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Handel and the Messiah

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HANDEL AND THE MESSIAH

Special Studies

for

Mr. George Keck

Fall 1970

by

Bernice Battle

Because of my interest in music and the fact that the Ouachita Baptist University Choir, of which I am a member, performed George Frederick Handel's work, The Messiah, this semester, I chose to delve into the world and work of this artist and to investigate his talent in relation particularly to The Messiah. I placed particular emphasis in my study on the purpose of the writing and the effect this great oratorio has produced.

Handel was born at Halle in Saxony on February 23, 1685, which was the same year of birth as Johann Sebastian Bach. He was the son of George Handel, a barber and surgeon who rose to the position of elector of Saxony, and Dorothea Taust. Handel's father greatly discouraged the development of his musical talent since he had intended that his son study law. From this comes the rumor that Handel practiced secretly on a clavichord hidden in the attic of his early childhood home.

At age eight on a visit to Saxe-Weissenfels with his father, young George played the organ with the court musicians. The duke overheard this performance and encouraged Handel's father to aid the child in the development of his talent. From then on Handel received instruction from Zachau who was one of the best organists in Halle.

At about age twelve, he was offered a trip to Italy by King Frederick I of Prussia for further musical training, but his father would not allow this. In 1702 after his father's death, Handel

obtained a position as organist in Halle. His attempts at composition had already been known early in his career.

In 1703, Handel went to Hamburg and became a member of the orchestra under Reinhold Keiser. He worked his way from violinist to conductor of the orchestra during Keiser's absence caused by debt.

On January 8, 1705, there was performed in Hamburg Handel's German opera, Almira, which was followed several weeks later by a work of the same class entitled Nero.

Handel left Hamburg in 1706 and traveled to Italy where he remained for three years. During this time he wrote two operas and two oratorios and developed his Italian style of opera. He was soon to become widely known throughout the musical world.

Handel was offered the position of cappellmeister to the Elector of Hanover which he accepted in 1709 on the condition that he could have a leave of absence to visit England, which he did in 1710.

He arrived in London as the composer of Italian opera. Rinaldo, an opera supposedly composed in two weeks, was his first success at the Haymarket in London on February 24, 1711. In June of the same year Handel returned to Germany, but promise of fame and fortune in England brought him back in January, 1712. In this period belong several operas and oratorios.

In 1716, he went with the king on a trip to Germany, where he wrote a second German "passion." He later returned to England and was the conductor of private concerts for the duke of Chandos for three years. In 1720, Handel appeared to the public again as the impresario of Italian opera.

For twenty years, Handel engaged in many operatic ventures in spite of his own bankruptcy in 1737 and an attack of paralysis caused by anxiety and fatigue.

It is doubted that Handel's change from opera to oratorio was in the interest of musical art, but it is fortunate since in the oratorio he displays the full expression of his great genius. The Messiah was the embodiment of a deep religious feeling of the people of England. Handel, by leaving opera for oratorio, changed from an entertainer of a caste to the artist of the people in the highest and widest sense.

In 1745, Handel became bankrupt for a second time. He was blind the last six years of his life but worked until the very end. He even attended a performance of his Messiah a week before he died on April 14, 1759. He was buried in Westminster Abbey as a man who contributed much to the music of England.

Not only is Handel's Messiah a work of art, but it is also the first attempt to view the drama of human existence from the standpoint of artistic value. ~~As~~ a whole, its impressiveness is due to Handel's great sense ^{of} ~~for~~ the unity of a work and shows the culmination of this quality ~~as~~ he had developed throughout his years of musical composition. It is not merely a number of scenes from the life of Jesus that are dramatically linked together, but was written as a representative of the fulfillment of redemption through the Divine Redeemer.

In comparison to Bach's St. Matthew Passion, we see that Bach's work was written as a church service primarily for edification. Handel's work is more of a poem dealing with ideas as opposed to Bach's

concern with facts. As Bach's contemporary, Handel separated himself by this dealing into the realm of Christianity from an idealistic standpoint.

As for Handel's dealing with Christianity, his views were quite unusual for his time. He realized that the facts of Christ's life were meaningless until they fulfilled themselves in their symbolism. He preferred to believe that the Christian system was a picture of human destiny, that is, the moral story of man himself. In order to make the crucifixion a religious mystery, Handel felt that each man must transform it into something that happens for the sake of the soul.

As I said earlier, the idea of The Messiah is from a purely artistic viewpoint. It is in itself extremely edifying, but this edificatory purpose has been read into it by modern hearers. It is not intended to be a sermon but a concert piece for public performance. It can be said that each modern hearer puts into and draws from the work what he wishes to ascertain.

The Messiah itself was compiled and edited by Thomas Jennens, and it is popularly believed that he and Handel worked together with Handel doing the largest part of the actual preparation. Jennens is believed to be, however, the person mainly responsible for the emphasis that was placed on ideas rather than the mere statement of facts.

The Messiah is typical of other oratorios in composition. It is divided into three parts:

1. The prophecy and realization of God's Plan to redeem

mankind by the coming of the Messiah.

2. The accomplishment of redemption by the sacrifice of Jesus, mankind's rejection of God's offer, and mankind's utter defeat when trying to oppose the power of the Almighty.
3. A Hymn of Thanksgiving for the final overthrow of Death.

Each section is then subdivided into sub-sections which follow this outline:

1. A division of the text into shorter sections.
2. The shaping of each section as a relatively independent group, often increasing in tension and sometimes rising from recitative through aria to chorus, sometimes merely from aria to chorus, and sometimes, particularly in the second and third parts, in the form of more complicated groups with several arias and inserted choruses of varied character.
3. The stressing of the special nature of each of the three main parts by opening and final choruses, except in the third part where there is only a final chorus, which are not connected with their neighbors but act as Prologue or Epilogue to that part as a whole.

The score of The Messiah is one of the simplest Handel ever wrote. Except in the choruses where the voice parts are doubled with the strings, the accompaniments are written almost without exception for strings alone. Even in the opening of the "Hallelujah," one of the most interesting things in all music, every chord is a derivation of D, A, or G.

The Messiah was written in twenty-four days. This seems feasible when we couple with this statement the fact that much of the music was previously used by Handel in other works. It was first performed on April 18, 1742 in Dublin. On March 23, 1743, The Messiah was presented in London, and in Berlin on April, 1786, it was again performed due to the influence of Philip Emanuel Bach. The great Handel

commemoration was held in London on May 29, 1784. The Messiah was performed by an orchestra and 525 voice chorus.

There are several manuscripts and a few printed editions of The Messiah that may be used as a basis of study. All contain several variations, and it is impossible to ascertain whether any are duplicates of the original writing. So, what is considered to be the original manuscript, Handel's autograph copy, and several other original manuscripts are the basis used for all other manuscripts and printed editions.

Since up until the time of the writing of The Messiah Handel was concerned mainly with the writing of operas and their performance, it can be seen that possibly and also most likely his original purpose in writing The Messiah was to further his monetary interests. Handel was a professional and as a professional, he depended on his music for his well-being. He chose the topic of the life of Christ because it would probably sell the best and was a fairly universal theme on which to base his work. He attempted to aim his work at the mass of people as could be understood from the monetary view.

Even if Handel did intend to make money from The Messiah, this fact does not detract in the least from the beauty and simplicity of the music and the inspirational quality that has been added by modern hearers. What was introduced as a piece for concert hall performances has now developed into the height of sacred music.

The Messiah contributed much to the musical advancement of the English people as well as the upgrading of sacred music it brought about. Up until the time of its writing, England was more or less a follower in European music rather than a leader. They could now

step forward in the field of music to compete with the great Bach family of Germany and other European musical giants who had up until that time controlled the musical world.

One question has remained ever prevalent in my mind throughout this semester. That is, "Why is The Messiah so famous and so popular?" I have ^{only} begun to ~~only~~ partially answer this question to my satisfaction in my semester of study and performance of The Messiah. I can see, as I have already stated, that the theme of the work is a highly appealing and universal one, but there seems to be much more than just this that causes the popularity of Handel's most famous work. There seems a captivating interest in the music that makes it great. No matter how often one hears this music, one invariably will attend the performance over and over. It is a never dying, never fading interest. The music is continually exciting, and it keeps the attention of the audience during the entire performance.

Whatever the source of its great popularity, The Messiah remains at the top in the world of sacred music. It far exceeds any music of its type written before or since, and its lasting appeal tends to make one feel that it will never die.

I think my most valuable experience with my studies this semester has been the actual performance of The Messiah with the Ouachita Baptist University Choir and Orchestra. Since this was my first experience in performing with an orchestra, I enjoyed my part immensely. The excitement of the performance and its beauty is enjoyed by the performers as well as the audience. Even after much practicing, the music has not lost its beauty in my eyes.

It is my belief that the greatness of The Messiah is found in the

fact that Handel skillfully made use of secular themes in the creation of this most sacred work. Despite the fact that he was not a church musician, Handel created the greatest of sacred choral works.

One of the most interesting stories I have read concerning Handel and The Messiah seems to sum up the entire situation of its greatness. When Handel's servant took his chocolate to him in the early morning, he found Handel at work on the manuscript of The Messiah, so greatly moved by his thoughts and visions that the tears were falling on the notes and blotting the page. Although this is probably a fictitious story, it could be taken as an illustration of the feeling that modern hearers have for the greatness of George Frederick Handel and his great work, The Messiah.

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