Georg Handel – The Messiah (Pinnock) [1990]

CD1 *1. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - Symphony The English Concert 3:23 2. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 1. Accompagnato: Comfort ye, My people Howard Crook 3:27 3. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 2. Air: "Ev'ry Valley shall be exalted" Howard Crook 3:31 4. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 3. Chorus: "And The Glory Of The Lord" The English Concert 2:51 5. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 4. Accompagnato: Thus saith the Lord The English Concert 1:36 6. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 5. Air: "But who may abide the day of his coming" Michael Chance4:45 7. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 6. Chorus: "And He shall purify the sons of Levi" The English Concert 2:25 8. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 7. Recitative: Behold, a virgin shall conceive Anne Sofie von Otter 0:29 9. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 8. "O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion" Anne Sofie von Otter 5:30 10. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 10. Accompagnato: For behold, darkness shall cover John Tomlinson 3:03 11. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 11. Air: The people that walked in darkness John Tomlinson 3:56 12. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 12. Chorus: "For unto us a Child is born" The English Concert 4:04 13. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 13. Pifa (Pastoral Symphony) The English Concert 1:10 14. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - Reci: There were shepherds ... Acc: And suddenly there Arleen Augér 1:34 15. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 15. Chorus: Glory to God in the highest The English Concert 1:58 16. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 16. Air: "Rejoice greatly, o daughter of Zion" Arleen Augér 4:50 17. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 17a. Recitative: Then shall the eyes of the blind Anne Sofie von Otter 0:21 18. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 18a. Duet: He shall feed his flock Arleen Augér 6:09 19. Handel: Messiah / Part 1 - 19. His yoke is easy The English Concert 2:16 20. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 20. Behold the Lamb of God The English Concert 3:21 21. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 21. Air: He was despised Anne Sofie von Otter 13:17* CD2 *1. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 22. Chorus: "Surely He hath borne our griefs" The English Concert 2:30 2. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 23. Chorus: "And with His stripes we are healed" The English Concert 1:53 3. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 24. Chorus: "All we like sheep have gone astray" The English Concert 3:54 4. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 25. Accompagnato: All they that see Him Howard Crook 0:47 5. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 26. Chorus: He trusted in God The English Concert 2:33 6. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 27. Accompagnato: "Thy rebuke hath broken His heart" Howard Crook 1:49 7. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 28. Arioso: "Behold and see" Howard Crook 1:59 8. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 29. Accompagnato: He was cut off Arleen Augér 0:14 9. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 30. Aria: But thou didst not leave Arleen Augér 2:09 10. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 31. Chorus: Lift up your heads The English Concert 3:05 11. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 32. Recitative: Unto which of the angels Trevor Pinnock 0:12 $ 12. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 33. Chorus: "Let all the angels of God" The English Concert 1:29 13. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 34a. Air: "Thou art gone up on high" Michael Chance 3:11 14. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 35. Chorus: "The Lord gave the*

word" The English Concert 1:05 15. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 36. Air: How beautiful are the feet Arleen Augér 2:37 16. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 37a. Chorus: Their sound is gone out The English Concert 1:22 17. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 38. Air: "Why do the nations so furiously rage together?" John Tomlinson 2:56 18. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 39. Chorus: Let us break their bonds asunder The English Concert 1:48 19. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 40. Recitative: He that dwelleth in heaven Howard Crook 0:11 20. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - 41. Air: "Thou shalt break them" Howard Crook 2:06 21. Handel: Messiah / Part 2 - "Hallelujah" The English Concert 3:57 22. Handel: Messiah / Part 3 - 43. Air: "I know that my Redeemer liveth" Arleen Augér 6:44 23. Handel: Messiah / Part 3 - 44. Chorus: Since by man came death The English Concert 2:20 24. Handel: Messiah / Part 3 - 45. Accompagnato: Behold, I tell you a mystery John Tomlinson 0:31 25. Handel: Messiah / Part 3 - 46. Air: The trumpet shall sound John Tomlinson 8:59 26. Handel: Messiah / Part 3 - 47. Recitative: Then shall be brought to pass Michael Chance 0:16 27. Handel: Messiah / Part 3 - 48. Duet: O death where is thy sting? Michael Chance 1:03 28. Handel: Messiah / Part 3 - 49. Chorus: But thanks be to God The English Concert 2:12 29. Handel: Messiah / Part 3 - 50. Air: "If God be for us" Anne Sofie von Otter 4:41 30. Handel: Messiah / Part 3 - 51. Chorus: "Worthy is the Lamb... Amen" The English Concert 7:32 Arleen Augér (soprano) Anne Sofie von Otter (contralto) Michael Chance (counter-tenor) Howard Crook (tenor) John Tomlinson (bass) English Concert Choir English Concert Trevor Pinnock - conductor

Messiah is by no means typical of Handel's oratorios. It was one of two that were premiered outside London. Athalia was first aired in Oxford and Messiah in Dublin. Because of the exigencies of the Dublin premiere, Handel wrote it for a generic cast of four soloists (SATB), rather than designing solo parts for specific singers; when writing the oratorio he probably did not know who his soloists were to be.

It is about the only one of his works where the standard performing version is based on Handel's later revisions. Handel was an inveterate reviser; each revival of a work was different, customised to the particular cast. Quite often the revised versions are inferior to the original. But Messiah received annual performances by Handel's ensemble as a charity concert for the Foundling Hospital. These concerts not only went a long way to reviving Handel's popularity, but also helped make Messiah the icon that it is today. Though Handel tinkered with Messiah for each performance, these annual outings seem to have enabled the work to settle down into something like a standard form.

Though it was written for just four soloists, in 1750 the alto Castrato Guadagni joined Handel's ensemble and Handel adapted the work to include him. This did not mean jettisoning his contralto. Handel created an extra solo part and kept the female contralto for singing such key

moments as ‘He was despised’. The versions of ‘Thou art gone up on high’, ‘How beautiful are the feet’ and ‘But who may abide’ which were written for Guadagni became the standard versions of these arias. It is this 1750s version of the work which formed the basis for Trevor Pinnock’s 1988 recording of Messiah, though Pinnock uses the soprano ‘How beautiful are the feet’ rather than the alto one.

This performance does not seek to be cutting-edge instead Pinnock uses his relatively large period forces to revitalise the traditional view of Messiah. So speeds are not controversial. He was despised is taken as a pretty slow pace. But the use of period forces means that the faster movements can achieve quite a speed without ever seeming rushed. This sort of revitalised traditional performance was rather cutting-edge in 1988, when period performances of Messiah tended to take a very particular point of view.

Pinnock was also in advance of his peers when it came to selecting his soloists. Nowadays we are used to young opera singers moving between the modern opera house and period performance. This was more unusual in 1988 when singers tended to be more specialised. So Pinnock’s cast, with three opera singers, was hardly standard period performance practice for the 1980s. All three singers, Arleen Augér, Anne Sofie von Otter and John Tomlinson have experience in both period and modern performance practice.

Augér is pretty much an ideal soprano soloist, radiant with a lovely line, her diction is also pretty impressive. Von Otter is more of an acquired taste. There is no doubt about the fine musicality of her performance, the dignity of her tone and suppleness of her phrasing. But there is a little coolness there as well; this was something that was particularly notable in her noble performance of ‘He was despised’. Many people will find this performance admirable, but I kept longing for that touch of warmth that a singer like Janet Baker brought to the role. Michael Chance makes a fine contribution singing the alto arias Handel created for Guadagni, but I thought that he could have risked being a bit showier at times.

Howard Crook makes an impressive tenor soloist. Better known, to me at least, as an haut-contre in the French Baroque repertoire, his instrument has the power and flexibility needed to bring off Handel’s tenor part.

The year that this recording was made, John Tomlinson made his debut as Wotan. Tomlinson has had extensive experience singing this repertoire and his recording of Handel’s Hercules with John Eliot Gardiner remains one of my favourites. But it is nonetheless impressive that he

managed to run his Wagnerian and Baroque careers in tandem. There is something old-fashioned and swaggering about Tomlinson's performance; it is highly theatrical and rather endearing. His command of Handelian fioriture remained impressive, even if not entirely clean. All the singers ornament discreetly, which is entirely appropriate.

The choral contribution from the English Concert Choir was impressive and their fleetness of articulation admirable. They number some 32 singers, all adults with a mixture of men and women on the alto part, so they achieve impressive moments of power in the bigger movements. But I missed an element of bite in the choral tone. This isn't a big/small thing; both large choirs and small ones can develop this sort of attack, but the English Concert Choir goes for a smoother, blended effect.

Though modern in tone, this is not a bloodless Messiah; in fact it is quite stirring at times. The combination of Tomlinson and Michael Laird's trumpet in 'The Trumpet shall sound' is quite brilliant and the bigger moments, such as the Hallelujah Chorus, certainly don't leave you wishing for a bigger, more old-fashioned performance.

Pinnock has taken care with the balance of his forces, so the 32-person choir is accompanied by a 37-person orchestra, including four oboes and two bassoons. This gives the sort of balance of tone that is so necessary in Handel. The performance from the English Concert is wonderfully confident and crisp, full-blooded, fine-toned without being prissy.

The set comes on two well-filled CDs in the Deutsche Grammophon 'The Originals Series' and includes a full libretto.

You can't go wrong in choosing this Messiah. You might decide to have a Messiah which takes more risks or one, like Hogwood's, which takes a more purist view as to the edition used. The Scholars' recording of Handel's original should be essential listening for everyone. But Pinnock's version should have a firm place at the centre of the library shelves. ---Robert Hugill, www.musicweb-international.com

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