

## Handel – *Messiah*

The sheer fame of *Messiah* makes it all too easy to overlook what a radical composition it is. The concept of plot is all but rejected – and with it, the allocation of roles to the various voices – yet text and music alike are coherent, making for a whole that continues to move audiences to this day. Handel himself had composed works free of any narrative before, mostly secular allegories, but the scope of *Messiah* extends much further. Similarly, large-scale compositions in the Western choral tradition tend to be based on stories drawn from the Old Testament or the early days of Christianity. Examinations of Christ's life on Earth – bearing in mind that settings of the Passion are primarily concerned with the events leading to his death – are comparatively rare.

Even then, the incarnation is only relevant to *Messiah* inasmuch as it is seen through the prism of its ramifications on the Christian faith. Critics may disagree about the extent of Charles Jennens' literary skills when it came to his own writings, but his compilation of Biblical verses is masterful here. Part One depicts the birth of Christ, as prophesied by Isaiah and related by St Luke, bringing comfort to God's people. Part Two focuses on his death, resurrection and ascension to the throne of Heaven, but (save for the single verse of the opening chorus) without a single word being taken from the Gospels. Finally, Part Three looks ahead to Christ's triumph over death as the ultimate promise of redemption, again with only the most oblique of narrative touches.

There is also much to admire in Handel's ability to compose music to reflect the deeper meaning of the text. He chooses his keys with care, for example using the warmth of E major for the comfort of both the tenor's opening recitative and *I know that my Redeemer liveth*, while an appropriately cold C minor is reserved for the scourging of Christ in the central section of *He was despised* and the mocking *He trusted in God*. Of the choral movements, *Let us break their bonds* is notable for the voices piling in one on top of another in excitement, while at the opposite extreme, the chilling words 'Since by man came death' are sung quietly with no instrumental support. The soloists' recitatives are predominantly with continuo accompaniment, with a few making effective use of the orchestra instead: the hesitant strings which introduce *For behold, darkness shall cover the earth*, for instance, later break out in a flurry of semiquavers to depict the sudden appearance of 'a multitude of the heavenly host' to the shepherds.

It was not until 1750, with the first of its annual performances in aid of London's Foundling Hospital, that *Messiah* became a popular success – eight years after the work's première in Dublin. A practical composer at heart, Handel had made many revisions to the score in the meantime, as shown by the wealth of alternative movements (among them arias rewritten to suit other voice types). Far from stopping at his death, this process persisted for a full two centuries afterwards: Mozart's addition of wind parts (eliminating the need for an organ continuo) resulted in a not always successful refashioning of a Baroque original to suit Classical tastes which survives largely as a curio today. Thomas Beecham's 1950s rescoring for symphony orchestra – including an anvil! – was, in part, prompted by ever-larger choirs (a Georgian legacy) performing the work underpinned by only a fraction of the full modern orchestra. Such excess pushed the grandeur so far that the next logical step, as George Bernard Shaw had called for a hundred years earlier, was to strip things back to something nearing Handel's original. Tonight's performance reflects this observance of period practice, though the continuing popularity of *Messiah* among choral societies ensures that larger-scale interpretations still have their place.

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