

## **GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL** **Messiah, HWV 56**

### **Vital Stats**

**Composer:** Born Feb. 23, 1685, Halle, Germany; 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."

**Most recent Oregon Symphony performance:** December 2010.

**Instrumentation:** Soprano, countertenor, tenor and bass soloists, SATB chorus, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 trumpets, timpani, continuo (harpichord and bass), and strings.

**Estimated duration:** 3 hours

In many ways, George Frideric Handel can be regarded as the first international music star. Born in Germany, he studied in Italy before moving to England, where he remained until his death. The music from the later part of Handel's life reflects a skillful blend of national styles, particularly evident in his choral music. 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, the always popular "*Messiah* singalongs," 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 instantaneous. 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 recognized as merely one of many successful, but not groundbreaking, oratorios he composed.

While performances of *Messiah* have become a Christmas tradition, it was originally intended for performance during Passion Week, the holiest week of the Christian year leading up to Easter Sunday.

The years immediately preceding the composition and premiere of *Messiah* were artistically and financially disastrous for George Frideric Handel. In 1737, Handel suffered a debilitating stroke; he eventually recovered enough so that his playing was unaffected. The grandiose style of Italian *opera seria* for which Handel was best known was dwindling in popularity, so much so that after 1741 he stopped composing opera altogether. London could not support the remaining two opera companies that were vying for an ever-shrinking audience weary of foreign language in its entertainments. Indeed, Handel himself had witnessed the bankruptcy and failure of two of his own opera companies in the 1730s. Handel was a shrewd and practical composer; he saw the public's waning interest in the musical form that had been his bread and butter for many years and started composing oratorios, a format he hoped the public 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 itself dates back to the early 1600s, Handel's innovations created the structure of the oratorio we recognize today. Handel regarded the oratorio as essentially 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 a dramatic, portrayal of the life, Passion, and resurrection of Christ. Jennens outlined the three parts of *Messiah* accordingly: the first part deals with the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah who would offer salvation, the prophecies of the Virgin birth, and Christ's many miracles and benevolent acts on earth. Part two 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 the final section, the texts deal with the promise of bodily resurrection after the Day of Judgment, the ultimate victory over death, and the final deification of Jesus.

Jennens' own religious beliefs directly informed his choice of texts for *Messiah*. An Anglican who leaned toward orthodoxy, Jennens was caught between his refusal to swear loyalty to James II (which would require him to repudiate his beliefs) and his hatred of James' Catholic relatives who stood ready to assume the throne. Because Jennens would not swear his allegiance to the king, he was effectively barred from public teaching appointments (this seeming obstacle actually freed him to pursue a life of scholarly leisure on his family's estate in Leicestershire). In choosing the texts for *Messiah*, Jennens attacked what he saw as a pernicious religious threat, the rise of "natural religion" or Deism. The Deists believed in God as the prime creative force in the universe, but not in divine intervention or revelation. The whole thrust of *Messiah* is therefore an affirmation of the very things Deism strove to discredit. With its emphasis on God the Father offering his only begotten Son, Jennens' *Messiah* declares the supremacy of God's compassion and the unwavering belief in both the incarnation and resurrection of Christ as the means to redeem the world.

*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 the concept of *Affektenlehre*, the Baroque aesthetic also known as text painting, which, as it suggests, audibly portrays words using musical devices. A few examples can be heard in the following excerpts: the chorus, "All We Like Sheep," features a melismatic (setting one syllable with many notes) ending to 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 first bass recitative, "Thus Saith the Lord," the word "shake" rises on a long, quaking melisma, with "the heavens" high in the bass range and "the earth" correspondingly low. 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 Handel's composition of *Messiah* have persisted through the years. Some accounts describe him as sequestered away, refusing food and drink as he wrote in a white-hot religious fervor. Others describe his intense 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 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

crowded Audience. The Sublime, the Grand, and the Tender, adapted to the most elevated, majestic and moving Words, conspired to transport and charm the ravished Heart and Ear.”

Handel wrote several versions of *Messiah* (different versions of arias transcribed from one voice part to another are the most common changes), and other composers took it upon themselves to revise and arrange the work after his death. Mozart’s slightly shortened version is perhaps the most famous, with its beefed-up orchestration that omits the archaic sound of the harpsichord and increases the winds. Taking their cue from Mozart, other composers tried their hand at arranging *Messiah* according to the prevailing 19th century Romantic aesthetic until it was so distorted and removed from Handel’s original conception that Hector Berlioz unjustly termed Handel’s music “a barrel of roast pork and beer.” It is a measure of *Messiah*’s underlying greatness that, Berlioz notwithstanding, it continues to inspire and move listeners no matter how far modern interpretations and performances stray from Handel’s original concept.

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### **Program Notes by Elizabeth Schwartz**

Elizabeth Schwartz is a free-lance writer and musician based in Portland. In addition to annotating programs for the Oregon Symphony, The Britt Festival and other ensembles, she has contributed to NPR’s “Performance Today,” (now heard on American Public Media). Schwartz also writes about performing arts and culture for Oregon Jewish Life Magazine and other publications. [www.classicalmusicprogramnotes.com](http://www.classicalmusicprogramnotes.com)

### **Recommended Recordings by Michael Parsons**

#### **Handel–Messiah**

Vocal soloists: Arleen Auger, Anne Sofie von Otter, John Tomlinson, Michael Chance  
Trevor Pinnock–English Concert & Choir  
Deutsche Grammophon/Archive 423630

OR

Vocal soloists: Heather Harper, Helen Watts, John Wakefield, John Shirley- Quirk  
Sir Colin Davis–London Symphony  
Orchestra & Choir  
Philips 438356

These recordings are available for purchase during intermission in the lobby of the concert hall.