In compiling the text for George Frideric Handel’s 1743 oratorio *Samson*, librettist Newburgh Hamilton based his work substantially on Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*. Hamilton padded Milton’s drama, adding a chorus of Philistines and incorporating portions of Milton’s smaller poems. Among these borrowings, passages referencing divine music are especially common. Hamilton granted many of these musical texts to the Philistines, and Handel in turn animated them with memorable music. This re-working of Milton’s text becomes problematic when viewed in the cultural context of eighteenth-century music criticism, which was closely tied to notions of affect and morality. In the Baroque era, many people believed in the power of music to influence the feelings and actions of listeners. Some commentators hoped to inspire morality, and to counteract the influence of questionable musical styles such as Italian opera, by uniting music with high-quality English text. Milton and Handel were frequently held up as ideal examples of such a fusion.

Through a combination of textual and musical analysis, this essay tracks the transformation of *Samson Agonistes* into Handel’s oratorio, using the treatment of the Philistine voices in three scenes to assess these questions of musical morality. Hamilton and Handel dignify the Philistines both musically and textually while also incorporating hints of their heathen status. In Act I, the Philistines employ Milton’s Psalm 81 to praise their god in a musical structure resembling an Anglican anthem. In the following act, Dalila, while vocally enticing, draws from the Italian operatic tradition to perform elaborate musical deceit. At the conclusion of the oratorio, the Israelites gain musical and moral control with the text of Milton’s “At a Solemn Musick,” transformed into a festival scene that parallels but eventually overshadows that of the Philistines. Ultimately, the Philistines’ music suggests transience rather than the type of transcendent worship reserved for the Israelites.