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PAUL HENRY LANG

BACH AND HANDEL

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Preface

This collection of essays, the second in a series drawn from Paul Henry Lang's reviews and editorials for *The New York Herald Tribune*, 1954–1963, deals with works that range from the most frequently performed to the most widely neglected choral repertoire. This curious aspect of the subject "Bach and Handel" was first discussed by the author in the conclusion of the chapters on Baroque music contained in *Music in Western Civilization* (New York, 1941). Viewed from the metropolitan concert scene at mid-century, it received fresh meaning: the enormous advances of Bach and Handel research in the 1950's had enhanced the public's understanding of the choral classics, but despite "signs of a genuine Handel renaissance" the traditional imbalance and traditional problems of performance remained.

The editorial procedure for this issue was the same as that followed for Volume XVII, Number 2, of the *American Choral Review*. Discussions of works frequently reviewed were consolidated to bring the principal arguments to the fore, and the continuity was guided by the contents of sections concerned with general considerations rather than individual presentations.

Of particular interest to the reader will be various passages that were later absorbed into Lang's Handel biography (*George Frideric Handel*, New York, 1966) for they appear here in their original form and show to what extent the ideas of the author's larger work were prompted by the impressions and postulates of American choral performances.

A.M.

Bach's Passion Settings

When the *Passion of our Lord According to St. Matthew* was first performed, on Good Friday, 1729, in St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig, a pious old lady exclaimed: "God save our children, this is like opera-theater!" Her fear that this is "opera," i.e., music drama, though shared by others, was indignantly rejected by the romantic Bach revival, which gave this monumental work the status of hallowed church music. Yet the pious lady was right, and modern musical criticism fully agrees with her; this is music drama. Now before the worshipful admirers of Bach rise in wrath, I hasten to say that nothing derogatory is meant by this statement. *The Passion of our Lord* is drama of the most profound kind and can only be represented as such. Though not so scenic and violently dramatic as *The Passion According to St. John*, the *St. Matthew Passion* is still genuine Baroque music drama.

The oratorio-Passion is not church music, though it is eminently suitable to be performed in church. This is a fact that some church musicians and the public fail to realize; they do not know the distinction between ritual music and music with a religious subject. In the spirit of the times this work is somewhere between church and concert hall, appropriate for both. But, of course, the technical and stylistic means of drama in music are the same whether in the church or in the theater; recitative, arioso, aria, concerted numbers, and choruses ("the crowd").

It is for this reason that without competent, experienced, and altogether professional leadership, this tremendous and exacting work will not come to life. Lowered eyes and quivering voices accompanied by a booming organ completely change the character of this music, full of vitality, epic grandeur, and healthy power.

Last night's performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* was in the hands of a genuine professional, Erich Leinsdorf, aided by the excellently trained Rutgers University Choir whose director, F. Austin Walter, also wants to go before St. Peter on the basis of honest musical services rendered rather than on mere holiness. There were neither false attitudes nor compromises; the power and fervor of the contemplative drama was communicated, as it must be, through purely musical means. Leinsdorf is not a choral conductor who wrings his hands and gives occult cues;

his baton rose and fell with the same precision he employed a couple of days ago in the pit of the Metropolitan Opera, for there is only one kind of conducting: precise, imaginative, and professional.

The choral portions were crisp, hearty, and beautifully in tune, the hymns well balanced, and the ensemble work was exemplary throughout the evening.

The recent nation-wide telecast of a fully dramatized performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* by the NBC Opera Company under the direction of Alfred Wallenstein was an unqualified artistic success whose significance transcends even the laudable cultural achievement of carrying such great music to a public numbered in the millions. Producer Samuel Chotzinoff and his associates evidently believe that this method of presenting a score supposedly altogether contemplative and devotional leads far more readily to an effective appreciation by laymen of its artistic quality than does the presentation of a series of musical numbers of extended and complicated nature.

The dividing line between Baroque opera and oratorio is not easily discernible. Opera shared in the static quality of the oratorio and its principal components, recitative and aria, were identical in the oratorio and Passions. In the eighteenth century, the "oratorio singer" of grave and sober bearing was as yet unknown; the singers sang in an oratorio as they did in an opera, freely and with dramatic fervor.

Since these great oratorios have long since left the church for the concert hall, the alternatives for us are performers on the stage in modern dress or in believable dramatic theatrical garb. For television viewing, NBC's choice of the latter has great merit.

The depth of Bach's sympathies with the events commemorated on Good Friday and his desire to pay homage to Christ's sufferings are unquestionable, but so is the dramatic intent that smoldered within. The purpose of presenting the musical setting of the Gospel on the holy day proper to it was very much within the spirit of the New Testament, for whatever else the New Testament may be, it is first of all a missionary book written by missionaries for their own use. The evangelists were not writing standard biography for future generations but handy short lives which they could use when teaching their converts.

The history of the oratorio-Passion, especially its German Protestant variety, shows this same spirit of edification and teaching, and in Schütz's day they hewed strictly to the scriptural text. But by Bach's time this had changed; he had a librettist, like an opera composer, who *arranged* the Biblical subject for dramatic setting. Thus the *St. Matthew Passion* contains scriptural passages but also so-called free poetry of a rather deplorable quality. Viewed from a technical point, the work is a

sequence of dramatic scenes of surprisingly unequal proportions, distributed among the dramatic figures and the chorus, which latter is very decidedly a protagonist. The sole difference between this particular setting of the Passion and an opera is the presence of a number of arias given to voices that have neither dramatic roles nor even identity, thereby intruding upon the drama in spite of the high quality of their music.

At a concert performance of the Passion the listener, responding to the challenge of the unseen stage, makes an unconsciously intense effort to grasp the personalities involved in the drama. While this manner of hearing is usual, there can be no question in my mind that the staged and visually enlivened performance deepens the sense of the interplay of personalities and assists the listener to grasp the true dramatic nature of the work. A concert performance of such a score is inevitably to some extent lacking in vitality, being a representation that plays down an essential ingredient of the genre: the actuality of the drama.

The NBC telecast proved that such a well-staged performance can do full justice to the *St. Matthew Passion*, for it demonstrated that Bach is indeed at work here as a dramatist who very often forgets, if but for the moment, his cantor self.

The two colossi among the settings of the Gospels are, musically speaking, of equally high value, though the *Passion According to St. Matthew* is generally regarded greater and more unified than the earlier *St. John*. Bach had his difficulties with the lyric parts, and not having a "librettist" as he had for the *St. Matthew*, completed the *St. John Passion* by using Biblical citations, verses from song books, and bits from an older popular Passion libretto by Brockes, but he was not satisfied with the outcome and subsequently made important revisions. The conductor must study and compare the earlier and later versions, and must make his own decision as to what to omit to make the work more homogeneous.

Though the individual numbers in the *St. John Passion* do not suffer when measured against those in the *St. Matthew*, the latter is the greater because of Bach's obvious attempt to broaden the oratorio-Passion as a genre, at the same time bringing it closer to the popular-churchly. The *St. Matthew* is considerably weighted down by allegorical and lyrical ballast, i.e., by extra-Biblical additions, yet withal, when appropriately presented, it must be considered the greatest work of its kind, and one of the greatest in all music.

These hallowed works present extraordinary difficulties for the performers. Bach utilized every formal, vocal and orchestral means that contemporary dramatic music could furnish. At the same time care must be taken to render its due to the madrigalesque element, of which there is a good deal. Neither of these features can be properly carried

out if the chorus is too large and if the orchestra does not assert itself. If the voices and the strings overpower the woodwinds, Bach's unequivocal intention of permitting flutes and oboes to be prominently heard is nullified; in his time each oboe part was played by two or even more instrumentalists. This liquescent quality of the orchestral sound is a very characteristic feature of the works and should be restored.

It must be emphasized that only the choruses and the Biblical passages were considered absolutely essential; the majority of the chorales and a number of the arias were *ad libitum*. Bach merely wanted to honor the old German custom of the so-called "Good Friday Meditations," the Passion recited in songs, by including a number of chorales in his oratorio-Passions. Furthermore, these chorales were sung by the congregation; in a concert performance they lose their devotional role since the audience remains passive, therefore they should be restricted to those essential to the architecture of the work. The same goes for the arias, some of which are clearly alternatives and should be selected, as intended, according to the capacity and availability of the singers.

We can scarcely exaggerate the incredible richness of these magnificent works. Such portions as the opening choruses in both Passions are unique even among Bach's great works and have no equal in the entire literature. The part writing is so full of independent ideas that even experienced musicians not used to this elaborate polyphony are unable to distinguish between principal and secondary parts. I have seen one of our most famous conductors, the late Serge Koussevitzky, completely at sea in the first chorus of the *St. John Passion*, and many a printed piano reduction shows the same musical color blindness.

The importance of first-rate performances of these Passions is clear when we realize that the reappearance of the *St. Matthew Passion* following Mendelssohn's pioneer performance in 1829 represents one of the capital turning points in recent musical history. From it dates the musical renaissance which established a spiritual bond between the past and the present.

B Minor Mass

With the first shining trumpet calls of Bach's *Cantata No. 191*, which opened the concert given last night in Town Hall by the Bach Aria Group, the celebrated *B Minor Mass* was before us. For Bach adapted portions of the *Gloria* of the Mass in the shape of a Latin cantata in honor of the Feast of the Nativity. As I listened to this decent and well-balanced performance by small forces, I realized that this is exactly what this music calls for. When performed by the usual large forces, "full" volume, everything becomes fuzzy, and all we hear is a heaving multitude grappling with the great difficulties of a vocal texture that is closer to the Baroque concerto than to a singing piece. Once the aural picture is clear and the convolutions of the individual parts can be heard, the wonderful design of the music becomes perceptible.

Then a natural question arises: Is not the monumental architecture of the Mass broken if one portion of it is lifted out of context? But this cantata once more proves that the gigantic *B Minor Mass* is really made up of a string of cantatas that can be separated. When so performed, the oppressive greatness of the work is mitigated and we do not depart crushed by the weight of an almost unbearable amount of uniformly great music.

The *B Minor Mass* is held to be Bach's greatest work, and in the minds of not a few the greatest musical composition of all times. But modern research has proved that we are dealing here with a historical misconception and a serious artistic mistake: the *B Minor Mass* is a collection of tremendous music that was, in fact, never meant by its creator to be joined in a single performance.

It is well known that Bach desired the title of court composer, and since the Saxon court was Catholic, the Protestant church composer supported his petition by submitting a "Mass in B Minor." But what he dispatched to Dresden was only the first portion of the gigantic work we know by that name: *Kyrie and Gloria*. This is known as the "short" or "Lutheran" Mass, and as such was of course unacceptable to the Catholic Church.

The *whole* Mass has never been used in a church service; we know it from concert performances. Even individual parts of the enormous

work are so large that they are not suitable for liturgic purposes by either denomination. However, it is not only the forbidding dimensions that make its practical use impossible. Substantial parts of the text are never employed by Protestants, while on the other hand, the incorrect handling of the Latin text by Bach surely made the *B Minor Mass* unusable for Catholic services. What is, then, the explanation for this incredible musical seascape that extends far beyond the horizon?

The Mass is supposed to be in B minor; but after the stupendous first part it is decidedly in D major. Obviously, the "short Mass" portion, *Kyrie and Gloria* (1733) is *the B Minor Mass*. On the last page of the *Gloria* Bach placed the unmistakable sign indicating the close of a major work; "The End; to the glory of God"; after that we are dealing with something else in a different key.

The *Credo* stands as an independent composition, as does the *Sanctus*. Such portions of the Ordinary of the Mass were often set to music as "movements," and to this day High Mass is often celebrated with selections taken from different works. The fourth part, from "Osanna" to the end, was apparently composed near the end of Bach's life.

Like all Baroque composers, Bach did borrow, transcribe, and transplant; this is a procedure known as "parody." The technical term has no derogatory connotation; it only refers to the employment, and consequent alteration, of a piece of music originally serving different purposes. Some of the greatest and most hallowed religious works are such parodies of secular originals.

Thus the procedure is accepted and traditional and Bach used it frequently, but nowhere did he employ the device so extensively as in his Latin works. The four sections of the *B Minor Mass* contain a dozen major transferences that are known to have come from his own earlier works, but I suspect several others, among them the lovely "Christe eleison," a veritable Italian opera duet, and the *Benedictus*. This would mean that a substantial part of the gigantic work consists of parody, something Bach would not do in a large *single* work. The *St. Matthew Passion* contains only five known parodies.

The manuscript of the *B Minor Mass* is extant in Bach's sturdy handwriting; each of its sections has a title of its own. Clearly the question arises whether we can speak of a unified work—a question that is hotly debated by the scholarly world. The editor of the new critical score flatly denies it, averring that the Mass consists of several independent sections bound together at a later date.

Finally, we must ask the question "why did Bach continue after the initial short Mass to set the entire text of the Ordinary?" He was, especially in his last period, an inveterate organizer of "collections" who rounded out and finished everything he had begun years earlier.

The *Well-Tempered Clavier*, or the equally extensive *Clavierübung* are such collections formed across the years, but no one would think of playing them in one sitting. The same is true of the *B Minor Mass*; any one of the four compositions making up the collection can and should be performed separately.

Last night we heard the Mass in the Church of the Incarnation, performed by forces pretty close to the number Bach envisaged in an ideal performance. The effect was most gratifying. The usual feeling of heaviness was largely dissipated, the tone became convincing, and the texture, usually covered by layers of fuzz shed by a large choir, became quite transparent, disclosing some lovely music. Honestly, I never thought of using the adjective "lovely" in connection with this huge monument of massive counterpoint.

The reason for this felicitous situation is to be sought partly in the free balance offered by a chorus of twenty accompanied by an orchestra of twenty-six. Everything was distinct, clear, and transparent, and the rattling that is inevitable when a large ensemble is trying to render a complicated contrapuntal texture was absent. But there was another and equally important reason: the fine musicianship of conductor Thomas Dunn. Dunn, who used the most up-to-date score, knows every bit of this score, and though a church musician by trade, he refuses to consider anything but the task at hand while engaged in music making. This is the only possible attitude a true musician should take even when officiating in ecclesiastic vestments. His tempos were refreshingly lively and in the cadences he did not wait for the other shoe to drop.

Since this is one of the most difficult scores to bring to life, a score that calls for a long association, there were some uneven spots in the performance. The "Crucifixus" was ineffably moving, while parts of the *Credo* and *Gloria* were jubilant and full of élan. The first "Kyrie" was the only cloudy piece, but then I wonder whether it can be done without some haze hanging over it. The division of the chorus into a vocal concerto grosso, while authentic, did not prove advantageous. With a force of twenty singers this is not necessary; they sound wonderful under all circumstances.

The Committee for Special Music of the Church of the Incarnation deserves full credit for their enlightened policies.

It is a curious twist of our modern concert life that for a wretched thing like the Khachaturian concerto there is not only an enthusiastic public but the best available professional forces, while such awesome works as Bach's Passions and Masses or Handel's oratorios are almost always left for amateurs stiffened by a professional orchestra. Far be it from me to deprecate the dedicated efforts of such musical organiza-

tions—on the contrary, I have genuine admiration for their devotion to great art—but certain inferences are unavoidable.

The concert industry is unwilling to support professional choirs the way it does orchestras, and few of the civic-minded citizens of means who gladly support opera and symphony would bestow their largesse on choral societies. Both Lincoln Center and the Washington Cultural Center seem altogether committed to the industry's routine, not a word from either of them about what used to be and still should be one of the pillars of a musical culture: good choral music.

These ideas crossed my mind a couple of days ago when I reported the fine performance of Handel's *Belshazzar* by the Cantata Singers, and they still agitated me last night as I attended the Oratorio Society's presentation of Bach's *B Minor Mass.*

Frankly, I hesitate to review this event beyond reporting its having taken place to the obvious enjoyment of the performers and their guests. For while professionals live by the sword, the large group of amateurs who get together to sing the *B Minor Mass* "because they love it" should be immune to any critical dissection. However, my ticket said "Admission $4"; that is, the event was a public performance, therefore it is our duty to take cognizance of it.

We have a few choral organizations that could be objectively—and favorably—judged by professional standards. All of them acquired their high standards with a limited group of singers, never allowing themselves to be swamped by sheer numbers; for only a relatively small chorus, professional or amateur, can be trained to a pitch of excellence.

The Oratorio Society puts in the field a large chorus. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that they have a large membership and all the members like to sing. But I must reluctantly protest the forces employed. No intricate contrapunal music can be satisfactorily sung by such a large number of untrained voices. The tiny differences in timbre and pitch that characterize the individual singers and which, in the aggregate, create the wonderful and rich choral sound, work to its disadvantage when the optimum number is exceeded.

In the stupendous fugues each part as it enters immediately begins to rub the edges of those already in motion, and by the time all are joined in the fugal fabric, the edges are pretty frayed. The result is a gray mist from which only the treble emerges with recognizable contours.

The conductor devoted himself largely to keeping order. The futility of this was startingly demonstrated in the "Qui tollis," which is the kind of music that makes you fall on your knees in humility and wonderment. The chorus kept time but all the warmth, mystery, and dramatic force was absent.

The soloists did not rise appreciably above the general level of the

performance, the orchestra was fair, the instrumental soloists very good, and there was a miserable electronic organ for the inaudible continuo.

Baroque music does not mean massed nondescript sound but crystal clear polyphonic lines. Such amateur societies should concentrate on easier fare and leave these difficult works to the smaller, well-trained ensembles operating under the direction of first class professionals.

Albert Schweitzer's famous Bach book, while admirable in some aspects, unfortunately is responsible for an attitude toward Bach's choral works that dispassionate examination of the scores no longer can sustain. According to Schweitzer, every theme and every turn in Bach's music has a descriptive symbolic meaning. The fact is that while Bach, like all Baroque composers, indulged in illustrative music, the elaboration of his ideas is invariably governed by purely musical imagination. Moreover, he was essentially an instrumental composer, and so devoted to the abstract logic of this wordless music that in his vocal compositions he often disregarded both proper setting of the text and proper vocal idiom. His strong leaning towards the instrumental is best illustrated in his preference for arias with a "concertising" instrument, of which there are several in the Mass. Here the solo instrument is lovingly treated, with all the curlicues and whirligigs of the Baroque lavished upon it. This either assures the instrument a dominant position or forces the voice to take over the instrumental characteristics and ornaments.

That this work is a Mass intended for the Catholic rite has nothing to do with its shape or tone. The Lutheran composer wrote it for the Catholic court in Dresden—he could not have submitted a Protestant oratorio or cantata for the court title he coveted. That the liturgic implications of the text were of little significance to him is shown by the fact that six important numbers in the Mass were borrowed from some of his German cantatas, one of them secular. The text was ultimately adjusted in a rather haphazard manner.

But there are other elements that show that this stupendous score really is an agglomeration of a number of cantatas, many of them stylistically unrelated. The *Gloria* is divided into seven independent numbers, the *Credo* into eight! Actually, *Kyrie* and *Gloria* contain enough music for a whole evening's entertainment, and I am sure that I am not alone in saying that real involvement of the listener—and no other listening is worth anything—ceases after about half of the Mass is heard.

Bach was a man of a strong and unyielding character that involved him in constant altercation with his ecclesiastic superiors in Leipzig. He preferred to work for princes and had great misgivings about exchanging the post of court conductor for the cantorate. However, what interests us here is his strong will power as it is manifested in his music. He loved to overcome obstacles and his inquisitive mind always hankered for

syntheses. Indeed, he systematically explored the musical universe, sampling other composers' works, and whenever he found something that suited him, it was incorporated in his compositions without any further ado. It made no difference to him whether the new elements were appropriate for the genre he was engaged in, for he made matter conform to his wishes. Thus the *Mass in B Minor* is a veritable repository of everything known to him in music. The first "Kyrie" is a contrapuntal essay that defies the imagination, but the bright and festive trumpet fanfares of the "Gloria" and its lilting dance rhythm recall Bach's outdoor suite music. The "Laudamus te" is a violin concerto pure and simple which would make sense without the voice. Then comes the "Qui tollis" and the bottom drops out. This is real Passion music that words cannot describe, and for once purely vocal in nature. It is immediately followed by an alto aria ("Qui sedes") in which there is not the slightest difference in phraseology between the solo oboe and the solo voice; the alto simply has to struggle with her part as well as she can. And so it continues, never flagging in intensity and never faltering in invention, imagination, variety, and richness until the listener is gorged and unable to take more.

There can be no question that this unique work is overdimensioned and in spite of its wealth of great music cannot be considered Bach's greatest accomplishment in the vocal field. That place must be reserved for the *Passion according to St. Matthew* in which the narrative of the Evangelist, set in true vocal recitative, provides a unifying element and in which choruses and arias are nicely balanced, with the simple contemplative chorales offering restful relief.

But we have the great Mass and must deal with the problem of its performance. If given with moderate forces so that the intricate polyphony is not blurred by a host of singers trying to keep up with the mercilessly rolling instrumental coloratura, if the conductor knows how to adjust himself to the ever changing stylistic demands, if the soloists accept the accompanying instruments as their co-equals, the impression will be unforgettable. Yet the attempt to perform the work as a unified whole is bound to remain fraught with danger.

Performing Bach

Eighteenth-century performances themselves were never "devotional" in the romantic-sentimental sense, but vigorous and straightforward music making. We have an interesting and enlightening description by the rector of St. Thomas's School of how Bach conducted his service music. He either conducted or played the violin as concertmaster-conductor, sang with the wayward, played the harpsichord or organ, exhorted the continuo player if the latter's accompaniment was not rich and full of improvised runs and flourishes, even stamped his feet if the rhythm sagged, and in general insisted on lively, healthy, and full-blooded music making. This must have been trying, but Bach's singers were students, well trained but not a finished professional choir, and he had to stir them up to obtain the quality he wanted in his church music.

The chorales, which many of our conductors present as ethereal meditations, represent, of course, sturdy congregational singing; the faithful knew them and at services sang them with the chorus. They should be sung with "full lungs," said the respected Frankfurt Cantor Fuhrmann, author of an influential book on performance (1706), in a steady and solid tempo, with all and sundry participating. The holds at the end of the lines are commas, not stop signs, and the measured and orderly gait of the singing must not be interrupted.

Tempo and dynamics as well as the phrasing of cadences are, next to "expressivity," the main stumbling block today. Contrary to popular "musicological" beliefs, rubato was known and used in the Baroque, as was crescendo and decrescendo; therefore metronomic pace and black-and-white dynamics are as much out of order as the romantic dilly-dallying practiced by most of our conductors and many of our singers. The tempo was fluent but not inflexible; brisk in the fast movements, and broad but not turgid in the slow ones. It was at all times governed by the intelligibility of the declamation in the solo numbers, and by the clarity of the part writing in the choruses—not by "devotional" attitudes. Cantor Fuhrmann was scornful of dynamic extremes, of the rapid alternation of "shrill high tones as if submitting to the tooth puller, followed by muffled beeps in the bass in the manner of toothless little old women." This dental simile describes rather well the dynamic

scheme employed in much Baroque music today. The earnest old cantor, perhaps a little corny in his humor, was fully aware of the threat loud and massive singing holds for the proper appreciation of polyphony. He cannot think of a more disagreeable effect than when "the treble sings like a stuck pig, the alto lows like a calf just weaned, the tenor rasps like a fellow who swallowed thistles, and the bass roars like an Indian lion." (This is a fine description of the current manner of singing *Messiah*.) Nor should the tempo be so comfortable as to enable "the sows to dance to it."

The cadences were indeed slowed down, especially at the ends of sections, because an improvised ornamental embellishment was usually executed at such points. Our musicians are no longer trained in this art of improvisation (though some able harpsichordists are bringing it back), therefore the main reason for the ritard no longer exists.

The recitatives were sung by reconciling the musical notation with natural speech rhythm; that is, they were sung dramatically. The unctuous endings in the recitatives, preceded by evanescent dynamics, are a romantic invention. Emmanuel Bach, who certainly knew how they made music in his father's time, insists that the harpsichord fall in promptly and rhythmically with its closing chords. In "fiery" recitatives this must be done "precipitously," even before the singer reaches the last syllables.

But perhaps the most important argument in favor of a relatively modest ensemble is the well-known fact that elaborate contrapuntal music cannot be sung by a large group without considerably lessening the clarity of the polyphonic process. When a Baroque composer wrote fugally, it was not, as in more recent times, for the sake of exhibiting "learning," but because the fugue, as an essential part of the reigning musical thought and idiom, had a primary communicative value and ability. Our public and even many of our musicians, although recognizing Bach's warm lyricism in the arias and ariosos, are somewhat puzzled by the great contrapuntal edifices which are highly expressive in their own right and are independent of sheer weight and mass. There is beauty and expression in the severe, grandiose world of polyphony upon which the West had worked for centuries to see it culminate in Bach's immense visions. But these great structures cannot be expressed with torrential sounds or sentimental whispers, they call for crystalline and transparent singing and playing such as only a well-trained small chorus and orchestra can provide.

The performance within a week of three of Bach's major choral masterpieces, by Leonard Bernstein, Thomas Dunn, and Eugene Ormandy, highlighted the many problems connected with the proper presentation of this great music of the Baroque era. Judging from the

various reactions, both professional and lay, to the Holy Week concerts, it is quite obvious that many persons are simply not aware of the fact that we possess exact and explicit documents concerning the performance practices in Bach's time, as well as detailed observations, descriptions, and instructions by competent and experienced contemporary musicians, including Bach himself. No one was ever hurt by reading this literature, a good deal of which has been translated into English. There is assumed to be an "issue" about the size of the forces to be employed, dynamics, tempo, etc., and also about the proper devotional decorum to be observed at such performances. Well, there is no such issue; the facts, presently to be related, speak for themselves. Nor does respect for the composer's intentions make one a "purist."

As to the decorum, I found it rather amusing that Thomas Dunn, a church musician conducting a chorus largely made up of professional church singers, appeared in Carnegie Hall in a business-like way and was roundly applauded by his public, while Leonard Bernstein, conducting an altogether secular outfit, put on a churchly aspect complete with solemn face, and admonished the public in the program notes not to applaud. Ormandy's performance of the Mass was also straightforward, without "attitudes." The church musician knew that he was conducting a concert and that it was improper to hold a pseudo-divine service in a concert hall, but more than a few of our conductors just love to act occasionally as if they were officiating from the pulpit or the altar.

The "modern"—that is, romanticized—performance practice of the great works of the late Baroque era began with Mendelssohn's famous revival of the *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829, but it was undoubtedly inspired by the grotesque Handel performances which by that time were traditional in England. Mendelssohn's chorus consisted of four hundred singers, but the ardent Handelians could muster two thousand or even three thousand roaring choristers! This sort of thing is simply a travesty; even one hundred singers are too many for contrapuntal music. At the other extreme is the chorus of eighteen used by Mr. Dunn. Historically this is correct, and if the singers are good professionals, such a performance can be most enjoyable. But such a very small ensemble calls for exceptional singers, untold rehearsals, and hairline balances, which can be achieved only in rare cases. A well-trained chorus of from thirty to sixty is the optimum practical number when such music is presented in a large hall or church. It supplies "body," yet not so much as to cause fuzziness in the contrapuntal lines. The orchestra should be scaled correspondingly, but it must be remembered that the Baroque orchestra had at least two oboes and flutes to each part; they wanted the liquescent quality that these instruments contribute to the orchestral sound. With larger ensembles their number should be augmented.

All contemporary witnesses agree that imaginative and inventive

continuo playing on the harpsichord (or organ) is one of the essentials of good performance, as Albert Fuller so ably demonstrated last week under Thomas Dunn in the *St. John Passion*. The perfunctory, tame, and timid chords of the harpsichord we usually hear at such performances would have evoked scorn from Bach. As a matter of fact, at performances employing an ensemble of thirty or more, they used two, and even three harpsichords. One was played by the accompanist for the recitatives and arias, usually the conductor; the other (along with the third player, if there was one) joined in with the tuttis in the concerto manner. They wanted the crisp, silvery sound of the harpsichord heard at all times, for it was an essential ingredient of Baroque sound pattern.

The orchestra—*but also the chorus*—followed the concerto grosso principle of alternating solo groups with the tutti, which, of course, gave the dynamic scheme a very definite cast missing in our performances. The score often indicates when the small chorus and the full chorus are to be used, but even if this is not the case, a conductor familiar with a number of scores from this period will know when to divide his forces. The arias were usually accompanied by the "concertino," the small solo group of the orchestra, but in the preludes and ritornels, the tutti fell in as in the concerto. This alternation of two unequal bodies of singers and players, a basic characteristic of Baroque music, is very attractive and lends the choral numbers a great deal of variety of color and dynamics as well as dramatic contrast.

The most beautiful music remains a mute score unless it is performed, therefore the exalted term "re-creation" given to the performance. This is quite justified, even though we must remember that the creative artist takes precedence over the re-creative. However, there is no denying that the life of a composition is in the hands of the performer, whose jurisdictional powers are of an incredible latitude. In my travels in Europe these past months I came across an instance of interpretative dilemma that was really tragic and haunted me for days.

A thoroughly respected choral society, especially celebrated for its performance of Bach's works, gave a concert of three of Bach's motets. One of these gigantic works is heavy enough fare for anyone, but three of them proved to be of impossible difficulty. Moreover, the organization insisted on performing them unaccompanied, which is not only incorrect from the musical and historical points of view, but measurably added to the strain. The group sang and the conductor conducted the entire program by heart; a remarkable feat—and another severe limitation. They never made a mistake, never dropped from pitch, and sang with clockwork accuracy, yet the sum total of their efforts was a dismal artistic failure despite the acclaim of the audience, which admired the unfailing accuracy of the choral machinery. But to me the effect was

persistently funereal. The performers stood earnest and almost forbidding in their simple black clothes, never taking their eyes off the conductor—a sober and unsmiling man. Almost without exception the singers were past middle age, a number of the ladies looking like the neat old women one sees in German paintings of past centuries.

Now, it is an unwritten law in journalism that children and elderly ladies are not to be pilloried, and most certainly I do not want to hurt these good people whose devotion to the cause was of an almost religious intensity, but their performance was an object lesson I want to pass on to our own choral societies and to the public.

There can be no question that what killed this performance, obviously the result of a fantastic amount of dedicated work, was the very fact that it was too mechanically perfect; there was in it not a spark of life, of spontaneity, of rejoicing in the wonders of a great work of art. Precision and dedication in themselves are not virtues in art unless they are allied with insight, imagination and freedom.

The conductor, who gave every one of the innumerable cues without fail and kept unerring control over the most intricate maze of Bach's eight-part counterpoint, seemed like an automaton. He never understood the meaning of a fugal entrance, of the poetic difference between subject and counter-subject, and permitted the exciting piling up of the themes in the stretti to run their course unidentified. The motet followed its appointed orbit inexorably.

But there was another lethal element: the quality of the voices. The human voice is a sensuous instrument and its quality is entirely dependent on the vitality of the singer. Although it is not uncommon for elderly singers to possess voices still true and even flexible, they seldom have luster and personality. Imagine a chorus of forty-odd people, the majority of whom have nondescript, impersonal, lusterless voices. It was depressing and pathetic.

I left appalled by the cruelty of these facts of musical life. It occurred to me that the celebrated Meistersinger, the earnest God-fearing journeyman-musicians of the Middle Ages, must have made music in this fashion; music by industry, rote, perseverance, and precision, and wholly devoid of imagination, produced by the tired master cobblers, butchers, and candlestick makers who, after the day's labors, convened for a session of music.

This sort of thing is most laudable if done for the performers' own benefit and enjoyment, but it should never be offered as a public concert. Here there can be no compromises, no extenuating circumstances, no pity, because vigor, imagination, and creative force—the main requisites for living music—know none of these.

Portrait of Handel

As we commemorate the bicentennial of his death, Handel's name sounds to many like the generic term for a musical attitude, for a tendency, a frozen religious monument. The prestige he enjoyed during his lifetime became hereditary in every succeeding generation in the English-speaking world, but his admirers failed to look behind that name to see a man and a musician. Had they done so, Handel would have appeared to them not as a codified formula, to be dusted off every Christmas and Easter, but as an honest, courageous, and very human person, and an incomparably many-sided artist. It would have been worth doing not only because Handel is one of the most original and powerful composers in all history, but because his life presents so moving a portrait of the artist's temperament forever at odds with circumstance.

A disconcerting compound of conqueror and conquered, he was as brave as a lion, but entirely lacking the lion's felinity. He acted at full speed, relentlessly, and with as little feeling for obstacles as a machine. Convinced that he was right, unflagging in his determination, undeterred by intrigue, threats, and competition, and even unmoved by pleading, he had the hardness and sharpness of steel, the bristling energy—even arrogance—of the very healthy. His faults and his engaging qualities were all on a bountiful scale, but he was extraordinarily free from weakness or self-pity. While he may have had to put aside his instincts and his interests—opera was his consuming passion—he kept faith with his ideal; his oratorio is still music drama. But he loathed worldly failure and so he always played for big stakes and never followed the sheltered way. And he turned everything to profit, learning from reverses how to cultivate the amenities of human intercourse and taste.

All through his career Handel moved forward, steadily and powerfully. He changed course but he never backtracked. The natural bent of his mind attracted him to power, to indisputable power, and this he finally found in England's institutions, in the English concept of Christianity, in the Old Testament, and in Greek drama. His changes were in one direction because they were guided by a natural instinct which became stronger when confirmed by experience. He meant what he said because his words were supported by feeling, thought, and a profound

knowledge of the problems of his art. It is the naked strength with which his impressions are conveyed that gives to his works their grandiose, hard-won beauty. There is an exquisite and easy certainty of touch, a melting yet precise outline, crisp in spite of his sweeping melody.

But Handel is not the simple character his biographers make him out to be. The cultural mixture of German polyphonist, Italian *operista*, and British imperialist, the spiritual background of Lutheranism and Church of England, the seeking of worldly conquest along with personal-artistic seclusion, these are considerations that do not fit in with any obvious reading of Handel's character that would represent him as the hallowed composer of Christian fervor and fortitude. There were other struggles of which we can catch only a faint echo every now and then.

The background of piety and character would appear perhaps less vague if those who see him through the window of St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig would look rather into St. Paul's Cathedral in London. For Handel's duties, as he saw them, were not so much worship, but chiefly musical personifying of representative qualities of his adopted land of which the Anglo-Saxon moral standard, together with their righteousness in dealing with the "heathen," was one. He could not live in England without acquiring, and one may add, without desiring to acquire, a knowledge of British articles of faith, and yet the range of his intellectual interests has been so minimized that he has been represented either as an expert craftsman with an uncritical mind, or as a simple devout church composer.

Handel was neither, or perhaps both, but greatly magnified. If the individual figures of his operas—magnificently drawn characters—are suffused in the equal blue of the far distance, we still behold the last scenes in his great oratorios. Armies wheel there, hordes of Philistines are destroyed, altars rise and fall, forests darken, and waters surge. The richness and variety of these scores overwhelm us, for he is the most resourceful of entertainers.

But we must remember that the Chosen People he depicts is not Israel but Britain, the trials and tribulations he presents, and above all the heroism and victory, the steadfastness and moral integrity he seemingly takes from the Old Testament all glorify his adopted land. Indeed, Britain never had a more genuinely national musical apostle than this mighty transplanted German. Every Briton understands this. Although to us Handel appears in a different light, of course the music remains equally majestic and powerful. We Americans, too, should deepen our acquaintance with the greatest musical story-teller of them all.

On Handel's Dramatic Oratorios

Although many books on music appear in the United States, the vast bulk of this output is not within the realm of literature. Anyone who follows the book review section of this newspaper will see that a serious work on music comparable to the rich offerings of literary or art criticism is a rarity. The reason, of course, is to be sought in the pronouncedly anti-intellectual orientation of our music education, from grammar school to university.

In this emptiness there now appears a publication that by its subject, scope, scholarship, wit, and fine literary tone represents a remarkable achievement. Winton Dean, whose *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios* has just been published, is an English musicologist of distinction. While his previous writings on Franck, Bizet, and Puccini are all excellent studies, with this sturdy tome of seven hundred pages he moves into the top rank of contemporary musical criticism.

This Handelian essay is far more than a thoroughgoing study of the oratorios: it is a courageous well-documented and well-argued attempt at rediscovery of a man and his art destroyed by "a society that dresses a Muse in a cassock" to throttle her.

It is most refreshing to encounter a book on music with ideas. Dean consulted the immense mass of Handeliana preserved in the British Museum and other libraries, and gives a first-class survey of all the historical data and circumstances surrounding each oratorio. More, his musical analyses are detailed and most perceptive. Any conductor who fails to study the chapter on the authentic methods of performance of these oratorios simply lays himself open to severe censure.

But what is most attractive in the book and will appeal to any intelligent reader even without technical training, is the interpretation of the changing historical scene. This is entirely the product of Dean's own mind, which is a brilliant one, and this *is* musicology, creative scholarship.

There are several important postulates that I should like to quote in the author's words:

(1) "The Handelian oratorio is primarily an English and secondarily a Protestant creation."

(2) "In England the social significance of Handel's oratorios has always outweighed their artistic status."

(3) "There is an almost hereditary confusion between esthetic and ethical values, which has been such a bugbear of English criticism."

The reader should be reminded that whenever the author says "Britain" or "English," he should add "and America" or "American." As in so many other things, our heritage and attitudes are the same, or perhaps a little worse when it comes to music.

Dean tackled a formidable task. Handel's oratorios have never been examined in their entirety by competent, imaginative, and unbiased scholars; only *Messiah* has been investigated by an able American, Robert Manson Meyers, and by a distinguished Dane, Jens Peter Larsen. Their true nature has been misrepresented by romantic religious nonsense; the editions are faulty, distorted, and completely out of date. A new critical edition is in preparation "but the Novello scores, the basic fodder available to choral societies and musicians throughout Britain, still carry the thick rind and the smell of disinfectant enjoined by the cautious palate of the mid-nineteenth century."

All this is due to the circumstance that "the Victorians worshipped Handel; they did not know him. Their performances were a ritual act, a spiritual lustration in medicinal waters where the senses could be refreshed without fear of contamination." But in fact the Handelian oratorio is not church music but a form of opera—dramatic music. "Although Handel was a good man and a church-goer, the spirit of his music, not least in the oratorios, is defiantly human and worldly." This statement is as bold as it is accurate, for indeed the Handelian oratorio is human drama—English musical theater. Although Handel and his librettists are clear about this, it has been customary for stage directions to be deliberately omitted, the texts mercilessly "Christianized" and "refined." It was "the submerged Philistinism, the Puritans' lasting legacy to English art," that wreaked havoc with this magnificent music. Since a number of the oratorios used texts from the Old Testament, they could not be performed in the theater because "hearing Holy Writ in a theater was like meeting a clergyman in a brothel." On the other hand, in Handel's time the oratorios could not be performed in church because they savored too much of that wicked and lewd thing: opera. "Oratorio might conceivably be taken as a spiritual tonic; as an esthetic repast it must be rejected out of hand."

In the eyes of Handel's contemporaries there was something disquieting and reprehensible about these wondrous arias and choruses which roused even the musically unlettered. Dean quotes an eminent lady who expressed this feeling in a letter reporting the queer passion of an acquaintance: "One of the most profligate poor wretches I know, and

the most lost and insensible to all serious considerations, is the most constant frequenter of all oratorios. How can you account for this?" Well one can account for it on grounds of a different kind of sensibility. The poor wretch may have been profligate, but he recognized, was moved by, and loved good music when he heard it.

A great deal of time has passed since Englishmen were suspicious of "Mr. Hendell" and his oratorio, but we, too, misjudge him completely, and this time from the other extreme. Perhaps Dean's engrossing work will bring home to this "insensible" age the fact that in Handel's music there is no preaching, no Puritanism. Handel is a Sophoclean composer and should be recognized as such. His was not a skeptic spirit; only artistic aims interested him. A tremendous connoisseur of human nature, he often reaches far below consciousness to rip off the mask with which we beautify our own secret egotism.

Belshazzar

There seem to be signs of a genuine Handel renaissance, which received strong impetus from Winton Dean's magnificent book on the oratorios. It is a pleasure to notice greatly improved performances of Handel's works (though *Messiah* is still roared by choruses with revivalist frenzy) and the appearance of the lesser known or unknown masterpieces.

The Cantata Singers last night presented one of the great dramatic "oratorios," *Belshazzar*. Under the excellent direction of Thomas Dunn they proved that *Belshazzar* is human drama. The core of the libretto is from Chapter 5 of Daniel but the librettist made copious use of Herodotus and Xenophon, therefore *Belshazzar* cannot be considered a "Biblical" work. If anything it is like a Greek drama. A true drama of human character does not involve minutiae of "characterization"; it is the representative aspect of character that interested Handel, but we, used to naturalism, no longer recognize and experience it. Last night's soloists did not quite succeed in overcoming this handicap. And, of course, the tremendous choruses of the Jews, the Babylonians, and the Persians are real *dramatis personae*. They are in turn prayerful, festive, elated, or belligerent, but always alive and acting. The Cantata Singers sang with uncommon assurance; they are gloriously in tune—in the trickiest chromatic fugue they did not slip one bit—but they are a little gentle, though as they warmed up, the choruses sounded much more virile.

It was a fine evening. I only wonder whether we will ever see *Belshazzar* acted on the stage; how overwhelming it would be in costume and in motion.

Acis and Galatea

Of late we have discovered that as we put off the romantic purple and return to the "dim past" of the Baroque, we hear a musical language that is still a beautiful and living language—flexible, sonorous, vivid, and ingratiating. A superb example of this art was presented last night in Carnegie Hall by the Caramoor Festival Group under Alfred Wallenstein's direction. Handel's *Acis and Galatea* is among his most exquisite achievements. Here is the musical art of water color at its purest and most perfect, with the kind of bloom that comes from an instinctively attained equilibrium between the profusion of nature and the formal beauty of pattern. It is a classic serenity that has nothing of classic dryness but seems to flower from health and happiness of mind. Nevertheless, this bucolic atmosphere is difficult for us to recapture. There are forms that are valid only to a community of spirit whose force actuates them. Once this oneness with the idea disappears, understanding for its music must be acquired by cultivation. Yet there is a natural and even easy way to this understanding. The key is Handel's infallible and profound musicality, which can create a mood with unparalleled pervasive power, and yet which holds fast, with the utmost severity, to the boundaries of the song-like. The sensuous power of the human voice, the ability to communicate through this medium with an immediacy no man-made instrument can rival, should be as accessible to us as it was to Handel's audiences.

The cast for last night's performance must have been chosen with this in mind for they are not only masters of the *bel canto*, but also know how to communicate with the voice. The choral numbers were outstanding, and choirmasters from all around town should have been there to hear this beautifully trained ensemble of thirty voices. They sang like a polished madrigal ensemble, yet did not lack in volume. The orchestra was first class, and here, too, many a conductor would have profited from seeing how the basses should be handled in a Baroque work. They used about two inches of their bow, wherefore the bass line ambled with delightful lightness.

Needless to say, the final twenty-one-gun salute goes to Alfred Wallenstein, whose wonderful sense of style and balance pulled these refined artists together into an ensemble that moved on ball bearings. This is music making that sends one home with a happy heart.

Semele

Semele is usually billed as a secular oratorio, but it is pure music drama—English opera; the excellent libretto by Congreve has not the slightest "devotional" or "contemplative" quality. Indeed, this great

work is altogether addressed to the "high cause of love's magnificence." Handel is incessantly and joyfully aware of visual and aural and tactilic beauty, of warm, solid, spontaneous human beings, of the swift and gradual interaction of character with character.

The performance of the work presented in Town Hall by the Amor Artis group under the direction of Johannes Somary did not quite permit this interaction. In the first place, this is theater music that should be staged. Even more regrettable was the employment of a nondescript voice for Athamas, Semele's fiancé. A boy alto's voice has no more character than the alto castrato's for whom the part was written; they should have used a grown female alto, though the best way to deal with these roles is to transpose them for male voices. But I must pay my respects to Somary for the conscientious homework he did; few conductors take the trouble of going to the proper sources when performing old music.

The Amor Artis group is made up of enthusiastic young people—the conductor himself is a very young man. As a result we heard good tempos, good rhythm, and a willingness to "let go." But the soloists were seasoned professionals, well versed in this style. By and large this was a very creditable production, though the texture was not as pellucid as it should have been. The accompaniments are extremely delicate and must be balanced with the utmost care. It is hoped that Somary and his plucky ensemble will explore the rest of the immense Handelian repertory—how about *Susanna?*

Solomon

The Caramoor Festival, which opened Saturday night in the delightful outdoor theater at the Rosen estate in Katonah, is establishing an enviable reputation for unorthodoxy, good taste, and artistic excellence. The opening night thrilled a large audience with a magnificent performance of a great and seldom-heard masterpiece, Handel's dramatic oratorio *Solomon.* As we listened to this endlessly attractive music, we realized that what makes it so appealing is not only the splendor and ardor we usually associate with Handel, but the charm and lyrical audacity, the interplay of joy and grief, and his wonderful way of dismissing the tear with a smile.

Handel, the master craftsman, is always full of surprises. His melody, here tender, there soaring, suddenly turns asymmetrical, and while you are trying to find the lost measure or extricate the added one, he's off on a different tangent and you're left there in delicious suspense. Time and again the music disappears round the bend, which seems at first to be hairpin, but turns out to have the virtues of an S.

Half of the first act of *Solomon* is in Handel's so-called "Coronation" style; that is, ceremonial music of the grandest sort. But after the glittering choruses, the robust master turns to delicate love music, and the royal pair's amorous effusions are followed by the most wondrously poetic choral commentary in which the listener is as close as he is likely to get to the process between creative spark and conflagration. At the center of the work is the somber music drama of the Judgment of Solomon. Here the two women are minutely characterized in the best operatic tradition. The third act is entertainment music, a sumptuous masque given in honor of the visiting Queen of Sheba ending with a regulation Coronation Anthem, usually a splendid "Hallelujah" chorus or, as in this case, a resounding "Praise the Lord."

Hercules

The American Opera Society last night performed Handel's *Hercules*, which they billed "a musical drama in three acts." The published score designates it as "an oratorio," which, of course, immediately suggests a religious work. But Handel himself called it a musical drama, that is, opera; and such it is—one of the greatest in the annals of the lyric stage, a masterpiece of eloquence, sympathy, and construction, as well as incisive skill. The libretto by Thomas Broughton, a learned divine, is very good, and since no amount of Victorian skullduggery was able to make this utterly human drama of jealousy into a fake holy piece, as was done with Handel's "sacred" oratorios, it is never heard.

The American Opera Society deserves our deep gratitude for not only presenting *Hercules* to the New York public, but presenting it with an outstanding cast in a stylistically and musically unexceptionable fashion. The difficulties facing any company enterprising enough to tackle such an assignment are many, the greatest being the unavailability of a reliable score. Actually, for the correct version the conductor would have to spend a sabbatical year in the British Museum. The old Handel Society score is bad, the Novello score worse, and, in addition, the latter is shamelessly sprinkled with holy water. The stage directions, carefully given by Handel, have been removed and the text wantonly altered so as not to "embarrass" the composer of *Messiah*.

An appraisal of the cuts made in last night's performance and other details of the score used involve an amount of labor which a conscientious critic is unable to carry out. Cuts are necessary because this is a very long score full of accretions, but the large chunks taken out were excessive, often hurting the continuity. I suppose the cuts were observed because the Society used borrowed parts, made for another

production (Milan?). Aside from this unfortunate blemish, it was clear that the musical director and the conductor proceeded with care and good taste. The forces employed were authentic in size, well balanced, and faithful to the spirit of the work.

Samson

The American Opera Society once more treated us to a little known oratorio, Handel's *Samson*, composed right after *Messiah*. It is not one of the tremendous ones, like *Belshazzar*, or the introspective ones, like *Jephtha*, but it has a lot of fine music, and the superb third act alone is worth the evening.

Samson is one of Handel's Miltonian oratorios; that is, the libretto owes more to Milton (*Samson Agonistes*) than to the Bible. From Milton came the Greek dramatic construction, the puritanic abhorrence of sex, as well as such a figure as Harapha, his own invention and not in the Bible. Though the Victorians misrepresented the libretto's letter and spirit, declaring *Samson* a sacred oratorio, the work is for the theater and has absolutely no religious connotations. Newburgh Hamilton, the librettist—a confirmed Miltonian—did not have the slightest interest in the Bible; in fact, he drew on at least a dozen other Miltonian poems, creating a panache, though not at all a bad one. Handel, another inveterate mixer, also borrowed extensively for this work from at least a dozen composers besides himself.

The Victorians would have been shocked at the behavior of the public. New Yorkers cannot be fooled by appearances; they immediately guessed that *Samson* is opera and not some vague "holy music," and since it is opera, let's wreck it as it is done at the Met. And so they did, handsomely, at the end of every aria.

Judas Maccabaeus

In the intermission of yesterday's concert given by The Little Orchestra Society, Sydney W. Roos, president of the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues, made a nice little speech praising Thomas Scherman and his society for their promotion of interfaith understanding. I fully subscribe to this and only wish that some of the church musicians would follow Scherman's example. But if Mr. Roos thought that Handel's *Judas Maccabaeus* was a *religious* work, he picked the wrong occasion for his fine eulogy.

This oratorio was composed in trying times: the Scottish rebellion threatened England and the monarchy, and thus King George, Handel's patron. Handel was a true British patriot, but he was also a shrewd impresario-businessman who always knew what to do in a

given situation. The sagging morale of the country needed a lift, so he slapped together, as only he could, a work called the *Occasional Oratorio*, which had neither plot nor construction but was vaguely uplifting. It appears that Handel also made preparations for a victory celebration, and after Culloden this took the form of *Judas Maccabaeus*. And a rousing victory piece it is, dedicated to the conqueror of the Scots, the Duke of Cumberland, the kind of composition Handel advised Gluck to write when composing for an English audience: "Hit them straight on the eardrums."

This curious work is second in popularity only to *Messiah*, but is not nearly so good; in fact, it is almost as slapdash as the *Occasional Oratorio*—though its grand choruses are top Handel. Nevertheless, *Judas Maccabaeus* has given rise to the most conflicting interpretations. Some have seen in it the expression of the most profound religious feelings, many identify it with Jewish national pride and aspirations, while the Germans, long before Hitler, considered it their very own apotheosis of the Führer principle. They were convinced that this is purely German music that no Britisher could possibly understand.

In the end none of these concepts has any validity; this is a dynastic victory pageant in Biblical terms for which the British have far more understanding than the Germans—it was composed for them and in their spirit. The work has no dramatic construction and little variety; some of the airs are very nice, though most of them are a bit perfunctory, but its hortatory power fairly lifts the listener from his seat.

Israel in Egypt

The Dessoff Choirs under Paul Boepple's direction, assisted by The Symphony of the Air, delighted the audience with a sturdy and well-prepared performance of a work heard all too rarely.

Handel's *Israel in Egypt* is a gigantic oratorio with tremendous choral numbers that have an epic breadth and dramatic sweep entirely unknown in *Messiah*. The preponderance of the choral element clearly indicates Purcellian traditions, and, while delicate lyricism is not absent in this overwhelming work, the sole protagonist is the people of Israel, in dire need and battling for life and freedom.

This was Handel's favorite domain; the greater the issue, the better he liked it. Knowing the Old Testament and identifying himself with its events and characters, the composer matched its majesty with vast tonal murals. There has been no other composer who could create the almost graphic presence of a multitude of seething humanity, but this is achieved neither by noise nor by any other external means. Handel here created a choral dialectic that is as convincing as it is persuasive.

The wonderful choral effect is achieved notably by the themes themselves and by their contrapuntal manipulation. With unfailing psychological insight, Handel maneuvers his material with an uncanny feeling for the proper opposition or juxtaposition. Whether he used his own or some one else's idea did not bother him; what mattered was the right melody and accent at the right place. When the oppressed people sing ". . . and their cry came up unto God," Handel throws in the famous old Easter song of Christendom, *Christ lay in death's dark prison.* Anachronism? Not at all; there is no anachronism in great art—only perfect illusion.

Messiah

One might question whether a performance of Handel's *Messiah* calls for another review. No planet revolves in a more accurate orbit, faithfully returning at Christmas and Easter, nor does any planet show such enduring features, valleys, and meadows that are the same winter or summer, and have been for ages. In the English-speaking world *Messiah* is the only universally admired musical composition, the only unquestioned work of art. Though originally considered a secular work, it has become the living symbol of holy music, and for over a century its interpreters have turned it into a rather breezy exercise in Christian health and happiness. Actually, there is room for a new presentation of this incomparable masterpiece. Like members of the Flat Earth Society, choirmasters firmly believe in its "ecclesiastic" nature and style, in the essential massiveness of its texture, and in its unvarying devotional tone. All this is about as valid as the scientific opinions of King Canute.

The public, in turn, not only loves *Messiah* with genuine attachment, but loves the ritual that goes with the performance. There is, for instance, the custom of listening to the "Hallelujah" chorus standing because, the story has it, that when he first heard it, George II rose to his feet in a religious trance. But the "Hallelujah" chorus is a festive anthem whose tone was very well understood in Handel's time. Actually, the not very bright Hanoverian who was King of England mistook it for the national anthem!

The fact that last night's performance of *Messiah* by the Cantata Singers was out of season indicates that something unusual is attached to the occasion; the work was presented as music. And this music is sensuous, refined, and fervent, glorying in the beauty and expressiveness of the human voice. Nor is it massive, for, with a few exceptions, it is intimate, madrigalesque, with the flavor of chamber music. Accordingly, the chorus numbered only about seventy, and the accompanying orchestra was a true chamber ensemble.

Every one of the soloists was a musician of the first water, and who has ever seen seasoned professional soloists sing with the chorus? They did so not only because it was done in Handel's time, but because they enjoyed every minute of this glorious music. All hands deserve

the highest praise, and it is hoped that a new Handelian tradition has been inaugurated.

The disappointing performance by the Philharmonic Symphony of Handel's *Messiah* under the direction of Leonard Bernstein set this listener to wondering why such an accomplished musician should be so lost in a work that is certainly accessible to his resilient musical mind. The only answer I can find is failure to study the score. This is not to intimate that Bernstein did not know what was in the score, he is not that kind of conductor; he must have mastered it as he would any number in the standard repertory. But the same methods cannot be used with a work more than two hundred years old, which has been mistreated for generations by incompetent amateurs, and which has acquired the status of church music, almost liturgic music.

Messiah is a very complex work, put together from the most heterogeneous sources, yet it has miraculous unity and unflagging inspiration, and it displays immense skill in all departments of musical composition. In my review of the concert I deplored the arbitrary telescoping of the three acts of *Messiah* into two sections, and called attention to the fact that the scrambled order not only violated Handel's intentions but negated both the spiritual motives and the musical architecture.

The word "acts" is not used in a casual manner. The eighteenth-century composer considered the oratorio a musico-dramatic genre whose organization was in many ways akin to that of the opera, and Handel was a musico-dramatist to the marrow of his bones. Each of the three acts of *Messiah* may be considered to constitute a large self-contained cantata. Thus, one cantata may be performed by itself, but does not admit the exchange of individual numbers with the other two.

But the musical organization of such an oratorio also owes its form to purely musical factors, notably to a planned sequence and logic of tonalities. The tonal architecture of *Messiah* is built upon a long wave. The bottom of the trough is reached in the E minor of "Behold and see," and from this point on the tonal scheme gradually rises. One glance at the text will make it clear why this is so. The most poignant, the most heart-rending moment of the Passion of the Lord is reached when He mysteriously feels that He is forsaken even by God. Surely, a careful study of the work, not just from the point of view of the mechanics of music making, should have brought this home to the conductor, and he would not lightly have shifted the order of things.

Incidentally, this E minor aria has fascinated many a great composer. It undoubtedly furnished the inspiration for the first movement of Brahms's E minor Symphony, and left its imprint upon, among other works, Beethoven's *"Hammerklavier" Sonata.*

Messiah is full of Italian folksong and of Handel's adaptations of his

own Italian compositions—therefore the lilting, idyllic, dance rhythms and tunes, notably the pastoral *Siciliano*. If this is not respected, the tone is falsified. Even in the "Hallelujah" chorus the majestic theme of "For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth" comes from one of Handel's Italian chamber duets. This alone should warn conductors not to permit the relentless bellowing traditionally associated with this impressive choral piece. But Handel was even more explicit than that. At the beginning of the "Hallelujah" chorus the composer in the original score prescribes the solo strings, which surely means *piano* and not *forte*. Only dynamic differentiation can bring out the tremendous climax, not sheer volume of sound.

Besides the magnificent choruses, *Messiah* has *secco* recitatives, accompanied by the harpsichord, as in opera, and ineffably beautiful arias in the purest Neapolitan *bel canto*. But some of them are music drama of the first water. Take the crushing accompanied recitative "Thy rebuke hath broken His heart." What incredible pathos; what genuine compassion at the words "He looked for some to have pity on Him, but there was no man, . . ."

A thoughtful conductor should also examine the old and senseless cuts made in the work by "tradition"—whatever this may mean. Some cuts are justified, though an integral performance is still far less taxing than that of Bach's *B Minor Mass*. But such cuts should be restricted to individual numbers and not to parts of the many "triptychs" in which the work abounds.

Finally, there is the utter falsity of the enlarged and "modernized" orchestral accompaniment. The press release of the Philharmonic, claiming the absence of any information regarding the orchestra employed by Handel and endorsing Prout's anachronistic orchestration, must have come from a cookbook. An original set of orchestral parts, discovered in London's Foundling Hospital sixty years ago, calls for strings, oboes, bassoons, trumpets, and kettle-drums. Of these only the strings, trumpets, and drums are always indicated in Handel's score; however, the general orchestral practice of the eighteenth century is well enough known (though not to our conductors) to permit the addition of oboes and bassoons to the violins and basses with which they play. Arnold Schering, who prepared the score for Peters in 1940, carefully added them to the orchestra.

It is hoped that the Philharmonic will not abandon its noble aim of presenting such great choral works; the Westminster Choir offers excellent partnership, but whoever conducts them will have to acquire up-to-date scores and perhaps do a little homework on the subject.

Reviewing the Oratorio Society's annual performance of *Messiah*, I wondered why this work is the only Handelian oratorio popular in this

country. To be sure, it is a glorious masterpiece, but it is neither the greatest of his oratorios nor typical of his usual style. The reason for the unique position of *Messiah* is undoubtedly to be sought in the fact that it is the only one of the great oratorios in which Handel set to music verses from the New Testament—hence the intimate, contemplative, and lyrical qualities of *Messiah* as opposed to the Cyclopean tone of the other oratorios. Now this does not mean that Americans are cooler toward the Old Testament than the British, but it seems that in Handel's music Englishmen have discovered their very own world. Albion is like Israel, the Chosen People, the children of God. To them Belshazzar and Judas Maccabaeus are not so much ancient Hebrew heroes as authentic British prototypes, and the Israelites who triumphed over the Philistines are figures of the British carrying the white man's burden.

The English public of the early eighteenth century grew tired of Italian opera, and Handel's various enterprises in this direction failed, but he was loath to give up the music drama that was his natural language. Sizing up British love for muscular Christianity, their pride in their own heroic achievements, he gave them something that would embody all this: the oratorio. And the British public did recognize itself in these magnificent epic-dramatic works; they identified themselves with the robust spirit of the Old Testament. This music, written by a German immigrant, became the most English music ever conceived, the most ingenuous artistic realization of English faith, aspirations, and righteousness, and it is for this reason that it cannot be as popular in this country as over there.

It would be a great mistake, however, to see in this spirit something like Frederick the Great's "enlightened" concept of religion: "God marches with the biggest battalions." No, Handel's Old Testament oratorios are faithful to the Bible; they are folk dramas; they exalt heroism and the unharnessed power of the people. In so doing they are entirely religious, but in the popular way of the prophets, kings, and heroes of ancient Israel—and of modern Britain. Handel was a popular composer in the highest sense of the word, and that surely has a meaning for us, too.

Handel's own life is a heroic saga, a symbol of courage and faith in creative power. This sorely tried man was an inexhaustible source of joy and plenty; there is no more extrovert, jubilant music than Handel's; no more festive and enthusiastic glow than his. No one perhaps was more enamored of light than this musician who lost his sight. Every feature of nature evoked a rapturous creative urge in him; his music is full of marches and dances, because he felt these rhythms to be a repercussion of life itself.

Bach and Handel: Ancillary Rivals

Every popular history of music reports with scorn the English bishops' reluctance to permit church choirs to assist Handel's oratorio performances, which took place in secular halls. But the indignant authors forget that the oratorio was not considered church music but "musical entertainment," even though it had a strong moral, ethical, and religious tone. These bishops may have been unimaginative, but they were not ignorant. They recognized that the Handelian oratorio represented music that was deliberately moving out of the church and into a secular atmosphere; therefore they regarded it with apprehension.

A caustic writer of the times gives a lively picture of this new form of "entertainment."

> This oratorio being a new thing set the whole world a-madding. "Haven't you been at the Oratorio?" says one. "Oh, if you don't see the Oratorio you see nothing," says t'other; so away goes I to the Oratorio, where I saw indeed the finest assembly of People I ever beheld in my very Life, but to my great surprize, found this sacred Drama a mere Consort, no scenery, Dress or Action, so necessary to a drama; but Handel was placed in a Pulpit. I suppose they call that their oratory. By him sat (singers) in their own Habits (and one of them) gave up a Hallelujah of Half an hour long.

This same movement from the church to the concert hall can be seen in Bach's Passions, though the genuinely churchly is still present to a fair degree.

Church music is by its very nature deeply influenced by the theological, philosophical, and social thought of the age. The great upheaval in Protestant religious thought caused by Pietism on the one hand, and the Enlightenment on the other, resulted in profound changes. The Enlightenment shook the edifice of theology when it proclaimed the adequacy of the mind unaided by faith. Now the old relationship of Church and State in the Protestant lands was changing. It must be understood, however, that this was not a total rejection of religion, though it did represent a shrinking of the sphere of the Church. At the same time, Pietism, within the Protestant churches, rejected elaborate art music and wanted the equivalent of what our own "old-time religion" Revivalists favored: sentimental ditties.

Now religious thought does adjust itself to inevitable historical-cultural trends, but it is another matter with creative art. There were three ways open to the Protestant composer of the first half of the eighteenth century: stubborn adherence to hallowed tradition, which leads to antiquarianism; bowing to the dominant popular taste, which a powerful and creative mind will reject; or entering upon entirely new directions. The last was made feasible by the weakening of the hold of the organized Church which we have mentioned; religious music was able to strike out on its own without church sponsorship.

Handel, a "modern" composer, unhesitatingly selected the new ways. Brimming with creative power, he espoused the oratorio, and in thundering choruses, affecting arias, and gripping recitatives conjured up the majestic events of the Old Testament. The only work in which he touched upon the New Testament was *Messiah*, although in this, too, most of the texts are from the Old Testament.

Bach—the inheritor of a two-hundred-year-old tradition, and the issue of a family of musicians that had served the Lutheran Church through those centuries—was in a different position. His inner struggle was tremendous, for he was a convinced orthodox Lutheran, yet his musical imagination could not be restricted to the kind of music his contemporaries wanted. Therefore, if he were to give full range to his creative powers, there was nothing to do but join the artistic movement out of the church.

Bach's Passions are not liturgic, ritual music; they are essentially the same kind as Handel's oratorios; secular music with a religious subject. Although his texts show the Pietist influence, there is no compromise in his music. The difference between the two giants of the Baroque is not to be measured in musical values; both are incomparable. But one of them was a humble introspective German Lutheran; the other, a naturalized Briton who embraced the Established Church which, as we should remember, was an arm of the government in England and hence had a strong political coloring.

Although his whole heart, his warmest invention, and all his redoubtable skill were poured into his oratorio-Passions, in the end, Bach, tired of the meager support received from his superiors, gave up this particular form of music. The Leipzig cantor retires to his study to address himself to the solution of the final mysteries of music, while the London man of the world raises the oratorio to a national British genre.

Two musicians are before us, born in the same environment in 1685, two men of exceptional genius, who nevertheless were as far apart as the antipodes. As for Bach, at least four of his major choral works, a number of the smaller ones, and a wealth of his instrumental music are constantly before the public, but a Handelian oratorio other than *Messiah*

is a rare event, and his operas are mere names. There are many misconceptions surrounding these two musicians, always mentioned together, with Handel always relegated to a lower eminence.

Bach was really not so little known by his contemporaries as sentimental biographers would lead us to believe; musicians knew and appreciated him. But the public did not know him until the romantic rediscovery in the nineteenth century. In contradistinction, Handel was a celebrity in his life, and by the time he died he was revered as a national hero. Bach was a musician who composed for himself or for his immediate circle, without any contact with or regard for the larger public. A humble and sober Lutheran who saw his era with the moral eyes of the Bible-reading Protestant, he was not a man of his age and did not particularly care for that age.

Handel, on the contrary, was in everything a man of his times, a man of the present, interested neither in his historical forbears nor in his position in posterity. He had the pride of an active and highly successful man of the world, and he needed the world both as an inspiration and as a theater for his music; there was nothing of the hermit in him. There have been few composers so receptive to influences coming from outside, whether from nature, which he worshiped, or from the music of his contemporaries or immediate predecessors from which he helped himself generously.

A robust and healthy soul, he does not look inward, examining himself with painfully searching conscience; he looks around, and with infinite receptivity takes in everything at a glance. His greatness rests on this fantastic responsiveness. His descriptive scenes, such as the two different pictures of the night in *Israel in Egypt*, which one of my able colleagues so perceptively noted the other day, are without parallel in the literature.

Handel, too, was a Bible-reader, but unlike Bach, who was preoccupied with the New Testament, notably with the ideas of Death and Redemption, Handel reveled in the powerful figures of the Old Testament, in the struggles of Israel, in the mighty clashes and curses, and gloried in the victory of the righteous which he set to music in triumphant sounds.

Bach has no sense whatever for nature, only for the soul. He feels everything and sees little; the absolute for him is beauty undisturbed by the outside world. There is at times a certain scholastic meticulousness in his music, which is characteristically medieval and Germanic and which has its own peculiar charm. He is solicitous about every line, each of which must be a work of art by itself. His conscientiousness was unexcelled; there is no such thing as a trifle for him: the smallest choral prelude of a dozen measures, or a little two-part invention receives the same all-absorbing care as the great choruses or fugues. These works are

often geometric boulders, but behind them is a rich and eternally viable symbolic world.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that this constant vigilance for the abstract musical line does at times obscure euphony, nor was Bach over concerned with the beauty of vocal sound. Handel did not bother with trifles; he composed murals, and they are like a mirror that reflects every picture. This is wondrously clear and gives very sharp contours. It is this clarity and sharpness, the idiomatic writing, and the glorious sound that make Handel's music so engaging and irresistible. Through his straightforward and powerful mind we see the world in its natural colors, for he does not, like Bach, give a special light and color to everything.

It seems that it is Bach's unique immersion in what appears to be abstract beauty that has made him so popular in modern times and, conversely, caused Handel to lose ground. But there is precious little resemblance between Bach and the "back to Bach" moderns, for their ideas do not come from that region where the outside world vanishes and the soul remains alone; they only see and imitate the marvelous polyphonic texture in the music.

Better acquaintance with Handel would lead us to a fuller appreciation of both composers, for the two are not comparable—they are complementary.

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