

Handel's *Messiah* in Historical Context

Program Notes by Lawrence Schenbeck

It all began when he received a remarkable libretto from an altogether too familiar source—Charles Jennens, the eccentric country gentleman who had produced the text for *Saul* a few years earlier. But once the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland offered George Frideric Handel his assurances that Dublin could host the composer in an extended series of concerts, he set to work. To crown his appearances, Handel meant to create a new oratorio. It would be called *Messiah*. He began composing on 22 August 1741 and finished in mid-September. That kind of speed was not remarkable; he often worked fast once inspiration (or a lucrative commission) struck. But as Christopher Hogwood noted in his colorful biography of the master, “The turbulent state of Handel’s manuscript, the blots, erasures, and emendations that litter the page right to the final bars” offer irrefutable proof of the furious energy generated by a genius in the throes of creation.

Another sign of that energy was Handel’s immediate embarkation on another major project: *Samson*, Act I of which was finished by the end of September, with all of it done in one more month. *Samson* better fit the pattern of Handelian oratorios past and yet to come: vividly drawn characters who sing their way through moral, military, and erotic misadventures; warring tribes—in this case, Philistines and Israelites—whose conflicts echo in the choral numbers; and verse adapted from the greatest English poets—in this case, Milton as paraphrased by Newburgh Hamilton.

Messiah was different. Jennens’ new text, cobbled together from Old Testament prophecies and a handful of New Testament passages, had no speaking (i.e., singing) characters, no principal narrator, and indeed no consistent dramatic “action.” The story unfolds in the abstract. Although Christ is clearly its protagonist, He is never named in the principal narrative (cf. “But thanks be to God”) and never speaks for Himself as He does, for example, in J. S. Bach’s Passion settings.

Nevertheless *Messiah* is laid out like a three-act Handel opera. Part I concerns itself with Isaiah’s prophecy about the coming of the Messiah and the Virgin Birth. Part II encompasses Christ’s betrayal, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and the beginnings of Christian evangelism. It ends with a massive cry of victory, the famous “Hallelujah” chorus. Part III, with text based largely on the Anglican Burial Service, becomes more reflective, touching on matters of faith, redemption, Judgment Day, and the “general Resurrection.” It ends with “Worthy Is The Lamb, Amen,” one of the few Handel choruses that finish off with a thoroughly realized fugue, a masterpiece of counterpoint from a man who usually favored swift, short musical statements. Its sober complexity provides the perfect conclusion to a work already unique in so many other ways.

Jennens organized each part of the text into a succession of “scenes,” and this lends the oratorio an attractive narrative clarity. So, for example, Part I begins with a *Sinfony* and three numbers that sketch out Isaiah’s prophecy. They are followed by a three-number scene promising God’s judgment: the world is unworthy, not yet ready for the coming of the Messiah. That scene is followed by a five-number sequence focusing on specific prophecies of Christ’s birth, which is then followed by a heartening “manger scene” of six numbers, most of them brief recitatives. Nearly all scenes end with a vigorous chorus that puts a seal on the preceding numbers.

From a musical standpoint, these climactic choruses are often structured to form gigantic V-to-I cadences. In the very first scene, for example, the E-minor darkness of the *Sinfony* gives way to a tenor recitative and aria in E major (!), followed immediately by the sunny A-major minuet chorus “And the glory of the Lord.” E-to-A = dominant to tonic. We feel this shift downward by five steps as a decisive musical return to the security of the “home key,” even though A major is introduced here for the first time.

That is just one indication of the chorus’s important structural and narrative role. Although Handel did not allow choral numbers to overwhelm the balance of music, as they arguably do in *Israel in Egypt*, they form a more significant element in *Messiah* than they had in *Saul* or would in many of his future works.

Handel’s original orchestration for *Messiah* was economical. For the first performances—charity events for which frugality was a watchword—he required only strings, keyboard *continuo*, two trumpets, and timpani. For some later London performances, horns, oboes, and bassoons (the woodwinds doubling string parts) were added. It seems likely that the solemn subject matter of the oratorio, which touched upon matters central to Christian belief, also recommended against spectacular instrumental displays.

Nor was the overall size of the chorus large. In Dublin Handel had 32 choristers at his disposal, in London fewer: 26 in April 1742 “at the New Musick-Hall in Fishamble street,” only 19 in May 1754 at the Foundling Hospital charitable performances. Detailed personnel records for the latter event have survived: 6 boy trebles from the Chapel Royal, joined by 13 adult males; an orchestra numbering 14 violins (divided 8/6), 6 violas, 3 cellos, 2 contrabasses, 4 oboes, 4 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and continuo. Oboe parts were disposed so as to offer maximum support to the treble line.

After 150 years of more-or-less gargantuan *Messiahs*, a tradition that began at Westminster Abbey after Handel’s death, conductors are now more apt to embrace “authentic” readings, in which performance style and body count more closely follow the historical evidence. String players tonight, for example, will adopt Baroque bows and bowing technique, a refreshing accommodation with an immediate impact. Handel himself was a Great

Accommodator, constantly cutting, expanding, and adding variants to fit individual singers and circumstances.

Massive or intimate, *Messiah* continues to win audiences even in an age of smartphones, Tidal, and Twitter. (How many audience members tonight will surreptitiously check their email or at least google Handel?) No matter—both the story and this telling of it remain ageless and unequalled. And so let us hear it!