

MUSIC and FAITH

The Music of Handel's Messiah

By Benjamin Ho

The opportunity to perform Georg Friedrich Handel's *Messiah* with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra under the baton of acclaimed conductor John Nelson last November (2012) ranks as one of my most endearing musical moments in life. Despite the challenge of juggling various work and family commitments last year, the experience of the entire project (about four months) was both emotionally invigorating and spiritually moving.

Most of us need little introduction to the *Messiah* oratorio, possibly one of the most famous of all works in the classical musical repertoire. Composed over a span of 24 days in the fall of 1741 by Handel, the work has now become an annual Christmas fixture by choral groups all over the world, and it continues to both awe and move listeners – including myself – more than 250 years after the death of its composer. Even Mozart, in a 1789 re-orchestration of *Messiah*, confessed himself to be humble in the face of Handel's genius, insisting that any alterations to Handel's score should not be interpreted as an effort to improve the music. "Handel knows better than any of us what will make an effect," Mozart was reported to have said. "When he chooses, he strikes like a thunderbolt."

Besides being a musical masterpiece, what made *Messiah* such a remarkable achievement is that it consists entirely of biblical quotations (73 verses to be exact) spanning both the Old and New Testament. As one music scholar observes, *Messiah* represents the first time in musical history that "the mighty drama of human redemption was treated in an epic poem."¹ Southern Baptist Theological Seminary professor Daniel Block speaks of *Messiah* as an "adventure [which] has led us through winding and circuitous paths, playing with our emotions like a roller coaster, taking us down with the Messiah to the depths of our own depravity and then lifting us to the heights of Hallelujah, sending us down to the Netherworld to taste the bitter gall of death, but then escorting us into the heavenly throne room to join the myriads of angels and other creatures and especially the redeemed to sing the praises of the Lamb!"

Indeed this message of God's redemption of his people through the Person of Christ, who is also the Promised Messiah stands at the heart of all biblical theology. In this respect, *Messiah* represents a theological and musical narrative of the very highest standards in which the story of Yahweh's redemption is profoundly fleshed out. I would like to highlight the following:

The Messiah: His Advent

¹ Robert Manson Myers, *Handel's Messiah: A Touchstone of Taste*, 1948, p.59.

Against the backdrop of a brooding overture, whose purpose apparently “was to create a mood without hope”², the first part of *Messiah* opens with a heartwarming rendition of Isaiah 40:1-5 before culminating in a glorious musical announcement of the arrival of the glory of the Lord, an event that will be witnessed by all flesh. Indeed, the revelation of God’s glory is among one of the most anticipated events in Israel’s history and we are being reminded in *Messiah* that the day of Yahweh has two sides. On the one hand, the day will bring great comfort to God’s people who have been languishing in exile in a foreign land, but on the other hand, it will also be a day of judgment. The words of John the Baptist are a poignant reminder of this truth, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 3:2). Nevertheless to those who long for the return of the true King, the advent of Christ is a call to celebration as seen in the multiple choral voices all echoing the joyful certainty that the prophecy of Isaiah would surely be fulfilled in God’s own good time. We who live in the aftermath of the Messiah’s advent should likewise “burst into songs of joy together...for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem” (Isaiah 52:9, NIV).

The Messiah: His Invitation

Among one of my favorite choruses in *Messiah* is the delightful passage of Matthew 11:30 whereby Jesus proclaims that “his yoke is easy and his burden is light”. These words, which accompanies Jesus’ call during his lifetime ministry to all “who are weary and burdened” to find rest in him, speaks of the character of his earthly ministry which involves feeding the flock, tenderly caring for the lambs, and gently leading those with young. This is vividly captured within the light and easy-going tempo music of the fugue, which intensifies towards the end, thus reiterating the assurance that those who seek the Good Shepherd lack no good thing (Psalms 34:10). Living amidst challenging times where the pressures of daily living can be overwhelming, the Messiah’s invitation and promise – that he places no heavy burden on his people – liberates us to be truly the human beings we were created to be.

The Messiah: His Passion

The second part of *Messiah* opens with a reference to the heavy load that Christ takes on himself – the sin of the whole world – as opposed to the lightness of the burden that he places on his people. The story of the Messiah’s Passion is powerfully sustained throughout as the music brings us vividly through the scenes of the events that lead up to Christ’s sacrificial death on the Cross. One of the most emotional portions of Christ’s Passion – in my view – is the musical passage echoing Isaiah 53:4 whereby we are told that the Messiah had “surely borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. Performed in a key of F minor, the music – which is played in a dotted rhythm – forces us to wrestle with the sin-scarred tension of our human existence whereby reconciliation between man and God is made possible only through the brutal

² Jens Peter Larsen, *Handel’s Messiah: Origins, Composition, Sources*, 1972, p.103.

suffering that Christ undertook on Calvary. As chorus rings out the final lines of “And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6), the music leaves both singer and audience shuddering at the emotive power that is being evoked that we are left in no doubt that the heavy punishment meted out to God’s Son was indeed the price that had to be paid for our sins.

The Messiah: His Triumph

For the Christian however, death does not have the final say. Instead the dark shadows of Calvary are but a temporal necessity in God’s plan of salvation whereby the resurrection of Easter Sunday is sung. Nowhere is this fleshed out more grandly or gloriously than in the “Hallelujah chorus” and “Worthy is the Lamb”, the music of which resounds with apocalyptic visions of the Messiah’s eternal and everlasting reign. In the words of Revelation 5:12, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (NIV) Indeed, God’s complete victory over sin is witnessed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20, NIV). We can take heart and encouragement from the fact that in Christ, death has been overcome and that we too can partake of God’s resurrection call. For the true people of God, author Daniel Block writes, “this oratorio should always be a doxology of praise, and for the rest, those still aligned with the kingdom of this world and the realm of darkness, this oratorio presents a challenge. Eventually every knee will bow prostrate before the lamb. The question is, will we do so submissively in this life, as an act of voluntary homage, or by constraint in the life to come.”

References

Daniel I. Block, Handel’s Messiah: Biblical and Theological Perspectives, in *Didaskalia*, Volume 12, Number 2, Spring 2001.