

One Time Only -- a Marathon-Messiah Sunday

By Cathy Robbins

Wednesday, May 30, 2007 | Pull out those I-pod buds. Get your ears out of whatever musical box you have them in -- hip hop, jazz, Mozart, golden oldies, etc.

Then go listen to something new: an "authentic" performance of Handel's "Messiah" that will be as close as possible to the original performance in 1742. More than any element, you, the audience and the attitude you bring with you, will affect the outcome of this unusual concert this Sunday at St. Paul's Cathedral.

If the June date is jarring -- keep in mind that the first "Messiah" was performed at Easter time -- the sound palette will be different too. For the first time in San Diego, the Bach Collegium will perform "Messiah" on period instruments, that is, instruments made in the 18th century or on modern reproductions of those instruments.

Violins and cellos will have gut rather than metal strings, and bows won't spend as much time on the strings. So the lush romanticism we hear from a big orchestra like the Philadelphia or the San Diego gives way to a lean, clean sound in which all the details are clear. Trumpets, which conductor Stephen Sturk calls the "wild cards," have no valves. The result is a warm, softer but still exciting sound. (The program will list each instrument and its history.)

The scaled-down ensemble -- 16 singers, four soloists, an orchestra of 18 -- will also conform to the performance practices and techniques of Handel's time. This will be a complete "Messiah" so it will last about 140 minutes. Some details will be modern. For instance, women will sing the soprano parts that choir boys sang in the 18th century.

Yet, the real wild card for this performance is the audience, the least "authentic" element. At Sunday's intersection of the 18th and 21st centuries, differences in audience expectations are at least as important as the instruments and the techniques. Sturk and Ruben Valenzuela, the music director for the Bach Collegium, help make those differences relevant to enjoying the event.

Today, we view Messiah as a quasi-sacred work, a mainstay of the two most important Christian holidays, Christmas and Easter. It is usually performed in churches, and we've been standing for the Hallelujah Chorus since 1743, when a London audience was so moved.

But the 700 or so people who jammed Neale's Musik Hall in Dublin for that first performance in 1742 expected to be entertained. Neale's was a theater, and "Messiah" was not church music, despite its text, which librettist Charles Jennens drew mostly from the Old Testament.

Handel needed a hit. At a time when the word "opera" meant something like a musical, Handel was the most famous opera composer and impresario of his day. After two bankruptcies, however, he was in such dire financial straits that in 1741, he nearly returned to his native Germany.

Turning away from operas, Handel relied on oratorios, dramatic narratives set to music, which could be produced without sets and costumes. For "Messiah," local choir boys were recruited to sing the soprano parts without pay. Handel needed a hit, and he wrote "Messiah" as a commission for a charity benefit, in just 24 days, never leaving his home, with meals brought to him.

Handel got his hit by giving his audience what they wanted. Eighteenth century listeners expected to be moved emotionally, maybe even to action, in what Valenzuela called the "doctrine of affections." Today, we rarely take action after a concert or television program, except maybe to race to the parking lot, a bar or the refrigerator.

Music was expected to exemplify principles of motion and time lapse -- in non-abstract ways -- and that gave it an immediacy that modern recording has diminished. "Music is motion; recording freezes music," Valenzuela said. Today, we can push a button to stop "Messiah" or the Spice Girls -- and our passage through time -- an unthinkable act in the eighteenth century.

Audiences expected a close relationship between words and sound. Librettos for oratorios were invariably drawn from religious texts, yet Valenzuela noted that the distinction between sacred and secular was not as sharp as it is today. (Think of "Jesus Christ, Superstar" as a regular offering rather than the shocker it was when it premiered in 1971 -- and still is for some.)

"Messiah" is text-driven, and Handel's audience would have known the words for "Messiah" very well, because the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer were part of daily life, Valenzuela said. They expected the music to match those words. In the "Hallelujah Chorus," Handel pulls out all the stops to give us "Messiah's" underlying theme -- the victory of life over death -- with the full chorus, trumpets and drums.

Sturk drew on "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given," which describes the birth of Christ, as an example of a perfect marriage of words and sound. Rather than the familiar picture of Christ's birth in a manger, etc. from the gospels, Handel turns to Isaiah 9:6 for this song.

The opening line -- "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given" -- is a string of short, mostly monosyllabic words in a mostly Anglo-Saxon iambic beat, that is, an unstressed syllable followed by stressed one. Different parts of the chorus toss the song's lines around lightly and quickly.

Then Handel does his magic. He puts the word "born" into the center of this Christian milestone -- not "child" (as in "Christ child") or "son" (as in son of God). Sturk opened to the score and pointed to "born" set musically into a melisma, a long string of rapid notes. The entire song lasts just under four minutes, but one word -- "born" -- occupies nearly 20 percent of that time.

When the text turns to name the child, it switches to multisyllables: "Wonderful," "Counsellor," "the mighty God," "the everlasting father," "the Prince of Peace." The entire chorus heralds these names with full-throated chords like clenched fists thrust into the air. Handel takes that last iambic phrase, "Prince of Peace" beyond finality to destiny.

As Sturk put it, "Handel knew what he was doing. He knew how to get our attention."

Our expectations today are very different. Music, especially pop, is beatdriven, even though words have songs; although it has a heavy beat, hip hop actually has shifted emphasis to text.

I learned the lesson of the beat some years ago while writing on a story about the acoustics in concert halls in the city where we lived. I wanted to include rock venues, so I turned to my main pop man, my teenaged son. Acoustics don't really matter for a rock venue, he explained patiently, because you're not there to hear the words. Like Handel's audience, rock fans come with full

knowledge of the words, and what they expect from a concert is a wall of sound.

In some modern art music, too, sound or even sound effects and video reign even when text is important. Steve Reich (a percussionist) uses video and other technologies as compositional elements in his operas and in works like "Different Trains," a haunting piece about Holocaust victims' voyages to concentration camps.

Expectations sometimes clash in ways that might not be reconcilable. In April, Swarthmore musicologist Michael Marissen wrote an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* that described anti-Semitism in "Messiah." Marissen pointed to passages where the libretto and the music conjoined to exalt Christianity at the expense of Jews.

Marissen stated that Jennens was deeply troubled by the spread of deism, which did not accept Jesus as the son of God, and was familiar with theological teachings that portrayed Jews as servants to the deists. "Messiah's" libretto, Marissen said, is shot through with anti-deism and thus anti-Jewish sentiment. (Three decades after "Messiah," a bunch of deists carried out the American Revolution.)

Valenzuela, however, noted that over his entire oratorio output, Handel made heroes of Samson, Esther and Saul. Marissen's essay produced a storm, and the *Times* published a dissenting op-ed from Wendy Heller, a (Jewish) Princeton music scholar. The idea of anti-Semitism in an eighteenth century work would not be surprising, she wrote. Still, Heller excoriated Marissen for distorting Handel's intent and encouraged readers "not to feel guilt or shame when hearing or singing 'Messiah.' "

Sunday's single performance of "Messiah" will come at the end of a day devoted to a marathon and rock and roll. "Messiah" is certainly an anthem for the day's athletes. It regularly blurs the line between art and pop. I recently heard KLSB (progressive talk radio) use the "Hallelujah Chorus" as punctuation for some liberal message.

In a sense, this "Messiah" is a chance to pull the plug on your twenty-first-century expectations and let the older world flow in. Your experience of your own time will be richer, especially when you turn to Reich and other modern composers who, like Handel, use the full range of artistic expression. Tune your ears for today by listening with yesterday's ears.

CONCERT INFO

Bach Collegium San Diego presents G. F. Handel's "Messiah," a complete performance on period instruments, Sunday, June 3, 7 p.m., St. Paul's Cathedral, 2728 Sixth Ave. (Bankers Hill), San Diego. Stephen Sturk conducting, with Pierre Joubert leader. Preconcert talk with Ruben Valenzuela at 6:15 p.m. Tickets \$25 (students), \$35 (general), \$60 (reserved). www.bachcollegiumsd.com or 619.341.1726.