

## ***Messiah, HWV 56***

**George Frideric Handel**

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

The German-born master of Italian opera, George Frideric Handel knew German prince George, Elector of Hanover, when both had still lived in Germany. Handel, in fact, received permission from Prince George to "temporarily" travel to England, which he did in 1710. The subsequent success he enjoyed in London persuaded Handel to stay there by 1712; so when the Hanoverian George succeeded Queen Anne to become King George I of Great Britain, while it may have made for an awkward reunion for the German ex-patriots, it did not take long for King George to welcome Handel back into his favour. Many more successes came Handel's way in his new home, as did acclaim from all sides. But baroque opera, as a form, began sinking under the weight of its own excesses by the 1730s, and Handel's fortunes waned as a result. As shrewd a businessman as he was a supreme musician, Handel correctly foresaw oratorio as the next popular concert form.

Like opera, oratorio involves soloists, chorus and orchestra. There is often a story related in the text of oratorio. But while operas of the day leaned more toward classical themes and stories, oratorios tended to lean to more sacred, spiritual texts. Another key difference between the two forms was language; oratorios were usually sung in the native tongue, and thus were perhaps more accessible to a wider, more middle class audience than Italian opera. In short order, Handel showed a deft hand at English oratorio, with works such as *Deborah* (1733), *Saul* (1738), and *Israel in Egypt* (1739). By 1741, he stood once again at the vanguard of British musical life.

It was librettist Charles Jennens who came up with the idea for *Messiah*, presenting Handel with a collection of texts from the Bible. *Messiah* was composed in a blinding flash of creativity of only 25 days. Jennens, however, seemed unimpressed. "His *Messiah* had disappointed me, being set in great haste, tho' he said he would be a year about it, and make it the best of all his Compositions," wrote Jennens. "I shall put no more Sacred works into his hands, thus to be abus'd." One wonders, parenthetically, how many other librettists would give their eye teeth to have their words "abus'd" in such a manner! It is also worth noting that Jennens' comments were made before he had heard the work, and his words softened quite a bit after. He and Handel collaborated on other oratorios (*Saul*, *L'Allegro* and *Belshazzar*), and they re-established good terms with each other.

Handel staged a public dress rehearsal of the new work – a move that generated such tremendous anticipation and publicity that hundreds were turned away from the official debut performance on April 13, 1742. Of those that were able to attend, the ladies were asked to remove the hoops from their gowns, and gentlemen were asked not to wear their swords, to accommodate the crush of people.

While the first performance – which took place in Dublin, as a benefit for a foundling hospital - was a well-attended affair, *Messiah* was not a hit from the outset. It would take a decade or so of London-based performances for the work to acquire the popularity it has subsequently never relinquished.

As an example of the oratorio form, *Messiah* stands apart from many of its fellows. There are no “character” parts sung by the soloists, and in fact there is, beyond some description of the birth of Christ in Part I, and His Passion in Part II, no story told in the music – there is no narrative line, as such. By 1750, *Messiah* was an unqualified success. Handel himself oversaw no less than 36 performances of it before his death in 1759. Handel often made adaptations to the work to suit the needs of particular singers, available instrumentation, and even just to make improvements as he saw fit.

Part I of *Messiah* deals with the prophecies of the coming of both Christ and John the Baptist, taken mostly from the Old Testament books of Isaiah and Malachi. The Christmas story as recounted in Luke comes complete with an exquisite instrumental pastorello, in true baroque Christmas concerto style, leading to a hopeful conclusion with the beautiful and tender aria “He shall feed His flock” and the buoyant choral fugue “His yoke is easy.”

Part II begins dramatically with the dark chorus “Behold the Lamb of God.” From there, the Passion of Christ is told starkly, though not with texts taken directly from the gospels, but rather as anticipated in Isaiah and the Psalms. An account of the glory of God climaxes in the rousing “Hallelujah,” with words taken from the Book of Revelation. It was an early performance of *Messiah*, attended by King George II, at which began the tradition of rising for this chorus. So taken was he by the music, the King stood, and when he did, everyone else did out of respect. We’ve been doing it since.

The actual resurrection of Christ seems almost skimmed over in Part II, but in *Messiah’s* Part III, the resurrection is meditated upon in great detail, beginning with the beautiful “I know that my Redeemer liveth.” Judgment day is looked for in the tense “Why do the nations so furiously rage together?” and the grand “The trumpet shall sound” (complete with a brilliant trumpet obligato part). With appropriate choral flourish, *Messiah* closes with the declamatory “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,” and another grand fugue on the word “Amen.”

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