

Chapter 6

Before We Begin

Some General Musical Considerations

Since oratorio is a close relative of opera, an understanding of some of the conventions of opera presents a good starting point for understanding oratorio.

One aspect of Handel's operatic language is his choice of genre. Opera in Handel's time consisted mainly of two genres of solo singing, recitative and aria. Recitative, as its name implies, is recitation-like. In it the voice declaims a text without repetition of words (except occasionally for rhetorical emphasis) and usually with just one note for each syllable of text. The rhythms of the music, with rhetorical exaggeration, follow the rhythm of the words, and the melodic contours, again with rhetorical exaggeration, follow the inflections of speech. Because in recitative the declamation of the words is of highest importance, accompaniment is minimal so as not to obscure the words. Often it consists only of basso continuo accompaniment (such as cello and harpsichord), in which case it is called *secco* recitative. In opera, *secco* recitative typically carries the dialogue and the dramatic action of the story.

The other type of vocal solo, the aria, moves away from declamation to lyricism and often to virtuosity. Aria repeats words and phrases of text frequently and uses rhythms that tend away from the irregularity of speech to the regularity of bodily (dance) rhythms. Often, several (sometimes very many) notes accompany one syllable of text. Such passages are called melismas. Instruments play a greater role in aria

than in recitative, often being equal partners with the voice. In opera an aria typically “portrays” the principal emotion (or affect, in eighteenth-century terminology) that has been generated by the action and dialogue of the preceding recitative. So Baroque opera consists largely of segments in which the drama unfolds in recitative followed by moments during which action is suspended while one of the characters sings an aria portraying the principal affect generated during the preceding recitative. The result is sometimes called “opera of affects” because periodically the dramatic action is interrupted while an aria portrays an affect for the audience’s contemplation.

Between the two extremes of recitative and aria there are two subtypes of recitative. One, accompanied recitative, uses other instruments of the orchestra in addition to the basso continuo. Accompanied recitative usually portrays the more dramatic moments in the narrative or dialogue. The other subtype, *arioso*, leans in the direction of aria by being less speech-like and more song-like. It was typically used for the more lyrical moments in the narrative or dialogue.

Handel inherited these types of solo vocal music from opera when he turned to writing oratorios, and since he spent so much of his career composing operas, by the time he turned to oratorio he was a past master of them all. But oratorio featured another genre, an extremely important one, that was almost entirely lacking in opera — the chorus. Before turning to oratorio, Handel had little opportunity to gain experience in this area. He did, however, have a few occasions to write choral music — some Latin church music and two Italian oratorios while he was in Italy, the Brockes Passion, occasional English anthems, and a few non-staged dramatic works in English. But though his experience was relatively limited, his talent wasn’t. Composing choral music seems to have been a natural talent for him.

Messiah presented a problem, however, in using recitative and aria. All of the words come from the Bible. Isaiah and the other biblical writers were not, of course, thinking of the recitative/aria format of Baroque opera, and Jennens did not rewrite the biblical story in new literary styles that lent themselves to being set as recitatives and arias. More specifically, with a few brief exceptions, no characters in the story speak any of the words. So even though Jennens’s collection of texts

has a narrative aspect, no obvious division between narrative and response presents itself.

Handel found a simple and effective solution. In his basic scheme, he took each unit of text, each “scene,” and set it in a progressive order beginning with recitative and then moving through aria to chorus. The cumulative effect of such a sequence is not only musically effective, but it also underscores the climax toward which the texts typically progress. Furthermore, arias and choruses generate a sense of response even when the text continues to be narrative; listeners sense emotional response at the same time as the narration continues.

Throughout Part I of *Messiah*, Handel maintained this pattern with minor exceptions. Parts II and III are much less regular. In the following commentary, we will consider reasons for the exceptions as they occur.

A second aspect of Handel’s musical language is well-known because it is one of the easiest things to point out about the way he set words to music. He made abundant use of a technique known as “madrigalism,” so called because it first flourished in the madrigals of the Renaissance. Madrigalism refers to imitation of a word or phrase by the music — for example, an ascending scale on the word “climb,” fast notes on “run,” a sharp dissonance on “pain,” and the like. Handel hardly ever passed up an opportunity to use madrigalisms, and he was especially imaginative in inventing them. Something about this may seem a bit naïve, however. Further, music doesn’t have to resort to such obvious bits of imitation to express a text effectively; any two-bit composer can do it. But if composers as great as Josquin and Lassus, Monteverdi and Schütz, Bach and Handel, and Beethoven and Brahms used such seemingly naïve tricks, perhaps we should think twice before dismissing their importance for effective text-expression. But even granting the importance (though not the necessity) of madrigalisms for text-expression, they are hardly the only, or even the main, expressive “tool” a composer has. If they were, musical expression would be severely limited. After all, how many words or phrases can be literally illustrated in music?

Madrigalism can best be thought of as one of many rhetorical devices. That is how Baroque music theorists categorized them. They

considered madrigalisms to be analogous to illustrations in verbal rhetoric. And just as verbal rhetoric consists of many more devices than illustration, so too musical rhetoric consists of many more devices than madrigalism. Anything a composer does that is out of the ordinary serves as a rhetorical device: getting louder or softer; speeding up or slowing down; pausing; taking a peculiar melodic turn or harmonic direction; leaving a dissonance unresolved; doing something unexpected with the form or using an unusual combination of instruments — anything, in a word, that calls attention to a word or phrase or idea in the text.

Finally, Handel had at his disposal a “vocabulary” of musical conventions that provided a common ground of understanding between composer and audience. Certain musical styles, gestures, techniques, and instruments had “meaning” that both composer and listener understood. The composer did not aim to create a highly individualized and original expressive language. Rather, the composer attempted to use commonly understood rhetorical devices and “vocabulary” as vividly and imaginatively as possible.

Mottoes

After Handel had gone to Dublin, Jennens sent him mottoes for the title page of *Messiah*. Jennens was fond of supplying mottoes. In a letter to his friend Holdsworth, he wrote that “many of our best authors make use of them.” He confesses, “whenever I scribble to the publick, I cannot resist the Temptation of adorning my Title page with any significant motto that comes into my head & seems a propos.”¹ The two he sent to Handel for *Messiah* are certainly apropos.

The first is a mere two-word Latin phrase from Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue: *majora canamus* (“Let us sing of greater things”). Handel had been singing of great things throughout his professional life in his operas about the great deeds of the heroes of ancient history. He continued to sing of the great deeds of heroes when he turned to oratorio, only the heroes came from ancient Hebrew history. Now Jennens enlisted Handel’s prodigious talent to sing of someone far greater than

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any ancient hero, namely the Messiah, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Notably, Christians had long thought that Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue, from which Jennens took the motto, contained a prophecy of Christ’s birth in the lines:

Jam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna,
Jam nova progenies caelo dimittitur alto. . . .

Now returns the Virgin, returns the reign of Saturn;
now a new generation is sent down from high heaven. . . .

The poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744) found Virgil’s lines so concordant with Isaiah that he rendered Virgil’s supposed prophetic lines as follows:

Rapt into future times, the Bard begun:
A Virgin shall conceive, a Virgin bear a Son!
From Jesse’s root behold a branch arise,
Whose sacred flow’r with fragrance fills the skies.²

Following the Latin heading, Jennens added two verses from Paul’s epistles: “And without controversy, great is the Mystery of Godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified by the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory [1 Tim. 3:16]. In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge [Col. 2:3].” The whole story of *Messiah* is summed up in those verses. According to Henry Hammond (1605–1660), in a book that Jennens probably knew,³ “manifested in the flesh” refers to “the several articles of our faith from the Birth to the Assumption [ascension] of *Christ*”⁴ — covered in *Messiah* numbers 2–33. The rest of *Messiah* covers further details that Hammond outlined in his paraphrase of the verse from Timothy:

He was beheld and confess’d and adored by Angels themselves . . .
he was . . . preached and proclaimed not only to the Jews, but

COMMENTARY

Gentiles . . . he was received and believed on by many of all nations through the world; and . . . he was visibly and with a glorious appearance of Angels taken up into heaven, there to reign for ever in the glory of God the Father. . . .⁵

Chapter 7

Part the First

The Coming of the Messiah

I. *Orchestra*: Sinfony

SCENE 1

2. *Arioso*: Comfort ye, comfort ye my people
Accompanied recitative: The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness
3. *Aria*: Every valley shall be exalted
4. *Chorus*: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed

SCENE 2

5. *Accompanied recitative*: Thus saith the Lord
6. *Aria*: But who may abide the day of His coming
7. *Chorus*: And He shall purify the sons of Levi

SCENE 3

8. *Secco recitative*: Behold, a virgin shall conceive
9. *Aria and chorus*: O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion
10. *Accompanied recitative*: For behold, darkness shall cover the earth
11. *Aria*: The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light
12. *Chorus*: For unto us a Child is born

SCENE 4

13. *Orchestra*: Pifa
14. *Secco recitative*: There were shepherds abiding in the field
Accompanied recitative: And lo, an angel of the Lord came upon them
15. *Secco recitative*: And the angel said unto them
16. *Accompanied recitative*: And suddenly there was with the angel
17. *Turba chorus*: Glory to God in the highest

SCENE 5

18. *Aria*: Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion
19. *Secco recitative*: Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened
20. *Aria*: He shall feed His flock like a shepherd
21. *Chorus*: His yoke is easy

I. *Orchestra*: Sinfony

The overture to *Messiah* (called a “sinfony” by Handel) provides an excellent example of a Baroque musical convention that conveyed a specific meaning to its listeners. This type of overture, which originated in French opera, consists of two sections. The first part is slow and pervaded by dotted rhythms, that is, a long note followed by a short note (or group of notes), the long note being at least three times the length of the short one. The stately movement of the dotted rhythms suggested royal pomp and splendor, in particular the entrance of King Louis XIV. The second section is fast and probably owes its origin to a long-standing courtly practice in which a lively dance follows a stately. By Handel’s time (and even long after), the French overture, or more specifically the stately dotted rhythms that characterize the first section, “meant” solemn ceremony and royal splendor. Other aspects of the music — harmonies, melodic gestures, and so on — could tilt this affect in various directions so that, for example, it could be celebrative for a royal victory or dirge-like on the occasion of a royal death. But whatever the more specific affect, the French overture would have immediately suggested to Handel’s audiences the pomp and ceremony as-

sociated with royalty. Although Handel usually began an oratorio with a French overture, here, for an oratorio about the King of Kings, doing so is particularly appropriate.

Did Handel wish it to suggest something specific about the King at this point? I think not. Although a certain severity and perhaps even a hint of elegy shade the first section and a note of joyful exultation colors the second section, this overture gives a rather general affect. Had Handel tipped the affective character of the overture too far in one direction or another, he would have weakened the impact of the succeeding numbers. The overture alerts the audience that a serious matter is at hand and suggests the coming of a king. But the kind of king and what his arrival portends are unclear, especially since the exuberance of the fast section is tempered by its minor key and by the final cadence that returns to the severity of the opening section.

Scene I

2. *Arioso*: Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God; speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned.

Accompanied recitative: The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

3. *Aria*: Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low: the crooked straight and the rough places plain.
4. *Chorus*: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it (Isa. 40:1-5).

After the somewhat severe ending of the overture we hear something very different. E minor is gone. The strings of the orchestra play quietly pulsing, smoothly connected chords in E major. In order to

achieve the desired effect, the bows caress the strings almost as a mother would caress her distraught child. The gently stroked E major chords immediately suggest tenderness. Before a word is sung, the orchestra “speaks” of comfort.

After the orchestra’s introduction, the tenor soloist sings “Comfort ye” — three notes gently descending by step, long-short-long. Nothing could be simpler or more direct. The orchestra immediately echoes the tenor. More elaborate and extended statements follow — “Comfort ye my people” — adding rhetorical emphases, while the orchestra accompanies with gently stroked chords as in the introduction. At the end of each phrase of text the orchestra echoes the simple three-note “comfort ye” motive.

A change occurs as the tenor identifies the source of the comforting message: “saith your God.” The orchestra momentarily drops out, allowing the words to come through without obstruction. They are sung to the three-note “comfort ye” motive, but with two alterations that change its character from tender to strong. The motive ascends rather than descends, and instead of the long-short-long (trochaic) rhythm, it has three equal notes (spondaic). For further emphasis they are repeated at a higher pitch. At the end of the phrase the orchestra repeats the original form of the motive, thus adding “comfort ye” to the tenor’s “saith your God.”

Tenor:	“saith your God,”	“saith your God.”
Orchestra:	["comfort ye"]	["comfort ye"]

The orchestra introduces the next section by resuming the gently stroked chords. After a measure and a half the tenor continues the comforting message in a longer phrase: “Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem.” The longer phrase obviously requires new music to accommodate its length, but the three-note “comfort ye” motive is not abandoned. It appears as the cadence notes at the end of the phrase — “[Je]-ru-sa-lem.” The phrase recurs more intensely a step higher and leads to a climax that emphasizes the change in verb from “speak” to “cry.” The tenor’s voice jumps up an octave and sings the phrase without any accompaniment: “and cry unto her.” Cry what? The gently

stroked chords resume in the orchestra as the tenor tells us “that her warfare is accomplish’d, that her iniquity is pardon’d.” “Her warfare” is repeated in another rising sequence that culminates and cadences, appropriately, on “accomplish’d.” But the peak of intensity of the whole section arrives on the word “iniquity,” sung to a high, dissonant note, which lasts a whole measure before it is resolved on “pardon’d.” The release of the tension on “pardon’d” after the long-held dissonance on “iniquity” offers a perfect musical analogue to the forgiveness of sin.

With the source and the content of the comforting message announced, the text and the musical style change. A voice “in the wilderness” cries out, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” At the literal level, as Roger Bullard points out, the “wilderness” that Isaiah was envisioning was the desert

from Babylonia, the land of exile, to Israel, the once more Promised Land. Ordinarily the traveler going from Babylonia to Israel would follow the curvature of the Fertile Crescent, avoiding the desert; but this road is to cut directly through the arid wilderness. It is the Lord who will be traveling that road, leading his people homeward.¹

The Gospels identify the voice as John the Baptist’s (Matt. 3:1-3, Mark 1:1-3, Luke 1:17, and John 1:23), so as we hear the tenor singing Isaiah’s words we also hear John the Baptist bidding his listeners to “prepare the way of the Lord . . . a highway for our God.” For this injunction Handel changed from the lyrical arioso style of “Comfort ye” to a dramatic, declamatory accompanied recitative with strong punctuating chords in the orchestra.

In the aria that follows, the text tells what will happen when the Lord God comes: “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low: the crooked straight and the rough places plain.” Metaphorically, the desert between Babylon and the Promised Land represents this sin- and strife-filled world. The imagery of its valleys being exalted and its mountains and hills being brought low resonates with words from the Magnificat of the Virgin Mary: “He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree” (Luke 1:52).

COMMENTARY

The text is full of contrasts — exalted and low, crooked and straight, rough and plain — that provided Handel with abundant opportunities for madrigalisms, opportunities that he obviously relished!

All this leads to the climactic chorus: “And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.” The text features four components. Handel gave each its own characteristic musical gesture and combined them in a variety of ways within the overall framework of a lively dance. The phrase “And the glory of the Lord” is always sung to a rising line that reaches its peak on “Lord.” “Shall be revealed” always descends, suggesting the incarnation. (See Example 1 below.)

And the glo - ry, the glo - ry of the Lord shall
be re - veal - ed.

EXAMPLE 1

“And all flesh shall see it together” is suggestive of a down-to-earth, rustic dance; its music is simple, repetitive, and rhythmically infectious. The fourth phrase, “for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it,” stands out from the rest. To suggest the rock-solid certainty of God’s word, Handel set the phrase to long, strong, repeated notes. It is sung only by the outer voices, framing the music from top to bottom. (See Example 2 on p. 93.)

Scene 2

5. *Accompanied recitative*: Thus saith the Lord of Hosts: Yet once a little while, and I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, and I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come (Hag. 2:6-7). The Lord whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the cov-

and all flesh shall see it to - geth - er.
and all flesh shall see it to - geth - er.
8 For the mouth of the Lord hath spo - ken it.
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EXAMPLE 2