

HANDEL'S MESSIAH

Messiah

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

1. Sinfonia
2. Comfort ye my people
3. Ev'ry valley shall be exalted
4. And the glory of the Lord
5. Thus saith the Lord of hosts
6. But who may abide the day of His coming?
7. And he shall purify the sons of Levi
8. Behold, a virgin shall conceive
9. O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion
10. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth
11. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light
12. For unto us a child is born
13. Pifa
14. a. There were shepherds abiding in the field
b. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them
15. And the angel said unto them
16. And suddenly there was with the angel
17. Glory to God in the highest
18. Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion
19. Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened
20. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd
21. His yoke is easy, and his burthen is light
29. Thy rebuke hath broken his heart
30. Behold, and see if there be any sorrow
31. He was cut off out of the land of the living
32. But thou didst not leave his soul in hell
33. Lift up your heads, O ye gates
46. Since by man came death
47. Behold, I tell you a mystery
48. The trumpet shall sound
44. Hallelujah

George Frideric Handel

b. February 23, 1685, in Halle, modern-day Germany

d. April 14, 1759, in London, England

Messiah

Composed: Summer of 1741 to a libretto by Charles Jennens

Premiered: April 13, 1742, in Dublin, Ireland

The Work in Context

1739: The Mughal Empire is defeated at the Battle of Narnal in modern-day Delhi.

1740: Austria goes to war against Prussia, starting the War of Austrian Succession.

1741: Russian explorer Alexei Chirikovon is the first European to visit Alaska.

1742: Anders Celsius proposes the centigrade (Celsius) scale. *Messiah* premieres.

George Frideric Handel was born in 1685, the same year as his fellow renowned composers J.S. Bach and Domenico Scarlatti. He was born in Halle, a small town in modern-day northern Germany. His father was a barber/surgeon who served the local nobility. Halle was a prosperous town in the early 1600s. It was a center of trade and culture before the 30 Years War destroyed large swaths of Europe, including northern Germany. By the time Handel was born in 1685, the region was impoverished. His father made his way to moderate prosperity through patronage of the local nobility. Handel's mother was the daughter of a Lutheran minister and was Handel's father's second wife. Once when the young Handel was between the ages of 7 and 9, he accompanied his father to the city of Weissenfels. Handel wandered into the room that housed the court organ and began to play. Duke Johann Adolf I heard the young musician playing and was immediately impressed, especially given Handel's young age. The duke recommended that Handel receive musical training, and the duke was not someone accustomed to being ignored. Handel's father engaged the church organist in Halle, Wilhelm Zachow, to begin his son's formal training. Zachow provided Handel with a well-rounded education. He taught him the older style of church music: fugues, canons, and counterpoint. However, he was also young and well-traveled, so he also taught Handel the newer, more dramatic style found in opera across the more cosmopolitan cities of Europe. Handel not only learned organ but also harpsichord, violin, and oboe, an instrument for which he had a special affinity.

Handel's father was 60 when Handel was born, and he died when Handel was 11 years old. His father had wanted Handel to study law, and Handel did take some law classes at the University of Halle. A year after entering the university, Handel received his first appointment as an organist at the Calvinist Cathedral of Halle when he was 17. Very few of Handel's early compositions survive, although we know that Handel composed from an early age. There is some evidence that much of his early work demonstrated a level of creativity and artistry that may not have been welcome in the church where he was employed. In 1703, Handel moved to Hamburg and took a position in the opera company as a violinist and harpsichordist. Handel had always been more drawn to opera than sacred music, so this was an excellent fit. He wrote his first Italian operas in Hamburg as well as on trips to Italy funded by Ferdinando de' Medici. He would spend the next several decades of his career writing Italian opera. In 1712 he moved to England and would live there for the rest of his life. He composed 40 operas between his move

to England and 1741, when he wrote *Messiah*. He founded his own opera company, and each season (early fall to mid-spring) he was the impresario as well as the composer and music director of his own theatre.

In the late 1730s, the popularity of Italian opera waned in England, and a rival opera company was formed in London in 1737 which further ate into Handel's revenues. Because he was the producer as well as the composer, these changes in the business of opera directly affected Handel's bottom line. To stave off destitution, Handel turned to composing oratorios. He saw this as a short-term solution to his financial problems, not a shift in artistic vision. Oratorios were cheaper to produce than operas in every way: he could hire English singers instead of pricey Italian divas, there were no sets or costumes, they required less rehearsal time since there was no staging, and the music didn't have to be memorized. Handel received the libretto for his first English oratorio, *Saul*, in 1735, and the work premiered in 1738. The success of this work set the course for the rest of Handel's career.

Messiah was written over the span of 24 days in August and September of 1741. Handel signed the manuscript with the letters SDG for *solī deo gloria*, or "To God alone the glory." This inscription led to the apocryphal story that Handel wrote the piece in a burst of divine inspiration. However, this pace of composition was not unusual in his operas or oratorios. Handel was an experienced composer at this point in his career, and he knew exactly what he was doing and how to do it quickly.

Handel went to Dublin in the fall of 1741 at the invitation of the Duke of Devonshire, the serving Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Handel organized a subscription series of his previous music as he prepared for the premiere of *Messiah*. Handel engaged choirs from the largest churches in Dublin and hired his orchestra. The proceeds of the premiere would go to fund several hospitals in the city. The expected audience was so large that it was requested that men not wear their swords and ladies not wear hoop skirts to create more space for the audience. The premiere was a smashing success, and Handel gave the work's first performance in London soon after. The work has been continuously performed since its premiere in 1742, making it potentially the oldest piece of Western music to have been continuously performed since its premiere.

One final note on the piece: there is a tradition that accompanies this piece to stand when the Hallelujah Chorus is performed. This movement will be the last number performed at this concert. The origin of this tradition is said to come from the London premiere of this work. The story goes that when this movement began, King George, moved by the music, stood up. When the King stood, everyone else was obliged to stand, and the tradition was borne. We request that the audience stand when the Hallelujah Chorus is performed in this concert.

Program notes by Martin D. King

An active performer and teacher, Martin D. King is on the faculty of Washington State University, where he teaches horn and music education. Dr. King maintains a busy performance schedule, holding positions in three orchestras in Eastern Washington and touring with his quintet, the Pan Pacific Ensemble. For more information, please visit www.martinkingmusic.com.