

Sektion VII/1

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Handel's *Messiah* in London and the Provinces, 1840–1857:

Setting the Stage for the Handel Festivals

The establishment of the regular Handel Festivals in London, beginning with the preliminary “practice” festival in 1857, consolidated the dominant performative context for Handel's *Messiah* in both the United Kingdom and the United States for the remainder of the 19th century. While many of the earlier performance practices continued with the introduction of the Festivals, the location and intent of the Handel Festival *Messiah* performances fundamentally inflected both the physical experience of the musical work and attitudes about its spiritual meaning and social import.

This development represents a nexus in *Messiah* reception. Major *Messiah* performances outside of London in the first half of the 19th century typically took place in churches or cathedrals, including the annual Three Choirs Festival. These largely amateur performances were focused on charitable fundraising and the general improvement (both spiritual and cultural) of all classes of society. In London, however, regular professional performances typically took place in the Hanover Square Rooms or, later, Exeter Hall, and were focused on maintaining an older repertoire as a living tradition. Spiritual improvement, charitable fundraising, and amateur involvement were lower priorities. And London performers simply didn't have the same degree of access to large sacred spaces such as St. Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey in which to perform.

This paper examines these parallel and competing performance traditions—centered respectively in London and the English provinces—in the years immediately prior to the establishment of the Handel Festivals, in order to more clearly understand the way in which the Festivals altered the reputation of *Messiah* for the remainder of its reception history. The Handel Festival concerts ultimately relied on a synthesis of both traditions, but with significant

recontextualization. The Festivals engaged amateur singers principally from areas outside of London, lending the enterprise a decidedly nationalistic flavor, but the concerts were a for-profit enterprise designed to honor the composer of *Messiah* rather than its subject. With even larger choruses and orchestras, in an immense performance space of remarkable engineering, the Handel Festival *Messiah* could aspire to the sublime in the Crystal Palace, but in the process sacrificed some of the sense of the numinous that had typically attended the work's performances outside of London. While in one respect the Handel Festivals marked a high-point in *Messiah's* public reception, it came at a cost. This paper concludes that the impact of the Handel Festivals, while granting unprecedented public exposure to the composer and his works, almost irreversibly compromised *Messiah's* reputation, firmly established in earlier performance traditions outside of London, as a sacred work and an instrument of spiritual and social good.