

HANDEL MESSIAH

Souvenir of a charity performance

Great St Mary's Church, Cambridge

Sunday 26 June 2011, 6.00 p.m.

In aid of the Clifford Bartlett Appeal

Emma Kirkby *soprano*

Clare Wilkinson *alto*

John Potter *tenor*

Stephen Varcoe *bass*

Psalmody

Gill Wilson, Julia King, Liz Curry, Helen Chapman, Teresa Pells, Anna Ramell *soprano*
Janet Bullard, Linda Gower, Selene Mills,
Maggie Menzies *alto*
Toby Parr, Andrew Spencer, John Clibbens,
Andy Beer *tenor*
Alastair Chapman, Nick Webb, Simon Adams,
Alan Bullard *bass*

The Parley of Instruments & Friends

Judy Tarling, Pam Munks, Paul Denley *violin 1*
Jean Paterson, Ilana Cravitz, Susan Marshall
violin 2
Annette Isserlis, Zen Edwards *viola*
Mark Caudle, Louise Jameson *violoncello*
Maggie Bruce *bassoon*
Andrew Kerr *bass*
Stephen Keavy, Jonathan Impett *trumpet*
Tenley Martin *timpani*
Clifford Bartlett *chamber organ*
directed by Peter Holman *harpsichord*

We are extremely grateful to all the performers, not just for taking part but for producing so outstanding a performance. We include here the cast, Peter's introduction to the programme, an expanded version of my reminiscences of *Messiah* and a review (kindly written by someone who was not aware that she would be asked). Francis Knights agreed to take photos at the rehearsal. The full set of 81 pictures will be accessible at www.parley.org.uk

Apologies for the slip in the caption for Louise Jameson – especially as she was such a help in the organisations of the event.

INTRODUCTION

Handel wrote *Messiah* to support two charities in Dublin, Mercer's Hospital and the Charitable Infirmary, and later in his career it was central to his concern for the Foundling Hospital in London: he gave annual charity performances of the work for the Hospital towards the end of his life, and he bequeathed a set of performing material to the institution so that it could continue to benefit from it after his death. We should see his involvement with the Foundling Hospital as part of the great surge of philanthropy and charitable enterprises that accompanied the religious revival in the middle of the eighteenth century – a revival to which *Messiah* greatly contributed. The work continued to be a mainstay of charity concerts throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and has remained so in our own time.

So it was natural that, when thinking of how I could support the Clifford Bartlett Appeal, I immediately thought of putting on a performance of *Messiah*. Clifford has spent much of his career thinking and writing about Handel and (specifically) *Messiah*, and his edition for OUP has become the standard one for historically informed groups, not least because it combines scholarship and practical advice in a masterly, user-friendly way. It is also the edition that makes it easiest for the performer to choose a particular version from the host of variants that Handel produced for different circumstances. For this evening's performance I have chosen a version performed in 1753 which appears to represent Handel's final considered thoughts, and which is close to the 'received' version performed after his death and in the following two centuries. In particular, it uses short versions of some of the numbers, including the Pifa, 'Rejoice greatly', 'How beautiful are the feet' and 'Why do the nations', greatly tightening up and intensifying the drama of what was originally a rather sprawling work. Charles Jennens's libretto is divided into opera-like scenes in the word-book for Handel's first London performances of *Messiah* in 1743, and this has influenced my pacing of the work.

MY MESSIAH – 1948-2011

Clifford Bartlett

I first encountered *Messiah* at one of the places that used to be particularly associated with the work: The Royal Albert Hall. This was the first concert I ever attended, in December 1947 or 1948. The conductor was Leslie Woodgate, who had been the BBC Chorus Master from 1934 as well as Musical Director to the London and North Eastern Railway Musical Society. We had seats behind the choir, and I was more interested in his gesticulations than the music. The Hallelujah Chorus must have had some effect, since I tried (and failed) to play it from the vocal score I received a few days later for Christmas. All those octaves in the bass were unmanageable, and I made sure that, when many years later I produced an edition, such unnecessary difficulty was not imposed on the player – it is much easier to add an octave if you want to rather than not play what is printed.

My next *Messiah* experience was at Dulwich College – a minor public school that was transformed at the end of the war by taking most of its entrance from the top boys of the 11+ exam. A scheme was devised in which the whole school took part in a performance, for which it hired the Royal Festival Hall for a day in 1952 – it had opened the previous year for the Festival of Britain. Everyone was taught some of the easier bits, leaving the rest to the choir, of which I wasn't a member: my voice had broken early and didn't settle into anything useful. I was overpowered by the grand sound, but was more excited by the building than the music – and also by the special train that took a devious route unknown to scheduled trains. What did impress me, though, was the preparation: all the second year rehearsed a choral reading of Jennens' libretto.¹ I was struck by the power of the allusive story-telling, almost entirely through prophecy – at that time I hadn't been to an Anglican funeral so didn't recognise the main source of "Part the Third".

In 1949, the war damage to Sydenham Methodist Church, in which my family was deeply involved, was restored, a two-manual organ acquired, and the husband of a friend of my mother was appointed organist. He (Horace Cox) became my music teacher, and for a year I spent up to three hours every Monday evening having lessons in piano, voice, music history and harmony. When I went to Dulwich College, my parents thought that I should have music lessons at school. That was a disaster, and apart from sight-reading at every piano lesson and becoming a bad viola player (they were short of violas in the orchestra), I

1. This was the idea of the Head of English, James Gibson. I mentioned it in the preface to my *Messiah* full score, and it turned out that the person who commissioned it at Oxford UP was the son of one of the English staff – though not one who taught me.

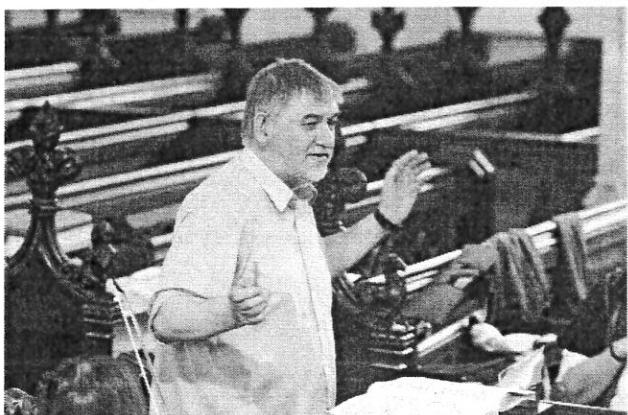
didn't benefit from the music at the College until the sixth form. But I joined the church choir, so was back within Horace's influence. On a good day, there were about 20 of us, of varying ages, abilities and backgrounds. We managed an anthem most weeks (usually from *The Church Anthem Book*) and generally took over the service at least once a year to perform an abridged *Messiah*.

The reputation of the work was still as high as it had been in Victorian England. There was no feeling that it was 'classical music': it was part of the seasonal tradition. Some of the older members will have gone to the Crystal Palace, a couple of miles up the hill, for the massive choir festivals, which were as often as not devoted to *Messiah*. (They also watched the flames when it was burnt down in 1936: even after the wartime bombing, that was the disaster people remembered.) Elaine's parents in Fenstanton, near Cambridge, also made regular trips to the Albert Hall to hear the work, though didn't travel to London for anything else.

Horace's main task was to get the notes right; intonation was considered a bit, musicality not at all – at least, not consciously, but he was a good musician so something came over. We generally had capable soloists in the choir, but a semi-pro soprano was sometimes brought in – I disliked her pretensions and sound, which gave me a suspicion of solo sopranos, and I never heard a satisfactory one until I met Emma Kirkby. Contraltos were often worse, which made me initially welcome countertenors – though it took a long time for them to get beyond the limited church-alto range and style.² The Novello vocal score by Ebenezer Prout was ubiquitous! To give him his due, it was from his introduction that I first realised that music had editorial problems. The need to sort out double-dotting seemed logical, and was followed in the new edition of Watkins Shaw. At first, it seemed an improvement – I attended lectures he gave on his edition in Cambridge in 1959, when it was published. It was in many ways an improvement, but looking back on it a few decades later, it seems terribly cluttered, hinders individual initiative, and makes rhythmic adjustment far too precise. The controversy over double-dotting the first section of the Overture virtually fell away when conductors stopped trying to beat it in eight.

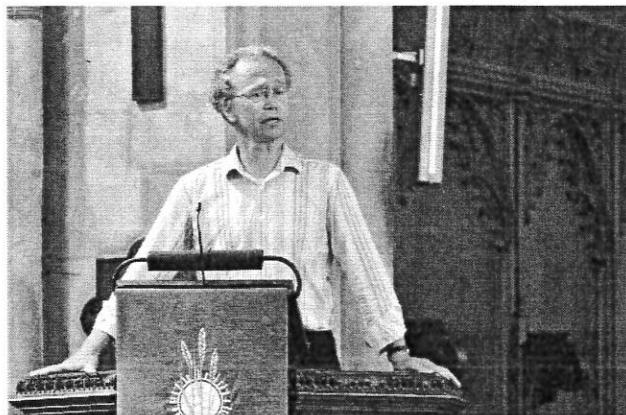
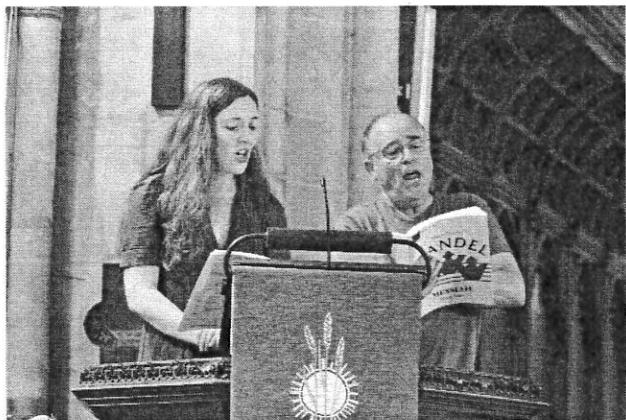
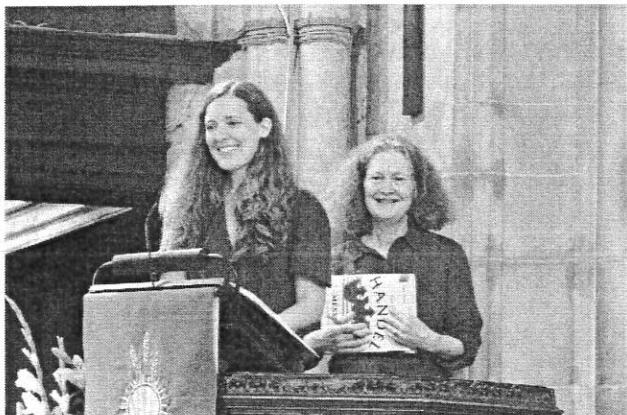
This period was the time at which I knew *Messiah* best. Every chorus line was learnt separately, and I had them all memorised. (I've never been able to memorise any other music.) I often accompanied the solos, so knew those as well. When I bought a miniature score, I was surprised

2. I was delighted that Peter Holman asked Clare Wilkinson to fill the gap when Michael Chance double-booked for our concert: many thought she was the star of the show.



MESSIAH in CAMBRIDGE
26 June 2011

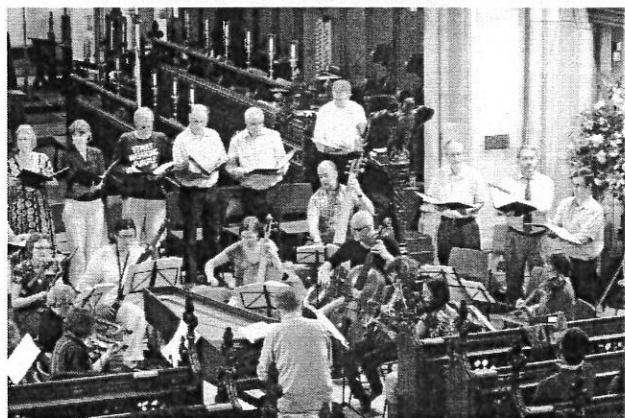
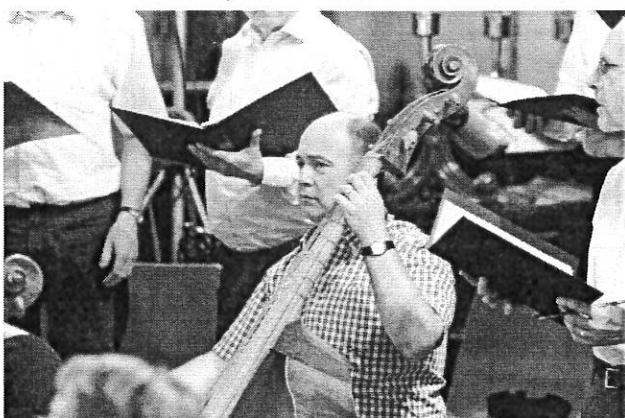
Pictures taken at rehearsal
by Francis Knights



*Peter Holman
Clare Wilkinson & Emma Kirkby
Judy Tarling*

*Clare Wilkinson & John Potter
Stephen Varcoe
Pam Munks*





*Pam Munks, Paul Denley vln 1
Annette Isserlis, Zen Edwards viola
Mark Caudle cello
Andrew Kerr bass*

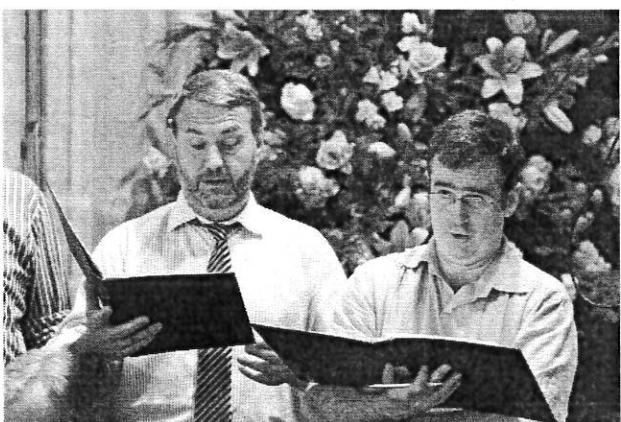
*Jean Paterson, Ilana Cravitz,
Susan Marshall vln 2
Louise Jameson cello
The Right Side
“The Trumpet shall sound”
(Stephen Keavy)*

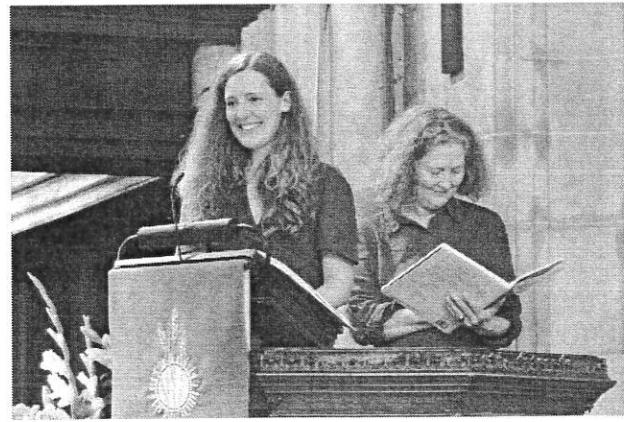
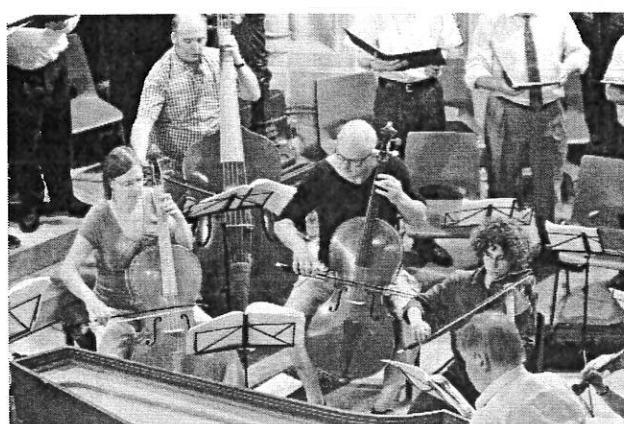
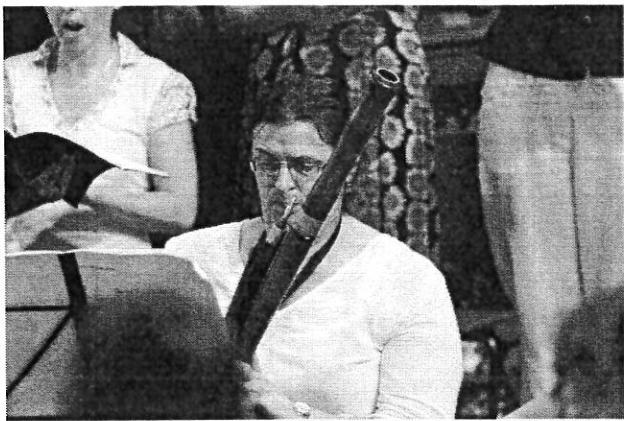
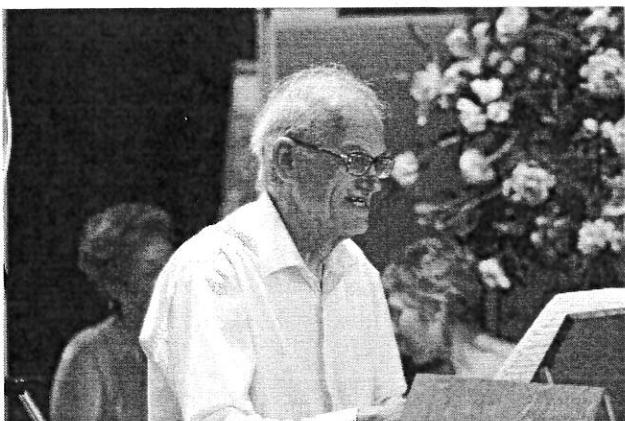




*5½ Sopranos
2 Sopranos, 2 Altos
4 Sopranos, 4 Altos and a Tenor*

*4 Tenors
4 Basses
3½ Sopranos, 4 Altos, 2 Tenors
2 Basses*





£4,500 was raised for the appeal, for which the Bartletts are very grateful.

We hope that our readers will be able to attend future such events.

how thin the orchestration was. I must have heard the work on the radio, but have no specific memories of it: somehow, it lived in a different world from the orchestral music that I often followed with scores. And by then, I had taken advantage of the free prom tickets my father got from his office (which purchased two season tickets and offered them at a shilling) so could relate what was on the page to what the orchestra was doing.³

Well-known though it is, *Messiah* is no longer as ubiquitous as it still was in my early years. Since then, pop music has appeared, removed much further from 'classical' than was the case of popular music in the 1940s and at least early 1950s. Most choral societies performed it every few years, at least! When I first had dealings with the Arts Council, it was their policy never to offer grants for G&S and *Messiah*: if they couldn't pay for themselves, nothing could! But choral societies and their conductors became more ambitious, and small choirs began to realise that early music (though the term wasn't used in the 1960s) didn't require big choirs. The 1960s was the period of chamber choirs and orchestras, who discovered much about early music but before it was feasible to transfer to early-style instruments; that happened in the 1970s. But that generation of performers, while having enormous insights into how the music might be performed, were also exploring a wide range of previously-unknown music, much of which only made sense with early instruments and vocal styles. The successor to *Messiah* is probably Monteverdi's 1610 *Vespers* (often using my edition). *Messiah* is still expected, and older people still respect it. But it doesn't now have the status of the Bach Passions, and *Messiah* is also in competition with Handel's other oratorios.

I was flattered to have been commissioned in the mid-1990s by Oxford University Press to produce a new edition of *Messiah*. Sadly, it hasn't made me wealthy in the way it benefitted Watkins Shaw. OUP appeared to be trying to usurp Novello as the UK publisher of large choral works. Novello, however, fought back, and OUP's interest moved elsewhere. But it was a fascinating task to undertake. I worked on the assumption that musicians should not be spoon-fed. In particular, printed editorial instructions can get in the way of an interpretation that derives from the words – their shape as stress as well as their meaning. As editor, my policy (not a unique one) has been to provide the performer with what the composer wrote, without a layer of interpretation, and to leave options as open as possible: performance suggestions were mostly mentioned in the critical commentary. Even within the last 40 years when early-instrument orchestras have been available, stylistic changes have occurred, and individual perfor-

3. My companion for Birmingham concerts, Jan, told me nearly 50 years later that my father also supplied tickets to her without suggesting we went together (I didn't know that any of my local friends would be interested, so usually went alone). I was very pleased that Jan and another choir member, Laurie (who lived opposite us) came this concert.

mances can be widely (wildly) different, especially in the degree of rhythmic flexibility.

I was interested to note in our performance how many of the performance suggestions that I had included were observed. I had indicated vocal appoggiaturas (especially in recitatives) by adding the letter name of the note to be added, which is far less obtrusive than putting a segment of a stave with the note. Much to my surprise, these were mostly observed. Double-dotting were mostly acceptable, though one crucial one (which the director, Peter Holman, agreed would have been acceptable at the time of the edition) wasn't: the quaver for "Behold the lamb of God" was given its full value. Also, some editorial string slurs were omitted for dramatic reasons.

Period style is reflected in even the traditional performances. My edition was premiered by the Huddersfield Choral Society, renowned for its *Messiah* performances since 1836. I went without much optimism, but was amazed at how impressive and moving the performance was. The design of the hall makes the musicians seem much closer than in most auditoria with that capacity; involvement with the event came from the start with the full-blooded singing by the choir and audience of *Christians, awake!*

Strangely, just as I lost touch with carols after *The New Oxford Book of Carols* was published, so I've had very little to do with *Messiah*. The exception was a visit to Israel in connection with a series of performances around new year 2000. I was invited to stay with Lydia and Assaf Hari in Haifa (mathematicians and baroque violinists) and to attend a rehearsal and performance – which impressed me very much. Before the recent performance, the last time I had played it was with a local orchestra and choir which was consistently after the beat and I was continually told not come in early (i. e. not on the conductor's beat).⁴ That wasn't a problem at this performance; Peter Holman directed much of it from the harpsichord anyway.

There is a long tradition of *Messiah* being used for charitable works, going right back to Handel's lifetime: there were annual performances in the 1750s at the Foundling Hospital in aid of the institution. The musicians were paid, and the details give some idea of how many performers were involved. So it was an appropriate work for this occasion.

Handel: *Messiah* Great St Mary's Church, Cambridge, Sunday 26th June Director: Peter Holman.
Soloists: Emma Kirkby soprano, Clare Wilkinson alto, John Potter tenor, Stephen Varcoe bass. Chorus: Psalmody Orchestra: The Parley of Instruments & Friends.

4. More memorable than the performance was the conductor's excuse for turning up late: he was staying at the Majors (John had been made President of the local music society a couple of weeks after he became PM) and security wouldn't inform him that his taxi had arrived.

REJOICE GREATLY

Messiah 26 June 2011

Anne Tennant

Like the first performance of *Messiah* in 1742 Dublin, and innumerable performances since, this was a charitable performance. This had an extraordinary bearing on the music. It was not easy to determine whether the intensity of performance was created because or despite of the small size of chorus (6.4.4.4) and orchestra (3.3.2.2.1 + bassoon, 2 trumpets & timps) with CB at the organ and Peter Holman directing from the harpsichord for the orchestral and solo pieces, standing and conducting for the choruses. All performers and front of house people donated their services. Emma Kirkby, of course is famous for her clear precision in word and music, and she thrillingly exemplified her stated values of "ensemble, clarity and stillness." The solo and choral voices on the whole were small but precise in hitting the note, and with compellingly clear enunciation. Clare Wilkinson had a rich warmth of tone. As she sang the arias written in 1750 for the alto castrato Gaetano Guadagni – "But who may abide the day of his coming?", and "Thou art gone up on high" – it was easy to imagine what inspired Handel in 1750 to reset these pieces in *Messiah* for the alto voice, and to bring to mind Burney's description of Guadagni's voice as "full and well-toned". However, other alto roles written for Mrs Cibber survived, and it was refreshing to hear even the Guadagni pieces from a lady. I had never felt before that the alto was the outstanding role.

During the 1740s, Handel was experimenting with ways of securing well-paying audiences (Nobility and Gentry) in London with oratorios, as operatic enterprise seemed cursed with embattled aristocrats who might be more interested in self-serving and the careers of their mistresses than in patronage of music. Handel seemed to have got it wrong early in 1745, putting on *Hercules* on a Saturday, which clashed with the Town's other Entertainments "Plays, Concerts, Assemblys, Drums, Routs, Hurricanes, and all the madness of Town Diversions" as Jennens put it. But as Handel tried to retrench by cutting the number of performances, he published a clear statement of his ambitions in setting English texts for an English audience. "As I perceived, that joining good Sense and significant Words to Musick, was the best Method of recommending this to an English Audience:

I have directed my Studies that way, and endeavour'd to shew, that the English Language, which is so expressive of the sublimest Sentiments is the best adapted of any to the full an Solemn Kind of Musick.

Handel published this in the *Daily Advertiser* of 17 January 1745. Although there was a pressing and immediate need to persuade his audience to continue their patronage

despite his retrenchment, it is surely a sincere and particular expression of Handel's achievement, perhaps especially in *Messiah*. It appeared as *A Sacred Oratorio* on 9 April, with many differences from what was sung in Dublin. Changes continued until the mid-1750s; the version at this performance (1753) differed only in a couple of places from the 'traditional' version – both increased the drama.

Part of the experience of this performance was its resonance with some of what must have been features in Handel's own performances of *Messiah*. In particular, it was based on the importance of the text. It was audible – someone in the audience was heard to say that she had never heard all the words before. The players, too, paid regard to the meaning and rhetoric of the text. The whole work was shaped according to the scenes indicated in the early librettos. Jennens was Handel's outstanding English-language librettist, and shines even though he didn't contribute a single word. By the end of the decade, Handel's practice was to perform *Messiah* for the composer's own benefit in London in the last week of Lent then subsequently at and for the Foundling Hospital, for which he raised a great deal of money.

Clifford, in his introduction to the programme, wrote of the common experience of an annual attendance at *Messiah*, but there was at least one lady at the performance who had never previously heard it right through. She said during the interval that she had never been at a concert like it. It had moved her to tears. Even for those who had heard it many times, it came across as a new, fresh experience. The pieces were performed with a pace and lack of ponderous solemnity, a relish of the extraordinary variety and inventiveness of tune, harmonies and rhythms, a simple but profound utterance of the Biblical Sublime. Though some commentators have suggested that Handel does not do much picture painting in *Messiah*, the light and rapid strings accompanying "he is like a refiner's fire" was almost heart-stoppingly expressive of the awesome prophesy. One of the most electrifying moments was "The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed." I have never experienced anything like this, the sweetness yet awful power of the valveless trumpet, and its extraordinary interweaving with the bass voice. Has anyone else written so movingly, arrestingly, for voice and trumpet? "This mortal must put on immortality."

The performance was inspiring, and surely gave emotional as well as financial support in the family's misfortune.