

# THE SACRED MUSIC SOCIETY.

Henry C. Watson<sup>1</sup>

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On leaving the Tabernacle<sup>2</sup> on Monday evening<sup>3</sup>, we asked ourselves if we had heard the Messiah? The answer was, No! Handel's Messiah<sup>4</sup>, like Shakspeare's plays, has become subject to travestie; the levelling and depreciating spirit of the age has laid its slimy hand upon it, and every chattering jay may libel in annotations, or emasculate by interpolation or emendation. In days past, and yet so recently, that the past is treading upon the hem of their retreating garment, in days scarce past, we say, the Messiah of Handel, like the Iliad of Homer or Paradise Lost of Milton, was looked upon as the great classical epic, as the great musical epic, of time. It was held sacred; and each one deemed it incumbent upon him, within his sphere, to preserve it as much as possible, in its original and majestic purity. It was then graciously conceded by liberal souls, that the composer of a great work knew his own mind, and put down his conceptions as he wished them executed, while the singer considered he had enough to do to study to give effect and do justice to the composer's manuscript. But we have fallen upon better days; the composer's task is easy: he has only to fashion the rough outline, and leave all the rest to the more exquisite taste, extensive knowledge and profound judgment of the singer, who is supposed of course to know a little more than singers usually do; for instance, he or she must be able to tell the name of a note when shewn to them, and also able to play the common chord in two

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Cood Watson (1818-1875) was a composer, singer, and music critic. He was an editor for a number of publications including *The New World*, *The Broadway Journal*, *The New York Tribune*, *the Albion*, and *Watson's Art Journal* (Wilson).

<sup>2</sup> The Broadway Tabernacle, built in 1836, was unique in that it was a church built to be a performing space. Inspired by the classical amphitheater, the auditorium could seat 2,500 people regularly and was used for musical performances as well as other civic functions (Kilde 43).

<sup>3</sup> The performance took place on Monday, February 24, 1845.

<sup>4</sup> Handel's *Messiah* is the most well-known English oratio, composed by George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) in 1741 with a libretto written by Charles Jennens. *Messiah* was first performed in full in the United States at a concert sponsored by the Sacred Music Society in 1831 (Lawrence 10).

positions. These accomplishments, considering the education usually bestowed upon singers, would be acknowledged great. It will be therefore perceived, that the singer is now the composer, and the composer the drudge. “The public is therefore respectfully informed that the skeleton of the Messiah, by Handel, will be performed this evening; the principal characters by the principle singers, who will give an entire new version of this almost obsolete work, done up to suit the times. N. B.<sup>5</sup> The public may rest assured that no vestige of its former classical style shall be allowed to remain.<sup>6</sup> N. B. No. 2. Composers can have their works altered and ornamented to suit the modern taste and refinement, on the shortest notice. N. B. No. 3. Mendelshon<sup>7</sup> cooked after the Italian style,<sup>8</sup> to suit the taste of the “Upper ten thousand.”<sup>9</sup> Such will be the announcements in future, we expect. Such were our reflections on listening to the Messiah on Monday evening. Of Madame Pico<sup>10</sup> we have little to say. Unacquainted with the language, and a stranger to the strict style of Handel’s school, we expected but little, and we can only reiterate the general expression, that Madame Pico did extremely well—considering. The contralto songs lay very unfortunate for her, resting chiefly upon the middle part of her voice, which is comparatively weak and thereby contrasting too strongly with her lower and stronger tones. Her ornaments were out of place, and consequently in bad taste. Some portions of the music she seemed to feel, and the few words she knew perfectly, she gave with good emphasis. But we never wish to hear Handel after the Italian fashion again.

Miss Northall<sup>11</sup> has a very good quality of voice, but the upper region, though clear, is thin, and has a tendency to extreme sharpness. She should not attempt to extend her compass beyond A, for too many voices are ruined by a foolish ambition to possess an extensive compass. The consequence is, that the whole scale becomes thinned and weakened. With respect to Handel’s music, we state distinctly, that Miss N. knows nothing of its sentiment,

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<sup>5</sup> Latin *Nota Bene* meaning “Note Well.”

<sup>6</sup> Since its composition, *Messiah* underwent many changes: in its performance as well as in its score. Handel himself altered the score after seeing it performed, but more significantly, following Handel’s death in 1759 the work entered the public domain, and was rescored by Mozart in 1803. In addition to increasing the size of the chorus (see [17]), orchestra size and variety increased. Timpani, flutes, clarinets, and bass drum all began to appear in performances (Burrows 50).

<sup>7</sup> Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) (alternatively referred to during this period as Mendelssohn Bartholdy or Mendelssohn-Bartholdy), was a German romantic composer. Often a favorite of Watson’s, his being mentioned here seems to indicate the poor taste of the “future” audience which prefers Mendelssohn performed in an “Italian” fashion.

<sup>8</sup> In the preceding article “MR. GEORGE LODER’S CONCERT.” Watson writes “The genius of the German music is entirely opposed to the Italian school.... The Italian finds himself fettered by the music, and his style either becomes heavy and strained, or the poor music becomes unmercifully ostracised.” Watson seems to place the two styles in opposition: the (inferior) Italian school is affected, heavy-handed, and open to individualistic interpretation while the German music is more simple, austere, and straightforward.

<sup>9</sup> The “Upper ten thousand” or “Upper ten” are the upper classes or aristocracy (OED).

<sup>10</sup> Rosina Pico, an Italian contralto singer (Lawrence 299).

<sup>11</sup> Julia L. Northall, an American soprano and frequent recipient of Watson’s criticism. Her performances were often the subject of hot debates between the editors of *The Evening Mirror* and *The Broadway Journal* (Lawrence 293).

its style, its execution. It cannot be sung unless it is felt and appreciated mentally. It cannot be sung properly unless the singer has been trained up in a strictly classical school, and has had constant opportunities to study classical models. Respectable mediocrity may be attained without this course, but no step higher. Miss Northall, on Monday evening, disfigured her music by a host of common-place cadences, hackneyed closes and affected sentiment, produced by constantly slurring one note into another, or by continued anticipation, faults of a most vicious school. Her cadence at the close of *Rejoice greatly*<sup>12</sup> was so ridiculous and startling, that every body doubted the evidence of their senses. We must now state, that we believe Miss Northall to possess good capabilities both mentally and physically, and we feel assured that if she will look more to nature, and strive to banish from her mind that meretricious style which offends the judicious, and palls most rapidly upon the multitude, we shall shortly have the pleasure of speaking more in her praise, than we have ever said to her prejudice.

Mr. Jones<sup>13</sup> executed his music with much taste. Some faults we might find, but he stood so preeminently superior to all who sang that evening, that we refrain from fault-finding, and are content to praise most warmly.

Mr. Brough<sup>14</sup> never did, never could, and never can sing any thing that Handel ever wrote. We have warm respect for Mr. Brough as a man, but we beg of him, for the sake of all that is classical, to connect himself entirely with the “Monks of Old,”<sup>15</sup> and such like ballads, and quit the legitimate.

Mr. Meyer<sup>16</sup> labors under many difficulties, and we feel that, considering the circumstances, we ought to refrain from saying all we know.

The choruses were extremely inefficient. Each separate chorus was rendered with no more of effect than an amateur church choir. The tempo of every chorus was by one half too slow; the trebles were repeated out of tune; twenty well disciplined voices would have completely drowned the entire mass. In short, we could scarcely recognise the chorusses of Handel, so utterly were they devoid of the spirit and the sentiment.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “Rejoice greatly” is the opening of the final scene of the first part of *Messiah*. Its text is taken from Zechariah 9:9-10, describing the coming of the Messiah.

<sup>13</sup> John S. Jones, an English tenor singer and actor (Lawrence 31).

<sup>14</sup> William F. Brough (1798-1867) was an Irish bass singer (Lawrence 36) (“Opera in America”).

<sup>15</sup> “The Monks of Old” is a traditional English broadside ballad: “a descriptive or narrative verse or song, commonly in a simple ballad form, on a popular theme, and sung or recited in public places or printed on broadsides for sale in the streets” (Britannica).

<sup>16</sup> Philip Meyer (or Mayer), a German basso singer (Lawrence 296). The “circumstances” of his performance remain unclear.

<sup>17</sup> A trend toward spectacularly large performances has been observed by Burrows. “A subtle change of musical emphasis came in 1771.... For the first time singers began to outnumber the orchestra, and the total number of performers crept upwards. The two performances of *Messiah* at the ‘Commemoration of Handel’ at Westminster Abbey in 1784 multiplied the performers to such an

The band, though composed of good men, was totally inefficient; indeed, we speak advisedly when we say, that a worse performance, in relation to its advertised importance, we never witnessed in our life.

We are sure that Mr. Hill<sup>18</sup> will agree with us in all that we have said. The only blame which attaches to Mr. Hill is this: as conductor of the Society,<sup>19</sup> he should not have allowed the performance to take place, knowing, as we are sure a man of his experience must know, that it could not redound to the credit of the Society. He retrieved the singers, the chorus and the band, by his steadiness. We can only regret that he was not firm enough to prevent the Society so disgracing itself.

We shall in a future number give some advice to the Government of this Society, for it ought to be the greatest Society in the country.<sup>20</sup>

The *three thousand* persons, including five hundred of the upper ten, and twenty-five hundred extremely serious people, stated by the *Evening Mirror*<sup>21</sup> to have been present at Madame Pico's concert, have dwindled down to some six or seven hundred. Verily these men in buckram do multiply by the thousand.



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extent that the work became a different musical experience. Though it is difficult to ascertain precise numbers, Messiah was rendered on these occasions by about 500, approximately equally divided between singers and instrumentalists.” (Burrows 48).

<sup>18</sup> Ureli Corelli Hill (1802-1875) was an important figure of the New York music scene at this time. He was the founder, first president, and first conductor of the 4<sup>th</sup> (current) New York Philharmonic Society, and the lead violinist and conductor in the Sacred Music Society (Lawrence 10).

<sup>19</sup> The New-York Sacred Music Society, or later Sacred Music Society, was formed in 1823 by the Zion Church Musical Association. By 1836 this society would become the “city’s most important singing organization.” Unaffiliated with any church, the Sacred Music Society would found its own hall, the Chatham Street Chapel, as well as its own literary publication, *American Musical Journal* from 1834-35 (Lawrence xxxviii, 64) before being dissolved in the end of 1848.

<sup>20</sup> Whether or not this advice was ever given is hard to say, but this was certainly not the last of Watson’s critiques of the Sacred Music Society’s management. See issues 1:20 (May 10, 1845) and 2:13 (Oct. 4, 1845) for more on the Society.

<sup>21</sup> Madame Pico, a favorite of the editors of the *Evening Mirror*, was a source of discord between the two periodicals. For the past month, the *Mirror* had been advertising Pico’s concert to little effect; Watson comments here on the sparse attendance of the concert.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Handel's *Messiah* has been a perennial favorite for hundreds of years. From its introduction to the North American continent by the Sacred Music Society in 1831 to the time of this article it was performed several times a year to huge crowds (in this case a crowd of nearly 1,000.) Concerts such as this would have been a source of entertainment to the "serious" people in the "upper ten," that is, the intellectual and wealthy New England population. As Handel's oratio grew in popularity so did the bombastic nature of its performances: large concert halls were constructed, massive amateur choruses and orchestras performed the piece to great crowds of people. As this trend became more and more pronounced, critics like Henry Watson called attention to the paradoxical nature of these performances: sacred texts, holy chants, and Handel's originally sparsely ornamented orchestration were being performed by lavish orchestras and choruses consisting of hundreds of people. It is unsurprising that Watson would call this the end of the "composer," whose score was now at the mercy of the conductor and singer's personal artistic visions.

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