

program notes

By Meg Freeman Whalen

MESSIAH, A SACRED ORATORIO

Composed in 1741.

Première on April 13, 1742 in Dublin.

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

Born in Halle, Germany; February 23, 1685

Died in London; April 14, 1759

The Charlotte Symphony first performed this work on December 3 & 8, 1939 in concerts at the Duke University Chapel in Durham, North Carolina and at the Armory Auditorium in Charlotte. Guillermo S. de Roxlo conducted the Duke Chapel Choir. The 22nd and most recent performance was heard on December 17, 2008 in the Belk Theater of the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, with Scott Allen Jarrett conducting the Oratorio Singers of Charlotte.



"Here nature smiles, when grac'd with Handel's art, transports the ear and ravishes the heart." So wrote a Mr. L. Whyte upon hearing the first performance of Handel's oratorio, *Messiah*, on April 13, 1742. Mr. Whyte was so enraptured, in fact, that he composed an entire poem in praise of Handel and his work.

Although Handel composed 26 oratorios, *Messiah* is indisputably his most popular. The debut performance took place in Dublin in the Music Hall on Fishamble Street. According to an advertisement in the *Dublin Journal*, proceeds were to benefit three charities: "for the relief of the prisoners in the several jails, and for the support of Mercer's Hospital in Stephen Street, and of the charitable infirmary on Inn's Quay." Tickets soon sold beyond capacity, and in order to squeeze 700 people into a concert hall designed for just over 600, men were cautioned to leave their swords at home, while women were asked to forego their fashionable hoop skirts for something slimmer.

Messiah was an immediate success. The audience that afternoon raised 400 pounds for charity, and the reviews were splendid. In addition to publishing Mr. Whyte's hymn of praise, the *Dublin Journal* called *Messiah* "the finest composition of music ever

heard...sublime, grand, and tender." The musicians were few by today's standards (25 singers and 30 instrumentalists), and most were Irish.

Handel composed *Messiah* in 24 days. The text, from Old and New Testament Scripture, was arranged by Charles Jennens, a wealthy and somewhat pompous aristocrat. Jennens wrote to a friend:

I shall show you a collection I gave Handel, call'd *Messiah*, which I value highly, and he has made a fine entertainment of it, tho' not near so good as he might and ought to have done. I have with great difficulty made him correct some of the grossest faults in the composition, but he retain'd his overture obstinately, in which there are some passages far unworthy of Handel, but much more unworthy of the *Messiah*.

Messiah is divided into three parts. Part the First, the prophecy and realization of God's plan to redeem mankind by sending a Messiah, consists of 21 numbers and can be subdivided into six sections. The first section, containing the well-known aria "Ev'ry Valley," tells of God's promise in the Book of Isaiah to send a savior. The second section emphasizes God's power and fierceness,

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followed by the prophecy (in section three) of Christ's birth to a virgin. The fourth section tells the joy of Christ's birth, culminating in the famous "For unto us a Child is born," with the fifth section narrating the angels' appearance to the shepherds. Finally, the sixth section is a representation, though not a narration, of Christ's life on Earth.

Part the Second, the Passion, consists of 22 numbers, beginning with the chorus "Behold the Lamb of God." There are three sections in Part the Second: Christ's suffering, His death, and His resurrection. In short, whereas Part the First represents Christmas, Part the Second represents Easter. The Biblical sources of the text here are many: Psalms, Isaiah, Hebrews, and Revelation. Once again, the text does not narrate the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, but rather responds to it. Finally, the Second Part ends with the triumphant "Hallelujah!" chorus, signifying the victory of life over death.

Part the Third is a thanksgiving for the defeat of death. The text for this final part is derived directly from the Anglican burial service, based on Scriptures from Job, First Corinthians, Romans, and Revelation. It begins with the beautiful aria "I know that my Redeemer liveth," announces Christ's second coming ("The trumpet shall sound"), emphasizes Christ's victory over the grave ("O death, where is thy sting?") and ends with the great choral epilogue, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain."

As a composer, Handel's first love was Italian serious opera – *opera seria* – and it is no surprise that his oratorios demonstrate many similarities to that genre: three acts, a serious subject, and the use of solo recitative and arias. But his oratorios manifest, as well, the influence of German and English church music, particularly in the use of the chorus. Handel's earliest oratorios, such as *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt*, contain more solo music than choral music, but

Messiah, which uses the chorus more than any other of his oratorios, exemplifies a balance between solo and choral singing.

The music of *Messiah* is wonderfully rich. Handel, often praised for his ability to use contrast effectively, juxtaposed differing musical textures, key relationships, and themes to create expressive effects of unusual strength, as evident in the following examples.

The solemn overture, in E minor, has two short movements. The first is marked "Grave" and is primarily chordal, or homophonic, whereas the second is a contrasting, polyphonic "Allegro." Immediately following the E minor overture is a bright E major ritornello that initiates the first recitative. Handel's expressive use of key changes is again illustrated when the hopeful A-major chorus, "And the glory of the Lord," is followed by a foreboding bass recitative, "Thus sayeth the Lord," in D minor.

Handel's most expressive characteristic, however, may be the combination of contrasting musical themes. The indomitable "Hallelujah!" chorus, for example, is so striking in large part because of the contrast between the lively "Hallelujah" motive and the sustained "King of Kings" motive.

Thus, the musical profundity of *Messiah* is one of balance: balance between soloist and chorus, between homophony and polyphony, between major and minor tonalities, between movement and stasis. *Messiah* is the pinnacle of Handel's achievement in oratorio, hence its great popularity.

Born in 1685, the same year as J.S. Bach, Domenico Scarlatti, and Jean-Philippe Rameau, Handel died in 1759 and was buried in Westminster Abbey. His last public performance, given eight days before his death, was his *Messiah*.

The score calls for four vocal soloists and mixed chorus, 2 oboes, bassoon, 2 trumpets, timpani, organ, harpsichord, and strings.