



Wednesday, December 9, 2015 at 7:00 pm – Meyerson Symphony Center

THE DALLAS BACH SOCIETY

James Richman, Artistic Director

MESSIAH

A Sacred Oratorio

by George Frideric Handel

Words selected from Holy Scripture by Charles Jennens

Anna Fredericka Popova, Soprano | Nicholas Garza, Countertenor | Derek Chester, Tenor | Curtis Streetman, Bass

† In memoriam Jack Carney

About the Program:

Handel's *Messiah* is called "A Grand Musical Entertainment" in the catalogue of the Charitable Musical Society of Dublin, where it is the most treasured entry, despite Handel's description of it on the cover page of his manuscript as "An Oratorio." The first performance was given in the city of Dublin on April 13, 1742, although the work was written in London in August/September of 1741. Charles Jennens, who provided the words, wrote a friend (on 10 July, 1741) "Handel says he will do nothing next winter, but I hope I shall persuade him to set another Scripture Collection I have made for him, & perform it for his own Benefit in Passion Week. 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. The Subject is *Messiah*." Handel must have indeed been inspired, as he seems to have composed *Messiah* in white heat directly upon receiving Jennens's "Collection" – what is interesting is why he made no immediate plans for performance. Perhaps the idea that Handel gave the premiere in Dublin because he feared the reaction of the more stringent Protestant clergy of London may have some truth to it, but before long the work was beloved there and was given many a performance, including annual benefits for the Foundling Hospital, Handel's favorite charity. On the 25th anniversary of Handel's death, in 1784, a grand

Handel festival was organized in Westminster Abbey, which featured a total of 275 choristers and an orchestra of 250 players. The numerical notion of greatness only gathered momentum during the nineteenth century, leading up to an 1859 performance at the Crystal Palace under the baton of Sir Michael Costa which featured a total of 3,225 musicians. At this point a music critic by the name of George Bernard Shaw (writing under the pen name Corno di Bassetto) raised the salient point in response to the ever more gargantuan presentations of the work. "Why doesn't somebody set up a thoroughly rehearsed and exhaustively studied performance of Messiah in St. James's Hall with a chorus of twenty capable artists? Most of us would be glad to hear the work seriously performed once before we die."

Informed by the "historically-informed performance movement," this goal is now a reality, which is as it should be, for this was the greatest of men and of composers, whose facility and genius have rarely if ever been equaled. The full extent of his work, in the shadows until the last few decades, has now begun to be enjoyed, once again mostly because of the "movement." Nowadays Handel is indeed known for more than Messiah and a few other oratorios and instrumental pieces, and the true extent of his universality is more and better felt in our time.

The thumbnail biography by Sir Charles Beecham, written for a post card of Handel's portrait at the National Gallery, gives the idea most succinctly:

George Frederick Handel (1685-1759). Born in Halle and died in London, a naturalized Englishman. Greatest of the international composers, he wrote with equal success in the styles of France, Germany, Italy and England. His career, like his personality, was stormy and brilliant. The downfall of Italian opera led him to English oratorio and his masterpiece, Messiah. He loved pictures, and children, endowing liberally the Foundling Hospital. Afflicted with paralysis and blindness, he died wealthy and the idol of the nation. Buried in Westminster Abbey.

The connection of Handel's oratorios with his operatic style is obvious, for while he did indeed change his focus after "the downfall of Italian opera" in London, he never abandoned the dramatic sense that informed his operas, particularly the later ones where the seemingly endless stream of da capo arias gives way to greater variety in composition.

The structure of Messiah is quite operatic, and much of the work is easy to imagine staged. Handel begins with a most unusual overture, in the unheard of (for overtures) key of E minor, characterized in the various lists of affects at the time as a key of uncertainty and gloom, with relief possible but not obvious. Of course this is a drama where the story is known to everyone in advance, which leads to a different order of events than any opera would have, and indeed we find that the uncertainty in the overture is immediately dispelled with a tenor recitative in the key of E major, at once a special and brilliant tonality, on the words "Comfort ye, my people" from the Book of Isaiah.

As "librettist," Jennens pieces together verses from scripture which provide connection and movement not only from one aria or chorus to the next, but also in the grand scheme of the composition where the large divisions (corresponding to operatic acts) are united by theme and

also provided with division into “scenes” by the connection and separation of Biblical quotations. The first “scene” in Part the First (Act One) thus consists of the recitative and aria for tenor and the first chorus, set to consecutive verses from Isaiah. The second “scene” is from Malachi, consisting of the stormy bass recitative Thus saith the Lord, followed by the aria But Who May Abide the Day of his Coming and the chorus And He Shall Purify the Sons of Levi. The third of these scenes is a pastiche of Isaiah vii, xl, and ix, ending with the proclamation of the birth of the Messiah. Then there is a brief instrumental interlude (pifa) which introduces the pastoral theme for the second part of “Act One” where the arrival of the newborn Jesus is portrayed in a scene which is easily imagined on stage – a soprano soloist appears along with angels placed in cloud machines while shepherds sing “And peace on Earth” standing around the crèche on ground level. At the end of this miniature drama, the angel chorus Glory to God ends with the disappearance of the staged angels as the orchestra evanesces into nothingness. Only the soprano soloist remains, to sing Rejoice Greatly (Book of Zachariah), joined then by the Alto for He Shall Feed his Flock, leading to the choral Finale His Yoke is Easy. By this time the tonal center has shifted to Bb Major for the close of the “Act”, which is as far away from the opening key of E Minor as is possible in Western music.

These final pieces introduce another characteristic of Jennens’s genius, which is the juxtaposition of the promise of the Messiah found in the Old Testament with the actual arrival of the Messiah in the New. Here this is illustrated with verses from Isaiah xxxv and Matthew xi. It is more than a little astonishing that well over half the text for Messiah is in fact from the Old Testament! The most stunning use of this device will come in Part the Third in the chorus Since by Man Came Death, where alternating sections of slow, dark, a capella singing from Old Testament texts alternate with brilliant choral sections with orchestra on the subject of the Messiah’s appearance from the New, just as the Old Testament figures usually found on the gloomy north sides of the eastward-facing great cathedrals contrast with the sunny brilliance of the New Testament windows and sculpture found on the southern walls.

That there was probably no intermission per se after Part the First is indicated by the progression from Bb to G minor at the beginning of Part the Second, and then to Eb for the great aria He was despised. (There is a symmetry with Part the Third if one considers Parts One and Two together, as both start in E and conclude in D.) In any event, Part the Second is divided similarly to Part the First into two great sections – the first telling the story of the human suffering of Christ, interestingly set to words entirely from the Old Testament after the brief operatic entry music (not an overture) Behold the Lamb of God from Saint John; and the second celebrating His divine aspect suffusing the world and causing torment to the wicked with a virtual crescendo of glorious righteousness: Why do the Nations so Furiously Rage Together?, Let us Break Their Bonds Asunder, He That Dwelleth in Heaven Shall Laugh Them to Scorn, Thou Shalt Break Them Like a Potter’s Vessel, Hallelujah!

Part the Third, the shortest, deals with the End of Days and the Last Trumpet, again combining the Messiah’s assurance of everlasting life (I Know that my Redeemer Liveth, once again in the

magical key of E Major) with the promise of death overcome (The Trumpet Shall Sound and Death, Where is Thy Sting). The great finale Worthy is the Lamb that was Slain contains a majestic Amen for which we find numerous counterpoint studies in Handel's notebooks, and which carries us majestically upwards as if in a great Baroque cathedral with a high oval of sky or paradise surrounded by swirling angels. And yet, at the very moment of triumph at the end of this signal composition, there is a surprising grand pause on an inverted dominant seventh chord begging for resolution, which seems to stop everything for supernatural reasons, exactly as when the fantastic forward energy of the Hallelujah Chorus comes to a crashing halt just before the end, at the height of its rapture. The Rev. Bishop Mark Herbener of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America points out to us that these two movements are the only pieces in Messiah with texts from the apocalyptic Book of Revelation, where indeed just before the end of the world there comes a great silence of half an hour. It appears that George Frederic Handel knew his Bible, and responded to it, on a very high level!