

Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

'Messiah' and 'The Creation' for Christmas

Handel, "Messiah," conducted by Martin Pearlman, Telarc CD 80322

Handel, "Messiah," conducted by Otto Klemperer, EMI CDMC 63621

Haydn, "The Creation," conducted by Robert Shaw, Telarc CD 80298

Haydn, "The Creation," conducted by Karl Münchinger, London OSA 1271

These two beloved oratorios always help reconnect us to the spiritual basis of the Christmas season, often forgotten in today's paganized world. They also demonstrate the scientific rigor which characterized all classical music and which was accepted by both Handel and Haydn as in harmony with their religious faith.

Telarc's new "Messiah" by the Boston Baroque on original instruments is pitched low, at about $A=415$ cycles per second (Hz)—more than a half-tone below $A=440$ Hz, today's freakishly high International Standard Pitch. While Handel's "A" was around 430, the disc does bring out a scientific point: Handel composed "Messiah" (1742) around the principle of human vocal registers.

As the Schiller Institute's 1992 book, *A Manual on Tuning and Registration*, shows, the lower, middle, and upper ranges of each trained voice are produced by different technical means and are heard as having a different timbre or vocal "color." These registers poetically suggest many voices, or *polyphony*, from one voice.

At $A=430$ —corresponding to $C=256$ in older physics texts—the note at which a voice species shifts from one register to the next, is set at geometrically defined points in the scale: namely, F-sharp for sopranos and tenors, the commonest voice

types; one whole step below, at E for mezzo-sopranos; and so forth.

Thus the mezzo-soprano aria in E-flat, "He Was Despised," from "Messiah," uses the E-natural register shift to convey the meaning of the text. The tonic E-flat and its leading tone, D, drop into the low register for emphasis on the word "rejected." This results in a line which rises out of, and falls back into, the first register, for tragic emphasis: "He was despised, despised and rejected."

Modern pitch distortion

The modern $A=440$ distorts this, because in the higher tuning, a well-trained mezzo-soprano will tend to place each E-flat, which belongs in the first register, up into the second: "He was despised, despised and rejected" (for musical figures, see *A Manual on Tuning and Registration*, p. 70, Figures 4.10 and 4.11).

Boston Baroque's mezzo-soprano Catherine Robbin's beautiful voice makes the voice registers richly clear in this aria. Luckily, there is little difference—in the essential registral points just mentioned—between E-flat and D, the key into which Boston Baroque's $A=415$ pitch has effectively transposed the aria. The too-low tuning does create problems for other voices, such as the soprano.

First-time buyers of "Messiah" would do best overall with Otto Klemperer's 1963 EMI Angel recording with the voices of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Grace Hoffman, Nicolai Gedda, and Jerome Hines, all good bel canto artists of the Italian school, pitched at $A=435$. Boston Baroque's singers and chorus do not live up to Robbin's level. Affecting the "unisex" prepubescent sound popular in Britain today, they ignore the fact that Handel himself, and much of the music in London in his day, was rooted

in Italian opera. Klemperer's conducting is also far the more powerful.

Man and Creation

"The Creation," as Telarc's intelligent notes point out, was inspired by Haydn's hearing of Handel's "Messiah" in London, and is beautifully conducted by Robert Shaw, of the Furtwängler-Klemperer school. If you want the English version of "The Creation," this is the one to buy. Yet to educated ears, the modern $A=440$ pitch and English words create some problems.

The tenor angel Uriel's aria "Mit Würd' und Hohheit" ("In Native Worth") is an example. "The Creation" (1798) celebrates the transformation of the universe by God's creation of man. At $A=430$, Haydn uses the tenor's dramatic shift into the third register to express this change. After a series of high F-naturals, at the top of the second register, Haydn interjects a key change at the point when man is created, and the tenor shifts into the third register on F-sharp on "und König der Natur!" (For musical figures, see *A Manual on Tuning* p. 97, Figure 6.5). The $A=440$ tuning forces the F's into the high register, so there is no difference at these crucial words, and indeed, tenor Jon Humphrey does not differentiate.

While only slightly lower at $A=435$, Karl Münchinger's 1968 London recording in German is first choice. Münchinger's soloists have a better command of the Italian round sound than Shaw's. Further, Haydn wrote his music not to the English libretto (by a friend of Handel's), but to the German translation by Baron van Swieten. Haydn took care to set the rounder vowels "u" and "o" on the high notes, where they favor the register shift. "Und König" on the cited high passage turns into the harsher "and king" in English.