

Nantwich Choral Society

GALA CONCERT IN AID OF ST.MARY'S
CHURCH RESTORATION FESTIVAL

G. F. HANDEL

DIXIT DOMINUS

FOUR CORONATION ANTHEMS



WEDNESDAY 28th OCTOBER 1992

The Parish Church of St. Mary, Nantwich
at 7.30 p.m.

NANTWICH CHORAL SOCIETY

NANTWICH SINFONIA

Leader: Andrew Long

Catrin Ley, soprano

Sarah Wright, mezzo-soprano

Paul Phoenix, tenor

Philip Ravenscroft, bass

Joy Roberts, harpsichord

conducted by
Stephen Buckman



— PROGRAMME —

DIXIT DOMINUS

1. The Lord said unto my Lord:
Sit thou on my right hand,
until I make thine enemies thy footstool.
2. The Lord shall send the rod of thy power out of Zion:
be thou ruler, even in the midst among thine enemies.
3. In the day of thy power shall the people offer
thee free-will offerings with an holy worship:
the dew of thy birth is of the womb of the morning.
4. The Lord swear, and will not repent:
5. Thou art a Priest for ever after the order of Melchisedech.
6. The Lord upon thy right hand:
shall wound even kings in the day of his wrath.
7. He shall judge among the heathen;
he shall fill the places with the dead bodies:
and smite in sunder the heads over divers countries.
8. He shall drink of the brook in the way:
therefore shall he lift up his head,
9. Glory be to the Father ...

Handel spent the years from 1706 to 1710 in Italy, quickly absorbing its musical language and consequently finding enormous success there. His main centre of activity was Rome where his wealthy and influential patrons kept him very busy supplying them with oratorios, motets and countless cantatas.

It may have been as a demonstration piece for Cardinal Colonna that in April 1707, Handel composed this setting of Psalm 110, 'Dixit Dominus', since so far he hadn't had the opportunity to write any large-scale choral music for the church. If so, then the cardinal was certainly impressed, because a few months later he got Handel to provide music for the magnificent Feast of Our Lady of Carmel, at which the 'Dixit Dominus' would have been heard again.

Handel's sheer audacity in writing a piece like this is remarkable. Here he was, a 22 year old German protestant, writing for the Catholic Church in Rome music which doesn't merely imitate that of the greatest living Italian composers, but transcends it - even out-Vivaldi-ing Vivaldi in its daring harmonies and novel effects.

The first movement, for example, is nothing less than a virtuosic concerto grosso in which the singers are treated like a second orchestra with no concessions made to the limitations of the human voice. Handel's inclusion of plain-chant melody in the first and last movements, and particularly under the soprano duet of the beautiful eighth movement was something quite new to Italian ears. But the most dramatic moment occurs in the seventh movement at the word 'conquassabit' ('smite in sunder') where Handel breaks the word up into separate syllables which the chorus spit out with menacing effect that still startles, even today.

INTERVAL

FOUR CORONATION ANTHEMS

1. Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon King.
And all the people rejoiced and said: God save the King! Long live the King! May the King live for ever. Alleluia. Amen
2. My heart is inditing of a good matter; I speak of the things which I have done unto the King.
Kings' daughters were among thy honourable women.
Upon thy right hand did stand the Queen in vesture of gold;
And the King shall have pleasure in thy beauty.
Kings shall be thy nursing fathers,
and queens thy nursing mothers.
3. Let thy hand be strengthened, and thy right hand be exalted.
Let justice and judgement be the preparation of thy seat. Alleluia
4. The King shall rejoice in thy strength, O Lord.
Exceeding glad shall he be of thy salvation.
Glory and great worship hast thou laid upon him.
Thou hast prevented him with the blessings of goodness and hast set a crown of pure gold upon his head. Alleluia.

After leaving Italy in February 1710, Handel returned to Germany and took up a post as composer for the chapel of the Elector of Hanover. He soon got permission to make a visit to England where he stayed (much to the Elector's annoyance) for six months; but by the end of 1712 Handel was back in London, and this time didn't see his employer again until September 1714, when the Elector himself came to England as its new king, George I. Of course Handel soon patched things up and continued to go from strength to strength.

His greatest supporter and patron was the Prince of Wales, who, when his father died in June 1727, chose Handel to provide the anthems for his coronation as King George II with Queen Caroline. This took place in Westminster Abbey on October 11th the same year. An enormous orchestra of nearly a hundred players was brought together to accompany the combined choirs of the Abbey and the Chapel Royal, all arranged in tiers like two pyramids either side of the altar. Unfortunately, in typical Georgian style, the end result of all this visual splendour seems to have been a musical fiasco. According to the then Archbishop of Canterbury, who made notes on his order of service of "What was done or omitted at that Coronation", the first anthem (Purcell's 'I was glad') "was omitted and no Anthem at all Sung ... by the Negligence of the Choir of Westminster". At the Recognition, Handel's 'The King shall rejoice' was "in Confusion: All irregular in the Music", probably because the Chapel Royal musicians had 'Let thy hand be strengthened' at this point in their orders of service! At the Anointing, the hymn 'Come Holy Ghost' was "by mistake of the Music not Sung; but the next Anthem [Zadok the priest] instead of it".

All in all, Handel cannot have been pleased with the fate of his four grand anthems, but they nevertheless became his most popular pieces of English choral music and a few years later Handel (never one to undersell himself) shrewdly ensured the success of his first oratorios for the London public by the inclusion of much of the music of the Coronation Anthems.

Colin Bromelow