

AQA AoS 1: the Coronation Anthems and oratorios of Handel

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Introduction

The *Coronation Anthems* and oratorios of Handel form one of four styles/genres in AQA's Area of Study 1, the Western Classical Tradition 1650-1910. Students will be required to answer unfamiliar listening questions in their summer exam, to identify and accurately describe musical elements, musical contexts and use musical language (including staff notation) when responding to a potential question in this area. This list of relevant elements which should be covered can be found on AQA's website here: www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/music/gcse/music-8271/subject-content/understanding-music

This resource will give a brief overview of the context of Handel's Coronation Anthems and oratorios, followed by detailed analysis of extracts from two works.

Before you start

Before starting this topic, it's important to ensure that your students are familiar with some of the key musical features of the Baroque period. Relevant features relating to this style include these:

- ▶ The use of the continuo section (especially the harpsichord) was key to the period, and played a significant role in recitatives and arias.
- ▶ Melodies were quite decorative, often using ornamentation.
- ▶ Phrases were balanced, often ending in perfect or imperfect cadences.
- ▶ Harmony was diatonic and functional, with modulations mainly to related keys.
- ▶ Terraced dynamics: the whole ensemble would change dynamic at the same time, and every part of the ensemble would have the same dynamic. There are very few crescendos and diminuendos.
- ▶ A variety of textures were used in the Baroque period. Polyphonic, homophonic, and melody-and-accompaniment textures are all present in Handel's writing in his vocal works.

Like the late Romantic Requiem, also in AQA's AoS1 (and covered in its own [Music Teacher](#) resource), looking at the *Coronation Anthems* and oratorios of Handel will allow for the study of vocal and orchestral textures, as well as the other, more usual elements.

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Handel in c1726-28, painted by Balthasar Denner

Handel and the English oratorio

Born in 1685, Handel trained in Halle, Germany, and then worked as composer in Hamburg and Italy before settling in London in 1712, where he spent much of his career. He was naturalised as a British subject in 1727, and his first composition after this was his *Coronation Anthems*.

It was also at a similar time (around the 1730s) that Handel devised a new genre that would reward him as richly as opera had: the English oratorio. The Italian oratorio had essentially been an opera on a sacred subject, but performed in concert rather than in an opera house – usually in a religious building. While in Rome in 1708, Handel had written *La resurrezione* ('The Resurrection') in this Italian style. In his English oratorios, he continued the aspects of the Italian tradition by setting dialogue in recitative and lyrical verses as arias. These arias resemble Handel's opera arias in form, style, the nature of musical ideas, and techniques for expressing the affections. However, Handel and his librettists brought into the English oratorio elements that were foreign to Italian opera, taken from ancient Greek tragedy, French classical drama, the German Passion, and the English masque and full anthem.

Use of chorus

Handel's most important innovation in the English oratorio was his use of the chorus – Italian oratorios had very few ensembles in them. It was Handel's experience with choral music that led him to give the chorus more prominence, along with his early exposure to the Lutheran choral tradition and German combination of chorus with orchestra and soloists.

Handel was also heavily influenced by the English choral tradition, which he absorbed in his *Chandos Anthems* and works for the Chapel Royal. As a result, the chorus makes significant contributions in his oratorios, playing a variety of roles, including participating in the action, narrating the story, or commenting on events like the chorus in Greek drama.

Handel's choruses are simpler than Bach's, being less consistently contrapuntal. He often alternates passages of fugal texture with blocks of homophonic writing, and sometimes sets a melodic line in sustained notes against a melody with quicker rhythm. The choruses lie well in the voice, and the orchestra usually doubles the vocal parts.

Arias and recitatives

Although arias and recitatives are not covered explicitly in AQA's musical elements table, it's worth giving your students some context as they will no doubt come across them, given their contrasting purposes and textures. Some basic information on arias and recitatives could include:

- ▶ **Aria:** a movement for solo voice accompanied by a reduced orchestra. An aria is more contemplative in nature, sometimes reflecting on an emotion. Musically, it's an opportunity for the composer to show off a soloist's voice, so it can also be virtuosic, with fast, melismatic passages. The aria is often introduced by the orchestra and the opening section is often repeated after a contrasting middle section, with the soloist now decorating the original melody – a form often known as a da capo aria.
- ▶ **Recitative:** this is usually for solo voice accompanied by the continuo section, in which the singer moves the story on with speech-like and syllabic word-setting. The texture is often melody and accompaniment, with chords from the continuo. The tempo is freer than in an aria or chorus, in order to mimic speech pattern.

Excerpts from Handel's oratorios

The most obvious Handel oratorio for which the busy music teacher will reach will be *Messiah* – and there's nothing wrong with that. There is a lot of worthy music in it, and this resource will try and find the balance between the well-known movements with some of the lesser-known.

Alongside *Messiah*, however, in *Israel in Egypt* Handel recycles material from his earlier works, and also reworks the music of other composers in a kind of parody. While *Esther* was Handel's first oratorio, it was revised from a masque of around 1718. *Saul* (composed in 1738) begins Handel's decisive move away from the Italian style towards the English oratorio.

The following analysis will follow the pattern of the resources found on the AQA website.

Messiah

Composed in 1714, *Messiah* unfolds as a series of contemplations on the Christian idea of redemption. It uses texts drawn from the Bible, beginning with the Old Testament prophecies and going through the life of Christ to his resurrection. The work is full of Handel's characteristic charm, including a mixture of traditions from French overture to Italianate recitatives and da capo arias, Germanic choral fugue, and of course, elements of the English choral tradition. Numbers of movements and bar numbers here are according to the Bärenreiter edition.

No. 2 Accompagnato: 'Comfort ye'

Melody	The melody is mainly stepwise movement, with the occasional leap. It is also syllabic, with the exception of a few ends of phrases. A sequence can be heard on the repetition of the word 'warfare'.
Harmony	The chords used are mainly diatonic – major or minor. They are usually in root position or first inversion. Chords in other inversions are used frequently from bar 31 to the end. This is typical of the recitative style, as it contributes to uncertainty and the restless feel of the speech-like melodies. Perfect cadences end phrases, though not always in root position: bars 18-19 have a Vb-I ending. Word painting can be found on the first appearance of the word 'iniquity', under which Handel places a diminished chord.
Tonality	This opens in E major. The music moves to the dominant (B major) at bar 11. It remains in this key until bar 31, after which the tonality becomes less certain. The movement closes with a perfect cadence in A major.
Structure	This is a through-composed movement, much like many arioso/recitatives in this style. It can be divided into two sections: bars 1-30 (the more lyrical and arioso section) and bars 31-end (recitative).
Sonority	The tenor voice is accompanied by strings and continuo.
Dynamics	While no official dynamics are written, this piece is contemplative in nature and often sung at a <i>piano</i> dynamic, until bar 31, where the singer often becomes more dramatic and louder.
Texture	This is a melody-and-accompaniment texture, with the strings playing repeated quavers in a chordal accompaniment. The texture changes at bar 31 when the accompanying chords are played only at the beginning of the bar, leaving the voice to sing mainly unaccompanied (monophonic texture).
Tempo, rhythm and metre	The first part of this is a measured steady tempo. The melody is characterised by the soaring, long-held notes, some of which the singer holds on <i>ad lib</i> . In the second part (from bar 31), the music changes to a recitative style, in which a freer tempo is used. The chords are placed by listening to the solo singer as they sing in speech-like rhythms. Because of this, the note values are mainly quavers and faster than the previous section.
Phrasing and articulation	Due to the nature of this arioso/recitative, the phrase lengths are not always even. The repetitions of 'comfort ye' mean that some phrases are shorter than others. The articulation of the opening section is much more legato, compared with the more detached nature of the recitative from bar 31.
Style/genre	This forms part of a Baroque oratorio. The type of movement is an arioso (a more measured and accompanied version of the recitative).

No. 3 Air: 'Ev'ry valley'

Melody	<p>The melody is mainly stepwise or conjunct, with some arpeggios at the start of some phrases. The melody becomes more disjunct at bar 33 ('the crooked straight') as a means of word-painting.</p> <p>There is a sequence on the word 'plain' (bars 36-38), which is also one of the many moments of melismatic writing in this movement. The word 'exalted' is set with melismatic writing – word-painting again.</p> <p>The melody is decorated with trills in the orchestral introduction.</p>
Harmony	<p>The chords are mainly diatonic, using primary and secondary chords: tonal functional harmony. Phrases close with mainly perfect cadences.</p>
Tonality	<p>The aria opens in E major. It moves to the dominant (B major) in bar 20. The music moves to A major (the subdominant) at bar 46, before returning to the tonic at bar 53.</p>
Structure	<p>The structure of this is binary form (two sections, AB) with an orchestral ritornello (a section that returns).</p>
Sonority	<p>This is for solo tenor voice accompanied by strings and continuo.</p>
Dynamics	<p>Overall dynamics are <i>forte</i> with some phrases repeated at a quieter dynamic.</p>
Texture	<p>The texture is melody and accompaniment. When the tenor is not singing, the melody usually falls in the first violins.</p>
Tempo, rhythm and metre	<p>Andante tempo, which allows for the fast semiquaver passages. This is in simple time and does not stray from the regular metre, apart from one pause towards the end of the movement.</p>
Phrasing and articulation	<p>The phrasing is quite fragmented: the opening ritornello contains a three-bar phrase followed by a four-bar phrase, and finishes with a two-bar phrase. The orchestral interjections when the soloist enters also break up the phrasing.</p> <p>The shorter and more detached syllabic phrases are contrasted with long legato melismatic phrases.</p>
Style/genre	<p>Baroque oratorio – aria.</p>

No. 7 Chorus: 'And He shall purify'

Melody	The main subject idea comes in two parts: the opening has slower rhythms (crotchets and quavers) and is syllabic. Counter melodies in stepwise minims contrast with the subject.
Harmony	The harmony is diatonic, comprising primary and secondary chords, with tonal functional harmony. Cadences are usually perfect or imperfect.
Tonality	This movement opens in G minor. In line with fugal convention, when the basses come in with the answer (bar 5), this is in the dominant (D minor). The music returns to G minor at bar 15, and moves to C minor by bar 25. At bar 30, we've moved to F major, and B flat major by bar 35. The movement winds its way back to G minor by bar 39.
Structure	The fugal form underpins the structure of this movement.
Sonority	The four-part choir is accompanied by the strings and oboes. The instruments double the voice parts.
Dynamics	The chorus opens <i>piano</i> . The dynamic rises to <i>forte</i> later on.
Texture	The contrapuntal opening of this is typical of Handel's chorus writing. The subject is passed around the voices and later on becomes more fugal in nature. After this, homophonic writing appears at bar 21, and as mentioned in the paragraph above, Handel alternates these two textures in this chorus. The orchestra doubles the vocal lines.
Tempo, rhythm and metre	This is a fast Allegro, in simple time.
Phrasing and articulation	Again, the phrasing here can be irregular. The opening phrase is two bars long, followed a three-bar phrase. The music is detached until the melismatic and legato passage on 'purify'.
Style/genre	This is a chorus from a Baroque oratorio.

Coronation Anthems

This set of anthems was commissioned for the Coronation of George II in 1727, Handel's first commission after becoming a naturalised British subject. The texts for all four anthems are from the King James Bible, but were selected by Handel himself. Because of the grand occasion they were written for, these anthems are quite extrovert in tone, managing massed forces and important contrasts rather than delicate colours. Handel exploited the wide and spatial reverberation of Westminster Abbey, with the choir of the Chapel Royal being augmented by 47 singers, accompanied by an orchestra of 160 instrumentalists. The chorus was divided into six or seven groups.

The four anthems are:

- ▶ Zadok the Priest
- ▶ Let Thy Hand Be Strengthened
- ▶ The King Shall Rejoice
- ▶ My Heart is Inditing

'Zadok the Priest' opens this collection, with its famous arpeggiated orchestral introduction, clearly written specifically for a procession, as we have seen clearly over the years. This anthem is known for its quiet introduction followed by the explosive entry of the choir in Handel's trademark block homophonic writing.

Melody	Bars 1-30 (Orchestral introduction plus 'Zadok the priest')	The opening melody is really a type of accompaniment. It is arpeggiated and outlines the chord progression with its rising semiquavers. The rising arpeggios become the orchestral accompaniment, with the 'melody' being the block of sound coming from the choir. This is stepwise and sits quite high in the soprano tessitura in order to create a dramatic impact.
	Bars 31-62 ('And all the people rejoiced, and said:')	The melody is still high for the sopranos, mainly stepwise movement. The word-setting is syllabic.
	Bars 63-end ('God save the King')	The setting is syllabic until the word 'amen' which is set melodically in two different ways: semiquaver passages or quavers separated by rests.
Harmony	Bars 1-30 (Orchestral introduction plus 'Zadok the priest')	The chord progression at the opening is exciting, but the harmony is still tonal and functional. The chords are diatonic, but Handel includes more inversions in order to maintain his stepwise descending bassline. This excitement of different inversions gives a real sense of anticipation. This section ends with an imperfect cadence.
	Bars 31-62 ('And all the people rejoiced, and said:')	The harmony for the rest of the movement is based around the primary and secondary chords and mainly in root position or first inversion. This section also ends on an imperfect cadence.
	Bars 63-end ('God save the King')	Diatonic chords, tonal functional harmony.

Tonality	Bars 1-30 (Orchestral introduction plus 'Zadok the priest')	This opens in D major.
	Bars 31-62 ('And all the people rejoiced, and said:')	D major and passes briefly through A major (dominant) and hints at B minor, but stays in the tonic key.
	Bars 63-end ('God save the King')	This starts in D major and moves to the dominant (A major) at bar 79. Hints of B minor appear 90 and 91, and is confirmed by bar 94. The music returns to D major at bar 103 and remains in this key until the end.
Structure	Bars 1-30 (Orchestral introduction plus 'Zadok the priest')	This anthem is in three sections: this is section 1.
	Bars 31-62 ('And all the people rejoiced, and said:')	Section 2.
	Bars 63-end ('God save the King')	Section 3.
Sonority	Bars 1-30 (Orchestral introduction plus 'Zadok the priest')	This is SSATBB chorus accompanied by strings, oboes and continuo. Unlike the choruses in his oratorios, the voices are not always doubled by the orchestra.
	Bars 31-62 ('And all the people rejoiced, and said:')	
	Bars 63-end ('God save the King')	
Dynamics	Bars 1-30 (Orchestral introduction plus 'Zadok the priest')	The dynamic is <i>piano</i> at the start which creates a sense of anticipation. The sudden <i>forte</i> as the choir enters is a dramatic surprise.
	Bars 31-62 ('And all the people rejoiced, and said:')	The dynamic is a joyous <i>forte</i> until the end.
	Bars 63-end ('God save the King')	
Texture	Bars 1-30 (Orchestral introduction plus 'Zadok the priest')	The orchestral introduction becomes the accompaniment for the homophonic chorus when they enter.
	Bars 31-62 ('And all the people rejoiced, and said:')	The choral texture is homophonic, while the violins play some dotted rhythms to give some contrast.
	Bars 63-end ('God save the King')	The choral texture is still homophonic, even during the melismatic passages. There are moments of unison writing as some voices declare 'May the King live forever'.
Tempo, rhythm and metre	Bars 1-30 (Orchestral introduction plus 'Zadok the priest')	With no formal tempo marking, this opening has been performed at many speeds, though a steady one is generally adopted, as it has a procession in mind.
	Bars 31-62 ('And all the people rejoiced, and said:')	The metre changes here and goes into triple time. The dotted rhythms in the violins add more interest to the texture.
	Bars 63-end ('God save the King')	This section returns to 4/4 time and is characterised by dotted rhythms and passages of semiquavers.

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Phrasing and articulation	Bars 1-30 (Orchestral introduction plus 'Zadok the priest')	The opening choral phrases are four bars plus three bars (and a pause).
	Bars 31-62 ('And all the people rejoiced, and said:')	Phrases are regular in this section, as well as being fragmented above the dotted rhythms. The articulation is detached in both the dotted rhythms and the voice parts.
	Bars 63-end ('God save the King')	The melismatic 'Amens' have contrasting articulations: the separated quavers are detached, while the semiquavers are more legato.
Style/genre	Bars 1-30 (Orchestral introduction plus 'Zadok the priest')	This is a Coronation anthem from the Baroque period.
	Bars 31-62 ('And all the people rejoiced, and said:')	
	Bars 63-end ('God save the King')	