NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2026

Handel's *Messiah*

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

George Frideric Handel: *Messiah*

Messiah is like no other oratorio. It holds a unique position in the literature, especially in Britain and the United States, where its annual performance during December has become a ritual as integral to the Christmas season as Santa Claus in the shopping malls. Yet this beloved work, arguably the most popular choral composition in the entire repertoire, would be more accurately placed during Lenten season, dealing as it does with crucifixion, resurrection, and redemption, as well as with the birth of Christ. Probably no one would be more surprised than George Frederic Handel to observe the hold its choruses have taken on holiday musical programs in English-speaking countries!

Various musical forms bind the work closely to the operatic tradition, of which Handel was an acknowledged master. The oratorio opens with a French overture (labeled "*sinfonia*") for strings, with a slow introduction in dotted rhythms followed by a vigorous fugue. Both "He was despised" and "The trumpet shall sound" are *da capo* arias, tripartite structures in which a central, contrasting middle section is followed by an exact repeat of the opening music. This formula was conventional in Italian opera, and was quite familiar to Handel's English audiences.

But other aspects of *Messiah* depart decisively from operatic tradition, as Handel knew that he must if he were to re-establish musical pre-eminence in English society. His economic situation was frail in the late 1730s. Italian opera, which had been his forte, was in serious decline, and he had turned to oratorio in order to appeal more directly to English taste and secure his own material and artistic future.

Oratorio in England was a middle-class venture, in contrast to the opera, which was still largely the province of the landed gentry and the nobility. Production costs were far lower for oratorio because no scenery, costumes or machinery were required. Furthermore, oratorio texts tended to be drawn directly from Scripture or at least based on sacred subjects, which meant that attendance at an oratorio was morally acceptable, perhaps even desirable. None of the stigma of opera or theatre (hotbeds of iniquity, both) lay over oratorio. Its greater appeal to the middle class is a major factor in accounting for its popularity.

Handel must be credited almost single-handedly with the development of the English oratorio. Though the genre was well cultivated on the continent for decades before Handel's arrival in England, particularly in Italy and Germany, no strong British oratorio composer preceded Handel. He fused elements of the English sacred choral tradition (hence the strong emphasis on choruses in *Messiah*) with characteristics of Italian opera to create a form

and style uniquely his. A third component of his oratorio style is the German Passion, which manifests itself most prominently in the Part II choruses. But even a cursory comparison of *Messiah* with one of the great Bach Passions reveals a fundamental difference in attitude. Where Bach focuses on suffering and Christ's sacrifice for mankind's sake, Handel concentrates on hope, glory, and salvation. The overall mood is more joyous and celebratory in *Messiah*.

What distinguishes *Messiah* from *Israel in Egypt* (1739), *Samson* (1743), *Susanna* (1749), or any of the other Handel oratorios is that it is essentially non-dramatic, in the sense that the action is not related by major players on the concert stage. The soloists do not represent specific characters. And the chorus, with its prominent role, may be likened to the people, whether the oppressed people of Israel or the proud-spirited English themselves. As the scholar Howard Smither has noted:

> Not only were [Handel's audiences] generally familiar with the stories, but they perceived a parallel between the Israelites and the English of their own time; both were intensely nationalistic and led by heroic figures, and both regarded themselves as being under the special protection of God, who was worshipped by pomp and splendor.

Credit for this unusual approach must be awarded not only to Handel, but also to his librettist Charles Jennens (1700-1773). Drawing exclusively from the prayer book psalter and Old Testament texts (despite the Christian emphasis of the subject matter), Jennens compiled a masterly libretto that has been widely underrated in assessing Handel's achievement in *Messiah*.

One possible explanation for the apparent oversight is Jennens' unattractiveness as a person. A wealthy dandy, he maintained a friendship with Handel, yet lorded his wealth and social station over the German composer. Both ostentatious and foppish, he was nicknamed "Solyman the Magnificent" by his contemporaries because of his flashy dress and retinue. After *Messiah* received its first London performance in March 1743, Jennens had the hubris to write to his friend Edward Holdsworth expressing dissatisfaction that Handel had composed such indifferent music for his first class libretto!

> I shall show you a collection I gave Handel, call'd *Messiah*, which I value highly, and he has made a fine Entertainment of it, tho' not near so good as he might and ought to have done. I have with great difficulty made him correct some of the grossest faults in the composition, but he retained his overture obstinately, in which there are some passages far unworthy of Handel, but much more unworthy of *Messiah*.

Jennens was quite insistent that Handel make adjustments in the work for London performances. Those changes have resulted in scholarly difficulty identifying a definitive version of the work.

Yet in all fairness, we must not sell Jennens short. He knew music well, and was enough of a connnoisseur to amass an enormous collection of Handel's manuscripts; most of them currently reside in the British Museum collection. He knew his Scripture and his secular literature, and had an uncanny sense for what would work well with music. In addition to culling *Messiah*'s texts, Jennens also collaborated with Handel on *Saul* (1738*), L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (1740, after Milton), and *Belshazzar* (1744).

Some of the alterations that Jennens suggested to Handel were practical. For example, the Dublin premiere in April 1742 is believed to have taken place with limited instrumental resources, resulting in limited scoring for obbligato trumpet, strings and continuo. However, once the work was mounted in London, where Handel knew he could count on additional instrumentalists, he added in parts for oboes, horns (doubling trumpet), bassoons (doubling the bass line), and timpani. He may have doubled the oboe parts with trumpets as well.

Similarly, Handel rewrote several arias to accommodate the vocal capabilities on London soloists. In one case, "But Who may Abide," six extant versions of the aria have survived: one for bass (the Dublin premiere), one for tenor, and three different arrangements for the *castrato* Gaetano Guadagni. The sixth version is in recitative. Handel's apparent willingness to make these adjustments for individual singers leads to the inference that his flexibility was motivated by practical concerns. He wished to promote his music in performance, and did what seemed necessary in order to ensure success.

No doubt it would astonish Handel, were he alive today, to audit one of the mass renderings that have become so popular in modern times. If he were to be startled at the huge numbers of performers, or raised his eyebrows a bit when a melismatic choral passage was inexpertly delivered by enthusiastic amateurs, he would surely derive enormous satisfaction that his music, so uplifting and reaffirming, continues to bring so much joy to the hearts of music-lovers everywhere.

George Frideric Handel: *Messiah*

George Frideric Handel
Born: February 23, 1685 in Halle, Germany
Died: April 14, 1759 in London, England
Composed: August 22–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, countertenor, 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 (Mezzo-soprano)

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. *(Zecharaiah 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. *(Psalm 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. *(Psalm 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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