

Calvin R. Stapert. *Handel's Messiah: Comfort for God's People*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. 192 pages. \$14.99.

Calvin R. Stapert wrote this book “to supply some information, explanation, and interpretation that might enhance appreciation of *Messiah*” (Calvin R. Stapert, xii). In this endeavor, Stapert hit all the high notes. The first half of the book delves into the context and history of *Messiah* and the second half analyses of the complex interplay between *Messiah's* lyrics and music. Stapert first outlines the history of opera and oratorio, which influenced George Frideric Handel's music. He then delves into the context of the British Empire and its influence on Charles Jennens' lyrics. The influence of societal expectations and tastes on the development of oratorio will appeal to anyone who is interested in the interaction between religion and society and the dichotomies, or rather false dichotomies, of sacred and secular. The second half of the book evidences Stapert's musical scholarship as a professor emeritus of music at Calvin College, and founding member of the Forum for Music and Christian Scholarship. He deftly deconstructs the musical intricacies and subtleties of *Messiah* for the reader. He peppers his analysis with an eclectic mix of dialogue partners including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Philip Yancy, and George Bernard Shaw.

Though musically rigorous, this book also offers some insights and tools for the practice of preaching and worship in the twenty-first century. While acknowledging that the popularity of *Messiah* led to some fine performances using anachronistic performance practices such as large choirs and modern instrumentation, Stapert persuasively argues for reclamation of the Baroque orchestration. (60) Stapert's discourse on style and space provides valuable insights for both preaching and worship. For me (Suzanne) Stapert's coverage of the aurality of oratorio and Handel's use of voice through madrigalism, rhetorical devices, and vivid vocabulary reaffirm the importance of conveying *ethos* and *pathos* in preaching. (3, 84) Other points of interest for the worship planner include the fact that *Messiah* was performed in a secular space in order to raise funds for charity. Meant to be both entertaining and educational, these intentions provide impetus to reclaim this piece from mere performance.

Ironically, the increase in recent flash mobs singing the Hallelujah Chorus in various public spaces across the world has brought *Messiah* back to its original platform. The enormous number of Internet hits indicates that the draw of *Messiah* remains. However, the educational piece is lacking and this book fills the gap. For example, Stapert's analysis of the debate concerning the anti-Jewish sentiment found in the section prefacing the Hallelujah Chorus not only cautions Christians of the assumptions contained within *Messiah* but also provides tools to reconstruct who may be implicated as “enemies of Christ.” (129-134) Other educational applications include the use of *Messiah* throughout the liturgical year. By presenting sections of *Messiah* throughout the church year an understanding of the theology of *Messiah* and theological assumptions concerning such topics as supersessionism, atonement, and the authority of scripture could be deepened. Furthermore, as twenty-first century congregations begin to stress experiential aspects in preaching and worship Stapert offers tools to explore the richness of the music together with a congregation. Brian Wren says that music and culture are not universal thus there is disagreement concerning how much the meaning of a piece can be derived from the work itself (Brian Wren, 2000, 56-57). Reading this book prompted me (Tim) to speak with some of my parishioners about their experience of *Messiah*. A few remarked that though they have heard it performed every year and they appreciate the music, they have never understood the words. Wren also writes that music becomes sentimental when it has no relationship to the

rest of the service (Wren, 2000, 73). Suzanne and I (Tim) would both offer that for twenty-first century ears *Messiah* can add beauty to a worship experience but also quickly lapse into sentimentality for those unaccustomed to opera and unfamiliar with the Biblical text. Therefore, the emotive experience of the congregation would be enhanced by introducing them to some of the interpretations found in this book.

All in all this book provides a feast of information which when consumed too quickly can overwhelm much like devouring a sumptuous meal. We both recommend savoring the richness of this book in small portions. It will definitely satisfy anyone looking for insights into a piece of music originally experienced over three nights. We found our appreciation for all the musical flavors and layers further enhanced by accompanying our reading with a recording using the baroque orchestration similar to that of the original production. Bon Appetit!

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