

MUSICĀ SACRĀ

Handel. *Messiah*. These two names paired together are often synonymous with what seems to be the greatest success in Western classical music, and rightly so; Handel's *Messiah* currently reigns supreme as the most frequently performed choral work in history.

The Composer

George Frideric Handel was born in Halle, Brandenburg-Prussia (now Germany) in 1685, which was the birth year of two other giants of the Baroque era: Domenico Scarlatti and (you guessed it) Johann Sebastian Bach. Becoming a naturalized British citizen in 1727 (or “subject,” as they used to say!), Handel's compositional output of vocal music is some of the most impressive in the canon, and in addition to the enormous success of his Italian operas (*Rinaldo*, *Rodelinda*, *Alcina*—just to name a few), his English-language oratorios secured him a place as one of the most consequential composers in British history. His coronation anthem, “Zadok the Priest,” has been performed at every British coronation since George II, and he is venerated with a liturgical feast day in Lutheranism, Methodism, and the Anglican Communion.

The Work

Messiah

Composed in 1741, *Messiah* had its first performance in Dublin in 1742, followed by its London Covent Garden premiere in 1743. The work comments on the fulfillment in Christian theology of the mission of the Messiah, the Savior and Liberator of Humankind from its sinfulness. In Christianity, this Messiah is Jesus of Nazareth, and Handel set texts from the King James Bible and the Coverdale Psalter (compiled by Charles Jennens, and as found in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*), which chronicles Christ's foretold coming in the Old Testament to his Passion, Resurrection, Ascension, and ultimate veneration by us on earth who await his coming again in glory.

Set in three parts, Part I contains the Messianic prophecy, the Annunciation, Jesus' birth, and his works and teachings; Part II commemorates Jesus' Passion, Death, Resurrection, Ascension, and God's victory over sin and death (ending with the famed "Hallelujah" chorus); and Part III celebrates the redemption of the faithful and the Anointed One's eternal reign and power—both temporal and celestial. The final composition of the work, "Worthy is the Lamb," is one of Handel's most striking choruses, and the "Amen" fugue is worthy indeed of serving as the conclusion of this monumental opus.

Today's rendering will be akin to what audiences in the eighteenth century may have heard, as Handel composed *Messiah* for relatively modest vocal and instrumental forces. In the late nineteenth/early twentieth-century, there arose a penchant for the Mahler-esque/Wagnerian musical spectacle, and performances of *Messiah* began to use expanded orchestral forces and a significantly larger chorus. As with all evolutions in performance practice and aesthetic taste, the latter has become just as valid, especially when one recognizes that traditional practices were often out of necessity/available resources. Nevertheless, Baroque oratorios (especially in England) enjoyed great textual nuance and musical finesse, and favorable advocacy can be made for either approach.

A Deeper Dive

Tracing the critical reception for *Messiah* since its premiere is of great interest for music historians, if for no other reason than to pinpoint just why this work skyrocketed to fame the way it did. While the panoply of factors is vast, the fundamental reason must be that the music for *Messiah* is so objectively dynamic and so finely crafted that it uniformly elicits a favorable response. The work contains the requisite Baroque flashiness, text painting, and incredible vocal virtuosity that undoubtedly makes the wingéd Seraphs jealous, and the choruses are truly some of the most spectacular of the era.

The Overture (or *Sinfonia*) was written in the French overture style, to be played in a "double-dotted" rhythm. Beginning in E minor, this somber but majestic *grave* eventually leads into

the tender *larghetto e piano* of the tenor's opening recit and aria ("Comfort Ye/Ev'ry Valley"). D major has long been associated as the "key of glory" in Baroque sacred works, and is prominently featured in Part I: the "Good Tidings to Zion" are told in this key, as are the triumphant blaring of trumpets in "Glory to God." While *Messiah* indeed chronicles the whole redemption narrative, Part I focuses on God's promise of comfort being fulfilled in the Nativity, which is why the work has so often been associated with Advent/Christmastide.

In Christology, one is perpetually made aware that while God's promise was fulfilled with the birth of Jesus, the Messiah's temporal mission on earth was to take on the mantle of human iniquity and to die so that eternal life becomes attainable. Part II focuses on this sentencing of the Son of God to pain and death, and Handel matches this narrative with some of the most affecting music in his oeuvre, including the very personal aria, "He was despised," and the choruses, "Surely He hath borne our griefs" and "And with His stripes we are healed." These latter two movements are in F minor, the farthest and most removed key area from D major in the circle of fifths. Part II ends with the rousing "Hallelujah" chorus, which firmly plants us back in the key of glory, celebrating Christ breaking the bonds of sin and death.

Part III is—theologically—the most important part of the Messiah story, as it affirms that they who trust in God for deliverance need not fear Death's sting, for they shall live with the Lamb forever in Paradise. This is the Christian faith, echoed by St. Augustine centuries ago: "We are the Easter People and 'Alleluia' is our song!" "I know that my Redeemer liveth" is one of Handel's most brilliant melodic moments, set in the same E major tonality that brought us peace and comfort at the beginning of Part I. The ending chorus, "Worthy is the Lamb," is in a tripartite form, and celebrates the jubilation of Jesus' Ascension, as he sits upon the Throne receiving earthly adoration. The final "Amen" fugue chorus exemplifies Handel's polyphonic mastery, executing the full arsenal of Baroque contrapuntal crafting through stretto, suspensions, and ecstatic harmony. While we know from his letters that

Handel's favorite chorus was the one he wrote for the ending of *Theodora*, we can safely say that this magnificent "Amen" is indeed one of the crown jewels of the Baroque choral repertoire.

Zen Kuriyama is a PhD student in musicology at Brandeis University, and holds postgraduate degrees in sacred music/choral conducting and in voice performance. For more info, please visit www.zenkuriyama.com.