CHAPTER 6

The Large-Scale Oratorio Chorus in Nineteenth-Century England

Choral Power and the Role of Handel’s Messiah

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We, as an imperial race, should appreciate the master’s imperial effects. Handel is the Napoleon of his order, without a Moscow. The French Caesar used to win victories by launching masses at his enemy’s centre. Handel too fights in masses and overpowers by straightforward blows. You cannot give him too large a force. Expand the Sydenham transept till twice four thousand executants find room on its orchestra, and his power is doubled without encumbrance. Such a musician deserves to be the musician of an empire. Rome would have decreed him divine honours, and sent her legions to battle with his music at their head.1

The lives of many Englishmen and women, regardless of class, were touched by large-scale choral singing in the nineteenth century. As both audience members and practitioners (amateur and professional), vast numbers of people experienced the striking effect of grand oratorio performances via regular concert life and festival culture nationwide. This article examines the contexts and origins of this choral culture and considers its role in shaping a sense of national belonging and identity. Handel’s Messiah plays an important role in this process because of its canonical status, its longevity and widespread familiarity. As Charles Dibdin observed while touring northern England in 1788, “Children lisp ‘For unto us a child is born’ and cloth makers, as they sweat under their loads in the cloth-hall, roar out ‘For his yoke is easy and his burden is light,’” which confirms both the place of Handel and the role of choral activity in the lives of working people.2

A comprehensive and detailed study of the multiple kinds of choral activity in nineteenth-century England remains to be undertaken. Available scholarship currently includes focal studies of important institutions (such as the Bach Choir and the Huddersfield Choral Society), of sacred choral activity

2 Charles Dibdin, The Musical Tour of Mr. Dibdin (Sheffield, 1788); cited in Ehrlich (1985), 22.
(the work of Nicholas Temperley is crucial here), and of educational movements including the transformational Tonic Sol-Fa method. In the meantime, the main survey available is found in Dave Russell's thought-provoking chapter in his monograph, *Popular Music in England 1840–1914.* Russell exposes the absence of systematic comparative studies of the social origins of choir members among these many thousands of organizations. In short, no large-scale study currently exists which attempts to explore fully the data relating to the choral activities of various kinds across the nation in this period. Such extensive work would require a dedicated grant-funded project.

From the separate studies that have been undertaken, and from evidence available in the newspaper columns of the period, it is possible to trace the standing and role of grandiose performances of oratorio in England during the nineteenth century. The trajectory of large-scale choral activity from the watershed performances of Handel's *Messiah* in 1784 makes it clear that the appetite for momentous performances of oratorio with highly-populated choruses continued throughout the Victorian era. The reasons for this undiminished appetite, and the nature of the structures supporting its continuity, reveal a great deal about the socio-economic tapestry of the period.

The status of the Handelian tradition, the overwhelming importance of grandiosity, and the impact of the visual and aural power of the masses is encapsulated within the epigraph to this article. The quote is apposite because it captures the force of the Handel oratorio tradition in England, invested as it was with intensity, enterprise, widening education, communal effort, and the dissemination of culture. The choruses of Handel's *Messiah* were popularly considered to be ‘sublime.’

The author of the epigraph adopted for this article, Joseph Bennett (1831–1911), occupied an influential role from the 1870s until his retirement. He depicted and commented upon England’s musical life via the pages of *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Musical Times,* among other widely-read publications. His rousing comment quoted here dates from thirty years after the death of Mendelssohn. Portraying Handel as omnipotent Emperor, Bennett leaves us in no doubt that the composer's music enjoyed primary popularity. This emblematic metaphor, bolstered by the military terms employed, resonates ideally with the empowering sense of a masterful, far-reaching and still expanding British Empire. After all, Queen Victoria had become Empress of India as recently as May 1876.

In his 1985 article, Howard Smither examined the fortunes of Handel's *Messiah* in Victorian England and traced its provincial and metropolitan progress employing the contemporary periodical literature as his source. His

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