

## MESSIAH WITH THE ELORA SINGERS AND LONDON SYMPHONIA PROGRAM NOTES

**George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)**

***Messiah*, an Oratorio**

“For Relief of the Prisoners in the several Gaols, and for the Support of Mercer’s Hospital in Stephen’s Street, and of the Charitable Infirmary on the Inns Quay, on Monday the 12<sup>th</sup> of April, will be performed at the Musick Hall in Fishamble Street, Mr. *Handel’s new Grand Oratorio, call’d the MESSIAH*, in which the Gentlemen of the Choirs of both Cathedrals will assist, with some Concertoes on the Organ, by Mr. Handell. Tickets to be had at the Musick Hall...at half a Guinea each.”

This notice, appearing in the local paper on March 27, 1742, was the first advertisement for what would become the world’s favourite oratorio. Handel had lived in London for a quarter century by this time, so it is surprising to see that the announcement was made in *Faulkner’s Dublin Journal*. The *Messiah* came to Ireland first.

Handel’s Irish sojourn, which lasted about eight months, was the result of an invitation received in the summer of 1741 from the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, at a momentous point in the composer’s life: he had just completed another disastrous London season of Italian opera and had resolved after thirty years of such ventures to quit the business for good. The oratorios in English he had been writing to fill the Lenten break during his Italian opera seasons turned out to be more popular and far cheaper to produce than the operas themselves. Now the Irish proposal gave him the chance to recoup his losses and attend to a project that had been developing over two years: a sacred oratorio on the subject of Christ.

Although *Messiah* defines oratorio in the minds of most music lovers, it is atypical in that there is neither plot nor individual characters, apart from one angel backed by the entire heavenly host; more fundamentally, its text is entirely drawn from Scripture. Oratorios (the term comes from ‘oratory’, the original location of their performance) were initially designed as a wholesome alternative to opera, entertainments that put singers and instrumentalists in the service of morality by narrating Biblical episodes without costumes or staging. Old Testament stories were expanded and recast to bring the empathy and drama of opera to religious subjects. However, the form had bypassed England altogether until Handel arrived, and in responding to English taste as well as his own muse, he created something new, something that attracted the burgeoning middle class as well as the aristocrats who had been the driving force behind the importation of opera. Part of the appeal was simply the intelligibility of a text in English instead of Italian; part of it was the identification of imperial England with God’s Chosen Nation; part of it was Handel’s incorporation and development of a pre-existing English choral tradition; and part of it was just some jolly good tunes appearing at a time of the year when other theatrical enterprises were forbidden. But by 1741 Handel had, with *Esther*, *Deborah*, *Saul*, and *Israel in Egypt*, laid the foundation for the main focus of the rest of his career.

However, the composer appears to have foreseen that an oratorio about the Messiah might face problems, even one in which the principal character never appears. He had discussed the subject with the librettist of *Saul*, Charles Jennens, as early as 1739, when they had agreed upon the general substance and approach. By June 1741 Jennens had delivered his text, much of it found in the Book of Common Prayer, with the hope that Handel would present it at a concert for his own benefit at Eastertime in 1742. Handel instead, after composing the entire

work in a feverish 24 days, chose to reserve its unveiling for a charitable benefit in Dublin (April 13, 1742) where he had mounted two successful subscription series over four months. His caution was proven justified not only by the enthusiastic response of the Irish to *Messiah* but by the critical reaction of the English after its London debut was announced for March 9, 1743 (with the title suppressed, moreover—"a New Sacred Oratorio" was all that was advertised). Protests condemned the profanation of Holy Writ by its presentation in a theatre at the hands of mere unordained players, and the public response was cold. It remained so over several revivals, until 1750 when Handel produced it as a benefit for the Foundling Hospital in London. Thereafter *Messiah* was an annual fundraising event for the institution, and a fixture in Western music.

In compiling his libretto Jennens had a particular aim, to counter the encroachment of the Age of Reason upon Christian faith. From the logic of revealed prophecy in Part I to the assurance of redemption of sin and resurrection in Part III, *Messiah* is a summation of contemporary Anglican doctrine; the details of the life of Christ are assumed to be known, and are touched upon only insofar as is needed to argue the case. Although Handel was not noted for piety, he does seem to have aimed higher than usual with *Messiah*: in answer to praise from Lord Kinnoul for his 'noble entertainment' of the town he is reported to have replied, "My Lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them, I wish to make them better."

*Messiah* is one of the few works to have an unbroken if inconsistent tradition of performance since the Baroque period. During his lifetime Handel made revisions to suit circumstances of different performances and singers—several arias exist in more than one version, and it is clear from accounting records that two horns were used at times, even though there are no surviving parts for them—thus no definitive edition of *Messiah* can be made. Some thirty years after Handel's death Mozart was commissioned to update the scoring for Classical Vienna, adding wind instruments to replace the continuo, an arrangement which still served Mendelssohn (although he also occasionally conducted it with the organ continuo restored). In England hundreds, and ultimately thousands, of performers were marshalled from Haydn's time onward in 'monster' concerts, a practice that survived long enough to draw the ridicule of Bernard Shaw (who observed that the considerable distance between the front and back of such groups caused a time lag in the sound reaching the audience, obliterating any sense of ensemble). Orchestrations kept pace, adding full operatic brass and percussion; even more brilliant scorings found their way onto disc in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Shaw was among the first to advocate smaller forces; his proposed choir of 48 and orchestra of 32 in 1913 was visionary for the day. Details of two Foundling Hospital performances (1754, 1758) record respectively orchestras of 39 and 34, and paid choirs (possibly joined by the soloists) of just 17 and 19. The imbalance leads one to wonder if unpaid singers may have augmented the total. Nonetheless, the tendency in recent years has been towards smaller forces than were customary even thirty years ago.

As noted above, the initial performances of *Messiah* took place in the period immediately preceding or following Easter. The tradition of giving it at Christmas dates from 1791 when annual performances were established in London by the Caecilian Society. While this contradicts Handel's intention, the custom has been entrenched for over two centuries, to the point that it is now unusual to hear it when it is most appropriate.

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Ironically in view of its success, the author Jennens found Handel's setting disappointing, vowing "to put no more Sacred Works into his hands, to be thus abus'd". Among the "grossest

faults in the composition” he found was the **overture**—“unworthy of Handel, but much more unworthy of the Messiah”—yet which Handel “retain’d obstinately.” This, a very plain French overture (a stately introduction followed by a lively fugue), sets up the opening tenor recitative “**Comfort ye**” perfectly by avoiding any hint of the major key to come, lending palpable consolation to the gently pulsing strings preceding the voice. In the succeeding aria “**Ev’ry valley**” Here Handel’s penchant for underlining the words in the music is heard in the phrase “the crooked [shall be made] straight”, with the bending and twisting vocal line ending in a sustained tone. Incidentally, in *Messiah* as elsewhere Handel was not shy about adapting his pre-existing music as needed: four choruses—“**And He shall purify**”, “**For unto us a Child is born**”, “**His yoke is easy**” and “**All we like sheep have gone astray**”—began life as Italian vocal chamber duets, which helps to explain their florid writing. Incredibly, the original words to “**For unto us a Child is born**” were “No, di voi non vo’ fidarmi” (“No, I will not trust you, blind Love and cruel beauty!”). The tune’s unnatural musical stress on ‘For’ is entirely natural on the original Italian ‘No’; perhaps this is another of the “grossest faults in the composition” that so offended Jennens.

Unlike the delicate opening and close of Part I, Part II is framed by monumental choruses, delineating the procession from tragedy to triumph of the Passion and Resurrection. In keeping with the more serious character of the text Handel’s style of choral writing now places greater emphasis on illustration, picking up in “**Surely he hath borne our griefs**” the jagged rhythm associated with “the smiters” of the aria “**He was despised**”; indulging in wayward part-leading in “**All we like sheep have gone astray**”; and evoking Eternity in the repetition of “forever and ever” in “**Hallelujah**”. The origin of a tradition whereby the audience stands during this last number is somewhat obscure—allegedly a relic of the first London performance in which the King got up in respect for the Lord God Omnipotent, there is no record of George II ever attending a performance of *Messiah*. The Prince of Wales’ presence was reported in 1749, so it may have been he who was responsible.

Part III hearkens subtly back to Part I in that the key of its opening aria, “**I know that my Redeemer liveth**”, is the same E major of “Comfort ye/Ev’ry valley”, a key not heard since that point—suggesting that the fulfilled prophecy of the Nativity also foretells fulfillment of the promise of Eternal Life through Christ. One also finds in the unexpected repetition of the “**Amen**” fugue subject by the two violin sections alone a sonic link with the fugue of the overture (so maligned by Jennens) that nicely ties the entire work together.