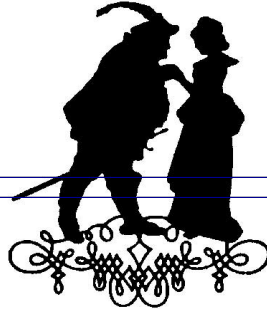


# Opera con Brio

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## A Vibrant and Theatrical *Messiah* Handel & Haydn Society, 2018

In a rare Holiday treat, Boston audiences had the opportunity to encounter the two monumental seasonal oratorios – Bach’s infrequently heard *Christmas Oratorio* and Handel’s ubiquitous *Messiah* - on the same weekend, indeed once on the same day, by two of the leading arts organizations in the city, each in iconic Symphony Hall. The Boston Symphony, with Andris Nelsons at the helm, presented a beautiful, if bloated, performance of Bach’s glorious work. This performance, the first ever of the complete six-cantata cycle by the BSO, was a fitting cap to the second annual Leipzig Week in Boston; after all, Nelsons is music director of both Leipzig’s Gewandhaus Orchester and the BSO, and while the *Christmas Oratorio* is a rarity here, it is omnipresent in Leipzig and elsewhere throughout Germany this time of year.



Bernard Labadie, conductor; Handel and Haydn Society Orchestra and Chorus  
Photo: Lara Silberklang

By contrast, *Messiah* performances here in the US are omnipresent in this period, many thanks in Boston to the venerable Handel & Haydn Society who gave the first complete performance of the *Messiah* in America exactly

200 years ago – on Christmas day in 1818. It then has performed the work virtually every holiday season since 1854, initially in the typical nineteenth-century enlarged performances of the day. (The H&H program notes describe a performance in 1857 featuring “a chorus of 600 and an orchestra of 80 performers.”) Recent presentations by H&H, however, have shifted to historically informed performances, begun toward the later part of the twentieth century, using both period instruments and performance techniques, as well as the smaller ensembles typical in Handel’s day.

This season’s *Messiah* by H&H refined these practices to perfection, and for theatrical vibrancy and idiomatic accuracy it may have been the most compelling *Messiah* I have ever heard – and I’ve heard many. It was stunning in every way. Much credit belongs to visiting conductor Bernard Labadie, founder and Director for three decades of Les Violons du Roy, also founder and Director of the extraordinary choir Le Chapelle de Quebec. As the program notes explained, he prepared the 30-voice H&H choir himself. It showed. Familiar choruses like “For unto us a Child is born,” “All we, like sheep,” and “Lift up your heads,” were crisp and light, leaping off the page with invigorating brio and clear counterpoint. As for the strings, the subtlety of phrasing and dynamics gave ample room for singers – both choral and soloists – to shine with exquisitely shaped phrasing and dynamics. It was Handel at his best. Indeed it’s possible to imagine we were hearing Handel’s music just as he wrote it and would like to have had it performed.

The singers were all exceptional. Indeed from the first moment experienced tenor James Gilchrist opened the oratorio with a slowly evolving and sustained “Comfort ye,” it was evident we were in for a special evening. One could hear why he has been acclaimed as perhaps “the finest Evangelist of his generation.” His impassioned *accompagnato* sections of Part II were articulated with impeccable, energized phrasing. In the same way, another standout was Canadian bass-baritone Philippe Sly, with a resonant tone and sustained power that carried him right through to his familiar final aria “The trumpet shall sound,” in which his voice and the fine trumpet obbligato of Jesse Levine were in perfect



Bernard Labadie, conductor; James Gilchrist, tenor  
Photo: Lara Silberklang

balance. (The concerts were dedicated to the memory of another fine bass, Donald Wilkinson, a long-time member of both H&H and Emmanuel Music choruses.)

A much-anticipated soloist was renowned countertenor Iestyn Davies, familiar to many from the recent Broadway revival of *Farinelli*. I had been forewarned by the press office that he was slightly indisposed, suffering a chest infection, but would sing anyway in the Friday evening performance. And he did, quite nicely in fact, perhaps without his usual force. Still, his opening aria in Part II was a highlight of the evening. His lingering pianissimo phrases on the words “He was despised” were breathtaking, and he handled the ensuing allegro with aplomb as well, as he did the remainder of the performance, with help perhaps from a more subdued orchestral pallet.



Bernard Labadie, conductor; Iestyn Davies, countertenor  
Photo: Lara Silberklang

But he had to withdraw from the upcoming two performances on Saturday and Sunday, replaced by the equally renowned British mezzo Christine Rice, currently performing with the BSO in the *Christmas Oratorio*. I couldn't resist going to hear her also in the Saturday afternoon performance (a good excuse as well to hear a repeat of this exquisite *Messiah*.) She eliminated only the aria "Thou art gone up on high," and gave a performance embodying the typically subtle and subdued warmth she would soon display in the Bach that evening, which happily I heard again. Another fine British artist, soprano Lucy Crowe, equally familiar from the opera world, was throughout the evening a radiant presence. A highlight was her glorious aria opening Part Three, "I know that my Redeemer liveth"; her clarion top notes indeed seemed heaven-sent.

The juxtaposition of these two great works by Bach and Handel this weekend, and of the two idioms – contemporary and historically informed musical forces – was indeed instructive. Both Nelsons and Labadie expressively shaped phrasings of the respective scores, with hands only. But this approach worked to greater advantage in the Handel chamber ensemble with early instruments. Maestro Labadie was masterful at drawing out every nuance of expression from his talented ensemble, not least of all in molding subtle arches of sound and color in carefully controlled dynamics. The final carefully shaped "Amen," growing almost imperceptively to a radiant glow, was simply glorious.

As a footnote, prior to each performance H&H showed its commitment to early performance practice by having members of the orchestra in the hallways illustrate refinements of string technique and bowing, and the ensuing nuance of expression possible. (I observed a fine demonstration of bowing technique by Bassist Erik Higgins.)



Bernard Labadie, conductor; Lucy Crowe, soprano  
Photo: Lara Silberklang

In Nelson's *Christmas Oratorio*, voices seemed on occasion to get smothered, but not so in Labadie's *Messiah*. In part, this has as much to do with the nature of the works as with the performance idiom or conducting. For Bach the voice is yet another instrument within his often intricate contrapuntal web; for Handel the voice is supreme, and the careful, often imitative, writing for strings and other instruments is all there to complement the vocal elements. The strength of the glorious H&H *Messiah* was that Labadie guided the performers with such a careful and loving hand that the vocal – and indeed vibrant dramatic element of *Messiah* – could flourish.

Much speculation around the BSO performances during Leipzig week was about the opera composer Bach might have been. (The Leipzig opera house was no longer operating when Bach started writing cantatas in Leipzig in 1723). But Handel was an opera composer par excellence, even at the time he wrote *Messiah*. It showed. In Labadie's hands, vibrant theatricality was what this *Messiah* was all about - spellbinding, intimate but powerful, compelling from start to finish.

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