

PERFORMING 'MESSIAH' AS HANDEL WISHED

FROM THE TIME OF ITS COMPOSITION until now, Handel's 'Messiah' has been performed in an extraordinary diversity of versions. The notion of performing 'Messiah' as Handel wished is complex: but the necessary pre-requisites for realising this notion are simple. The first requirement is a faithful fair copy of what Handel wrote and used — no more, and no less. None of the available editions offers this. Consequently, any performance based on one of these editions is based on corruption. The second requirement is a body of singers and instrumentalists who are prepared to study and perform what Handel wrote. It is simultaneously fascinating and infuriating to meet with the empty justifications of editors for altering and adding to Handel's original; and with the determination of singers to substitute their versions for Handel's, and of instrumentalists to play their way instead of that marked by Handel.

The latest recordings claiming authority have employed an appropriate small body of performers; but they have been contributed to by soloists who insist on ornamenting their way, by string players who caricature baroque bowing, and harpsichordists unschooled in the art of playing continuo. These recordings have more commercial value than artistic integrity; and they do no more than provide an illusion of authority. Much nonsense is talked about how baroque music should be performed; and unfortunately most listeners will have no good reason for rejecting this nonsense. Those who wish to know the truth must search for it, and it is not easy to find. Few will ever know it.

Handel's 'Messiah' is one of Christendom's artistic masterpieces. It deserves to live again and again, brought to life with the most scrupulous care for every detail bequeathed to us by its composer.

i Studies and Editions

Any suggestion that Handel's wishes regarding performances of 'Messiah' may be known with confidence invites denial. His original manuscript is now in the British Library; and the fair copy of it, used by him as his conducting score, is now in Saint Michael's College, Tenbury. These two closely related manuscripts embody his first and most of his later thoughts about 'Messiah'; but they do not provide a final version signed by the composer as representing the finished work as he wished it passed on to the future. The score and performing parts made at Handel's instructions in his Will for the Foundling Hospital do no more than support other evidence regarding the relation of soloists and chorus, the instrumentation, and the number of performers in one or more performances towards the close of Handel's life. Other early texts of 'Messiah' or of portions of it add little to the evidence of the three chief sources: the Autograph Score, the Fair Copy, and the Foundling Hospital Parts. Unfortunately as far as is known none of the parts used by Handel's singers and instrumentalists has survived.

During this century an enormous amount of time has been devoted to the study of 'Messiah' with a view to providing an exhaustive historical account and an authoritative edition. Those who now wish to be well-informed regarding 'Messiah' must turn to the chief publications of this century:

i *Essays about 'Messiah'*

- (a) Watkins Shaw, *The Story of Handel's Messiah, 1741-1784* (Novello, 1963), and *A Textual and Historical Companion to Messiah* (Novello, 1965).
- (b) Jens Peter Larsen, *Handel's Messiah. Origins, composition, sources* (Black, 1957).

ii *Scores derived from the original manuscripts*

- (a) Friedrich Chrysander, Score (Deutsche Handelgesellschaft, 1901), and Fritz Volbach, Miniature Score (Eulenburg, undated; derived from Chrysander).
- (b) Arnold Schering, Score (Peters, 1939), and Brian Priestman, Miniature Score (Eulenburg (No 956), [1963]; derived from Schering).
- (c) John Tobin, Score (Hallische Händel Ausgabe, Bärenreiter, 1965).
- (d) Watkins Shaw, Score (Novello, 1965).

iii *Facsimile reproductions of the original manuscripts*

- (a) Handel's Autograph, with an introduction by Friedrich Chrysander, for the Deutsche Handelgesellschaft, 1892; reprinted Da Capo Press, 1969.
- (b) Handel's Conducting Score, with an introduction by Watkins Shaw, for the Royal Musical Association, 1974.

It is of negligible consequence that the Foundling Hospital parts have not been published in facsimile.

This essay is not concerned with the following; and after a brief comment about each, to put them in their place, they are dismissed.

- iv (a) *Songs in Messiah* (Walsh, c.1749).
- (b) *Messiah an oratorio in score* (Randall and Abell, 1767).

These were the first editions of two series; and the successive publications of each are described by William Smith in his *Handel; a descriptive catalogue of the early editions* (Cassell, 1960), pp. 116-129. They add nothing of authority to the Autograph and the Conducting Score.

- v (a) Mozart's additional instrumental parts of 1789, Score (Peters, [1939]).
- (b) Prout's re-orchestration, Score (Novello, 1902).

Mozart's additional instrumental parts are of a very different character from the oboe and bassoon parts of the Foundling Hospital set. The former are contrapun-

tal additions, reflecting Mozart's skill in orchestration; the latter are straightforward re-inforcements of the original chorus and string parts. Prout's re-orchestration is a complete rejection of Handel's instrumentation; it is virtually an orchestration (for the late nineteenth century symphony orchestra) of a keyboard reduction of Handel's accompaniments.

ii Instruments and Voices

The Autograph and the Conducting Score agree with each other as regards the instruments prescribed by Handel. Only here and there are the staves of the score labelled; but there is negligible doubt as to what is intended:

- i the standard instrumentation for the choruses is the usual Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Bass of Handel's day;
- ii in a few choruses 2 trumpets alone, or with a pair of kettledrums, are added to the strings; and in one instance a pair of oboes;
- iii in some arias either the violins alone, or with the viola, are in unison;
- iv in the aria 'The Trumpet shall sound' a trumpet plays alongside the singer;
- v in the Pifa (= Pastoral Symphony) a Violin III and the Viola are directed to play respectively an octave below the Violin I and the Violin II; and in the *accompagnato* 'All they that see him', a Violin III is prescribed (but Violin I and Violin II are in unison, so the strings remain in 4 parts, and the significance of this re-allocation is not obvious);
- vi the Bass alone is slightly problematical: (a) here and there the bass clef is replaced by the tenor clef, and in some instances the direction 'violone' (ending in the letter 'c', not the letter 'e'), an abbreviation for violoncello, and not the word *violone*, is written against the staff; (b) here and there is the direction 'tasto solo'; here and there are figurings; and here and there written with one of the vocal clefs are notes for a keyboard continuo to support the voice parts at a 'point of imitation'.
- vii in the Conducting Score Handel has regularly indicated 'con ripieno' and 'senza ripieno' (either in full or abbreviated). There are no such directions in the Autograph.

The Autograph and the Conducting Score also agree with each other as regards the voices. The usual cantus (= soprano), alto, tenor, and bass voices are implied by their proper clefs as used in Handel's day. The Autograph and the Conducting Score differ as regards a number of alternative versions of solo items. But there is no doubt as to what voice was intended for any particular item, or any alternative

version of it. The choruses with one exception are for the usual 4 parts. In the chorus 'Lift up your heads' the Cantus is replaced by Cantus I and Cantus II; but nowhere does the chorus actually sing in 5 parts; and after the opening the Cantus I and Cantus II come together.

The instruments and voices of Handel's complete score are laid out in regular order:

Oboe I
Oboe II

Tromba I
Tromba II
Timpani

Violino I
Violino II
Viola

Cantus
Altus
Tenor
Bassus

Bassi

Nowhere are all these provided for simultaneously; and regularly throughout Handel writes on the minimum number of staves necessary for the particular item.

The Autograph and the Conducting Score agree very largely over details such as the directions regarding style (such as *allegro*), volume (such as *forte*), articulation (such as slurs), and other markings (such as trills). But some of these details are marked scantily or inconsistently: the scanty markings call for supplementation by analogy, and the inconsistencies for reconciliation. In the Conducting Score Handel's annotations give some guidance (which can be supplemented from other sources such as a programme) as to how he chose on some occasions to share the soprano items between two singers.

In four important respects Handel's Autograph and Conducting Score leave us partly or entirely uninstructed:

- i as to which alternatives he preferred in those instances in which he left more than one version of any item;

- ii as to what instruments should play from the instrumental bass line; violoncello is mentioned, a keyboard continuo instrument is implied, no other bass string instrument is mentioned;
- iii as to whether or not he wished oboes and bassoons to be added to the strings — there is nothing in either score to suggest that he did;
- iv as to the style of cadenzas and ornamentation he wished to be added where he allowed for a cadenza, or where a context seems to call for an ornament.

All four of these raise issues about which much needs to be said. However what is quite certain is that it is not the business of a scholar to make decisions which ought to remain the prerogative of the director of a performance. It is even less his business to embody such decisions in an edition. He ought to expose the issues, explain them, and set forth any factual or circumstantial evidence on which as reliable a decision as possible may be based. A scholar ought, unless there is very good reason to the contrary, to provide a text as free as possible from editorial intrusion; and certainly free from editorial additions. A detailed critical commentary does not excuse a text which deliberately and unnecessarily changes the original, or one which hides the original beneath a layer of editorial additions. The most reprehensible claim attached to editions of old music published in recent times is that they are devised to serve both scholar and performer alike. They often present a disservice to both.

iii **Establishing the Text**

It is well-known in other fields of learning concerned with the past, especially the distant past, that the first task of scholarship is to establish the text. At one extreme a unique original of impeccable clarity needs no more than photographic reproduction for all who are interested and adequately schooled to interpret it for themselves; and scholars may interest themselves immediately in searching for misprints or slips of the pen. If the facsimile will serve for performers, a few footnotes from a scholar will suffice to inform the user of likely errors in the text. At the other extreme a group of fragmentary and corrupt texts, of uncertain relation to each other and to an unknown original, demands a reconstruction, perhaps many alternative reconstructions in thoughtful attempts to guess at the original.

Many conventions of musical notation have changed in course of time; and in many instances although the original may be clear enough — there is no doubt what is actually written or in print — knowing what the composer meant or intended depends on knowing his conventions, and judging correctly whether or not a slip of the pen or error in compositing has intervened between his thoughts and their record in writing. More often than not sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century handwritten or printed music is extremely crowded — a reflection

of the cost of paper; and the original calls for a fair copy well spaced to allow for on-the-page comments. Every stage of copying, even the production of a photographic facsimile, destroys some evidence which may have significance; but if anything is to be gained, then the initial fair copy must accept, in the interests of better understanding, the risks inherent in discarding or changing features which are of no apparent consequence.

The first task of scholarship is then the production of a fair copy, either handwritten or printed, of the original documents; and if the scholar himself provides the handwritten fair copy, and it is exceptionally clear, then the opportunities for the introduction of error are minimal.

There is no doubt at all that so far scholars have failed to provide a fair copy of 'Messiah': they have not presented only what Handel left as regards the music (and that includes the words attached to the notes), simultaneously pointing out all the details which present difficulties in reading or understanding. All have provided texts ready for use, by present day performers and according to their individual views as to how Handel's text needs to be supplemented and embellished; and their critical commentaries justifying the various decisions they have made are interesting, but do not compensate for their intrusions into the composer's originals and their abrogation of the rights of directors of performances.

iv Comparative Study of the Editions

A comparative study of the scores of Handel's 'Messiah' derived from the original manuscripts, the original manuscripts and yet another score which is a fair copy of the original manuscripts (annotated to point out difficulties in reading, inconsistencies, and discrepancies) is not a useless waste of time. The editors of these scores have noticed between them probably most, and possibly all of the small matters calling for comment; and they have presented between them a diversity of interpretations of the small matters which performers used to consider. Consequently such a comparative study serves two purposes: first it alerts all those interested in the publication of reliable editions to the status of these published editions of Handel's 'Messiah'; and it points out to those who wish to perform Handel's 'Messiah' the matters small and great which they must decide upon, preferably with an edition which is in fact as fair a copy of the original as integrity can provide. The remarks which follow draw attention to examples of the differences between the editions and the originals which come to light as a comparative study is made.

i Alternative Versions

As is well known for some of the items in 'Messiah', Handel left a number of alternative versions. Some are in his autograph, or in his conducting score, others are elsewhere. The status of the versions almost certainly varies: some may be a firmly preferred substitute for an earlier version; others may be versions of

convenience for a particular performance. The editions vary as regards the extent to which they include the alternatives:

- Chrysander — gives many alternatives.
- Volbach — gives none.
- Schering — gives some alternatives.
- Priestman — follows Schering.
- Tobin — gives many alternatives.
- Shaw — gives many alternatives.

ii *The Literary Text*

As is well known the literary text of Handel's 'Messiah' was compiled by Charles Jennens; it is in English; and I know of no suggestion that Handel was at any time associated with a translation into German. Also as is fairly well known Handel's command of English was imperfect, and in several instances his treatment of the words is faulty. All the modern editions give the original English text; and some give also a German version:

- Chrysander — provides a German translation below the English.
- Volbach — gives Chrysander's translation with the original English below the German.
- Schering — gives pride of place to a German translation based on that of Chrysander, with the original English in smaller type below.
- Priestman — reluctantly follows Schering.
- Tobin — provides a German translation below the English.
- Shaw — gives the original English only.

iii *Oboes and Bassoon*

With the exceptional instance of one chorus, in which Handel has written parts for Oboe I and Oboe II, his scores (both original and conducting) make no mention whatever of oboes and bassoon. A handful of sets of parts for these instruments survive from Handel's time; they are reported as all differing from each other. Obviously these parts were not the work of Handel; and equally obviously they served a purpose at certain performances. Handel's wishes regarding the use of oboes and bassoon are not known; and there is no justification for postulating one way or the other that oboes and bassoon either should or should not be included if a performance is to accord with Handel's wishes. And there is no justification whatever for raising any surviving set of oboe and bassoon parts to the dignity of a place in Handel's score.

The director of a performance ought to decide what part if any oboes and bassoon are to play in his performance. I have not made a study of the surviving oboe and bassoon parts. Such a study might disclose that the parts served a variety of purposes: in some instances a purely artistic one — to enhance the character

of the instrumentation; in others a purely practical one — to support weaknesses in instrumental or vocal parts. If this is so then the director of a performance may well have reason either for adopting a surviving set of parts for a particular performance, or for preparing his own.

A quick glance at the modern editions shows their treatment of the oboes and bassoon:

Chrysander — points out when the oboes and bassoon parts are involved in the Foundling Hospital parts. He does not allocate them a stave.

Volbach — as for Chrysander.

Schering — gives the Foundling Hospital oboe and bassoon parts on extra staves above the strings.

Priestman — as for Schering.

Tobin — gives the Foundling Hospital oboe and bassoon parts on extra staves, the oboe parts above the violins, and the bassoon part above the bass instrumental line.

Shaw — points out the Foundling Hospital oboe and bassoon parts on the string staves, and gives another surviving set on an extra stave at the top of the score. He makes no comment on any bassoon part associated with the other oboe parts; and he supplements the original parts with his own inventions.

Obviously these scores do not serve us well if we turn to them for an impression of the diversity of oboe and bassoon parts provided for performances in Handel's day.

iv *Keyboard Continuo*

The single stave with a bass clef, occasionally replaced for a few bars by a tenor, or even alto or soprano clef, obviously serves both the bass string instruments and the keyboard continuo. The modern editions offer a variety of keyboard parts:

Chrysander — provides a part of pianoforte beneath his fair copy of Handel's score. This part is a reduction of the instrumental parts, supplemented by a realization of the bass in recitatives and other passages bare of other instruments. The realization is simple — it makes no attempt to impose any sophisticated style on its user. Briefly, Chrysander's pianoforte part is a substitution for the instrumentation, as would be printed in a vocal score, and serve for vocal rehearsals.

Volbach — provides a realization of the bass in recitatives and other passages bare of other instruments. The realization is that given by Chrysander with slight modifications and a few additions.

Schering — provides nothing.

Priestman — as for Schering.

Tobin — provides a keyboard realization for the recitatives only.

Shaw — provides nothing.

v. *Headings*

In all editions the 'Overture' and 'Pastoral Symphony', as Prout called them at the beginning of the twentieth century in his edition for Novello, are given Handel's original headings of 'Sinfony' and 'Pifa'. The recitatives, airs, and choruses are now numbered and called by their opening words, whereas Handel gives no more than 'recit', 'accomp', and 'chorus' for these movements, and nothing at all for the airs. (The numbering varies a little between the editions.)

vi *Clefs*

All the editions replace the original clefs with those in common use today — an expediency against which argument is difficult. Handel's choice tells us something; but if his choice is pointed out, then substituting present day clefs seems to do no more than make reading easier for those not accustomed to the usual eighteenth century clefs.

vii *Bars and Accidentals*

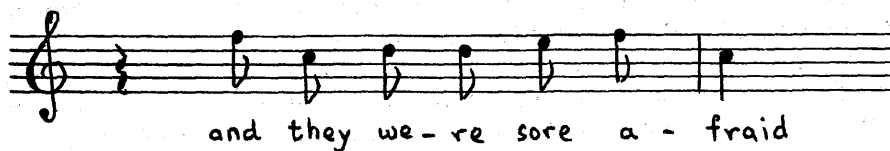
All the editions replace Handel's sometimes irregular bars with regular; and substitute accidentals according to present day custom. Both then and now the conventions regarding accidentals are linked with bars; consequently all the editions have destroyed the evidence not only on which a decision could be taken regarding any accidental over which there is doubt, but also the circumstances which would alert the observant reader to the possibility of uncertainty. The destruction of this particular kind of evidence is widespread, even among those claiming concern for punctilious authenticity.

viii *Time Signatures*

The only change is of no significance: Shaw alone replaces Handel's C with its equivalent 4/4.

ix *Faulty Treatment of Words*

These editions manage Handel's faulty treatment of the words in different ways; one example suffices to illustrate the diversity. Following the Pastoral Symphony, at the close of the second section of the soprano account of the visitation of the shepherds are the words: 'and they were sore afraid'. The original seems clear enough. Handel wrote:



with 'were' as two syllables, and with the accents on 'and' and 'we-'. Obviously the original cannot be accepted; and in performance some modification of what Handel wrote must be adopted. Each modern edition gives its version without on-the-spot comment; so the user will be unaware of the editor's correction of Handel, and therefore that some other substitutes for Handel's faulty original ought to receive the user's consideration.

x *Loud and Soft, and so on*

Handel's indications of loud and soft are few. In some instances they may be supplemented with confidence by analogy. But any need to make extensive additions to what Handel wrote calls for much consideration, and falls within the prerogative of the director of a performance. The modern editions differ:

Chrysander — gives in the score Handel's original markings; but he gives in his pianoforte part regularly throughout detailed direction regarding loud and soft. He gives also in his pianoforte part a variety of other directions such as accents and ritentos.

Volbach — gives in the score Handel's original markings; but he gives a few extras in his continuo part.

Schering — gives Handel's original markings and others from the Foundling Hospital parts without differentiation; and adds some of his own.

Priestman — gives Handel's original markings; and adds some of his own.

Tobin — gives Handel's original markings generously supplemented in different type, mostly on the grounds of analogy.

Shaw — gives a generous sprinkling of louds and softs of his own invention (without saying so), in one instance flatly contradicting Handel's perfectly clear directive: Handel marks the tenor 'Accompagnato Larghetto e piano'; Shaw marks it 'mf'. Handel's few original markings are in fact given by Shaw (though he does not point this out) with forte and piano spelt out in full.

These comments ignore the issue of how the editions differ in reflecting Handel's inconsistency over marking the separate staves — often it is obvious that a single forte or piano against one part should apply to others.

xi *Details of Rhythm and Articulation*

As is well known baroque musical notation had a small diversity of features which lead to uncertainty as to what was intended, even though what was actually written is clear enough. Editorial intrusion on this count varies markedly.

Chrysander — as regards rhythm (as, for example, in the bass accompagnato 'Thus saith the Lord') gives what Handel wrote; but in recitatives he displaces the cadence chords and in his pianoforte reduction of the accompaniment he occasionally replaces Handel's articulation (bowings) with his own (as, for example, in the soprano accompagnato 'And suddenly there was with the Angel').

Volbach — gives what Handel wrote, except that in recitatives he displaces the cadence chords.

Schering — gives what Handel wrote.

Priestman — gives what Handel wrote.

Tobin — gives what Handel wrote, except that in recitatives he displaces the cadence chords.

Shaw — in his score, gives many rhythmic changes, implying that they ought to be made; displaces the cadence chords. In his vocal score some of the rhythmic changes are made substantive, without any reference to the original (as, for example, in the bass *accompagnato* 'Thus saith the Lord'); and in his parts he imposes articulations (bowings) for which Handel gives no hint (as, for example, in the soprano aria 'Rejoice greatly' at the last occurrence of these words). A feature of Shaw's score and vocal score is his inconsistency — in one instance acknowledging his intrusion, in another not.

xii *Trills, Appoggiaturas and Cadenzas*

Handel marked only a few trills, appoggiaturas and cadenzas; but he almost certainly expected his parts, especially the vocal solo parts, to be ornamented. What he would have wished, and what his performers actually did, may have been close together or far apart. What he wished may have been on the one hand no more than a few trills and appoggiaturas matching those he had marked, and modest cadenzas at obvious spots in an aria; or on the other hand a great diversity of decorations of all kinds, and elaborate cadenzas wherever places could be found for them. Editorial intrusion on this particular prerogative of the director of a performance varies markedly.

Chrysander — supplements Handel's markings with only a few extras which are obvious by analogy or because of the context; and he distinguishes his additions from Handel's originals.

Volbach — as for Chrysander.

Schering — as for Chrysander.

Priestman — as for Chrysander.

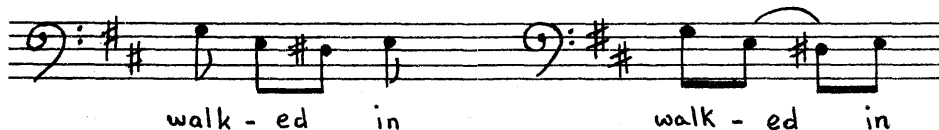
Tobin — as for Chrysander as regards trills and cadenzas; but in the recitatives he has added appoggiaturas at almost every opportunity.

Shaw — in his score, as for Chrysander. But in his vocal score he provides extra trills and appoggiaturas, and cadenzas composed by himself wherever he could put them in.

xiii *Idiosyncracies of Notation*

The editions differ over a diversity of small matters which are either obvious but seem inconsequential, or not obvious but possibly of consequence. The linking of tails of quavers may be either no more than a matter of convenience for the eye and pen or a reflection of Handel's intentions regarding the treatment of the words or the bowing of the strings; for example (as Shaw illustrates in his

foreword):



All the others (Chrysander, Volbach, Schering, Priestman and Tobin) follow Handel. In some instances Prout's vocal score follows Handel, whereas Shaw's, which was planned to replace Prout's, does not; but in this instance Prout changes Handel's underlaying of the words.

Many of the small changes in notation such as tails up or down on the staff almost certainly have no significance whatsoever beyond tidiness and convenience in reading; and they are a natural consequence of changes of clef. Any issue which such changes could affect should be referred to the original — a fair copy should not be expected to provide this evidence.

v In Conclusion

The most interesting generalization to emerge from this survey of the editions is that for most features at least one edition has adhered to what Handel left:

- i freedom from intruding oboes and bassoon parts
Chrysander and Volbach
- ii freedom from keyboard realization of the continuo
Schering, Priestman, and Shaw
- iii freedom from a German translation
Shaw
and from deviations from Handel's treatment of words
Tobin (it seems, from a glance at a few sensitive spots)
- iv freedom from additional louds and softs
Chrysander in his score (that is, excluding his pianoforte reduction of the accompaniment)
- v freedom from additional trills, appoggiaturas and cadenzas
Chrysander and Volbach, Schering and Priestman (closely)
and

Tobin as regards trills and cadenzas, but not appoggiaturas

- vi details of rhythm and articulation
Schering and Priestman.

One feature has been rejected by all:

- vii none has retained Handel's original clefs for the voice parts; though inconsistently, Chrysander and Volbach, Tobin, and Shaw have reproduced the vocal clefs where these occur in the continuo; Schering and Priestman on the other hand give these vocal entries in the continuo with the treble or bass clef.

A fair copy of Handel's original exposing the problems in reading, and an adequate commentary on Handel's intentions are still wanted. Libraries and students are offered a handful of versions distinguished by their editors' differing views on what for present-day use should replace the original.

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