

## Coronation Anthems, HWV 258 - 261

## George Frideric Handel

- 1) Zadok the Priest
- 2) Let thy hand be strengthened
- 3) My heart is inditing *soloists*: Penny Jenkins, Rosie Jenkins, James Hawkey, Douglas Bowen
- 4) The King shall rejoice

One of the last acts of King George I before his death in 1727 was to sign "An Act for the naturalizing of George Frideric Handel and others." Thus Handel's first commission as a naturalized British citizen was to write the music for the coronation of his son, King George II, later that year.

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 took place in Westminster Abbey on 11th October 1727. At the King's insistence, it was Handel who was invited to compose the anthems for this momentous state occasion rather than Maurice Greene, who had recently been appointed as Organist and Composer to the Chapel Royal in succession to the recently deceased William Croft. 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, turned his attention 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, which was only resolved by Handel being officially required to compose for State occasions, and Greene for all other royal services. 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 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, opening with a tour de force that no familiarity can stale. It has been sung at every coronation since its first performance in 1727. It has three short movements, in which the choir sings as a unit, with scarcely any counterpoint to muddy its grandiloquence. *Let thy hand be strengthened* 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: it was sung late in the service when Queen Caroline was crowned, and throughout Handel's setting there are textual references that are relevant to a queen. In tonight's performance the short solo section will be sung by Neil's wife, daughter, and two of his protégés. *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' in which trumpets and drums feature significantly.

*Programme Note by John Bawden*