

WHY *Not* RE-SCORE The MESSIAH ?

By THE MUSIC EDITOR



AS a Music Show it is a conglomeration, magnificently counterpointed and decorated, but badly built as a work of art. In fact it isn't art. But it is—Music. And a good many people regard it as—Religious. Anyway, like Rule Britannia, it is splendidly British. But if people are to enjoy the Messiah for all it is really worth—which is a good deal after all—won't some resourceful musician kindly cut out a lot of the superfluous recitatives and some of the choruses, and write a first-class modern orchestration for it?

WHY should a supposedly first-rate symphony orchestra travel 500 miles in order to help a first-rate Canadian choral society give the Messiah? Is that sort of musical game worth the candle? Has oratorio not begun to go the downward slope even in England, the only country where it ever struck any permanent root; and if so, what is the use of Canadian choral societies trying to bolster it up?

We ask these impertinent questions because, a few days ago, the Toronto Oratorio Society, under the baton of Dr. Edward Broome, an Englishman in Canada, was assisted by the Russian Symphony Orchestra to do Handel's chef d'oeuvre. More than 3,000 people heard the work. Everybody seemed delighted. In fact, I was quite interested myself. I have been to many a show much duller than the Messiah—and some of them are grand operas, quite modern ones. Nobody was tired when it was over. It was a cheerful show, made a deal of agreeable noise, most of it artistic, and no doubt revived a whole train of memories in the minds of those present. Oratorio has a reminiscent character that way. I am always reminded of great crowds crudely assembled, a sort of judgment day episode, with all the town choirs massed row upon row, all the church folk present, many of the preachers, a general democracy of Methodists and Anglicans, with a few Scotch—because some Scotch folk really like Handel. I could even imagine John Bull as chairman of a concert in which the Messiah was the only number. And I know that John Bull would be able to stand up and sing the Hallelujah bass score from memory, as many good Englishmen would count it musical heresy not to be able to do.

The Messiah is just about as British as the Magna Carta or Devonshire cider; and to prove it you may follow the trail of the Messiah to the prairies and the trenches. Thousands of men in the front line know the Messiah, even the solos; know it in their sleep. They inherited it and so did their fathers before them. The roots of the old thing go back clean through the Victorian era into the days of the early Georges. And it will take a lot of dis-

integration to uproot it. Put to a referendum, I doubt if England would not as soon move to abolish the House of Lords. Once upon a time the Messiah was popular in many parts of Canada. Its vogue has been declining. The late F. H. Torrington had the distinction of conducting the work over 200 times in this country. It used to be done in some of our smaller cities and large towns. We never hear of it now—in London, or St. Thomas, Brantford, Hamilton, Ottawa, or any of those places. The old Philharmonic, under Guillaume Couture, used to do it in Montreal. Not now. Opera is more popular there. Winnipeg has had a few performances of the work, and for some while back one of the most celebrated Messiah singers ever known since the days of Sims Reeves and Charles Santley has been teaching music in Winnipeg—Eatkin Mills, who was quite the biggest basso-cantante Messiah artist that ever came to Canada.

There are two ways of judging the Messiah—also the Elijah, the Redemption and a few other works of that ilk. They are either a musical show or they are a sort of religion. I know the Messiah is a show because the audience spent about a third of their time applauding, and we don't usually applaud our religion. It must be a sort of religion because its libretto is lifted almost direct from the Bible and set to music that sometimes is quite devoutly uplifting. Which it is most is a matter of individual preference. I have known audiences to be profoundly affected by certain parts of the Messiah. Any ordinary person who could not be moved by Comfort Ye, He Was Despised, and I Know that My Redeemer Liveth, has something wrong with his critical machinery. There are some choruses, too, that take hold of the religious element in a man. I don't feel sure about the Hallelujah. Handel may, as he said, have seen the heavens opened when he wrote that chorus, but of course Handel was a very excitable old Hanoverian, who sometimes became quite emotional in a very cheap way, and sometimes surpassed all his contemporaries in such exquisite bits as the Pastoral Symphony and He Shall Feed His Flock. In the matter of choruses I much prefer Worthy

is the Lamb and Lift Up Your Heads.

But when you take away from the Messiah its religious factor and estimate it as music, which it really is, what is the result? We are told that Handel wrote the whole thing in about three weeks. Which, of course, means that he had a lot of it already composed in sections. "He Was Despised," for instance, he originally composed as a love song, and it must have been a good one; yet nobody thinks of it as anything but beautifully religious. A large number of the choruses are mainly Handelian vocal exercises in counterpoint and polyphonics. Most of the introductions are miserably scratchy and thin, just as they were in the days of the little tinkly-tank orchestra of Handel's day. Some of the accompaniments are beautiful. Once you come to analyze the thing it resolves itself into a sort of potpourri of scenes taken from Scripture and tacked together with more or less appropriate music. But it covers such a wide range and variety of scenes that there is no possible occasion for any sort of climax. Handel was too prolific a writer. He had an overplus of what is called thematic material and a paucity of coloring and subterfuge in working it up. A modern opera contents itself with two or three leading motifs around which it plays in all manner of combinations and colorings from the orchestra till they are painted right into the brain of the listener, who, of course, is much assisted by the acting and the stage setting. The Messiah is a whole repertoire of motifs, none of them worked up and most of them strung together without any sort of regard for modulation, tone-color or suggestion. The effect is much like listening to a miscellaneous concert of anthems and solos and organ numbers, all of which are more or less religious, but few of which have any connection one with another.

Such a loosely constructed work can not be kept alive by its inherent musical character. It can only be sustained by tradition and as far as possible good performance. By tradition we do not mean keeping up the style in which Handel or any other old master was supposed to conduct the work. That makes little or no difference. There are various readings of the scores. For all practical purposes one is as good as another so long as it is well done and does not outrage the sentiment. About the only tradition of any importance is that of tempo; and some of the English critics are so finicky about this that a few years ago one of them took a metronome under his coat to the Birmingham Festival—or was it Leeds?—and tested out the performance, which he reported in the Musical Times by rounds like a prize fight. This is neither music nor religion.

The Toronto Oratorio Society gave what may be called a first-rate production of the Messiah. It is doubtful if any society anywhere ever sang the work better in all essential respects. Dr. Broome has a chorus that gets surprising results in masses of tone, and only falls down on balance and quality. Of course it is impossible to keep some of those choruses from being blatant. There is really no bass part to the Messiah; only a baritone. The tenor section is often encouraged by the score itself to try its hand at drowning out the rest of the chorus, and it sometimes succeeds. The sopranos simply have to shriek on some of the high passages—notably in the Hallelujah—and there never was a chorus of sopranos that didn't. Perhaps Mr. Fricke, the new Mendelssohn Choir conductor, who, with Dr. Vogt, its late conductor, occupied one of the loges, can correct me on this. He is a veteran at oratorio, which he has given at Leeds festivals in all its glory.

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