

George Friedrich Handel

Music for the Carmelites

On the Occasion of the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel 1707

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Introduction

In early 1707 a young, talented, and then relatively unknown Georg Friedrich Händel (hereafter *G.F. Handel* or just *Handel*) arrived in Rome. He had come to Italy at the invitation of Prince Ferdinand de' Medici and while there came under the patronage of several important patrons. Through these generous patrons, he acquired a commission to compose music for the Carmelite feast in July dedicated to the Madonna of Carmel.

The topic of G.F. Handel's music for the Carmelites in Rome has been addressed by many authors in recent decades. The settings have been critiqued from their musical composition to their place within the Catholic Vespers and Mass for the feast day that year. But, one piece of information seems shockingly absent from all modern scholarship thus far. That year, in 1707, the feast day fell on a Saturday. Being located that year prior to Sunday in the weekly calendar, there is a possibility that there wasn't a Second Vespers, as has been assumed thus far. If that is the case, then the liturgical construction, and Handel's role in it, would in fact be very different than what is currently perceived.

G.F. Handel

G.F. Handel was born February 23, 1685 in Halle, in modern day Germany, and was baptized on the next day¹. He was the son of a court barber-surgeon who wanted his son to study law. It was soon discovered, however, that G.F. Handel had a prodigious talent for music. Thus impressing the Duke of Saxe-Weisenfels with his emerging musical skills, the Duke convinced Handel's father to allow him to study music with a certain Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow. Under Zachow's tutelage, Handel gained proficiency in the art of music, being brought up to enjoy a career as a musician for the Lutheran

¹ Hogwood, Christopher, *Handel*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), pg. 11.

community. In 1703, Handel abandoned the path he had been set upon and moved to Hamburg, the center for German opera at the time, to make a name for himself. It was there that he wrote his first successful opera, *Almira*.

While Handel was starting his musical career in Hamburg, he came to the attention of Prince Ferdinand de' Medici, a great lover of art², who subsequently invited the young Handel to Italy. It seems that Handel was at first reluctant to acquiesce to the Prince's kindness, but was finally persuaded to travel to Italy.³ It is during his Italian journey that he wrote his music for the Carmelites, which is the subject of this paper.

After staying in Italy for four years, he traveled briefly back to Germany, to the court in Hanover, and then to London, where he remained the rest of his life. It was during this latter period that Handel wrote the music for which he is most famous for, including the *Messiah*.

Handel and the Carmelites

When Handel first arrived in Rome, in January of 1707, he very quickly came to the attention of very important patrons. This is noted by Francesco Valesio, who wrote in his diary about Handel's organ performance at Saint John Lateran Church, the Patriarchal Basilica of the Pope:

“...There is lately arrived in this city a Saxon who is a most excellent player upon the harpsichord and composer of music and today made great pomp of his virtue in playing upon the organ in the Church of San Giovanni to the amazement of all...”⁴

Through his musical abilities, Handel quickly came under the patronage of several important patrons, of whom one was Carlo Cardinal Colonna.

² Hogwood, Christopher, *Handel*, (New York: Thames and Hudson 1985), pg. 31.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nolan, O.Carm., Simon, “Carmel and Music II: Handel's Music for the Carmelites”, *Carmel in the World*, Volume 42, Number 1, 2003.

Cardinal Colonna was accustomed to providing the very best in pomp and circumstance for the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which feast day was July 16, and was held at the Church of Santa Maria di Monte Santo, the Church being under the custodial care of the Carmelite Order of the Ancient Observance (O.Carm.). In the course of these celebrations, there would be parades and processions through the Piazza del Popolo – where the Church was located – and the finest and latest in music from the best composers available at the time.

The Carmelites

The Carmelite Family traces its origins back to Elijah the Prophet (1 & 2 Kings) and his successor Elisha. In the modern period, they were founded when a group of hermits gathered together on Mount Carmel to live a holy life of allegiance to Jesus Christ.⁵ In the early 13th century, Saint Brocard approached the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Saint Albert of Jerusalem, to write a rule of life for the many hermits that had gathered together to form a community on Mount Carmel. The Patriarch wrote a rule, which was approved and confirmed – with some minor alterations and mitigations – by Pope Innocent IV in 1247.

In the middle to late 16th century, a reform grew out of the Carmelites in Spain, which aim was to return to a more contemplative form of life. It was lead by Saint Teresa of Avila and her good friend Saint John of the Cross. By the turn of the 17th century, there were two Carmelite Orders, those who remained in the original order, known as the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance (also known as Calced Carmelites – O.Carm.), and those who followed the reforms of Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross, known as Discalced Carmelites (also known as Teresian Carmelites – O.C.D.).

In Rome, there was a group of Carmelites of the Ancient Observance who desired to live their

⁵ Rule of Saint Albert, 2.

lives in closer keeping with Carmelite identity. Father Simon Nolan, O.Carm tells us that they “sought to reform their way of life by living a stricter observance in keeping with the 'primitive rule' of the order (the rule of Saint Albert as mitigated by Pope Innocent IV). The main emphasis of the new reform was the necessity of prayer in solitude. Broadly speaking the reformers sought to emulate the Discalced Carmelite reform while remaining part of the [O.Carm] order as a whole.”⁶

It was these Calced Carmelite reformers who had custody of the Church of Santa Maria di Monte Santo. It was these Calced Carmelite reformers who Carlo Cardinal Colonna provided lavish ceremonies for their Solemnity every year. It was these Calced Carmelite reformers who G.F. Handel wrote music for in 1707.

Vespers

In the Catholic Church, the Liturgy of the Hours (also known as the Divine Office) is aimed toward “the sanctification of the day of the whole range of human activity”⁷. The Liturgy of the Hours divides the day into seven canonical hours, which at the time Handel wrote his music for the Carmelites were – Matins with Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline. Vespers serves as one of the principal hours and is reckoned to be of the highest importance.⁸

Vespers consists of various Psalms, Antiphons, Responses, Hymns, etc. in number and order in accordance to the rite in which it is being celebrated. A rite is a distinct liturgical, theological, spiritual, and disciplinary patrimony.⁹ The Carmelites of the Ancient Observance followed the Carmelite Rite (also known as the Rite of the Holy Sepulchre (Jerusalem)) at the time Handel wrote his music for them.

6 Nolan, O.Carm., Simon, “Carmel and Music II: Handel's Music for the Carmelites”, *Carmel in the World*, Volume 42, Number 1, 2003.

7 Catholic Church, *Liturgy of the Hours: According to the Roman Rite*, (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1975), Vol. 1, pg. 28.

8 Ibid, pgs. 41-43.

9 Catholic Church, *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium*, (Vatican City: S. Congregatio Pro Ecclesia Orientali, 1990), canon 28.; Catholic Church, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, (Vatican City: Vatican Publishing House, 1964), no. 3.

Vespers for the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel – 1707

In the sixteenth century, there was a revision decreed by Pope Gregory XIII of the Julian Calendar to make it more astronomically accurate. So when Handel wrote his music for the Carmelites, being in Rome, they had already switched to the Gregorian Calendar. In 1707 the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, July 16, fell on a Saturday.

What does that mean? A solemnity has two Vespers, one on the evening before – First Vespers – and one on the evening of the actual feast – Second Vespers. So the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel had its First Vespers on the evening of July 15 and Second Vespers on the evening of July 16. However, every Sunday is considered a solemnity for the Catholic Church. It would have First and Second Vespers, too – meaning that Second Vespers for the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel conflicts with First Vespers of Sunday in 1707. So how do we harmoniously resolve this dissonant situation? In each rite there is an order of liturgical precedence which duty is to govern which solemnities are more important liturgically than others.

So which feast had liturgical precedence over the other in 1707 according to the Carmelite Rite? If it were today, we would look at the order of liturgical precedence in the Roman Rite, which is used by the majority of Carmelites today, and read that: “If on the same day Vespers of the current office and First Vespers of the following day are to be celebrated, the Vespers of the day holding the higher rank in the table of liturgical days takes precedence; if both days are of the same rank, Vespers of the current day takes precedence.”¹⁰ And since the Solemnity of the Patron Saint of an Order takes precedence over Sundays in Ordinary Time, according to the current rubrics, then the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel would have Second Vespers. Unfortunately, the only way to know for certain would be to inspect a copy of the rubrics used by the Carmelites in Rome in 1707. We are left to speculate one way

¹⁰ Catholic Church, *Liturgy of the Hours: According to the Roman Rite*, (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1975), Vol. 1, pg. 101.

or another. We can, though, investigate how the liturgy would be similar and different in each situation. We can compare the celebration of the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in the case where it has First and Second Vespers and the case where there is only First Vespers.

A Solemnity With or Without Second Vespers

G.F. Handel wrote a number of musical pieces for the celebration of the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in 1707. Of what Handel wrote that is still extant, we have three Psalms – Dixit Dominus (Psalm 110(109) – HWV 232), Laudate Pueri (Psalm 113(112) – HWV 237), and Nisi Dominus (Psalm 127(126) – HWV 238). In addition are three Antiphons – Te Decus Virgineum (HWV 243), Hæc Est Regina Verginum (HWV 235), and Salve Regina (HWV 241) – and a Motet – Sæviat Tellus (HWV 240).

This body of work is not enough to produce a single complete Vespers, let alone two of them. So what is going on? If we assume here that there were in fact two Vespers, there are a number of possible explanations. It could be that other music for the celebration was provided via other composers, a practice not uncommon in that age. Or perhaps Handel ran out of time in writing all of the music. We do know he was racing against the clock to complete his scores, as is evidenced by dates on several pieces less than a week before the solemnity.¹¹ It is quite possible – and in my opinion, quite probable – that there are more works that Handel wrote for this occasion that have either been lost to the passage of time or have yet to resurface into the public arena. But, for now these seven works are all we know were written by G.F. Handel for the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in 1707.

If this solemnity only had one Vespers, then there is a question as to why there is music written by G.F. Handel that seems to only have a place in Second Vespers. One possibility is that Handel wrote

¹¹ Nolan, O.Carm., Simon, “Carmel and Music II: Handel's Music for the Carmelites”, Carmel in the World, Volume 42, Number 1, 2003.

music for the Second Vespers not realizing that it wouldn't have been celebrated that year. Or it could even be that they celebrated First Vespers of Sunday liturgically and then celebrated Second Vespers of the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel as a sort of concert or extra-liturgical act. Of course, this is all conjecture as we have no written accounts as to the actual celebration that year.

Dixit Dominus

There is one Psalm that is generally added to the music Handel wrote for the Carmelites that some scholars disagree on. That is the Dixit Dominus (Psalm 110(109) – HWV 232). The main objection raised is that it was written in April of 1707, not July. There are many possible explanations for this. It is possible that Handel's patron, Cardinal Colonna, gave Handel plenty of time to prepare adequately – over three or four months. If this is so, one reason that there is an apparent gap of approximately three months between his composition of Dixit Dominus in April and of his other Psalms for the celebration in early July could be that he was attending other business – perhaps visiting

Text of Psalm 110(109)	
Dixit Dominus Domino meo: “Sede a dextris meis, donec ponam inimicos tuos scabellum pedum tuorum”.	The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit thou at my right hand: Until I make thy enemies thy footstool.”
Virgam potentiae tuae emittet Dominus ex Sion: dominare in medio inimicorum tuorum.	The Lord will send forth the scepter of thy power out of Sion: rule thou in the midst of thy enemies.
Tecum principatus in die virtutis tuae, in splendoribus sanctis, ex utero ante luciferum genui te.	With thee is the principality in the day of thy strength: in the brightness of the saints: from the womb before the day star I begot thee.
Iuravit Dominus et non paenitebit eum: “Tu es sacerdos in aeternum secundum ordinem Melchisedech”.	The Lord hath sworn, and he will not repent: “Thou art a priest for ever according to the order of Melchisedech.”
Dominus a dextris tuis, conquassabit in die irae suae reges.	The Lord at thy right hand hath broken kings in the day of his wrath.
Iudicabit in nationibus: cumulantur cadavera, conquassabit capita in terra spatiosa.	He shall judge among nations, he shall fill ruins: he shall crush the heads in the land of the many.
De torrente in via bibet, propterea exaltabit caput.	He shall drink of the torrent in the way: therefore shall he lift up the head.

Figure 1

Prince Ferdinand de' Medici, who invited him, in Florence.

Regardless of the explanations, there is good reason to believe that the Dixit Dominus was included in the music for the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. One very good reason is that this Psalm is actually a part of prescribed Psalms for the feast. It is a Messianic Psalm that is usually reserved for high feast days, and so it is quite probable that it would have been included here, even if it had been used previously for another event.

If we take a look at the music itself, this Psalm is quite exquisite. It shows evidence of being right at the transition point between the older system of contrasting sections and distinct movements. The piece starts off in G minor and throughout makes circle of fifths progressions modulating to B-flat Major (relative key) and D minor (dominant). The piece is also highly rhythmic, at many times making

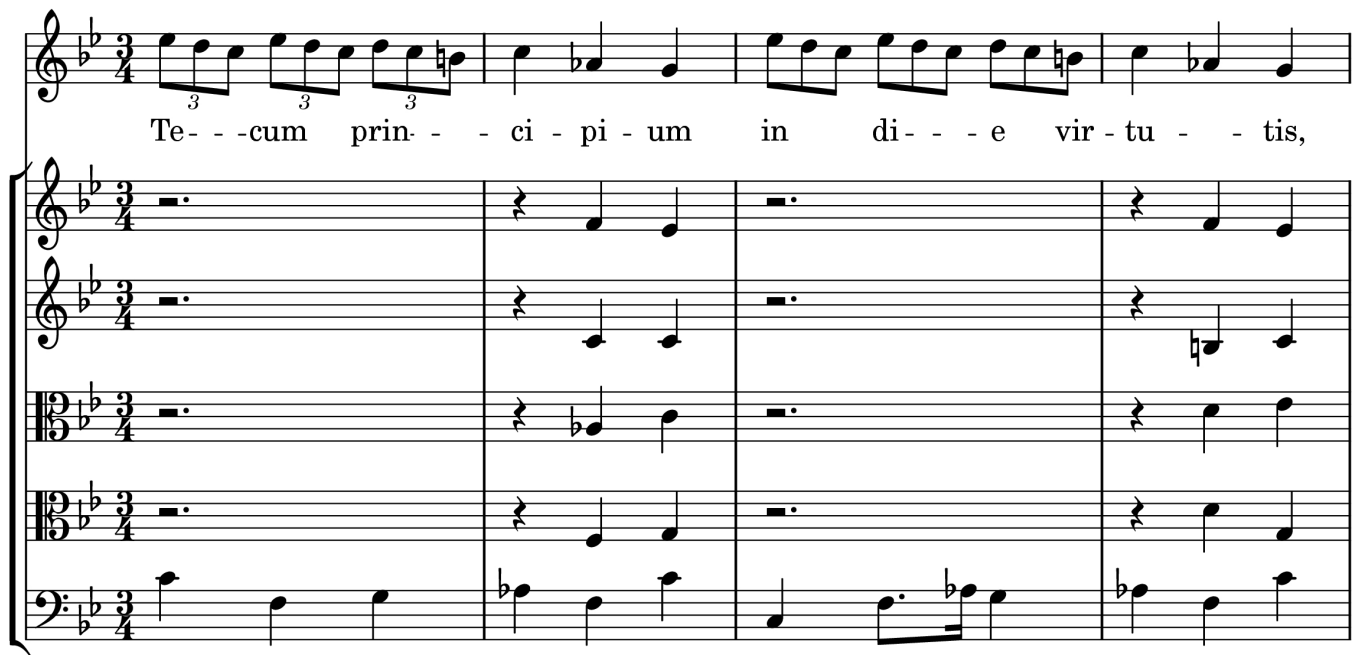


Figure 2

opportune use of homo-rhythmic sequences, and this indicates a complete departure from the older unmetered style of the modal system towards an embrace of the newer metered tonal system.

Handel makes ample use of text painting, as is evident in Section 4 – Iuravit Dominus, where he moves between grave and allegro tempos to stress the meaning of the words (see figure 1). Handel's

Dixit Dominus is also replete with flowing sequences, as is demonstrated in Section 7 – Iudicabit. This piece also shows Handel's ability to take musical concepts and run with them to create a certain feel to the music, as in Section 3 – Tecum Principium, where he goes wild with triplets (see figure 2). Dixit Dominus also shows the influence on Handel of Vivaldi. Handel also pays tribute to the older styles of Church music, as in his melismatic sequences in the Gloria Patri.

Conclusion

Whether Handel's music for the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was for First and/or Second Vespers may be a matter of historical speculation, we do know that he did write music for the Carmelites for their feast. We do have a number of extant works from that occasion that show the brilliance of a young composer who would go on to become one of the greatest composers of the Baroque period.

As for me, I do believe that there were two Vespers for the Solemnity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in 1707, though without recourse to the rubrics used by the Carmelites in Rome at that time, I cannot be certain.

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