

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSIAH

A beloved oratorio “Handeled” by George Bernard Shaw and Marshall McLuhan

A double bass player arrived a few minutes late for the first rehearsal of the local choral society's annual performance of Handel's Messiah. He picked up his instrument and bow, and turned his attention to the conductor. The conductor asked, "Would you like a moment to tune?" The bass player replied with some surprise, "Why? Isn't it the same as last year?"

I doubt whoever first told this joke was making specific fun of double bass players – more of the ubiquity of Handel’s Messiah and the inevitability of its return at this time every year – especially into the lives of we musicians. For musicians annual performances of “Messiah” may be as much a ritual as they may be for you. Standing far apart from the rest of the choral/orchestral repertoire its challenging but oh-so-familiar score, the long evenings and large crowds, the only extended scriptural narrative most musicians could easily recite from memory, the exquisite soloists, the sense of divine mundanity and supernal spectacle makes this single stop along our annual musical road to fiscal year-end a unique and important one. Messiah, to choirs of all sizes, shapes and ability levels, is much more than a major musical undertaking, a major cultural contribution to their communities, a major source of reliable income in this busiest of musical seasons – it is to some extent also a badge of honour – a coming of age beyond the reach of smaller and newer choirs, and yet always tantalisingly there as an achievement or as a goal.

Recently, I was helping my University of Toronto colleague Ivars Taurins, prepare the Tafelmusik Chamber Choir for its annual Messiah performances. Ivars is perhaps best known for his hilarious portrayal of Maestro Handel in the annual Sing-Along version of *Messiah* Tafelmusik holds at Massey Hall. Though very popular with a general public there is always a sense of this being a musician’s “Messiah” in the sense that it pokes good-natured fun at the iconic work which we take such care to revere most of the time year after year, city by city, audience by audience.

While helping Ivars I learned a new term from my colleagues... “Drive-by Messiah”, referring to the many ‘serious’ performances of “Messiah” that are scaled down, barely rehearsed and ultimately rather unsatisfying (of which I hasten to add that Tafelmusik’s Messiah and the Guelph Chamber Choir’s are certainly not of this type). I found this term funny because it rather sarcastically attaches the low-planning, low responsibility of the ‘drive-by shooting’ to some Messiah performances. Because we all know “Messiah” so very well it perhaps stands alone among major choral works in being able to survive such treatment (or some would say mis-treatment).

Well, because I and many others find Tafelmusik's Sing-Along Messiah funny; because I found my colleagues' reference to the "Drive-by Messiah" funny, and because indeed this most favourite of classical compositions ends up taking its turn at being the subject of good-natured jabs (especially among musicians) I am drawn to share with you one of my favourite quotations of all time - not from McLuhan, who I will talk about shortly - but from Irish playwright, author and critic George Bernard Shaw, who was, just as a bit of trivia, also a co-founder of the London School of Economics. Shaw wrote, famously,

“When a thing is funny, search it carefully for hidden truth.”

This tantalising call to examine whatever we sometimes dismiss as 'just funny' has become a form of credo for me, and occasioned me to invent for myself the title I've always lacked while following my unconventional journey through life and music. Ladies and gentlemen, although I was advertised as a musicologist for this Podium talk, and this is at least partly true – I actually call myself a “Meta-Theorist”, one who pursues and/or constructs theories **about** theories, and thus digs into the hidden places behind the familiar – and in my case this is most often about music.

In this invented vocation I have found one of my most intriguing guides, most unlikely authorities on both nothing and everything, and richest store-houses of food for thought to be the late Canadian professor, author, critic, and internationally-revered media guru **Marshall McLuhan**.

Again, before I get into McLuhan I'd like to initiate you into Bernard Shaw's wonderful wit and perspective on the musical art. As a London music critic from the mid 1870s well into the 20th century he put out an astonishing number of articles, reviews, essays and addresses – enough to fill three 1000-page volumes I'm lucky enough to own. Shaw, who wrote under the pseudonym "Corno di Bassetto" ("basset horn" – the Italian name for an archaic predecessor of the clarinet) put his very sharp pen to paper many times in respect to both "Messiah" (which he loved), and of course its performances, which he usually did not. Here are a few choice excerpts:

(1 July 1891) “Fundamentally my view of the Handel Festival is that of a convinced and ardent admirer of Mr. Handel. My favourite oratorio is The Messiah, with which I have spent many of the hours which others give to Shakespeare, or Scott, or Dickens.”... “No doubt Mr. Manns' three thousand five hundred choristers might better his instructions so heartily as to go considerably beyond the utmost license of art if he told them that unless they sang [‘He trusted in God’] like a howling bloodthirsty mob, the utter loneliness of ‘Thy rebuke hath broken his heart’, and ‘Behold and see’ must be lost, and with it the whole tragic climax of the oratorio.”

(27 December 1876) On Monday, December 18th, a performance of the Messiah by the Albert Hall Choral Society took place, conducted by Mr. Barnby with Dr. Stainer presiding at the organ. The assembly of a large audience bore testimony to the unfailing popularity of the greatest of oratorios. The performance, on the whole, was unsatisfactory in the extreme.”

(8 May 1886, a review of a mercifully forgotten oratorio, ‘The Redemption’ by Charles Gounod) “No one has ever been bored by an adequate performance of the Messiah. Even a Good Friday tumble through it at the Albert Hall – ordinarily the worst thing of its kind in the whole cosmos – inspires rage and longing for justice to Handel rather than weariness.”

(May 1913) “You may despise what you like, but you cannot contradict Handel. The four bars in which Handel finally affirms “the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace,” would have struck [any atheist] into the gutter, as by a thunderbolt. This is why every Englishman believes that Handel now occupies an important position in heaven... Yet in England his music is murdered by the tradition of the big chorus! 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 get a tremendously powerful *fortissimo* from twenty good singers... but all the efforts of the conductors to get a *fortissimo* from the Handel festival’s 4000 are in vain.

(20 August 1890) A young violinist once remarked to Mr. Shaw at a performance of *Il Trovatore* saying “Ugh! It’s like the Messiah.” Like the Messiah!—a work the greatness of which I had never dreamt of questioning in my life, in spite of my implacable contempt for oratorio as a *genre*. And nothing happened to the ribald: the earth did not yawn, nor the roof fall and crush him.”

Well, as you can hear, Shaw didn’t mince words about his favourite oratorio, nor the scores of musical charletons he routinely perceived to murder it upon the English stage. While I feel convinced that if Shaw were here he would be delighted with the performance you are going to hear – although I bet Gerry Neufeld would probably at least the slightest bit intimidated!

I’ll admit to you up front that as far as I can find, McLuhan, the author of popular, yet for most unreadable books about media, culture and technology and coiner of such ubiquitous phrases as “The Global Village” and “The Medium is the Message” was no musician. He never played an instrument, nor seemingly followed concerts and the arts despite a respectable upbringing in Edmonton as the son of a successful businessman and an actress. And though McLuhan freely and regularly waded into fields far beyond his acquaintance, he never said anything substantial about “Messiah”, Handel, oratorios, music or anything similar.

Why am I talking to you about him now, then? It is precisely McLuhan’s generalism within the rapidly specialising-culture of the modern age that attracts me to his thought – he may never have said anything about “Messiah”, but his fearless and elegant forays into virtually anything and everything is precisely what entices me to often ask myself, to follow the WWJD

of my evangelical Christian friends up with my own WWMS – What would McLuhan say? – and that is what I propose to do for you (and in supreme vanity, for McLuhan himself) this evening. I don't know whether McLuhan would approve of or care for what I have to say, but I like to think he'd be a bit amused by my reading from a prepared text on a portable pocket video screen, something he of course never lived to see.

I'm going to begin by sharing with you, or probably reminding you of a classic scene from Woody Allen's 1977 film "Annie Hall." The character Allen himself portrays, Alvy Singer, is standing with Annie in a theatre line-up, and a man behind him is talking very loudly about Marshall McLuhan.

- Alvy Singer** What I wouldn't give for a large sock with horse manure in it!
[to audience] Whaddya do when you get stuck in a movie line with a guy like this behind you?
- Man in Line** Wait a minute, why can't I give my opinion? It's a free country!
- Alvy Singer** He can give it... do you have to give it so loud? I mean, aren't you ashamed to pontificate like that?
And the funny part of it is, Marshall McLuhan, you don't know anything about Marshall McLuhan!
- Man in Line** Oh, really? Well, it just so happens I teach a class at Columbia called "TV, Media and Culture." So
I think my insights into Mr. McLuhan, well, have a great deal of validity!
- Alvy Singer** Oh, do ya? Well, that's funny, because I happen to have Mr. McLuhan right here, so, so, yeah, just
let me...
[pulls McLuhan out from behind a nearby poster]
- Alvy Singer** come over here for a second... tell him!
- McLuhan** I heard what you were saying! You know nothing of my work! You mean my whole fallacy is
wrong. How you got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing!
- Alvy Singer** Boy, if life were only like this!

Having Marshall McLuhan "manifest" to explain himself is a dream that many people, including myself, have had at times since encountering his ground-breaking and controversial insights. But Alvy Singer was correct: in real life, Marshall McLuhan doesn't step up to clarify or explain his extraordinary ideas and positions, nor defend them from attack or misuse. Indeed while he was alive he only rarely engaged his mis-users and critics, and if he did only rarely did he achieve anything beyond further perplexing or enraging them.

This was him writing in 1962:

“Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian library the world has become a computer, an electronic brain, exactly as an infantile piece of science fiction. And as our senses have gone outside us, Big Brother goes inside. So, unaware of this dynamic, we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence.”

(Is your head spinning yet? Don't worry – it will be!)

Douglas Coupland, award-winning Canadian author and recent McLuhan biographer observed of these words, “In one stroke, Marshall anticipated – four decades in advance – the Internet, although there were many more than this one stroke. The man was fifty-one when he published those words, a Canadian professor of Renaissance rhetoric, a man who perpetually shared his loathing and contempt for most of the electronic age, yet a man who perversely and ironically is considered its biggest cheerleader.”

McLuhan's observations — “probes,” he liked to call them — are riddled with such flamboyantly undecipherable aphorisms as “The electric light is pure information” and “People don't actually read newspapers — they get into them every morning like a hot bath.” McLuhan wrote: “People make a great mistake trying to read me as if I was saying something ... I don't want them to *believe* me. I just want them to *think*.”

So, what would McLuhan say about Messiah? Most of McLuhan's paradigms and unique insights can be applied to almost any idea or invention, but as there is insufficient time for this I will focus on his best known phrase.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE – McLuhan was a devout Catholic from Tuesday March 30th 1937 (the date of his conversion at age 28) until December 31st 1980, the day he died. The intended ‘Message’ of Handel's *Messiah* is clearly the birth, death and resurrection of a divine son of God, Jesus Christ, for mankind's salvation. McLuhan would have held that this was the central message of the one holy Catholic Church, and that Handel's oratorio was one medium by which this message could be conveyed. But he would have had a lot to say about that medium, and would have argued that the message could only be conveyed under the profound influence of the medium. What does it mean to that message that it is communicated in this way – rather through, for example one's own reading of the bible, or the hearing of a sermon?

In communications study and common parlance, media are usually understood as “The form and technology used to communicate information.” As the Greek derivation suggests, media are those things which come between other things: for example, between an event and a TV news viewer lies the medium of television, and within it are hidden a microphone and camera, transmission apparatus, a concise and hastily-prepared script, reporters, researchers, editors and technicians, and the viewer's receiving set, all of which impact his or her reception of the event.

But McLuhan takes the concept a giant step further: technologies that ‘extend’ people, their thoughts, senses, bodies and actions, are media. The shoe can be said to extend the foot (because it allows it to walk farther and more easily on more surfaces than it could bare), the amplifier and the radio can be said to extend the ear (since they enable hearing of things too quiet or too distant to be heard by the ear unaided). Cave painting and handwriting extend human thought beyond the usual limits of time and space (allowing a person not in the spatial or temporal presence of the thinker to know his or her thoughts), and as Gutenberg’s invention of moveable type in the 16th century gave birth to the mass media it extended human thought simultaneously to many persons not in the presence of the thinker. As in the television news example above, media often contain one another: the ear-extending microphone, the eye-extending camera and the judgment-extending reporter exist as media within the medium of television.

So, if we look at “Messiah” as a Medium – what would McLuhan tell us it behaved?

In *Laws of Media: The New Science* (published posthumously in 1988), McLuhan sought to describe the behaviour of technology change by proposing four “laws” of media. He suggested that our technologies deeply shape us, the users and consumers as well as the ‘messages’ they carry.

1. media extend (enhance, amplify),
2. media obsolesce (do away with things no longer needed or relevant),
3. media retrieve (restore older actions and ideas usually obsolesced by preceding technological advance), and
4. media reverse (take on the opposite effects of their original extension) when overheated.

What does Messiah extend? – just as the shoe and our cars extend our feet (allowing us to travel farther, or faster), Messiah extends the message of the birth of Jesus Christ for mankind’s salvation, from the pulpit and sanctuary to the concert hall. It takes our inherited printed treasure-house of scripture, the bible, and lifts it off the page and tosses it out into the air around us as we sit in wrapt fascination.

What does it obsolesce? – McLuhan might have argued that Messiah makes all other oratorios obsolete by its greater popularity and likely financial success – the reason you have noticed far more performances of Messiah in the past weeks than say Saint-Saens’ Christmas Oratorio. He might even argue that it has played a part in the obsolescence of church itself – to the extent that many have this and other secular vehicles in which to invest their basic inclination towards ritual, gathering and the divine, whereas before the phenomenon of sacred music being extracted to secular settings these urges were necessarily applied to church life.

What does it retrieve? – McLuhan would have argued that Messiah retrieves church worship in this age of sagging church attendance, that it restores the motion of gathering to meditate upon the gift of love and salvation that has always been the

church's story – but that it does it in a way that non-churchgoers can tolerate more easily than formal worship services. It also retrieves the related and ancient practice of people gathering to listen to stories told, and music played – both of which have suffered in our time with the proliferation of electric media such as recordings, television and the Internet.

What does it reverse into? – If McLuhan saw (as many devout Catholics do) God's Gift of salvation as a deeply personal one he might suggest that large gatherings of musicians and listeners in concert halls become deeply impersonal. Moreover, while the message is given a measure of gravity by this beautiful setting, by tuxedos and ball gowns and by rules of audience and stage deportment it attaches to the message, possibly excluding what is meant to be a universal message.

According to Douglas Coupland, McLuhan, a cradle Protestant, "... like most converts, quickly became hard core. He went to mass almost every day for the rest of his life. He recited the rosary. He was a firm believer in Hell. He was disgusted that other Catholics weren't catholic enough." So there can be no doubt McLuhan cared, and cared deeply about the 'Message' in Messiah.

McLuhan didn't care much for Shaw's plays, and may not have known any of his criticism. In a modern drama course he once taught at the University of Toronto student often complained that Professor McLuhan spent ninety per cent of his time talking about T.S. Eliot (one of his favourites) and one percent of time talking of George Bernard Shaw, despite the fact that both authors had equal weight in the final exams. Skipping formal criticism, McLuhan remarked that "Since Shaw had only three original ideas in his life" students could just 'prepare material on Shaw themselves'. And incidentally he never even hinted at just what he thought those "three original ideas" were.

But if one of them were "When a thing is funny, search it carefully for hidden meaning" they may well have applied that idea to McLuhan himself, to Shaw's famously witty dramas and remarks, and perhaps, yes, to such seasonal rituals as gift giving, church attendance and of course, going to hear 'Messiah.'

I believe it is mainly we musicians who seek and occasionally find humour in that annual phenomenon in our lives that is Handel's Messiah – you may smile at the beauty Handel has bequeathed us through tonight's performance, or at the beautiful and joyous faces of players and singers as they share it with you; you may even be enjoying a special holiday tradition or evening out with loved ones, sure to give rise to a smile or two - but you may be unlikely to find yourself suppressing a laugh at any time. But If you gave a little chuckle at the double bass player in my joke for whom Messiah was so consistently the same from year-to year that even tuning was unnecessary I hope you've enjoyed looking a little further into it with me, and with two men who may not have been able to stand each other or frankly much of anyone else, but who would certainly have stood together, in admiration of and affection for this masterwork, as the Choir sang Hallelujah!

Thank-you.