

Handel at the Royal Court

"Greatest Oratorios Written by a Man who had Little Religion and Much Snobbery"

Written by Margaret Macpherson

SOME words, such as Bolshevik or Boche, carry a temporary odium to our minds. Such a word is "Prussian." It brings a mental vision of brutal militarists doing the goose-step, or of Nazis hauling a shaven-headed frightened girl through the streets for other Nazis to spit upon. "Prussian" seems to us to be the antipode of Christian. Yet the greatest Christian oratorio of all time was written by a Prussian—Handel, the composer of the "Messiah." No gentler, more exalted or inspired Christian music has ever been written.

Whatever you are meant to do in this world, take it from me, you will do it. You may do it willingly and happily, a useful cog running smoothly in the universal machine; or you may do it with resentful grinding and jerking and friction, envious of the other fellow, discontented with your lot. You may say to yourself "I was never meant to be a navvy (or butcher or typist or reporter, or whatever you are), but a poet (or millionaire or sea-captain or actress, or whatever it is you think you should have been). But destiny, or God, or whatever you like to call it, is wiser than we are. You may be in a constant state of rebellion because you are a relief worker forming a road; but that road will bring progress and happiness to hundreds of thousands of people, and adversity now will build your character for better jobs later.

When George Frederick Handel was a child his father was determined that he should not be a musician, but a lawyer. In those days and in their society a musician was a sort of mountebank, equal in standing to a circus performer. But Handel was born to be not a mediocre musician of small local successes, but a great composer who was all the greater because he had to school his nature to his father's wishes, had to wait patiently for his success and make sacrifices for his art. We all know the story of the little lad who, forbidden to practise his music, was found in his nightgown in the dead of night playing on a little clavichord in the attic. "Love will find out the way," as the old poem says.

From earliest childhood, Handel had the benefit of a painstaking and thorough tuition. His master, Zachau, taught him the clavichord and organ, and also the art of the orchestra. The boy learned to play every instrument in an orchestra;

he understood the capacity, the value and the difficulty of each one. Although he diligently pursued his law studies in accordance with his father's wishes, he lived for music. Then two things happened which opened the way for him. His father died. And the Electress of Hanover heard him play. This Princess did much to elevate music from being a mere street show to one of the finest arts. She it was who founded the Berlin opera, attracted musicians from all over Europe, and by her appreciation, her social status, and her money, cast a glamour over what had been previously considered rather a low profession.

Handel, still dutiful to his father's memory, went on for several more years with his legal education, and was entered for the Faculty of Law, at the University of Halle, five years after his father's death. He faithfully completed his law course, and then became—an organist. As organist and choirmaster at the Lutheran Church he really had a lot of fun. Instead of using church music that was already written, he used to compose his own. He wrote hundreds of cantatas, psalms, hymns, chorales. It was excellent practice. Later on, punctilious and particular musician that he was, he burnt the lot of them. Nothing less than perfect was good enough for Handel.

But the music, performed by his own choir and orchestra, taught him the art of composing fugal music for the voice, which burst into triumphant flower later in such magnificent work as, for instance, his "Hallelujah Chorus."

When Handel arrived in England at the age of twenty-five the art of music was defunct, having died with Purcell fifteen years before. His friendship with the Electress of Hanover now stood the young man in good stead. He was more or less "in society," and had no difficulty in getting an introduction to Queen Anne, also a music-lover. This august lady helped him to such an extent that the next year he was invited to write an opera for production in London at the Haymarket Theatre. The opera was written in fourteen days, words and music, and it had an instantaneous success.

Running after royalty was a paying game. He next wrote a special piece for the Royal birthday, and his reward was that he became the fashion. (Continued on page 19.)



GEORGE FREDERICK HANDEL, who was intended for the legal profession—and even went so far as to complete his course. But he soon forsook law for his real love—music.