



Handel: A Classical Icon OR Handel's 250th Anniversary

Handel's Oratorio

VOICE OVER

Handel's Messiah- Handel created his own style of oratorio.....

His oratorios are like operas

But, they're based on sacred stories and they're sung in English

DONALD BURROWS

I think one of the things that's very special about Handel is that he did manage to turn them into very large and powerful musical dramas, using the type of work that he learnt in the theatre with opera but putting it with the English tradition of Church Music in using the chorus.

VOICE OVER

We would now associate oratorios with performance in church. But the first oratorios were performed in the theatre.

DONALD BURROWS

the history of oratorios as we know them now began when he introduced a couple of them on the end of his opera season at the major London opera theatre.

And so I think it attracted quite an interesting sort of audience, the opera goers, but also people who wanted to hear these new works in English.

VOICE OVER

No oratorio had ever had an impact like Handel's Messiah.

DONALD BURROWS

Most of Handel's oratorios are actually based on Old Testament subjects but the one which is now most famous, Messiah of course, is on the story of Jesus Christ and was a little controversial when it was first performed in London. There were articles in the newspapers that said should this type of work on this subject be performed in the theatre with actors.

But the whole reputation of the work changed in 1750 with a performance in the Chapel of the Foundling Hospital, which was a children's charity, still quite new, in North London.

VOICE OVER

This charity event was greeted with a huge wave of excitement

A thousand famous faces from London society crammed in to The Foundling Hospital Chapel, as hundreds more were turned away

DONALD BURROWS

someone wrote at the time even Bishops had attended the performance so now there was no sort of moral doubt about Messiah as there had been in the theatre and the rather funny thing about it is once it had been performed in the Foundling Hospital Chapel in this way we don't hear any more problems about Handel performing it in the theatre.

VOICE OVER

By the end of Handel's life, Messiah was the oratorio he had performed the most.

DONALD BURROWS

It's perhaps a little bit strange that something that Handel had not been quite certain about in the early performances became something of a hit and actually it fitted with what people wanted to do and with what people wanted to hear.

VOICE OVER

Although German was Handel's mother tongue,

He had an ability to write melodies that enriched the meaning of his English libretto

DONALD BURROWS

The forceful way that he set the words, things like "For unto us a – a child is born". It's now very, very difficult to think of that phrase without hearing Handel's music.

And it became a permanent part of the repertory in a way that was not something that Handel could have foreseen because at that stage composers wrote for the moment, for the things they were doing, possibly to revive the work a couple of times later on but certainly Handel couldn't have thought that we would still be listening to it two hundred and fifty years later.

Messiah spread through Britain but also through various different broader social classes as many, many people learnt to sing and of course brought their friends for the audience as well.

I think it's become something that has become identified with English language culture. It's one of the things that – that as it were represent us out in the wider world, and it's something that was first Donald Burrowse in LonDonald Burrows, first written in LonDonald Burrows. In a way it's ours.