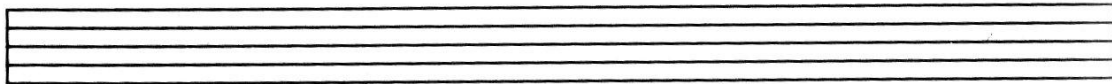


# The Words, The Music, The Embellishments: A Look At *Messiah's* Score



Charles Jennens may have made a fool of himself rewriting Shakespeare, then publishing his distortions of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, among other plays. But he didn't tamper with Scripture. On the contrary, he seemed mesmerized by the beauty of both Old and New Testaments as he lovingly shaped the text of *Messiah*. He drew from the Gospels, of course, and the Epistles of Paul, the poetry of Psalms and the prophecies of Isaiah. But he went beyond these to selections from less familiar texts, including the books of Zechariah and Haggai. The first chorus, taken from Isaiah, tells us, "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." It is followed immediately by a recitative that connects Haggai and Malachi:

Thus saith the Lord of hosts: yet once  
a little while, and I will shake the  
heavens and the earth, and the sea and  
the dry land, and I will shake all nations,  
and the desire of all nations shall come.

*Haggai II, 6,7*

The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come  
to his temple, even the messenger of the  
covenant whom ye delight in, behold he shall  
come, saith the Lord of hosts.

*Malachi III, 1*

The words merge into one message of threat and promise. Later that most comforting of all arias, “I know that my Redeemer liveth,” unites Job (“I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.”) with Corinthians 1 (“For now is Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep.”).

This compilation, this synthesis of prophecy and realization, encompasses almost any faith or spiritual persuasion. Handel, a believer and yet a man of his “enlightened” world, was deeply touched by its broad sweep and its simply stated message. Jennens evoked the mystical in words without mystery. But Handel’s portion of the project is far more puzzling, its exact contours never defined, its precise proportions left to interpreters. His approach, scope, synopsations, division of labor, nuances—all have taken the shape and direction that later players impressed upon *Messiah* and at the same time extracted from it. Perhaps as much as anything this flexibility reveals the greatness of the work.

Handel wrote in haste and in the style and manner of the time, not always dotting and fussing with interpretive marks, not always fully working out instrumentation. Musicians of his day understood the code, where and how the ornaments should evolve, when oboe and violin should blend, how the instrumental ensemble should underscore a singer. Handel didn’t always specify that the violins should accompany a soloist in arias, but that was the custom of the time, so he probably meant the violins to perform that duty. He didn’t always specify that oboes were to accompany the choruses, but following the accepting style, oboes were given that function when copyists interpreted the score.

So, unknowingly, the main player, Handel, initiated the mystery. The plot evolved as the dramatis personae interpreted their roles, and as future directors adjusted the script. The cast, in order of appearance, might be listed as:

*G. F. Handel:* the composer, who made changes as he wrote and as he continued thinking about his precious oratorio. He made changes for given performances. Sometimes he used four soloists, other times five, and occasionally six. He created a living, growing work. We are not even sure which score is his original one, and we certainly don’t know which one he would consider the master score.