

Coronation anthems

George Frideric Handel (1685 - 1759)

Zadok the priest
Let thy hand be strengthened
My heart is inditing
The King shall rejoice

There are relatively few pieces of music which in the space of a few bars are capable of evoking the mood of ceremony and patriotism associated with England's great State occasions. Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* marches and Walton's *Orb and Sceptre* and *Crown Imperial* marches come to mind, but Handel's magnificent *Coronation Anthems* were amongst the earliest to capture the true spirit of such events.

The coronation of George II took place in Westminster Abbey on 11th October 1727. (It had been planned for October 4th, but was postponed for a week because of the threat of floods in the area). At the King's insistence, it was Handel who was invited to compose the anthems for this momentous state occasion rather than Maurice Greene, recently appointed as Organist and Composer to the Chapel Royal in succession to William Croft, who had died that August. It must have come as a shock to Greene to hear that he had been passed over in favour of Handel, a German renowned at that time primarily for his Italian operas (it was another ten years before Handel, faced with bankruptcy from the increasing losses incurred by his Italian opera company, turned his attention instead to oratorio). No doubt Greene would have assumed, quite reasonably, that as composer designate to the Chapel Royal he would be commissioned to write the music. Not surprisingly, a considerable degree of ill-feeling ensued between the two men. The story clearly reveals the immense standing that Handel enjoyed at Court. He was even allowed to select his own texts, rather than have that task performed for him by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The music was planned on a grand scale. From contemporary documents we know that 47 singers and at least 92 instrumentalists, possibly as many as 160, were assembled for the Coronation - an exceptionally large group of musicians by any standards.

Zadok the priest is the first and arguably the most dramatic of the four anthems, and has been sung at every coronation since its first performance in 1727. It has three short movements. *Let thy hand* is more extended, with a lyrical central movement and a rousing 'Alleluia' to end with. *My heart is inditing* is noticeably more reflective in character than its companion pieces. *The King shall rejoice* is the grandest and most extensive of the set. It has four contrasting movements concluding, predictably but none the less effectively, with another exhilarating 'Alleluia'.

programme notes by John Bawden

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