

# ORATORIO again

RTHK Radio 4  
10:00 – 11:00

Programme 3  
Sunday 21 december 2008

**MUSIC: Bach: Christmas Oratorio Pt 2: Sinfonia 92X05 # 6**

**KANE: V.O. @ c. 0:20 keep music under until fade out @ c. 3:30**

This is “Oratorio”, one in a short *season* of oratorios I’m introducing for you this month. I’m Ciaran Kane: and the music you’re hearing in the background is actually *not* the work I’ve chosen and advertised for today’s programme. But there *is* a connection, and a *reason* I’m starting with the ‘Sinfonia’ from part two of J.S.Bach’s great “Christmas Oratorio”, the part written for the *second* day of Christmas, 26<sup>th</sup> December. There are six parts to Bach’s work, each for a different day of the season from Christmas Day to Epiphany (‘little Christmas’, the 12<sup>th</sup> day). I’m afraid there’s no way we could fit even an *abridged* version of Bach into this “Oratorio” time-slot. But the work for *today’s* programme, also a Christmas Oratorio (but in French “Oratorio de Noël”), is a quite *short* piece, not even 40 minutes. So I’m filling our ‘extra’ time with Bach. Besides, the composer of “Oratorio de Noel”, Camille Saint-Saëns, deliberately made the “Prelude” to his own work after the *style* of Bach’s ‘Sinfonia’. There are other resonances, too, in Saint-Saëns. In fact so much so, that on its first performance it was dismissed as being “mere Bach”. In musical circles in the Paris of those days, mid-1800s, Bach was *not* held in high esteem, except maybe among organists. And Saint-Saëns was one of those. He’s better known now as pianist and composer of concertos, symphonies, operas. But he was also a church musician, and was organist for 20 years at the famous Madeleine church in Paris, succeeded there by Gabriel Fauré. The “Oratorio de Noël” begins with a prelude which may remind you of Bach’s ‘Sinfonia’ you’ve been hearing. This is followed by a recitative and choral presentation of the Christmas story from St Luke’s gospel, ch.2, verses 8 – 14. The text is in *latin*, telling about angels appearing to shepherds, announcing news of the saviour’s birth, and the host of angels then singing together “Glory to God in the highest”.

[ 328 ]

**MUSIC:** Saint-Saëns: Oratorio de Noël CD 69080 ## 1, 2 7:51

**KANE:** The Prelude and the Christmas story of the angels appearing to shepherds, from the “Oratorio de Noël” of Camille Saint-Saëns. The rest of the oratorio is simply a series of settings of verses and texts from the bible somehow associated with Christmas. Rather than *narrative*, they’re a kind of commentary on the first, main, text. A number of them appear in the church liturgies of Christmastime as motets or antiphons. And they’re arranged in a curious evolvment, the first being a solo aria, then an aria with choir, a duet, choir again, trio, quartet, quintet with choir, and a final chorale-style tutti. The first of these pieces, ‘Expectans expectavi Dominum’, takes its text from the start of Ps 40: ‘Patiently, I waited for the Lord’. The one that follows is based on words from St John’s gospel, “Lord, I believe thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God who has come into this world”.

[ 155 ]

**MUSIC:** a s a b o v e ## 3, 4 6:09

**KANE:** With words from St Matthew’s gospel and Ps 118, the following duet of soprano and tenor accompanied by harp and organ is perhaps the most lyrical piece in Saint-Saëns’ “Oratorio de Noël”. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. The Lord is God; his light shines out to welcome us”.

[ 54 ]

**MUSIC:** a s a b o v e # 5 3:49

**KANE:** The most dramatic element in the oratorio comes in the next choral movement, on words from the start of Ps 2: “Why this tumult among the nations ?” The “why” question is hammered out against a background of questioning, in the gliding motif of the instrumental accompaniment. And it melts into the *answering* words of ‘Gloria’ glory to Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The *next* text *also* is one of those that feature in the Christmas liturgical anthems, “Tecum principium in die virtutis tuae”, words from Ps 110 v.3 ‘From birth, princely state shall be thine’. This is sung by a trio of tenor, soprano and baritone.

[ 107 ]

**MUSIC:** a s a b o v e ## 6, 7 7:23

**KANE:** For the following quartet and quintet in Saint-Saëns’ ‘Oratorio de Noël’, the texts are from the prophet Isaiah, in chapters 49, 52 and 62. “Ring out, heaven, with praise; let earth keep holiday..... the Lord brings consolation to his people” “Rise up, daughter of Sion,

