

'In the flesh shall I see God' - Incarnating Handel's Messiah

Charles Jennens libretto to Messiah is an amazing achievement. The compilation and adaptation of the bible verses is complex, full of allusions and theologically crystal clear in its message. What Handel manage to achieve in his setting of the libretto, is to transform a brilliant but rather intellectual and narratively tortuous text with almost no described action into something highly dramatic, full of variety and, above all something that is felt and experienced in the body. From the crude gravity of the overture and the dancing joy of "And the glory, the glory of the Lord", all the way to the wall of choral sound that blows the listener back in their seat in "Worthy is the lamb", it is all about contrasts, all about the physicality of the music; it is all about *making the Word flesh*.

Oratorio in Handel's London was not church music. It was entertainment, at the theatre, for the same audience who used to go and see opera and at the same venue. For me it is obvious that it is a composer with a 35-year long experience of the theatre that is writing, one that knows all about dramatic pacing and theatrical effects.

Towards the last years of his life there is some evidence that Handel with small adjustments to the score strived towards a more dramatically concise performing style, laying greater importance on theatrical action. One example of this is the shortening of the bass aria "Why do the nations", where he cuts more than half the aria, substituting a short recitative leading directly to the chorus "Let us break their bonds asunder" where the people rage against God. This shortening creates a tightness of drama and an operatic quality to the dramatic momentum which ties perfectly in with the pacing and line that I strive for in our Messiah. Another example is the reverted to his original shorter form of the pastoral instrumental "Pifa", to condense the structure of the nativity scene. I see these Handel's late thoughts as a confirmation of my musical feeling that Messiah needs a natural dramatic flow, and a strong sense of musical drive to have the maximum impact.

It is easy in working with Messiah to confuse grandeur of conception and scope with a grandiose performing style. I prefer to go completely the other way: I want our Messiah to dance, to twist, to wiggle and wobble, rather than to solemnly parade along. For me, a sparkling, life affirming way of attacking the music, makes also Jennens text to shine in a crisp and clear light and enhances the narration of the mystery of the Messiah.

Today many things is known about the way Handel's music was performed in the 1740s and 50s, and although we play with modern instruments tonight, this knowledge can inspire us to find a style that is well suited to the music: a crisp, light way of playing which in the same time can be explosive and full of contrasts. The music should speak, rather than paint (the latter being characteristic of music from the romantic era).

The word 'meditative' is often used in describing Messiah or performances of it, but for me the meditative is not the main focus in creating our Messiah. For sure there are meditative moments: Take for example the soaring beauty of the tenors opening 'Comfort ye', the shadow like chorus in 'Behold the lamb of God', the angelic soprano melody in 'I know that my redeemer liveth', or the hushed chorus entrance in the 'Amen' of the last number. But for me, these are also the moments where Handel appear the most dramatic and even operatic! These four mentioned moments in the score, which I would like to dwell upon a little bit, are

also for me some of the key junctures in Messiah. They highlight Handel's ability to articulate contrasts, to interpret and expand on the text, and to charge these specific points with emotion in a way that can speak to the spirit, soul and body of people across time, geography, and religious belief.

The overture to Messiah is of the exact same style as most of his opera overtures. We are directly thrown into a pitch black universe, with the stern, grim seriousness of crudely rhythmic first part, which gives way to an insistent forward driving allegro that relentlessly drives us forward, towards a short return of the opening stern chords, ending, after a harsh clash just before the last chord, in the darkest possible possible place of the lightless e-minor. And then suddenly, in the start of 'Comfort ye' the faintest ray of first morning light breaks through with the strings almost searching phrase, where a few repeated notes unfolds to the most beautiful melody in the shimmering key of E-major. It is as if Handel paints the hand of Jesus the Messiah with limitless love caressing a sleeping child. With such mastery is the composer articulating a so simple and commonplace musical event, the change from e-minor to E-major, that the Messiah could end here, and we would still have received the musico-dramatic message!

Unlike the second and third parts of Messiah which both end with massive, festive choruses, the first part concludes with the fresh and sprightly almost playful 'His yoke is easy'. In this chamber music like chorus (which is actually closely built on one of Handel's earlier Italian chamber duets, hence the lightness of touch and texture) the children of God rejoice in wide eyed fascination over the lightness of living in Jesus instead of under the law. The chorus concludes in almost an euphoric whisper, the deliriously happy B flat-major chord ringing in the ears of the audience.

Then, like if a ten tons-concrete block had suddenly hit the soul, the sky turns dark and the harmony falls to a gloomy g-minor as the sinner in an instant realises the magnitude of the sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God. For me it is like the breathlessness that can hit you when you for a moment think of the eternity of time and your own mortality.

'Behold the lamb of God' is one of the few movements in Messiah marked with the slowest of all the tempo indications, Largo, which lends the music the feeling of being frozen in time. The chorus parts enter one by one with hushed falling lines shadowed by the dark sounding strings.

As the text slightly shifts focus to the hope of forgiveness in 'That taketh away the sins of the world' Handel builds a long, pleading, extremely passionate phrase in crescendo to a momentary relief in F-major, only to immediately be hammered back into the g-minor of the opening.

The last part is flavoured by the sopranos twice repeated 'That taketh away...', a phrase which is so completely devoid of colour and life, as to be a hauntingly beautiful way of describing in music the absolute loneliness of the soul.

'I know that my redeemer liveth' the famous soprano aria that opens the third part of Messiah, is an aria about death, but it shares with the tenor opening the shiny key of E-major, the only two pieces in this for the time unusual remote key in Messiah. The text are from Job and Corinthians, and here we see two examples of the mastery of Charles

Jennens: first of all by combining the two texts (from two entirely different contexts) he stresses the unity between the Old and New Testament and the old and new covenants. Secondly he lets the Corinthians text continue into the next number 'Since by man came death' which lends a structural unification of the numbers, and creates a textual-dramatic forward momentum of the opening of the third part. (This latter connection is ingeniously strengthened by Handel's setting of the chorus in a-minor, thereby creating a natural musical connection by a dominant-tonic relation. This text about the death of the body, graphically described "and though worms destroy this body", and the resurrection is set by Handel with a celestial soprano voice soaring over a light and delicate accompaniment of basso continuo and violins (we choose to play it on a solo violin to further increase the tenderness of the texture). By the formal the weight of this aria and its hauntingly beautiful musical design, Handel and Jennens really dwells on the purely corporal aspect of the mystery of incarnation; the physical body being so important that man must regain it when meeting his creator. For me this aria has the weightlessness of angels footsteps, the middle sections slight restlessness when describing the decay of the body, and the rising melody of the last part painting Paul's words "For now is Christ risen from the dead. By the formal the weight of this aria and its hauntingly beautiful musical design, Handel and Jennens really dwells on the purely corporal aspect of the mystery of incarnation; the physical body being so important that man must regain it when meeting his creator.

The end of the aria is perhaps the heart of the Messiah: the slight pause after the soprano cadenza describing a frozen moment just before the resurrection, the soul of man, or even of mankind, suspended in a timeless state of ultimate tranquility and stillness.

Handel paints musically simultaneous life and death, the eternal drama and mystery of existence, condensed into one single moment.

The third part of Messiah is the shortest. It is built around three pillars: "I know that my redeemer liveth" described above, the majestic "The trumpet shall sound for the bass soloist (with the amazing little accompanied recitative before it, which in just eight bars manages to paint a full musical picture of the mysterious change of the soul before the last trumpet), and the climactic final chorus triptych "Worthy is the lamb-Blessing and honour-Amen". The chorus has been sparingly used in the third part, as if Handel draws his choral bow for a final release, and when the chorus finally explodes in "Worthy is the lamb" it is like a climax of all the dramatic wanderings of the whole Messiah. The energy builds up through the sharply rhythmical middle part "Blessing and honour" to culminate in a huge cadence on the dominant to create maximum expectation for the "Amen" to come. But instead of the expected huge blast of "Amen", what follows is the intimate, personal prayer of the individual human in front of the Creator. For me this moment suggest the story from Kings where Elijah goes upon the mountain to meet the Lord; there is a hurricane, an earthquake and a fire, but God was not in any of those. After all this there was a soft whisper, upon hearing it Elijah covered his face and prepared to meet God.

A few bars later we get the final explosion of sound as the whole orchestra and chorus join in for the last fugal peak of the piece, like a dimly lit room that is suddenly flooded with blazing light, and we even let the huge organ of Holmen Church take part in filling every corner of the room with sound.

By that time tonight, you will have heard a tremendous amount of music. If you by then have received something for your soul and spirit, I'm happy. But if you here and there have felt the music in your body, then I really know we have done our job.