

(From the *Leeds Intelligencer*, Saturday September 18 1858)

SATURDAY MORNING, SEPT. 11.

THE MESSIAH.

This, the last performance of the Festival, was the best attended of all. We believe every seat was taken, and both the attendance and the performances were worthy of the great composer and of his greatest work. The programme was allotted as follows: -

PART FIRST

Overture.....		
Recit. accompanied	Comfort ye my people	
Air	Ev'ry valley	} Mr. Sims Reeves.
Chorus	And the glory of the Lord	
Recit. accompanied	Thus saith the Lord	
Air	But who may abide	} Mr.Hinchcliffe.
Chorus	And he shall purify	
Recit.....	Behold, a Virgin shall conceive	
Air and Chorus	O thou that tellest	} Miss Palmer.
Recit. accomp	For behold darkness	
Air	The people that walked in darkness	} Mr. Weiss.
Chorus	For unto us a child is born	
Pastoral Symphony		
Recit.....	There were shepherds	
Recit. accompanied	And lo! The angel of the Lord	
Recit.....	And the angel said unto them	
Recit. accompanied	And suddenly	} Miss Walker.
Chorus	Glory to God in the highest	
Air.....	Rejoice greatly	} Madame C. Novello.
Recit.....	Then shall the eyes of the blind	} Madame C. Novello.
Air	He shall feed his flock	Miss Dolby,
	Come unto him	Madame C. Novello.
Chorus	His yoke is easy	

PART SECOND

Chorus	Behold the Lamb of God	
Air.....	He was despised	Miss Dolby.
Chorus	Surely He hath borne our griefs	
Chorus	And with His stripes	
Chorus	All we like sheep	
Recit. accomp	All they that see him	Mr. Sims Reeves.
Chorus	He trusted in God	
Recit. accomp	Thy rebuke hath broken His heart	
Air.....	Behold, and see	} Mr. Sims Reeves.
Recit.....	He was cut off	
Air.....	But thou didst not leave	} Mrs Sunderland.
Chorus	Lift up your heads	
Recit.....	Unto which of the Angels	} Mr. Sims Reeves.
Chorus	Let all the Angels of God	
Chorus	The Lord gave the word	
Air.....	How beautiful are the feet	} Madame Weiss.
Chorus	Their sound is gone out	

Air	Why do the nations	Mr Weiss
Chorus	Let us break their bonds	
Recit.....	He that dwelleth in Heaven	
Air	Thou shalt break them	} Mr. Sims Reeves.
Chorus	Hallelujah	

PART THIRD

Air	I know that my redeemer	} Madame C. Novello
Chorus	Since by man came death	
	By man came also	
	For as in Adam all die	
	Even so in Christ	
Recit. accomp	Behold, I tell you a mystery	
Air	The trumpet shall sound	} Mr Wine (Trumpet obligato, Mr. T. Harper.) Mrs. Sunderland.
Air	If God be for us	
Chorus	Worthy is the Lamb	
Chorus	Amen	

Before noticing the performance we recur to a subject we have already mentioned – the insertion in the performance of a solitary piece, “If God be for us,” without the accompanying portions of the episode of which it forms a part. If the whole work had been given “uncurtailed”, of course we should not have had a word to say in objection, but it is seldom, if ever, given complete, and certainly not so in this instance. The usual, and long established manner of giving the St. Paul episode is to proceed to the middle of the trumpet song, and then omitting the rest, to take up the chorus “Worthy is the Lamb”. This omitted portion consists of the duet, “Oh death, where is thy sting,” the chorus “Our thanks be to God,” and the air, “If God be for us;” – all relating to the same subject, and so blended together that if one be given, all ought. The customary omission does not mutilate the oratorio, for the transition from the point where the trumpet song stops, “We shall be changed” to the chorus, “Worthy is the Lamb,” is perfectly natural and consistent; but the insertion of any one of the three pieces is not so. Now although we do not admire the curtailment of the *Messiah*, the whole oratorio has been found so exhausting, that the attention requisite to the audience has compelled the shortening process, and this has been skilfully effected.

If it were our lot to describe the performance of the *Messiah* at a festival in the West Riding, as defective and unsatisfactory, in the choral portions at least, we should have a very poor account to give of any other performance in which the chorus took a part. It has long been said that the *Messiah* is the national oratorio, and such is the case; but more than this, it is peculiarly the oratorio of the West Riding of Yorkshire. It is the music text-book of the Riding. There is not a country choir that has not given the grand choruses over and over again; there is not a village church where some aspiring soprano has not essayed “I know that my Redeemer liveth,” and some ambitious tenor tried his powers with “Comfort ye my people.” It would be surprising then if we had to complain of the execution of the *Messiah* in the West Riding, at a great festival; nay more, it would be surprising if that execution were not such as to astonish the ears of strangers, unaccustomed to the fresh hearty voices of our smoky vales chanting with fervid feeling the divine strains of the great composer. Upon this occasion we have no cause for surprise. The astonishment is all on the other side. The visitors gaze in silent wonder as the tremendous basses pour out their mighty voice, as the trebles ring clearly a prolonged note so high that it seems to the unsophisticated impossible to be reached, as the sweet altos and pure tenors send forth their beautiful melodies with a fullness and richness of tone that perfectly enchant the admiring listener. “What lungs they have got,” says a metropolitan critic by our side, as the “Hallelujah” peals forth; “Now in London that band would be balanced rather above than under the chorus, and we have more voices at Exeter Hall than you have here, but then they are not such voices. One would think smoke a capital thing for the lungs, to hear them. There, listen to that!” Our metropolitan friend was right; they have not *such* voices in town. As to the smoke question

we do not pretend to judge, but they have a trifle of that commodity in the adjoining county, and a critic from Manchester makes the candid confession, "We can do nothing like this in Lancashire." Here our metropolitan friend chimes in again: "I have heard all the great choirs of the continent, as well as in England, but I never heard anything like this – there is nothing like it in Europe." We suggest "Birmingham?" "Files and tin cans," says he. We venture further – "Norwich?" "Cockneys," he exclaims doggedly, as if to demolish every claim of the good people of Norfolk. We say "um," and try to look modest, and as if we were not intensely gratified; and so the conversation is carried on throughout the performance, every new telling point, and they quickly succeed each other, renewing our friend's excitement.

We felt all this before, but it would perhaps have appeared egotistical to say it, and therefore we prefer to give the exact words addressed to us, rather than express our own opinion. They will be gratifying to the chorus singers of the West Riding as the candid acknowledgement of parties who had no motive for praising them, but who could not withhold the praise which they felt was due. Our quotations are fair samples of many opinions we have heard, all of them laudatory, but some of them so high flown that we may not repeat them. Every one, nearly, who heard the *Messiah* this morning will admit the justice of the laudation we have reported. The band, powerful as it was, was literally nowhere when the full swell of the voices burst forth : even the organ was drowned in the great volume of human melody. But magnificent as the performance, taken as a whole, was, there were a few short-comings which we had not expected from the West Riding chorus. We make some allowance for the fact that there was no rehearsal, a fact which completed the astonishment of our metropolitan friend, but we don't admit that as an excuse for the basses being late in commencing the chorus, "The Lord gave the word," nor for some unsteadiness which the altos exhibited in "And He shall purify." The trebles also in the first part were somewhat weak, a defect afterwards made up for; while the tenors in the forte passages were unable to cope with the great volume of the basses. This, of course, was not their fault, but their misfortune; yet we must say that the balance of voices was more even than in the *Elijah* on Wednesday morning.

The *Messiah* has been so often reviewed in these columns that we shall on this occasion merely refer to the more salient points of the performance. After the overture, which was given with great finish, Mr. Reeves began the recitative, "Comfort ye my people." The execution of this passage was perfect, and we trust was attended to by those local leaders of choirs who produce it at home. The marked distinction of tone between the actually spoken words, and those describing them, as "Saith your God" was a study for those who are in the habit, and it is almost invariably the case, of going through the whole recitative as if all the words were spoken ones. We have often been annoyed with this error by singers of some repute, who fail to distinguish between the words describing the action, and those put into the mouth of the prophet, but Mr. Sims Reeves very carefully discriminates between them, and we recommend his reading to rising tenors. The air "Every Valley," was a magnificent exhibition of skill and power, and the recitatives in the second part allotted to Mr. Reeves were given with the most delicate pathos. "Thou shalt break them" was the only other air which Mr. Reeves sang, but it was a great one, though in one part he got slightly out of time. He quickly recovered, however, and the burst of applause which greeted the conclusion was a deserved tribute to the artist's performance. The next soloist was Mr. Hinchcliffe in the recitative, "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts," and the air, "But who may abide?" We cannot congratulate this gentleman, for although he sang correctly, he sang stiffly, and the execution was rather a singing lesson, than one worthy of a great festival. The "refiner's fire" was greatly deficient in energy, and altogether the piece was not pleasing. We must here mention the delicate accompaniment of the violins, in the recitative especially, and more especially to the words, "I will shake all nations." Nothing could be finer or more exquisite. Miss Palmer had the misfortune to be accompanied too loudly in the air, "Oh, thou that tallest," but she sang with much force and great feeling, and with an accuracy to the score which even more ambitious vocalists might well emulate. Mr. Weiss took the recitative, "For, behold, darkness," much too slowly, and the succeeding air wanted expression. In the second part this deficiency was amended, and the grand air, "Why do the nations?" though not faultless, was really a splendid piece of vocalisation. The recitatives

after the pastoral symphony were given by Miss Helena Walker with much taste, and especially we may note the words "a Saviour," in the third recitative, which was beautifully rendered. We remarked that this young lady, who gives promise of much future excellence, recited her words, and did not sing them, after a very absurd practice which is but too prevalent. In this respect there was scarcely a single vocalist who might not have profited by the example.

The next solo performer was Madame Clara Novello, who was in excellent voice, and sang "Rejoice" as no one, perhaps, excepting herself, can sing it. Equally great was she in the duet with Miss Dolby, while the opening air of the third part, "I know that my Redeemer liveth," was the gem of the whole oratorio, its only drawback being that in some parts the accompaniment was rather too loud. Miss Dolby executed her portion of the duet with great success, and her rendering of the air, "He was despised," was truly tender, touching, and pathetic. Mrs. Sunderland sang with very great taste and finish in both her pieces, and was warmly cheered. Madame Weiss produced her best effort on "How beautiful are the feet," and Mr. Winn very pleasingly astonished his friends with his splendid delivery of the trumpet song, which was brilliantly accompanied by Mr. T. Harper.

Of the Band we can only speak in terms of unqualified praise, and with the exceptions we have mentioned the performance of the chorus was all that could be desired. Almost every chorus was a triumph, and in the midst of so many performances, it is impossible to fix upon any as the one crowning act of the choir.

At the conclusion a verse of the National Anthem was given, and then rose a tremendous shout for Dr. Bennett, the conductor. We must here express our opinion that the conducting of the festival could not have been placed in more able hands. Throughout all the performances the marks of his energy and talent have been perceptible, and although of the great oratorios his reading of the *Elijah* was perhaps the more finished, he did not fail to render justice to the genius of Handel. One particular piece we must notice, because, in consequence of the erroneous reading of M. Costa, and others who have followed his example, there was some danger of having a magnificent production spoiled for a time. We refer to the chorus, "For unto us a Child is born." To produce a great contrast at the word "Wonderful," M. Costa has been in the habit of taking the introductory passages very pianissimo, quite contrary both to the meaning of the words and of the music ; but Dr. Bennett begins the jubilant song with a cheerful allegro, and when the word "Wonderful" bursts forth there is quite sufficient contrast to mark it.

Dr. Bennett having made his acknowledgements to the audience and the chorus, the latter wildly showing that their voices were not exhausted, cheers were called for the Mayor, and heartily responded to.

Sir Peter Fairbairn returned thanks, and especially thanked the visitors, both for himself and the people of Leeds, for the support they had given to the Festival.

This concluded the proceedings and the company separated. We cannot close this notice of the Festival performances without paying a well-merited acknowledgement to the services of the chorus master, Mr. R. S. Burton ; whose unceasing zeal and constant assiduity have produced in the choir an efficiency so excellent as to call forth most laudatory tributes from all who heard them, and to excite profound astonishment in the minds of all who had hitherto been unaccustomed to listen to Yorkshire voices. Great and pleasing as is the effect to the audiences, few can estimate the care, and labour, and ability required to obtain the desiderated completeness in a choir of upward two hundred persons not accustomed to sing together, but to act under the control of their various local leaders. To combine and harmonise their voices, in different detachments and at different times and places, without having the opportunity of bringing them all together ; to instruct them so that they shall adopt one reading for all ; this is the laborious task of the chorus master, and it is one which Mr. Burton has performed with remarkable success : for it must be borne in mind, as an additional tribute to his attentive vigilance and earnest ability, that very many of the choruses, as in the *Stabat Mater*, the *Passions-Musik*, the *Mount of Olives*, the *Seasons*, and

May Queen, were perfectly new to the singers, and therefore required not merely watchfulness to correct mistakes previously conceived, but sterling instruction from the beginning.

Messrs. H. Smart and W. Spark presided alternately at the organ with great ability.

Although some of the arrangements of the Committee were open to, at least, serious disputation, the thanks of the company are justly due to the gentlemen whose names are subjoined, and who acted as stewards upon the occasion for their great attention and courtesy : - Mr. J. W. Atkinson, Mr. H. Armfield, Mr. Geo. Brook, Mr. Geo. Buckton, Mr. Henry Dawson, Mr. J. N. Dickinson, Mr. E. C. Dray, Mr. Thos. Eagland, Mr. Joseph Gill, Mr. J. W. Hill, Mr. Joseph Holt, Mr. Wm. Illingworth, Mr. Fred. Ingham, Mr. George Jay, Mr. Walker Joy, Mr. James Kitson, jun., Mr. Chas. G. Maclea, Mr. Julian Marshall, Mr. David Newton, Mr. John Latimer, Mr. John Piper, Mr. Geo. Smith, Mr George Alderson Smith, Mr. J. A. Williams ; and to Mr. Fred Spark, the secretary.

Finally, although objections have been taken to some of the regulations of the Committee, still, when we consider the great amount of difficult labour imposed upon them, we must make due allowances, and when that is done there is little left for objurgation and a great deal for praise. Some trifling shortcomings there must ever be on such occasions, while they have the grand satisfaction of having both deserved and obtained the reward of merit, a grand and triumphant success.

The following have attended some or the whole of the performances: - His Grace the Archbishop of York, J. W. Childers, Esq., High Sheriff of Yorkshire, Lord Hawke, Lord Londesborough, Countess of Essex, Lord Goderich, Sir Thomas Beckett, Lady Ingilby and Miss Ingilby, Lady Mary Viner, Sir John Lowther, Sir Peter and [...*long list of names in order of rank.*]

Transcribed May 2008