

confidence. Handel has indeed made Christmastide his own. Each returning season accentuates with peculiar emphasis his grasp upon the musical affections of the Anglo-Saxon world.

Since its first appearance on 13 April 1742 Handel's *Messiah* has been performed more steadily in English-speaking countries than any other choral work in existence. Its muscular Christianity has thrilled thousands to whom *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are little more than names. Even the familiar symphonies of Mozart and Beethoven demand facilities beyond the scope of most small towns, whereas *Messiah* remains the *cheval de bataille* of every provincial chorus in Great Britain and the United States. Zealous Christians who take no serious interest in music and hear no other musical performance piously avow that this solemn ritual exalts their religious devotion. Generations have lived and died in the firm faith that *Messiah* embraces all that is good and great in music, and though it has passed its bicentennial, its popularity continues unabated with thousands who cannot hum one of its great themes nor in the least comprehend the plan upon which its noblest choruses are constructed.

Throughout England the name of George Frideric Handel has been held in absolute veneration for almost two hundred years. No other composer has so truly touched the heart of John Bull. In his magnificent pomp and militant self-assurance Handel gave England a national music of her own, and Englishmen have unanimously adopted the naturalized German as their national hero in music. His bones lie buried in Westminster Abbey, and numerous landmarks in London remind Englishmen of his long residence there. For forty-nine years "the Shakespeare of music" drew his inspiration from the great people whom he labored to please. It is therefore not inappropriate to claim Handel as the greatest composer England has produced. But if Handel's name is a household word, the household seldom inquires further than the one work by which he is universally known. To the bourgeois

Briton *Messiah* represents the cornerstone of Handel's fame. In his stubborn devotion the orthodox Englishman criticizes its music no more than he criticizes its words. If one could attend a nineteenth-century Handel Festival at the Crystal Palace to hear *Messiah* thundered by a host of four thousand stalwart voices before an audience of tens of thousands (including the Queen and Prince Consort), he would undoubtedly feel that he had discovered the musical soul of England.

In this account of the fortunes and misfortunes of *Messiah* the author seeks to present a biography of Handel's masterpiece, a chapter in the history of English taste. Actually *Messiah* is Handel's least representative (because least dramatic) choral work, but in its phenomenal vogue through two centuries it has dictated the style and conception of subsequent oratorio to the present day. In courses of sermons, in volumes of history and criticism, in scores of poetical tributes *Messiah* has been treated from almost every conceivable religious and artistic point of view. If the reader of literature is impressed with the importance of Handel's music in English social life for two centuries, perhaps the musician will be surprised at Handel's impact upon the subject-matter of English prose and verse. Of the making of books about Handel there is no end. In his flowing full-bottomed wig and magnificent ruffles and gorgeous velvet coat, quick-tempered Mr. Handel might have made gruff remarks on that score. But the author's own feeling is best expressed by the Reverend William Hughes in his disarming preface to a sermon on *The Efficacy and Importance of Musick* in 1749:

As every one must be sensible, that it requires a great Share of Knowledge to add any thing of real Consequence to the REPUBLICK OF LETTERS, (especially in the present curious and discerning Age) it may possibly carry with it an Air of Presumption, to pretend to obtrude the following mean Performance upon the Publick, when Men of the most approv'd Parts and Learning, have already done known justice, to this, as well