

Messiah

About the Work

Composer: George Frideric Handel

Program note originally written for the following performance:

[National Symphony Orchestra: Handel's *Messiah*](#)

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It was Gay and Pepusch's satirical romp of 1729, *The Beggar's Opera*, that first soured the fashionable London taste for what Samuel Johnson described in his 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* as "an exotic and irrational entertainment" - Italian opera. As both composer and impresario, Handel was London's most important producer of opera, and he toiled doggedly for the entire decade of the 1730s to keep his theatrical ventures solvent, but the tide of fashion (and the virulent cabals of his competitors) brought him to the edge of bankruptcy by 1739. As early as 1732, with the oratorio *Esther*, he had begun to cast about for a musical genre that would appeal to the changing fancy of the English public. Neither that work nor the oratorio *Alexander's Feast* of 1736 had the success that he had hoped, however, and the strain of his situation resulted in the collapse of his health in 1737, reported variously as a stroke or as acute rheumatism and depression. Much to the surprise and chagrin of his enemies, he recovered (he was often lucky with his health - a metal frock button deflected a sword point in a duel when he was young, saving his life), and resumed work. The oratorios *Israel in Egypt* and *Saul* appeared in 1739, but created little public stir. Determined to have one last try at saving Italian opera in London, he spent the summer of 1740 arranging production details and searching for singers on the Continent for his upcoming winter season. After returning to England in early autumn, he completed what proved to be his last two operas, both of which failed ignominiously on the stage. *Imeneo*, premiered on November 22nd, closed after only two performances; *Deidamia* (January 10, 1741), after three. Handel's publisher, Walsh, despite having good success selling the recent Op. 6 *Concerti Grossi*, could not find enough subscribers to warrant printing the score of *Deidamia*. In February, Handel largely withdrew from public life and he seldom left his house on Brook Street, near Grosvenor Square. His rivals rejoiced.

Rumors began to circulate that Handel was finished in London. Some held that his health had given way for good; others, that he had died. The story given greatest credence, one fueled by Handel's composition of some Italian duets - pieces largely useless in London - was that he planned to return to the Continent. A letter printed in the *London Daily Post* on April 4, 1741 called for public support to convince him to stay. Handel was never one to share his feelings, so nothing definite is known of his plans during the early months of 1741. However, in the summer he suddenly sprang back to creative life, inspired by a small book of Biblical texts that had been compiled by Charles Jennens, a moneyed fop of artistic pretensions but a sincere admirer of the composer (his preserved collection of every score Handel published on subscription is an important source for modern researchers) who had earlier supplied the words for the oratorios *Saul* and *L'Allegro, il Penseroso e il Moderato*, based on Milton's poem. Handel's imagination was fired, and he began composing on August 22nd. The stories have it that he shut himself in his room, eschewing sleep and leaving food untouched, while he frantically penned his new work. Twenty-four days later, on September 14th, he emerged with the completed score of *Messiah*. "I did think I did see Heaven before me and the great God Himself!" he muttered to a servant.

It was long thought that Handel, a devout Christian and Bible scholar, composed *Messiah* out of sheer religious fervor, with no thought of an immediate performance. In his book on Handel, the late

scholar of 18th-century music H.C. Robbins Landon contended that the work was written at the request of William, Duke of Devonshire, the Lord Lieutenant of Dublin, who visited London early in 1741. William, who knew Handel largely through his sacred vocal music, apparently asked him to provide a new work for performance at a series of concerts in Dublin that would aid various Irish charities. "It is characteristic of Handel that, in the midst of his sorrow and debts, he could dismiss both, as it were, with a wave of his pen and write his *magnum opus* for a charity far away," wrote Robbins Landon. At any rate, Handel's newly regained enthusiasm stirred by William's request continued to percolate, and he began *Samson* immediately upon finishing *Messiah*, completing that score, except for two numbers, within six weeks.

Handel was undoubtedly glad to leave London and its bitter disappointments in November 1741 for the journey to Dublin to produce his new oratorio. He traveled by way of the ancient cathedral town of Chester, where he met the fifteen-year-old Charles Burney, later to become the most important English-language chronicler of 18th-century music, and read (badly) through a few of *Messiah*'s unfamiliar choruses with some local singers. He arrived in Dublin on November 18th, being "universally known by his excellent Compositions in all Kinds of Musick," trumpeted the city's press. It was the beginning of one of the happiest periods of Handel's life, when, as he wrote to Jennens, he passed his time during the ensuing nine months "with Honour, profit and pleasure." He gave six concerts of his works in the new Neale's Music Hall on Fishamble Street between December 23rd and February 10th, a series with which he was especially gratified since it was arranged for him (rather than, as was typical in the 18th century, by him) by the local gentry and charitable organizations who had invited him to Ireland. The success of those programs was so great that a second series was given in the spring. In addition to some instrumental and sacred vocal works, he presented *L'Allegro*, *Alexander's Feast*, the *Ode to St. Cecilia's Day*, *Esther* and a revised version of the failed opera *Imeneo*, which succeeded as a "new serenata" with the title *Hymen*. The acclaim he received at those Irish concerts must have been sweet, indeed, after the difficulties he had endured in London. "The music sounds delightfully in the charming room, which puts one in such spirits, and my health being so good, that I exert myself on the organ with more than usual success," he recorded of his efforts and rewards at the keyboard.

Preparations for the presentation of Handel's grand new oratorio went on throughout the winter of 1742. Choristers were assembled from Dublin's churches, the best available soloists and instrumentalists were engaged, and the date of the premiere was set for April 13th. The public rehearsal on April 9th roused excitement to such a pitch that the following announcement had to be placed in *Faulkner's "Dublin Journal"* concerning the official first performance: "The Stewards of the Charitable Musical Society request the Favour of the Ladies not to come with Hoops [i.e., hoop skirts] this Day to the Musick-Hall in Fishamble Street. The Gentlemen are desired to come without their Swords, as it will greatly encrease the Charity, by making Room for more company." Through these sacrifices, the capacity of the hall was raised from 600 to 700 on April 13th. An almost equal number, hoping for a ticket, are said to have milled about outside. *Messiah* was a triumph. "It gave universal Satisfaction to all present; and was allowed by the greatest Judges to be the finest Composition of Musick that ever was heard," announced *Faulkner's Journal*. Handel repeated *Messiah* on June 3rd, and lingered a while longer before leaving Dublin on August 13th with sincere but never-fulfilled promises to return.

The Irish triumph of *Messiah* did not follow Handel back to London, at least not immediately. He wanted to present his new oratorio as soon as he returned, but he knew that there would be, in the words of Robbins Landon, "strong opposition to hearing the words of the New Testament in a theatre peopled by actors and actresses of loose morals and dubious sexual habits." He chose instead to give the Old Testament-based *Samson* on February 18, 1743, and it proved to be the first of his oratorios that won unqualified acclaim in the British capital. *Messiah* was ready for its London premiere on March 23rd at Covent Garden, though he chose not to bill the work under its true title but called it, simply, "A New Sacred Oratorio," hoping to skirt some of the indignation of the more puritanical audience members and of Edmund Gibson, the Bishop of London. The ploy succeeded

only in part. "Any work about the Omnipotent should never be performed in a playhouse," fumed one clergyman. Some of his colleagues tried to shut down the theater. (It is an interesting sign of those 18th-century times that the Church never publicly raised such objections to oratorios based on the Old Testament - the *Jewish* Old Testament, as it was viewed.) *Messiah*, still known only as "Handel's New Oratorio," was given twice more in 1743, and twice again in 1745, then put aside. Not until the death of Bishop Gibson and his succession by the more liberal Thomas Sherlock in 1748 did Handel again mount *Messiah*, at last under its original title, for a single performance at Covent Garden on March 3, 1749. It was, finally, the following year that Handel's surpassing masterpiece began to receive its due. After the April 13, 1750 Covent Garden performance, Handel presented it again, on May 1st, for the benefit of the London Foundling Hospital, a charity that had been established in 1740 by Captain Thomas Coram for the "Maintenance & Education of Exposed & Deserted Young Children." The concert also commemorated the dedication of the Hospital's Chapel and the organ therein that Handel had already contributed. (Handel's other local charitable interest was the "Society for the Support of Decayed Musicians & Their Families," later more sanitarily renamed the Royal Society of Musicians.) *Messiah*, buoyed by a wave of public good will inspired by Handel giving its proceeds to a worthy cause, was a huge success. He presented it for the Foundling Hospital annually thereafter. It was the last work he directed, only eight days before he died on April 14, 1759.

Ever since the London audience belatedly approved *Messiah* in 1750, it has remained one of the best-known and most widely performed of all musical works. It is the only important piece of Baroque music with an unbroken performance tradition from the time of its creation to our own day. It was heard in America as early as 1770. A performance of *Messiah* by over 500 musicians was the focus of the celebration of the centennial of Handel's birth at Westminster Abbey in 1784. (It was then thought that he was born in 1684 - the monument above his grave in the Abbey still wrongly bears that date.) In 1789 Mozart arranged the orchestral accompaniments for a performance in Vienna sponsored by that champion of "ancient" music, Baron von Swieten, Court Librarian and librettist for Haydn's *The Creation*. George Bernard Shaw reported in one of his turn-of-the-20th-century columns of music criticism on a performance involving some 4,000 (!) participants. (About the tradition of the audience standing for the "Hallelujah Chorus" initiated by George II during one of Handel's *Messiah* performances, Shaw noted that "it is the nearest sensation to the elevation of the Host known to English Protestants.") Today, there is probably not a major city in the Western world that does not hear *Messiah* at least once a year.

For all of its unparalleled popularity, *Messiah* is an aberration among Handel's oratorios, the least typical of his two dozen works in the form: it is his only oratorio, except *Israel in Egypt*, whose entire text is drawn from the Bible; it is his only oratorio without a continuous dramatic plot; it is his only oratorio based on the New Testament; it is his only oratorio presented in a consecrated space during his lifetime, a reflection of the sacred rather than dramatic nature of its content ("I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better," he told one aristocratic admirer); it has more choruses than any of his oratorios except *Israel*; the soloists in *Messiah* are commentators on rather than participants or characters in the oratorio's story. None of this, of course, detracts a whit from the emotional/artistic/(perhaps) religious experience of *Messiah*. (Handel and Jennens never appended the definite article to the title.) Its three parts - *The Advent of the Messiah*, *The Passion of Christ*, and *His Resurrection* - embody the most sacred events of the Christian calendar, yet its sincerity and loftiness of expression transcend any dogmatic boundaries. In the words of George P. Upton, the American musicologist and early-20th-century critic of the *Chicago Tribune*, "Other oratorios may be compared one with another; *Messiah* stands alone, a majestic monument to the memory of the composer, an imperishable record of the noblest sentiments of human nature and the highest aspirations of man."