

SYMPOSIUM: CHORAL MUSIC IN MELBOURNE

Messiahs, Elijahs and All that Jazz: Melbourne Musical Taste between the Wars

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I happened to be born in Melbourne. I say ‘happened’ because I come from a Sydney family, but my father was in the RAAF during the 1930s and the Second World War and for some of that time he was stationed in Melbourne. My father and mother were both musical—my father an organist, my mother a mezzo-soprano—and for a few years they were both members of the Philharmonic choir. I don’t remember this, but my sister, Barbara Fisher, who is a poet, has recalled her first experience of a choral concert:

Oh I’m back in oratorio
At Melbourne Town Hall.
Who’d take a child of five
To hear *Elijah*?
Only my dear parents
so innocent and unaware,
or so I thought.
I sat through Mendelssohn
with a patient minder,
bored to shreds, or was I?¹

Not so apparently, because for some days it seems she paraded around the house attempting to render the chorus ‘Baal we cry to thee.’ In the poem she also recalls ‘the wondrous white sound’ of the ‘white-clad women’ rising *en masse* to sing.

If it hadn’t been *Elijah* it would have been *Messiah*. These two oratorios, which of course had always been popular, nevertheless dominated the Philharmonic’s programming between the wars as they never have before or since. Indeed, I have calculated that in these twenty-one years—1919 to 1939—the Society performed *Messiah* on thirty-seven occasions, *Elijah* on thirty. The only other major work to be given more than twice was Gounod’s *Faust* with six performances.²

¹ ‘Pacific Philharmonia,’ *Archival Footwork* (Indigo, ACT: Ginninderra Press, 2001) 47.

² These calculations are based on the record provided by W.A. Carne, *A Century of Harmony: The Official Centenary History of the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society* (Melbourne: The Society, 1954).

There were certainly those who saw the *Messiah–Elijah* syndrome as a disease needing treatment. Thorold Waters, who edited the *Australian Musical News*, was something of a thorn in the Society's side. 'Who killed Oratorio?' he asked and answered his own question:

'I' said the Philharmonic Society—any Philharmonic Society, anywhere,—'I killed Oratorio, with my bow and arrow, my "Elijah" and my "Messiah," I killed Oratorio.' Who saw it die? 'I,' said the audience, 'but you'll have to hurry up if you want me as a witness, for I'm next to being dead myself.'³

He also pointed out how, in the endless repetitions of *Messiah* the Society had actually been ignoring Handel as a composer. Indeed, the only other Handel oratorio to be performed during this period was *Israel in Egypt*, given all of one performance.

The immediate reason for the Society's dependence on *Messiah* and *Elijah* was that they were good little earners. The onset of the Great Depression exacerbated concern over the finances of the Society and it does seem that the mid 1930s saw something of a crisis not only in the affairs of the Society but in the wider Melbourne music scene. As we shall see, musical standards, both of the chorus and the orchestra, were intermittently an issue throughout the period, and this may have added to the dependence on *Messiah* and *Elijah*. Revisiting these two old warhorses on an annual basis put much less strain on choir and orchestra than undertaking a new work.

But the institutionalisation of these two oratorios as musical markers of the calendar does raise questions about musical taste between the wars. It is a time when the gap between what we might loosely call classical and popular music—or between highbrow and lowbrow, terms which gained currency during this period—threatened to become a chasm. The advent of the cinema, wireless and gramophone—not to mention the microphone and wurlitzer organ—was seen by many involved in the traditional world of orchestras, conservatoriums and choirs as representing a degrading of musical taste on a massive scale. Particular venom was directed at jazz. In 1926 the *Argus*, which was very much the establishment newspaper in Melbourne, saw jazz as representing

an imported vogue of sheer barbarism. Jazz is a direct expression of the Negroid spirit ... it affronts the ear at every turn ... It has degraded the modern fashion of dancing to represent more and more the dreary posturing and ugly contortions of the primitive African people from whom it emanates ... It is a matter for anything but pride that British people should have turned their own delightful heritage of song and dance to a noisily concealed perversion of the musical instinct.⁴

Jazz was American, black, primitive, perverted. Even in the world of live theatre, now increasingly a middle-class preserve, there was concern about musical taste. Writing in 1923 Fritz Hart lamented the advent of American musical comedy which had contributed to a degeneration in the public taste for music. 'Now the average Briton hums and whistles the

³ *Australian Musical News* 1 January 1935: 1.

⁴ *Argus* 6 June 1926, quoted by Andrew Bissett, *Black Roots, White Flowers: A History of Jazz in Australia* (Sydney: ABC Enterprises, 1979) 42. See also my chapter, 'Music and Cultural Hierarchy 1918–1939,' Nicholas Brown, et al. (eds), *One Hand on the Manuscript: Music in Australian Cultural History 1930–1960* (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, ANU, 1995) 181.

most vulgar of American importations.' The world needed light music, but it had to be the right kind of light music (that 'delightful [British] heritage of song and dance').⁵ It does seem that one response to the perceived degradation of public taste for music was to reach for the security blanket of the talismanic classics such as *Messiah* and *Elijah*, or, in the field of light music, Gilbert and Sullivan which also was in the process of being institutionalised in the schools and amateur theatre.

As for musical standards of performance, the lack of a full-time professional orchestra was always a cause for concern. Carne quotes a review of a 1922 *Messiah* complaining that 'we do not at present possess in Melbourne an orchestra of a really reliable type, capable of playing in time and in tune,' a casually damning indictment one would have to say.⁶ But the choir was not exempt from criticism either. In 1935 George English (conductor of the Postal Institute Choir and the Bach Choir) said that 'if things were going badly in the musical world—and they were—it was largely because the musical societies were attempting to perform works which were beyond their powers.'⁷ During his time as conductor (1889–1911) George Peake had introduced a triennial test for choir members and this, according to the *Australian Musical News* had 'worked miracles in relieving the Society of its drones, its sleeping beauties, its novel readers, its chatterers, and those whose artistic interest in the latest fashion displayed by the audience made them oblivious to the conductor and dumb as singers.'⁸ One wonders, however, how rigorously this test was applied over the years. Certainly it was always more difficult to recruit men than women. And in 1938 there was to be a major shake-up which reflected a need to lift musical standards.

An interesting little imbroglio in 1935, just after Melbourne's centenary celebrations, dramatised some of the problems facing the music scene. The English contralto, Madame Muriel Brunskill, had sung in an opera company entrepreneured by Sir Benjamin Fuller and led by Florence Austral and Horace Stevens (well known in Melbourne for his much praised *Elijah*)—but the Melbourne season had not been well patronised, allegedly because of the competing social events associated with the centenary. Brunskill followed the opera season with a concert tour, and her poor experience in Melbourne proved too much for her and she gave vent to her displeasure in the *Argus*. 'A colossal air of self-satisfaction pervades the city's music,' she declared. 'Without exception, it is the worst city I have ever visited, and I shall never return.' There was, she added as the clincher, more musical appreciation in north Queensland. Interestingly, the same issue of the *Argus* reported the formation of a Women's Committee for the Philharmonic, which was going to be charged with fund raising. Mrs Bernard Heinze was elected president. Bernard Heinze, addressing the meeting confessed that the Philharmonic faced two problems—'the problem of finance and that of interesting the public once again in choral music.'⁹

Brunskill's condemnation won support from some of Melbourne's musical fraternity. Herbert Davis, conductor of the Zelman Memorial Symphony Orchestra, said there was 'a social stranglehold on music in Melbourne.' In particular he complained of the apathy towards

⁵ F. Bennicke Hart, 'The Good and the Atrocious in Comic Opera,' *Australian Musical News* 1 January 1923: 1.

⁶ Carne, *Century of Harmony* 171.

⁷ *Argus* 8 August 1936.

⁸ *Australian Musical News* 2 March 1925: 21.

⁹ *Argus* 6 August 1935: 6, 10.

the efforts of local musicians and of the way 'social people' were always demanding complimentary tickets to concerts. Leslie Curnow, conductor of the Orpheon Choristers, agreed that there was a small social circle dominating Melbourne music. In response Mrs Herbert Brookes, a strong supporter of Bernard Heinze, insisted that she always paid for her tickets.¹⁰

The Philharmonic also came under fire. Curnow said that if the Philharmonic Society functioned properly there would be no need for a Bach Society, which had just been formed. R. Grant Taylor described the Philharmonic as being 'serenely wedged in a rut, bounded on its two sides by the "Messiah" and "Elijah".' R.J. Oehr, who had been secretary of the Society since 1905, and perhaps had, literally, seen better days, confessed despairingly that 'the musical public was an unknown quantity.'¹¹

There was, however, a nice little coda to the Brunskill controversy. The evening newspaper, the *Star*, in a gesture of metropolitan reconciliation, sponsored a recital by the contralto in the Town Hall, as if to make amends. The *Argus* reviewer was resolutely complimentary. 'The singer was at the height of her form' he reported, and the audience? —well, 'a discriminating audience exhibited interest and enthusiasm.' However, in view of Herbert Davis's complaint one cannot help wondering how many of the discriminating had paid for their tickets.¹²

Perhaps a symbolic low point for the Society was the 1936 tour of Sir Malcolm Sargent under the management of the recently formed ABC. For a performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* the ABC did not turn to the Philharmonic but rather recruited a chorus, known as the Sargent Choir, especially for the occasion. There was 'an immense audience' for the concert, and, the *Argus* reported, 'the quality of the singing came as a revelation to many music lovers.' It expressed the hope that the Sargent Choir, which had been rehearsed by George English, would become a permanent organization.¹³ There seemed little doubt that this performance of *Gerontius* left in the shade the one and only performance that had, to that date, been given by the Society back in 1924.

Things were, however, about to change. Heinze had succeeded Zelman as conductor of the Philharmonic in 1927, not a propitious moment to be taking over with the Depression just around the corner. However, as Thérèse Radic has shown, by this time Heinze was already on the way to becoming the dominant force in Melbourne music. In 1935, just after the Brunskill imbroglio, Heinze confessed to Grainger that he was feeling depressed about the Philharmonic, because, while the standard of orchestral music was improving, 'choral technique and ability seem to be at a standstill.'¹⁴ The lifesaver proved to be the Australian Broadcasting Commission. An agreement with the ABC, negotiated 1936–37, came into effect on 1 July 1937. As Carne describes it, 'the Society undertook to give four or more concerts a year; the Commission undertook, through its officers, to assist in certain aspects of the management of the concerts and to accept the financial responsibility thereof, while reserving the right to broadcast.'¹⁵ It

¹⁰ *Argus* 8 August 1935: 10; 9 August 1935: 8. Mrs Herbert (Ivy) Brookes was the eldest daughter of Alfred Deakin and had had a long involvement in the Melbourne musical scene, dating from the time she played violin in Marshall-Hall's orchestra.

¹¹ *Argus* 9 August 1935: 8; 10 August: 26.

¹² *Argus* 19 August 1935: 7.

¹³ *Argus*, 15 October 1936: 12.

¹⁴ Radic, *Bernard Heinze: A Biography* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1986) 67.

¹⁵ Carne, *Century of Harmony* 205.

was the opportunity also to reform and reconstitute the choir. A significant number of members of the once-only Sargent Choir were admitted, and George English replaced Dan Hardy as Chorus Master. A rapid succession of visiting conductors—Sargent, Bantock, Szell (and during the War of course Beecham)—again, under the auspices of the ABC, made possible suddenly more adventurous programming—Walton's *Belshazzars Feast*, Bach's Mass in B minor, Verdi's *Requiem*. *Belshazzar's Feast* is an appropriate point of concluding this story, for me at least. The solo part was sung then, and on several subsequent occasions during and after the War, by the Sydney bass Raymond Beattie who was, some years later, my first singing teacher.

It was significant that it was the ABC that was the agent for reviving the fortunes of the Philharmonic. It represented a belated recognition that the new media had to be enlisted to the cause of music rather than scorned. In the context of Melbourne of the 1930s Heinze was a modernist. He had caused something of a furore in 1926 when he had some approving words to say of jazz as music, while a Percy Grainger concert he organised in 1935 was a bit too unconventional for the critics. The *Age* critic accused Grainger of being 'unduly sensuous in his use of tone' and could not resist the ultimate put-down: 'a first consideration [in Grainger's music] would seem to be the reflection of American popular taste.'¹⁶ Heinze was a publicist and, as they say today, a communicator, a man for the times. But if any performance signalled the beginning of a new era it was *Belshazzar's Feast*, with its violent choruses and jagged rhythms, a work calculated to blow away the cobwebs of the *Messiah-Elijah* syndrome. The critics too appeared blown away. According to the *Sun* the performance evoked 'as vehement a demonstration of approval as any Melbourne Philharmonic audience has made in a generation'¹⁷. It is not, of course, that *Messiah* and *Elijah* are not worth performing (indeed, is there not a case today for reviving *Elijah*?) but that the embalming of them as relics, to be taken out of the Philharmonic's reliquary once a year, did neither them nor the cause of music any good.

¹⁶ *Age* 3 August 1935: 10.

¹⁷ Carne, *Century of Harmony* 209.