

Eric Idle Still a Very Naughty Boy

Monty Python legend teams up again with John Du Prez for first-ever comic oratorio 'Not the Messiah'

BY LINDA RAPKA, OVERTURE MANAGING EDITOR

For something indeed completely different, Monty Python star Eric Idle and long-time collaborator John Du Prez presented the first-ever comic oratorio, "Not the Messiah (He's a Very Naughty Boy)," which made its West Coast premiere at the Hollywood Bowl Aug. 1 and Aug. 2.

Making an unlikely pair of Handel's holy oratorio "Messiah" and '70s cult Python film "Life of Brian," the satire on classic oratorio form features Idle as narrator and self-proclaimed "bariton-ish" vocalist joined onstage by Du Prez and soprano Shannon Mercer, mezzo-soprano Jean Stilwell, tenor William Ferguson and baritone Theodore Baerg, as well as the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Pacific Chorale, Los Angeles Scots Pipe Band – along with the occasional

singing sheep, kilted bagpiper and keyboard-operated leaf blower.

Idle and Du Prez began their collaboration 30 years ago with "Life of Brian." In the wake of the success of the hit musical "Spamalot," the pair comes full circle with their new madcap musical satire, which premiered in 2007 and has since traveled the globe.

"Not the Messiah" revives the story of Brian Cohen, a Jewish boy born a few mangers down from Jesus who is mistaken for the Messiah. The original spoof of the New Testament caused an uproar when it was released for its lampooning of organized religion. "Not the Messiah" adds another layer with a jab against the current U.S. administration: this time around Brian joins not the

anti-Roman People's Front of Judea, but a mob of ancient power-seeking Republicans.

The score consists mainly of new material composed by Du Prez, though there were no shortage of Python references. The show commenced with Sousa's "The Liberty Bell (the familiar theme to "Monty Python's Flying Circus"), gave a wink wink, nudge nudge to the classic "Lumberjack Song" and nodded to a line in the team's first film "The Meaning of Life" with the tune "O God You are So Big," ending appropriately with a fireworks and bagpipes singalong to "Life of Brian's" unforgettable closing number sung by Idle as he lay hanging upon a crucifix, "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life."

The rest of the score is a formidable pastiche of practically

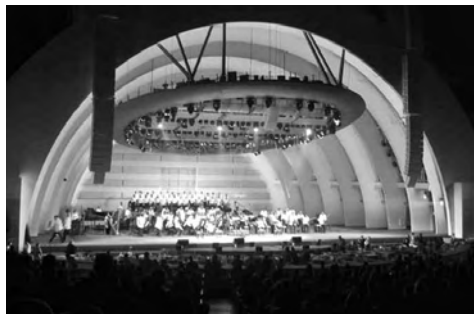


Photo by Linda Rapka

every musical genre under the sun: doo-wop, gospel, Baroque, pop, country and western, Broadway, Welsh hymns, hip hop, Greek chorus and mariachi, with Idle consistently throwing surprising tidbits into the mix. "Hail to the Shoe!," a spoof of Handel's "Hallelujah," has Idle beatboxing like a rap star, and "Individuals" takes an unexpected turn when he appears onstage in full-on Bob Dylan regalia replete with acoustic guitar, harmonica, and indiscernible mumbled speech.

With Brian and Judith's duct simulating an orgasm gone Baroque and the revealing of Brian's mum's not-so-chaste past, "Not the Messiah"

proves at times to be a bit naughty. And while some of the pop culture references seem outdated and irrelevant, the timely allegorical warning against the unrestrained tyranny of a Republican-run government during one of the most heated Presidential campaigns in U.S. history makes up for it.

The jumbling of religion, politics and sex with comedy in "Not the Messiah" covers all the bases of contentious subject matter in a sure attempt by Idle to get the sparks of controversy flying, as so often happened in his Python days – proving he's still quite a very naughty boy himself.