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The Oratorio: Paradox in Music

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"THE ORATORIO:
PARADOX IN MUSIC"

Prepared in Association With the
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THE ORATORIO:
PARADOX IN MUSIC

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Without a doubt, the most ambiguous and obscure of the larger musical forms is the oratorio. It is extremely difficult to define because it has taken so many meanings at different times and in different countries. One may explain or describe it as a dramatic poem, usually of religious or contemplative character (but not liturgical), to be performed throughout by solo voices, chorus, and orchestra in a concert hall or church without the assistance of scenery, costumes, or action.¹ This description, however, does not cover every example of oratorical literature; exceptions are already evident, even with the works by composers of one century-- Bach's Christmas Oratorio and Handel's Occasional Oratorio are in no sense dramatic; Haydn's Seasons is in no sense sacred; Handel's Israel in Egypt is almost entirely choral, while his Trionfo del Tempo and La Resurrezione have no chorus at all; "full orchestra" can only be a relative term, and at all periods some oratorios have been staged and others not.²

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1. Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians, (Colles, H.C., Ed.), (The MacMillan Company) p.708
 2. Dean, Winston, Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques, (Oxford University Press) p.3

Miscellaneous concerts of sacred music have been called 'oratorios'; for example, those given in Lent toward the end of the eighteenth century.³ Even single-movement sacred vocal compositions have had the name applied to them; this was probably the nature of the 'oratorio' mentioned in the announcement at New York in 1751 to be sung between the acts of "The Beggar's Opera".⁴

The historian overlooking the situation finds himself playing a kind of blind man's bluff.⁵ After despair, he may emerge with no more positive conclusion than that an oratorio is a fairly serious work of fairly large proportions for voice and instruments.⁶ The attempt to define the form, then, becomes a problem of major proportions in that no consistency is evident.

If all the ingrediants are so variable, how, then, do we conclude what the essential quality of the oratorio is? The question can only be answered with reference to each period and each country individually.

It is impossible to say when, where, or by whom the first dramatic representation of a scene from the Scriptures was attempted.⁷ We know that from the tenth to the late thirteenth century there flourished all over Europe a form

3. Scholes, Percy, The Oxford Dictionary of Music, (Oxford University Press) p. 726

4. Ibid., p.727.

5. Dean, Op. cit., p.3

6. Ibid., pp.3-4

7. Groves, Op. cit., p.708

of liturgical drama.⁸ These earliest surviving examples of dramatized Scripture come from the Winchester Troper about the year 980, and were dramas written in Latin and performed by the clergy in churches and cathedrals with costumes, scenery, and action, sometimes on a very elaborate scale.⁹

Another of the oldest examples of which we have a certain record is the "Festum asinorum" celebrated in Beauvais and Sens in the twelfth century and long remembered in connection with a famous carol, the "Prose de l'ane."¹⁰

These dramas apparently died out early in the fourteenth century, as a result of the increasing secularity of subjects, and the diminishing influence of the church due to the corruption from within, a succession of weak Popes, the growing unrest among people, and the wars and plagues. The mystery and miracle plays reached their prime during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, springing directly from the liturgical dramas.¹¹ The subject matter remained sacred, although performance was a secular responsibility. The authors anticipated the oratorio in their division into types: mysteries (Biblical stories), miracles (lives of the Virgin and the Saints), and the later moralities (with allegorical characters, as in the familiar Everyman).¹²

8. Dean, Op. cit., p.5

9. Ibid.

10. Groves, Op.cit., p.708

11. Dean, Op.cit., p.7

12. Ibid.

The original motive power behind the oratorio was didactic, to teach with the aid of visible action.¹³ In unlettered societies the drama has always proved the most effective method of propaganda (a fact that certainly is not irrelevant to the popularity of television and movies today). It was with this in mind, no doubt, that the good priest, Phillip Neri (1515-95, later canonized and now known as St. Phillip Neri), began in Rome, in 1556, popular services especially designed to attract and hold the attention of youth.¹⁴ He thought very highly of the performances as a means of instruction, and warmly encouraged the cultivation of sacred music of all kinds, hoping to make the instruction classes as attractive and pleasurable as possible.¹⁵ On certain evenings in the week, his sermons were preceded and followed by the "dramatic rendering" of a scene from the Scripture, adapted to the understanding of the Roman youths and humbler classes.¹⁶ Too, his discourses were delivered between the acts of the drama.¹⁷

As these observances were first introduced in the small chapel for private services and prayer called the Oratory of St. Phillip's newly built church, St. Maria in Vallicella, the performances themselves were commonly spoken of as oratorios,

13. Dean, Op. cit., p.5.

14. Scholes, Op. cit., p.709.

15. Patterson, Annie W., The Story of Oratorio , (Walter Scott Publishing Company). n. 46.

16. Groves, Op. cit., p. 709.

17. Ibid.

and no long time elapsed before this term was accepted, not in Rome only, but throughout all of Europe as the distinguishing title of the 'drama sacro per musica'.¹⁸

St. Phillip died in 1595, but the performances were not discontinued. While Peri and Caccini, leaders of a group known as the Camerata, were searching for a style of dramatic music in Florence, Emilio del Cavalieri was endeavoring with equal earnestness to attain the same end in Rome. With this purpose in view he set to music a sacred drama entitled "La Rappresentazione dell' anima e del corpo."¹⁹ The music was written throughout in the 'stilo rappresentativo' of which Cavalieri claimed to be the originator.²⁰ This monodic style used recitative for the purpose of heightened expression and representation of feeling.

By a singular coincidence, the year 1600 witnessed the first performance of Cavalieri's 'Rappresentazione' and, in Florence, of Peri and Caccini's "Euridice". 'Rappresentazione' was produced in the Oratory of St, Maria in Vallicella in February, ten months before the appearance of "Euridice" in Florence.²¹

Musically, Cavalieri's "oratorio" was very similar to the first opera, Peri's "Euridice".²² The first oratorio was to be given with dresses and action and a hidden orchestra of much the same kind as that used in the first

18. Groves, Op. Cit., p.709

19. Ibid.,

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Scholes, Op. Cit., p. 727

opera.²³ This oratorio was a mystery play set to music, and nearly all(perhaps all) the mystery plays had some music mixed with their use of the speaking voice. The ancient mystery play, then, is the true source of the early oratorio and the didactic purposes of the two are absolutely identical.²⁴

"Soul and body" was Cavaliere's last work; he was unable to follow up his experiment as he would doubtless have done had he lived, and his immediate imitators were neither very clever nor very numerous. Such imitators did, however, exist, and a few of them were successful in expressing religious feeling and moral teaching in a sensitive way.²⁵

About the middle of the seventeenth century the oratorio entered a new phase, owing to the activity of Giacomo Carissimi (1605-74), another member of the Florentine Camerata, who, in his Jephtha, Judicium Salomonis, Jonas, Extremum Judicium and other works, created the first oratorios which, according to their extension and diversity of treatment, all authors seem finally agreed are fully deserving of the name oratorio. In these works, Carissimi introduces a personage known as the 'historicus' or 'testo' ('Evangelist' in in German oratorio)

23. Apel, Willi, Harvard Dictionary of Music, (Harvard University Press) p. 516.

In fact some modern writers have denied it a place in the history of the oratorio, and, mainly on account of its elaborate stage production, have placed it in the category of "sacred opera", a later example of which is Steffano Landi's Il San Alessio(1632). At any rate, it would seem as though this work were an isolated attempt which failed to

24. Scholes, Op. cit., p. 727.

25. Ibid.

to whom certain narrative passages were assigned between the the clauses of the dialogue for the purpose of carrying on the story intelligibly in the absence of scenic action.²⁶

Carissimi's most illustrious disciple and perhaps the only one whose genius shone more brightly than his own was Alessandro Scarlatti.²⁷ Though often thought of as a composer solely of art songs and keyboard pieces on the order of the invention,^{28A} Scarlatti(1659-1725) wrote many oratorios (eighteen are preserved with the music) which are very closely akin to the style of his operas, but are, truthfully, less successful than these.²⁹ He gave to the aria a definite structure which it maintained for more than a century--the well-balanced form, consisting of a first or principle strain, a second part, and a return to the original subject in the shape of the familiar "Da Capo".³⁰ This symmetrical system soon came into general use in every school in Europe.³¹ His carefully planned oratorios were full of interest, whether regarded from a musical or a dramatic point of view.

Among the most favored of Scarlatti's contemporaries were earlier, Alessandro Stradella, whose natural genius excelled that of all the best writers of this period, and then Antonio Lotti(1667-1740) and Antonio Caldara(1670- 1736) both representative of the Roman-Venetian tradition, while

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26. Apel, Op. cit., p.517.
 27. Groves, Op. cit., p.711.
 28. Apel, Op. cit., p.517.
 29. Ibid.
 30. Groves, Op. cit.,p.711.
 31. Ibid.

Leonardo Leo(1694-1744) and Nicolo Jommelli(1714-74) continued the Neapolitan type of virtuosity and vocal display, removing the oratorio even farther from its ideal.³² The Neapolitan school born in Naples in the late seventeenth century and continuing into the late eighteenth century established a type of opera and oratorio consisting mainly of recitatives and arias, choruses being almost never used, and employing the da-capo form of the aria.³³

By the close of the seventeenth century, there was a decline in Italian oratorio. It had become entertainment and was now taken only lightly by the Italian musical public.³⁴ The spirit that animated the great sixteenth century religious liturgical music passed out of Italy with the birth of the opera. It met the spirit of the Passion music in Germany and the offspring of the two is modern oratorio.³⁵

The actual personal link between the great Italians of the sixteenth century and the figure at the beginning of German oratorio, Heinrich Schutz, is Giovanni Gabrieli, who took the young Schutz in Venice as one of his pupils during the last three years of his lifetime.³⁶ In the resulting music, Schutz presents an entirely new concept

32. Groves, Op. cit., p.711.

33. Apel, Op. cit., p.517.

34. Scholes, Op. cit., p.728.

35. Groves, Op. cit., p.712.

36. Ibid., p.713.

of oratorio, in that there is no thought of the stage, no attempt at anything like a 'tune' or anything attractive; the solemnity of the subject is obviously the only thing present to his mind and his sole aim is to represent them faithfully.³⁷

Without a doubt, the greatest single episode in the history of early Germany, and the one which exerted the strongest significance upon German music, and indeed, upon all music to follow, was the Reformation led by Martin Luther. Luther not only taught the German nation to sing in church, but also led the way in a significant development of German culture and expression.³⁸ His work eventually made possible congregational participation and worship in every land, and established hymn-singing by the people as a characteristic of Protestantism.³⁹ His efforts and encouragement led to such general cultivation of church music in the first two centuries after the Reformation that musical leadership was transferred from Italy to Germany. Heinrich Schutz was the pioneer in a development which finally culminated in the mighty works of Johann Sebastian Bach. The new church music was a strophic, vertical hymn style, as opposed to the horizontal style of Palestrina with much harmony and instrumentation. The new music was for worship and meditation.

37. Groves, Op. cit., p. 713.

38. Ibid.

39. Reed, Luther D., The Lutheran Liturgy, (Muhlenberg Press) p.86.

It is well, then, that we ask ourselves, "Where would we be in music literature and history had not some of Martin Luther's objections be musical ones?" We cannot stress strongly enough the importance of the Reformation in the development of the oratorio, and the importance of Martin Luther's arrival at this particular time in history. The influence of Luther's work was far greater than he anticipated and greater than many historians of music seem to realize. Luther brought the meaning and power of the Reformation home to the German composer by his translation of the Bible, his hymns, and his reconstruction of the liturgy. His principles of worship became all-powerful, and his suggested forms guided other Reformers and other musicians on their way, the greatest and most important of whom was J.S. Bach. Were it not for the Reformation, the supreme desire of Bach to see music "in the service of Him who has given and created it" would doubtless have never been felt. The Reformation and its impact upon Bach echoes still today the principles of worship through music and will continue to do so until the end of time.

J.S. Bach, the greatest figure in all of music history, lived a century after Luther and Schutz, and wrote four oratorios--three Passion oratorios and one Christmas oratorio. (These are actually only considered oratorios when working

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40. Groves, Op. cit., p.713.

on a rather wide definition.)⁴¹ Certainly a 'St. Mark Passion' and probably another, too, have disappeared. Of the Passion oratorios, that according to St. Luke was regarded by Mendelssohn as "spurious", but it is now generally accepted as a genuine but very early work; it is of very slight importance, and demands little more than historical mention. Of the other two great works the St. John Passion is the earlier, dating from 1724, five years before the St. Matthew Passion, and is the more dramatic and less reflective of the two. The Christmas Oratorio, written five years after the St. Matthew Passion, is practically void of the drama element, and the pastoral music is the only portion which is not basically mystical in outlook. The title is Bach's own, but the Christmas Oratorio is not a whole singly conceived work like each of the Passion oratorios, but is a collection of six separate cantatas written for six separate holy-days, beginning with Christmas and ending with Epiphany.⁴²

Telemann, Bach's senior by four years, wrote other than his forty-four Passions, many oratorios on other subjects, among which Der Tag des Gerichtz and Die Tageszeiten seem to have been the best known. Telemann, without a doubt the most prolific composer of all time, may possibly have written other oratorios which are now totally extant.⁴³

41. Scholes, Op. cit., p. 728.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach wrote not only two Passions, and a Passion cantata, but also two oratorios--The Israelites in the Wilderness (1775) and The Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus (1787).⁴⁴ It is firmly believed that The Israelites in the Wilderness served in some degree as a model for Mendelssohn's Elijah, as it bears such a resemblance.⁴⁵

The two great Viennese composers of the period who enriched so many fields of music side by side, took very diverse views of the oratorio. Mozart's work in this form is altogether negligible and consists merely of two compositions--- La Betulia liberata which is really only an 'opera seria' without action, and Davidde penitente of considerably later date.⁴⁶

Haydn, on the other hand, put much of his greatest music into his oratorios.⁴⁷ He was soundly impressed by the Handelian idiom in England, which will be later discussed with that country, and he produced two oratorios that aroused new activity on the continent.⁴⁸ His first attempt at oratorio was a lengthy work, Il ritorno di Tobia, written in the Neapolitan tradition and containing little that is distinctively Haydn.⁴⁹ More widely known, and certainly of greater significance as a religious composition, is his

44. Scholes, Op. cit., p.728.

45. Ibid.

46. Groves, Op. cit., p.718.

47. Ibid.

48. Wienandt, Elwyn A., Choral Music of the Church, (Free Press) p.360.

49. Ibid.

setting of The Seven Last Words, (Die Sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze)⁵⁰

The best of Haydn's oratorios is Die Schöpfung (The Creation, 1798) which is the first great work that calls upon the resources of the symphonic orchestra in connection with the Handelian choral idiom. It matters little whether the performance is given in the German text to which Haydn wrote his work, or in the English to which we have become accustomed. The descriptive passages usually come after the sections of text and are entirely instrumental and therefore equally successful in either language.⁵¹

Beethoven's only oratorio, Christus am Oelberge (Christ on the Mount of Olives) op.85, was completed in 1803, following closely on the heels of The Creation. It, nevertheless, should not be judged by the same standards. Beethoven never achieved a comfortable familiarity with large vocal materials; he lacked the insight into the possibilities of oratorio that Haydn had gained through his English experience, and generally Beethoven could not restrain himself suitably for his subject.⁵² One may detect the "sturm und drang" of Beethoven's complex personality even in his attempt at the oratorio. To quote Dr. Wienandt in his text, Choral Music of the Church: "The Beethoven recitatives often contain imperious demands shaped into short phrases that

50. Wienandt, Op. cit., p.360.

51. Ibid., p.362.

52. Ibid., p.363.

are thunderously punctuated by orchestral chords, and the vocal solo lines dissolve into meaningless flourishes and florid 'passagi'. Even so, it is an over-simplification to dismiss Beethoven as a composer who was unsympathetic to the human voice. While he treated it more as an instrument of declamation than of lyric sensitivity, there are undeniably great moments in his oratorio. They happen, unfortunately, at rather widely separated intervals."⁵³

Schubert's essays in oratorio writing are two-- Miriam Siegesgesang(1828) and Lazarus(1820), the later left unfinished.⁵⁴ Miriam's Song of Victory is a short work that might fitly be called an 'oratorietto', and is designed for soprano solo and chorus, with only a provisional piano accompaniment.⁵⁵

Oratorio composition for the remainder of the nineteenth century was by men who were most often associated with and did their most work in the field of instrumental expression. Only in England and America did composers exist whose principal skill lay in the creation of choral music with "instrumental force" acting only to supplement the voice. First among those instrumentally oriented composers was Louis Spohr(1784-1859), a violin virtuoso and composer in all major forms of music.⁵⁶ His oratorios had high popularity

53. Wienandt, Op. cit., p.363.

54. Groves, Op. cit., p.719.

55. Ibid.

56. Wienandt, Op. cit., p.363.

in Germany, Britain, and America, but have now, like all his music practically vanished except for The Last Judgement; their rather relaxing chromatic idiom being too pervasive for modern taste.⁵⁷

Often linked with Spohr is J.C.F. Schreider (1786-1853) who wrote fifteen or sixteen oratorios which enjoyed a great reputation in their day,⁵⁸ and are now totally unknown.⁵⁹

Very different has been the fate of the oratorios of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847). St. Paul, Elijah, and Hymn of Praise long were household words, and the unfinished Christus shows enough of the same characteristics to warrant the supposition that, if the composer had lived to finish it, it would have equaled the popularity of the others. Mendelssohn's oratorios give the impression that he lived in untroubled unconsciousness of anything outside nineteenth century Protestantism. This seems to be the real secret of his vitality in England and Germany. Mendelssohn's style is completely predictable from the standpoint of style, rhythm, and harmony. He seldom, if ever, departed from the traditional harmonic language of the day. He appealed directly and with absolute sincerity to a particular form of religious sentiment. He is the only great artist, in words, color, or music, who has ever touched this 'emotional spring', and he had, and still has his reward.⁶⁰

57. Scholes, Op. cit., P. 728.
 58. Wienandt, Op. cit., P. 363.
 59. Ibid.
 60. Groves, Op. cit., P. 719.

In 1843, halfway between the production of Hymn of Praise and Elijah, Wagner's Das Lichesmahl der Apostel (The Love Feast of the Apostles) was introduced. The work for male choir is one of Wagner's mildest, and would hardly require notice were it not the solitary contribution to the oratorio field of one of the greatest of composers.⁶¹

The crowning achievement of German oratorio came from Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) who, although he did not call his work an oratorio, made for himself a place of great importance with the appearance of Ein deutsches Requiem. Brahms did not intend national identification in the title of his work; rather his adjective, deutsches, should be considered a designation of Protestant usage.⁶² As the German Requiem is not an oratorio by traditional standards, it is likewise, by the same token, not a Requiem in the traditional sense and form. He was actually writing music which he intended for his own funeral.

Brahms was an excellent contrapuntist, and, equally important, he was also sufficiently steeped in the traditions of an earlier time to concern himself with the most careful relationships between words and music. Nowhere in the Requiem do voices or instruments undertake passages that are not entirely subordinate to the text.⁶³

No direct successors to Brahms appeared on the German

61. Groves, Op. cit., p. 719.

62. Wienandt, Op. cit., p. 369.

63. Ibid.

scene. The Germans had already made their mark in England with the oratorio, but in their home country the contemporaries and successors of Brahms continued on other paths.⁶⁴ Only in the twentieth century has there been a renewed interest in oratorio composition, some of it by composers who have been recognized principally in secular circles, but a considerable amount coming from a newly emerging group who have returned to performing and composing for the church, bringing much dignity back into the calling of church musicians.⁶⁵ There are too many for thorough examination, but a few may be mentioned as representative: Hugo Distler(1908-1942) and his Die Weihnachtsgeschichte(The Christmas Story), Ernst Pepping with his Die Weihnachtsgeschichte des Lukas(The Christmas Story According to Luke), Hans Freidrich Micheelsen with his oratorio passion setting, Die Passion Jesu Christi, Johann Nepomuk David(1895-) who wrote Ezzolied in 1957, and Willy Burkhard(1900-1955) with his oratorio, Das Gesicht Jesajas (The Vision of Jesus).⁶⁶

It is not generally recognized that Franz Liszt (1811-1886) had much interest in religious choral music. Nevertheless he composed more than sixty such works, two of which are oratorios: Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth (St. Elizabeth) completed in 1862, and Christus, composed in Latin

64. Wienandt, Op. cit., p.369.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.,p. 376.

as several separate sections over the years 1855-67.⁶⁷
Neither of these works is often heard today, and both are in a dated harmonic style unmistakably that of Franz Liszt.

In France we find that oratorio has never taken strong root. It shows its earliest results in the music of Lully's contemporary, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, who brought back from Italy ideas about oratorio writing which took shape in many works, including David et Jonathan, L'Enfant prodigue, and Le Sacrifice d'Abraham.⁶⁸

Berlioz continued the tradition with his oratorio L'Enfance du Christ (The Childhood of Christ), a very gentle and sensitive work. Gounoud's oratorios are somewhat tainted by sentimentality, but are effective and had great popularity in England where he spent five years of his life.⁶⁹

Cesar Franck wrote four oratorios; The Beatitudes, Rebecca, Ruth, and Redemption. Pierne specialized in oratorios using children's choirs--The Children of Bethlehem and The Children's Crusade. Probably more could be done with children's oratorios if composers would try; Haydn, Berlioz and others have recorded the deep impressions made on them by the singing of the large choir of charity children at St. Paul's Cathedral in London.⁷⁰

The last important works in the line of French dramatic

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67. Scholes, Op. cit., p.728.
68. Groves, Op. cit., p.720.
69. Scholes, Op. cit., p. 729.
70. Ibid.

choral composition are those of Parisian-Swiss, Arthur Honergger(1892-1955). His oratorio, Le Roi David (King David) has become one of the more popular oratorios of the current century. It embodies the dramatic impulse that had motivated most Frenchmen since Charpentier. King David may qualify as an oratorio because of its development of a Biblical story, but it is never removed from its original medium, the stage.⁷¹

Oratorio came late to Britain and then won a popularity more triumphant than in any other country. So far as records show, nothing that could be called an oratorio exists in British music before Handel. The place of Handel in relation to the religious oratorio is somewhat anomalous, not because of what he wrote, but rather because of the attitudes that have developed about his music.⁷² It is felt, especially in the United States and Britain, that his oratorios represent the peak of church music in the English language.⁷³ The Handelian English oratorio is something sui generis; it had no sort of forerunner, and, apart from some slight relics in the works of Beethoven and Spohr, and some clearer ones in the works of Mendelssohn, he left no traces in the work of any great man. Apart from the Messiah, which occupies a unique position, the Handelian oratorio is an entertainment, sometimes consisting of imposing choruses as in Solomon, and Israel in Egypt,

71. Scholes, Op. cit., p. 729.

72. Wienandt, Op. cit., p. 317.

73. Ibid.

sometimes of Biblical history and tasteful love interest as in Joseph and Jephtha, and sometimes of vivid drama as in Saul and Belshazzar.⁷⁴

Whether we continue to respect Handel's theatrical oratorios as church music or not, there is no denying that English composers who followed him broke out in a rash of oratorio composition, all based on the Handelian style. Their works have been viewed with disdain, tolerance, and even embarrassment by English writers who have examined many examples in an effort to find some unquestionably outstanding works.⁷⁵ The oratorio had become a favorite among the English, and several generations of composers beginning with Greene, Boyce, and Arne set themselves the task of satisfying the immense appetite of the public. By the last quarter of the century a blight had set in, from which there was to be no relief for nearly another hundred years. The considered opinions of English historians of the period hold small hope for the unearthing of hidden masterpieces:

The composers of these tons of oratorios were all honorable men; their vision of things outside the organ-loft were usually fitful and reluctant, but they worked hard and conscientiously, and their music is nothing worse than intolerably dull. They set, with apparent absolute indiscrimination wellnigh every word of the Bible; and when they were not writing oratorios of their own, they were still making them out of the mangled remains of other mens' music.⁷⁶

Hardly one faint word of praise may be found among

74. Wienandt, Op. cit., p.317.

75. Groves, Op. cit., p.715.

76. Wienandt, Op. cit., p.318.

these comments, but at least one good end was achieved along with this mountain of music. The English people had learned to sing and to enjoy listening to oratorios, and other vocal music. A tradition was at the same time developing that would eventually call forth talented men to produce works of quality, permitting British choral music to take a position of importance when finally it emerged.⁷⁷

Oratorio was reaching the end of its popularity before the United States had yet had time to establish herself as a composing nation. In the last century of the Oratorio Period(1600-1900) choral societies were gradually coming into existence in the United States.⁷⁸ The first, the Handel and Haydn Society of Dartmouth College, dates from four years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The foundation of the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston in 1815 was important for the popularization of oratorio in the United States.⁷⁹ The oratorio of Horatio Parker was the first to invade Europe in a marked way, and won recognition from some of the old, established and influential English festivals.⁸⁰

The great classical oratorios and some of the more modern works have been kept before the public by the

77. Wienandt, Op. cit., p. 318.

78. Groves, Op. cit., p. 200.

79. Wienandt, Op. cit., p. 319.

80. Scholes, Op. cit., p. 730.

devotion of choral societies, but there has been no great effort on the part of composers to maintain oratorio as a living art-form.⁸¹

As we have seen, the history of the oratorio has been that of an art-form with extremely ill-defined boundaries. On one hand, it has in the past become practically identical with opera or with purely secular cantata; on the other, it still often passes little by little into pure worship-music form. It appears now, however, most probable that certain kinds of oratorio which were once popular will attract, at any rate, the foremost composers no longer. The old type of oratorio libretto, the hack-work of men without a religious preference or literary instinct is very justly dead; composers are now seeking their inspiration in fine original poetry, either strictly religious or 'ethically religious' in character, and when choosing to use Scripture as text, generally do so with very little meditative thought.⁸²

For an art-form undergoing such a process of rejuvenation there normally ought to be a noteworthy future; yet, it is perhaps idle to speculate on what the sacred music of the future will be or what it will be trying to communicate to its listeners. Past generations have shown us that we can be assured of at least one thing--the future conditions

81. Scholes, Op. cit., p. 730.

82. Ibid.

of the human race will determine the course our music will take.⁸³ If there is continued strife and unrest, music will reflect this with a clashing restlessness; if there is peace, the music will reflect our composure as well as our complex civilization.⁸⁴

We have perhaps reached the heights of experimentation during this century. A vast number of new styles and methods of compositions have been tried, and it remains that all over Europe, England, and the United States, the younger musicians are turning their faces away from oratorio and looking elsewhere for their creative fulfillment; but this may be only a passing phase, and fascination may again make itself felt. Nevertheless, the oratorio today and of the future will have to recognize that the days of lavish praise and pampering are over, and that the new works may no longer be fairly judged in a medieval cathedral, but must establish themselves as music and music alone. Will there be any more Messiahs written? Will there be another Honegger and other King Davids? The religious music of the future must stand, as the great oratorio literature of the past stands now, in the bright light of day and in the rush of the world by its appeal to us as men and women, and as musicians.

83. Horton, William L., "What is the Composer Trying to Say", The American Music Teacher, XVI (September-October, 1966), p. 36.

84. Ibid.

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