

# SOME THOUGHTS ON POPS

By Liveryman Christopher Hogwood C.B.E.

FOR MANY YEARS NOW I have been collecting concert programmes, or at least details of concert-giving, that cover the last 200 years or so. In part this is just my natural antiquarian instincts coming out – I can't bear to pass over any piece of recorded information, especially if it is about music, from any period. It has also turned out to be useful when trying to alleviate the gloomy situation of the typical concert programming with which we are cursed today, and to try and initiate some revival of earlier systems of allocating repertoire. But in the process, it has shown me just how variable is public taste – if indeed it is public taste that determines concert planning – and how much the demands of concert life have actually influenced the output of composers.

Without the voracious public appetite for demonstrations of pianistic skills based on popular operatic medleys, we would never have had the Lisztian paraphrases of Mozart, Rossini and Bellini; without the English public's appreciation of the "naive" slow movement melody and the "military-allegro" manner, Haydn would not have continued with the style that makes his London symphonies so exceptional. Without public (and impresario) demands for a deliberately popular piece, Bartok would not have been prevailed upon to produce the *Concerto for Orchestra*.

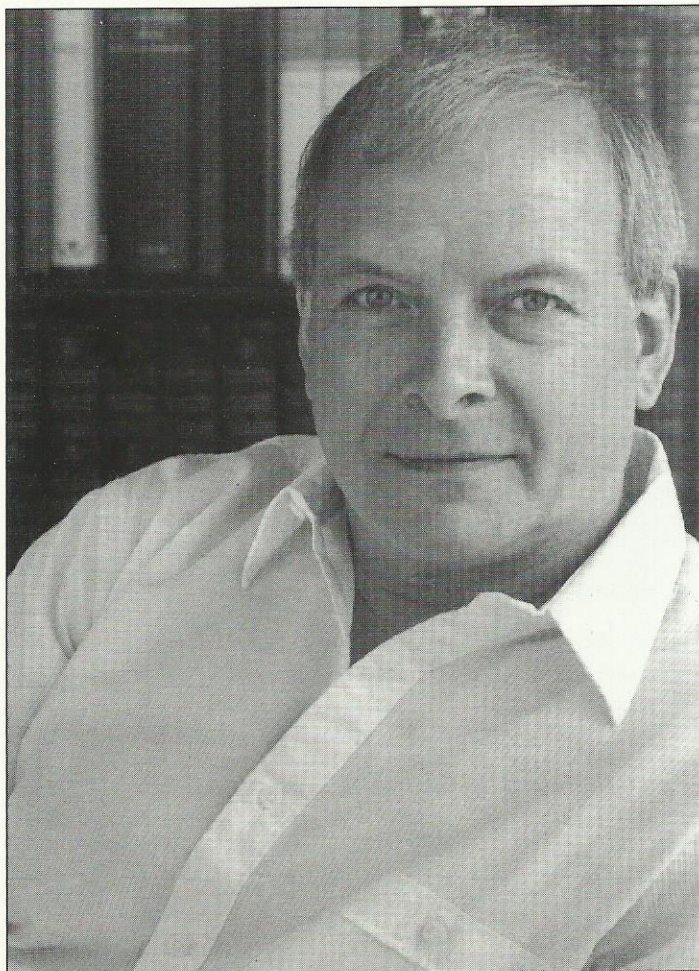
On the other hand, if the public had only shown more enthusiasm for Mozart's first two piano quartets, his publisher would not have decided to cancel the rest of the order with the excuse that "the public found the work too difficult and would not buy it". He did, however, have the decency to let Mozart retain the advance for the whole set, on condition that he did not write the remaining contracted works!

Popularity does not necessarily imply a lengthy pedigree; the over-wrought Pachelbel *Canon* was hardly known at the

beginning of this century, Vivaldi was a non-starter (even the *Four Seasons* were described as "infantile") until the 1930s when Ezra Pound took up the cause of having his works put into print. As for the "*Albinoni Adagio*", this popular "baroque" piece is the work of one Remo Giazzoto, who died only a year or so ago in Italy.

The question of what constitutes popularity is one that teases everyone concerned with planning concert series today. There will always be a faction who cannot conceive a year without Beethoven 5 and the Grieg Piano Concerto; there will always be those who sigh and ask "Why *Messiah* again?". There are, luckily for London, a majority of music-lovers here who admit the need (commercial as well as cultural) to retain an acquaintance with the most established masterpieces, while still counterbalancing them with what is rather slackly called "experimental" repertoire; this would cover Machaut, Schumann, Gesualdo, Poulenc and Tom Adès – although how many of these is strictly speaking an experimenter? (I should report that my Macintosh spelling checker has just pulled me up to suggest that Machaut should read Machiavelli, and Gesualdo should be replaced by Gestapo! So much for the cultural leanings of Silicon Valley...). Some few works, of course, appear to be immune to the fickleness of popular fashion – and none more so than *Messiah*. Handel's most famous, though least typical oratorio, has firmly refused to leave the top ten since the time it was written; but it has undergone some fairly radical transformations in order to retain its public presence. Rather like the aging starlet taking plastic surgery every other year to ensure that neck and nose match up to the latest requirements, so *Messiah* has been given the gargantuan treatment (2765 singers and nearly five hundred orchestral members for the Crystal Palace in 1859), with adaptations and added wind parts (by Mozart) to meet the private taste of aristocratic Vienna in 1789, and more recently in either the "choral/social" manner (lots of well-drilled singers sipping weekly coffee, a hastily rehearsed orchestra giving their normal *seconda vista* reading) or the "historically-respectful" school (lots of cadenzas and baroque oboes, little anything else). Maybe the continuum of *Messiah* will turn out to be one of the touchstones of taste; certainly there can be little expectation, statistically speaking, that any one year's version will be the last word. However, my hopes that the more elephantine days are over are heightened by noting that George Bernard Shaw's feelings and arguments of almost a century ago are as vivid and valid now, and as ferocious a defence of the "historically aware" *Messiah* as you are ever going to find.

"People think that four thousand singers must be four thousand times as impressive as one. This is a mistake: they are not even louder. You can hear the footsteps of four thousand people any day in the Rue de Rivoli – I mention it because it is the only street in Paris known to English tourists – but they are not so impressive as the march of a single well-trained actor down the stage of the Théâtre Français. It might as well be said that four thousand starving men are four thousand times as hungry as one, for four thousand slim *ingénues* four thousand times as slim as one. You can get a tremendously powerful *fortissimo* from twenty good singers... because you can get twenty people into what is for practical purposes the same spot; but all the efforts of the conductors to get a *fortissimo* from the four thousand Handel Festival choristers are in vain; they occupy too large a space; and even when the conductor succeeds in making them sing a note simultaneously, no person can hear them simultaneously, because the sound takes an appreciable time to travel along a battle front four thousand strong; and in rapid passages the semiquaver of the singer farthest from you does not reach you until that of the singer nearest you has passed you by. If I were a member of the House of Commons, I would propose a law making it a capital offence to perform an oratorio by Handel with more than eighty performers in the chorus and orchestra, allowing forty-eight singers and thirty-two instruments."



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