

Programme Notes

Handel *Messiah*: Parts II & III

"I went to the Bristol cathedral to hear Mr. Handel's *Messiah*. In many parts, especially several of the choruses, it exceeded my expectation."

This is from the diary of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who attended a performance of George Frideric Handel's choral masterpiece in August 1758, just a year before the composer died.

Our performance this evening has been several years in the making. I had wanted to do this "immersive" version during my time as Director of the London Handel Festival but it was difficult to find the right venue and audience. So I have brought my Handelian passion to my newly adopted city of Bristol, and was delighted to discover that Bristol has been receptive to Handel's music since the mid eighteenth century, and that St George's is the ideal setting with its perfect acoustics and requisite technical set-up and, more importantly, an open-minded audience willing to take risks. In presenting this version, I am trying to tackle the essential challenge of how to make Handel's well-loved work relevant to audiences of today. After all, it is written in an archaic language by a dead white man in a wig, and many of us have memories from childhood (or even adulthood) of 'enduring' it for hours on end in cold churches on hard seats not understanding what it all meant.

Unlike the Bach passions, there is no clear narrative in *Messiah*. The text used by Handel is not the story of Jesus as directly taken from the Bible, indeed Jesus is never even mentioned directly by name, but rather a series of passages from both the Old and New Testaments which taken together allude to the life of Christ. Handel's god-abiding Georgian audiences would have understood all the biblical references, but that's not necessarily the case for today's audiences in a largely secular society. Handel's audiences would also have understood well the concept of rhetoric, of using the art of persuasion through text to make convincing arguments; this was of course the Age of Enlightenment when music was written to appeal to human reason and rational thought. Throughout the work the chorus and soloists are constantly making statements and asking questions, cajoling and coaxing you the audience to join "team Jesus".

There is therefore, I feel, an overriding need to make the text abundantly clear, just like in an opera, and it is no surprise that Handel developed the oratorio genre based on his skills as a lyric composer. In tonight's performance, not only will the words be displayed as they are sung, but as a choir we have worked in rehearsal at emphasising the meaning through clear enunciation and emphatic word stress. Beyond this, I have also worked closely with Peter Wagstaff and Joe Price to source meaningful images of art across centuries, alongside contemporary graphics to help bring the words to life.

Messiah has been performed for centuries and remains a cornerstone of choral repertoire. It helps that there are passages of great music, but I think it has also retained its appeal because it is the story of one man. Whether you are a believer or not, it is our very humanity which dictates that we cannot help but relate to and be moved by the work's universal themes of suffering and rejection, hope and renewal, and our lives are enriched as a result. Handel himself said of his audiences for *Messiah*: "I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better..."

This evening we have kept some authentic elements; we are performing at baroque pitch (a semi-tone below modern pitch), the orchestra are playing on period instruments, and the solos are all sung by members of the choir – a practice Handel often followed in his own performances. Handel also wrote it as an Easter piece, it is only in later times it has become associated with Christmas.

So tonight we perform parts 2 and 3, including the iconic "Hallelujah!" chorus, which focus on seasonal messages of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Handel composed *Messiah* in an astonishing 24 days, without getting much sleep and often leaving meals brought to him uneaten. His servants would find him in tears as he composed, and when he completed his famous "*Hallelujah!*" Chorus, he reportedly said, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself seated on His throne, with His company of Angels." We have our wonderful tradition of standing for this chorus because it is said that George II did at the time. There is no direct evidence that the King even attended a performance of *Messiah* but Handel would be pleased that audiences today do not let the truth get in the way of a good story!

I do hope you enjoy and appreciate our version of *Messiah* tonight. We politely ask that you refrain from applause until the end of each half, to maintain the dramatic flow. Thanks so much for coming to watch and listen, and for taking the risk with us.

Samir Savant

CEO, St George's Bristol

Tenor, Fitzhardinge Consort