



The King's sleepy foot stands on ceremony

WELL, HERE'S ANOTHER FINE MESSIAH YOU'VE GOTTEN US INTO

WHEN HANDEL LEFT Dublin in August of 1742 to return to London, he was in a much better mood.¹ The concerts had gone very well, he was once again the musical toast of the town and he even had a little bit of money in his pocket. What could be better?

Almost immediately, he launched into plans for another season, this time with oratorio instead of opera.² He revised *Samson* and wrote a new organ concerto for a concert in February of the following year.

Handel also now had new allies on the musical scene. The aristocracy and other mucky-mucks were still hanging around the opera houses, but the increasing (and increasingly richer) middle class was happy to come hear Handel's oratorios. And Handel wasn't about to stop them.

But if he thought they would flock to hear *Messiah*, as the Dublin audiences had, he was in for a big surprise.

¹ Handel in a bad mood was something you wanted to avoid whenever possible. Handel in a good mood could be quite fun, really.

² He'd learned his lesson.

The catch was that they tended to be a pretty religious and strait-laced bunch, this rich middle class, and many of them regarded the theatre as a place fit only for good-for-nothings and reprobates.³ Actors were considered highly suspect (especially ones such as Susannah Cibber, whose exploits were still a chief topic of gossipmongers and tattle-tales).

It wasn't so bad when the oratorios had Old Testament themes. To some degree, people considered those just quaint old stories — history lessons with a strong and uplifting moral at the end. But an oratorio on a *Christian* theme — and in a *theatre*, no less — well, they weren't sure whether that would do at all.

Considering the heights to which *Messiah* has risen and the fervor with which it is now admired, particularly among the religious types in our own day (I ask you, where would the Mormon Tabernacle Choir be today without *Messiah*?)⁴, I think it's pretty interesting that Handel's famous oratorio was such a hard sell in those first London years. But it was, so there you go.

The first London performance of *Messiah* was given at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden on March 23, 1743, with repeat performances on the 25th and 29th. Matthew Dubourg came along from Dublin to lead the orchestra again, and Handel himself conducted.

In hopes of avoiding controversy, the work was not referred to by name in any of the advertisements. It was called simply "A New Sacred Oratorio" or "A Sacred Oratorio."

³ Nowadays we call it Hollywood.

⁴ Other than in Salt Lake City, I mean.

Maybe if nobody noticed, Handel thought, they wouldn't get angry.

It was a good plan, but it didn't work.⁵

Even before the performance, there was an uproar in the press. Someone with his nose way out of joint even wrote an angry letter to the *Universal Spectator*:

“An *Oratorio* is either an *Act of Religion*, or it is not,” says the letter, testily; “if it is, I ask if the *Playhouse* is a fit *Temple* to perform it in, or a *Company of Players* fit *Ministers of God's Word*. ... [I fear] it gives great *Opportunity to profane Persons* to ridicule *Religion* at least, if not to blaspheme it; [is *God's word*] to be prostituted to the *perverse Humour* of a *Set of obstinate People*?”

And so on.

The letter was signed “Philalethes,” which was obviously a pseudonym for somebody or other. Handel scholars aren't sure who.⁶

Well, you could have knocked Handel over with a feather after he'd read that one. And the devout Jennens, too, who would have been mightily surprised to be told that his earnest collection of Bible verses should be considered blasphemous. Really!

⁵ They never do.

⁶ Though I have my suspicions.