

PROGRAM NOTES

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

(1685–1759)

HANDEL—THE PEOPLE'S COMPOSER

In the 18th century, the commissioning of a statue for public display during one's lifetime was an exceptional honor usually reserved for royalty or great military heroes. It was something of a surprise, then, when in 1738 a statue of England's favorite musician, George Frideric Handel, was unveiled in London's Vauxhall Gardens. Though born in Germany, Handel had lived in London since 1712 and became a naturalized British citizen in 1727. His Italian operas were spectacularly successful during the 1720s and '30s, and he was the favored composer at the king's court. If anyone deserved such a gesture of public acclaim, Handel did.

But the sculptor, a talented young Frenchman named Louis-François Roubiliac, depicted the great composer in an unusually casual fashion. Instead of showing him in formal attire and powdered wig (as was the custom), Roubiliac portrayed Handel as a regular Londoner; he's wearing indoor clothes with his top shirt-button undone, a soft cap on his head, and slippers dangling nonchalantly from his feet. His legs crossed, the composer casually leans his elbow on a pile of his best-known scores, including *Alexander's Feast*, a work premiered only a short time before Roubiliac received his commission. This statue proudly proclaims Handel not as a noble national hero and aristocrat but as a "composer of the people," an ordinary man with an extraordinary gift for music.

The everyday, middle-class English folk that strolled through Vauxhall Gardens would soon prove to be the key to Handel's musical future. By 1738, his Italian opera ventures, which were aimed squarely at the lofty tastes of the aristocratic elite, were struggling and doomed to fail. *Alexander's Feast* was one of his more recent works that had tapped into the British love of choral music in their own language, and Handel knew that his future success relied on winning acceptance with this new audience. The easiest (and most financially viable) way to achieve this was to write English-language oratorios, a genre that Handel had only dabbled in previously but which would now dominate his compositional output for the rest of his career.

ORATORIO AND MESSIAH

The oratorio as a musical genre originated during the 17th century in the churches and monasteries of Italy. In the oratory (a side chapel found in many consecrated buildings), the theatrical presentation of vocal music on a sacred topic was an adjunct to the liturgy of the church. By the early 1700s, when Handel was living in Italy, oratorios were also being performed in private chapels and palaces as a form of entertainment and had taken on the now-standard characteristics of a sung drama on sacred texts, without staging or costumes.

Handel had composed several oratorios earlier in his career. But with the looming failure of his opera ventures, he devoted himself to the oratorio as a form in which he could continue his flair for dramatic vocal writing and combine it with his experience as a composer of sacred choral music. With oratorios, Handel eventually won over his new audience, earned back the esteem of the London critics, and secured his lasting reputation.

None of Handel's oratorios, though, have garnered more audience, esteem, and reputation than *Messiah*, composed in the autumn of 1741 and premiered in Dublin the following Easter. *Messiah* stands alone as the most popular work in the choral and orchestral repertoire today. It is the first "classic" in the musical canon—the oldest composition to have never fallen out of favor—and has remained part of the performing repertoire continuously from Handel's day to our own. It is without peer or precedent.

And yet, as an oratorio, *Messiah* is atypical. Instead of telling its story through narrative and dialogue, as do most works in the genre, it presents a series of tableaux that reflect and meditate on the work's theme, which unfolds conceptually more than narratively. Also, while most oratorios are based on biblical stories, few of them use actual scripture as their text. To produce an oratorio using only scripture, with little direct narrative, on the topic of the Messiah was a bold step for Handel at this precarious point in his career.

THE LIBRETTO

Handel was encouraged in this venture by his librettist, Charles Jennens, an aristocrat, musician, and poet of modest talent and exceptional ego. Jennens had already worked with Handel on *Saul*, an oratorio from 1739, and may also have been the librettist for *Israel in Egypt* later that season. With *Messiah*, though, Jennens seems to have outdone himself in compiling a libretto with profound thematic coherence and an enhanced sensitivity to musical structure. He sent the libretto to Handel in July 1741; Handel began setting it to music the following month and, with customary swiftness, completed it 24 days later.

Jennens structured the libretto in three parts, similar to the three-act format of an Italian baroque opera. But there the similarity with opera ends. Jennens chose to focus each of the three parts of *Messiah* on different aspects of the Savior's life and ministry. Though these tableaux are roughly chronological in order, the combination of Old and New Testament texts makes the prophecies and their fulfillments timeless and ever-present. Part I actually begins with the conclusion—already in the opening recitative, Jerusalem's "warfare is accomplished, . . . her iniquity is pardoned." It then proceeds to outline the prophecies of Christ's coming, the Nativity, and the hope of healing and redemption. Part II begins with Christ's Passion and Crucifixion, followed by His Resurrection and Ascension and the spreading of the gospel, culminating with the grand victory over wickedness and unbelief in the "Hallelujah" chorus. Part III is a relatively short finale that details the promise of a

universal resurrection for all people, addresses Christ's final victory over death and sin, and ends with praise for the Lamb of God.

Jennens's libretto focuses intently on a handful of select themes and images that unify the work's structure. First, and most obviously, is the title itself—the word *Messiah* appears only twice in the Old Testament and twice in varied form ("Messias") in the New Testament, where it is more frequently rendered in its Greek form, "Christ." It was an uncommon method of referring to Jesus, both in the early 17th century when the King James Bible was published and in Handel's time a century later. This oratorio could easily have been called *Redeemer*, *Savior*, *Christ*, or any of the other more common biblical titles for Jesus. But with its connotations of royalty and anointing—"Messiah" literally means "the Anointed One"—Jennens narrows the focus of the lyrics.

In *Messiah*, the theme of royal preeminence recurs frequently, most notably in the choruses "For unto Us a Child Is Born," "Hallelujah," and "Worthy Is the Lamb." But Jennens combines this regal symbolism with prominent pastoral images, creating a composite portrait of a Messiah who is at once both King and Shepherd. Correspondingly, for the narrative of Christ's birth Jennens chose the annunciation to the shepherds, where a pastoral quality prevails, instead of any of the other nativity accounts from the Bible. It's significant that for *Messiah*, Jennens also selected numerous verses from the Psalms of David, a poet whose own life directly foreshadowed the Savior's in its conflation of "shepherd" and "king."

Jennens cleverly wove throughout the text several scriptural threads of metaphysical imagery that reveal central tenets of Christian doctrine. Christ is, for example, portrayed in *Messiah*'s text as both the Good Shepherd and the Sacrificial Lamb. He is scorned yet triumphant, humble, and supernal. He offers pastoral peace while waging war against wickedness. We are washed clean with His blood. These instructive mysteries reach a climax in a series of three choruses at the start of Part II in which the audience is repeatedly reminded that "He hath borne our griefs," "with His stripes we are healed," and "the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

Another connecting image is the "yoke" of Christian faith, which the believer is assured in Part I is "easy" and "light," only to have the wicked threaten to cast away the "yoke" of Christianity from among them in Part II (in the chorus "Let us break their bonds asunder"). There is a marked chiaroscuro of emotions as well, as the optimistic conclusion of Part I ("His yoke is easy and His burthen is light") leads directly into a sobering realization in Part II that the burden of the world's sins was, in fact, heavy and arduous for the Savior ("Behold the Lamb of God").

With these and other metaphors spread mosaic-like throughout the libretto, Jennens's *Messiah* text stands on its own as a remarkable example of 18th-century doctrinal understanding and scriptural knowledge.

HANDEL'S MUSIC

Once he got hold of the libretto, Handel worked at white-hot speed to set it to music. But this didn't necessarily indicate he was in the throes of devotional fervor, as legend has often stated. Handel composed many of his works in haste, and immediately after completing *Messiah* he wrote his next oratorio, *Samson*, just as quickly.

The rapidity with which Handel composed *Messiah* can be partially explained by some musical borrowings from his own earlier compositions. For example, melodies used in the two choruses "And He Shall Purify" and "His Yoke Is Easy" were taken from an Italian chamber duet Handel had composed a few weeks earlier, "Quel fior che all' alba ride." Another secular duet, "Nò, di voi non vo' fidarmi," provided material for the famous chorus "For unto Us a Child Is Born." "All We Like Sheep" borrows its wandering melismas from the same duet. And a vocal work from 1708, "Se tu non lasci amore," was transformed into the duet-chorus pair at the end of the oratorio, "O Death, Where Is Thy Sting," and "But Thanks Be to God."

In each instance, however, Handel does more than simply provide new words to his own tunes. There is considerable recomposition and in most cases a significant change of emotion as well. These secular works set mostly pessimistic texts about death and soured love. And yet the borrowed material is made to fit perfectly with the meanings and contexts of their new scriptural words. It is proof of Handel's mastery that he could take a musical idea conceived for a very different text and blend it with newly composed thoughts into a new expression of undiminished efficacy.

Handel understood better than most composers how music and drama could work together. When it came to oratorio, which lacked opera's visual elements of sets, costumes, props, and stage action, he had to draw even more keenly on his ability to "paint" the text in the music. It begins in *Messiah* with Handel's decision to open the work with a French overture, a form that traditionally signaled the entrance of the king in French baroque ballets and operas. Then, throughout *Messiah*, Handel's use of stately dotted rhythms almost always connotes royalty.

There are moments when the text-painting is obvious, such as the tracing of the valleys, mountains, and hills in the melodic contours of the tenor's opening aria "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted," or the blissfully careless wandering of the musical lines in "All we like sheep have gone astray." But there are also more subtle touches in *Messiah* that show an extraordinarily skilled hand, treating every musical moment with care and attention. In the chorus "Behold the Lamb of God," for example, the solemn main theme—a descending scale in dotted rhythm—is a variation on the lilting theme of the pastoral duet "He shall feed His flock like a Shepherd," which is itself an inversion of the orchestral "Pifa" from Part I. With this single musical gesture, Handel unites the pastoral lullaby that accompanied Christ's birth with the prophecy of His role as the Good Shepherd and a heart-rending funeral march for the Sacrificial Lamb. To highlight the symbolic

transformation, Handel includes an open-fifth harmony at the end of “Behold the Lamb of God”—the only place in the entire oratorio he uses this effect—to indicate emptiness and emotional desolation. These are the kinds of subtle details that may escape the casual listener, yet they demonstrate the deep awareness of theology and command of musical structure that marks this work as Handel’s masterpiece.

Perhaps because of the powerful fusing of scriptural texts and immaculately crafted music, enthusiastic Handelists in the 19th century perpetuated a number of legends regarding the composition of *Messiah*. An often-repeated story relates how Handel’s servant found him sobbing with emotion while writing the famous “Hallelujah” chorus, and the composer claiming, “I did think I did see all Heaven before me and the great God Himself.” Handel reportedly left some of his meals untouched during this compositional period, in what was subsequently lauded as a display of monastic self-denial. Whether these reports are entirely accurate or not, in the 19th century they helped foster an image of Handel, and this work in particular, as divinely inspired.

THE LEGACY OF MESSIAH

The first public performance of *Messiah* took place in Dublin, Ireland, on April 13, 1742. As this was to be a benefit performance for charity, the ladies were asked not to wear hoop dresses, and the men to leave their swords at home, in order to accommodate more people in the hall. *Messiah* was an unqualified success in Dublin, but when Handel took the oratorio to London the following season, it received a chilly reception. Even though King George II attended the first performance at Covent Garden Theatre (and, it is claimed, initiated the tradition of standing for the “Hallelujah” chorus), London audiences at first found *Messiah*’s contemplative texts lacking in drama and narrative action, and it closed after only three performances. Some clergy considered the theater in general a den of iniquity and certainly no place for a work on such a sacred topic. Handel couldn’t win—when *Messiah* was scheduled to be performed in Westminster Abbey, other members of the clergy declared it sacrilege for a public entertainment to take place in a consecrated church! And Jennens wasn’t entirely pleased with what Handel had done with his text either. After initially expressing thorough disappointment with the musical treatment, Jennens later declared Handel’s composition “a fine Entertainment, tho’ not near so good as he might & ought to have done.”

It wasn’t until 1750, when another performance for charity was staged at the Foundling Hospital in London, that English audiences began to take *Messiah* to their hearts, and yearly performances at the hospital from that time on established the lasting popularity of both the work and its composer. Upon Handel’s death in 1759, he willed his score and parts for *Messiah* to the Foundling Hospital in a charitable gesture of gratitude.

During Handel’s lifetime, performances of *Messiah* typically entailed ensembles of around 20 singers and an equal number of instrumental players. But a tendency toward spectacular gigantism in the second half of the century was already starting to man-

ifest itself in Handel's later music. His 1749 suite of *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, for example, employed a band of more than 50 wind instruments plus strings—potentially nearly 100 players. It was given a stunningly successful dress rehearsal in front of 12,000 paying audience members in the same Vauxhall Gardens that housed Handel's statue. And the music only got bigger after that. For the 25th anniversary of Handel's death, a performance of *Messiah* in Westminster Abbey involved nearly 300 singers and an equal number in the orchestra.

In the 19th century, *Messiah* performances in England were something of a national pastime, often presented on a gargantuan scale and with scant knowledge of Handel's original intentions. Performances in London's Crystal Palace in the middle of the century sometimes engaged thousands of singers, for audiences numbering in the tens of thousands. Even the "standard" 19th- and early 20th-century festival performances of *Messiah* in English cathedrals typically included choirs of 300 or more and orchestras of commensurate size. With recent musical scholarship revealing many details about performance practices in Handel's own time, some scholars today consider these mammoth *Messiah* performances an abomination. But it was a venerable and durable tradition, nevertheless, and the principal manner by which Handel's most famous work was kept alive for nearly two centuries.

Although these large performances were a departure from the scale of Handel's original conception, they still maintained the work's signature attribute as a piece for the people. The 19th-century festival choirs were typically comprised of local townsfolk, farmers, and members of the working classes, for whom this experience was likely their only opportunity to engage with noble and enlightening art. The goal of including as many singers as possible was considered an edifying influence on the community at large, gathered together in this annual act of social, musical, and spiritual unity. And the success of these festivals was not measured in terms of the quality of the musical performance or the sublimity of aesthetic effect, but rather by how much money the festival was able to raise for charity.

In the second half of the 20th century, as leaner, faster, and more "authentic" baroque-style performances of *Messiah* proliferated, communities began to spontaneously organize "sing-along" *Messiah* events, returning the work once more to its populist roots. The volunteer nature of today's *Messiah* sing-alongs, and the communal experience of performing these choruses with thousands of other singers, mirrors closely the *Messiah* traditions from the 1780s to the 1960s.

The custom of performing *Messiah* at Christmas began late in the 18th century. Although the work was occasionally performed during Advent in Dublin, it was usually regarded in England as an entertainment for the penitential season of Lent, when performances of opera were banned. *Messiah*'s extended musical focus on Christ's redeeming sacrifice also makes it particularly suitable for Passion Week and Holy Week, the periods when it

was usually performed during Handel's lifetime. In 1791, however, the Cæcilian Society of London began its annual Christmas performances, and in 1818 the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston gave the work's first complete performance in the United States on Christmas Day, establishing a tradition that continues to the present.

THE MORMON TABERNACLE CHOIR AND MESSIAH

Messiah choruses have long formed part of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's core repertoire, going back well into the 19th century when the tradition of large-scale performances took root in the United States. And the Choir has frequently led the way in making this music available to a wider public. The Choir's first recording in 1910 included the "Hallelujah" chorus in what is almost certainly the first recording of a *Messiah* excerpt made outside of England, and the first recorded by an established choir. (The handful of earlier English recordings used smaller, ad hoc groups of singers.) In June 1927, the Choir recorded "Worthy Is the Lamb" on its first "electrical" recording (recorded with microphones) a week before Sir Thomas Beecham conducted the first electrically recorded complete *Messiah* in London. The Choir's 1959 recording of *Messiah* with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra is still hailed as a landmark and was inducted into the National Recording Registry in 2005. Richard Condie directed the Choir's 1974 album of *Messiah* choruses with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra; then Sir David Willcocks led the Choir on its 1995 recording of the complete oratorio. And the "Hallelujah" chorus has appeared on more than a dozen of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's albums over the last century.

This current performance of *Messiah* represents another signal event in the Choir's ongoing tradition. With decades of recent scholarly research into the sounds and practices that Handel himself would have recognized, audiences globally are now more accustomed to a different *Messiah* sound than was accepted even 40 years ago. The newly lean textures and sprightly tempos, the brighter timbres of baroque instruments, different styles of ornaments and articulations, and the techniques of early music performance practice have revealed an exhilarating new palette that is now an integral part of the *Messiah* soundscape. And yet these small-scale, historically informed performances can sometimes lack the sublime power, dynamic range, and emotional heft of the modern orchestras and large choirs that sustained *Messiah's* reputation over the last two centuries.

In his new edition of *Messiah*, Mack Wilberg has synthesized the best of both worlds. He has carefully studied the work of other historical composers who have enlarged upon Handel's score—Mozart, Hiller, Prout, Goossens—and learned from their efforts. Using Handel's original orchestration of strings, oboes, and trumpets as a foundation, Wilberg has retained only the woodwind and brass parts from Mozart's and Prout's editions that remain true to Handel's compositional ideas and the principles of baroque timbre, while also providing the necessary instrumental support for a large choir. He

has also refined the rhythms and articulations of the vocal parts so that the choir can sound as much like a baroque chamber group as possible, while still able to bring its impressive resonance and dynamic variety to the grander choruses. In short, this is a *Messiah* that honors both historical traditions simultaneously: the work's baroque origins and its subsequent development through the Romantic period.

Audiences seem drawn to *Messiah* like no other musical work, particularly as a collective event; they feel a desire to take part, not merely to listen. Perhaps it is the personal expression of devotion that the opportunity affords them. Instead of simply representing "the children of Israel" or "the crowd" as in other oratorios, the choruses in *Messiah* present an occasion for mutual expressions of sincere personal faith. When a choir of believers sings "For unto us a child is born" and "Surely He hath borne our griefs," or when they praise the God "who giveth us the victory" and "hath redeemed us," the pronouns are profoundly personal. They are not only singing great music, they are themselves participants in the grand spiritual drama being represented through that music. That awareness can inflect a performance as deeply as does the knowledge of notes, rhythms, and performance practices.

It is for this reason that Handel's *Messiah* aspires to much more than just an enjoyable musical event or a monument of baroque choral music. It aims to lift souls. After an early performance of the work in London, Handel was congratulated by Lord Kinnoul on the "noble entertainment" he had recently brought to the city. Handel is said to have replied, "My Lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better."

—Program notes by Dr. Luke Howard