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BOOKSPOT

Messiah by Jonathan Keates, the story of Handel's masterpiece

Everyone knows Handel's *Messiah*. Anyway, if you don't, the timing of your curiosity is pretty good, since performances of the old warhorse have a tendency to break out at this time of year, writes Philip Henser.

In 1993, Alex Ross, writing in the New Yorker, pointed out that there were 21 complete performances in New York in December alone. Thanks to the miracle of bachtrack.com, it is possible to discover that this year there were nearly 70 performances of the whole thing during Advent, in settings from Vancouver to Melbourne, Budapest to Bristol. For a musical work lasting three hours without plot or narrative, that is pretty good going. Handel wrote it, in part, to make money, and it is still making money.

onathan Keates wrote an excellent biography of Handel in the 1980s, and this charming, solid little book is an intriguing account of the single reason that most of us still think of Handel from time to time. It is the story of the triumph of an immigrant. Early 18th-century London was unusually open to European influences. The arrival of the Huguenot silk weavers after 1685 was followed by Italian musicians, a German-speaking court, French and Dutch artists, and a general spread of influence and European elegance. Handel arrived in the capital on the back of the Hanoverian court and a taste for Italian opera, and quickly established a reputation in London society for genius and personal charm.

Italian operas went out of fashion, and Handel, from the 1730s onwards, started to concentrate on a new form, the oratorio – a sacred drama, not staged, but performed in concert while the audience's imagination constructed the scenes. These remain some of his most wonderful pieces, and it is only really in the last generation that the majesty of his operas has been rediscovered. The great oratorios – *Athalia*, *Israel in Egypt* and *Saul* – have always been at the

head of his reputation. Unlike most composers, Handel was at the centre of his society's intellectual life – a deist assertion from his contemporary Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* bursts into flame at the climax of the oratorio *Jephtha*. The oratorios, despite their antique subjects, are vital contributions to an argument in quite unexpected ways.

Messiah ought to be a real oddity. Unlike the other oratorios, it has no story, apart from a brief sequence about the shepherds at Jesus's birth. The text is a series of excerpts from scripture arranged by Charles Jennens, a wealthy squire who was opposed to the Hanoverian succession – Handel, quite the opposite in loyalty, must have been a very agreeable man to have entered into this collaboration. It is a series of reflections and prophecies, in which none of the singers have any kind of identifiable role or point of view. The singer who states "I know that my Redeemer liveth" could be anyone and, for the moment, is.

The first performance was in Dublin, in 1742, for a fashionable audience that was begged to leave off their hoops (the ladies) and their swords (the gentlemen) because of the size of crowd expected. They behaved very well: an observer

said with some surprise that “tho’ the young and gay of both sexes were present in great numbers, their behaviour was uniformly grave and decent …” In London the piece took a little time to establish itself, but by the 1750s, the Foundling Hospital had started annual fundraising performances. (Handel, characteristically, was pretty sharp about refusing the hospital’s attempts to claim exclusive rights.) Both the quality of the music and the charitable purpose of the performances had by now made it a firm favourite.

Curiously, however, Handel’s interest was in the drama of the piece and not just the musical purity. The first soloists were not always the best singers. Susannah Cibber, the first soprano soloist, was an actor rather than a singer. Charles Burney, the great musicologist, said of her performance that “her voice was a thread and her knowledge of music very inconsiderable, yet by a natural pathos, and perfect conception of the words, she often penetrated the heart, when others, with infinitely greater voice and skill, could only reach the ear.” Handel, in the end, was a showman, knowing exactly when to make a performance out of reticence, how to touch an audience’s heart with failure and incompleteness.

The story of *Messiah*, as Keates recognises, is almost at its most interesting after Handel's death. This oratorio is quite modest in its physical demands; its composer had appalled Jennens in demanding for *Saul* a carillon, a £500 organ, trombones and massive percussion effects. *Messiah* needed very little by comparison; its effect was intimate. Yet the ensemble quickly started to expand. Mozart was commissioned to rewrite it with more woodwind, and less accomplished hands quickly started adding all sorts of unlikely instruments. By the 1850s, another musical immigrant, the Neapolitan Michael Costa, was conducting performances of *Messiah* with thousands in the choir, nearly 500 in the orchestra, and a hitherto unsuspected requirement for a pair of cymbals.

These vast performances have gone on nearly to the present day, although more serious interpretations have begun to dominate. Many of the famous proponents of the piece, such as Sir Thomas Beecham, have not taken much interest in the correct historical style. Keates is properly aghast at some of the excesses, but I must admit to having a slight soft spot for them. There is something of the splendid charlatan about *Messiah*: the entrancingly insouciant chorus "For

unto us" has, it has always seemed to me, wanted to give the general impression of a fugue without actually troubling to give Handel any of the hard work of actually writing one.

Keates also neglects the wonderful place *Messiah* holds in the hearts of those of us from the north of England, where colossal amateur choral accounts, complete with tubas, might have stamped rudely over the conclusions of musicologists, but achieved any number of other things. The bringing together of working class and middle class, for instance; I quite see that a performance of *Messiah* with 20 in the choir is more Handelian than one with 3,000, but I wouldn't want to be the one to tell 2,980 Mancunians that their services were no longer required. Those massively inauthentic performances introduced many people to what the highest art could look like. I sang a couple of choruses from *Messiah* in the school choir at my comprehensive 40 years ago. I bet there are a few dozen people who learned it in the same choir who think of Handel from time to time, even now. If you put on a performance with marimbas and an ondes martenot, I'd quite enjoy it.

Keates is an enthusiastic, serious and careful writer, and this delightful book, though designed up to the hilt, contains a lot to muse over. I shake my head over the absence of music examples – the picturesque reproductions of Handel's manuscripts are barely readable. Still, the author clearly knows what he is talking about, and illuminates what we thought we knew. No readers will get beyond the fifth page without finding themselves humming a very familiar tune or two.

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• Philip Hensher's *Tales of Persuasion* is published by 4th Estate.

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