

Programme Notes

George Frederic Handel (1685-1759): *Coronation anthems* (1727)

To many English music-lovers, the words, 'choral music' suggests Handel rather than any other composer. In particular they call to mind performances of *Messiah*, whether sung by choral societies accompanied by an orchestra to an audience of a thousand, or a few voices accompanied by an organ in a church or chapel on a Sunday evening.

Handel was born in 1685 in the Saxon town of Halle, but became an English citizen and died in London in 1759. He was supremely cosmopolitan: a man of the world who was equally at home in different countries and with different musical styles: Italian opera, the German instrumental suite, the English anthem and the royal ode for special occasions.

Handel came to Britain as a composer of Italian opera, the fashionable entertainment of the day. *Rinaldo* (1711) was his first work for the London stage, but such was his popularity that he, rather than an English composer, was commissioned to compose a birthday ode for Queen Anne and received a lifetime allowance from her. The story of Handel's former employer, the Elector of Hanover becoming King George I after Queen Anne's death in 1714 is well known: suffice that good relations were quickly re-established and Handel's allowance was doubled.

During the following years, Handel set about diversifying his style. He composed English anthems for a wealthy patron, the Duke of Chandos, the oratorio '*Esther*' and the pastoral opera *Acis and Galatea*, both to English words, and turned his attentions to instrumental sonatas and suites. The oratorios that Handel composed in the latter part of his life, when the public began to tire of *opera seria* are among the greatest sacred musical works.

George I died on 11th June 1727, and his successor, George II, was crowned on 11th October. The music for such an occasion would normally have been entrusted to the Organist and Composer of the Chapel Royal William Croft, but he died on 14th August. Maurice Greene was appointed to succeed him, but it soon became known that that the new King had insisted that Handel should compose the music instead of Greene.

Handel composed the four Coronation anthems in a very short time: the precise order of service was not completed until 20th September. *Zadok the Priest* and *Let thy hand be strengthened* follow the text of the 1685 coronation. The texts of the other two anthems, *The King shall rejoice* and *My heart is inditing* are taken from the Bible. Burney quoted Handel as responding to the official texts that were sent to him, 'I have read my Bible very well and shall choose for myself'. As he quotes the biblical references at the head of each anthem, we can assume that he indeed did so!

The four anthems show Handel's sense of festive occasion that is permeates much of his choral work. *Zadok the Priest* has been performed at every coronation since then, and is sung regularly in many cathedrals and large churches.

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924): *Requiem mass* (1887)

Gabriel Fauré started his musical life by improvising on a harmonium in the École Normale at Montgauzy where his father was Director. These improvisations so impressed an elderly lady that she suggested that M Fauré send his son to the famous École Niedermayer in Paris. And so, at the age of nine, Gabriel embarked on his musical studies. The école provided an excellent all-round musical education as well as producing first class musicians for the Church. Fauré left in 1865 with first prize for piano, organ, harmony and

composition. His *Cantique de Jean Racine* was the product of one of his composition classes.

Fauré contributed to French musical life primarily as an organist in Paris – he was one of his teacher Saint-Saëns' successors at the Madeleine. Regarded as a dangerous musical revolutionary in his young days, he eventually became Professor of composition at the Conservatoire where his students included Ravel, Koechlin, Nadia Boulanger, Grovlez, and Florent Schmitt among others. In 1905 he became its Director and held this influential post until his retirement in 1920.

Fauré's music is largely confined to small forms: chamber music, piano works and songs, in contrast to the large scale works of the late romantic period. He composed nearly a hundred songs, including a song cycle, *La Bonne Chanson*, to words by Verlaine, and a good deal of piano music that shows the influence of Chopin, in its style as well as its titles: Barcarolles, Nocturnes and even a Mazurka. His chamber music, which was written over half a century, includes sonatas for violin, cello and piano, piano quartets and quintets and a string quartet: an output that equals that of Schumann or Brahms.

The *Requiem Mass*, which Fauré composed in memory of his father in 1887, is scored for soprano and baritone solos, chorus, organ and orchestra. It was first performed at the church of the Madeleine in 1888 and has been continuously in the repertoire of choral societies in France and elsewhere since then. Unlike the large-scale dramatic works of Berlioz and Verdi, simplicity and tranquillity are the keynotes. The melodies, although simple in themselves, remain memorable long after any performance through his delicate instrumental colour and his magical and imaginative modulations, possibly learned through his experience of improvisation on the organ. The atmosphere is one of serenity and hope: even the use of trombones, the traditional instrument for death, is brief and the *Dies Irae*, with its terrors of judgement and hell-fire is simply omitted. It is an affirmation of faith expressed in the simplest musical terms that has won itself a special place for amateur singers and is frequently performed liturgically as well as in concerts.

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Rochester Choral Society
June 2008