

Handel's *Messiah*

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

George Frideric Handel: *Messiah*

Certain works of classical music belong to everyone, regardless of their cultural background or customary musical preferences. Handel's *Messiah* holds this universal appeal, not only because we associate it with the holiday season, but also because Handel's lovely arias and bubbling choruses do indeed lift us up. They are, collectively, a cause for celebration. The joining together of such large performing forces—a modern phenomenon that would have amazed Handel—with unfailingly enthusiastic audiences is among the most convivial celebrations in our society.

Born the same year as Bach, Handel lived a far more cosmopolitan life. Early in his career he worked in Italy, where he mastered all types of vocal music, including opera. After settling in England, he continued writing Italian opera. In the late 1720s, he shifted his focus to sacred oratorios on biblical texts. *Messiah* is the crown jewel among them. Handel composed it in only twenty-four days from late August to mid-September 1741 in London. The premiere took place in Dublin on 13 April, 1742. The oratorio rapidly worked its way into the English repertoire.

Handel's librettist, Charles Jennens, selected his texts primarily from the Prayer Book, also drawing on the Book of Isaiah and the Gospels. Far from being exclusively Christmas-season texts, Jennens' words also have relevance to Easter, Ascension, and Whitsun.

The music is transcendent. Who can resist the excitement of the chorus' first entrances in "And the Glory of the Lord"? What choral singer does not shiver with delicious anticipation at the prospect of negotiating the formidable melismas in the fugue subjects of "And He Shall Purify" and "His Yoke Is Easy?" Is there any choral movement that encapsulates the spirit of the holiday season so perfectly as "For Unto Us a Child Is Born?"

To *Messiah* as well belongs the most famous and revered tradition in all choral music: the audience rising to stand at the conclusion of Part II for the "Hallelujah" chorus. And for those moments of participatory repose between choruses, Handel provides a wealth of glorious solo arias, including some moving recitatives. Nearly three centuries later, his music is still capable of transporting us to a higher plane.

George Frideric Handel: *Messiah*

George Frideric Handel

Born: February 23, 1685, in Halle, Germany

Died: April 14, 1759, in London, England

Composed: August 22 to September 14, 1741

World Premiere: April 13, 1742, in Dublin, Ireland

Duration: 2 hours and 10 minutes

Instrumentation: two oboes, bassoon, two trumpets, timpani, harpsichord, organ; bass-baritone, tenor, alto, and soprano soloists, mixed chorus, and strings

PART 1

Sinfonia (Overture)

Accompagnato (Tenor)

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness; prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (*Isaiah 40:1–3*)

Air (Tenor)

Ev'ry valley shall be exalted, and ev'ry mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain. (*Isaiah 40:4*)

Chorus

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. (*Isaiah 40:5*)

Accompagnato (Bass-baritone)

Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts: Yet once a little while and I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations; and the desire of all nations shall come. (*Haggai 2:6–7*)

The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the Covenant, whom you delight in; behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of hosts. (*Malachi 3:1*)

Air (Countertenor)

But who may abide the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner's fire. (*Malachi 3:2*)

Chorus

And He shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness. (*Malachi 3:3*)

Recitative (Mezzo-Soprano)

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel, God with us. (*Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23*)

Air and Chorus (Mezzo-Soprano)

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain.

O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, behold your God! (*Isaiah 40:9*)

Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. (*Isaiah 60:1*)

Accompagnato (Bass-baritone)

For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people; but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. (*Isaiah 60:2–3*)

Air (Bass-baritone)

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. (*Isaiah 9:2*)

Chorus

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. (*Isaiah 9:6*)

Pifa (Pastoral Symphony)

Recitative (Soprano)

There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. *(Luke 2:8)*

Arioso (Soprano)

And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid. *(Luke 2:9)*

Recitative (Soprano)

And the angel said unto them: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." *(Luke 2:10–11)*

Accompagnato (Soprano)

And suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying: *(Luke 2:13)*

Chorus

Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will towards men. *(Luke 2:14)*

Air (Soprano)

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, thy King cometh unto thee; He is the righteous Savior, and He shall speak peace unto the heathen. *(Zechariah 9:9–10)*

Recitative (Mezzo-soprano)

Then shall the eyes of the blind be open'd, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing. *(Isaiah 35:5–6)*

Duet (Mezzo-soprano and Soprano)

He shall feed His flock like a shepherd; and He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. *(Isaiah 40:11)*

Come unto Him, all ye that labor, come unto Him that are heavy laden, and He will give you rest. Take His yoke upon you, and learn of Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls. *(Matthew 11:28–29)*

Chorus

His yoke is easy, and His burden is light. (*Matthew 11:30*)

INTERMISSION

PART II

Chorus

Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. (*John 1:29*)

Air (Mezzo-soprano)

He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. (*Isaiah 53:3*)

He gave His back to the smiters, and His cheeks to them that plucked off His hair: He hid not His face from shame and spitting. (*Isaiah 50:6*)

Chorus

Surely He hath borne our griefs.

And with his stripes.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way. And the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (*Isaiah 53:4–6*)

Recitative (Tenor)

All they that see Him. (*Psalms 22:8*)

Chorus

He trusted in God. (*Psalms 22:9*)

Air (Bass-baritone)

Why do the nations so furiously rage together, and why do the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord, and against His anointed. (*Psalms 2:1–2*)

Recitative (Tenor)

He that dwelleth in Heaven. (*Psalms 2:4,9*)

Air (Tenor)

Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. (*Psalms 2:9*)

Chorus

Hallelujah: for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. (*Revelation 19:6*)

The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever. (*Revelation 11:15*)

King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. (*Revelation 19:16*)

Hallelujah!

PART III

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God. (*Job 19:25–26*)

For now is Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep. (*I Corinthians 15:20*)

Chorus

Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. (*I Corinthians 15:21–22*)

Accompagnato (Bass-baritone)

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

(*I Corinthians 15:51–52*)

Air (Bass-baritone)

The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

(*I Corinthians 15:52*)

Chorus

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His blood, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing. Blessing and honor, glory and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen.

(Revelation 5:12–14)

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