



Are You Musical?

Part One – Solemn Music

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Chapter 1 - Rachel's Choice



Those of us with rooms of our own had shut ourselves in and were allowed one walk a day and the homeless of London were being taken by local councils to out-of-use hotels. It was - it is - that year!

I like to make drawings of friends and was doing so one afternoon from my stock of iPhone photos, taken over the years, when the radio said that Rachel Podger, aged fifty-one, 'the unsurpassed glory of the baroque violin' (I quote a reviewer from *The Times*), was about to present the BBC's *Inside Music* programme.

The wind – 'George' or 'Mildred' or something, which had been lashing the coasts - was blowing white blossom from the trees in my quiet suburban street, an annual spectacular. It was a little after 1pm and the day was 31 March. It was the Spring Solstice, which brings equality across the world. You *could* say so - equality of night and day, at any rate.

For the first time in living memory no-one calling themselves a Druid, or a Pagan was being allowed inside the circle of Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire. 31 March is also the birthdate of Johann Sebastian Bach. Therefore, it was Early Music Day across Europe and across the offshore islands including Britain.

Two million of us on both sides of the trench, the 'English Channel' as we preposterously call it when you look at the weight of freight it carries, or carried till today, were prepared to listen to Rachel. She'd recently come first for 'clarity' and musicianship in a round-up of recordings of a Bach violin concerto.

Oh, but there was leisure to spare for some of us in those days, and none, none at all in the stacking rooms of the supermarkets

and in the hospitals. No equality between the idle and the overburdened in the time of Covid-19. Idle, over-70, with the white florets blowing in at my open door, I wondered lazily what ‘Rachel’ means and looked it up.

Turns out it’s Hebrew for the animal most valued in ancient times in the eastern Mediterranean where western Asia touches Africa and Europe. The ewe: the creature that both clothed and fed humanity. Endearingly youthful and enthusiastic Rachel of the 2,500-year-old name began her two-hour selection of some of her favourite performances by her heroes.

The broadcasting suites were empty everywhere by then except for lone presenters and techies so we knew she’d been pre-recorded. Suddenly she said as much: she would be performing live before an audience somewhere, she said, even as her selection went out on air. But instead she must have been at home, a captive audience of her own work, or perhaps caught in a foreign country, bless her.

The live performance will have vanished, postponed to another day, for it was – it is! -that year. Rachel gave us a version of *Greensleeves* played by a friend of hers on a *viola da gamba*, a wooden violin-like thing of the 1400s descending from the Arabic *rebab* (I get that from Wikipedia, where I get much of my information).

Rachel then said, “I can’t get over how good Handel is at writing tunes.” She gave us *As Steals the Morn* of 1740. A soprano and interweave. For a wonder they’re neither falling in love, nor dying, nor parting forever, merely thinking aloud, singing:

‘As steals the morn upon the night

And melts the shades away:

So, Truth does Fancy’s charm dissolve

And rising Reason put to flight

The fumes that did the mind involve

Restoring intellectual day?

The young voices fall silent. A baroque oboe carries the tune away, as if it were a shepherd in Asia 8,000 years ago blowing through a vulture-bone to entertain the sheep beside the headwaters of the Euphrates. The original performers of Handel's tune did so at the Royal Theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields. They were celebrating, and every woman and man in the audience was celebrating, "The Enlightenment".

The re-set, the re-think, the refresh in Europe that started with everyone's relief at the death of Louis XIV in 1715 climaxed in the suppression of the French monarchy at the onset of the French Revolution in 1789. We're going to spend time in the 18th century - all of *Part One* of this rumination or blog or post or gambol or whatever it is. Lucky us, for there are wonderful people in that century.

Handel's tune: *'The fumes that did the mind involve'*. The 'fumes' here are the beliefs held in the "Middle Ages", a term that first appeared in Latin in 1469 as *'media tempestas'* or 'middle season'. People had become disgusted with the pretensions of Popes in Rome. Boniface VIII, born Benedetto Caetani, whom Dante so hated, had proclaimed in 1302 that "it is absolutely necessary that every human creature be subject" to him. Sod that.

Caetano and his kind of Christianity's repression and violence from the mission of St Paul in the 30s CE up to the 1400s when at last there was an awed recovery of the pre-Christian Mediterranean world of Greeks-speakers was now to be regarded as an interruption, the 'middle season'. The Classical World and the Modern World would from now on join hands over the bowed and humbled heads of the 'Middle Ages' and the 18th century result would be "The Enlightenment".

So - with Rachel Podger to usher us into the Royal Theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields in London in 1740 - we're at a premiere of *As Steals the Morn* by Handel and the singers are singing to a live audience and reach the triumphant climactic line '*Reason restoring intellectual day...*' Reason restoring intellectual day. The fall of walls. The building of bridges. Encyclopaedias and IP internet system, instead of the Inquisition and Huawei.

As the mid-18th century audience applaud, the women startlingly vertical on their chairs because they're in whalebone stays and the men slouching in three-quarter length coats, breeches and buckled shoes, Cesare Beccaria of Milano is 770 miles away across the trench and a *bambino* only two years old.

In 1764, driving the Enlightenment on, he'll publish a little book, scarcely more than a pamphlet, called *On Crimes and Punishments (Dei Delitti e Delle Pene)* which will denounce once and for all the brutalities of 'the middle season'. It will be 'the first full-scale work to tackle criminal reform and to suggest that criminal justice should conform to rational principles.'

The 'brief work' will 'relentlessly' protest against torture to obtain confessions, against secret accusations, against the arbitrary discretionary power of judges, against the inconsistency and inequality of sentencing, against using personal connections to get a lighter sentence, and against the use of capital punishment for serious and even minor offences. So, I see online.

And I see too that Lorenzo Zucca, who is a professor of law and philosophy at King's College University of London and who has a wonderful wide Hercule Poirot moustache and a trim beard and who has taught in Milan, has described in an essay he calls *The First Socialist* how on Thursday 12 April 1764 when Beccaria was in his middle twenties (and Handel was five years dead) and Lombardy was under Austrian Habsburg Roman Catholic rule:

‘The citizens of Milan were summoned to watch ‘the brutal killing of Bartolomeo Luisetti. He had been condemned to death after being accused of sodomy. [He was] killed by asphyxiation and then burnt at the stake in front of the crowd.’

Beccaria ‘witnessed the scene with horror’ and suggested in his *On Crimes and Punishments* that together with countless other ‘middle season’ religious offences sodomy should no longer be dealt with as a crime. His booklet was read by individuals who would help make the American and French Revolutions. 4,094 miles away from Milan the United States ‘founding fathers’ Thomas Jefferson and [John Adams](#) quoted it. The treatise was extremely well received. Catherine the Great publicly endorsed it.

“I can’t get over how good Handel is at writing tunes” said Rachel on 21 March. I’ve been ferreting about among recordings of *As Steals the Morn* on YouTube, and have found, among many in this era of 18th century musical revival, a beautiful 2014 one by contralto singer Nathalie Stutzmann and counter-tenor Philippe Jaroussky. Another in 2015 is by soprano Lucy Crowe and tenor Mark Padmore, a visually unbeatable one in which we don’t see the singers or instrumentalists at all but watch photograph after spectacular photograph of miraculous early earthly morns.

The sun ‘steals’ up to peer through trees and gaps in mountains, dazzling our eyes with the ‘intellectual day’. I’ve found a version too by the most popular early music ensemble in America, *Voices of Music*, a troupe is based in San Francisco which plays only compositions from before 1800. In this we are within an austere 18th century sort of a church and we watch from different angles as soprano Amanda Forsythe and tenor Thomas Cooley bang out *As Steals the Morn*.

The instrumentalists with them – I rely on the credits list, for left to myself I’d have known only that there are some violins – are playing six baroque violins, two baroque cellos, two baroque

violas, a *violone* (which looks like a double bass), a baroque oboe, a baroque bassoon, an archlute, which looks like a mandolin, and a 4ft tall upright organ, whose player stands with her back to us throughout because, as Handel apparently used to do, she's co-ordinating the whole deal with a hand occasionally lifted from the keyboard.

No conductor. Everyone was present on stage except the two singers has a musical instrument under their hand. It so happened, a week after Rachel's broadcast, that a new book by the theatre director Peter Hall was mentioned on Radio 3. We heard that 'conductors' using a baton and playing no musical instrument were unknown until they appeared in France in the 1830s in France, just as, across the trench, Queen Victoria became Queen.

That was during a long backward return to 'the Middle Ages', 'the middle season', after the collapse of the French Revolution in 1804. Six French monarchs in a row, though one only lasted a few hours. During the 1830s a certain Louis-Philippe became the 7th in a row. Authoritarianism was back: the '*fumes that did the mind involve*'. And 'conductors' were in. I heard that twenty-three-year-old Mendelssohn 'conducted' *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1832 and the audience were 'astonished'.

174,378 views were listed by 4 November 2019 for the Californian performance and I find one later viewer commenting 'What a voice, like an angel! Now it is 15 March 2020 and Corona virus is all over the world, also in my country the Netherlands, I wish all the people who suffer all the best. Keep faith, comfort you with this beautiful music. I pray for Italy.'
