

ABOUT THE MUSIC
Winterlude… Handel's *Messiah*
December 12 & 13, 2026

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

Messiah [oratorio] for Solo Voices, Orchestra, and Chorus, HWV 56



COMPOSER: Born February 23, 1685, Halle, Germany; died April 14, 1759, London, England
WORK COMPOSED: 1741 (between August 22 and September 14 in London)
WORLD PREMIERE: April 13, 1742, at the New Music Hall on Fishamble Street in Dublin, Ireland
INSTRUMENTATION: 2 oboes, 1 trumpet, timpani, harpsichord, strings, chorus, solo soprano, solo mezzo-soprano, solo tenor, solo bass
ESTIMATED DURATION: 115 minutes

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Handel's *Messiah* is one of those masterpieces we like to call "timeless" because we are so used to them that it is sometimes hard to imagine that they weren't always with us. Also, being by far the composer's most popular composition, some people might assume it is the quintessential Handel oratorio. The truth, however, is that *Messiah* is very much a product of its time, and it is actually a rather unusual case among Handel's works.

Handel turned to oratorio-writing in the 1730s, after the Italian opera company he had founded and directed in London was forced out of business by the competition. Replacing secular subject matter with sacred ones was not in itself the most far-reaching element of change. More important was the switch from the Italian language to English, which directly affected musical style – not to mention the fact that Handel now had to rely on local singers, not great stars imported from the continent.

Handel had practically no precedents to build on when he wrote his first English oratorios. His first essay in the new genre was *Esther*, first conceived as a shorter work back in 1718, during what was only a temporary break in Handel's Italian opera production. *Esther* was considerably revised and expanded for a 1732 revival, now quickly followed by *Deborah, Athalia, Saul,* and *Israel in Egypt*. All these oratorios (as well as many of the later ones) are based on dramatic stories from the Old Testament, with the exception of *Athalia*, which is an adaptation of a tragedy by Racine. *Messiah* is unusual in that it is based on both the Old and the New Testaments, and that it has no dramatic action or named characters: it is a retelling of the life of Christ through a judicious selection of Bible verses, compiled for Handel by a gentleman named Charles Jennens. A son of a wealthy family who owned large estates in the country, Jennens devoted himself to literary, artistic, and political pursuits in London. A great admirer of Handel's music, he served the composer as librettist not only in *Messiah* but in *Saul, Belshazzar* and, possibly, *Israel in Egypt* as well.

Messiah is also the only Handel oratorio whose first performance took place outside England (namely, in Dublin, Ireland), although we don't know for sure whether it had been intended for Handel's Dublin season from the start. What we do know is that Handel left London for Dublin about two months after completing *Messiah*, and stayed there for a full nine months, during which time he gave two full subscription series of six concerts each, consisting of earlier works. *Messiah*, performed

on April 13 as an extra production, completed this "baker's dozen" of Dublin concerts.

The capital of English-dominated Ireland had a fairly rich artistic scene at the time, with considerable local talent complemented by artists brought in from London. Handel found a grateful and receptive audience there, filling the Great Music Hall on Fishamble Street to capacity. The most prominent members of Dublin high society were all there, among a crowd of about 700 people. *The Dublin Journal* called the work "the finest Composition of Musick that ever was heard," and further wrote:

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.

Soon after his return to London, Handel produced *Messiah* at Covent Garden and, due to the resounding success, revived it every few years for the rest of his life. He led his final *Messiah* performance on April 6, 1759, just eight days before his death and long since completely blind. After his passing, the tradition of annual *Messiah* performances continued, and the work quickly became popular in Europe as well as in the United States. It never needed to be revived, for it never went out of fashion during the 285 years of its existence.

Handel made many revisions in the score over the years, transposing arias to different vocal ranges, deleting numbers and adding new ones, so that the work now exists in a multitude of versions, forcing performers to make choices that are not always easy to make. The Watkins Shaw edition, based on a careful study of all sources, is the most widely used version today.

The three parts of *Messiah* correspond to Nativity, Passion and Resurrection, making the work suitable for performance either at Christmas or during the Lenten and Easter season (in fact, the first performance took place about two weeks after Easter in 1742). In this country, *Messiah* has long been a special Christmas tradition, with churches often presenting performances or sing-alongs of Part I alone. Yet the work only takes its full meaning if heard in its entirety, presenting Christ's entire life story in which birth, death and eternal life become inseparable.

After the overture, the first half of Part I deals with "God's Promise." Within that section, the happy news ("Ev'ry Valley Shall Be Exalted") is contrasted with the fearful challenge this news may represent to the world ("But Who May Abide the Day of His Coming?"). Feelings of joy again predominate in "O Thou That Tellest Good Tidings in Zion." Then, after an image of "the people that walked in darkness" seeing "a great light," the "Promise" section culminates in the proclamation of the "Wonderful Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

Part I then continues with the famous *Pifa* or "Pastoral Symphony," an instrumental movement symbolizing the birth of the Child, followed by the angels' hymn of praise. The message of joy and comfort is reiterated as Part I closes.

This message contrasts dramatically with the opening of Part II, where the Lamb of God is seen suffering, "despised and rejected," and the world, "gone astray like sheep," becomes aware of the torment that as the price of redemption. Part II reflects on the Passion without literally recounting its events, anticipates Resurrection and – after a powerful portrayal of the forces of evil – moves on to the final defeat of those forces and the proclamation of victory in the celebrated *Hallelujah* chorus.

The main motive of Part III is the conquest of Death by Life, expressed in turn through an individual's confession of faith ("I Know that My Redeemer Liveth"), a communal statement ("Since By Man Came Death") and the glorious announcement of Judgment Day complete with the angel's trumpet ("The Trumpet Shall Sound"). One last time we turn to a personal reflection in the aria "If God Be For Us," before the chorus makes its final proclamation in "Worthy Is the Lamb." We see, then, how Jennens's Biblical collage makes both theological and dramatic sense as it provides a logical train of thought by arranging a large number of religious topics in a unified and highly compelling sequence.

This dramatic logic, which makes up for the absence of a "plot" in the conventional sense, enabled Handel to write music that illustrated each topic, but also did much more than that. One could say that the text takes its full meaning only when joined by the music. Handel placed his contrapuntal virtuosity in the service of drama in the great choral fugues ("And With His Stripes," and "He Trusted in God," and bent the strict rules of fugue-writing in numerous ways to suit his dramatic purpose. Often, as in "And He Shall Purify" or "For Unto Us A Child Is Born," the first voice drops out when the second, imitating voice enters. It is an unorthodox practice that reduces the counterpoint and even eliminates it completely at times, yet it brings single parts from the chorus to the foreground almost as if they were individual characters in a drama. The arias have obvious links to the style of Italian opera in which Handel worked for so many years; yet he tended to move away from the standard "da-capo" form which could easily impede the dramatic flow as it requires a full repeat of the first half after a

contrasting middle section. There is only one aria – "He was despised" – that follows the "da-capo" pattern strictly. " The Trumpet Shall Sound" has an almost full repeat, with the instrumental introduction omitted the second time.

Maybe the most unique quality of the music of *Messiah* is its combination of religious feeling with uncommon vigor and natural robustness. Despite moments of grief and tragedy which are by no means downplayed in the music, Messiah, from the opening Overture to the final "Amen," positively bursts with life. Which may well be one of the reasons why we would never want to be without this great masterpiece.

FURTHER READING

Those who desire a detailed, movement-by-movement description of *Messiah* can be referred to Jens Peter Larsen's classic study (Handel's *Messiah*: *Origins, Composition, Sources*. 2nd edition: New York: W.W.Norton, 1972). Donald Burrows published a concise discussion of the work in the *Cambridge Music Handbook* Series (1991). Richard Luckett's Handel's *Messiah*: *A Celebration* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992) is a richly illustrated and highly readable account, while Thomas F. Kelly tells the story of the first performance based on a large number of contemporary documents in his delightful book *First Nights: Five Musical Premieres* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

© P.L., Ph. D., Program Annotator, The Cleveland Orchestra (1990-2007)
Visting Associate Professor, Bard College (2007-2024)