

# Tafelmusik

Handel *Dixit Dominus*

NOVEMBER 11 - 14, 2010

## PROGRAMME NOTES

ACCORDING TO THE BAROQUE FRENCH LEXICOGRAPHER Sébastien de Brossard, “motet” is the name given to “all pieces written on Latin Texts on any subject whatsoever, such as the praising of Saints, the Elevations, even entire Psalms.” He goes on to say that “it is a musical composition which is fully figured and enriched with all that is finest in the art of composition.” In France, the *petit motet*, with one, two or three solo voices and continuo, was contrasted with the *grand motet*, with solo voices, choir and orchestra. The *grand motet* was typically a psalm setting, in which the various verses were presented as individual movements, alternating solo voices, solo ensembles, and choruses. When the Concert Spirituel – a concert series meant to provide entertainment during Lent and on religious holidays when the opera was closed – was founded in Paris in 1725, the *grand motet* was a staple of the concert programmes, paired with brilliant symphonies and concertos. The surviving autograph score of **Rameau’s** *grand motet* “*In convertendo*,” a setting of Psalm 126, was prepared for three performances at the Concert Spirituel during Lent in 1751. Jean-Philippe Rameau was at the height of his career as the leading opera composer in Paris, and the news of the upcoming motet performances kept “all Paris occupied with this novelty for fifteen days.” In the end, his colleagues were dismayed that he deigned to present an “old motet of about 40 years ago.” Indeed, the original version of *In convertendo* is thought to have been composed between 1713 and 1715, when Rameau was employed as organist at the Dominican convent in Lyon. Although pieces composed 40 years ago are still considered quite “modern” today, in the 18th century they were veritable antiques. The criticism, however, was quite shallow. Although the score of the original version has not survived, it is clear from the 1751 manuscript that Rameau did extensive revisions, rewriting entire sections, and imbuing the work with many of the instrumental and vocal colours found in his “modern” operas.

The other two works on the programme find their inspiration in Rome. The city and its musicians drew many visitors throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, among them many curious and gifted composers. Two of the most renowned were Charpentier and Handel, both of whom studied in Rome as young men. Baroque Rome was a city of great contrasts, ranging from the overcrowded dwellings of the general population, then numbering some 150,000, and the decayed grandeur of the ruins of ancient Rome, to the splendour of the great baroque churches, piazzas and palaces. Although the city was under the rule of the Pope, a great deal of power and influence was held by certain wealthy families. The often conservative attitude of the reigning Pope towards art and music was balanced by the generous patronage of Romans such as the Cardinals Ottoboni, Pamphili and Colonna, Prince Ruspoli, and the exiled Queens Christina of Sweden and Maria Casimira of Poland, each of whom employed a substantial household of musicians.

The nineteen-year old Parisian **Marc-Antoine Charpentier** left for Rome in 1662, staying for some five years and studying primarily with Giacomo Carissimi. The *Salve Regina* was not written until a few years after his return to Paris, but the Roman influences are clear in this and many other of Charpentier’s choral works. It is scored for three choirs: two four-part choirs, and a third solo trio of three male voices (the *exules*, or exiles), all three supported by continuo players. The polychoral texture was rare in France, but common in Rome and Venice, undoubtedly inspired by the cities’ magnificent churches. Charpentier melded French and Italian style to

develop a musical voice that was absolutely unique: a harmonic language that was luxuriously French and audaciously Italian, and an expressiveness that combined French subtlety with Italian naturalness.

**George Frederic Handel** arrived in Rome from his native Saxony at the age of 22, in 1707, and was immediately embraced by the Romans. Although he had come to Italy with opera foremost in his mind, the fact that his sojourn began in Rome, where opera was forbidden by papal decree, meant that the first music he composed in Italy was in fact sacred choral music. It is extraordinary, and proof of Handel's remarkable talents, that the young Lutheran was able to procure so swiftly the enthusiastic patronage of three cardinals (Ottoboni, Pamphili and Colonna) and a marquis (Ruspoli) – and that he was permitted to play the organ of one of the great churches of Mother Rome soon after his arrival. It has been conjectured that Handel was contemplating conversion to Roman Catholicism, but this is flatly denied by Handel's first biographer, John Mainwaring:

*As he was familiar with so many of the Sacred Order, and of a persuasion so totally repugnant to theirs, it is natural to imagine that some of them would expostulate with him on that subject. For how could these good Catholics be supposed to bear him any real regard, without endeavouring to lead him out of the road to damnation? Being pressed very closely on this article by one of these exalted Ecclesiastics, he replied, that he was neither qualified, nor disposed to enter into enquiries of this sort, but was resolved to die a member of that communion, whether true or false, in which he was born and bred.*

Cardinal Colonna was the first to commission sacred music from “il Sassone,” asking him to provide music for a very Catholic occasion, the 1707 festival of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, celebrated each July in the Roman church of the Carmelite order, S. Maria di Monte Santo. The feast was in honour of the Virgin Mary as patroness of the Carmelites, and the major services were First Vespers on the eve, and Mass and Second Vespers on the day. The music was on a very lavish scale and was entirely financed by Colonna.

The psalm setting ***Dixit Dominus*** was among the works composed by Handel for the festival. An exhilarating “concerto” for voices and strings, it was completed in April 1707, a few short months after Handel's arrival in Italy. The extreme technical demands placed on both the vocal and instrumental forces reflect the young Handel's excitement at having arrived in this land of virtuoso singers and players. It was clearly a work meant to impress, and it is a mark of Handel's genius that in such a short time he was able not simply to master Italian sacred style, but also to grasp the spirit, imagination and vigour of the Italian baroque. *Dixit Dominus* is often cited as the first of Handel's great choral *tours de force*. When Felix Mendelssohn first visited England in 1829 he borrowed the autograph score to make a fair copy – it is said that he kissed the score before replacing it on the shelf.