

Program Notes for November 29, 2008

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G.F. Handel, *Messiah*

“Difficult” music, executed by the most skillful musicians for the enjoyment of connoisseurs, is the putative definition of great musical art. Perhaps Bach’s great contrapuntal choral works can be so described. However, the obverse seems to conflate the “popular,” with the “dispensable,” connoting mere light fare. In the canon of choral music, masterpieces of great genius, well suited for amateur performance, but esteemed by almost all, might be reduced to only two works: Handel’s *Messiah* and Brahms’s *Requiem*. In particular, *Messiah* has enjoyed an almost unique position as, perhaps, the most frequently performed work in classical literature. The chorus, “Hallelujah,” the five most quintessential minutes of grandeur known in music, thralls us, stirs us, and as Shakespeare might say, “thunders like a Jove.” The legends that have cropped up about this movement alone convey how much reverence the work inspires. For example, one story goes that George II rose in his seat upon hearing it, impelling all present to do the same – thus, it has become a concert ritual to stand when the chorus delivers. Another tale describes Joseph Haydn weeping upon hearing it in 1791, and uttering that Handel was the “master of us all.” Almost all choruses in *Messiah* have an infectious pomp. The choruses selected today combine magical doses of archaic splendor with warm jocular dignity that both enchant and coax listeners to sing along. Thus, for generations, “sing-a-long” *Messiahs*, often termed “Scratch Messiahs,” crop up during Advent with a regularity as the very season itself.

Messiah is also one of the most hastily composed works, occupying Handel a mere twenty-four days in 1741. That it is such a treasure is astonishing. The first public performance took place in Dublin, April 13, 1742. The text, compiled by Charles Jennens, a wealthy landowner and amateur theologian, draws from both the Old and New Testaments. In particular, prophetic sections of *Isaiah* are combined with various Psalm texts, and are juxtaposed with messianic passages from *Luke*, *Corinthians*, *Romans*, and *Revelation*. The hurried manner of composition, in part due to Handel’s deteriorating financial condition, is belied by the consistent quality of each aria, recitative and chorus. Handel’s textual colorations were never so skillful and subtle.

In today’s “Sing-In,” thirteen sections from Part I (Advent and Christmas) are presented with an aria and chorus from Part II (*Romans X*); the evening is capped off with the thrilling final choruses of Part III.

But wait don’t leave: one more *Hallelujah* for good measure!