

Handel's Republican 'Chorus' Project

by David Shavin

On Sunday, April 16, 2023, the Schiller Institute NYC Chorus performed George Frideric Handel's oratorio Messiah at St. Paul & St. Andrew Methodist Church in New York City. The following is an edited combination of Mr. Shavin's program notes, and his address to the audience at that concert, titled "Let Us Have Peace."

George Frideric Handel's famous oratorio *Messiah*, first performed in Dublin in 1742, was actually the culmination of his 1737–41 development of the "choral" principle. It was triggered by the sudden death in 1737 of his longtime patroness and collaborator, Queen Caroline. Handel's remarkable *Funeral Anthem for Queen Caroline* marked the occasion. It is an overlooked work, but evidence of Mozart's study and appreciation of it is heard in the poignant opening of his 1791 *Requiem*. For the first time in over 30 years of composing, Handel featured a chorus without any vocal soloists. Instead, the chorus is transformed, being enriched with the variegated tasks previously assigned to soloists. The chorus was thrown "center stage"—and there was a fundamental political problem that Handel was addressing.

Caroline had been, in a word, the last best hope for a non-imperial, republican England. She was the last royal student of the republican philosopher Gottfried Leibniz, the fellow whose concept of *happiness* found its way, thanks to Benjamin Franklin, into the Declaration of Independence—most notably, in the famous three-part conception "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The idea there, in brief, is that what is necessary

for life, beyond merely using up whatever resources nature provides, is the scientific breakthroughs and inventions that the liberty of the human mind provides. No other species can solve such innate limitations on population growth. That the actual setup of this world requires human creativity, that our liberty of thought is not simply for our entertainment, not simply to pass the time between birth and death—that is what makes for a happy world. (The term Leibniz used for the concept was *felicitas*.) The Creator made this world a happy one. By contrast, worlds that are not happy are ones where human liberty is not necessary, or where Malthusian population crises are necessary.

In brief, Benjamin Franklin had arranged a special trip in 1766 to Hanover, Germany to meet with the people who were reviving Leibniz's works, despite 50 years of opposition from three King Georges. Franklin's role in heading the five-man committee that wrote the Declaration of Independence has

been overlooked, but something changed Thomas Jefferson's 1774 defense of "life, liberty and property" to Franklin's "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

When Caroline, the last Leibnizian influence in England, died, Handel could have sighed, resigned himself to a more and more imperial London, and simply used his talents to entertain London with pretty operas. It is best to have both able statesmen and an engaged population, but if no qualified leadership is apparent, it becomes that much more important that a population is organized to defend actual national interests. Hence, Handel's new "republican" effort behind



George Frideric Handel

Thomas Hudson

his choral project appears closely linked musically and historically with his response to Caroline's departure.

The republican nature of the vocal chorus is the same as with the classical chorus from the time of the Greek dramas of Aeschylus and Euripides—the thought process of the audience is put on stage for the actual audience in the theatre to examine, as a collective social body, their own inner workings. (There's an art in getting humans to carry out such self-examination without it devolving into a paralyzing focus upon one's self, an impotent version of self-consciousness.) Handel took up the cudgel of fighting for the soul of England's population himself.

Over the next four years, Handel worked on such Biblical oratorios as *Israel in Egypt* and *Saul*, developing his mastery of this classical use of the chorus, confronting audiences with the internal limitations that, unaddressed, kept them as “too little” people. The trick was, as Friedrich Schiller described, for example, in his 1784 essay, “The Theatre Considered as a Moral Institution,” to make people better than they were when they entered the theatre. Where words and lectures and sermons fall short, it is beauty that speaks, as Abraham Lincoln would put it, to “the better angels of our nature.”

Composing the Drama

His 1741 *Messiah* finds Handel at the height of his powers. He engages his audiences in a specific universal problem, common to everyone but too often not properly solved—that of mortality and the meaning of their lives. And he engages them for a sustained period of time, with music that proves to them that they have a direct relationship to beauty and are better than they think they are.

Handel worked previously with Charles Jennens, the librettist of the *Messiah*, on other texts—the Bib-



In style of Michael Dahl

Queen Caroline

lical oratorio *Saul*, along with settings of major poems of John Milton. No later than 1739, the two began work composing their drama, as Jennens wrote to a collaborator about Handel: “I have been preparing a collection for him from Scripture, which is more to my own tast & (by his own confession) to his too...” Most of their compositional work, over no less than 20 months, involved crafting a universal, non-denominational drama, which united 51 different textual selections from 13 different locations! It drew heavily upon *Isaiah* and *Corinthians*, but also *Psalms*, *Lamentations*, *Zechariah*, *Malachi*, *Haggai*, *Matthew*, *Luke*, *John*, *Hebrews*, *Romans*, and *Revelation*.

Handel didn't apply himself directly to the music until July 1741, polishing off that part in the final 23 days. While that is certainly an amazing feat, one much celebrated, one must assume that Handel, in the composition of the drama, had thoroughly worked through the overall structure and the relationship of various parts and their functional roles, providing a mind such as his a substantial head start.

A Synopsis of the Drama

The chorus undergoes a transformation, beginning with their assigned mission to prepare the way of the Lord, making straight in the desert a highway for our God. They must internalize the bold message, to “speak peace unto the heathen,” to make possible “peace on Earth, good will towards men.” They must take on the darkness of the world, absorbing the physical abuse of Christ, finding that “with his stripes,” they can be healed. It is wonderful that the chorus has qualified themselves to preach the gospel of peace.

Yet people are still bowing down to evil. The difficulties climax when kings and “rulers take counsel together against the Lord.” Hence, “nations so furiously rage together.” At this point, we discover that the

chorus is not giving up and going home. They sing “Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their yokes from us,” which Handel sets to very bold music. The tenor adds Heaven’s approval of the revolution against the kings and rulers: “He that dwelleth in Heav’n shall laugh them to scorn, The Lord shall have them in derision. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel. Hallelujah!”

Yes, we’ve arrived at the famous “Hallelujah” chorus—but who remembers that it is the celebration of a people that has broken the bonds and yokes of the kings and rulers—the last holdouts of those taking “counsel together against the Lord”? “Hallelujah: for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth!” Such a celebration for smashing the power of the oligarchs of this world is by no means out of place.

However, no one should be standing up on account of King George II. It is a laughable story that he stood up for the Lord’s victory over kings and rulers, one for which there never was a shred of evidence. Actually, that myth only arose forty years later, and, ironically, shortly after King George III was smashed at Yorktown! So, by all means celebrate, but not by standing up—or bowing down—for any King George. Be transformed with joy—but don’t lose concentration, don’t fool yourself that the job has been completed.

The concluding Part III addresses the secret of real revolutions. “Since by man came death” is set by Handel very tenuously. It is definitely a problematic subject—but then he surprises all, pounding home the too-little-emphasized corollary: “By man came also the resurrection of the dead.” We might wonder why we have to die, but somehow the solution comes by man.

The bass poses both the mystery and the solution: “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling



Mason Chamberlin the Elder

Charles Jennens

of an eye....” The tension is palpable, the drama reaches its peak. The very music uplifts us: “The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

It is marvelous, we are inspired—yet, finally, we must know how that works: “For the corruptible must put on incorruption, and the mortal must put on immortality.” And there we have it. There is no way around it. We must put on immortality. The miracle is that we mortals take upon ourselves an immortal identity! It is truly an act of grace—and creatures made in the image of such a God (a God whose grace, remember,

created a happy world!) are capable of such an act. A special mortal creature, humanity, can choose to act for all generations to come.

And with victory accomplished, it is perhaps appropriate now to reference the power of music, which itself made a stage appearance with “The trumpet shall sound!” The music that has been carrying the drama throughout has had an unstated power, and audiences that respond to the beautiful and evocative developments are invited to recognize that they, to the extent the music addresses a deeper part of them than almost anything else, have a correspondingly beautiful soul. A real composer never flinches on this. Real beauty has the power to evoke from within the better angel of our nature.

The alto provides the victorious conclusion: “Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written [in *Isaiah*], ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’” The tenor joins in for the celebratory, and musically inspiring, duet: “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”

So, what else can such a transformed chorus do? They sing the fugal “Amen.” A population that can find their own unique, sovereign part as necessary for the proper realization of the voices of others and the higher attainment of their society, sings such a Handel fugue.