

A musical journey

In a two-part series, **Malcolm Bruno** surveys the shape-shifting orchestrations of Handel's *Messiah* from the work's completion in 1741 to the present day

Handel's *Messiah* is like no other work in the western musical canon. In its extraordinary history it has been performed continuously to ever-growing audiences since its 1742 debut. Composed in London during late summer 1741 and first performed in Dublin the following spring – with a dozen singers and a small instrumental ensemble in a modest concert room – it grew quickly in size and magnificence. For 17 years – from

its first performance in 1742 to the last under the composer's direction in 1759 – its popularity soared not only with Londoners of distinction, but in the provinces, including Dublin. Performed in Handel's final years in London's Foundling Hospital chapel (accommodating an audience of some 1,200), annual charity performances of *Messiah* became the city's greatest musical festivity. By 1784, to mark the centenary of Handel's birth, a week of celebrations – whose concerts

engaged the unprecedented choral and orchestral forces of some 513 performers – were held at Westminster Abbey.

A decade earlier *Messiah*'s fame had reached Handel's native homeland, with the first German performance in Hamburg in 1772. Five years later Mozart first heard *Messiah* in a shortened version by Johann Adam Hiller, third cantor after Bach in Leipzig's Thomaskirche. Finally, in 1789, just two years before his death, Baron van

▼ The final bars of the 'Hallelujah' chorus from Handel's *Messiah*, from the composer's autograph score

The image displays a page from Handel's autograph score for the 'Hallelujah' chorus. It features eight staves of handwritten musical notation in ink. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and bar lines. The handwriting is fluid and characteristic of the 18th century. At the bottom right, there is a signature and the date '6. 1741.'.

WIKIPEDIA/SCAN FROM THE STORY OF HANDEL'S MESSIAH BY WATKINS SHAW, PUBLISHED BY NOVELLO & CO. LTD, LONDON 1963



HÄNDEL HOUSE



HÄNDEL HOUSE MUSEUM, LONDON

▲ The Chandos Portrait of Georg Friedrich Händel (artist unknown), c.1720, in the Fitzwilliam Museum; Thomas Hudson's Portrait of Charles Jennens, c.1745, in the Handel House Museum, London

Swieten, the court librarian in Vienna and a great Handelian enthusiast, gave Mozart the task of creating a new orchestration of Handel's baroque original, to include a full complement of the latest Viennese winds. It was this Mozartean *Messiah* published in 1803 – ideally suited for what would become the modern orchestra – that transported the work into the symphonic era. It remained the benchmark for a *Messiah* until midway through the 20th century, when it was overtaken by the rise of the contemporary baroque orchestra.

With a growing interest in music before the symphonic era over the past 50 years, performances with smaller ensembles and baroque instruments have returned, first in collegiate chapels and then on the concert stage – in Britain and then beyond. Today, though it remains a popular work for large amateur choral societies, *Messiah* flourishes increasingly with highly skilled vocal ensembles accompanied by baroque or scaled-down modern orchestral forces.

A work of genius

Messiah wins our enthusiasm not only by virtue of Handel's music, but by the libretto of Charles Jennens. A man of wealth and

erudition, Jennens's passion for the stage was matched by a library of hundreds of volumes of music and literature and one of the finest art collections of his time. Though *Messiah* was not the first libretto he had prepared for Handel, he saw its uniqueness. As he wrote in a letter to his friend Edward Holdsworth on its completion: 'I hope to persuade Handel to set another Scripture

priest of the Church's greatest sacrament, nor a rabbi, the earthly Jesus of Nazareth. His was rather the Hebrew Messiah, the anointed one of God, recast in a secular, Promethean form: a suffering saviour derived from Old Testament prophecy, but one who redeems all humankind finally in the majestic vision depicted at the close of Scripture in the Book of Revelation.

Jennens's Messiah was the anointed one of God, recast in a secular, Promethean form

Collection I have made for him, & perform it for his own Benefit in Passion Week. I hope he will lay out his whole Genius & Skill upon it, that the Composition may excell all his former Compositions, as the Subject excells every other subject. The Subject is Messiah.'

Jennens's *Messiah*, however, features 'neither empty womb nor empty tomb'. The Christmas story is distilled to a cameo appearance of the shepherds, with Easter expressed in words borrowed from the Book of Job (in an entirely unrelated sense to their original context): 'I know that my Redeemer liveth'. Jennens's hero was neither the high

As the Jennens scholar Ruth Smith explains, 'the evangelically minded Jennens had the genius to see that the people most alienated from Christianity were the least likely to be reached by sermons, but could be reached by the emotional power of Handel's music. In the week before Easter such people would be more likely to attend a theatre than a church ... And besides reaffirming the faith of the faithful, *Messiah* was a summons to those who knew that they should believe, but were in danger of forgetting. Enlightenment rationalism questioned whether the Newtonian ruler of the cosmos could be interested in the fate

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◁ of every human being. *Messiah* responded affirmatively with a reminder of personal judgement, redemption and eternal life.' It is certainly these universal qualities that have – without apparent limit – imbued *Messiah* with its exceptional longevity. *Messiah* flourishes today not only in Europe and America, and the English-speaking world at large, but as far as east China where a burgeoning market for choral music embraces the work anew.

▼ The New Music Hall in Fishamble Street, Dublin, where *Messiah* was premiered on 13 April 1742



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A first *Messiah*

Like the Bible, *Messiah* defies singular definition, though unlike the Bible, its principal sources – the composer's autograph and conducting score – survive intact, the former housed behind thick glass and dimmed light in the British Library. From the start they became not a final, authoritative statement, but a well-spring – a blueprint from which Handel's lifetime *Messiah* journey in all its versatility would be initiated. The 'standard' *Messiah* familiar to many of us by contrast reflects only a tradition at the end of Handel's life, largely (if inadvertently) transmitted through Swieten/Mozart into the Victorian era.

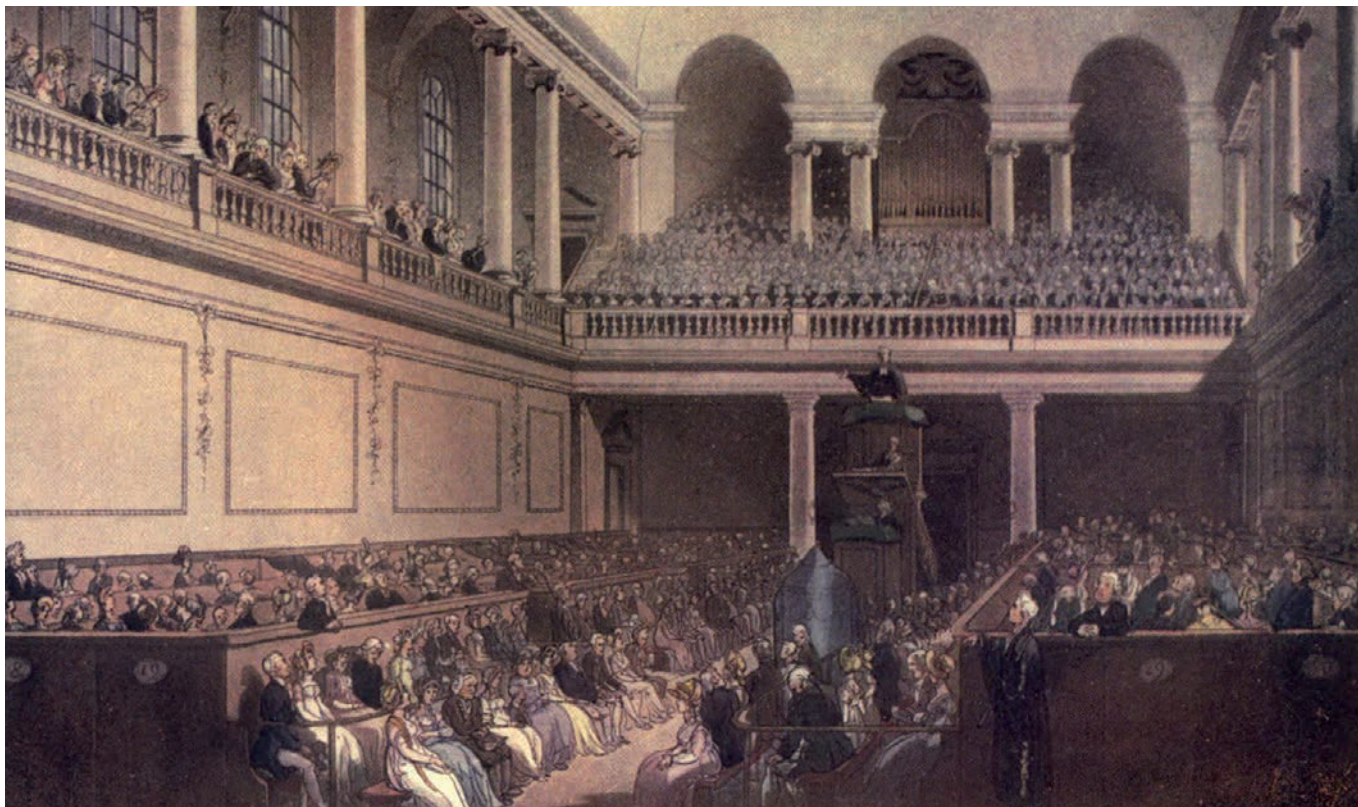
A recent surge of interest in rediscovering the unique earlier *Messiah* performances has focused on the composer's first 1742 revisions for the Dublin premiere – though these upon further reflection appear more a result of Handel's confrontation with provincial talent than his desire to recast the work more generally. Performances on his return to London in the 1740s and early 1750s support this view, with further revision centred on three notable arias for the 22-year old Italian castrato Gaetano Guadagni, of which 'But

who may abide' is the most sensational. During the 1750s a number of literal transpositions by Handel's amanuensis, John Christopher Smith, facilitated circumstances of individual performances and these include 'But who may abide' for soprano (up first to G and then to A minor).

Even more significant than such occasional inurement to vocal talent was the evolution of *Messiah* – even during Handel's lifetime – from an unstaged Lenten operatic work to a choral oratorio, a process clearly manifest by the late 1750s Foundling Hospital performances. In the 19th century the growth of the *Messiah* audience from London's operatic elite to the wider amateur public re-established the work entirely as a main staple of the newly emerging choral societies in England, Germany and America. Their many performances in vast concert halls or cathedrals contrasted sharply with Handel's original *Messiah*, featuring full da capo arias – such as 'Rejoice greatly' – that assumed a small, fleet professional vocal consort for a London theatre seating a few hundred patrons.

Breitkopf's illustrious publishing history of *Messiah* follows this history, beginning with Hiller's first edition of Mozart's orchestration

▼ The chapel of London's Foundling Hospital hosted regular charity performances of *Messiah* from 1750



in 1803. An epoch-making work (imported to London before mid-century in a number of English editions and finally championed by Ebenezer Prout for Novello in 1902), it was overtaken by Breitkopf's second *Messiah* publication. Appearing the same year as Prout's, it completed the monumental Händel-Gesellschaft project, in which Friedrich Chrysander offered a 'Mozart-free' *Messiah* and included, at vast cost, a lithographic print of the autograph.

A century beyond, full identification of all the known 18th-century manuscript copies of *Messiah* – a process begun in the 1940s by Harold Watkins Shaw – has given us a clearer picture of the composer's own performance intentions, including such practical matters as ornamentation and instrumentation. A third Breitkopf edition thus gives the opportunity to place centre-stage Handel's initial conception of the work – of its arias and their sequencing – and to uncover clues of early performance practice from a source in Dublin's Marsh's Library, the 'John Mathews *Messiah*'. Standing out against its contemporaries, this source derives ultimately and uniquely from a set of parts dated as early as 1743. Assembled originally from such material then in the song room of Salisbury Cathedral, its copyist, lay clerk John Mathews, amended an assiduously dated 'score-in-progress' as his cathedral career progressed from Salisbury to Durham and then to St Patrick's, Dublin. Its provenance has been shown to stem from London – perhaps from the original parts-borrowed by James Harris Esq. from Handel's London scriptorium for first performances in Salisbury. ■

Messiah 1741 was published by Breitkopf & Härtel in 2018; see review, p.87.

Recently visiting scholar at Princeton, musicologist Malcolm Bruno is editor of a number of major choral publications for Breitkopf & Härtel and Bärenreiter Verlag. An independent producer for BBC and Public Radio International in the US, since 2004 he has been artistic director of Larvik Barokk in Norway, where he also chairs the board of the ensemble Barokksolistene.

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The enduring impact of Mozart's orchestration

ROB SHIRET



Freestyle BY GRAEME KAY

Promenading in Liverpool

A trip to Liverpool to research a feature on Henry Willis & Sons afforded the opportunity to revisit this most extraordinary of British cities, with its 2,500 listed buildings (more of them Georgian than even the city of Bath can boast) and its two cathedrals – one the largest Anglican church in the world (disputed by Saint John the Divine in New York) and the other, Roman Catholic, dedicated to Christ the King, and the world's only circular cathedral.

I had never before visited the spectacular Lutyens crypt, vestige of the plan abandoned, due to the ravages of the second world war, to build the world's largest Catholic cathedral to a frankly overwhelming and – to be honest – fabulously ugly and oppressive design, like a vast brick dreadnought, by Sir Edwin Lutyens. Larger in itself than some cathedrals, the crypt's enormous spaces provide a treasury, a concert room, a multi-purpose hall, and a chapel in which is secreted a mechanical-action II/14 Rushworth & Dreaper organ, transferred from the redundant Church of St Patrick, Widnes in 1999. It should not be missed on any visit to that other architectural marvel upstairs.

While the so-nicknamed 'Paddy's Wigwam' is striking in design – welcoming, contemplative, a masterclass in the management of colour and light, and clearly in robust good health following the later addition of its processional staircase and the remedial work done to address serious construction flaws – by contrast the roseate glow of the Anglican



▲ Meditative mood: 'The Fruit of Silence' in Liverpool Cathedral

Cathedral's red sandstone offers a gateway to the numinous in a completely different way. On entering the building, feeling as small as a flea in a bell jar, one is always immediately struck by the atmosphere of quiet, warmth and curious intimacy which its colossal, uncluttered internal spaces belie.

Just how intimate the Cathedral can feel was demonstrated by a performance of 'The Fruit of Silence', a touring concert by the City of London Sinfonia, which this year paired its players with the cathedral choirs of Worcester, Exeter, Bristol, Sheffield, Bradford, Truro, Llandaff and Lichfield in a technically challenging programme of moving and meditative music by James MacMillan, Purcell, Vasks, Tavener, Bruckner, Pärt, Lotti, Allegri, Paul Mealor and Dobrinka Tabakova. As the musicians move around the buildings, the audience moves too, standing, or sitting on seats and beanbags *au choix*. Fruit of Silence, yes, but the indelible impression here in Liverpool was more likely to be the processions of light as we tracked the choir, under the direction of Lee Ward, round the Cathedral's beautiful spaces, their music illuminated by twinkling LED lights for Allegri's *Miserere* performed in stereo, with half the choir placed under Tracey Emin's lovely pink neon artwork saying, in her handwriting, 'I felt you and I knew you loved me', and the rest of the singers high up on the internal Dulverton Bridge.

More people should have been there to share this undeniably transcendent experience; but then it was a shock to call a taxi and hear the dispatcher ask, 'Which cathedral?' Fair question. 'The Anglican.' 'OK ...' Pause. 'Where is it?' ■

Graeme Kay is a digital platforms producer for BBC Radio 3 and 4.

GRAEME KAY