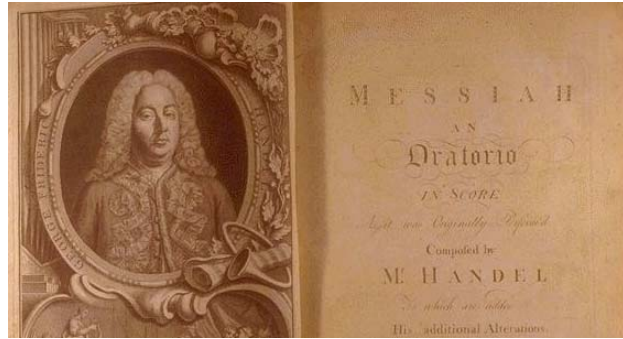


Handel's "Messiah" in period performance

Bach Collegium Redeems Handel Chestnut

Posted: 06/04/2007 at 01:19:14 PM PDT

Updated: 06/06/2007 at 11:31:01 AM PDT
by **Kenneth Herman**



Every December San Diego, like most cities in North America, is awash with almost every imaginable sort of "Messiah" performance. You have your choice of permutations of the revered (and overexposed) Handel oratorio from the old-fashioned huge community chorus affair with 200-plus singers and a pick-up orchestra to tiny church choirs that chirp out a few choruses to wheezy organ accompaniment. Then there are the "Messiah" lite offerings that reduce the three-hour oratorio to a short list of "Messiah" hits and promise to get the consumer in and out in 60 minutes flat. There are the "Messiah" sing-alongs, where the audience members bring their own "Messiah" scores and sing all the choral portions while a quartet of singers from the opera chorus has a go at the popular arias in between. Then there's the trendy "Messiah" brunch, where drag queens lip-synch the arias while patrons sip mimosas. . . well, I confess that my imagination took off in a flight of fancy with that last description.

What San Diego rarely experiences (has it ever?) is a serious, period-instrument performance done in the style and proportion that the composer himself might have actually recognized, one that uses 18th-century instruments (or copies thereof), Baroque pitch (A=415 rather than 440) and temperament, as well as choral and vocal conventions of the early 18th century, not the received choral and vocal styles/proportions of the 19th and 20th centuries, the ones we all know and many love. Enter Ruben Valenzuela and his plucky Bach Collegium San Diego, who staged a breath-taking and eye-opening (or should we say "ear-opening") period instrument performance of "Messiah" Sunday evening at St. Paul's Cathedral.

A seasoned conductor, Valenzuela nevertheless chose to play harpsichord *continuo*, selecting his colleague Stephen Sturk to conduct the oratorio and entrusting the instrumental leadership to his skilled British concertmaster Pierre Joubert, a veteran of such acclaimed early music ensembles as Christopher Hogwood's Academy of Ancient Music and Simon Rattle's Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. Under this trinity of musical expertise, the 16-voice Bach Collegium Chorus (what we now believe to be a typical Baroque chorus size), four guest vocal soloists and the 19 instrumentalists of the Collegium orchestra conjured a magical "Messiah" performance worlds apart from the usual December rituals, yet immediately recognizable to even diehard Mormon Tabernacle Choir devotees.

How did this small but mighty group accomplish this feat? It all has to do with style and proportion. The style is inferred from the rhetoric of the text, the natural stress and release of English speech—in this case the pregnant cadences of King James English—and not from the arch of the long melodic line. The latter approach looks for beautiful arching melodies for which the syllables of the text are just so many pretty vowels on which to glide this lovely theme. Such an approach works wonders for Brahms and Bruckner, for example, but it sinks Bach and Handel like a stone. Sturk asked his singers and instrumentalists for short, clear phrases, immaculate articulation, sprightly accents that leaped from the text, and a minimum of vibrato—except where used as an ornament to underscore a particular emotional state. The Collegium forces responded with enthusiastic precision, at least the majority of the time: a three-hour work makes exacting rehearsals of every measure at union scale a financial nightmare.

From the opening moments of the familiar Overture, the evening's aesthetic was established: quick (but not frantic) tempos and thin, clean textures from instruments that prized agility over richness of timbre. What the oboes and first violins lacked in muscle they gained in a quicksilver ability to gracefully execute florid figurations and tasty ornamentation. The first vocal piece, the tenor recitative "Comfort Ye, my people," introduced the *messa di voce*, a typical Baroque ornament that is a quick (and often unexpected) swell on a single syllable followed by an equally swift decrescendo before the syllable ends. When tenor Scott Whitaker sang the word "comfort," instead of sounding either stentorian or saccharine, his *messa di voce* infused the word with a compelling, dramatic summons. Vocal cadenzas on important words of the text further underlined the dramatic rhetoric, such as soprano Virginia Sublett's telling cadenzas on the words "heathen" and "shout" in "Rejoice greatly," or bass John Polhamus' cadenza on the verb "shall" in the phrase "we shall be changed" in the familiar aria "The trumpet shall sound." It was only later in the 18th century that performers and composers turned the "cadenza" into a mere display of musical prowess—here the cadenzas expressed meaning of the text!

Sublett, a lyric-coloratura soprano who was born to sing 18th-century music, was as buoyant, polished and captivating a singer as when I first heard her some 20 years ago. How does she do it and make it sound as effortless as yawning? She chose the lilting 12/8 version of the aria "Rejoice greatly" (Handel composed at least three different versions), which danced exuberantly across the front of the stately cathedral. Her melting "I know that my redeemer liveth" could convert even the most stone-hearted doubters. Polhamus, another winning Baroque stylist, although his warm, inviting timbre would succeed in almost any idiom, brought out the marvelous dialectic that Handel wrote into his bass arias, contrasting the slow, sustained importuning of "But who may abide" with the daunting but ever articulate *fioritura* of "For he is like a refiner's fire". In "The trumpet shall sound," Polhamus met his artistic match in trumpeter Kathryn Aducci, whose flawless, elegant performance of this aria on natural trumpet (i.e., a trumpet with no valves) outshone any trumpeter I have ever heard. Modern trumpets with their clumsy valves and pinched timbres make Handel's trumpet obbligato in this aria sound labored and harsh. Aducci spun out a sinuous line as delicate as that of a flute, yet with all the power and color of brass. If the angel Gabriel *does* play a trumpet, I have every confidence that he sounds very much like Ms. Aducci.

Whitaker delivered the tenor arias with panache, but proved less sympathetic to the Baroque ethos of the Collegium's planners. His timbre, I think, is a bit rich for the idiom. Music historians believe that the solo tenor voice changed during the time of Rossini, bringing the strength of the chest sound higher into the range, which had previously belonged to what we today call "head voice." (This is why the heroes of most 18th-century operas were either baritones or countertenors.) His *bel canto* vocalism aside, he nevertheless produced splendid declamation in "[All] they that see him, laugh him to scorn," and portrayed great pathos in "Thy rebuke hath broken his heart." Countertenor Martin Green, who is also St. Paul Cathedral's organist-choirmaster, sounded less confident than his fellow soloists, groping for opening notes in his recitatives, perhaps finding them a bit low for his range. His arias were emotionally flat and monochromatic, although he came out of his shell in his duet with the tenor, "O Death, where is thy sting?"

The chorus triumphed in all the lively sections, making quick-paced fugues sound as easy and playful as children at recess on a spring afternoon. In "He trusted in God," they appeared like vicious Greek furies transplanted from one of the "Orpheus" operas, yet they found innocent exultation in "Let all the angels of God worship Him." Their sound was consistently pure and clear, their diction immaculate. In the chorus "For unto us a child is born," they stealthfully approached the word "wonderful" only to fling it out with giddy exuberance instead of the usual ponderous declamation. Now *that* was magic. Even the warhorse "Hallelujah" chorus seemed renewed with this fresh approach. (Dear San Diego audience members—please stay seated at the performance of this piece. Unless there is a member of English royalty present at the performance and **they** stand up—*then and only then* should you jump to your feet.)

Valenzuela and his colleagues have revitalized a familiar work of the Western musical canon with a fresh, clarified vision of what lies underneath all of the plush Victorian upholstery with which we have become both familiar and bored. It is not simply the case of the Bauhaus premise that "less is more." Rather, Handel on his terms—or at least as much as we can decipher them at this distance in time—is far more interesting than the performance practices that have obscured the real thing.

Dates : June 3, 2007
Organization : Bach Collegium San Diego
Phone : (760) 341-1726
Production Type : Concert
Region : Hillcrest
URL : www.bachcollegiumsd.com