

Carmel and Music 2:  
Handel's Music for the Carmelites

Simon Nolan, O. Carm.

The feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was a major event in 18th century Rome. Just inside the northern limits of the city, in Piazza del Popolo, the Carmelite church of S. Maria di Monte Santo became the annual focus for lavish festivities, with illuminated arches being erected in the surrounding streets stretching as far as Piazza di Spagna and Piazza S. Carlo. And this festival in honour of the principal patron of the Carmelite order was not only visually stunning. Each year worshippers at the church were also treated to a veritable musical extravaganza provided by some of the most celebrated Italian composers of the day.

In January 1707 something different happened. A foreigner of extraordinary musical ability made his mark in Rome. The diarist Francesco Valesio tells us: ‘...There is lately arrived in this city a Saxon who is a most excellent player upon the harpsichord and composer of music and today made great pomp of his virtue in playing upon the organ in the church of S. Giovanni to the amazement of all...’ This young German (he was twenty-two) was none other Georg Friedrich Handel. Handel was soon to win the favour of a number of important patrons including the Marquis Francesco Ruspoli and Cardinal Carlo Colonna. The Colonna family had long been patrons of the Carmelite order and it was through them that the young Handel was commissioned to provide music for the celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in July 1707.

### **Life of Handel**

The family of Handel was of Silesian origin. Georg, the composer’s father, was an important medical doctor in Halle and at the court of Saxe Weissenfels. He married for the second time when he was already over sixty and his second son by this marriage, Georg Friedrich, was born in 1685.

Georg Friedrich showed extraordinary musical ability from a very early age. His father, for his part, did everything to discourage his son from following a career in music, preferring that he would study law. However, on one occasion, when he was only seven, Georg Friedrich accompanied his father on a visit to the court at Weissenfels and so astonished the duke and his musical director with his organ playing that he was promptly sent for musical training under F. W. Zachow in Halle.

Even though his father died in 1697, Handel decided to pursue legal studies and entered the university of Halle in February 1702. In March of the same year he was appointed temporary organist at the cathedral there. The following year Handel decided to give up his legal studies and to go to Hamburg to build up his musical career. There he worked as a violinist in the opera orchestra and wrote two German operas which were very successful. In 1706 he decided to seek his fame and fortune in Italy.

Handel produced his opera Rodrigo at Florence in 1706 and visited Rome, Naples and Venice. He did all he could to visit music academies and to meet notable Italian composers, seeking to learn from the Italian school of composition.

After the huge success of his opera Agrippina in Venice in 1709, Handel decided to accept the position of Kapeilmeister (music director) at the court of Hanover. However, almost

immediately he sought leave to go to London. From this point on Handel was associated with England and the English court, producing such famous works as the Water Music, Music for the Royal Fireworks, operas such as Rinaldo and oratorios such as Messiah, Esther, Deborah, Solomon and Judas Maccabeus. In 1727 Handel produced a set anthems for the coronation of George II. For the rest of his life England was his home. On 6th April 1759, he played the harpsichord for a performance of Messiah. Returning home that night he felt unwell and took to bed saying: 'I wish I may die on Good Friday, in the hope of meeting my dear Lord and Saviour on the day of His Resurrection.' Georg Friedrich Handel died on Saturday 14th April and was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey. Several years later the great composer Ludwig van Beethoven was asked who was the greatest composer of all time. 'Handel,' he answered 'because he achieved the greatest effect with the smallest of means. Handel was indeed an extraordinarily talented composer with an extraordinary gift for combining rhythm and melody in works which have stood the test of time. His Messiah is performed by thousands of music groups all over the world to this day. In recent years people are rediscovering his early work, especially the music he work during his Italian sojourn. Above all, musicians and music enthusiasts have begun to appreciate the extraordinary beauty of the liturgical music he wrote as a young man for the Carmelite Order.

### **The Carmelite Church of S. Maria di Monte Santo**

Before we consider Handel's Carmelite Vespers in more detail it is worthwhile considering the location in which the work was originally performed. The church of S. Maria di Monte Santo derives its title from the principal convent of a reform movement which thrived within the Carmelite order in Italy in the 17th and 18th centuries. Inspired by friars such as Desiderio Placa and the prior general, Henry Sylvio, a group of Carmelites sought to reform their way of life by living a stricter observance in keeping with the 'primitive rule' of the order (the rule of St Albert as mitigated by Pope Innocent IV). The main emphasis of the new reform was the necessity of prayer in solitude. Broadly speaking the reformers sought to emulate the Discalced Carmelite reform while remaining part of the order as a whole.

In the middle of the 17th century the friars of the reform of Monte Santo sought to expand their presence in Rome. Pope Alexander VII wished to erect two churches flanking the Via del Corso at the point where it joins Piazza del Popolo. The twin churches of Our Lady of Monte Santo and Our Lady of the Miracles were the result of his plan. The first of these was to become the principal Roman church of the Carmelite Monte Santo reform. Its foundation stone was laid in 1662. Piazza del Popolo with its twin churches is a major attraction for visitors to Rome to this day.

### **The liturgy for the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel**

The principal liturgical celebrations for the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel are first vespers (celebrated the evening before), the Mass and second vespers (on the evening of the feast). The Carmelite rite required the singing of five psalms at vespers as well as numerous antiphons, responses, hymns and canticles.

Much of the liturgy of vespers was chanted using simple tones, but it had become customary for the Carmelites at S. Maria di Monte Santo to commission composers (with the help of patronage) to write lavish settings of the Latin psalms and antiphons for soloists, choir and

orchestra. In response to such a commission the young Handel set about composing music for the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel on July 16<sup>th</sup> 1707.

It is important to realise that Handel's music for the Carmelites is not a single unified work like an opera or oratorio (such as Messiah). In fact Handel was concerned with the business of writing a number of separate psalm settings, motets and antiphons which were to be inserted into the Carmelite liturgy at the appropriate points. Much of the ordinary chanting at vespers and mass would be undertaken by the Carmelite friars with the choir and soloists singing the more elaborate settings.

There has been some debate among scholars as to whether Handel's music was intended for first or second vespers or for mass. Some have even questioned whether the music was written for the Carmelite feast at all! However, the evidence provided by the latest scholarship points towards the conclusion that Handel did indeed write music for the celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in 1707 and that his psalm and antiphon settings were intended (along with music by other composers) to be spread out between the various liturgies.

Scholars have been greatly aided in their work by the discovery in 1985 of a number of Handel's musical scores in Manchester, England. We now know that Handel was working under much pressure at the beginning of July 1707. He was obviously working to complete his music before July 16<sup>th</sup> and the celebration of the Carmelite feast. For example, the *Laudate pueri* was completed on July 8, and the manuscript of *Nisi Dominus* bears the date July 13<sup>th</sup>. Like many composers of his day Handel certainly knew what it was to work to a deadline!

### **Saeviat tellus**

From a purely Carmelite point of view the most interesting text set to music by Handel is the motet *Saeviat tellus* for solo soprano. It could have been sung either at first or second vespers or during mass. This motet exhorts the Carmelite order to remain fearless in the face of all adversity, relying as it does on the protection of the Virgin Mary. The text tells of the appearance of Our Lady to Pope Honorius III, encouraging him to give official recognition to the Carmelite order in 1226.

Handel's music for this Carmelite motet is extremely dramatic and sounds very much like a battle cry. Indeed this setting has much in common with the kind of battle arias Handel was later to write for his operas and oratorios. One cannot help but marvel at the assurance with which the young German composer writes, and the sensitivity with which he sets the Latin text. In the opening section the Carmelites are reminded that 'though Lucifer roars among the flames with deceptions and cunning, you may laugh at the threats of Hell.'

In the middle section Handel writes an exquisitely gentle setting of the words 'O Sweet night, serene peace, remain long and unchanging for the Carmelites.' To the background of sweet and soothing music the soprano sings to reassure the order of the caring protection of Mary (*lux amabilis Mariae*).

In the following sections the heavens are addressed: 'faithful stars, you are charged with saving the Carmelites from the world.' The order is exhorted to be victorious under the protection of Mary (*sub Virginis tutela*) and to rejoice (*Carmelitae jubilate*). The motet ends with a rousing *Alleluia*.

Scholars have pointed out how many of the melodies employed by Handel in this Carmelite motet find their way into his later better-known works.

### **Salve Regina**

Another impressive setting by Handel is his *Salve regina* for soprano and small orchestra. It would seem that Handel composed this work at the Ruspoli country seat of Vignanello in June 1707, and perhaps it was not originally intended for the Carmelite liturgy. However, it seems likely that Handel did indeed reuse this setting on July 16th for the Carmelite feast. According to the Carmelite *Caeremoniale* of 1616 vespers on feasts of Our Lady was concluded with a procession to the altar of Our Lady, during which the *Salve Regina* was sung.

The first two sections of Handel's setting of the *Salve Regina* ('Hail, Queen of heaven' and 'To Thee do we cry.') are very intimate and perhaps even a little sad in tone. However, this is followed by a bubbly third section with an extremely impressive part for the organ. Handel probably played this himself. It is certainly designed to impress!

### **Dixit Dominus**

Handel's setting of the *Dixit Dominus* (Psalm 109) was possibly originally composed for an occasion other than the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. However, it fits in very well as the first of five psalms at second vespers. Here Handel writes for full choir, two sopranos, alto, two tenors and bass. The work is quite grandiose and would certainly have made a great impression at the beginning of vespers. Once again, Handel sets the Latin text in various sections allowing the soloists to shine either on their own or in combination with the others. The work concludes with an elaborate setting of the 'Glory be.'

### **Laudate pueri**

The *Laudate pueri* (Psalm 112) was written specifically for the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in July 1707. It could have served either as the first psalm of first vespers or the second psalm of second vespers. Handel scores the music for soprano solo, choir and orchestra. A solo oboe also plays a prominent role. The opening section is extremely rousing, with the stirring soprano opening being echoed by full choir. Handel may well have worked under pressure (he only finished this setting eight days before the feast!), but the result is one of his finest works. Once again, one can marvel at the assurance with which the young German Protestant sets Latin texts for an Italian audience.

### **Nisi Dominus**

The *Nisi Dominus* (Psalm 126) was most likely sung as the fourth psalm at second vespers for the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. This setting was completed just three days before the feastday itself!

The opening is exquisite, with choir, orchestra and soloists singing with quiet assurance ‘if the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labour.’ The opening melody is unashamedly Gregorian in character. Once again, we are impressed by the ability of Handel to adapt his music to a different religious and cultural context. Many elements which became hallmarks of Handel’s more mature years are already in evidence. We have an example of a ‘battle’ aria with his setting of the words *Sicut sagittae*. The section *Cum dederit dilectis suis somnum* is another piece of ‘night’ music. The concluding *Gloria patri* is as grand as the final section of Handel’s later *Messiah*. Once again, the principal melody has a plainchant feel to it.

Handel also composed brief settings of the antiphons *Haec est regina* and *Te decus virginem*. These were most probably intended for first vespers of the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

### **Conclusion**

Handel’s music for the Carmelites has been one of the most important re-discoveries in musical scholarship. But Handel’s music is much more than an historical curiosity. If readers take time to listen to the music with imagination they will indeed find themselves transported back to an earlier era of Carmelite experience, but at the same time they will find much to sustain them in living the Carmelite vocation in the world of today. Words have a compelling force. But when words and music come together effectively the human spirit can be moved at an even deeper level to experience something of heaven on earth.