

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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Of Cabbages and Kings

By Lorin Wilkerson

The coronation ceremony in Great Britain is extremely ancient: since Saint Dunstan's setting forth the main elements for the coronation of the Anglo-Saxon King Edgar in 973, England's monarchs have been crowned in much the same way. Music is a vital part of the occasion, and so coronation anthems and marches have been composed for centuries. Many important English composers have provided them over the years; some who have worked in this specific genre are John Blow, Henry Purcell, William Boyce and Ralph Vaughan Williams, among others. But without a doubt the most popular and enduring coronation anthems in the long history of this august occasion were those penned by George Frideric Handel in 1727

These were composed on a large scale...in these works Handel was not striving for subtlety, or delicacy of articulation. These were composed for the coronation of the king of what was fast becoming (if indeed it were not already) the greatest empire in the world—they were to be sung in Westminster Abbey, and he had as

many as 200 instrumentalists and singers available for these performances. This is Handel writ large; one of the last acts before the death of George I was to naturalize Handel as an Englishman, and Handel's first work as an English subject was music for the coronation of George II and Queen Caroline. Over the years Handel re-used much of the music from these almost note-for-note in his oratorios (as was common practice at the time) so these works will be familiar from many sources.

Handel chose all the texts from the King James version of the bible. His notorious independent streak can be seen in the curt reply he gave to the bishops who sent him suggested biblical texts to use for the composition: "I have read my Bible very well, and shall choose for myself."

The most famous of the anthems, *Zadok the Priest*,

had a somewhat rough beginning according to the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was less than satisfied with the performance of the orchestra at the least. However, according to John Alcock, one of Handel's young choristers, the fault lay not with Handel. "Handel was the only master of music that could ever govern a set of singers: and he himself was often obliged to use very rough means, as well as bitter



Westminster Abbey, the site of every English monarch's coronation since 1066

words, before he could accomplish it.” One can only imagine...¹

The King Shall Rejoice (to be performed by the BCC on Feb 2nd) is taken from Psalm 21, and was most likely composed in September and October of 1727. The All Music Guide at Classical Archives describes it thusly: “The opening sequence based on the first stanza of the Psalm leads to a setting of “Exceeding Glad Shall He Be.” After this comes a heaven-storming declaration for full choir and orchestra of “Glory and Worship,” before the anthem ends with a final, majestic “Alleluia.” The scoring gives special prominence to ceremonial clarino trumpets, which add nobility and brilliance to the most opulent moments, as does the use of the organ.”²

When the great flame of the baroque era began to be quenched elsewhere in Europe, it was principally Handel’s vocal music that kept it burning brightly in the British Isles. In addition to the *Messiah* and *Acis and Galatea*, *Zadok the Priest* is one of the pieces responsible for the undying reverence for Handel in England, which soon spread to the rest of the world. To this day, *Zadok the Priest* has been performed at every coronation since it was first heard in 1727, and it will undoubtedly be performed at the next.

¹ Christopher Hogwood. *Handel* (Revised Ed.) (Thames & Hudson, © 1984 & 2007) p. 89.

² <http://www.classicalarchives.com/work/1746.html#tvf=tracks&tv=about>

Carl Heinrich Graun (1704–1759)



Carl Heinrich Graun was yet another of the ‘working-class’ composers alongside J.S. Bach or Christoph Graupner or J.Friedrich Fasch. He was not a wealthy and cosmopolitan composer along the lines of Handel or Telemann; he had to sing for his supper, both literally and figuratively.

Graun was a skilled tenor, and sang at the opera in Dresden and later Braunschweig. Famous enough in his own day, his opera *Cesare e Cleopatra* was the inaugural work at the Berlin Opera House. He composed a number of operas, and held an important post as *Kapellmeister* for Frederick the Great. But like so many baroque composers he was largely forgotten when musical styles changed, though some of his works continued to be performed. An interesting side note: his direct descendant Vladimir Nabokov would go on to become one of the 20th century’s premier novelists.

Carl Heinrich Graun: Motet
“Machet die Tore weit”
Handel: Coronation Anthem #2
“The King Shall Rejoice”
J.S. Bach: Cantata #119
“Preise, Jerusalem, den Herrn”

Sunday, February 2, 2014 at 2:00 p.m.
Rose City Park Presbyterian Church

SuperBach Sunday!

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