Handel's *Messiah*

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**Program Notes**

*Handel says he will do nothing next Winter, but I hope to persuade him to set another Scripture Collection I have made for him, & perform it for his own Benefit in Passion Week. I hope he will lay out his whole Genius & Skill upon it, that the Composition may excell at his former Compositions, as the Subject excells every other Subject. The Subject is Messiah.*

- Charles Jennens, from a letter to his friend Edward Holdsworth, dated July 10, 1741

When Charles Jennens presented his libretto for *Messiah* to his friend George Frideric Handel in 1741, it was in the hopes of convincing the composer that he should devote his efforts to writing oratorios rather than operas. This was not just because the two men had previously collaborated on the successful oratorio *Saul* (1738), but because Handel, the German-born composer who had enjoyed years of successes in delighting London audiences with his Italian operas, was succumbing to a tide of tastes that had finally turned against him. A few years before, both his opera company and his health had collapsed. While his health improved relatively quickly, the reception of his operas did not. His most recent operatic efforts had been so unsuccessful that he was seriously considering abandoning England altogether. The year 1741 proved to be pivotal for Handel. In February he gave his last performance of an Italian opera (*Diademia*), and by September 14, he had quickly composed his sixth oratorio and most enduring masterpiece: *Messiah*.

It is staggering to contemplate that Handel's composition of *Messiah* took only twenty-four days. This may indeed be evidence of an unusually profound inspiration on Handel's part, but it is worth noting that this timeframe was fairly typical for the composer. Most of his operas and oratorios were written in similarly short, intense bursts, often during his limited "down time" between theatrical seasons. In the six weeks immediately after he composed Messiah, for example, he wrote *Samson*, another large-scale oratorio.

By November of 1741, Handel had arrived in Dublin in response to an invitation to give a series of performances there, and on April 13, 1742, *Messiah* was ready for its first public performance. It was so evident that this new work was going to be a huge draw that promoters encouraged ladies to refrain from wearing hoop-framed skirts and gentlemen were requested to come
without their swords. Whether or not it was because their fashion accessories were left at home, the city’s brand new Great Music Hall in Fishamble Street, built to hold 600, packed in 700 audience members for the premiere of Handel’s new oratorio.

One year later, when Handel introduced London audiences to Messiah, the work was not universally praised. Many objected to the notion that a biblical text was being sullied by being performed in that hotbed of sinful subject matter and overwrought drama: the theatre. For others, the piece was not dramatic enough, since it had so many choruses and practically none of the characters and dialogue more common to opera. It was only when Handel began annual charity performances of the work at the Foundling Hospital in 1750 that its popularity began to take hold. By the time Handel died in 1759, Messiah had secured a place of honor in the Western musical canon that it still holds today.

Perhaps this enduring success is due not only to Handel’s musical genius, but also to Jennens’ unique libretto. Like most oratorios, the libretto utilizes sacred texts, in this case from both the Old and New Testament. Unlike most oratorios, there are hardly any instances of narrative (the angel’s proclamation of the birth of a savior in Part I is the only true exception) and no defined speaking characters (even Christ’s name is hardly mentioned until Part III). Instead of plot-driven action, Jennens presents a succession of dramatic scenes, scriptural passages and metaphorical references that allow the listener the opportunity to reflect upon the story rather than merely react to it.

Like an opera, the work is divided into three parts, or acts, each comprised of several scenes. Part I offers comforting prophecies of salvation, fiery proclamations of approaching judgment, and a jubilant accounting of Christ’s birth. Part II is the emotional core of the work, the longest in duration and scope, and certainly the most dramatic. A depiction of Christ’s passion, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven would be substance enough, but this act goes even further, exploring the spread of the gospel and God’s ultimate victory through the triumph of Christ’s reign. Part III is one of is one of affirmation and thanksgiving, and invites the listener to contemplate eternal life, the conquest of sin, and the final, joyous acclamation of the Messiah.

Handel’s genius and skill reassert themselves in the musical linking of these scenes, and through his setting of the text. Often, these links are accomplished through the repetition of musical figures. For example, the abrupt, angular, dotted rhythms played by the instrumentalists during the scourging of Jesus make their first appearance in Part II during the aria “He was despised,” but they continue through the chorus that immediately follows (“Surely, he hath borne our
grievances”) and appear yet again when the passion narrative returns with the recitative, “All they that see Him, laugh Him to scorn.” Sometimes, the unity of ideas is underscored by similarities in tempo and affect, as in the end of Part II, when violent images of another sort are given similar treatment (“Why do the nations so furiously rage together”, “Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron”). In other parts of the piece, Handel favors not unity but abrupt change. He adeptly alters key, tempo, and meter to serve similarly sudden changes in the text, as in the dramatic shifts between awed reverence and the refiner’s fire of “But who may abide the day of his coming” in Part I.

Perhaps the feature of Messiah that has contributed the most to its longevity is how Handel distributes the storytelling duties almost equally between soloists, chorus and orchestra. In effect, everyone on the stage has a starring role. And the music of all three of these forces is constantly, fluidly shifting between a lyrical style that provides memorable melodies, and a declamatory style that expertly mimics speech patterns with rhythm and dynamics.

Although Messiah maintains its reputation as a monumental work—its grand form carefully sustained as it is performed again and again in the centuries since its composition—from the very beginning, it has been a work in flux. As in many of his other compositions, Handel made numerous changes to the piece for nearly all of its performances. Some of these changes were to accommodate the ranges or abilities of different singers and others seem to represent Handel’s ceaseless interest in fine-tuning the impact or accessibility of the piece as a whole. In the end, the fact that there is no definitive version of Messiah might be its most attractive quality. Perhaps more than with any other piece of its scale, audiences and performers alike are welcomed back to Messiah and invited to rediscover its music, its message and its methods of performance, making Messiah a musical experience that somehow manages to be as comforting and familiar as it is striking and wholly new.

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