

The music of George Frederic Handel

At the age of twenty-five Handel had a great deal of musical experience behind him, and had written his first Italian opera, *Agrippina*, which was received with great acclaim in Venice. He was then appointed Kappelmeister to the Elector of Hanover. As part of the terms of his employment he was told to visit London – possibly because George was next in line for the English throne on Queen Anne's death. In London he wrote his next Italian opera *Rinaldo*, which was also received very well.

By the time Handel settled in London in 1712 Italian opera was very fashionable. The Royal Academy of Music had been organised by a group of sixty nobles and wealthy gentlemen for the sole purpose of presenting operas. Along with Giovanni Bononcini (1670 – 1747), who had written and produced operas throughout Europe, Handel wrote several operas for the Academy, each delighting its audiences.

Sixteen years later in 1728, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* epitomised the feeling in London towards opera at the time. It was a satirical work, mocking operatic conventions, and concentrating on a spat which occurred between two of Handel's sopranos at the Academy. Musically *The Beggar's Opera* borrowed favourite tunes from contemporary airs, including some of Handel's own works. This new 'ballad opera' was the vogue for a couple of seasons, but all subsequent works paled into insignificance against Gay's original. However, all of the ballad operas were focussed on the libretti, rather than the music which was always just a rearrangement of someone else's work.

The Royal Academy was failing to find funding, and it closed in 1729. Handel either did not, or would not acknowledge the public's change in taste, and took over the theatre in a dual composer/entrepreneur role. Obviously answering some demand, a competing opera house also opened in London (the Opera of the Nobility), but the demand was not high enough to support one opera house, let alone two, and by 1737 both companies had effectively disappeared. During these eight years, Handel fulfilled his composing obligation to the opera house and supplied many new operas. The final two he wrote (*Serse* and

Deidamia) are comic and satirical – a considerable step from the Italian opera he had revelled in twenty years earlier. Despite his change in emphasis, they were still not particularly successful at the time. Written in 1732 (first performed in the King's Theatre, London, 27 January 1733) this is a recitative and opening of an aria from the opera *Orlando*. It is sung in Italian, accompanied by a typical string group with oboes.

Excerpt 01: recitative and aria (*Povera me*) from *Orlando* [1'11"]

Throughout his opera career Handel also wrote orchestral music and church music. Although his output of either is not prolific, the orchestral music is of historic note, as it offers a clear bridge to the Classical era. The majority of it is based on traditional structures (with the occasional addition of dance movements), but the writing is very forward looking, again based on what Handel learnt in Italy. In his church music, he is most noted for the four coronation anthems written for George II in 1727, of which *Zadok the Priest* has been performed at every British coronation since. In these works he demonstrates his ability to write very successfully in another situation.

In response to the public's change in taste – and surely because there was no money left in opera, and Bank of England records show Handel to have been financially astute – he turned his attention to the oratorio. To all intents and purposes, the principal difference between opera and oratorio is the fact that oratorios are sung in English (as opposed to Italian) and are performed without any acting or scenery. Musically, oratorios contain the same emotive operatic arias, descriptive recitatives, and powerful choruses. The difference is imperceptible in this extract from *La Resurrezione* first performed in Rome in 1708. It is defined as an oratorio in *Groves* because of the text and lack of staging. It is nevertheless sung in Italian, and it is musically more dramatic than the excerpt from *Orlando*. This is helped by the addition of trumpets to the orchestra, but the vocal writing is very virtuosic using an extremely large range.

Excerpt 02: opening of *Disserratevi, o porte d'Averno* from *La Resurrezione* [1'33"]

The simple differences between opera and Handel's later oratorios opened the door to the middle class public who had felt uncomfortable with the aristocratic entertainment, and 'snob value' of the Italian opera. By the same token, ardent opera supporters did not support the oratorio as they were "disconcerted by their solemnity" (Mackerness, 1964, p102). The lack of theatricals sets was also important in that it meant performing the oratorios was a cheaper affair than the operas, in which producers had delighted in trying to conjure up the most extravagant sets.

The oratorio texts are primarily sacred, principally coming from the Bible, Gerald Abraham suggests that while the "religious element is less than secondary, the Biblical subject and occasional references to Jehovah made a strong appeal to the secular religiosity of superior middle-class England" (1979, p543). This neatly sums up the air of change from sacred to secular, which is emphasised when it is considered that people were now going to the theatre rather than church for their "religious thrills" (Philips, 1943, p162). The oratorio also enabled performances to be given in Lent, a time when opera was banned, and Handel laid on oratorio seasons during Lent. It was these seasons that led to an added attraction: during the intermissions Handel would improvise organ concerti. These concerts gave a solid foundation to Handel's immense popularity with the English – keeping him and his music in vogue for a little over a century.

Despite the initial success of the oratorio *Messiah* at the New Music Hall, on Fishamble Street in Dublin on April 13 1742 (where the ladies in the audience were asked to remove the hoops from their skirts, and gentlemen were asked to refrain from carrying swords thereby allowing more people into the hall) it was not so well received in London. Although it was an oratorio, the middle-classes were unsure about it being based on a Christian theme. The old testament stories on which all of the other oratorios are based were seen just as tales and therefore suited to the theatre. However *Messiah's* text is drawn from the old and new testaments, with verses from both being combined in the aria *I know that my redeemer liveth*. One anonymous contemporary writer described the work as "blasphemous" in the press. It was not until

1750, when Handel arranged a charity performance at the Foundlings Hospital, that its popularity began to increase.

In *Messiah*, Handel brings together the compositional skills he has explored elsewhere. The arias could be from any of his operas, the chorus writing from a coronation anthem (immediately *Zadok the Priest*, and the *Hallelujah Chorus* spring to mind), and the opening *Symphony* and subsequent *Pifa* would not be out of place in a within a concerto.

An insight into Handel's work can be seen in the chorus *His yoke is easy*. It is an interesting example of Handel's 'borrowing' (a trait for which he is renowned), as the melody comes from one of his Italian love duets. This helps to explain why the word "easy" is treated to such a long run of notes, as in the duet it is sung to the word "*ride*" (Italian for "laugh") – making far more sense of the music. Here the first few entries of the chorus can be heard with the runs sounding like laughter.

Excerpt 03: opening of *His yoke is easy* from *Messiah* [0'20"]

Being an oratorio *Messiah* would not be a staged performance, but Handel includes a great deal of the scenery through imagery within the music. The clearest example must be in the chorus *All we like sheep have gone astray*. On the word "astray" the voices, previously moving together, disappear in different directions ending each phrase at different ends of the ranges.

Excerpt 04: opening of *All we like sheep* from *Messiah* [0'25"]

Unquestionably, Handel's work is of great historical significance. He contributed to the wealth of late Baroque music while at the same time anticipating many musical ideas of the Classical era; his programmatic writing could be seen to give a foretaste of the Romantic composers. He demonstrates an understanding of the fundamental Baroque principles while concentrating on melody and harmony (as opposed to the strict contrapuntal style adopted by Bach). His decision to appeal to the middle-class

audiences is a clear manifestation of the social changes which continued through the rest of the century

and had a great impact on all future music.

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