

Handel and *Theodora*



Handel in 1747

The early music revival of recent decades has led to the rediscovery of many of the lesser known works by Handel. However most people are still only familiar with a tiny proportion of his compositions - works such as *Messiah*, *Water Music* and a few “big tunes” like *The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba* taken out of context. Handel composed 38 Italian operas - most for the London stage - and is arguably the greatest opera composer of all time, but many opera lovers have never seen a Handel opera. In the 1730's opera box office receipts were falling, and Handel - in the midst of a mid-life crisis - reluctantly turned to oratorio. Of his roughly 15 oratorios, several are of equal or greater quality to *Messiah*, but the overwhelming popularity of *Messiah* has meant that the other oratorios are only occasionally, if ever, performed by choral societies.

Messiah was unusual in being the only major Baroque work by any composer to survive into the Classical era with no break in popularity. It was first performed in 1742 but its predominance amongst Handel's works came later. In 1749 Handel gave the first charity performance of *Messiah* at the Thomas Coram Foundling Hospital and later donated the score to the hospital. These charity concerts became an annual event for London's rising middle classes. The work also suited the changing moral, religious and political values of the time, unlike his other vocal works. After Handel's death in 1759, a veritable cult developed around *Messiah*. There were massed performances in Westminster Abbey - in 1791 Haydn attended such a concert with 1068 performers (Handel would have used well under 100). *Messiah* inspired the founding of the first choral societies.

Theodora was Handel's penultimate oratorio, composed in 1749 when he was 64 years old. His health and eyesight were already failing - he went blind in 1751, soon after finishing his last oratorio *Jephtha*. He composed no new works during the last eight years of his life. In 1959 Winton Dean, one of the first to draw attention to the quality of Handel's other oratorios, wrote: “In his last two oratorios Handel surveyed and conquered a new world. His geniusburgeoned afresh...”. Dean compared *Theodora* and *Jephtha* with the late works of Verdi (*Otello* and *Falstaff*); in the case of both composers “such an Indian summer is the rare attribute of supreme artistic genius” and the late works have a “mellow tone”, a “balance of detachment and intense participation”, an “understanding of youth in all its innocence and vitality” and a “conspicuous extension of spiritual range”.

The source of the *Theodora* libretto was a play by the 17th century scientist Robert Boyle, itself based on a collection of the lives of saints compiled from early church records. However, in choosing the story, the librettist Thomas Morell was probably strongly influenced by the very recent success of Samuel Richardson's 1747/8 novel *Clarissa*. Novel and oratorio have similar themes and each has two strong female characters, sympathetically portrayed.



Theodora is a powerful story of courage and conscience in the face of religious persecution, set in Antioch in about 304 AD, during the reign of Emperor Diocletian. Theodora, a princess of Antioch, has given up her wealth and status to become a Christian. She and her fellow Christians refuse to celebrate the Emperor's birthday by sacrificing to the Roman gods. As a punishment, the Roman "president" Valens has Theodora arrested and imprisoned in a brothel. Didymus, a Roman officer and secret Christian, is in love with Theodora and risks his life to rescue her. Septimius, another Roman officer and a friend of Didymus, is torn between his own beliefs and sense of duty, his friendship for Didymus and his wish to show kindness and mercy. Irene is Theodora's friend and leader of the Christian community. The members of the Chorus are in turn Heathens and Christians, representing Antioch society in a state of flux between two systems of belief, and directly participating in the story both physically and emotionally. The story ends with the martyrdom of Theodora and

Didymus. In the libretto this double martyrdom was presented in a positive light and the complete libretto ended with the conversion of Septimius. However Handel left out the conversion scene and concluded the oratorio with a final chorus which underlined the tragedy.

The first performance of *Theodora* was at Covent Garden in March 1750. Although greatly admired by Handel's friends and reputedly a favourite work of the composer, it was a box office failure with only four performances in Handel's lifetime. The première was preceded by a series of minor earthquakes which drove some of the potential audience out of London. However the subject matter (including prostitution) and the unfashionable tragic ending may have contributed to the failure. *Messiah* apart, *Theodora* was Handel's only oratorio on a Christian theme, but the story is not in the Bible and would have been unfamiliar to the audience. Also, the theme that "prosperity" was the "bane of virtue" (to quote one aria) may not have appealed to the well-off audience. After the first performance Handel had an apparent crisis of confidence and butchered the score, removing much vital music including Theodora's powerful prison aria *With darkness deep*. Why he did so isn't recorded, although it may be that some people found the words too close to the bone.

Theodora was rarely performed after Handel's death. The Victorians found the sexual references hard to take and bowdlerized the text. A decent performing edition didn't appear until 1984. However in 1996, a groundbreaking staging by Glyndebourne Opera propelled *Theodora* into the limelight, and it is now considered to be one of Handel's greatest works.

Theodora is a masterpiece of musical drama, glowing with fervour and intensity. It is packed with wonderful arias, two glorious duets and some of the most emotionally charged choruses Handel ever composed. It contains no well-known "big tunes" although the aria *Angels, ever bright and fair* was later published separately. Handel is reputed to have ranked one chorus above the Hallelujah Chorus from *Messiah*. The final chorus - a profound expression of sorrow at human suffering - has been compared to the final chorus of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. It is questionable what Handel and Morell intended the oratorio to "mean", but (despite the 18th century poetic language) *Theodora* seems surprisingly modern and relevant today with its strong theme of freedom of conscience and belief, bringing to mind instances of persecution in our own times. **IP**

Sources:

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Ruth Smith, 1995: *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought*.

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