

Dixit Dominus

George Frideric Handel (1685 - 1759)

Dixit Dominus Domino meo
Virgam potentiae tuae
Tecum principatus
Juravit Dominus
Tu es sacerdos
Dominus a dextris tuis
Judicabit in nationibus
De torrente in via bibet
Gloria Patri

Handel was a prodigiously gifted musician who by the time he had reached his twenties was already an experienced composer and performer with an established reputation. Like many ambitious musicians he was drawn to Italy, the birthplace of opera, and so in 1707 he went to Rome for three years, where he hoped to further his career as an opera composer. Though raised in the Lutheran faith, Handel always willingly composed for other denominations and was soon patronised by the Catholic Church in Rome, and by many of the city's principal movers and shakers.

Dixit Dominus is a setting of Psalm 110 (109 in the Latin Vulgate) which Handel composed in 1707, when he was only 22. Along with other Latin psalm settings and motets composed at about the same time, it very probably formed part of a setting of the Carmelite Vespers for the feast of the Madonna del Carmine. The work is in eight movements, scored for five-part chorus, soloists, strings and continuo.

At that time the talents of the finest Italian instrumentalists were regularly on display in the brilliant concertos of Vivaldi, Corelli and others, and singers were similarly able to parade their skills in opera, the exciting new musical theatre that had become all the rage, thanks to composers such as Alessandro Scarlatti and Antonio Caldara. *Dixit Dominus* is a showpiece for both singers and players alike, and whilst its unremitting energy and dramatic intensity presents all the musicians with considerable challenges, the demands that Handel makes on the choir are extremely testing, and seldom equalled in his later works. The piece is an extraordinary *tour-de-force*, particularly for a 22-year-old composer, and demonstrates Handel's precocious mastery of counterpoint, of harmonic and melodic invention and, perhaps most impressively, of powerful dramatic gesture. Clearly, he viewed the commission as an opportunity to display his total command of the Italian style, and so make the most memorable impression possible on his hosts. Not surprisingly, *Dixit Dominus* is regarded as one of his finest works.

It seems likely that the text was originally intended for a coronation, later becoming part of the liturgy for Sunday Vespers and the ordination of priests. It is one of the most frequently referenced psalms, and from early times has been seen as one of the primary portrayals of Christ as prophet, priest and king not only of his own people but of all nations. Nowadays it seems uncomfortably bellicose, but in Handel's time it would have been cheerfully read as a prophecy of Christ's victory not only over his earthly enemies, but also over the devil and all his works.

The psalm is set by Handel to music of exceptional brilliance, the dramatic contrasts within and between movements vividly illustrating and reinforcing the words. The work is unified by a plainsong *cantus firmus* - a melody in greatly extended notes, against which the remaining parts weave decorative lines - which appears in both the opening and closing movements. After the energetic opening chorus comes a simple and elegant alto solo, followed by a beautifully lyrical movement for soprano, built on a repeated triplet figure. The drama resumes in the fourth movement, one of alternating slow and fast sections, the measured 'Juravit Dominus' being notable for its daring chromatic harmony and bold dissonances. The sixth and longest movement combines verses 5 and 6 of the psalm text. The unmistakable influence of Corelli can be heard in the instrumental introduction, with the two violin parts and then the voices constantly overlapping in a series of striking suspensions. The ensuing section, 'Judicabit in nationibus', is a busy *fugato* which appropriately disintegrates at the word 'ruinas'. There follows one of the most remarkable passages in this unique work: a series of percussive chords repeated to the same syllable (a device very reminiscent of Monteverdi) graphically depicts a crushing military victory. The Gloria brings back the *cantus firmus*, this time set against even more brilliant figuration than in the opening movement, and the work closes with an extended and superbly executed fugue.

programme notes by John Bawden

To those using these notes

You are more than welcome to use all or part of these notes for your choral society or church programme, or for educational purposes. Please would you ensure that my authorship is attributed, and would you also kindly advise me by e-mail - info@directoryofchoralmusic.co.uk. If you wish to use these notes for commercial reproduction, e.g. a CD or DVD

liner, please contact me first. Thank you.