

George Fridrich Handel (1685-1759): Dixit Dominus – Three Vesper Psalms, No. 1

Handel spent the years 1706-1710 in Italy, initially at the invitation of Prince Ferdinando de' Medici, whom he had met during the latter's visit to Hamburg in 1705. Despite Handel's censures on Italian music during their conversations, Ferdinando was sufficiently impressed by his musicality to invite Handel to return with him to Florence. According to his first biographer, the Rev. John Mainwaring, however, Handel "resolved to go to Italy on his own bottom, as soon as he could make a purse for that occasion", duly arriving in Florence in the autumn of the following year before moving on to Rome early in 1707. His first patron there was Cardinal Ottoboni, at whose Palazzo della Cancellaria Arcangelo Corelli had been directing weekly concerts since 1690 and whose influence on Handel was immediate, softening his vocal style and deepening the sonority of his writing for strings. It was probably at Ottoboni's instigation that Handel composed the first of his Italian liturgical works, the dramatic setting of the 110th psalm Dixit Dominus, which was completed in April 1707, possibly for performance at Easter Vespers. In the Catholic liturgy it is prescribed as a Vespers psalm and Handel would have been aware of the many extant settings by other composers, including Charpentier, the Scarlattis and Monteverdi. It is the psalm most widely quoted in the New Testament gospels and perhaps the strongest evidence of its ubiquity is the setting of verses 1, 5 and 7 that Richard Rogers composed for the Praeludium sung by the Mother Abbess and Nuns at the opening of *The Sound of Music*.

His time in Italy was decisive in the development of Handel's career, occurring as it did at such an early stage. It was the home of opera, oratorio, chamber music, cantata and the principal instrumental forms of concerto and sonata. Germany, by comparison, was relatively provincial and the experience of meeting and working with Italian composers and musicians enabled Handel to develop full command of all the forms of music in which he chose subsequently to compose. His setting of Dixit Dominus shows clearly the extent to which he had already absorbed and begun to develop the expressionist church style of the dominant contemporary Italian composers, Carissimi and Stradella. It shows that he had already begun to master the baroque vocal technique of diminution, which was intended to produce a natural sound although based on the quite unnaturally produced vocal agility of castrati singers in particular, though it is here deployed in elaborated runs for all parts, solo and choral. By shortening the time-values of the notes of melodic lines, diminution enabled the linking of two long notes through elaborated figures, alternating dynamically back and forth from a soft voice through a gradual crescendo, then gently back into diminuendo. This makes the setting also an illuminating example of the groundwork for the euphony of Handel's later English oratorios – for example, he reworks the fifth movement chorus, 'Tu es sacerdos', as 'He led them through the deep...' in *Israel in Egypt*. The extravagant harmonies and dissonances that are explored adventurously in this work – especially in the extraordinarily innovative chord structure of the fourth movement, 'Juravit Dominus' - equipped him with the confident expertise to deploy them more sparingly as expressions of emotional tensions in later works, such as *Theodora* and *Jephtha*.

The work is divided into nine separate movements which, although varying widely in mood and texture, have in common a confident exploratory sense of the potential of the forms and interrelations of orchestral and vocal composition newly encountered by Handel. The setting is integrated through an elegantly balanced structure for deploying the vocal resources: the opening, closing and two central movements are all given to the chorus; three movements are given to soloists, and two to soloists only. From the outset, however, Handel writes for the voice almost as if it were an orchestral feature of the composition, pushing it for soloists and chorus alike to the limits, and beyond, of existing performative conventions. Whether or not it was part of his intention, this enabled him to extend the range of the singing voice to accommodate the innovations of his later operatic and choral works.

The opening movement begins with a deceptively steady, allegro orchestral introduction before altos, followed by sopranos (divisi throughout the work), tenors and basses, vocalise the title phrase for 10 bars until soprano and tenor soloists soar, one after another, into exuberant runs on 'sede a dextris

meis'. These are picked up by the chorus, phrased by sopranos as other parts embroider the melody until, after a brief orchestral interlude, a sequence of passages launches each part serially into a sombre, slow plainsong for 'donec ponam, scabellum pedum tuorum', against which other parts chant, in turn, a fast, imitative counterpoint. This structure of vocal interrelations recurs throughout the work and anticipates a similarly ordered pattern in the Hallelujah chorus of Messiah. The movement closes to the relative calm of a reprise of the orchestral introduction, with the following two movements given respectively to alto ('Virgam virtutis') and soprano ('Tecum principium') soloists.

The fourth movement, 'Juravit Dominus', opens with a disconcerting choral statement whose almost atonal gravity is countered by the lightly intervalled phrasing of 'et non poenitebit'. A second statement of the opening phrase heightens the initial suggestion of atonality with a strange, almost unnatural harmonic progression as it moves into a structure similar to that of the opening movement, with prolonged statements of the text punctuated by more rapid, semi-fugal iterations before voices fade softly to a conclusion, accompanied by pianissimo strings. Almost immediately though, basses open the next movement with a sonorously assertive chant of 'Tu es sacerdos', against the rapid counterpoint from other voices of 'secundum ordinem Melchisidech'. The structure of fugal contrast between slower dominant and faster subordinate exchanges on dazzling runs is reasserted, uninterrupted until it slows slightly to the precarious harmony of its conclusion. This is the bold experiment in choral virtuosity Handel reworked later, and to comparable effect, in the first part of Israel in Egypt for the chorus 'He led them through the deep'.

The chorus is given much needed respite as soloists open the sixth movement, 'Dominus a dextris tuis', displaying virtuosic, free-ranging explorations of the text, underwritten by continuo and lower strings until second sopranos lead the chorus, at the same allegro pace, into their own energetic explorations. The orchestra's concluding passage links it to a fast, complex dialogue with the chorus which opens the next movement on 'Judicabit in nationibus'. The initial statement ends with a rapidly undulating declaration of intent from the strings, echoed by the chorus in a series of intervalled runs on 'implebit ruinas', before basses introduce the heavy, unpredictably punctuated rhythms of 'conquassabit' which gradually quicken to the concluding runs of 'capita in terra multorum'.

A complete shift of both mood and pace occurs with the cello introduction, adagio, to the glorious solo soprano opening of the next movement, 'De torrente in via bibet', quietly underlined by tenors and basses (falsetto!) on 'Propterea exaltabit caput'. For all its brevity and restful quietude, requiring both soloists to embody angelic calm, this movement requires them, and the choral basses, to move with agility around the tops of their ranges – in anticipation, perhaps, of the robust choral energy of the concluding 'Gloria Patri'.

A deceptively gentle introductory rhythm, which will provide the melody for the subordinate phrase 'et Spiritui Sancto', precedes the first sopranos' run on the final movement's title, setting the time and dynamic for what will follow. There are brief passages, on 'sicut erat in principio' and 'Et in saecula saeculorum' where time slows sufficiently for the chorus to gather before the onslaught of the next section, but even in these, all parts are required to move up and down scales and across octaves in successive runs, at speeds which require taking breath variously where possible, until the rallentando of the final sequence of 'Amen'.

Paul Filmer
December, 2022

Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713): Concerto Grosso in G minor, Op VI, No. 8 'fatto per la notte di

natale' **Soloists** Rebecca Austen-Brown and Ian Willson

1 Vivace - Grave

2 Allegro

3 Adagio - Allegro - Adagio

4 Vivace

5 Allegro

6 Largo Pastorale

Although the set of his 12 Concerti Grossi were not finally published until after Corelli's death, they seem to have been widely known in Rome since the early 1680s. By this time he was established there under the patronage of his contemporary, Cardinal Benedetto Pamphili, great-nephew of Pope Innocent X. Corelli became his maestro di musica in 1687, residing in his Palazzo on the Corso, where he directed a chamber ensemble of 10 permanent players, augmented by however many other musicians were required for larger orchestral concerts on special occasions. He was simultaneously chamber musician to Queen Christina of Sweden until her death in 1689. In 1690, with the death of Innocent and the accession of Pope Alexander VIII, Pamphili was appointed papal legate to Bologna and Corelli moved to the Palazzo Cancelleria of his new patron Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, Alexander's great-nephew, where he remained until his death.

Corelli was held in great esteem among his contemporaries as both a violinist and composer. Although relatively few of his compositions have survived, they have nevertheless remained influential. His sets of trio sonatas and violin sonatas were widely imitated and his concerti grossi in particular set the model for compositions in this form during the later 17th century and beyond. Handel was clearly influenced by him during his time in Italy as a young man and again later when he came to compose his own mature concerti grossi.

In the late 17th century the concerto characteristically took the compositional form of either a dance suite (concerto da camera) or more sober church music (concerto da chiesa), for two melody instruments and a basso continuo shared by a chordal and a bass instrument. The first eight of Corelli's concerti grossi are in the latter, chiesa form with fast, usually fugal movements.

The eighth, so-called Christmas concerto, 'fatto per la notte di natale' (made for Christmas Eve) is the most widely known of the set of twelve. The short opening movement, precisely marked 'vivace-grave', switches almost immediately from its assertive beginning to a softer, slowly developed movement. A lively fugal allegro follows, underwritten by a brisk cello bass line, followed then by a contrastingly slow adagio movement in two parts, interrupted by another brief allegro passage. The fourth movement inserts a gracefully simple dance rhythm, marked 'vivace', which leads in turn to another fugal allegro, suggestively joyful in celebration of the nativity. The concerto concludes with its longest movement, in the gently swaying bucolic Siciliano rhythms of the 'Pastorale ad libitum' that mark it, through the shepherds' celebration of Christ's nativity, as a work for Christmas performance.

Paul Filmer, November 2022

Marc-Antoine Charpentier (c1636–1704): Messe de minuit pour Noël, H.9 (c1690)

Given his prodigious output over a considerable range of music – he left 28 autographed volumes of compositions of secular stage music, operas, cantatas, sonatas and symphonies as well as sacred

motets, oratorios, mass and psalm settings – surprisingly little is known about Charpentier's life, as the uncertainty about his birth date suggests. This may be due in part to the baleful influence on his early career of his elder contemporary, Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687), who had been court musician to King Louis XIV since 1653 and held the title of 'Music Master to the Royal Family' from 1662, exercising a virtual monopoly over commissioning the composition and performance of both court and theatre music for the next 25 years. Charpentier was not entirely without either commissions or influential patrons, however. He was appointed as Chapel Master to the Dauphin initially in 1670, though soon displaced by Lully in favour of the latter's own candidate; he was reappointed to the position after Lully's death and in the interim was nevertheless commissioned to write many occasional compositions for performance in the chapel, and was awarded a royal pension in 1683. Many of his sacred works were composed in fulfilment of his responsibilities there, the most well-known being the 1692 *Te Deum in D*, the prelude to which – a *marche en rondeau* - continues to be used as the signature tune of the Eurovision Broadcasting Union, played over the opening credits of all Eurovision events.

As did Handel decades later, Charpentier spent some of his early adult years in Italy, arriving in Rome in 1667 where he studied under Carissimi, whose influence can be heard in his sacred oratorios, notable for the lyrical harmonies and skilled polyphony through which they effectively synthesised Italian and French compositional styles. On his return to Paris in 1670, Charpentier was appointed as resident composer to the court of Mlle Marie de Lorraine, Duchesse de Guise, and housed in an apartment in her luxurious Hôtel where he remained until her death 17 years later. In addition to his work for the Duchesse, Charpentier also composed occasional works for her nephew's widow, Madame de Guise, a first cousin of the King. It was probably as a result of her intercession that he was able to circumvent Lully's monopoly on theatrical music when, in 1672, Molière commissioned him to write the incidental music for his last play, *Le Malade Imaginaire*. Charpentier continued to compose incidental music for Théâtre Française productions for more than a decade thereafter, notably for those by the great neo-classicist Corneille, often using large ensembles of instrumentalists in flagrant defiance of Lully's prescriptions.

After Mlle de Guise's death Charpentier became Maître de musique at the Jesuit Collège de Louis-le-Grand and subsequently at the church of Saint-Louis until 1698, when he was appointed to the royal position of Maître de musique at Saint-Chapelle where he served until his death. It was almost certainly for performance at Saint-Louis in the early 1690s that he composed the *Messe de minuit*. Charpentier was known and valued for his many oratorios and pastorales on Christmas themes, as well as his settings of carols – noels – all of which were accepted features of liturgical performance at Christmas in his time. But his *Midnight Mass* is unique in incorporating arrangements of 11 traditional vernacular noels as integral features of his setting of the ordinary Mass specifically for performance on Christmas Eve. Each of the six sections of the Mass incorporates one or more of them and the sequence of movements that constitute the Credo – the longest section of this setting – is punctuated by four of them. As befits their vernacular character, several of the carol melodies are light and dance-like, appropriately joyful in celebrating Christ's birth, though Charpentier qualifies their lively good cheer at certain points to complement the more solemn parts of the Mass by elaborating them at slower tempos – for example, 'Et in terra pax' at the beginning of the Gloria, 'Et incarnatus est' and 'Crucifixus etiam' in the Credo.

The work opens with a gently sedate instrumental setting of the carol 'Joseph est bien marié' as a prelude to the Kyrie, into which sopranos lead all voices in succession - this same tune appears intriguingly as a recurrent melodic theme in alternative arrangements throughout the Mass. An instrumental reprise of it follows in *rondeau* form, before the next carol, 'Or nous dites Marie', precedes solo renditions of 'Christe eleison', succeeded in turn by an instrumental setting of another carol, 'Une jeune pucelle'. The choir then return to the Kyrie, this time led by altos, to be followed by an organ solo rendition of a further carol, 'Une Vierge Pucelle', in an arrangement by another of Charpentier's

contemporaries, Nicolas Lebègue (1631- 1702), whose orchestral arrangement of the carol 'Laissez paitre vos bestes' later constitutes the Offertoire between the Credo and Sanctus.

A simple, bass solo plainsong-like chant of the opening phrase, 'Gloria in excelsis Deo', begins the second section, followed by the choir's quiet fugal incantation of 'Et in terra Pax'. The mood changes with the bright exaltation of 'Laudamus te...', set to the cheerful tune of another carol, 'Les bourgeois de chastre', followed after a brief orchestral interlude with a rather more pious chorus of 'Gratias agimus...'. An orchestral variation of the melody precedes successive solo renditions of 'Domine Deus...' from counter-tenor, tenor and bass who proceed to harmonise for 'Qui tollis...', which is then reprised slowly by the full choir. The carol 'Ou s'en vont ces guays bergers' provides a lively setting for the soprano soloists' 'Quoniam tu solus sanctus...', taken up by the choir in a succession of joyful 'Amens' to close the movement.

The central section of the Mass, its core statement of belief, opens with the bass soloist chanting the initial affirmation of faith, 'Credo in unum Deum...' followed by the chorus to its completion on 'ante omnia saecula.' The celebratory carol 'Vous qui desirez fin' then sets the catalogue of divine manifestations which begins with 'Deum de Deo...' and ends with the exultation of 'descendit de coelis.' A much greater sense of awe is then conveyed by marked changes of time and dynamic for the quiet, slow report of 'Et incarnatus est ...'. The transformation of crucifixion into resurrection at the axiom of Christian faith is here set to the appropriately titled carol: 'Voicy le jour solomnel de Noël', as the tenor leads fellow soloists in the narrative of crucifixion before they unite in celebration of the resurrection. The full chorus then rejoice, to a dancing rhythm, in Christ's ascension before the soprano soloists begin the Credo's final catalogue of beliefs, joined by the counter-tenor and then the choir on 'Et unum sanctam catholicam...' until a grand finale of diminutions on 'Et vitam venturi saeculi', liberally interspersed with 'Amen'.

The instrumental interlude of the Offertoire reprises an earlier carol to follow the Credo, before the gentle melody of 'O Dieu que n'estois je en vie' provides a lyrical introduction and accompaniment to the choir's repeated invocations of the Sanctus. A quiet closing 'gloria tua' prefaces a brisk series of bright Hosannas, repeated after the tenor and bass soloists join in the Benedictus. The melody of a final carol, 'A minuit fut fait un resveil', then accompanies the soft Agnus Dei with which the chorus brings the Mass to its gently reverent conclusion.

Paul Filmer, November 2022