

***MESSIAH* AND LONDON'S FOUNDLING HOSPITAL**

By Bruce Lamott

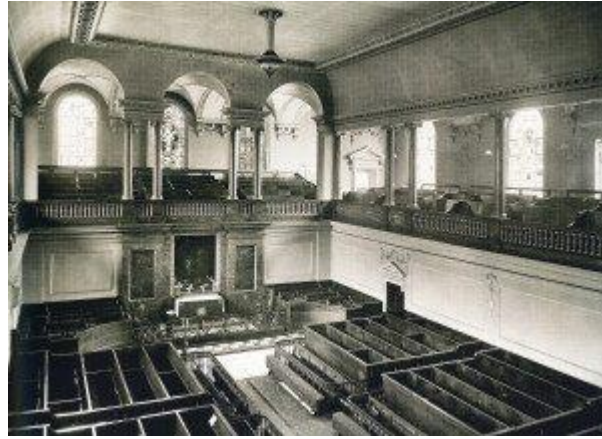


George Frideric Handel

More than two hundred years before music and philanthropy were joined in such events as *The Concert for Bangladesh* and *We Are the World*, George Frideric Handel used his “Sacred Grand Oratorio” *Messiah* to generate income for a number of worthy causes. *The Dublin Journal* writes of its premiere on April 13, 1742, “It is but Justice to Mr. Handel, that the World should know, he generously gave the Money arising from this Grand Performance, to be equally shared by the Society for relieving Prisoners, the Charitable Infirmary, and Mercer’s Hospital, for which they will ever gratefully remember his Name.”

But Handel’s longest philanthropic affiliation was with London’s Hospital for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Young Children, known as the Foundling Hospital. The “hospital” was not a medical facility in the modern sense, but rather for children either orphaned or living in the squalid workhouse with their impoverished parents, who would deposit them in the Foundling Hospital in the hope of reclaiming them, perhaps, in better times. It received a Royal Charter in 1739 in response to petitions by Thomas Coram, a sea captain and successful merchant, who was appalled by the sight of babies abandoned on the street. Typhus, dysentery, measles, influenza, and parental neglect due to London’s Gin Craze caused a death rate of 74% for children under five; and puritanical disapproval of the illegitimacy associated with many of the births put London far behind other European cities in seeing after their welfare.

The close association of Handel’s *Messiah* with the Foundling Hospital began with the performance at the end of a program on May 27, 1749; paper covered the empty windows of the unfinished chapel for a midday performance that included some of his *Music for the Royal Fireworks* and an extended work entitled *Blessed are they that considereth the poor and needy*. Later known as the “Foundling Hospital Anthem,” which he had compiled from previous works, he concluded the anthem with the “Hallelujah Chorus.”



Foundling Hospital Chapel

The hospital's new building, described as "the most imposing single monument erected by eighteenth century benevolence," had been built on 56 acres of the Earl of Salisbury's estate. The artist William Hogarth, who Handel was later to join on the hospital's board of governors, decorated the walls with artworks donated by his fellow British artists, including Thomas Gainsborough and Joshua Reynolds, creating the first public art gallery in England. Overly optimistic plans for an official dedication in March 1750 by the Archbishop of Canterbury with music by Handel, had to be scrubbed. The alternative was to inaugurate the new organ that Handel had commissioned for the chapel. However, as Richard Lockett wryly notes, "Organ-builder Jonathan Morse failed to make organ-building history by completing it on time."

Handel proposed instead a benefit performance of *Messiah*, following its recent success at the theater at Covent Garden during Holy Week. The performance, on May 1, 1750, was such a success that he was asked to repeat it two weeks later. The combined audience numbered almost 2,000, arriving in an "infinite crowd of coaches," and patrons were requested to attend without swords and hoop-skirts to make space for the patrons. Between its Dublin premiere on April 13, 1742, and the beginning of what was to become an annual performance at the Foundling Hospital in 1750, performances of *Messiah* had been intermittent. It was first performed in London in 1743, revived and revised for Holy Week in 1745, and did not reappear until a single performance on Maundy Thursday of 1749. Some adjustments were made to accommodate the specific casts, but the most significant revisions came in 1750, with the arrival of the alto castrato (a male singer who had been castrated before reaching puberty to preserve his pre-pubescent voice) Gaetano Guadagni. Handel wrote a new virtuosic aria, "But who may abide/For He is like a refiner's fire" with two contrasting sections that exploited not only Guadagni's facility with bravura runs but also his dramatic expression in the ominous passages that preceded them.



Foundling Hospital Chapel

Even in 1751, when the death of the Prince of Wales caused the closing of the theaters, Handel was permitted to give two performances of *Messiah* at the Foundling Hospital for another audience of 2,000. Both the chapel setting and the philanthropic purpose of these performances eased the minds of people discomforted by the performance of “a sacred oratorio” in a theater. Many shared the sentiments of socialite Catherine Talbot, who deemed Covent Garden “an unfit place for such a solemn performance” and extolled the virtues of the Foundling Hospital as a place “where the benevolent design and the attendance of the little boys and girls adds a peculiar beauty even unto this noblest composition.”

A departure by Guadagni sent Handel back to the drawing board, but instead replacing his custom-fit arias with new ones, Handel transposed and reassigned them to the soloists at hand. The Foundling Hospital performance in 1754 included two prima donnas, Giulia Frasi, who had sung *Messiah* performances since 1749, and Christina Passerini, new in town and en route to Scotland to perfect her English. (Sorry, Maestro McGegan, but what could she have learned about speaking English in Scotland?) Passerini was given transposed versions of Guadagni’s show-stoppers in higher keys. It is these versions that you will hear in this performance. To placate the other soprano, the tenor recitative and aria, “He was cut off from the land of the living / But Thou didst not leave his soul in hell” were given to Frasi, but as we have but one soprano soloist in our performances, we shall not cut off our tenor from these numbers.



Handel’s *Messiah* – bass part; St Patricks Dublin

Handel's magnanimity towards the Foundling Hospital extended far past the box office, which succeeded in raising £7,000 for the charity. In addition, Handel personally donated £600 per year as well as underwriting the purchase of the organ. To assure that benefit performances of *Messiah* could continue, he willed to the hospital a fair copy of the score and parts, delivered three weeks after his death on April 15, 1759.

Annual *Messiah* benefits for the Foundling Hospital continued until 1777, and the hospital and chapel were razed in the 1920s. The work of this oldest children's charity in the U.K. has continued to the present day. Handel's score and orchestra parts are still proudly displayed in London's Foundling Museum, and the BBC has recently completed a documentary on a "reconstruction" of these performances. The spirit of philanthropy imbued in *Messiah* since its inception adds further appeal to this revered and remarkable work.



Foundling Hospital