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Thurs Eve
Preview
26 March 59

Handel:
St John Passion

~~1259~~ ~~1742~~
~~1685~~ ~~1685~~
74 57

My dear friends, it is a great joy for us to ~~pa~~ inaugurate tonight our six-week festival of Handel's music. It's not easy to make a Handel festival — or, perhaps I should say, it's too easy; most performances ~~are~~ of his music are limited to the Water Music, a few Concerti Grossi, and the Messiah. Granted that these are glorious works, there is still so much other ~~glorious~~ magnificent music of Handel that we have decided to make our commemoration in terms of ~~the~~ less-often performed works; the ~~[illegible]~~ glorious Ode for St Cecilia's Day, two harpsichord concertos, an organ concerto, a Concerto Grosso, and this beautiful Passion we are to hear tonight.

The St John Passion is a case in point; it is performed extremely rarely, and its neglect is ridiculously unjust. You see, so many people in ~~the~~ positions of musical authority tend to judge a work by what they know about it, have learned about it, or have heard about it, rather than by the experience-judgment of actually having heard it with sensitive ears. As a result, legends arise about certain works: for example, that this Passion is ~~an ordinary~~ a minor, uneventful, conventional work — a judgment based, of course, on the fact that Handel was a boy of 19 when he wrote it, & that it was probably his first published ~~work~~ composition. Odious comparisons are made with the Messiah, which he wrote when he was close to 60, and which represents an apex of a long line of development in the oratorio form. Now granted that this 19-year old effort is not the Messiah — it is much shorter, smaller in conception, less sustained formally (for instance, the

But to what end? We know ~~that~~ from our ~~joy~~ own joy in hearing Mozart how fresh his music is.

(2)

overture is only 6 bars long) — still, any such comparisons are eminently unfair; for this early work is so full of genius, heartbreaking beauty, and true originality that it is ~~[illegible]~~ shocking to hear it dismissed as "conventional".

Poss cut. ¶ Of course, any work can be proved to be conventional, if you're out to ~~go~~ prove it. If you go through the collected works of Mozart, & discover the same stock 18th century cadences used literally over and over hundreds of times, which you can, you could build a case that Mozart was conventional. Likewise for Beethoven. Likewise for this St John Passion: one could point to the recitation of the gospel by the Evangelist as conventional recitative; so what? There has to be a conventional groundwork for every work of art, in whatever period — even for a Roger Sessions violin concerto or a Schoenberg quartet. It is what a composer does with the conventions, what he adds to them, that makes his contribution to music exciting & moving.

Conventional?! Let me just show you a few places in this work, — typical places, mind you; and ~~the~~ you can decide for yourselves whether they're ordinary or not. You have only to hear the first two bars of the overture to know that you're in the hands of a real original: just listen, & notice the 6th chord:

ORK - #1 - to dbt. bar 3

Did you hear it? Not just the intensity of feeling, the mastery of ~~imitation~~ the canonic device, but the astounding

Prokofieff kind of harmony:

(Play)

Then, a bit later on, there is that ~~song~~ ravishing duet ~~duet~~ for sopranos comparing Jesus to roses; and this ~~refrain~~ happens:

ORK + singers: #9, bars 39 – 50.

Unbelievable, isn't it? And its peculiar mystery is enhanced as the orchestra repeats it:

ORK – #9, 51 to end.

A fabulous piece of music, for 1704 or for 1804 or for 1904. It would still be utterly unconventional if it had been written last week.

Then consider Handel's melodic lines; I hardly know what example to show you, there are so many breathtaking ones. Take this ~~moment~~ violin solo which introduces the soprano aria "Deuch dein befangniss"; + watch how this passionate line falls + rises in ~~extraordinary~~ wide intervals that would be extraordinary for any composer of any period:

ORK #23: to dbt. bar 6.

And imagine; that line ~~also~~ is then sung, impossibly enough, with the violin imitating the voice:

ORK + Sop: bar 6 to dbt. bar 9.

Perhaps even more fantastic is the melody to which Christ, thirsting on the cross, calls for water:

ORK + Bass: #52, complete.

Isn't it wonderful? How noble + how original! And how

dramatic. This sense of drama that Handel had, even as a teen-ager, is remarkable; These words have never been set more touchingly; we can almost see Christ weakening, + failing on the cross. And his last words, "Es ist vollbracht" — "it is finished" — provide the most astonishing melodic line of all:

ORK + bass: #55, entire.

Conventional, is it? I think you will agree that it is highly unconventional. And the examples are numberless; we haven't even looked at the subtleties of his orchestration, the formal developments, the dramatic details of the Evangelist's recitation, of Pontius Pilate's amazing characterization, of the brilliant ways in which the chorus is made to assume various roles, + so on + on. To say nothing of the rhythmic originality in this work; let me give you just one last example, a propos of rhythm. Handel has written a short, mocking choral setting of the mob taunting Jesus; listen carefully to the rhythmic displacements, + then decide if this is conventional or not:

ORK + chorus, #5, entire.

If that is conventional, I'll eat it. The rhythmic variety in that short passage would be considered quite normal + appropriate in a composition by Stravinsky or Bartok.

Well, enough. I have gone into this in some detail not because

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I need to sell you this work, or to convince you of its worth: I think simply performing it is enough to accomplish that; but I admit that I have been somewhat ~~surprised~~ exercised at the arbitrary ~~condescension~~ slightness of this work on the grounds of youthful conventionality, and I could resist making this rebuttal.

Just before we ~~play~~ perform it, a word about the ~~[illegible]~~ unusual arrangement of the program. It's not our idea to break up the Passion with an Organ Concerto; it's Handel's idea. It was ~~quite~~ customary in his time to provide this kind of secular relief between the parts of a sacred work; and we are dutifully following the tradition. Besides, this Passion was purposely written in separate parts, ~~in order~~ to make a place between for the sermon; and we thought you'd infinitely prefer to hear Mr Prince-Joseph play Handel instead.

Leonard Bernstein
26 Mar 59

Inserts for British TV

(1) (p.2) My dear young friends: Every year the NY Philh. and I give a number of special concerts for young people which are seen & heard over television by millions of ~~Canadians &~~ Americans & Canadians. Sometimes we have a look into the music of one certain composer - like Stravinsky, or Mahler; ~~or~~ sometimes we present very gifted young soloists; but mostly we ~~play music, & talk~~ concern ourselves with questions about music itself, & try to answer them by playing music and then digging into it to find the answers. Now because this is the first time we have the pleasure of meeting the young people of Britain, we're going to concern ourselves with the real meat & fixtures - etc.

(2) (p.15) Now this business of making melodies out of scratchy little motives is really a very common method, used by all sorts of composers: I've even done it myself, in a more modest way. Any of you who know the music of W S S may ~~remember~~ recognize this simple little motive at the very beginning of the score -

PLAY (in C)

Do you remember it? That's the gang call, etc. (p.9 of carbon) to end of ff, p.10)

(Then:)

But now comes an even harder problem. What makes it even more difficult (etc., p.15) —