



ABOUT THE MUSIC

FLC Conducts *Messiah!*

December 2, 3 & 4, 2023

Program notes by Elizabeth Schwartz

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

Messiah for Solo Voices, Orchestra and Chorus, HWV 56

George Frideric Handel was perhaps the first international music star. Born in Germany, he studied music in Italy before moving to England, where he remained for the rest of his life. Handel's mature music, particularly his choral works, reflects a skillful blend of these three national styles.

For over 260 years, *Messiah* has been Handel's most popular and beloved oratorio, and continues to give pleasure to audiences around the world, whether in mammoth Cecil B. DeMille-type extravaganzas with 3,000+ singers; ever-popular "*Messiah* sing-alongs;" gospel and country versions; or performed in Baroque style with small choruses and chamber orchestras playing period instruments.

Today *Messiah* is considered Handel's greatest musical achievement, but its popularity was not immediate. Written during a three-week span in the summer of 1741 and premiered in Dublin the following spring, Handel composed it for a charity benefit "For the relief of the Prisoners in the several Gaols" and several other worthy causes. *Messiah* received warm reviews at its premiere, but its enduring popularity did not begin until after Handel's death. During his lifetime it was regarded as simply one of his many successful oratorios.

While *Messiah* concerts have become a Christmas tradition in North America, the oratorio was originally written for performance during Passion Week, the holiest week of the Christian year leading up to Easter Sunday.



COMPOSER: born February 23, 1685, Halle; died April 14, 1759, London

WORK COMPOSED: Summer 1741

WORLD PREMIERE: April 13, 1742, in Dublin, at a charity benefit concert "For the relief of the Prisoners in the several Gaols."

INSTRUMENTATION: soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, and bass soloists, SATB chorus, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 trumpets, timpani, continuo (harpsichord and bass), and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 2.5 hours

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The years immediately preceding the composition and premiere of *Messiah* were artistically and financially disastrous for George Frideric Handel. In 1737, he suffered a debilitating stroke, although he eventually recovered enough to resume work. The grandiose style of Italian *opera seria* for which Handel was best known was dwindling in popularity, so much so that after 1741 Handel stopped composing opera altogether. In the 1730s, Handel himself had experienced the bankruptcy and failure of two of his own opera companies, and by 1740, the city of London could not support its remaining two opera companies vying for an ever-shrinking audience weary of foreign language in its entertainments. Both shrewd and practical, Handel accepted the public's waning interest in opera seria, and started

composing something new – oratorios in English – that he hoped audiences would prefer.

Handel's oratorios represent some of the best examples of the genre. He wrote many of them; *Messiah* was his ninth. Although other composers had written oratorios, and the oratorio as a genre dates back to the early 1600s, Handel's innovations established the oratorio format we know best today.

Handel regarded the oratorio as an unstaged opera with a sacred plot, juxtaposing the drama of opera with the profundity of sacred themes; this combination appealed to both theatre lovers and those of a more religious inclination. Like opera, oratorios were written in several parts that focused on the dramatic elements of the libretto. In cities where opera was banned, and during the Lenten season, when opera houses were closed, oratorio satisfied the public's desire for dramatic musical works.

An oratorio's text, particularly a sacred oratorio, was of equal importance to the music. For *Messiah*, Handel teamed up with Charles Jennens, a collaborator as gifted with words as Handel was with music. One does not need to be either a musical or Biblical expert to appreciate the care with which Jennens chose and arranged the texts of *Messiah's* libretto. Jennens' selection of texts is masterful, drawing on both well-known and obscure passages from the Bible.

Jennens' libretto contains almost no direct narrative; it is a contemplative rather than dramatic portrayal of the life, Passion, and resurrection of Christ. Jennens outlined the three parts of *Messiah* accordingly: Part I presents the biblical prophecies of the Messiah, who would offer salvation; this section also presents prophecies of the Virgin birth and Christ's many miraculous and benevolent acts. Part II recounts Jesus' suffering and the rejection of his teachings by the people, his agony on the cross and subsequent resurrection, the knowledge spread among the populace of His true identity as the Son of God, and the spreading of the Gospel. In Part III, the texts deal with the promise of bodily resurrection after the Day of Judgment, Jesus' victory over death, and his ultimate deification.

Messiah's lasting reputation is also due to Handel's skillful rendering of Biblical texts, which would have been as familiar to the audiences of his day as commercial jingles and pop song lyrics are to today's listeners. Handel was a master of *Affektenlehre*, the Baroque aesthetic also known as text painting, which, as it suggests, audibly portrays words using musical devices. A few examples: the chorus, "All We Like Sheep," features a melismatic (setting one syllable with many notes) ending on the word "astray" in the line "All we like sheep have gone astray," with the word itself going astray from the phrase. In the opening tenor aria "Ev'ry Valley," Handel sets the word "crooked" with a variety of bouncy dotted rhythmic figures, and the word "straight" with strong single beats. In the bass aria "The People that Walked in Darkness," the opening phrase "The people that walked in darkness" meanders as if lost through a dark minor key, which abruptly changes into a triumphant major with the words "have seen a great light." This same technique of juxtaposing minor with major can be heard in the chorus, "Since by man came death." The opening lines begin in a somber minor key, which then bursts into the joyous relative major on the words "By man came also the resurrection of the dead."

A number of myths regarding *Messiah* have persisted over the years. Some accounts describe Handel refusing food and drink as he wrote *Messiah* in a white-hot religious fever. Others describe the composer's emotional state, weeping or gazing raptly into the distance, lost in an ecstasy of pious thought. The fact that Handel wrote *Messiah* in just 24 days has been taken as proof of his religious inspiration, but in fact Handel often composed quickly, especially during the summer months when he was readying operas for the upcoming theatrical season. Handel completed Part I in six days, Part II in nine, and Part III in another six, with three more days for fleshing out the orchestration. Although a sincere Christian, the speed at which Handel produced such transcendent and enduring music owes more to his gifts as a composer rather than to the passion of his religious beliefs.

Messiah received warm reviews in the Dublin newspapers even before its premiere. One reviewer, after attending a rehearsal, wrote "Yesterday Morning, at the Musick Hall ... there was a public Rehearsal of the *Messiah*, Mr. Handel's new sacred Oratorio, which in the opinion of the best Judges, far surpasses anything of that Nature, which has been performed in this or any other Kingdom." Another review said of the actual performance, "Words are wanting to express the exquisite Delight it afforded to the admiring crouded Audience. The Sublime, the Grand, and the Tender, adapted to the most elevated, majestick and moving Words, conspired to transport and charm the ravished Heart and Ear."

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Elizabeth Schwartz is a writer and music historian based in the Portland area. She has been a program annotator for more than 20 years, and works with music festivals and ensembles around the country. Schwartz has also contributed to NPR's "Performance Today," (now heard on American Public Media).

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