; and again when Samuel returns near the end of Act III (bb. 667-668).[28] Jürgen Balzer and Hugh Ottaway point out that the motif first associated with Saul's defiance (*Ex. 2a*) returns in the Act II chorus precisely at the moment that Saul begins to be jealous of David (*Ex. 2b*).[29] Similarly, both Balzer and Ottaway note that, when David and Saul are reconciled in Act III, Saul sings the oboe theme (b. 437) associated with David (essentially the subsidiary theme of a sonata form, bb. 29ff.) from the Prelude to Act II.[30]

Despite these few (Leit)motivic connections, it remains the case that hearing *Saul og David* is a different experience indeed from hearing one of Wagner's music

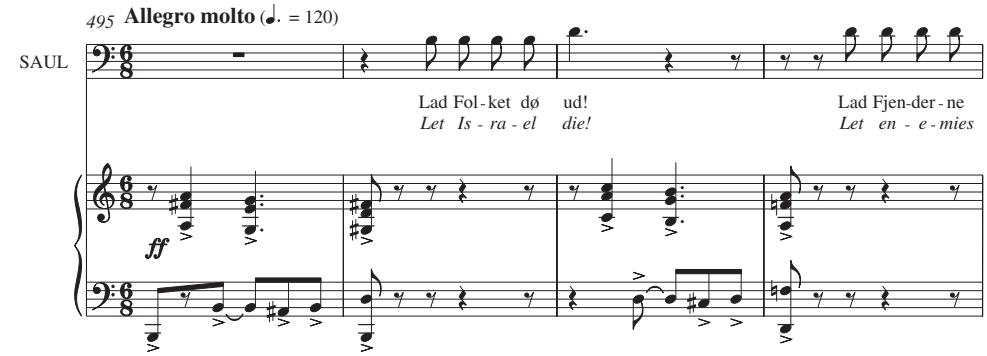
28 Clegg, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, 3.

29 Balzer, *op. cit.*, 82; Hugh Ottaway, 'Nielsen's *Saul og David,' Musical Times* 118 (no. 1608, 1977), 121ff.

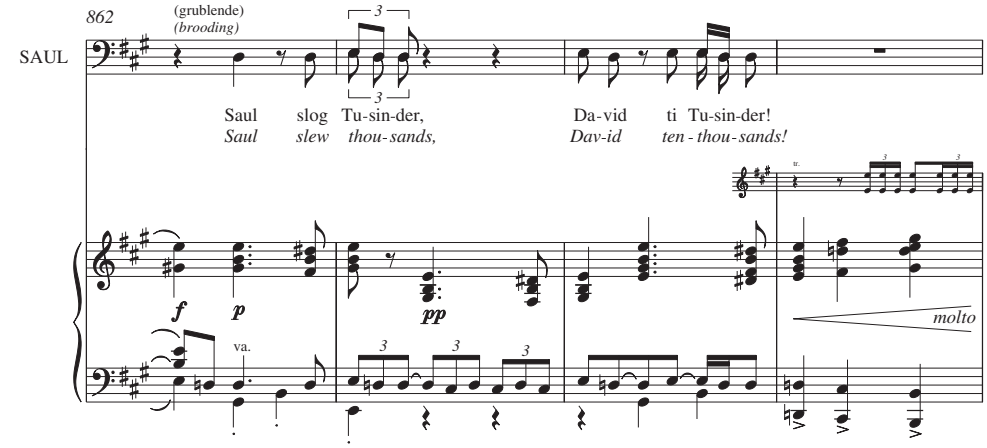
30 Balzer, *op. cit.*, 83; Ottaway, *op. cit.*, 123.



EX. 1: *Saul og David, Act 1, bb. 356-358*



EX. 2a: *Saul og David, Act I, bb. 495-498*



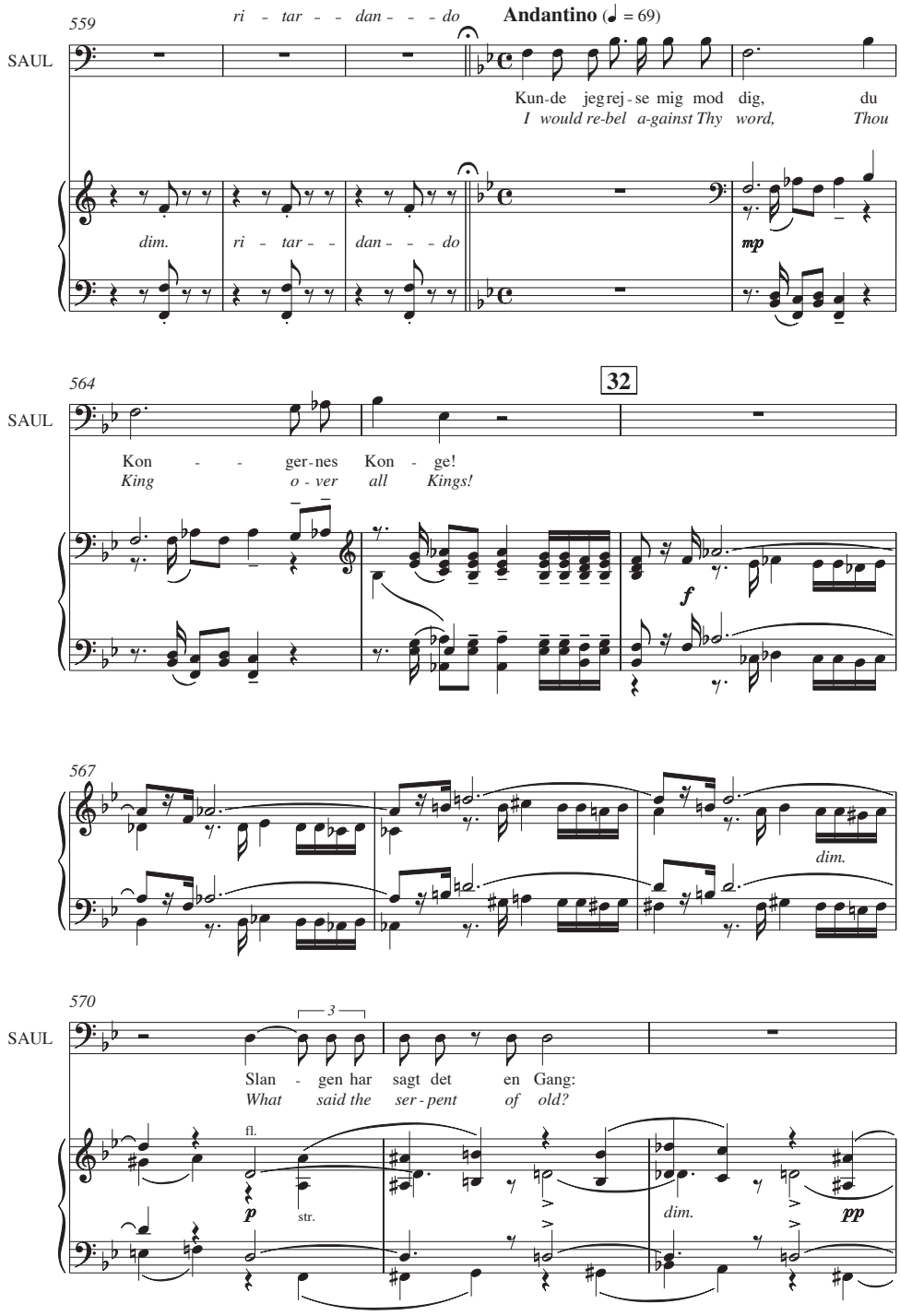
EX. 2b: *Saul og David, Act II, bb. 862-865*

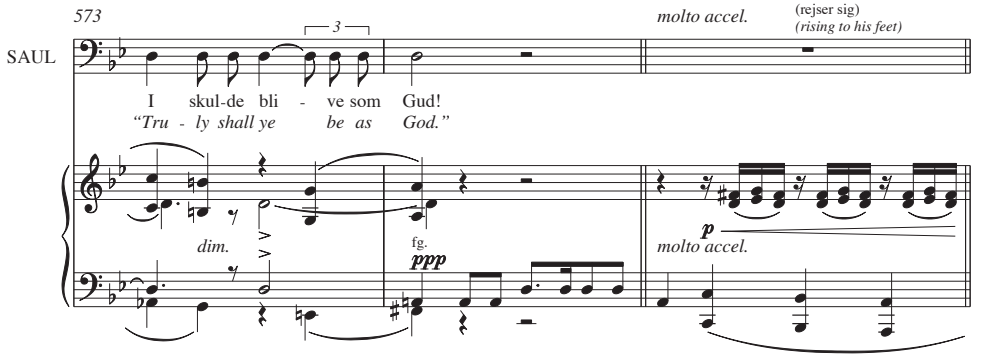
dramas. Not only are there obvious differences in the musical surface (Nielsen's surface is indeed less sensuous than Wagner's usually is), but one does not as a listener have to remember *Leitmotivs* and their dramatic and musical cross-references across vast stretches of musical time. Nonetheless, there *are* moments in the opera that strike us as Wagnerian in character – in melody, harmony, orchestration, and combinations thereof. Interestingly, what distinguishes such moments is not that they are *intra*-textual (that is, moments within the opera that cross-reference one another), but *inter*-textual (that is, moments in *Saul og David* that sound like moments in Wagner's operas). Nielsen explicitly renounced extensive intratextual, *Leitmotivic*, cross-reference, but he nevertheless, consciously or unconsciously, imported Wagnerian moments into it – one hardly knows whether to call them Wagnerian quotations, Wagnerian allusions, or Wagnerian topics. We have noted how frequently early reviewers automatically compared *Saul og David* to Wagner's works, and it could not be clearer that audiences *did* have Wagner in their ears at this time. Clegg's helpful year-by-year listing of the opera repertoire of the Royal Theater in Copenhagen from the 1890-91 to the 1902-03 seasons shows how central Wagner's works were. In these years *Lohengrin* was presented 38 times, *Die Walküre* 28, *Tannhäuser* 21, *Der fliegende Holländer* 16, *Die Meistersinger* 14, and *Siegfried* 6.[31] Nielsen, of course, played second violin in the orchestra from 1889 to 1905, so he surely knew all the works well. In addition, we know that in his travels in Germany he heard *Das Rheingold, Tristan,* and *Götterdämmerung.* It is thus hardly surprising that he would have musical ideas that resonate strongly with those that populate Wagner's music dramas.

Nielsen's Wagnerian moments in *Saul og David* often strike us as especially strange and out of place because they bring music from an aggressively secular world into a sacred one – another way in which Wagner and the Hebrew Bible are 'strange bedfellows' in the opera.[32] At the same time, they often seem oddly appropriate, in that the dramatic situation from which the Wagner quotation or topic is lifted often parallels in some way that of the moment when it enters *Saul og David.* Saul's monologue in Act I offers some telling examples. *Ex. 3* reproduces the quasi-recitative that prepares Saul's cursing of God at b. 576. At b. 565, the closely spaced, rocking major chords (including I, IV, and V in E♭ major) are dimly reminiscent of the rocking chords of the Valhalla theme in *Das Rheingold* – especially at the end of the first statement of the entire theme (see *Ex. 4a*). Given this music, it is hard not to make a connection between the 'King of Kings,' against whom Saul wants to rise up, and the all-powerful Wotan that we meet at the beginning of Scene 2 of *Rheingold.*

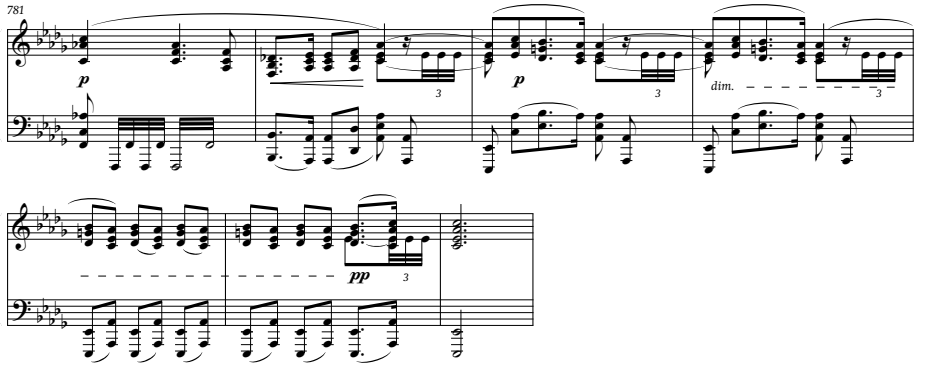
31 Clegg, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, 130-138.

32 The strangeness is, of course, multiplied geometrically when we take Wagner's anti-Semitism into account.

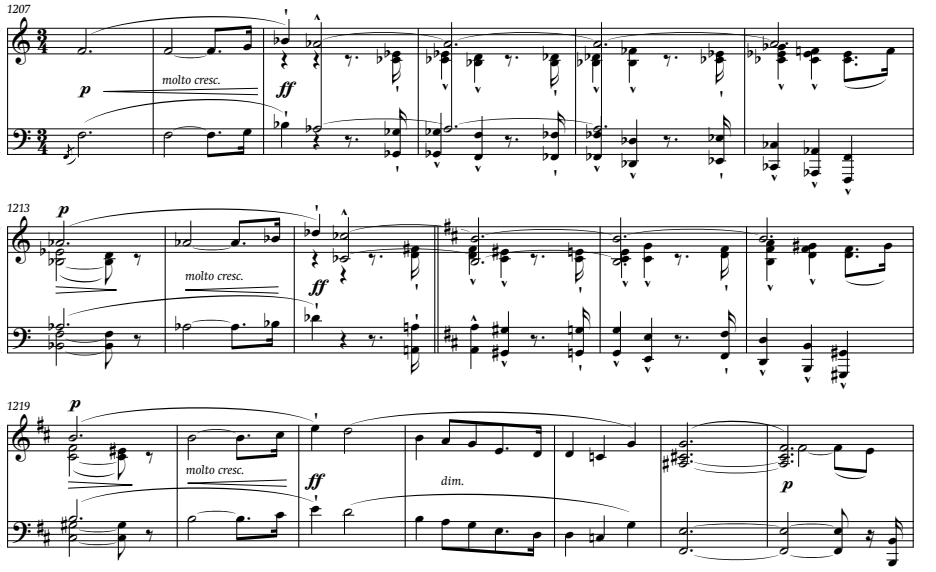

559
ri - tar - - dan - - - do
Andantino (♩ = 69)
SAUL
Kun-de jeg rej - se mig mod dig, du
I would re-bel a-gainst Thy word, Thou
dim.
ri - tar - - dan - - - do
mp
564
32
SAUL
Kon - - ger-nes Kon - ge!
King o - ver all Kings!
f
567
dim.
570
3
SAUL
Slan - gen har sagt det en Gang:
What said the ser - pent of old?
fl.
p
str.
dim.
pp



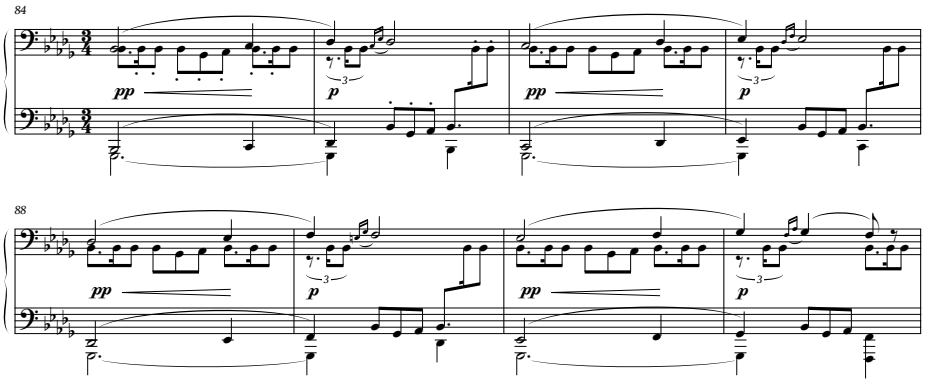
EX. 3: *Saul og David, Act I, bb. 559-575*



EX. 4a: *Wagner, Das Rheingold, Scene 2, bb. 781-787*



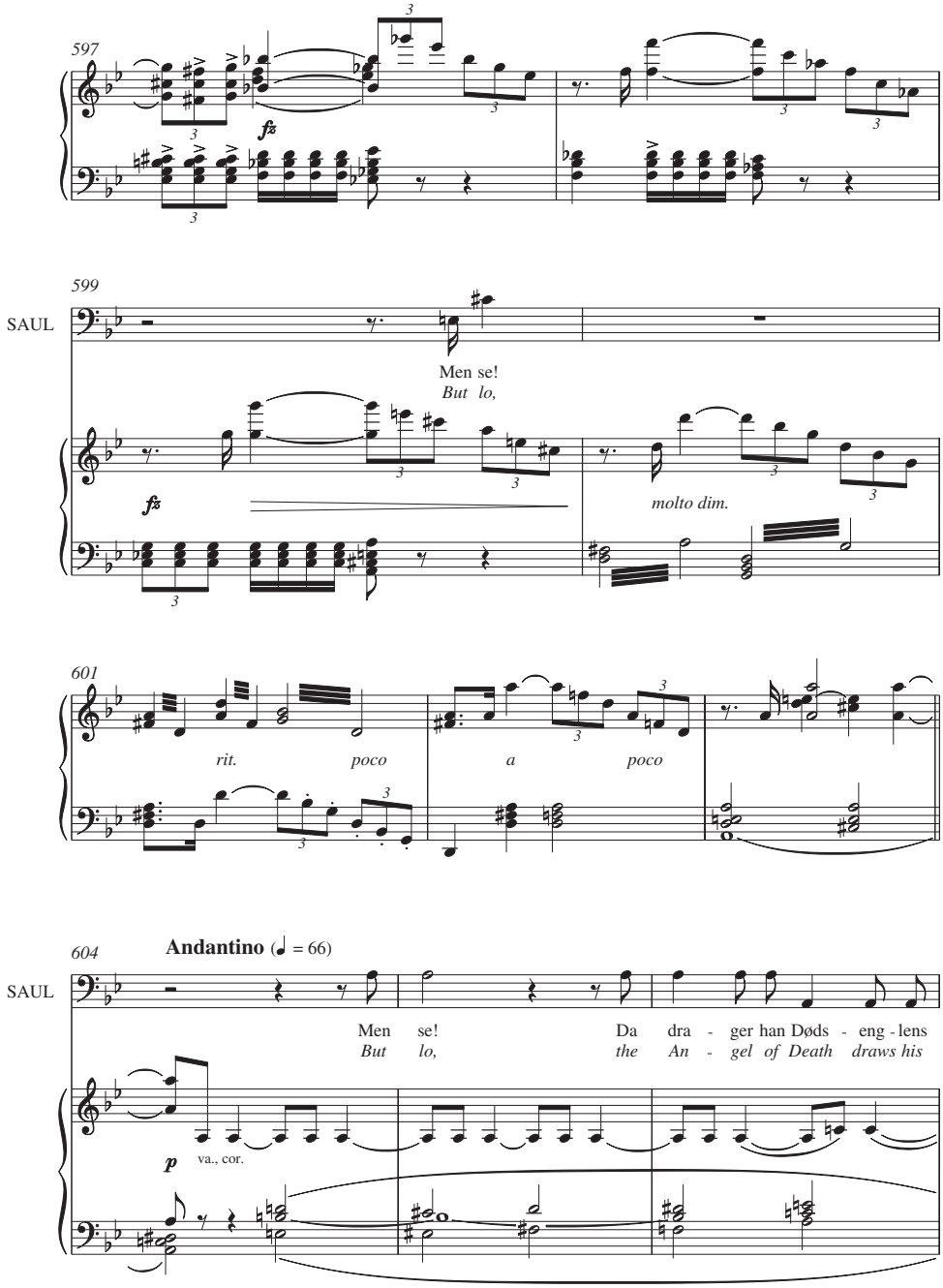
EX. 4b: *Wagner, Tristan und Isolde, Act I, Scene 5, bb. 1207-1225*



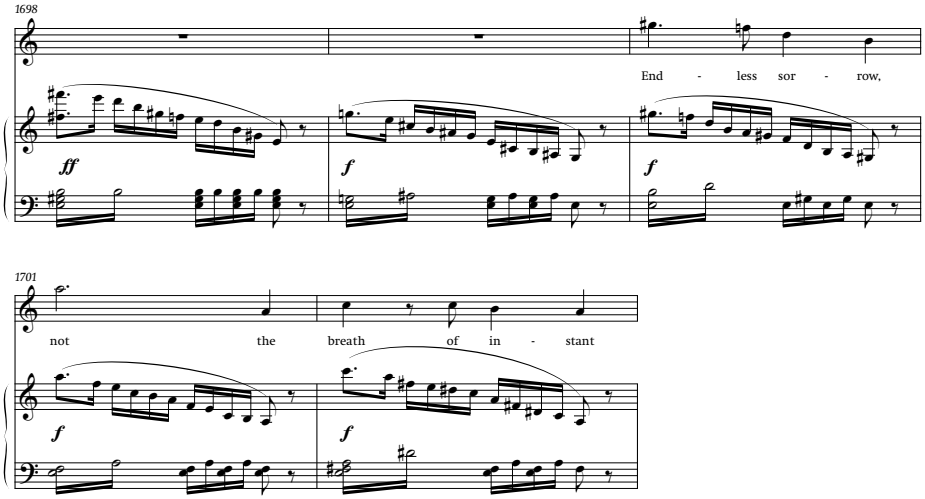
EX. 4c*: Wagner, Siegfried, Act I, Scene 1, bb. 84-91*

But immediately the reference changes. Suddenly, the music sounds like the beginning of Act I, Scene 5 of *Tristan* (compare *Ex. 3, rehearsal 32*, to *Tristan* excerpt *Ex. 4b*): the annunciatory octaves, with a quick dotted figure leading to a much longer, accented note, which is held while lower voices move scalewise down in parallel sixth-chords *(Tristan*) or tenths (*Saul*). The keys are even right: the figure begins solidly in A♭ minor, then proceeds sequentially up a minor third to B minor (which continues in *Tristan,* but is altered and sent in another direction in *Saul*). And, even more interestingly, the rhetoric is right: we know from the solemnity of this introduction that we are being prepared for a major statement, the moment to which the act has led. Then, precisely when Saul sings 'The serpent said it once,' the Wagnerian reference changes again, and we hear the slow, ascending bass quarter notes of the Fafner theme that so dominates Scene 3 of *Rheingold* and numerous passages in *Siegfried* – here in parallel tenths with the upper parts, and chromatic rather than diatonic, as in the *Ring* (compare *Ex. 3*, to excerpt from *Rheingold,* Scene 3, *Ex. 4c*).

The next section of the monologue (b. 576) is declamatory and recitative-like in its opening bars, and the orchestra plays little that is thematic until he sings the words 'threats which my mouth sends back with scorn' (b. 591). At this point the entire orchestra plays a bar of *forte,* descending, scalewise octaves – exactly like the famous descending octaves of Wotan's Spear throughout the *Ring* – here associated with a moment at which one king is cursing and defying another (complaining about a breach of contract, perhaps?). A few bars later (*Ex. 5*), building to Saul's climactic 'Men se!' the upper strings play long, high quarter notes, from which a quick descending arpeggio descends – music quite similar gesturally and rhythmically to the music near the end of Act I of *Tristan* in which Brangäna suddenly realizes the horror that her switching of the magic potions has brought about. Then, as the monologue winds down, the orchestra brings in the Fafner theme again as Saul sings 'Vengeance



EX. 5a: *Saul og David, Act I, bb. 597-606*



EX. 5b: *Wagner, Tristan und Isolde, Act I, Scene 5, bb. 1698-1702*

is the Lord's,' (b. 612) and the Valhalla reference once more at the very end of the monologue – again just after the words 'King of kings!'

And so, Nielsen, having kicked Wagner ceremoniously out the front door, inadvertently lets him in the back. Or does he? If we know our Wagner well, we can see rich parallels between the way Christiansen and Nielsen transformed the Biblical story of Saul and David into a modern opera, and the way Wagner forged his libretti from myth and romance. If we know our Wagner well, we can also see the similarity between the formal balance and symmetry evident in *Saul og David* and that of the Wagnerian music dramas. If we know our Wagner well, we can recognize, though dimly, certain aspects of large-scale tonal structure, the occasional cross-referential motive, and quite a few striking quotations of, or allusions to, well-known Wagnerian tunes. But we hardly have to have heard much Wagner at all to perceive that *Saul og David* sounds not even remotely like a Wagnerian music drama. It lacks the hyper-sensuous musical surface – the ubiquitous half-diminished seventh chords, Wagner's distinctive ways of merging diatonic and chromatic language, the unrelenting foregrounding of *Leitmotivs*, and the gradual accumulation of associations with referential motives, chords, and keys that, perhaps more than anything else, defines what the later Wagner sounds like. Nielsen's pride in having made a clean break with *that* sound, and developing his own instead, is entirely justified. Paradoxically, then, even though a Wagner scholar can examine *Saul og David* and see the opera permeated with the imprint of Wagner, everyone else – from the average operagoer to the sophisticated professional musician, and

even the Wagner scholar himself or herself in a non-scholarly mode – hears only the stark differences between the new opera and its distinguished German forebears.

What then, of the Hebrew Bible, the other protagonist in this essay, and its specifically musical realization in *Saul og David?* An approach that might be especially profitable is to interpret the opera as tragedy. Northrop Frye called Saul 'the one great tragic hero of the Bible,'[33] and three relatively recent critical studies focusing on Saul as a tragic character offer an intriguing starting point for a musico-literary reading. In 1980 David M. Gunn published a study of the Saul story that bypassed the mountains of text-critical work that had dominated Biblical scholarship on the subject, and instead read it from a literary-critical point of view, chiefly as a tragedy.[34] A decade or so later (1992), J. Cheryl Exum continued the literary approach, though in a way critical of Gunn, and interpreted the story of Saul in the light of both ancient Greek tragedy and other tragic characters in the Hebrew Bible.[35] And quite recently, Sarah Nicholson has examined literary re-tellings of the story, from the tragedy *Saül le furieux* (1572) of Jean de la Taille, to eighteenth-century dramas by Voltaire (1767) and Vittorio Alfieri (1782), to Alphonse de Lamartine's *Saül: Tragédie* (1818, based on Alfieri's drama), and even Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886).[36] Closer to Christiansen and Nielsen's work is H. C. Andersen's five-act libretto, *Kong Saul* (1876),[37] written for the Danish composer J. P. E. Hartmann (who began to set the libretto to music, but never finished his opera). A more detailed literary and musical reading of *Saul og David* than I have been able to offer here – one that proceeds from the rich literary legacy that the Biblical story has generated, and one that makes sensitive use of both traditional and more recent music-analytical techniques – would surely greatly further our understanding of the opera. It is hoped that the present essay will contribute in some measure to the undertaking of such a study.

33 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, New York 1982, 181.

34 David M. Gunn, 'The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, 6, Sheffield, 1980.

35 J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty*, Cambridge 1992.

36 Sarah Nicholson, 'Catching the Poetic Eye: Saul Reconceived in Modern Literature,' in *Saul in Story and Tradition,* Carl S. Ehrlich and Marsha C. White (eds.), Tübingen 2006, 308-333.

37 H.C. Andersen, *Kong Saul,* in *H. C. Andersens Samlede Skrifter,* 15 vols., Copenhagen 1876-80, vol. 11, 435-466.

A B S T R A C T

Carl Nielsen's first opera, *Saul og David,* turns on the pairing of two seemingly contradictory foundations: the book of 1 Samuel in the Hebrew Bible, and the musico-dramatic influence of Richard Wagner. It is well-known that Nielsen firmly rejected Wagner and Wagnerism in the opera, and it is generally acknowledged that he succeeded: *Saul og David* sounds not at all like Wagner, and it overtly lacks the web of leitmotivs that so characterizes the Wagner music dramas from *Das Rheingold* on. Nevertheless, it is clear that Nielsen, along with his librettist Einar Christiansen, learned much from Wagner. Most importantly, the creation of a modern musical drama out of an ancient text was a task that both Wagner and his Danish successors faced. Like the best of Wagner's music dramas, *Saul og David* is a model of clarity and intensity – a drama that focuses an abundance of narrative detail in the original source into a taut, psychologically penetrating story, a story masterful in its condensation of action and in its large-scale dramatic and musical form. That the opera appropriates a number of dramatic and musical techniques of the anti-Semitic Wagner in its portrayal of a foundational story from the Hebrew Bible is an irony well worth contemplating.