




COMMUNICATION: CONFERENCE REPORT

Redemption and the Modern Age – Handel’s *Messiah* between the Late 18th and the 21st Century

Georg-Friedrich-Händel-Gesellschaft and Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Halle (Saale), 29 May–2 June 2021

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In 2020 both the Halle Handel Festival and the annual musicological conference in the composer’s birthplace were cancelled, though the conference papers were published in the 2021 volume of the *Händel-Jahrbuch*. By contrast, in 2021 a significant number of festival concerts were held online and the conference was transferred fully to Zoom. Thanks to the organization of the latter by Wolfgang Hirschmann, Annette Landgraf and Konstanze Musketa, as well as the enthusiasm of the participants, the online format did not impair the scholarly gathering in any way. As opposed to the last couple of years when the themes of the conference were conceived along broader, often interdisciplinary lines, this time it was instigated by a specific circumstance, the two hundred and eightieth anniversary of the first performance of *Messiah* in Dublin in 1741. The call for papers invited applicants to explore ‘the performance history, the history of the arrangements and the history of the impact’ of Handel’s most famous oratorio.

The conference opened with a keynote lecture by Andreas Waczkat (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen) on images of Jesus Christ as saviour and hero in oratorios by composers from Handel to Friedrich Schneider. After briefly examining Charles Jennens’s theological precepts, Waczkat devoted most of his attentions to Handel’s lesser-known successors. The prolific, but unpopular, oratorio author Schneider composed a trilogy about Christ but was criticized by his librettist Philipp Mayer for portraying him only as triumphant, while settings of sections from Klopstock’s *Messias* by composers such as Andreas Romberg rarely offered a heroic view. After this address, the biennial Handel research prize was awarded to Teresa Ramer-Wünsche (Hallische Händel Ausgabe, Halle) for her dissertation on the genesis of Handel’s serenata *Parnasso in festa per gli sponsali di Teti e Peleo*, HWV73, stemming from her work on the critical edition (Bärenreiter: Kassel, 2017). The ceremony was followed by her lecture on affect, subject matter, word setting and borrowing in *Parnasso in festa*. She focused first on the working methods of the Italian librettist who wrote parody texts based on English models in the works from which Handel borrowed, and then investigated the roles that the original affect and subject matter of those models may or may not have played in Handel’s compositional process.

The first two sessions on 31 May continued the pursuit of theological questions and approaches. Karl Friedrich Ulrichs (Theologische Fakultät Universität Leipzig) explored the comparatively infrequent use of extracts from *Messiah* in evangelical homilies, that is, sermons which take a piece of music as a source of inspiration. While Ulrichs merely stressed in a neutral manner the suitability of Handel’s music for such purposes, the following two papers took a more polemical stance, mostly on the controversial view by Michael Marissen – as expressed first in his article ‘Rejoicing against Judaism in Handel’s *Messiah*’, *The Journal of Musicology* 24/2 (2007), 167–194, and expanded in his monograph *Tainted Glory in Handel’s Messiah: The Unsettling History of the World’s Most Beloved Choral Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) – that Jennens intentionally corrupted the biblical sources of his librettos to express anti-Judaistic sentiments. One example is the aria ‘Oh

thou that tellest good tidings to Zion', which seemingly rejoices triumphally over the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Marybeth Hauffe (Kirchliche Hochschule Wuppertal/Bethel) set out to prove that Jennens's libretto is in agreement with Bible translations by providing a detailed genealogy and demonstrating that Jennens's philological methods correspond to modern-day standards of objectivity. Rather than arguing against Marissen's theory as Hauffe had done, Stephen Nissenbaum (University of Massachusetts Amherst) proposed an interpretation according to which the animosity was directed towards the Hanoverian dynasty instead of Judaism. Examining the minutiae of Jennens's changes to the Biblical text, he drew a convincing parallel between the texts of the coronation anthem *Zadok the Priest*, HWV258, and the 'Hallelujah' chorus.

Most papers presented on 1 and 2 June dealt with the diverse processes of reception of *Messiah*, whether through revision, adaptation, performance or recording. I will address them diachronically, beginning with three examples of late eighteenth-century adaptation. Juliane Riepe (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg) spoke on *Il Messia*, a newly discovered source for a reworking of the oratorio in Italian performed in Florence in the 1770s, comparing it to the autograph and printed editions and establishing some characteristic differences. In preparation for Breitkopf & Härtel's critical edition of Mozart's orchestration of *Messiah*, Bruno Malcolm (independent scholar, Cwmcarvan) pointed out that the first publication of this version of the oratorio in 1803 bears some creative hallmarks of its editors Gottfried van Swieten and Johann Adam Hiller, which appear to be in many aspects removed from Mozart's original intentions. The possibilities of reconstructing Mozart's ideas are limited because it is only for Act 3 that his autograph survives. Malcolm offered insights into the discrepancies between the Act 3 manuscript and the 1803 edition and confirmed that Mozart's version of the oratorio is more than a straightforward reorchestration. Continuing both previous lines of enquiry – *Messiah*'s Italian reception and Mozart's arrangement of the score – Livio Marcaletti (Universität Wien) inspected Johann Simon Mayr's reception of *Messiah* as shown by Mayr's personal library and his reworking of the oratorio. The score adheres only partially to Mozart's orchestration, but Marcaletti focused on questions of prosody and word-setting that follow the adaptation from English into Italian.

Luke Howard (Brigham Young University) reviewed two separate traditions of *Messiah* performances in England before the establishment of the Handel Festival (1840–1857): amateur charitable performances in the provinces and profit-oriented concerts in London. Of particular interest is his recognition of progressive tendencies in the provincial tradition and the disadvantages of the post-1857 trends from London that prevailed in the rest of the century. This tradition was the subject of Florian Csizmadia's (independent scholar, Stralsund) paper on the reception of *Messiah* in the Victorian era. Having studied not only the performances themselves but also their criticism, including writings by Hanslick and Shaw, Csizmadia did not shy away from pointing out the cultic, quasi-religious and nationalistic attitudes of the performers and the public; he also noted anticipations of the need for a more historically informed performance. Graydon Beeks (Pomona College) studied the annotations George Smart made to Jenny Lind's copy of the vocal score of *Messiah*, reflecting a conservative taste in interpretation that was supposed to fashion a new image for Lind as an oratorio rather than an opera singer.

Three papers replaced eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western Europe with more global horizons. Yasuko Kawamura (Tokyo University of the Arts) investigated the tradition of annual performances of the oratorio as part of the nascent Christmas culture in Japan in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with the most important role being played by amateur choirs, as Japan reached third place in the number of *Messiah* performances over Christmas after the UK and USA. Rebekka Sandmeier (University of Cape Town) and H. Stefan Walcott (University of the West Indies at Cave Hill, Barbados) explored intercultural readings of *Messiah*. After a brief overview of the reception of Handel and *Messiah* in South Africa, Sandmeier analysed Tunde Jegedes's *African Messiah* (1992), a rethinking of Handel's work that unites diverse elements such as African art music, African traditional music, music of the African diaspora and Western art music without thinking in terms of cultural borders. Walcott was artistically involved in the creation of *Handel's Caribbean Messiah*, which integrates folk and popular musical elements from Anglo-, Franco- and

Hispanic Caribbean music with Handel's score, Walcott stressing that the creative choices were made with the fractured cultural identity of the Caribbean in mind.

On the other hand, Martin Elste (independent scholar, Berlin) spoke about *Messiah* as *Weltmusik* (world music), not in the ethnomusicological sense, but in terms of the global pervasiveness of Handel's music, made possible by its circulation via different media. He examined a variety of examples demonstrating how aesthetic trends in performance practice are combined with technological changes in the recording industry, concluding that the coexistence of different performance traditions was the case even before the advent of the digital era. Whereas Elste relativized historically informed performance to a certain extent, David Vickers (Royal Northern College of Music) reviewed fifty-nine period-instrument recordings of *Messiah* produced between 1980 and 2020 with a focus on parameters such as the adherence to primary sources, the number of singers and players, the use of various voice types, and the choice of tempos to show that even nominally historically informed approaches can become 'questionable' if not applied consistently. Finally, the paper by Colin Timms (University of Birmingham) on irony in Handel's oratorios departed from the main subject matter of the conference, although it took the chorus 'For unto us a child is born' and its borrowing from the chamber duet *No, di voi non vuol fidarmi* (HWV189) as its starting-point. Criticizing Winton Dean's view that certain parts of Handel's oratorios – most notably from *Theodora* (HWV68) – are unsuccessful because of a contradiction between the words and their setting, Timms explained them as cases of irony, where the contrast between the original meaning and its ironic turn would have been recognized by connoisseurs.

The conference showed that Handel's most famous oratorio remains an important point of departure for high-quality research of diverse kinds, and a vital part of Handel scholarship. Papers presented at the conference will be published in the 2022 issue of the *Händel-Jahrbuch*.

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