

Performing Handel: Messianic delusions

As ever, Christmas is heralded with generous servings of Handel's 'Messiah', but Jessica Duchen warns that what we hear isn't always what the composer intended

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Christmas is coming, decisions are being made over whether to splash out on an organic turkey, and Handel's Messiah is being reheated for its annual outings. With its stirring choruses and memorable melodies, it's no wonder that Messiah is still everyone's seasonal favourite, especially when performed in a style allegedly appropriate to the mid-18th century. But just as consumers of supposedly organic food can be misled, so music-lovers, dazzled by displays of "superior" knowledge, often swallow assurances that they're hearing a historically correct performance when they manifestly aren't. As usual, Messiah is being rolled out by the promoter Raymond Gubbay at the Royal Albert Hall. I can't say exactly what this year's team, involving 500 voices and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, is likely to do with it, but I know what happened last time I went, about five years ago. This cavernous Victorian hall hosted a huge, enthusiastic amateur chorus, accompanied by another major London orchestra.

That orchestra, however, was reduced to a theoretically "authentic" size - a mere handful of musicians - while nothing else was. It was no surprise, then, that nobody in the audience could hear it. When I commented on the mismatch, the lady beside me declared, nose in air: "I like to hear my Handel the way Handel heard it." Yet there was nothing remotely authentic about venue or choir; moreover, a composer as rigorous, professional and hot-tempered as Handel would have thrown a wobbly at the imbalance of forces. As for the conductor's blanket instruction to the strings to cease all vibrato, the solo singers vibrated as lavishly as if they were singing Verdi. My neighbour, and many like her, have been brainwashed into accepting all such compromises as the genuine article. Indeed, a performance without a dash of token "authenticity" has become unimaginable, even if such tokenism doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

Perhaps it's unfair of me, but now I steer clear of Albert Hall Messiahs, and a few others, too. Tomorrow, Birmingham audiences can hear the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra resuscitating Mozart's arrangement of the work from 1789, "arranged for the capabilities and styles of the performers of that time", though

the ambience of Symphony Hall is hardly 18th century. And for Bristol's Messiah, on 23 December, the accompanying baroque orchestra, Music For A While, is supposed to make itself heard, presumably on "authentic" gut strings, in the 2,075-seat Colston Hall. Perhaps a better bet is the English Chamber Orchestra and Tallis Choir at Chelsea's best-kept secret, the beautiful Cadogan Hall, on Wednesday: here, at least, acoustic, chorus and accompaniment have a chance of suiting each other.

"Historically informed" performance is riddled with muddle, compromise and misuse, as any movement must be when attempting to recreate 17th- or 18th-century values in the 21st century. And historical correctness is a means to many ends, not all of them musical. Promoters save money by employing smaller orchestras. A number of conductors - Nikolaus Harnoncourt, John Eliot Gardiner, Roger Norrington et al - built their names on niche historical performance, but then moved merrily on to Romantic pieces, to mixed effect. Within the orchestras, besides a hard core of devoted, well-informed specialists, I've also met countless musicians who have found work by playing historical instruments, or simply switching off their vibrato, when they couldn't secure enough employment in mainstream ensembles. Record companies chasing profit from novelty have a lot to answer for, as have critics for giving historically informed renditions the biggest plaudits, even if the playing is shoddy. Christmas Messiah-style tokenism is everywhere. It's easy. Turn up the tempos, switch off the vibrato, chop up the phrasing, diminuendo through every slur, slap on gut strings if you can be bothered, and, bingo, you're historically informed.

But that doesn't make half-baked musical results bearable. A new CD of Mozart Piano Concertos by the admirable pianist Pascal Rogé finds the conductor Raymond Leppard reducing the orchestral parts and their operatic melodies - played by the anything-but-authentic Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra - to a clump of meaningless bite-sized articulations. A CD of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, conducted by Claudio Abbado, has just won a Gramophone Award, presumably because the celebrated maestro saw fit to attempt elements of historical style, but the rhythmic quirks are so awful that Pamina's greatest aria made me feel seasick. So, how much of such "historical style" is actually correct, and how much Chinese whispers? Here's just one example. Mozart's father Leopold wrote *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing* in 1755. It includes the following gripe: "Performers there are who tremble consistently on each note as if they had the palsy." He doesn't like it, but makes it perfectly clear that, five years after Bach's and Handel's death, and a year before Wolfgang Amadeus was born, violinists were not only using vibrato, but using it generously.

Done well, by artists with a deep, thorough understanding of what they're doing and why, historically informed performance can be fantastic. The German fortepianist and harpsichordist Andreas Staier, and the American pianist Robert Levin open up new worlds. The best violinists, such as Fabio Biondi, don't shy away from applying vibrato when appropriate. It's their inspirational musicianship

that counts - for them, correctness isn't an end in itself. Likewise for "modern" artists who sometimes beat the early-music brigade at their own game: the violinist Viktoria Mullova has taken to gut strings to spectacular effect, and pianists such as Daniel Barenboim, Andras Schiff, Richard Goode and Angela Hewitt continue to play Bach to perfection on the modern concert grand. Stylistic awareness serves but doesn't rule them. They treat music as great art, first and last. But when performers are too busy gesturing at authenticity to remember that they need to sound more than just "informed", they wreck the very music that the movement was supposed to revitalise.

And that's where audiences are being really short-changed. In 1791, Haydn attended a performance of Messiah in Westminster Abbey given by 1,000 performers. He was so moved that, in response, he composed his finest oratorio, The Creation. Today, such a performance would be rubbished for not being historically correct (no matter that 1791 wasn't far off Handel's time, unlike 2006). If Handel had heard watered-down, superficial "correctness" instead of roof-raising, thousand-strong spiritual glory, would he have been so inspired? I doubt it.

Handel's 'Messiah' is being performed at Symphony Hall, Birmingham (0121-780 3333), tomorrow; Cadogan Hall, London SW1 (020-7730 4500), Wednesday; Royal Albert Hall, London SW7 (020-7589 8212), Friday; Colston Hall, Bristol (0117-922 3686), 23 December