NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2024

Handel's *Messiah*

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

George Frideric Handel: *Messiah*

George Frideric Handel was a survivor. Time and again he reinvented himself, took advantage of current events to further his career and adapted his music to adjust to changing performance circumstances. After he shifted his focus away from Italian opera in favor of English language oratorios in the late 1730s, he found astounding variety in Biblical texts. In one major work after another—*Saul*, *Israel in Egypt*, *Samson*, *Judas Maccabaeus*, *Belshazzar*, *Susanna*—he zeroed in on the dramatic potential of Biblical stories. In the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha, he found characters and relationships as compelling as those of the gods and heroes who populated his opera libretti.

In fact, there was not so much difference in the basic themes that Handel had addressed in his operas: death, wealth, beauty, love, contemplation of the devil, pursuit of a virtuous life and the preservation of one's soul. Oratorio gave him free rein to pursue these ideas through the same musical vehicles of arias, duets and choruses. He simply did so without costumes or staging. Most important, presenting his music in the English vernacular gave him the opportunity to expand his audience exponentially. Outside Italy, Italian opera was the province of the wealthy few. Sacred oratorio belonged to everyone and had the advantage of being performed in a language everyone spoke.

Handel also composed a substantial amount of English church music, including anthems and hymns, as well as some Latin liturgical settings. Among his choral works, he remains best loved for his oratorios, above all *Messiah*. Its global popularity has placed it in a league of familiarity occupied by only a few classical works. *Messiah* keeps company with Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, Ludwig van Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, Maurice Ravel's *Boléro* and Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*. The fact that Handel and his librettist Charles Jennens succeeded in doing so with a sacred work adds to the unique qualities of this beloved oratorio.

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, 1741, in Dublin
Duration: 2 hours 20 minutes
Instrumentation: In its original orchestration, *Messiah* was scored for strings and continuo, plus trumpet obbligato for the aria "The Trumpet Shall Sound." For the London performances in 1743, Handel added oboes and bassoons, doubling the strings during the choruses. Today, *Messiah* is generally performed with oboes, bassoons, trumpets, timpani, strings and harpsichord & organ continuo, plus vocal soloists and chorus

George Frideric Handel was born in Germany, educated in Germany and Italy and spent nearly all of his mature career in Italy and England, his eventual adopted home. Born the same year as Johann Sebastian Bach, he lived a far more cosmopolitan life and must be counted among the most international of composers. He was also a pragmatist. Recognizing as a young man that his future success lay in the mastery of Italian opera, he betook himself to Florence in 1706 at the invitation of Prince Ferdinando de' Medici. While he lived and worked in Italy, his path crossed that of both Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti, Antonio Vivaldi, Tomaso Albinoni, Antonio Caldara and Arcangelo Corelli. During his Italian years he developed a mastery of all types of vocal music, including opera, oratorio, chamber cantata and important instrumental forms like the concerto and the sonata.

When Handel left Italy in 1710 for Hanover and, eventually, England, he was a highly accomplished composer and a superb organist. Initially he made his reputation in London through Italian opera, but by the late 1720s English taste was changing. The highly successful run of John Gay's The Beggar's Opera (1728) precipitated a revolution of sorts in popular taste. English audiences wanted their musical entertainment in English, and the future of Italian opera in London looked grim.

The necessary adjustment prompted Handel to turn his energies to a series of sacred oratorios on primarily Old Testament texts. These date primarily from the 1730s until Handel's death in 1759, and *Messiah* is the crown jewel among them. Handel composed his most famous oratorio in a period of 24 days from late August to mid-September 1741 in London. The work received its first performance in Dublin on April 13, 1742. The oratorio rapidly worked its way into the English repertoire as well. While its first London performance, in 1743, received an indifferent reception, Handel had the satisfaction of witnessing a change of fortune for the work during his lifetime. After 1750, when a performance was presented in London to benefit a Foundling Hospital, *Messiah* became an annual event, a tradition that has grown to remarkable proportions in many countries besides England.

Handel's librettist for *Messiah* was Charles Jennens, a wealthy Englishman with whom Handel had collaborated on the 1738 oratorio *Saul*. He 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. As Nicholas Kenyon has observed:

> *Messiah* is an oratorio which celebrates the whole of Christ's work, from its anticipation in the prophecy of the Old Testament, through his life, suffering, death and Resurrection, to his future second coming in glory.

No small order for a composer, that. But Handel was equal to the task. Winton Dean, in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, has admirably summarized some elements of what makes *Messiah* so special.

> The greatness of *Messiah*—Handel's only sacred oratorio in the true sense and therefore untypical—derives on one level from its unique fusion of the traditions of Italian opera, English anthem and German passion, and on another from the coincidence of Handel's personal faith and creative genius to express, more fully than in any other work of art, the deepest aspirations of the Anglican religious spirit.

To the chorister, whether in a formal performing ensemble or in an audience participating from a seat in the hall, *Messiah* is more than what Dean describes. Who can resist the excitement of the full 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, and His Burthen is Light?" 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 entire assembly rising to stand at the conclusion of Handel's Part II, when the orchestra intones the familiar three introductory measures of "Hallelujah."

Here is music that speaks to the spirit in the most warm and communicative of ways; here is music that is fun—albeit very demanding!—to sing. And for those moments of participatory repose between choruses, Handel provides a wealth of glorious solo music for our enjoyment, including some recitative as moving as any operatic example: "Then shall the eyes of the blind be open'd" (preceding "He Shall Feed His Flock/Come Unto Him") and "Thy rebuke hath broken his Heart" (leading to "Behold, and See if there be any Sorrow") come immediately to mind.

Among the other favorite relatives we are delighted to re-encounter in this rich family of arias, recitatives, orchestral interludes and choruses are the tenor arias "Comfort Ye" and "Ev'ry Valley Shall be Exalted"; soprano arias "Rejoice Greatly" and "I Know that my Redeemer Liveth," the bass aria "The Trumpet Shall Sound" and the incomparable contralto solo "He was despised." With the latter is associated a wonderful story that epitomizes the spirit of *Messiah*.

On the occasion of the first performance in Dublin on April 13, 1742, the contralto soloist was the English singer and actress Susanna Maria Cibber, sister of the composer Thomas Arne. Her elopement with her lover,

John Sloper, several years previously, had precipitated a scandalous lawsuit that prompted her to retire from public appearances for three years, choosing to reside quietly in the Berksire countryside with Sloper. She travelled to Dublin in 1741 for a single season at the Aungier Street Theatre. Travel was slow in the mid-eighteenth-century, but gossip, as always, made its way rapidly, and Mrs. Cibber's (by which name she remained known) muddied reputation preceded her.

When Handel arrived in Dublin with his entourage to prepare for the premiere of *Messiah*, he contracted with her to perform as one of his soloists. His decision, though it might have been questionable from the standpoint of public opinion, was artistically sound. So sweet was her singing, and so transporting her interpretation, that a distinguished member of that first audience, Reverend Dr. Delany, was moved to rise from his seat and exclaim: "Woman, for this, be all thy sins forgiven!"

No such drama is expected from modern audiences, but singers and instrumentalists alike take great pride in faithful execution of this immortal score. More than two and one-half centuries after that first performance, Handel's music is still capable of transporting us to a higher plane.