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NEWSY NOTES

BY AGRICOLA

GEORGE FREDERIC HANDEL
Second Article

In 1716 Handel accompanied the King to Germany, and paid a flying visit to his native town. Shortly returning to England he found the Haymarket there closed for want of popular support. He therefore took service with the Duke of Chandos as organist of his private chapel at "Cannons" a magnificent palace situated near Edgware. This chapel is, I believe now the Parish Church of Edgware, and its most interesting relic is an organ of moderate size, which stands behind the altar, and bears a tablet with the inscription: "Handel was organist of this church from 1718 to 1721 and composed the oratorio of 'Ether' on this organ." At Cannons, too, he wrote the English pastoral "Acis and Galatea" whose fine solo "O Rudder than the Cherry" demands a voice of the first quality.

One day, the story runs, as the composer was going to the Cannons he was overtaken by a shower in the midst of the village of Edgware and sought shelter in the forge of the blacksmith, who was also the "parish clerk." After the usual salutations, the blacksmith fell to work again at his anvil, singing an old song the while. By an extraordinary chance, the hammer, striking in time, drew from the anvil two harmonic sounds, according with the melody and forming a sort of continuous bass. Struck with this incident, Handel listened, remembered the air and its uncommon accompaniment and on his return home composed a piece for the harpsichord on this theme. This piece has been continually reprinted and will continue to be as long as mankind is responsive to the beauties of music. It is the "Harmonious Blacksmith."

The old anvil is still in existence and was tested by a party of musicians about a quarter of a century ago. Its fundamental note was found to be B flat.

For the next twenty years we find Handel engaged in the composition and production of opera, a venture which brought him neither pleasure nor profit. Two reasons are assigned for this. He had not yet struck the right note; not that his music was inferior, but Italian opera with its floridity was not in consonance with the English taste. He was also, although of a kind and charitable nature, very irascible and this caused continual quarrels with his artists who one by one deserted him for rival composers. This led to his bankruptcy in 1737, a misfortune which was aggravated by a paralytic stroke induced by anxiety and overwork. In connection with his impulsive temper a tradition has come down to us that he once took hold of a prima donna and held her out of the window, threatening to drop her into the street unless she sang a particular passage in his particular way!

But the most misfortunes which darkened the days of the composer at this period turned his genius to another form of expression—the oratorio. This was an expansion from the individuality of the opera to the nationality of say "Israel in Egypt." Hueffer acutely remarks that "Handel is less the exponent of individual sufferings and aspirations of a nation, or in a wider sense, of mankind." In "Israel in Egypt" (1740) we have the "marvellous choral pieces expressive of either pictorial detail (as the gnats and the darkness tangible and impenetrable) or of the combined religious feeling of an entire nation." The oratorio Saul had appeared two years before, and Hueffer says of the celebrated "Dead March" in words which cannot be improved upon that the measured and decisive rhythm and the simple diatonic harmonies plainly indicate that here a mighty nation deplores the death of a hero. "It is full of intense grief, in spite of the key of C major which ought once for all to dispel the prejudice that sorrow always speaks in minor keys."

At this juncture in his affairs the Duke of Devonshire, who was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland at that time, invited Handel to visit him and the invitation was accepted. The musical societies of Dublin were about to give an entertainment for the charitable purpose of relieving "poor and distressed prisoners for debt." Handel at once put himself into communication with these bodies and promised them an oratorio for the occasion. In the short space of twenty-four days was produced the "Messiah" the masterpiece of this great master. Whoever has listened to its music must admit that its most distinctive feature is the soft time No. one, without exception—neither Beethoven nor Mozart—has ever risen to the grandeur of Handel's ideal in this respect and he himself was never more sublime than in the "Messiah." The date of its first performance in the capital of that "genial and polite nation" as Handel designated the Irish, was April 13, 1742 and it was produced in London on March 23rd of the following year. The story is told that on setting out on this voyage to Ireland Handel was stayed at Chester by contrary winds, and wishing to employ his delay in trying over some pieces of a new oratorio, he sought for some one who could read music at sight. A house painter named Handson was pointed out as most suitable, as was one of the best musicians attached to the Cathedral. Poor Jansen managed so badly that the irascible composer became purple with anger and after swearing, as was his wont, in five or six different languages at a time, wound up with:—"You scoundrel! Did you not tell me that you sing at sight?" "Yes sir," said the scoundrel, "but not at first sight." The humor of this was too much for Handel, who burst into laughter and the rehearsal proceeded no further.

The Oratorio Sampson which will again be referred to was also completed in 1771 and for the next ten years the composer's life was one of remarkable industry; besides giving to the musical world the completed score of an oratorio for each year, he composed about 150 cantatas, 24 chamber duets, and an immense quantity of other vocal and instrumental music.

On the 21st of January, 1781 Handel commenced the oratorio of Jepthah—his last great work. It was not completed till the end of the following August; it is the work which he took the longest time to finish and the manuscript all too plainly shows the successive phases of the blindness which overtook him. He submitted to three painful operations, without however any beneficial result, and for the last six years of his life was totally blind. This cruel misfortune at first profoundly affected him, but bowing to the inevitable, his manly soul triumphed over what is perhaps the greatest affliction that can befall a mortal. Sick as he was, the intrepid old man arose once more when charity needed him and gave two performances of the "Messiah" for the benefit of the Foundling Hospital. "Sampson" one of his earlier works, was on the program during that season; and in spite of all his moral energy he could not listen unmoved to the sightless hero of the Hebrews as he gave utterance to his intense grief. Then it was that they saw the old composer, seated at the organ, grow pale and tremble, and when at length he was led forward to say farewell to the audience many were moved to tears.

On the 6th of April, 1789 a week before his death, the "Messiah" was performed for the last time under Handel's leadership. On going home he went to bed never to rise again.

Seized with the feeling that his hour was come he commended himself to his Maker and gently passed away on the anniversary of the first performance of the "Messiah" April 13th, 1789, being then 74 years old. He was buried with fitting honors in that Valhalla of the British race, Westminster Abbey.

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MISS MAYBELLE MATHESON.

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How rare to behold,
Where lovely May-time
Her buds unfold.

—Walter Renfrew.

TRAFFIC DEPLETES DOGDOM

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