

***Messiah*, HWV 56** (arr. Eugene Goossens)

**George Frideric Handel**

(b. Halle, 1685 / d. London, 1759)

First performance of the oratorio: April 13, 1742 in Dublin

First performance of the Goossens arrangement: September 1959 in Lucerne

This is the ESO premiere of this arrangement

Handel wrote *Messiah* in a blaze of inspiration in 1742 – the latest in a string of oratorios written to satisfy the market for such works in his adopted home of London. He had already written about a dozen, and had at least as many to come. But *Messiah* was different. Its subject matter – Christ Himself – needed to be handled differently, with more sensitivity, than a typical Biblical story. Librettist Charles Jennens assembled the texts – very little actual story is told in the word (aside from the familiar Christmas account from Luke). Unlike many oratorios, there are no “character” parts in *Messiah*. Instead, the prophecy of His coming, the nature of His suffering and resurrection, and the lessons these reflections have for Christians is related in a work which has taken its place as the most popular example of an oratorio – even though it is unlike most other examples of the form.

*Messiah* did not take long to establish itself as one of Handel’s most celebrated pieces. Many performances took place during Handel’s lifetime, and he felt free to adapt his score to suit the needs of any given performance. As it has come down to us in its usual baroque garb, *Messiah* is scored for a pair of oboes, bassoon, harpsichord and organ continuo, and strings. A pair of trumpets and timpani are used sparingly, highlighting certain specific moments of the work. Tonight’s version, by contrast, is scored for three flutes (one doubling on piccolo), four oboes (one doubling on English horn), two clarinets (one doubling on bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling on contrabassoon), four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani plus three additional percussionists, harp, and strings - quite an upsell.

Eugene Goossens (1893-1962) was a conductor, the son of a conductor, and grandson of a conductor. At the age of 19, he became a violinist in a London-based orchestra conducted by Thomas Beecham, and the two became friends. He rose through the ranks of fame and honour, including nine years (1947 to 1956) as Music Director of the Sydney Symphony in Australia, only to be brought down by a scandal over his interest in the occult, and his relationship with a woman with whom he shared that interest. His reputation ruined, he returned to England, where Beecham extended a helping hand by commissioning a new arrangement, for modern orchestra, of Handel’s beloved oratorio, *Messiah*.

In the middle of the last century, such notions as “authentic, historically-informed performance” did not exist. Since the emergence of true conductors – meaning specialists whose task it is to lead an orchestral performance from the podium, without simultaneously playing an instrument oneself – it was common to adapt music to suit a given situation or even personal preference. Music was cut, rewritten, adapted, or changed in other ways as a matter of course. So while to our ears, hearing Handel’s baroque score made large, sumptuous and “modern” may seem sacrilege to some, it was certainly no big deal to either Beecham or Goossens – or to the audiences which heard this re-orchestration.

Nor was a different arrangement of this treasured work unusual. No less than Mozart re-orchestrated *Messiah* once, as had others. With due credit to Goossens, the version of *Messiah* to be presented at these performances was performed at the Lucerne Festival in 1959. With no credit to Goossens, and all of it going to Beecham, the arrangement was recorded by RCA and became a best-seller. Controversy over who should get the credit has plagued it ever since. Beecham's widow claimed that while Goossens had in fact been commissioned, Thomas Beecham did not care for much of it, and so re-wrote nearly all of it, with the help of Royal Philharmonic Orchestra musician (and composer) Leonard Salzedo. But Goossens' supporters take exception to that. "Another Beecham musician, clarinetist Jack Brymer, remembers the recording session. 'All the orchestral parts were marked 'Orchestrated by Sir Eugene Goossens',' he says. 'How can anyone claim that this is not Goossens' work?'"

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