

Oratorio

You're listening to the most famous Oratorio chorus, from Messiah, by George Frederick Handel

[wrote c.20: central figure in story of Oratorio]

Oratorio = a species of Sacred Music: difficult to define

Like the theology of God, whatever you can say about Oratorio you've also got to say that it might not be that way at all.....

Not all sacred music is oratorio ; not all oratorio is sacred music

In conventional usage, Oratorio mostly has these features:

- ✓ Religious music, story/theme told in music (= religious text or theme)
- ✓ Didactic, narrative, dramatic
- ✓ Has an orchestra/accompaniment, choir, soloists, narrator (sometimes), 'recitative'
- ✓ Usually rather long and big-scored
- ✓ Not liturgical, not performed in church
- ✓ Static: no acting, dancing, costumes, stage-settings

Excludes:

- ✓ Masses
- ✓ Requiems
- ✓ Motets
- ✓ Hymns/Poems (Stabat Mater, Dies Irae etc. ; 'Dream of Gerontius')
- ✓ Cantatas




Title

"Oratorio" (*Italiano*) <<< "Oratorium" (Latin) = prayer-room cf. "Oratory" (English), small chapel

// dormitory, lavatory, conservatory, refectory, laboratory, depository [Auditorium = ?]

First usage of title, c.1640 in Rome

So named because of prayer-halls (Oratories) where Oratorian Fathers organized spiritual exercises during which dramatic singing was used, which developed into early form of “oratorio”. 

The Oratorians

>>> St Philip Neri (1515-1595) founded Institute of the Oratory (the ‘Oratorians’) as a group of secular clergy living together in community, devoted to preaching, catechising, care for poor in Rome. They had oratories (small chapels, prayer-halls) attached to their residences or churches (sometimes custom-built). On Sunday evenings, between 1st November and Palm Sunday, they held “Spiritual Exercises” in these oratories, for young men and boys. From the start (1575), music and song was part of the programme: short opening prayer, hymn, scripture, sermon recited by a young boy, more prayers, hymn and scripture, sermon by a priest. Used the popular Italian “Laude” (folk-style songs, with religious themes, in latin or vernacular). Gradually developed presentation of scripture stories and morality plays with solo and choral singing >>> earliest form of Oratorio.

Oratorian Oratories spread quite quickly around much of Italy and into France, and the Sunday ‘oratorios’ became very popular in most places [but not in Venice, which became centre of opera in Italy]

By 1650s, Italian vernacular languages being used, as well as latin. Oratorios still short, often in two sections, with sermon in between. Popularity began to wane in 18th century but lasted through to early 19th century. Meanwhile, gradually moved out from church, more into concert halls and theatres; role of choir/chorus diminished, in favour of soloists and ‘star’ arias; women replaced the famous ‘castrati’ singers.



Origins

We’re after the time of Palestrina, Victoria and Early Music composers of N.Europe; a little after the Council of Trent and its decrees on music in church.

Musically, Italian popular “Laude”, dating from Middle Ages: after St Francis of Assisi. Like the songs of the Troubadors (monophony)

Development of polyphonic singing in sacred music

Influence of medieval ‘mystery’ plays, liturgical and extra-liturgical dramatisations of gospel and bible stories (e.g. Emmaus pilgrimage as part of Eastertime Vespers: in England, cycles of ‘mystery plays’)

c. 1600 growing interest in emotive expression in song, solo singing, ‘stile rappresentivo’; popularity of madrigals. Fading appeal of massed choirs of St Mark’s Venice....

Emilio de Cavalieri's "Representation of the Soul and Body" (sometimes cited as 'first' oratorio), c.1600 was short morality play, with costumes and dance)



Baroque Oratorio: Italy

- Giacomo Carissimi (1605-1674) first 'big' name in oratorio. Composer, teacher, choirmaster in Assisi for 1 year before settling in Rome, at German college. Many oratorios, in Latin. First to use scripture words for texts. Adapted madrigal style/features from Monteverdi (1567-1643). Pupils included Marc Antoine Charpentier, who introduced oratorio to France, wrote of number of them: but the genre didn't catch on. Influenced Heinrich Schütz in Germany. Handel familiar with some of his arias.

"Jephthe", "Jonas", "Judgement of Solomon" best known. Wrote no operas

- Alessandro Stradella (1639-1682): v.important influential as composer in his time: church music, cantatas, concerti grossi, operas murdered in Genoa, after affairs in Rome, Venice, Genoa... "St John the Baptist"
- Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725) Naples and Rome. Operas and oratorios (115 + 20) One, in honour of the Trinity, is for 5 'voices', i.e. faith, divine love, theology, unfaithfulness and time. "Santa Cecilia" (a 'sacred tragedy') first perf. March 1709, Rome, in oratorio season ending at Easter with Handel's "Resurrection" (he was in Rome 1707-1710) By now, no chorus: 4 soloists (Santa Cecilia lost until mid-20th century: words by Cardinal Ottoboni, patron of arts and music whose granduncle was Pope Alexander 8th).
- Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741). Well-known oratorio "Juditta Triumphans" Judith was one of favourite characters for oratorio, together with other O.T. women, especially in Protestant lands where Catholic saints and doctrine etc. no longer 'usable' as subjects. Operas and oratorios about Judith still appeared in late 20th century.

Baroque Oratorio: Germany

In the glory-age of Venice (late 16th century), most prominent of north-Europeans to go visit/study there was Heinrich Schutz (pupil of Giovanni Gabrieli): big influence on German baroque, introducing Venetian style and methods.

- Heinrich Schutz' developed Lutheran-style liturgical cantatas, built around the sermon on the day's gospel, using Lutheran chorales for congregation participation. His Christmas and Easter "Oratorios" (normally so called) are, rather, extended cantatas for these special feasts.
- J.S.Bach's Christmas and Easter Oratorios: sets of 6 Cantatas for the Holy Days around both seasons. Have Narrator, Persons involved in scene, Chorus, soloists with arias/poetic meditations/recitatives.

COMPOSERS noted or quoted

- c.1550 Emilio de Cavalieri 卡瓦列里 1602
- c.1554 Giovanni Gabrieli 喬望尼·加布里埃利 1612
- 1571 Michael Praetorius 浦雷托流士 1621
- 1567 Claudio Monteverdi 蒙台威爾第 1643
- 1585 Heinrich Schutz 許茨 1672
- 1605 Giacomo Carissimi 卡利西密 1674
- 1639 Alessandro Stradella 司塔德拉 1682
- 1643 Marc Antoine Charpentier 夏邦泰 1704
- 1660 Alessandro Scarlatti 亞力山大·史卡拉第 1725
- 1678 Antonio Vivaldi 韋發第 1741
- 1681 Georg Philip Telemann 泰雷曼 1767
- 1685 George Frederick Handel 韓德爾 1759
- 1685 J.S.Bach 巴赫 1750
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- 1732 Joseph Haydn 海頓 1809
- 1756 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart 莫札特 1791
- 1770 Ludwig von Beethoven 貝多芬 1827
- 1809 Felix Mendelssohn 孟德爾頌 1847
- 1857 Edward Elgar 艾爾嘉 1934
- 1913 Benjamin Britten 布列頓 1976
- 1942 Paul McCartney 保羅麥卡尼