

Handel and Haydn

Richard Excell

The year 2009 was a particularly big one for musical anniversaries; above all it was 250 years after the death of George Frideric Handel and 200 years after the death of Joseph Haydn. Notable among many Handel commemorations were those in his birthplace, Halle, Germany, and the city where he lived the longest, London. In Austria and Hungary, 2009 was officially declared the 'Haydn Year'. No doubt many music lovers will have precious memories of concerts, but in the last weeks of the year the University of Melbourne also acquired a more tangible legacy: first editions of the two oratorios which were the composers' own favourites, though they fared very differently in public estimation.

There have been many reasons given for the muted reception of Handel's *Theodora* at its premiere and for two centuries after: the earthquakes that kept faint-hearted theatre-goers at home, the unfamiliarity of a Christian story as a Handel oratorio theme, the obscurity of this particular Christian story, and the lack of an upbeat ending among them. Thomas Morell's libretto was adapted from *The martyrdom of Theodora and Didymus* (published 1687), a pious novel by Robert Boyle.¹ The libretto is perhaps not helped by the literal reference to a fate

'worse than death indeed'.

From the outset the response to *Theodora* set a pattern of public disdain contrasting with high esteem among a few connoisseurs, as a letter by Handel's friend the Earl of Shaftesbury reveals: 'I can't conclude a letter, and forget *Theodora*. I have heard it three times, and venture to Pronounce it, as finished, beautiful and labour'd a composition, as ever Handel made. ... The Town don't like it at all; but Mr Kellaway and several excellent musicians think as I do.'²

Another letter, by the librettist Morell, suggests that Handel himself perceived this mixed response very quickly, and accepted it with wry humour:

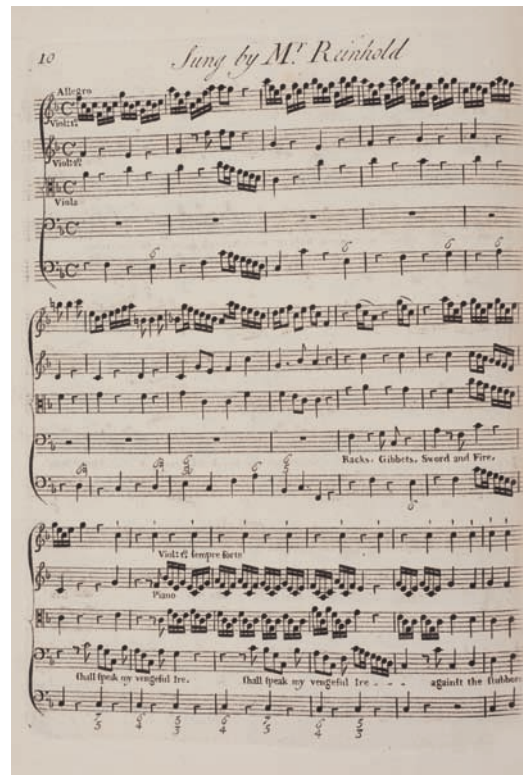
The next I wrote was *Theodora* (in 1749), which Mr *Handell* himself valued more than any Performance of the Kind; and when I once ask'd him, whether he did not look upon the Grand Chorus in the *Messiah* as his master piece? "No, says he, *I think the Chorus at the end of the 2d part in Theodora far beyond it.*—"He saw the lovely youth &c'.

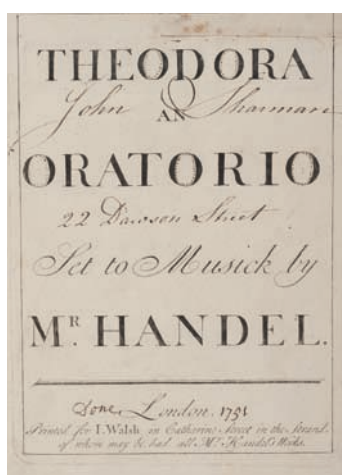
The 2d night of *Theodora* was very thin indeed, tho the Princess *Amelia* was there. I guess'd it a losing night, so did not go to



Mr *Handell* as usual; but seeing him smile, I ventur'd. when, *will you be there next Friday night?* says He, *and I will play it to you.*³

The full score of *Theodora* with choruses, including the one he valued so highly, was not published until 1787.⁴ Even then, the publication was not so much a recognition of the merits of this particular work as a by-





Opposite, above: Frontispiece, engraved by Jacobus Houbraken, from George Frideric Handel, *Theodora: An oratorio in score*, London: Printed for H. Wright, (Successor to Mr. Walsh) in Catharine Street in the Strand, [1787]. Purchased 2009, Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library Rare Collections, University of Melbourne.

Left: Title page from George Frideric Handel, *Theodora: An oratorio*, London: Printed for I. Walsh in Catharine Street in the Strand, [1751]. Purchased 2009, Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library Rare Collections, University of Melbourne.

Below: Opening of 'Racks, gibbets, swords and fire', from Handel, *Theodora: An oratorio*, [1751].

product of the 'Handel Commemoration' of 1784,⁵ which inspired efforts to publish a monumental edition of all his works. This is reflected in the binder's spine title of the copy the library has acquired, which reads: *Handel's Works, vol. xiv Theodora*.

The very first edition of *Theodora* had, like most first editions of Handel's operas and oratorios,

included only the overture and songs, with the original singers named.⁶ For many years just one of these arias, *Angels ever bright and fair*, was widely known, but there are many others of at least equal quality and great variety, ranging from the villainous Roman governor Valens' blustering *Racks, gibbets, swords and fire* to *Theodora's* haunting *Fond flatt'ring world, adieu*.

The University of Melbourne's copy in the Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library Rare Collections bears the name of an early owner: 'John Sharman, 22 Dawson Street'. As 'an eminent astronomer and geographer' he may seem an unlikely connoisseur of a neglected musical masterpiece, but the concluding sentence of his obituary makes things clear: 'His talents as a composer will be admitted by all judges of melody, who remember that we are indebted to him for the sublime music of the 106th Psalm.'⁷

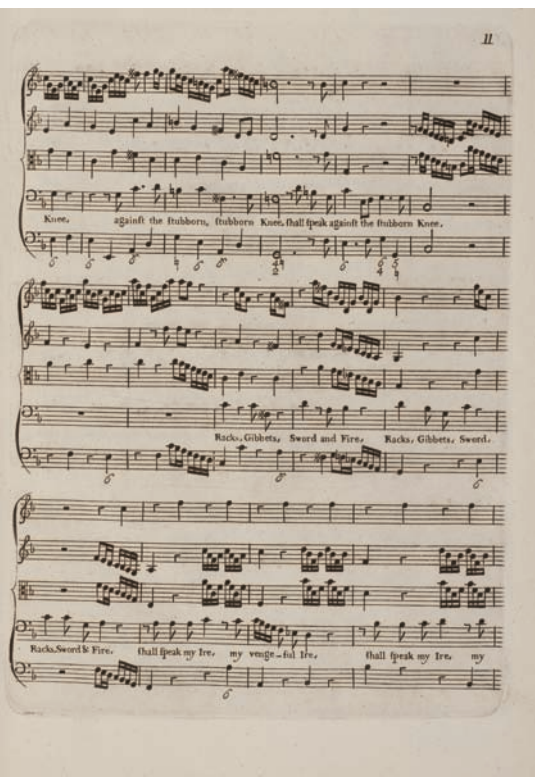
Though *Theodora* continued to have admirers,⁸ it is only in recent years, aided by several recordings and a provocative staged version directed by Peter Sellars, that Handel's own opinion of this oratorio is finally being vindicated.

Haydn's *Creation*, by contrast, was an immediate triumph, and has remained a favourite of all but the most jaded of music lovers. The main

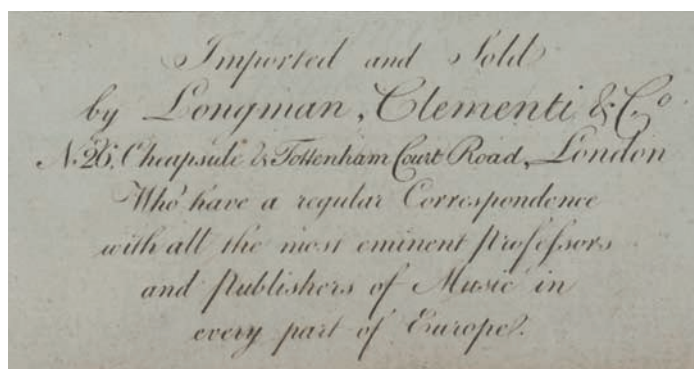
reason is of course the richness and good-natured profundity of the music itself, but careful preparation helped. The first performances, private and later public, were unusually well-rehearsed for the time, and anticipation had been aroused across Europe. The first edition was also the product of careful preparation,⁹ as the composer himself announced:

The success which my Oratorio *The Creation* has been fortunate enough to enjoy ... [has] induced me to arrange for its dissemination myself. Thus the work will appear ... neatly and correctly engraved and printed on good paper, with German and English texts; and in full score, so that ... my composition will be available to the public in its entirety, and the connoisseur will be in a position to see it as a whole and judge it.¹⁰

Haydn, whose dealings with music publishers were not always marked by the most scrupulous behaviour on either side, was also motivated by a desire to secure his due financial reward. Each verified copy, including those despatched internationally, received the composer's 'JH' monogram from his personal hand-stamp. In the event,



Right: Detail of publisher's overpasted label on title page of Joseph Haydn, *Die Schoepfung: ein Oratorium in Musik: The Creation: An oratorio*, Vienna: [the composer], 1800. Purchased 2009, Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library Rare Collections, University of Melbourne.



Below: Opening of 'The heavens are telling', from Haydn, *Die Schoepfung*.

The Creation was a great success, and most of the performances that Haydn directed himself in Vienna were for charity.

The triumphant visits to London which had seen the premieres of Haydn's last 12 symphonies were still fresh in English memories, and, as we have seen, Haydn anticipated this too by publishing *The Creation* in German and English from the outset, with the German words in the normal position below the staff and the English words above. He sent an initial run of 100 copies to his London distributor, Longman, Clementi & Co., whose overpasted label can be seen on the University's copy. Also present in our copy (but not in most extant copies) is the printed list of subscribers, with a handwritten addition which may indicate the volume's original owner. The inserted name, 'François Cramer', is easily identified. Born into a musical family in 1772, Franz (or François) Cramer had been one of the younger violinists in the orchestra assembled by the impresario Salomon for Haydn's London concerts.¹¹ Though not as famous as his elder brother, the pianist and composer Johann Baptist, Franz Cramer had a distinguished career in his own right, culminating in his appointment in 1834 as 'Master of the King's Musick'.¹²

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Notes

- 1 The same Robert Boyle (1627–1691) is better known as the chemist after whom 'Boyle's Law' is named. The earliest source for the story was Saint Ambrose, and there had more recently been an unsuccessful French play by Pierre Corneille.
- 2 Fourth Earl of Shaftesbury, letter to James Harris, 24 March 1750, cited in Ruth Smith, 'Comprehending *Theodora*', *Eighteenth-Century Music*, vol. 2, issue 1, March 2005, p. 57.
- 3 As transcribed in Ruth Smith, 'Thomas Morell and his letter about Handel', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, vol. 127, no. 2, 2002, p. 218.
- 4 George Frideric Handel, *Theodora: An oratorio in score*, London: Printed for H. Wright, (Successor to Mr. Walsh) in Catharine Street in the Strand, [1787]. Purchased 2009, Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library Rare Collections, University of Melbourne.
- 5 Handel was born on 24 February 1685, but in the 1780s the new year in England was still counted from 25 March ('Lady Day').
- 6 George Frideric Handel, *Theodora: An oratorio*, London: Printed for I. Walsh in Catharine Street in the Strand, [1751]. Purchased 2009, Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library Rare Collections, University of Melbourne.
- 7 Obituary, *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, vol. 93, 1823, p. 94.

- 8 Notably a review by the composer G.A. Macfarren in *The Musical Times*, 1873, p. 206.
- 9 Joseph Haydn, *Die Schoepfung: ein Oratorium in Musik: The Creation: An oratorio*, Vienna: [the composer], 1800. Purchased 2009, Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library Rare Collections, University of Melbourne.
- 10 *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung, Intelligenz-Blatt*, no. 15 [June 1799]; translation from 'Haydn, Joseph, 5: Vienna 1795–1809', *Grove music online*. *Oxford music online*, accessed 19 February 2010.
- 11 Simon McVeigh and others, 'Cramer', *Grove music online*. *Oxford music online*, accessed 24 February 2010.
- 12 'Queen's Musick' from 1837.

