

Reflection on Handel's "Messiah" – December 17, 2017

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It's one of the most famous and widely performed pieces of music in history. Handel intended his oratorio "Messiah" for Lent and it was first performed just after Easter 1742. Some do perform it during that time of the year, but over the centuries, public performances of the masterwork became a rite of Christmas. It's been some 276 years since Handel composed the classic yet, we continue to gather and listen. Why? Well, for one thing, the sheer beauty of the music. For another, the incredible skill of the composer. In one of history's most astounding creative feats, Handel produced the 260-page score in just 24 days after he'd received the libretto. During that time, he never left his house and barely came out of his room. A servant who brought him his meals said, "He was praying, or he was weeping, or he was staring into eternity." As much as the music, Messiah's lasting popularity also owes to Charles Jennens's moving text which took some two years to write. The text is, of course, drawn from the Bible. From prophecy to incarnation to death and resurrection...the life of Christ has been called the greatest story ever told. Indeed, Christian literary scholars have noted how the narrative qualities of biblical revelation are finely tuned to the way we're made as humans.

Together, the music and subject of Handel's "Messiah" reach the sublime status of great art, art that speaks to "what is permanent in the human soul," as the 19th-century poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold wrote. No wonder we love to hear it at Christmas, the time of year that calls us back to the permanent things. Master artists and authors create a "unity and profoundness of moral impression," Arnold wrote, "...which constitutes the grandeur of their works and which makes them immortal." That kind of moral impression is grounded in the conviction that human nature persists that truth exists and life has meaning and purpose. Such courage of conviction has been waning for some time.

A century ago, the great English writer and theologian G. K. Chesterton diagnosed that "what we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty used to rein in our ambition," he wrote. "It shifted to constrain conviction where it was never meant to be." Things haven't improved since Chesterton's time. Reality is culturally determined, some say, a mere social construct built on personal background and identity. Of course, personal experience does influence one's perspective on reality. And, just as eyeglasses are shaped by a sanding process many factors grind the lens through which we see reality. But it remains just that – a lens. It does not change reality itself. Great art helps continue to refine and polish that lens with accounts of truth that transcend our own outlooks. Wise voices across generations have urged a perennial return to classic works to gain perspective on our age and experience. "Every age has its own outlook," C.S. Lewis explained. "It is especially good at seeing certain truths and especially liable to make certain mistakes. We need to read 'old books,' he said, 'to correct the blind spots of our day.'" The well-aged insights of great works of art, literature and music help us sift today's culture, as Arnold explained, to identify what will "cultivate what is best and noblest" in us as human beings.

There is an anecdote relating to the London premiere. After the performance, a nobleman approached Handel thanking him for the wonderful "entertainment" he had composed. Handel is said to have replied, "My lord, I should be sorry that I only entertained them. I wish to make them better."

Great works endure because they appeal to universal longings of the human spirit. They make us want to become better people and that's exactly what Handel did. With "Messiah" he went far beyond just entertaining his audience. He created a lasting work that inspires and uplifts its listeners in the simplest and most profound way. I have no doubt that we will be uplifted and inspired in our listening this day!

Come Lord Jesus...

King of Kings and Lord of Lords...

To reign forever and ever!

Hallelujah!

Amen and amen!