

## HANDEL MESSIAH HWV56

'...he has made a fine Entertainment of it, tho' not near so good as he might & ought to have done. I have with great difficulty made him correct some of the grossest faults in the composition, but he retain'd his Overture obstinately, in which there are some passages unworthy of Handel, but much more unworthy of the Messiah.'

It seems extraordinary that anyone could have been quite so negative about one of the pinnacles of the oratorio, let alone its creator and librettist (and good friend of Handel), Charles Jennens. But *Messiah* was a window into Jennens' soul, and perhaps Handel might never have lived up to his expectations. Jennens possibly took some umbrage from Handel's apparent attitude to it: initially slow to get around to writing it – he laid it aside when he decided that he needed something of 'gayer turn' for the 1739 season (*l'Allegro*). When he did start composing, he finished it within a month. Jennens had planned a London performance of it in Holy Week; Handel took it to Dublin, giving its premier there (without Jennens) in April 1742.

Perhaps seeking a little conciliation, Handel wrote to Jennens of the excitement 'his' oratorio had caused:

'The Nobility did me the Honour to make among themselves a Subscription for 6 Nights, which did fill a Room of 600 Persons, so that I needed not sell one single Ticket at the Door, without Vanity the Performance was received with a general Approbation.'

Handel performed *Messiah* thirty-six times, and it became a fundraiser for the Foundling Hospital, to which he bequeathed his score and parts. It is now his most performed work, and ironic that it is the chief reason for Jennens' own fame. Jennens himself vowed that 'I will put no more sacred words into his hands, to be thus abus'd', but he soon relented, and included various Biblical passages in *Belshazzar* two years later: perhaps he was not so disappointed with *Messiah* after all.

*Messiah* is a statement both of Jennens' faith and of Handel's. Jennens was a high Anglican who believed firmly in the importance of the mysteries of revelation, resurrection and redemption. He was filled with concern at the rise of Deism, which argued the mystery out of Christianity: reason was all you needed; revelation was irrelevant. God created the universe, and He had no need to act in it through history and miracles. Deism pounded the pillars of Christianity which Jennens felt should remain untouchable. *Messiah* was, therefore, Jennens' refutation of Deism, and his restatement of the centrality of mystery.

Handel also believed in the importance of history and mystery. He created the Old Testament English oratorio, and there are many instances in both *Messiah* and his music more generally suggesting the centrality of mystery to his faith. Handel clearly felt the significance of *Messiah*: he signed off the manuscript

SDG (*Soli Deo Gloria*, 'To God alone be glory'), and his revisions of *Messiah* were not merely variants to suit different singers, but genuine improvements, following Jennens' suggestions.

The oratorio is in three parts, corresponding with the three mysteries: revelation, resurrection and redemption. Most of the text of *Messiah* comes from the Old Testament, emphasising biblical typology. Typology is the belief that the Old Testament provided types, or pre-figurings, to Christ's antitype (answering figure) in the New Testament. For example, to describe Christ's birth, Jennens cleverly mingles passages from the Gospels with Old Testament prophecies, highlighting the reciprocity of the two Testaments. The third part is largely taken from St Paul, but starts with a passage from Job. And the two Pauline passages in the second part, 'How beautiful are the feet' and 'Their sound is gone out', are Paul's own quotations from the Psalms and Isaiah – showing the connection between Old and New Testaments. Jennens' use of typology was part of the anti-Deist stance: the Deists played down the importance of the Old Testament, viewing it as one tradition of mythology.

Handel was well aware of this biblical typology. A great example is the chorus 'Since by man came death'. This is in an A<sup>1</sup>B<sup>1</sup>A<sup>2</sup>B<sup>2</sup> structure: the A sections are written in a deliberately antiquated style (harking back to the renaissance); the B sections are written in the most modern style, so that the music, as well as the text, reflects the 'modern' antitype of the 'ancient' type.

A typological arrangement of biblical passages hardly sounds like ingredients for a 'fine Entertainment,' but Handel suffuses the work with high drama and moments of both reflection and jubilation. The scene of Christ's birth is almost conventional dramatic oratorio writing: Luke's Gospel provides dramatic recitative, and Handel uses the orchestra and choir as shepherds and angels (even suggesting that the trumpets started the chorus 'Glory to God' far away, as if fluttering in heaven). Another scene of high drama is Christ's passion. The chorus 'Surely he has borne our griefs' is a French overture, followed by a fugue, whose subject may represent the cross. Then we have a series of contrasting choruses and recitatives, including the equivalent of Bach's *Kreuzige* choruses in his Passions ('He trusted in God'). The scene ends with the aria 'Behold and see,' an air of bare loneliness. Interestingly, this aria is in E minor, the key of the Overture, and a key symbolising hope after hardship. This aria is answered by the next, 'But Thou didst not leave', in A major (itself perhaps referring to the Part I chorus 'And the Glory of the Lord').

*Messiah* works on so many levels. It is full of good tunes and fine choruses, but it is also immensely skilfully wrought in both musical terms and in theological. When Jennens wrote that 'I hope he will lay out his whole genius & Skill upon it, that the Composition may excell all his former Compositions, as the Subject excells every other Subject', he need not have worried.

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