

Jillian Graham

Text of Messiah PCT – December 2012

Good afternoon everyone. My name is Jillian Graham, and I'm a soprano with the MSO Chorus that will sing for you this evening.

I want to say some things about Handel, his Messiah, and its various interpretations, but I'd also like to share with you something of a chorister's and a personal perspective on singing this wonderful work, again and again!

Handel was born in 1665 in Germany, and as I'm sure you're aware, became a rather prominent German-British composer, famous in particular for his operas and oratorios. He settled in London in 1712, where arguably he achieved his greatest fame and influence.

Despite Handel's fame, his private life remains enigmatic. Although he was supposedly pursued by a few adoring sopranos, he didn't marry, and was not known to have any long-term relationships. Possibly his temper had something to do with that. For example it's said that on one occasion, during a dispute over seating in an orchestra pit, Handel fought a near-fatal duel with a fellow composer and musician, Johann Matteson, whose sword thrust was blunted by a metal button on Handel's coat. But apparently they got over it and remained close friends! On another occasion at a rehearsal in a London opera house, Handel got infuriated with a soprano's refusal to follow his instructions. He grabbed her by the waist and threatened to toss her out of an open window, saying: "I know that you are a real she-devil but I will have you know that I am Beelzebub!" And his physical form was a bit intimidating too. According to his first biographer, John Mainwaring, "He paid more attention to food than is becoming to any man". Artist Joseph Goupy, who produced scenery for Handel opera productions, used his artistic talents to make a caricature of Handel at an organ keyboard, his face contorted into a pig snout, surrounded by poultry and wine bottles, with oysters strewn at his feet.

But enough about Handel's idiosyncrasies, which I think can be forgiven. One of the major reasons he relocated to England was the popularity there of Italian-style opera, and he supplied English audiences with many. But as time passed, music fashions changed, and the English public grew tired of Italian opera, particularly what they perceived as its absurd plots, soloists' 'attitudes' and the ornate vocal style. They were now looking for entertainment with a more local flavour.

To Handel's financial detriment, he was a bit slow to catch on to this trend, but when he did, he started to produce a series of English language oratorios. The librettist for some of these, wealthy musical and literary landowner Charles Jennens, sent Handel a new libretto in 1741, one which drew on sources from both the Old and New Testaments. Jennens commented to a friend, "I hope Handel will lay out his whole genius and skills upon it, that the composition may excel all his former compositions, as the subject excels every other subject. The subject is Messiah".

It appears that Handel did exactly that, composing the work in somewhere between three and four weeks in 1741. Not surprisingly, he literally worked on it from morning until night, and while he did borrow from himself on a few occasions, he can be forgiven for that too. It need hardly be said that this is amazing music, with its brilliant polyphony and word painting. [And if you're interested, you can read more about those self-borrowings in your concert programs.]

The Messiah's premiere was on the 13th of April, 1742, presented as a charity concert at the Great Music Hall in Fishamble St in Dublin, much to Charles Jennens' disgust. But the choice of Dublin probably related to the somewhat apathetic reception to Handel's music in London during the previous season. He didn't want to risk a failure with the Messiah, which was relatively unorthodox at the time because of its looser narrative. Apart from this, Dublin at the time was one of the fastest-growing, most prosperous cities in Europe, and its wealthy elite was keen to display its sophistication and economic means to stage major cultural events.

Your program notes will tell you more about the premiere, and the musicians involved, but I'll say a few words about it. Handel's music was reportedly not the only attraction. People wanted to catch a glimpse of contralto soloist, Susannah Cibber, who was at the time embroiled in a rather scandalous divorce. But her singing was of such a standard that a Dublin clergyman, the Reverend Delaney, was so overcome by her rendering of the aria 'He was despised', that he leapt to his feet and cried, "Woman, for this be all thy sins forgiven thee".

700 fortunate listeners were able to get in for the premiere, which was obviously a squeeze—and possibly also a fire hazard. Men were requested to remove their swords, and ladies asked not to wear hoops in their dresses. The reception was extremely positive with the press writing such comments as, "Words are wanting to express the exquisite delight it afforded to the admiring and crowded audience".

This warm reception was not fully replicated when Handel introduced the work 11 months later at Covent Garden in London, partly because of the perception that music based on the Bible shouldn't be performed in a theatre. But it was apparently at this first London performance that the tradition of standing for the 'Hallelujah' Chorus began, when King George II spontaneously rose to his feet in a spirit of exaltation—a nice tradition, I think.

The cool London reception led Handel to reduce the number of performances planned, and it wasn't regularly performed until 1750 and beyond, when the tradition of annual charity performances for London's Foundling Hospital began. And these continued beyond Handel's death in 1759.

Until blindness curtailed his compositional activities, Handel continued to revise the Messiah, both for aesthetic and pragmatic reasons—he would alter arias to suit the singers available, and score it for different instruments, probably for the same reason. Thus it's difficult to isolate one, definitive version, as Handel himself considered it a work in progress. And of course since his death, many people have

arranged the music to be compatible with their times—no less a composer than Mozart being one. A version considered ‘standard’ or ‘traditional’ was around from the early 20th century—the Ebenezer Prout version—but from around the 1960s, scholarship about more authentic performance practice was reflected in performances and recordings.

The different recordings of course reflect the many different interpretations. There can be significant variances in articulation, ornamentation, tempi (or speeds), choices of numbers to cut, whether modern or period instruments are used, and numbers of performers. Among many others, conductors such as Beecham, Boult, Solti and Sargent made recordings in the early and middle years of the 20th century, and Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Harry Christophers, Stephen Layton and Antony Walker have produced very different recordings in the final years of the 20th century and into the 21st.

I think the more general differences between those earlier and more recent recordings can be well illustrated with two in particular: firstly Sargent’s in 1946 with the Huddersfield Choral Society and the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. 150 choral singers were selected for this recording, and the orchestra was large. And then there’s one produced here in Australia with conductor Antony Walker in 2002, with the 20–strong chamber choir *Cantillation* and the baroque chamber Orchestra of the Antipodes on period instruments. Taking into account that recording techniques in 2002 were far more advanced than in 1946, the differences are still obvious. The Sargent recording reflects a pre–authentic era, with its large forces, and perhaps more romantic interpretation, particularly with the slow tempi.

I’ll play a few brief excerpts for you. The first is right at the beginning—the orchestral Sinfonia. You’ll certainly hear the different impacts of large and small forces, tempi, ornamentation and clarity. I’ll play the Sargent excerpt first, and the Walker will follow.

Play Tracks 1 & 2

Next I'd like to play a bit from one of the soprano arias—'I know that my redeemer liveth'. You'll hear a big difference between the more operatic voice of soprano Isobel Baillie in the Sargent version and the beautiful, pure voice of Sara Macliver, perhaps better suited to this music.

Play Tracks 3 & 4

And finally, of course I had to finish with a chorus, and one which requires a certain choral vocal dexterity easier to obtain with fewer singers—'And he shall purify'.

Play Tracks 5 & 6

I myself prefer the smaller, more authentic baroque version—it's crisper, cleaner, lighter, more alive, more nuanced, and reveals the character of the music much better. But I'll leave it to you to decide which you prefer!

Although the Sargent recording could be said to have 'industrial-strength' forces, there have been performances on a much grander scale than this! The fashion of large-scale performances began in 1784 with a series of commemorative concerts of Handel's music given at Westminster Abbey under the patronage of King George III. Three years later, when further performances were given at the Abbey, advertisements promised that "the band will consist of 800 performers!" The 19th century saw increasingly grandiose renditions in Europe and America. In the 'Great Handel Festival' of 1857 in Britain, there was apparently a chorus of 2000 singers and an orchestra of 500! And in our own day, even Harry Christophers, who had conducted the Messiah with his small group of singers, 'The Sixteen', around 200 times, staged a 'Massive Messiah' with 750 singers at the 60th anniversary of the Festival of Britain last year. This year, by the way, we have a mere 98 singers and 40 orchestral musicians, plus soloists and conductor, of course.

And then there is the tradition that has developed of ‘People’s’ or ‘Sing your own’ Messiahs—a perfect opportunity to experience singing this wonderful music. And I’ve even heard of Messiah performances where score-carrying audience members have felt compelled to join in when they chose to, even if a ‘People’s Messiah’ was not the intention! One such occasion was in Toledo, Ohio in 1985, when the reviewer for the *Toledo Blade* newspaper was unfortunately positioned near a would-be soprano who apparently “produced the breathless, off-key vocal sounds in the style of the late Florence Foster-Jenkins”, who as many of you would know, I’m sure, had enough money to sing in such exalted venues as Carnegie Hall, but definitely not enough talent. Check out You Tube if you’ve never heard her sing—her version of ‘The Queen of the Night’ is a scream—literally!

So now to the chorister’s perspective. I wanted to say first that what we do, we do for love. Symphony orchestra choruses are typically unpaid, and the MSO Chorus is no exception. By day we are doctors, lawyers, academics, students, teachers, music teachers, IT specialists, business owners, office workers, florists—you name it. So why do we put ourselves through the stressful audition and re-audition process; why do we give up on average two nights a week for rehearsals, and during Production Weeks often every night? Our reward is obviously not in the making of money, but in the making of music. Choral singing is perhaps the ultimate in team work, but not competitive team work, as in sports. We blend together to create something that is hopefully both refined and beautiful. And in this choir, we are fortunate enough to work with an exceptionally gifted, inspiring, musical and witty chorus master in Jonathan Grieves-Smith—certainly a drawcard for me when I decided to audition for this choir. He’s the one who prepares us to a standard whereby other conductors can swan in for Production Week and need only fine-tune the choir according to their interpretations. We also get to work with a marvelous professional orchestra, and some of the most renowned conductors and soloists. We sing a variety of works, most of which are well worth singing (with the possible

exception of Percy Grainger earlier this year, but that's just a personal view ...). And I guess the Messiah, at least for some of us, is the icing on the Christmas cake—it's such a gift to choirs.

I sang it first when I was 16 years old at secondary school. We Diocesan High School choristers trooped out to South Auckland to meet up with the King's School boys who provided the tenor and bass sections, so perhaps the music wasn't the only attraction ... I really can't remember, though I do recall that the young fellow who played trumpet was rather keen on me at the time. Unfortunately his rendition of the solo 'And the trumpet shall sound' completely put me off. Anyway, I loved the work from the beginning, and I still remember singing the words 'Wonderful counsellor' for the first time.

I've sung it many times since—maybe 30 or 40, not including all the rehearsals, of course. And obviously with the seven years that I've been in the MSO Chorus, I'm now singing it for the seventh year in a row. I think my family dreads Messiah time a bit, because I tend to sing it around the house rather too much for their liking, and they only have to say the words 'surely' or 'worthy' in an unrelated sentence and I'm off—'Su-re-ly, su-re-ly'.

The Messiah conductors in my time, then, have included Nicholas Milton, Graeme Abbott, Antony Walker, Stephen Layton, Roy Goodman, Reinhard Goebel and this year of course, Bernard Labadie. For me, British conductor Layton's season is probably still the most rewarding—a hard taskmaster who demanded a very high standard, but an amazing choral director and musician with huge respect for his singers and players as musicians. It was truly a privilege to work with him. But I really enjoyed Walker's musicianship as well, and Roy Goodman's energy and passion for the work.

Last year Goebel did the Mozart version. Mozart was a great admirer of Handel, but musical language and taste had changed. He made a number of alterations,

including two in particular that bothered me. In some of the choruses, Mozart had passages sung by soloists alternating with full chorus, for example in 'For unto us a child is born'. That chorus being one of my personal favourites, I didn't much enjoy having to shut up in some places where we would normally be singing! Mozart also shortened 'And the trumpet shall sound', and transferred most of it to horns. While that might have been preferable for the Diocesan/Kings version I did at 16, the trumpet solo in the hands of a professional is a treat, and I did miss it last year. And Goebel would have to be the most eccentric conductor I have ever experienced, which did add some challenges!

You'll find that the Messiah you hear this year is shorter, partly because of the cuts Labadie has chosen to make, including about four choruses, and partly because his tempi tend to be lively rather than slow. He is definitely after an interpretation based on his knowledge of the composer's wishes and on Baroque performance practice, and he shares relevant aspects of this knowledge with us. Sometimes you find that conductors might be musicologically knowledgeable, but are less able to communicate either their love of the music or their musical interpretations through their conducting gestures. Labadie is not one of those. He has very clear ideas of how he wants it to sound, and is able to communicate those well, both verbally and physically—that's of course as long as we're watching ... He is all about musical gesture, articulation, phrasing and shaping, and the result, I believe, is a highly nuanced, sophisticated and musical performance. He's quite a perfectionist, which can get very annoying in rehearsals, but the result is really worth it. It's good to have high expectations, and very satisfying to sense the improvement in quality. The Messiah, being so often performed, is in danger of de-generating into a good blast and a bellow, but nevertheless an unmusical performance. I'm fairly certain you won't find that this evening.

So I'm enjoying it this year as ever—I, personally, never tire of this work. There's an apocryphal story that Handel composed the music in a fervour of divine inspiration,

and that as he wrote the 'Hallelujah' Chorus, "he saw all heaven before him". But does one need to be religious to enjoy this music? Patrick White's biographer, David Marr, was recently interviewed on Margaret Throsby's program on ABC Classic FM, and had chosen a piece of glorious choral music by John Taverner. In his introduction to this selection, he posed the question, "What do atheists do with their passion for Church music?" But I think it's a potent aesthetic experience whether you're religious or not. Those universal emotions of grief, pathos, serenity, joy and jubilation are all powerfully evoked by the music itself.

I hope you enjoy the performance, and that you see your version of heaven before you.

Thank you.