

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
December 8, 2018
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Messiah has become a part of our musical culture to an extent that Handel, sharp entrepreneur though he was, could never have dreamed of when he completed the oratorio almost 250 years ago. There can be no doubt that *Messiah* is the work that has the widest popular appeal in the entire choral repertoire. Indeed, some of the oratorio's numbers, particularly the famed *Hallelujah* chorus, have become virtual *clichés*, instantly recognizable when they are heard in movies or commercials. The very popularity and familiarity of *Messiah* sometimes stands in the way of our appreciation of this masterwork. For the message of *Messiah* in fact runs deeper than the hallelujahs that resound at the close of Part II: more than perhaps any other work, *Messiah* represents a sermon in music, incorporating the entire religious creed of its librettist, Charles Jennens, and its composer, George Frederick Handel.

For this program, the Peoria Symphony Orchestra welcomes the Apollo Chorus of Chicago and several fine vocal soloists: Jesefien Stoppelenburg, soprano; Lindsay Metzger, mezzo soprano; Alex Mansoori, tenor; Evan Boyer, bass.

George Frederick Handel (1685-1759)
Messiah

Handel composed Messiah in just three weeks in early 1741. The first performance was in Dublin on April 13, 1742. Duration 82:00.

Handel and the Oratorio

The Handel scholar Winton Dean has appropriately described the oratorio as "...the most slippery of the larger musical forms"—slippery in that, prior to Handel, it is difficult precisely to define the form. The idea of using a large text in a multi-movement setting certainly dates back to the liturgical dramas and mystery plays of the Middle Ages, but the term "oratorio" dates only from about 150 years before *Messiah* was composed. "Oratorio" originally referred to the musical devotions of the *Congregazione dell'Oratorio*, a monastic Order founded in the late 16th century, whose services were held in the oratory of the Roman church of Santa Maria della Vallicella. The Italian and German oratorios of 17th and early 18th centuries provided a rich historical foundation on which Handel could build. These works set a wide variety of texts—Scriptural, mythological, or allegorical—often using a mixture of recitative, aria, and chorus. However, it was Handel who achieved the synthesis of this oratorio tradition with the worldly musical style of Italian opera in his English oratorios of the late 1730s and

afterwards. It is Handel's definition of the oratorio that remains with composers to this day: an extended work for voices and orchestra, usually with a sacred text—in reality, an unstaged sacred opera—that includes movements for soloists and chorus.

When Handel moved to England permanently in 1717, it was to compose and produce operas. He was the acknowledged master of the highly stylized and pompous Italian opera that was the fashion of the time, and with the support of his aristocratic patrons and wildly enthusiastic audiences, he became the most successful impresario in the history of the form. Handel's operas were showy affairs, featuring ornate sets and stage machinery, ballets, and highly ornamented arias by the prima donnas and *castrati* that dominated the London stage. However, by the late 1730s, London audiences were tiring of Italian opera, with its elaborate dramatic conventions and plots that were often incomprehensible—even for the minority who actually understood Italian! Faced with financial ruin, Handel turned to a new form, the English oratorio. Handel's oratorios from this period, works such as *Deborah*, *Israel in Egypt*, and *Saul*, were dramatic settings of Old Testament stories that were thoroughly familiar to his English audiences. Although Handel retained many of the outward forms of Italian opera in these works—recitative, *da capo* aria, and ensemble—he placed a much greater emphasis on the chorus. The oratorio turned out to be a stroke of financial genius. By abandoning elaborate staging, and using local soloists and choristers, rather than the temperamental and expensive Italian singers he had employed in the 1720s, Handel was able to produce these phenomenally popular new works for a fraction of the cost of his operas. Handel's place in English musical culture was now secure. Long after his operas and instrumental works had fallen from memory, his oratorios, particularly *Messiah* of 1741, were being performed again and again.

The first *Messiah*

In July of 1741, Charles Jennens, who had written the libretti for two of Handel's oratorios wrote the following in a letter to a friend—the earliest mention of *Messiah*:

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

The libretto fell into Handel's hands at the perfect time. The composer had just made a final effort to revive comatose Italian opera by staging two works in London. The performances were flops, and Handel, financially burned, was giving serious thought to

returning to Germany. He decided instead to accept an invitation to go to Dublin to produce a season of his new English oratorios. Handel wrote *Messiah* between August 22 and September 14 of 1741, and completed *Samson* during the next month. He set off for Ireland in November, and began what was to become an incredibly successful series of productions. Handel was able to recoup much of the money he had lost in his futile opera productions, but more importantly, his name became irrevocably tied with oratorio. This success prompted a preoccupation with the form that would last for the rest of his career, producing such works as *Belshazzar* (another collaboration with Jennens), *Judas Maccabeus*, and *Jephta*.

Messiah was intended to be the grand finale of his Dublin visit, and it was performed at a benefit concert during Holy Week in 1742. The reception of this new oratorio was everything Handel could have hoped for. A public rehearsal of *Messiah* on April 6 was attended by over 600 ticketholders, who jammed into Dublin's New Musick Hall. The stuffiness and crowding at this rehearsal caused the promoters to place a notice in the next day's newspaper asking that ladies "...come without Hoops, as it will greatly increase the Charity by making room for more company." We can only agree with the Dublin reviewer of this first performance:

"Words are wanting to express the exquisite Delight it afforded to the admiring crouded Audience. The Sublime, the Grand, the Tender, adapted to the most majestick and moving words, conspired to transport and charm the ravished Heart and Ear..."

***Messiah* after Handel**

After its success in Dublin, Handel produced dozens of performances of *Messiah*, the last one only two weeks before his death. Handel always used *Messiah* as the Holy Week finale for his annual London season, in a performance whose proceeds went to charity. (In fact, it is clear that both Jennens and Handel thought of this as a work for the penitential season of Lent, while today, *Messiah* is almost exclusively associated with the Christmas season—a much later development.)

Messiah took its time in crossing the English Channel. It was not until the 1770s that performances of the work were heard in Hamburg, Leipzig, Berlin, and Vienna. (Mozart himself produced a translated, re-orchestrated, and streamlined *Messiah* in 1789.) However, *Messiah* soon became standard fare for German church choirs, and its influence can be seen in the oratorios of many later Germans, particularly Haydn and Mendelssohn. At about the same time it was being introduced in Germany, *Messiah* crossed the Atlantic to the Colonies. The first American *Messiah* was heard in Boston in

1770, and performances were soon heard in Charleston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

It remained popular throughout America and most of Europe from this time onward. (Only the French were slow to accept the work—the first full French production was in 1870.) However, the celebrity of the work approached deification in England in the late 18th and 19th centuries. In 1784, George III sponsored what was to become the first Handel Festival, which featured a massive performance of *Messiah* by over 500 singers and instrumentalists. Tradition credits King George himself who instituted the longstanding tradition of standing up during the *Hallelujah* chorus, as a gesture of respect towards the late Handel. (This has long since been proven to be apocryphal, but if you'd like to stand, go right ahead!) Joseph Haydn heard a festival performance of *Messiah* in May of 1791, and was profoundly moved, reportedly bursting into tears during the *Hallelujah* chorus. Haydn's oratorios—particularly *The Creation* of 1798—were directly inspired by Handel's works, especially *Messiah*, as were the later oratorios of Mendelssohn.

This tradition of jumbo-sized performances reached its peak in the Victorian Age. A Handel Centennial performance, held in the opulent Crystal Palace in 1859, employed 2700 singers and more than 400 instrumentalists, and a London performance at the turn of the century featured a choir of more than 4000. (We can only imagine what these elephantine groups did to the sixteenth-note lines and delicate counterpoint in choruses such as *Lift Up Your Heads...*) George Bernard Shaw, always an acute observer of musical tastes, wryly proposed that Parliament make any performance of *Messiah* by more than 48 singers a capital offense!

***Messiah* — Music and Text**

As in most of Handel's oratorios, the music of *Messiah* uses the forms of Italian opera in which he was so facile. The opening *Symphony* follows the form of a French overture: a slow section with pompous dotted rhythms followed by a lively fugue. The brilliant *da capo* form that was the vehicle for operatic vocal display is retained in a few of *Messiah's* "airs," such as *Every Valley*. *Da capo* like this are set in ABA form, with the second "A" section providing the soloist an opportunity to ornament. Most of *Messiah's* arias, however, are set in a through-composed form that better suits the irregular Biblical prose of its text. Arias and choruses are typically introduced by recitative, but in *Messiah*, Handel also makes frequent use of the *Arioso*, a through-composed form that was becoming increasingly popular in the mid 18th century. *Arioso* movements do not typically feature the type of vocal display heard in the more showy arias. The most important musical moments in *Messiah* are found in its choruses. While most of these are in the freely developing quasi-fugal form typical of his opera choruses (some of

Messiah's choruses were, in fact, written originally for Italian words and recycled into the oratorio), the chorus takes a much larger role in developing the sense of the work's text than in any of his operas.

The text of *Messiah* is unique among Handel's oratorios. Most of them use heavily-edited versions of epic stories from the Old Testament or Classical mythology. There is a dramatic continuity in these oratorios: they tell a story, in which the soloists and chorus play clearly-defined roles. *Messiah*, however, is a *pastiche* of direct quotations from the English Bible. There are certainly moments of great drama in the work, but there is no "plot" —Jennens and Handel followed a somewhat more subtle plan. The oratorio is divided into three sections, which encompass the life of Christ, yet do not serve as a narration. Part I serves as a prologue: the opening dozen numbers are Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah's imminent arrival. The second half of this section turns to the story of Christ's birth and the promise of his miraculous power. In Part II, *Messiah* alludes indirectly to the events surrounding Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. However the expressive content of this section follows a clear development: the opening is a lamentation on Christ's suffering, which moves gradually towards a joyous acclamation of his resurrection and his might that reaches its peak in the *Hallelujah* chorus. Part III, which sets texts drawn almost exclusively from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and the Book of Revelations, is an epilogue of sorts. In closing *Messiah*, Jennens melded together these texts to form a meditation on Christ's second coming and his role in humanity's salvation.