

## HANDEL BROCKES PASSION – The Passion of Christ

*A new English edition edited by Neil Jenkins*

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### MUSIC

Until recently the only English-language edition of the Handel *Passion of Christ* was a heavily truncated version edited and translated by Denys Darlow and published by Oxford University Press. The Chrysander Gesellschaft Edition of 1863 was later supplied with an English translation of such dubious quality that it would be impossible for modern performers to make use of it.

The translator, Russell Martineau, found it difficult to deal with the “*marinismo*”<sup>\*</sup> quality of the text, (with its grotesque fascination with the goriest moments of the Passion story), and came up with a lame version which sounds extremely dated to modern ears. The OUP edition of 1965 was much better in this respect, but only contained about one quarter of the original music.

It was in the 1960s and early 1970s that I first got to know this work whilst performing it with Denys Darlow’s Tilford Bach Choir (in his English version) and with Paul Steinitz’s London Bach Society in the Bärenreiter edition of 1968, which we gave in German in a pretty full version for a concert and BBC broadcast. Since the 1980s I myself have not sung it again, and I know of very few other performances. Yet it is a great work, showing a different side to Handel than that found in his cycle of English oratorios commenced some twenty years later. He was a young composer making his career in London when he set the German text by Barthold Heinrich Brockes which had been given to him by his friend Johann Mattheson. Anyone who knows and likes the works that he was creating at this time, the *Chandos Anthems*, *Acis and Galatea* etc will find the same vibrant and varied outpouring of original musical material here – and even some echoes of those very works, showing that they were all being forged at around the same fertile time.

Its neglect in England has been the lack of any complete English-language edition. Consequently this wonderful work has not been heard in English for a generation or more. I am indebted to the more recent German editions, as well as to Chrysander, for their useful scholarship and example of how to deal with the anomalies of the various manuscripts which have been collated together in the preparation of their versions. As there is no extant manuscript, performers have been dependent on the work of Chrysander, the Bärenreiter editor, and more recently Andreas Traub, if they have wanted to get to know the work in detail. The excellent new Stuttgarter

Händel-Ausgaben Urtext edited by Traub (2007) which, is based on the copy of the work made by J.S.Bach in the 1740s, presents a truly performable edition for modern times. My version is compatible with this; and the only major differences are the new English text that I have produced, and the new keyboard realisation and piano reduction. As a result of my work translating Bach's two great Passions, the *St John* and *St Matthew*, for the New Novello Choral Edition (1997 - 1998) I brought the same skills to the project of turning this work into a version which would both be consistent in tone with the original Brockes text and stand as a worthy text in its own right, capable of being performed in church and concert hall.

### TEXT

The poem by Barthold Heinrich Brockes was published in Hamburg in 1712 as "*Der für die Sünde der Welt gemartete und sterbende Jesus*", and was set by various German composers commencing with Reinhard Keiser in 1712. He was Kapellmeister in Hamburg and a friend of the librettist, who mounted the first performance of Keiser’s work in his own home, and thereafter annually. Telemann set the text in 1716 for a performance in Frankfurt, and Handel sent his version to Mattheson (as Mattheson tells us in his *Grundlage einer Ehren-Pforte*) in 1716, having composed it between 1715-16. Mattheson definitely performed it in Holy Week of 1719, and possibly earlier. It was one of four versions of the text (Mattheson himself having composed his own version in 1718) which were popular in the North German cities in the 1720s. There is a record of a performance in Luneberg, and it was well enough known to Bach for his own *St John Passion* of 1724 to be indebted to both Brockes’ text and Handel’s musical setting.

At this time there were two formats for the composition of Passions: one derived from the liturgical seventeenth century *historiae*, which simply used the text of one of the Gospels, and which eventually expanded to include reflective arias for solo singers. This one tended to be performed in church, sometimes within the Holy Week liturgy. And then there was another, newer, form, deriving from Italian oratorio models which was much more theatrical in the style of its arias and choruses, and which was rarely allowed to be performed in church. The biblical narrative was less important, and was sometimes treated very freely and poetically. This is the case with the Brockes text. It also differs from such works as the great Bach Passions inasmuch as the narrative is not taken from one sole Gospel writer, but is an amalgam of all the Gospels. This was known as

'harmonising' the four Gospels. Brockes' handling of the biblical text is also quite selective, ending before the deposition from the cross, omitting various details such as Judas' return to the High Priests and 'casting down' of the silver pieces, ignoring the characters Simon of Cyrene, Nicodemus and the three Maries, and concentrating instead on Peter's denial (and his subsequent remorse) and Judas' similar desolation prior to his suicide, as well as the lengthy flagellation scene. The text throughout is written in a free verse. In my edition I have done my best to replicate the original rhyme-schemes in the Arias etc, and in some *accompagnato* Recitatives, but not in the quasi-Biblical text. Since Brockes does not quote the Biblical text exactly I have been allowed a little freedom in making my quasi Biblical text fit Handel's notation.

Performers familiar with the Bach Passions will also find that Brockes' unnamed solo voices - the *Daughter of Zion* and various 'Believers' (originally designated in German as *Gläubige Seele*) - as well as major characters like *Peter* and *Judas* take an active part in some of the quasi-Biblical recitatives. Another important difference from Bach's treatment is the much smaller role allotted to the Chorus. Whereas both Bach Passions make use of the Chorus both as the *Turba* (bystanders, voices of disciples, Priests and people) and as Christian commentators on the unfolding action, in the Brockes text there is less opportunity for such intervention. In fact, the forward momentum is supplied by the very rich and varied solo arias and ariosos.

One particularly interesting feature of Handel's *Passion*, is the way it seems to have influenced Bach when he was composing the *St John Passion* in 1724: apart from the fact that he uses the same Brockes texts in his arias from time to time, there is one startling similarity when Bach composes the Aria and Chorus "*Eilt, ihr angefochtenen Seelen*" in the same key, compound time and with a nearly identical use of the choral "*wohin*" interjections as Handel employs

### **SOLO VOICES**

It would be difficult to perform this work with less than 7 solo voices today. Brockes is very liberal in his use of different characters, both biblical and fictitious. Thus he requires a *Daughter of Zion* and various *Believing Souls*, apart from the protagonists in the biblical narrative. Handel makes good use of them all. In my edition I try to be practical by stating that soloists will be needed for *Daughter of Zion* (S), a *Believer* (S), a *Believer* (T), a *Believer* (B), *Jesus* (B), *Virgin Mary* (S), *Peter* (T), *Judas* (C-T), *Caiaphas* (B), *Pilate* (B), *Centurion* (B), *High Priest's servant*

(B), *3 Maids* (S, S, S), *James & John* (C-T, C-T) and *Evangelist* (T). However, this list can be made more manageable by various strategic 'doublings'.

### **DURATION**

Using a recent recording as a guide, the length of this complete work, without an interval, is approximately 2 hours 45 minutes. Handel does not specify that there should be a break in it, and scholars all assume that it was performed in Hamburg with out any interval – as was the custom at the time for performances in secular buildings (such as the Drillhaus or the Nieder Baum-Haus). However, when Mattheson became the Cathedral Organist in Hamburg he introduced oratorios there without seeming to upset the clergy or the city fathers, who had earlier objected to these 'theatrical' musical events. But it still seems that there were no intervals in the performances.

In order to make the work a more practicable length for modern audiences and performers I have made suggestions for suitable cuts. These mostly occur in the second half, where Brockes delights in all the "*marinismo*"\* horrors of the shaming and scourging of Jesus, and devotes at least 8 aria texts and other recitatives to describing it in a rather repetitive manner (although Handel's music is uniformly excellent). I have also suggested where an Interval might take place. In this I have used the example of the break in Bach's *St John Passion*, where it occurs after the Chorale following Peter's denial. Fortunately there is a chorale in the Handel work at a similar point.

### **APPENDIX**

I also supply an additional movement taken from Handel's choral work *The ways of Zion do mourn*, for those occasions when a choir would like to conclude the work with a longer choral movement than Handel provides - as are found in both of Bach's Passions. This movement is suitable for the position in which it now occurs, being similarly orchestrated and describing the Burial in tender tones, followed by a joyous conclusion.

### **NOTE**

\*N.B. "*marinismo*" is named after the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian poet G. B. Marino, whose "*Strage degli innocenti*" ("Massacre of the innocents"), and other poems were translated into German by Brockes. Marino's turgid poetic style contained extravagant images used for their sensational, shocking, effect. Brockes himself adopted the same style to vividly colour all of the painful moments in the agony in the garden, the flagellation and the crucifixion. In my translation I have tried to make these moments more palatable for a modern audience.