Chapter 11: Class of 1685 (II): The Vocal Music of Handel and Bach

I. Handel
A. Introduction
   1. In every idiom, Handel’s music is imbued with aspects of music for theater.
   2. In the early eighteenth century, opera tended to be formulaic, which made it possible to compose quite a few in a short period.
   3. Handel’s *Giulio Cesare* is a prime example of the composer’s operatic style, written at the height of his career (1724).
   4. The aria “Empio, diró, tu sei” contains several exciting aspects of what Handel could do within a da capo aria.
   5. Handel eventually fell out of favor with London audiences, who came to prefer the lighter works.

B. Lofty Entertainments
   1. As his operas declined in popularity, Handel realized that he would need a new outlet to continue his career in England. He returned to the genre of oratorio.
      a. A performance of *Esther* in 1732 showed Handel that there was public interest in such works.
      b. His *Saul* (1739) introduced a new type of oratorio, now known as the Handelian oratorio.
      c. *Israel in Egypt* (later in 1739) moved the genre further away from opera in its lack of personal dramatic action in favor of colorful choruses that supply the narrative.

C. Messiah
   1. The *Messiah* includes aspects associated with Handel’s other works, but it differs in its New Testament subject.
   2. Handel composed *Messiah* supposedly in twenty-four days.
   3. It has never gone out of the repertory—an unusual feat—although it took a few years to gain true popularity.

D. “Borrowing”
   1. Handel’s alarming speed in composing *Messiah* was due in part to being able to recycle pre-composed music.
   2. Such borrowing was common, and Handel partook frequently.
      a. Almost half of *Israel in Egypt* derives from works by other composers.
      b. Some scholars have attributed Handel’s numerous borrowings in the 1730s to a stroke in 1737.
      c. Others comment that it was not until the nineteenth century that modern ideas about copyright came into being, and to apply them to Handel is unfair.
   3. Handel borrowed extensively from himself in *Messiah*.
      a. Such borrowing explains why some of the choruses are so difficult: They were originally intended for soloists.
      b. Modern attitudes tend to see *Messiah* as church music, but for Handel such was not the case.
II. Bach
A. Bach’s Cantatas
   1. Bach’s contemporaries considered his sacred vocal music to be his chief contribution.
   2. Unlike Handel’s, Bach’s vocal music was intended for church.
   3. He adopted some of the dramatic devices associated with opera.
   4. Texts published by Neumeister altered the traditional biblical verses associated with chorales into little poems that contained an emotional response to the texts, functionally as arias do.
   5. Of the Bach cantatas: They include both secular and sacred; most follow operatic conventions of recit/aria (da capo) mixed in with chorale settings.

B. Death Set to Music
   1. Bach’s cantata Christ lag in Todesbanden (BWV 4) dates from early in his career.
   2. The work consists of variations on the chorale, and the text matches the chorale exactly.
   3. Each verse is set differently.

C. What Music Is For
   2. Enlightenment writers saw music as something that was pleasant, gratifying, and improving, but ultimately unnecessary.
   3. Bach’s view was vastly different—he belonged to an earlier era when music could persuade and reveal. If what he wished to convey was positive, the music conveyed that. But if he was after a different emotion or reaction, Bach could write very disturbing music that is difficult to accept as “pleasing.”

D. Bach’s “Testaments”
   1. Bach’s most familiar religious works are the large-scale works: Passions and the Mass in B Minor, which became part of the concert repertory in the nineteenth century.
   2. The Passion oratorios were written for church use, for Good Friday, in the 1720s.
      a. They are semi-dramatic works with character roles, such as the Evangelist, and the chorus often acts as the “crowd.”
      b. Reflective arias interrupt the action (which takes place in recitatives).
   3. The Passions are the closest pieces to opera that Bach wrote.
      a. St. John is more like an opera in its drama.
      b. St. Matthew is more contemplative.

E. Cursed Questions
   1. When nineteenth-century performers resurrected Bach’s vocal music, they did so in a context far removed from that in which it was created.
   2. One obvious issue in the St. John Passion text is the way the Jews were treated.

III. Scarlatti
A. Scarlatti, at Last
   1. Scarlatti aesthetically belongs in the Enlightenment.
2. Precocious son of Alessandro Scarlatti, Domenico spent most of career on the Iberian Peninsula.
   a. In Madrid he was free to compose whatever he wished—which was mostly keyboard music, specifically harpsichord.
   b. His creative spirit unbound by rules, he invented a new type of composition that he called “ingenious jesting with art.”
   c. His works require instrumental virtuosity and are visually exciting.
3. The lack of symbolism in the sonatas places them in the tradition of seventeenth-century Italian instrumental music.
4. Formally, the sonatas follow a modern format.
5. Scarlatti found his stride as a composer relatively late in life (early fifties), and his works, while recognized as unique and original, more properly belong to the next generation of composers, rather than that of Bach and Handel.