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PACO 129

SIR THOMAS BEECHAM

Handel - Messiah

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BEECHAM conducts HANDEL

MESSIAH

The 1927 Columbia Recording

Dora Labbette soprano
Muriel Brunskill contralto
Hubert Eisdell tenor
Harold Williams bass

Orchestra and BBC Choir
Sir Thomas Beecham conductor

Obert-Thorn

I am left a little unsteady of breath after playing through almost the whole of the music here recorded (which is not the complete *Messiah*, but a tolerably full selection, lacking only a few of the numbers). I did not hear Sir Thomas's performance with these soloists and the Philharmonic Choir a month or two ago, but I can believe that it was striking exceedingly. There need be no hesitation in giving strong praise to a great deal of the recorded work, though those who heard the concert performance will not expect the same thrill as they had then ... Sir Thomas, I see, "stated that he wished to provide an interpretation which, in his opinion, was nearer the composer's intentions." Who knows what they were? We know what was the custom of the time, as regards the size of the choir, but as for Handel's intentions regarding interpretation, no one knows them—Sir Thomas no more than anyone else. It is enough that, save for some very rapid speeds, about which there is plenty of room for debate, he has produced a performance that has great nervous energy (though less than he himself puts into his conducting), and that gives us all the strength if not quite all the brooding beauty that lies in the best parts of the music. - K. K., *The Gramophone*, January 1928

Producer's Note

Sir Thomas Beecham's 1927 recording of Handel's *Messiah* has often suffered in comparison with his two later versions of the work. It is the least complete of the three (the 1947 set wins in that regard, if only by the inclusion of the "B" sections of two *da capo* arias not found in the 1959 stereo remake), and is in the most primitive sound. Additionally, the soloists and chorus were arguably bettered in the later versions. Nevertheless, it is valuable to hear, not only as a document of performance practice in transition from the huge choirs and slower tempi of the Victorian era, but also of the development of Beecham as a Handel interpreter. As contralto soloist Muriel Brunskill later recalled, "His tempi for this work, which now are taken for granted, were revolutionary; he entirely revitalized it, the old slow progress was gone forever. *Messiah* was reborn."

For this first extended recording of the electrical era, Beecham used the then-standard Ebenezer Prout edition with its customary cuts and simplified orchestration based on Mozart's arrangement. Most curiously, the final "Amen" was not recorded, which left the performance ending in the dominant. For those who find this like "waiting for the other shoe to drop", I have included as an appendix the finale taken from Beecham's 1947 remake, although I have not joined it to the earlier recording so as not to falsify it. Also missing from the original set but presented here was the "Pastoral Symphony." Though recorded during the *Messiah* sessions, it was not included because it would have been an odd side. It was instead released on a single disc with another coupling. (One wonders why Columbia didn't record the "Amen" and include it with the "Pastoral Symphony" to fill out the set without any odd sides. Perhaps it was thought that an 18 disc set was already enough of a challenge for collectors to afford.)

Although EMI brought out an LP of excerpts, the present recording has only had one complete extended-play reissue, a Pearl CD set from 1990 which left out the "Pastoral Symphony" because the producers were unaware that it existed. The problems inherent in the original recording might have something to do with the paucity of reissues. Although the warm acoustic of Central Hall, Westminster is well caught and the balances between soloists, chorus and orchestra are good, the original discs sound muffled and bass-heavy. In order to bring out detail, I had to boost the upper frequencies a good deal, which also brought along a heavier-than-usual amount of surface noise. In addition to this, each side had a good amount of pitch drift, which Andrew Rose has successfully managed with the aid of Capstan software. The frequent, almost random volume level fluctuations during some of the choruses, however, proved to be an intractable problem.

The sources for the transfers were exceptionally quiet American Columbia "Full-Range" and "microphone" label pressings, except for the "Pastoral Symphony" side, which came from a first-edition laminated English Columbia disc.

Mark Obert-Thorn

CD 1

- 1 **Part I - Overture** (3:57)
- 2 **Recit: Comfort ye, my people (Tenor)** (3:28)
- 3 **Air: Ev'ry valley shall be exalted (Tenor)** (3:26)
- 4 **Chorus: And the glory of the Lord** (3:45)
- 5 **Recit: Thus saith the Lord (Bass)** (1:40)
- 6 **Air: But who may abide (Bass)** (4:30)
- 7 **Chorus: And He shall purify** (2:42)
- 8 **Recit: Behold, a virgin shall conceive; Air and Chorus: O thou that tellest good tidings (Contralto)** (7:12)
- 9 **Recit: For behold, darkness shall cover (Bass)** (1:49)
- 10 **Air: The people that walked in darkness (Bass)** (3:28)
- 11 **Chorus: For unto us a child is born** (3:47)
- 12 **Pastoral Symphony** (3:29)
- 13 **Recit: There were shepherds abiding in the fields (Soprano)** (1:57)
- 14 **Chorus: Glory to God in the highest** (1:55)
- 15 **Air: Rejoice greatly, O daughter (Soprano)** (3:59)
- 16 **Recit: Then shall the eyes; Air: He shall feed his flock (Contralto, Soprano)** (7:08)
- 17 **Chorus: His yoke is easy** (2:50)

CD 2

- 1 **Part II - Chorus: Behold the Lamb of God** (3:47)
- 2 **Air: He was despised (Contralto)** (5:29)
- 3 **Chorus: Surely, He hath borne our griefs** (2:41)
- 4 **Chorus: And with His stripes we are healed** (1:48)
- 5 **Chorus: All we like sheep have gone astray** (3:53)
- 6 **Recit: All they that see him (Tenor); Chorus: He trusted in God** (2:57)
- 7 **Recit: Thy rebuke hath broken His heart; Air: Behold, and see (Tenor)** (3:48)
- 8 **Recit: He was cut off out of the land; Air: But Thou didst not leave (Tenor)** (3:24)
- 9 **Chorus: Lift up your heads** (3:16)
- 10 **Air: How beautiful are the feet (Soprano)** (3:05)
- 11 **Air: Why do the nations so furiously rage (Bass)** (2:34)
- 12 **Chorus: Let us break their bonds** (1:30)
- 13 **Recit: He that dwelleth in heaven; Air: Thou shalt break them (Tenor)** (1:56)
- 14 **Chorus: Hallelujah!** (3:42)
- 15 **Part III - Air: I know that my Redeemer liveth (Soprano)** (6:42)
- 16 **Quartet & Chorus: Since by man came death** (1:47)
- 17 **Recit: Behold, I tell you a mystery; Air: The trumpet shall sound (Bass)** (3:59)
- 18 **Chorus: Worthy is the Lamb** (3:26)
- 19 **Chorus: Amen** (3:24)



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Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer:
Mark Obert-Thorn

Additional pitch stabilisation: Andrew Rose

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Cover artwork based on a photograph of Sir Thomas Beecham and an engraving of Handel

Recorded 24 June – 11 July 1927 in Central Hall, Westminster, 8 October 1927 in the Portman Rooms, London (CD 1, Track 2 & CD 2, Track 16) and 8 July 1947 in Abbey Road Studio No. 1 (CD 2, Track 18)

*Nellie Walker, contralto, sings on CD 2, Track 16 in place of Muriel Brunskill

**Luton Choral Society and Special Choir; Herbert Dawson, organ; and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

First issued on Columbia L 2018/35, L 2345 (Pastoral Symphony) and RCA Victor 12-0117 in album M-1195 (Amen)

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