

NOTES on HANDEL'S *MESSIAH*

Albany Pro Musica, 2005

David Griggs-Janower

There is much I would like to tell you tonight about Handel's *Messiah*, about other works, about 25 years with APM, but as usual I've programmed too much music because I can't bear to leave anything out (and I've left *much* out!), so there's no time. So permit some remarks, which you may find interesting, either before we perform, or even weeks after! I said in our program, "What's left to say about *Messiah*?" Read on, McDuff!

Handel, the Father of the Oratorio. One doesn't hear that, as one hears of Haydn being Father of the Symphony, but it's absolutely true. There were Italian "oratorios" in the late 17th-early 18th centuries (Handel lived in Italy at the beginning of the 1700s, as a very young man), but they were essentially sacred operas, with only a few characters and no chorus. They seem to have developed during Lent and in Rome in general, where secular (heathen!) operas were forbidden. The plots were taken from Bible stories or the lives of the saints, and they were musically little more than vehicles for opera singers to strut their stuff. Handel wrote two of these.

Years later, living in England, he wrote a "real" oratorio, on the Biblical subject of Queen Esther, in English (1720, rev. 1732). Little by little Handel created the oratorio form, adding a significant role for the chorus (yay!) and making the oratorios much more dramatic. On the whole the librettos, now always in English, were fashioned anew; these were more dramatic, "more natural and more alive" [Jens Peter Larsen] than the stereotypical Italian opera libretto. The use of English also resulted in a shift away from Italian opera singers, who tended to perform in order to display their virtuosity (think Farinelli) and toward English actor-singers, who could carry the drama as well as a tune. The plots were based on Biblical stories, and the central character was usually an Old Testament heroic figure; a list of some of his oratorios, mostly from the 1730s, makes this clear: *Athalia*, *Deborah*, *Joshua*, *Solomon*, *Saul*, *Judas Maccabeus*, *Susanna*, *Theodora*, *Joseph*, *Samson*, *Belshazzar*...

Two oratorios were on classical subjects, and are more like unstaged operas (Handel hoped they would be staged?), with minor choral roles: *Semele*, which is a fabulous work, by the way, and *Hercules* (both 1743-44). And two didn't fit the mold precisely: *Israel in Egypt* (1738) and *Messiah* (1742). Neither of these two has individual characters, and both are entirely the words of the Bible, rather than having a newly-created libretto; the chorus and soloists speak the actual Scriptures. Further, *Israel in Egypt* is almost entirely choral, and *Messiah*, with almost no narrative, is one of the few New Testament works. Handel's friend Charles Jennens did an incredible and interesting job of choosing passages from a variety of places in the Old and New Testaments for *Messiah*: Isaiah, Haggai, Job, Malachi, Matthew, Luke, John, Zechariah, Psalms, Acts, Lamentations, Corinthians I, Hebrews, Ephesians, Romans, and Revelations. Rather than a dramatic story, "the libretto is a meditation on the significance of [Jesus] as Messiah in Christian thought and belief." [Watkins Shaw] But at least one writer calls it the "first time the mighty drama of human redemption was treated in an epic poem." [Robert Manson Myers.]

Handel finished part one, a hundred pages of score, in 6 days. The entire 259 pages took him 24 days. We have complete information for the first of many annual performances for charity at the Foundling Hospital, so we know Handel used an orchestra of 15 violins (divided into 1sts and 2nds), 5 violas, 3 cellos, 2 double basses, 4 bassoons, 4 oboes, 2 trumpets, drums, and 2 horns, probably doubling the trumpets at the octave. There were six boy sopranos, and thirteen men divided among the alto, tenor and bass parts! Quite different from tonight, I'm afraid, but we are closer than the 1784 performance with 157 strings, 26 oboes and as many bassoons, 12 trumpets and 257 singers (with no conductor!). This was the Westminster Abbey Commemoration of Handel's birth (they had his birth year wrong) so perhaps they may be forgiven their excess. In the 19th century the forces grew still larger; the London 1859 (centennial of his birth) *Messiah* had 460 in the orchestra and 2765 singers!

The premiere in Dublin was a great success; the first performance in London was only moderately successful. The work was usually referred to as "a sacred oratorio" and not by name, and the performances took place in theaters, not in churches (for another nine years). It is ironic that the composer of this work, which had received more performances in American and English churches over the centuries than any other fifty oratorios combined, was roundly criticized

by some for the blasphemy of performing a sacred work in a “playhouse” and by a “company of players.”

The three parts of *Messiah* are really not, as many have said (and I said in the program book!), “a representation of the life of Christ—a combination of Nativity, Passion and Resurrection. The work is guided by the single idea of presenting the drama of Redemption, the struggle between light and dark, between God and mankind...This is apparent both in the whole plan and in every single phase of the work.” [Larsen]

Part I is a series of scenes, each with this light-darkness struggle. And this struggle takes place not only between sections and between movements, but within movements. The bass arioso and aria, “For behold, darkness shall over the earth” and “The people that walked in darkness” both begin in a very dark and gloomy minor key (and what could possibly be more dark and gloomy than the very odd melody of “The People that Walked,” who are clearly stumbling blindly). But the minor soon yields to major at “have seen a great light.”

This sort of thing is familiar, darkness being minor and light turning it major, and obvious once pointed out. But as an organizing principle it is far less obvious. Perhaps hearing the work with new ideas about the organization of the text will make it fresher to us.

THE PROPHECIES/GOD’S PLAN FOR REDEMPTION THROUGH A MESSIAH

Overture E minor Darkness (A people in captivity without hope)

Scene 1: God’s Comfort and Praise
Comfort ye, my people, saith your God E major/A major (Light, Hope)
Ev’ry valley shall be exalted
And the Glory of the Lord shall be revealed

Scene 2: The Remoteness of Almighty God to Man
Thus saith the Lord of Hosts D minor/G minor (Darkness)
But who may abide the day of his coming?
For he is like a refiner’s fire!
And he shall purify the sons of Levi(with his refining fire)

Scene 3: The Message of Joy
Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son D major (Light)
O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion (“Arise, shine, for thy light is come” - the light breaks through)

Scene 4: The Light Penetrates the Darkness
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth B minor
The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light
For unto us a child is born G major The victorious light - Wonderful! Counselor!

FULFILLMENT OF PROPHECIES/THE BIRTH

Scene 5: The Christmas Message
Pastoral symphony (pifa) Only major keys now
There were shepherds abiding in the field
Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth

Scene 6: Christ’s Sojourn on Earth/Christ’s invitation
Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion
Then shall the eyes of the blind be open’d
He shall feed his flock/Come unto him, all ye that labour
His yoke is easy, his burthen is light (Hallelujah)