



Sunday 23 December 2012

The Mozartists

George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)

Messiah

an oratorio in three parts

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The Choir and Orchestra of The Mozartists (leader, **Matthew Truscott**)

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“The Sublime, the Grand and the Tender” - an introduction to Handel’s *Messiah*

“*The sublime, the grand and the tender, adapted to the most elevated, majestic and moving words, conspired to transport and charm the ravished heart and ear.*” The Dublin Journal, 13–17 April 1742, on the first performance of *Messiah*

Handel’s *Messiah* was composed within twenty-two days, between 22 August and 12 September 1741, and was premièred in Dublin on 13 April 1742. It was first performed in London, to a somewhat muted reception, at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden on 23 March 1743, but it gradually increased in popularity during the remainder of Handel’s life, helped in part by the establishment of an annual charity performance in the chapel of Thomas Coram’s Foundling Hospital in Bloomsbury. A quarter of a millennium later it still maintains its position as one of the most popular and iconic works in the repertoire.

Background

Georg Friedrich Händel was born in Halle, Germany, in 1685 – the same year as Johann Sebastian Bach and Domenico Scarlatti. He was the son of a sixty-two year old surgeon and his thirty-four year old second wife. His early musical training was intended to equip him for a career as a Lutheran church musician, but in 1703 he moved to Hamburg, where he was appointed as a violinist at the opera house and where he composed his first opera, *Almira*.

It was his sojourn in Italy between 1706 and 1710, though, which led to the flowering of his youthful talent and the maturing of his operatic style. This period witnessed the composition of nearly a hundred dramatic cantatas, as well as his first two oratorios – *La Resurrezione* and *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* – and it culminated in the triumphant première of *Agrippina* in Venice on 26 December 1709. His reputation now secured, he was appointed Kapellmeister to the Elector of Hanover in June 1710.

Before the end of the year, however, he had obtained leave to come to London, then one of the wealthiest cities in the world, where Italian opera, and indeed opera as an entirely sung medium, was still a novelty. It was not long before he was asked to write a new opera for the Queen’s (subsequently King’s) Theatre, Haymarket, and *Rinaldo*, premièred on 24 February 1711, was the first of thirty-six operas which Handel wrote for London over the next thirty years. Any conflict with his responsibilities in Germany was resolved in 1714 when his employer became King George I of England, following the death of Queen Anne, and moved to London.

Handel in 1741

By 1741 Handel’s fame and reputation were firmly established. He had become a naturalised British citizen in 1727, adapting his name to George Frideric Handel, and had subsequently been honoured with a pension from the court and the office of Composer of Musick for the Chapel Royal. He had even – most unusually for a living person – had a full-length statue erected in his honour, in Vauxhall Gardens (it is now housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum).

But despite such success and recognition, all was not well. For some time the popularity of Italian opera in London had been in decline, prompting the renowned commentator Dr Charles Burney to observe: “The opera, a tawdry, expensive, meretricious lady who had been accustomed to very high keeping, was now reduced to a very humble state.” The huge success of Gay and Pepusch’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, which had opened at the Lincoln’s Inn Fields Theatre more than a decade earlier, only served to underline the public’s disenchantment with ‘serious’ opera’s extravagant artificiality and bickering divas, and further competition was provided by the formation of the rival ‘Opera of the Nobility’, which by 1734 had secured some of Handel’s leading singers and displaced his own company at the King’s Theatre, Haymarket. A subscription series for Handel’s proposed 1739 opera season had failed to find sufficient support, and the winter of 1739–40 had been so cold that the theatres had been forced to close (and meat had been cooked over fires built on the frozen Thames). Handel did manage to present *Imeneo* in November 1740 and *Deidamia* in January 1741, but neither was a success, receiving a mere five performances between them. He was finally forced to accept that he had no future in London as a composer of operas.

Libretto

Handel might even have left London altogether had it not been for the success of *Messiah*. It may have owed something to fortune that the libretto was presented to him at such a significant point in his life, but it certainly offered an important opportunity for him to turn away from Italian opera once and for all and to focus instead on a genre which he had begun to develop during the previous decade, and which had the particular advantage of being sung in his audience's native language. Handel had already incorporated a revival of his 1719 oratorio *Esther* as a bonus at the end of his 1732 opera season at the King's Theatre, and the composition of *Deborah* and *Athalia* soon followed. It was with *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt*, though, both written in 1738, that he really started to develop the dramatic and formal possibilities of the oratorio, and these two works also marked the beginning of his collaboration with the librettist Charles Jennens.

Jennens was an English landowner and patron of the arts, who was fifteen years Handel's junior. His interests included music, drama (he owned an extensive collection of books on Shakespeare), philology and theology, and as such he was a particularly propitious colleague for the composer whose music he greatly admired. Handel usually took an active role in collaborating with his oratorio librettists, but he seems to have had little or no involvement in the creation of the *Messiah* text; "Handel says he will do nothing next winter", Jennens wrote to a friend on 10 July 1741, "but I hope I shall persuade him to set another scripture collection I have made for him".

The libretto of *Messiah* was assembled from the Authorised King James Version of the Bible, with the exception of the verses taken from the Psalms, which are presented in the slightly differently worded form in which they appear in the Book of Common Prayer. The verses are selected with extraordinary economy and skill, but even so it would be hard for someone entirely unfamiliar with the Bible to follow its narrative flow or to appreciate its contextual subtleties – the reference to 'feet', for example, in the soprano aria "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace" may seem obscure without knowledge of the original poetic context, which describes how welcome and warmly received are the feet of a messenger bringing good news who is first seen running on a far distant hill before gradually coming closer.

The three-part layout is consistent with that of the Italian 'opera seria' to which both Handel and his audiences were accustomed, with the first part concerning the prophecies and nativity of Christ, the second his passion and reincarnation, and the third reflecting on his role as Saviour. Unlike most of Handel's oratorios, there are no specific characters (to have represented Christ through an individual singer would have been considered blasphemous, and the first London performance still attracted considerable controversy and debate concerning the suitability of the subject-matter), and only in a few isolated cases is there any reported speech. Nonetheless the narrative has an extraordinary sweep and intensity, and for this Jennens as well as Handel deserves great credit.

Early performances and revisions

Handel wrote *Messiah* at his London home in Brook Street, and in keeping with all his other oratorios and operas written there he seems to have anticipated a London première. But he then accepted an invitation from the Duke of Devonshire, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, to give a season of concerts in Dublin in 1741-42. Thus it was that, the original score adapted or transposed in a few places to accommodate the forces available, *Messiah* was given its first performance on 13 April 1742 at the Great Music Hall, Fishamble Street. It was a Benefit Concert in aid of three charities – The Society for Prisoners' Debt Relief, the Mercers' Hospital and the Charitable Infirmary – and it raised a total of £400. This sum was divided equally between the three charities, and the concert also secured the release of one-hundred-and-forty-two prisoners, indebted but no longer in debt. No less importantly, Handel and Jennens' work attracted universal praise and admiration. Handel remained in Dublin for a further four months, signing off his visit with a second performance of *Messiah* on 3 June. This time the proceeds were for the composer's own, private benefit.

Handel was to direct a total of thirty-six performances of *Messiah* before his death in 1759, all except the first two taking place in London. The London première, which took place at the Covent Garden Theatre on 23 March 1743, was not a success, due to the controversy that preceded it in the press, but all criticism focused on the work's unsuitability for presentation in a theatre (and for being performed by renowned singing actresses who regularly appeared in such dens of iniquity) rather than on Handel's music. The work was more firmly accepted with each repeat performance, and by the time Handel set up an annual charity performance of the work at the newly built chapel of the Foundling Hospital at Coram Fields in 1750, the work's merits and mastery were widely acknowledged.

As was his custom, Handel continued to adapt and revise the score with every revival, with the result that there is no single, definitive version of the piece. Generally his changes were made to ensure that the music perfectly 'fitted' the soloists assembled for each particular performance, and he might also adapt the distribution of arias dependent on the varying quality of each singer. Other revisions, though, were new ideas aimed at heightening the drama and surprising the expectations of the audience, and there can be little room for debate that the decision, for example, to suddenly interrupt "Why do the nations" with the ensuing chorus before the bass soloist can begin a reprise of the main section of the aria is a dramatic and masterly improvement on the original full 'da capo'. This evening's performance presents a version of the work which seeks to incorporate Handel's lasting preferences, including the versions of "But who may abide the day of his coming" and "Thou art gone up on high" which he adapted in 1750 for the great castrato Gaetano Guadagni.

Performing Messiah today

Nowadays *Messiah* is one of the most frequently performed works in the repertoire, and performances of the work come in all shapes and sizes. The penchant for huge forces began surprisingly early – the 1784 performances held at Westminster Abbey to celebrate Handel's centenary (or so they thought; they were actually a year early!) used five hundred performers – and Mozart's 1789 re-orchestration was actually the second of numerous attempts to augment what is even by Handel's terms a relatively modest orchestration. Handel's notation in any case left certain details of exactly who plays what unspecified, encouraging a flexibility influenced by the size and acoustic of the venue and assuming a basic knowledge of eighteenth-century performance practice. On the other hand, such an unusual request as that specified in the autograph score for the trumpets to play "in the distance and a little quietly" during the chorus "Glory to God" was already omitted in some of Handel's subsequent sources.

In recent decades the resurgence of interest and expertise in period instruments and baroque performance practice has gradually enabled historically informed performances to regain the ascendancy. In truth, though, the only real authenticity still achievable is the authenticity of response to the text and the music. Our prime responsibilities as performers are to tell the story, to understand and communicate the text, and to bring out the word painting and the effervescent glory and profundity of Handel's faith as expressed through his extraordinary music. In seeking these goals we run the risk of being hampered by the complacency of familiarity, given how many times *Messiah* is performed every December, but to perform a work of this stature and greatness can only ever be a privilege.

In searching for the essence of *Messiah* it is important to remember that the work was not performed in a church until some nine years after its composition – before its first performance in the chapel of the Foundling Hospital it had been performed exclusively in theatres or concert halls – and that it was regularly referred to as an 'entertainment', even by Jennens himself. Handel, however, who surely deserves the last word, seems to have been upset by this nomenclature, replying to Lord Kinnoul's congratulations on such a "splendid entertainment" with the words: "I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better".

Libretto

Part the First

1. Symphony (Overture)

2. Accompanied recitative (tenor)

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God; speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplish'd, that her iniquity is pardon'd.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

[*Isaiab 40: 1-3*]

3. Air (tenor)

Ev'ry valley shall be exalted, and ev'ry mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight, and the rough places plain.

[*Isaiab 40: 4*]

4. Chorus

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

[*Isaiab 40: 5*]

5. Accompanied recitative (bass)

Thus saith the Lord of Hosts: "Yet once a little while and I will shake the heav'ns and the earth; the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations; and the desire of all nations shall come."

[*Haggai 2: 6-7*]

"The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His temple, ev'n the Messenger of the Covenant, whom you delight in; behold, He shall come", saith the Lord of Hosts.

[*Malachi 3: 1*]

6. Air (alto)

But who may abide the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appeareth?

For He is like a refiner's fire.

[*Malachi 3: 2*]

7. Chorus

And He shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness. [Malachi 3: 3]

Recitative (alto)

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel, God with us.

[*Isaiab 7: 14; Matthew 1: 23*]

8. Air (alto) and Chorus

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain. O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, behold your god.

Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.

[*Isaiab 40: 9, 60: 1*]

9. Accompanied recitative (bass)

For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people; but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.

[*Isaiah 60: 2-3*]

10. Air (bass)

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

[*Isaiah 9: 2*]

11. Chorus

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

[*Isaiah 9: 6*]

12. Pifa (Pastoral symphony)

Recitative (soprano)

There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

[*Luke 2: 8*]

13. Accompanied recitative (soprano)

And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid.

[*Luke 2: 9*]

Recitative (soprano)

And the angel said unto them: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

[*Luke 2: 10-11*]

14. Accompanied recitative (soprano)

And suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying:

[*Luke 2: 13*]

15. Chorus

"Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will towards men."

[*Luke 2: 14*]

16. Air (soprano)

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem. Behold, thy King cometh unto thee. He is the righteous Saviour, and He shall speak peace unto the heathen.

[*Zechariah 9: 9-10*]

Recitative (alto)

Then shall the eyes of the blind be open'd, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.

[*Isaiah 35: 5-6*]

17. Duet (alto, soprano)

He shall feed His flock like a shepherd; and He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

[*Isaiah 40: 11*]

Come unto Him all ye that labour, come unto Him all ye that are heavy laden, and He will give you rest. Take his yoke upon you and learn of Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

[*Matthew 11: 28-29*]

18. Chorus

His yoke is easy, His burthen is light.

[*Matthew 11: 30*]

Part the Second

19. Chorus

Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. [John 1: 29]

20. Air (alto)

He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

He gave His back to the smiters, and His cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; He hid not His face from shame and spitting. [Isaiah 53: 3, 50: 6]

21. Chorus

Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him. [Isaiah 53: 4-5]

22. Chorus

And with His stripes we are healed. [Isaiah 53: 5]

23. Chorus

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned ev'ry one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. [Isaiah 53: 6]

24. Accompanied recitative (tenor)

All they that see Him laugh Him to scorn; they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying: [Psalm 22: 7]

25. Chorus

"He trusted in God that He would deliver Him; let Him deliver Him, if He delight in Him." [Psalm 22: 8]

26. Accompanied recitative (tenor)

Thy rebuke hath broken His heart; He is full of heaviness. He looked for some to have pity on Him, but there was no man, neither found He any to comfort him. [Psalm 69: 20]

27. Arioso (tenor)

Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto His sorrow. [Lamentations 1: 12]

28. Accompanied recitative (tenor)

He was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgressions of Thy people was He stricken. [Isaiah 53: 8]

29. Air (tenor)

But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell; nor didst Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption. [Psalm 16: 10]

30. Chorus

Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.

Who is this King of Glory?

The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in.

Who is this King of Glory?

The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of Glory.

[Psalm 24: 7-10]

Recitative (tenor)

Unto which of the angels said He at any time: "Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee"? [Hebrews 1: 5]

31. Chorus

Let all the angels of God worship Him. [Hebrews 1: 6]

32. Air (alto)

Thou art gone up on high; Thou hast led captivity captive, and received gifts for men, yea, even from Thine enemies, that the Lord God might dwell among them.

[Psalm 68: 18]

33. Chorus

The Lord gave the word; great was the company of the preachers. [Psalm 68: 11]

34. Air (soprano)

How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.

[Isaiah 52: 7, Romans 10: 15]

35. Chorus

Their sound is gone out into all lands, and their words unto the ends of the world. [Romans 10: 18, Psalm 19: 4]

36. Air (bass)

Why do the nations so furiously rage together, and why do the people imagine a vain thing?

The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord, and against His anointed.

[Psalm 2: 1-2]

37. Chorus

Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their yokes from us. [Psalm 2: 3]

Recitative (tenor)

He that dwelleth in Heav'n shall laugh them to scorn; The Lord shall have them in derision. [Psalm 2: 4]

38. Air (tenor)

Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. [Psalm 2: 9]

39. Chorus

Hallelujah! for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth.

The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever.

King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. Hallelujah!

[Revelation 19: 6, 11: 15, 19: 16]

Part the Third

40. Air (soprano)

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.

For now is Christ risen from the dead, the first-fruits of them that sleep. [Job 19: 25-26; I Corinthians 15: 20]

41. Chorus

Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. [I Corinthians 15: 21-22]

42. Accompanied recitative (bass)

Behold, I tell you a mystery: we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be chang'd in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. [I Corinthians 15: 51-52]

43. Air (bass)

The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be rais'd incorruptible, and we shall be chang'd.

For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. [I Corinthians 15: 52-53]

Recitative (alto)

Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallow'd up in victory." [I Corinthians 15: 54]

44. Duet (alto, tenor)

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.

[I Corinthians 15: 55-56]

45. Chorus

But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. [I Corinthians 15: 57]

46. Air (soprano)

If God be for us, who can be against us? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is at the right hand of God, who makes intercession for us. [Romans 8: 31, 33-34]

47. Chorus

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His blood, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.

Blessing and honour, glory and pow'r be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever.

Amen.

[Revelation 5: 12-14]

Choir

Soprano

Amy Carson
Kirsty Hopkins

Tenor

Julian Forbes
John McMunn

Alto

David Bates
Kate Symonds-Joy

Bass

Alex Ashworth
Sam Evans

Orchestra

Violin 1

Matthew Truscott (Leader)
Iona Davies
Nia Lewis

Oboe

James Eastaway

Trumpet

Paul Sharp
Simon Desbruslais

Violin 2

Jill Samuel
William Thorp
Daniel Edgar

Timpani

Elizabeth Barker

Viola

Lisa Cochrane

Harpsichord

Christopher Bucknall

Cello

Joseph Crouch

Keyboard
technician

Keith McGowan

Bass

Cecelia Bruggemeyer

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