TOO HOT TO HANDEL® - THE GOSPEL MESSIAH
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Saturday, December 10, 2022 · 3:00pm & 7:30pm
Scottish Rite Theatre

Peoria Symphony Orchestra
George Stelluto, Conductor
Alfreda Burke, Soprano
Brianna Thomas, Mezzo-Soprano
Rodrick Dixon, Tenor
The Heritage Ensemble

TOO HOT TO HANDEL - THE GOSPEL MESSIAH

Part 1

No. 1 - Sinfony
No. 2 - Comfort Ye
No. 3 - Every Valley
No. 4 - And the Glory of the Lord
No. 6 - But Who May Abide?
No. 7 - And He Shall Purify
No. 8 - Behold, A Virgin Shall Conceive
No. 9 - O Thou That Tellest
No. 10 - For Behold Darkness
No. 11 - The People That Walked in Darkness
No. 12 - For Unto Us a Child is Born
No. 14 - There Were Shepherds
No. 15 - And Suddenly
No. 17 - Glory to God

INTERMISSION

Part 2

No. 18 - Rejoice Greatly
No. 19 - Then Shall the Eyes
No. 20 - He Shall Feed His Flock
No. 21 - His Yoke is Easy (Chorus)
No. 22 - Behold the Lamb of God
No. 23 - Surely He hath Borne our Griefs
No. 26 - All We Like Sheep
No. 28 - He Trusted in God
No. 47 - Behold I Tell You
No. 48 - The Trumpet Shall Sound
No. 37 - The Lord Gave the Word
No. 38 - Why Do the Nations So Furiously Rage Together?
No. 44 - Hallelujah!

George Frederick Handel
(1685-1759)

The production of “Too Hot to Handel” was co-arranged by Bob Christianson & Gary Anderson. The original concert was developed by Marin Alsop.

CONCERT SPONSORS & UNDERWRITERS

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This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.
Alfreda Burke’s vocal artistry has been described as “voluptuous, creamy and luxuriant” by the Chicago Tribune. She made her Carnegie and Orchestra Hall debut in Strauss’ Elektra with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra led by Daniel Barenboim and has appeared in concerts throughout North America and Europe. Highlighted performances include the Chicago Symphony at Ravinia under Erich Kunzel; Cincinnati Pops Symphony Orchestra; Michigan Opera Theatre/DSO/Rackham Choir; Royal Philharmonic (London); Prague Philharmonic; Umbria Music Festival (Italy); Todi International Music Masters (US); Miss World 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2021 (China, UK, US, Puerto Rico); Nkosi Zwelivelile Mandela, Miss World Beauty With A Purpose and Rise Against Hunger events; Gala (South Africa); Humanity Rising: Notre-Dame Reborn virtual Gala; Sentinel of the Sea Award/Virtual Celebration honoring Gary Sinise; Holders Season Gala (Barbados); Lancaster Festival; Corrales Cultural Arts Council (New Mexico); Grant Park Music Festival; Millennium Park Gala; Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra; Kennedy Center; Auditorium Theatre 125 Living the History; Orpheum Theatre (Memphis); Chicago Opera Theater; Chorus Angelorum; Chicagoland Pops Orchestra; Siamsa na nGael; and NATO Chicago Summit, among others. Alfreda filmed a Prague PBS special, Hallelujah Broadway, which was released on the EMI/Manhattan Records label (Czech National Symphony Orchestra Studios, Prague). She and Rodrick Dixon were featured in PBS Great Performances’ Now Hear This: Florence Price and the American Migration and sang in the historic Mayoral Inauguration of the Honorable Lori E. Lightfoot in 2019. She is honored to be a HistoryMaker and a permanent part of their collection at the Library of Congress.

Alfreda’s oratorio, opera, concert, and musical theater engagements include the Dame Myra Hess Memorial Concerts broadcast on WFMT-FM; Mozart’s Requiem, Mass in C Minor, Coronation Mass in C Major; Handel’s Messiah; Mendelssohn’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream; Beethoven’s Mass in C; Poulenc’s Gloria; Schubert’s Mass in G; Mahler’s 2nd & 8th Symphonies; Strauss’ Elektra; Puccini’s Turandot (Liu); Tchaikovsky’s Islanta; Barber’s Knoxville: Summer of 1915; Menotti’s Amahl & the Night Visitors; Rutter’s Requiem; Vaughan Williams’ Dona Nobis Pacem; Boulez’s Le Visage Nuptial under the baton of Pierre Boulez; Gershwin’s Porgy & Bess; Lukombe’s Crucifixion Resurrection; Bernstein’s West Side Story; Lloyd Webber’s Jesus Christ Superstar; Christianson and Anderson’s Too Hot to Handel; and Kern’s Show Boat. A cycle of Paul Laurence Dunbar songs was written for her by Dr. Edward Hart, College of Charleston (2015); and spiritual settings were arranged for her by Belford Hernandez (2017). She was featured in
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ABOUT THE PROGRAM
Written by Michael Allsen © 2022

*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 280 years ago. *Messiah* has never gone out of style since its first performance in 1742, but here also is a tradition extending back to the 18th century of revising this work to fit current tastes. Here we present a 1992 arrangement recasting this familiar work in Gospel and Jazz styles. Joining the Peoria Symphony Orchestra for this concert are Alfreda Burke, soprano; Brianna Thomas, mezzo-soprano; Rodrick Dixon, tenor; and The Heritage Ensemble.

**Maestro’s Musings**

With cleverness and wit,
We turn old into new.
Can you believe it?
A Gospel Messiah for you!

We turned the heat up a little
On Handel’s genius thought
And from this musical griddle
Bring you something hot!

— G. Stelluto

**About the Production**

*Too Hot To Handel® - The Gospel Messiah*

Arr. Gary Anderson and Bob Christianson

George Frederick Handel (1685-1759)

*The production of “Too Hot to Handel” was co-arranged by Bob Christianson & Gary Anderson. The original concert was developed by Marin Alsop.*

*Handel composed Messiah in just three weeks in early 1741. The first performance was in Dublin on April 13, 1742. The version heard here was arranged in 1992 and premiered on December 18, 1993, in New York City. Duration 115:00.*

**Background: Messiah**

When Handel moved to England permanently in 1717, it was to compose and produce operas. He was a master of the pompous Italian opera that was the fashion of the time, and he became the most successful *impressario* in the history of the form. However, by the late 1730s, London audiences were tired of Italian opera, with its elaborate dramatic conventions and plots that were often incomprehensible — even for the minority who understood Italian! Faced with financial ruin, Handel turned to a new form, mostly settings of Old Testament stories. Although Handel retained many of the outward forms of Italian opera in these works — recitative, *da capo* aria, and ensembles — 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 star singers he had employed in operatic productions, Handel was able to produce these phenomenally popular new works for a fraction of the cost of his operas.

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 Benefit in Passion week. I hope that he will lay out his whole Genius and Skill upon it, that the Composition may excel all his former Compositions, as the Subject excels 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, unsuccessful attempt to revive comatose Italian opera. This was such a flop that Handel was seriously thinking about returning to Germany. He decided instead, however, 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* the next month. He set off for Ireland in November and began what was to become an incredibly successful series of productions. *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. 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 crowded Audience. The Sublime, the Grand, the Tender, adapted to the most majestic and moving Words, conspired to transport and charm the ravished Heart and Ear...”
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 assembled by Jennens, dealing with the birth, death, resurrection, and legacy of Christ.

**Background: Reinterpreting Messiah**

After its success in Dublin, Handel produced dozens of performances of Messiah, the last one only two weeks before his death. Performances of the work were soon heard in Hamburg, Leipzig, Berlin, and Vienna. 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. However, the celebrity of Messiah and Handel 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. This tradition of jumbo-sized performances reached its peak in the Victorian age. A Handel Centennial performance, held in the 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 4,000. (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!*). Writer George Bernard Shaw wryly proposed that Parliament make any performance of Messiah by more than 48 singers a capital offense!

Messiah was, of course, translated into many languages, beginning with German, and later Italian, French, and others. It was also reinterpreted musically. In early 1789, Mozart prepared a streamlined and re-orchestrated version of Messiah for performance in Vienna. When Felix Mendelssohn and others led the work in the 19th century, it was frequently re-orchestrated for a large symphony orchestra. The idea of reinterpreting this very traditional work using gospel and other contemporary styles was clearly in the air in the early 1990s. In 1992, producer Mervyn Warren and others assembled a popular album titled *Handel's Messiah: A Soulful Celebration*, featuring performances by many prominent gospel, jazz, and hip-hop artists. That same year, conductor Marin Alsop, then recently appointed as director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, conceived the idea of a version of Messiah for live performance that “maintained the basic DNA of the piece” but recast it in gospel style.

**What You’ll Hear**

This version of Messiah is fronted by gospel and jazz soloists and a choir singing in gospel style. The traditional orchestra is supplemented by a full rhythm section: electric guitar and bass, drum set, and Hammond B-3 organ (the distinctive tremolo sound so much a part of Black gospel music). The producers of *Too Hot To Handel - The Gospel Messiah* provide the following description:

“George Frideric Handel was on a roll in the spring of 1742 when he premiered his great oratorio, the Messiah. The sensational new appeal of *Too Hot To Handel*® has been met with the same enthusiasm as it was when the ink was fresh in 1742. More than two hundred and fifty years later, Handel’s Messiah remains one of the most performed and popular choral works and is appreciated by audiences all over the globe. Instantly recognizable is the ‘Hallelujah Chorus,’ which always gets people on their feet during performances of the Messiah. It is exactly that sense of excitement that prompted conductor Marin Alsop to suggest giving Handel’s Messiah a new twist. *Too Hot To Handel* grew from an idea to fruition in the hands of Alsop’s colleagues: Gary Anderson and Bob Christianson, who recreated this gospel/jazz version adaptation of the Messiah in 1992. ‘Alsop, in collaboration with Anderson and Christianson, envisioned the Messiah in a way that captures a fresh ‘feel’ and thrill, while still retaining Handel’s original musical intent. ‘It’s a great story, but I also think that it requires some kind of audience participation. It becomes an active listening experience when you’re allowed to stand up or clap your hands,’ says Alsop, who wanted to relax the perception of a quiet, polite classical audience and turn the performance into a participatory event. The creative team of Alsop, Anderson, and Christianson decided their adaptation would encompass jazz, gospel, rock, and funk—to ‘break the classical sound barrier.’ The result is a swinging performance of the traditional oratorio.”

> THE FUN ELEMENT IS REALLY, REALLY IMPORTANT AND I THINK IT FEELS CURRENT. IT FEELS LIKE IT'S OF TODAY...WHEN PEOPLE START CLAPPING AND DANCING, IT'S JUST A GREAT MOMENT.

—CONDUCTOR MARIN ALSOP, CO-CREATOR OF TOO HOT TO HANDEL