

Introduction to Händel's "MESSIAH"

By M. J. Albacete

For many people of the Christian faith, the celebration of the Christmas season would be unthinkable without attending a performance of George Friederick Händel's masterful oratorio MESSIAH, or at least listening to portions of it on the radio, or television, or CD. For some it is a thrilling spiritual experience in music; for others, it is a labor of love, as we secretly nudge our finger down the long list of more than 53 individual selections listed in the program, waiting impatiently for the several glorious airs and better still, the four or five spectacular choruses which we all know so well and for which we came to the concert hall in the first place! IT is, after all, over 275 years old, and times and musical styles and tastes have changed...

Having said that, I think that a brief exploration into the history and construction of MESSIAH will considerably enhance our appreciation of it, and provide us with subtle insights and detail specific points of interest which we will be able to anticipate as the performance evolves.

It seems a curious stroke of fate that Händel is now remembered by most people as the composer of one oratorio, because he only started to write and produce them when he was about fifty years old; up to this time, opera was the very center of his creative life. In fact, he considered himself primarily a composer of operas, and was never very fond of the oratorio format.

Georg Frideric Händel was born in Halle (Germany) on February 23, 1685, the son of a barber-surgeon and his second wife. Händel was drawn to music as a mere child, but his father was determined that he should pursue a career in the law, and so did not allow him to study any instrument. So little Georg studied in secret on a small clavichord hidden away in the attic of their home (no doubt in collaboration with his mother), but his remarkable talents could not long be hidden away, especially when his virtuosity was displayed publicly at the keyboard of the organ in the local church, and his father reluctantly relented. His first and most influential teacher was the organist of that church, who owned a sizeable collection of German, Italian and French music scores. Through the study of these, Händel quickly mastered various instruments, basic composition, and the musical styles of these countries. He was soon attracted to the big city of Hamburg, where his first operatic efforts drew considerable attention.

Around 1706 Händel made his way to Italy, then the musical capitol of Europe, where this German Lutheran earned both an income and a formidable reputation writing cantatas and various other liturgical pieces for high Roman Catholic church officials and the nobility. The next four years were important for Händel's musical education, since every type of music was being written and performed by noted composers in Florence, Rome, and Venice. Significantly, he was exposed to Italian opera and oratorio, achieving mastery and success in every musical genre.

While there, Händel was advised on one particular occasion by the Duke of Manchester to try his skills in London, where there was a voracious appetite for music. He did so, and his operatic efforts met with overwhelming acclaim, over the next few years alternated between London and Germany, but his heart and mind favored England, where he soon became something of a cult figure. By 1723, Händel took up permanent residence in London, on Brook Street in Grosvenor Square (which is still standing), where he lived for the rest of his life. Here, Händel quickly assimilated all of the nation's musical styles, specializing in the ever-popular operas and oratorios. In the years which followed, he turned out a huge quantity of music of all types, including more than three dozen operas and something like twenty oratorios.

One tentative—and rather serious—setback occurred on April 13, 1737, when Händel suffered a stroke or a severe attack of rheumatism that partially crippled him for a short time. But tough as he was, he made an amazing recovery, and was soon back on his rigid schedule. During the summer of 1738, two major works—the oratorios **Saul** and **Israel in Egypt**—claimed his full attention. With *Saul*, Händel worked with a new librettist, Charles Jennens, an independently wealthy and very literate personality who was skilled at fashioning texts for both opera and oratorio. Their brief collaboration resulted in several noteworthy masterpieces.

Jennens was a great admirer of Händel's music. In a letter written by Jennens to his friend, he recorded that "I hope I shall persuade him to set another scripture collection I have made for him. I hope he will lay out his whole genius and skill upon it, that the composition may excel all his former compositions, as the subject excels every other subject—the subject is MESSIAH." Jennens' text is a brilliant compilation derived for the most part from the Old Testament, though he may have had some help from one or two people, including the composer himself! Still, Händel personally acknowledges Jennens as the sole compiler, and so we will leave it there.

We have all heard that MESSIAH was composed in little over two weeks in the summer of 1741. Specifically, Händel started on August 22 and ended on September 14, and I don't mean to disillusion you. Was he motivated by profound religious inspiration? Under pressure to meet a deadline? There appears to be no specific reason for haste, since no performance was projected for the immediate future. The truth is, he usually worked this quickly; still, the speed in this case was rather remarkable.

But Händel made use of another device which accelerated the process of composition. MESSIAH reveals the subtle influence of various composers, and on several occasions he adapted some of his own previous works for MESSIAH. Shortly before, he had composed a series of Italian duets, and in three of these we find prototypes of several MESSIAH sequences, such as "For unto a Child is Born," "His Yoke is Easy," "And He shall purify," "All we like sheep," and "O Death, where is thy sting?"

But his actual inspiration might just have been a special invitation he had received early that same year from the Lord Lieutenant of Dublin, Ireland, to present a series of concerts in that city. This was a welcome change of pace for the composer, who by this time had fallen on rather hard times in London, as opera seemed to be falling out of favor. Something new and different was needed, and MESSIAH could have been the answer.

Jennens' libretto was already pre-arranged in the traditional Baroque formula into recitatives, arias, and choruses, and the first step thereafter for Händel was to lay out the whole score on paper, composing the arias and choruses in skeleton draft with the leading voices and instrumental parts, and writing in the easier recitative texts between the arias.

With his new oratorio in hand, Händel took ship for Ireland. The first performance of MESSIAH took place in Dublin as a charity concert for the benefit of prisoners in Gaol and for a hospital and an infirmary, presented at the new Music Hall in Fishamble Street, on April 12, 1742, to an audience of approx. 700 enthusiastic citizens. Of necessity, MESSIAH was repeated about two months later to similar acclaim. Händel's visit to Dublin was a triumph.

But MESSIAH was not accorded the same respect in London. Händel was reluctant to present such a sacred subject as MESSIAH in a London theater, based on past experiences with the Anglican clergy over a theatrical performance of Esther, another biblical subject. The taste of the middle class had shifted dramatically

towards Evangelicalism and music and art were regarded with suspicion. Theaters were perceived by the clergy as profane and subversive, a haunt of sin and moral laxity; the very thought of words from the bible being sung by theater people, and performed in a playhouse—immoral, shocking, blasphemous!

Still, MESSIAH gradually gained popularity. As early as 1744, MESSIAH was performed in Londo, by the Academy of Ancient Music at their normal venue, the Crown and Anchor Tavern. In 1749, 1752, and 1754 MESSIAH was performed at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, then annually from 1756 on. That same year marked the first performance of MESSIAH in a cathedral (Bristol), and next year at Hereford. After that, MESSIAH enjoyed many venues in various locations.

To this day, MESSIAH remains Händel's best-known work, although this was not the status it enjoyed until the last few years of his life, brought about by annual performances for charitable benefit concerts at the Foundling Hospital (an organization for underprivileged children which still exists as the Thomas Coram Foundation). Over time, Händel made various adaptations and revisions to suit the occasion, and the temperament of the singers. When Händel came to revive MESSIAH, it was always as his last performance of the theater season, and usually within two weeks before Easter—a fact worth noting today, when MESSIAH most often is performed at Christmas.

From 1750 on, Händel's health declined, with poor vision and eventually blindness in the left eye. In August 1752 he was seized with a paralytic disorder in his head, which further compromised his sight. Georg Frideric Händel died at his house in Brook Street at 8 am on Saturday morning, April 14, 1759, and was buried four days later in the south transept of Westminster Abbey in the presence of some 3,000 people. A monument by Roubiliac was unveiled on July 10, 1762.

MESSIAH is described as an oratorio—exactly what is an oratorio, and how is it different from an opera? The oratorio originated in the Oratories (or chapels dedicated to prayer and contemplation) of convents of churches of 17th century Italy, as a strategy designed to attract the faithful through music to the service of God, and away from the profane spectacles of theatre and opera. Oratorios were not intended for performance in church, but rather for the intimate privacy of palaces of the nobility. Oratorio applied theatrical musical techniques to a sacred story, similar to opera, which it closely resembled. In Rome, where papal control was strong, operas were forbidden entirely from time to time, and when allowed, various restrictions applied: for example, female singers were excluded. Instead, they seemed to have

no objection to boy sopranos and altos, and incredibly, to the popular castrato singers! Where operas were banned during lent, out-of-work musicians could perform oratorios. Biblical topics were generally acceptable, but no costumes, no stage sets or machinery, no theatrical movement, and no representations of Christ—any of these would be regarded as blasphemous.

In shvort, oratorio was considered an entertainment; in London, such oratorios were almost always dramatic narratives, functioning like English operas composed for concert performances in theatres such as Covent Garden.

MESSIAH was composed within the specific genre of English theatre concert oratorio that Händel himself had developed. There was nothing like it before this time, and nothing like it came after, even from Händel's own pen. It is, in effect, one of its kind. Unlike opera, MESSIAH has no characters, and singers don't have specific roles. MESSIAH is unique among the 20 oratorios composed by Händel in being the only one which has any connection with the Christian religion, and only in a rather oblique way. In constructing his libretto, Jennens paid almost no attention to anything Jesus said or did, because MESSIAH is not about these things. The subject of the drama is God's redemption of mankind through the Messiah.

A full performance of all three parts of MESSIAH is accomplished through a series of alternating musical devices, which include a number of solo arias variously sung by tenor, soprano, alto (boy's voices, or counter-tenor), and bass/baritone; the recitativos, and the choral numbers. The arias, or "airs" as Händel would have called them, are more elaborate, extended vocal sections in which passages are repeated over and over again, giving the singer various opportunities to demonstrate the power, beauty and versatility of the voice—and believe me, some of stars in former times took frequent advantage by melodramatically extending certain lines or phrases beyond the written score! The connecting recitativos—recitations—are straightforward text passages with little or no repetition, designed to move the narrative along. Such recitativos may be "secco," meaning that the voice is accompanied only by a continuo (harpsichord), or "accompagnato," accompanied by the orchestra. And then there are the sections for full chorus.

Part I of MESSIAH is often described as the Christmas section, but it is not an account of the birth in a manger in Bethlehem. We approach the birth of Jesus indirectly through Old Testament prophesy, and the vision of the shepherds. Most of the passages here are taken from the book of Isaiah, with a few from Haggai, Malachi, and Zechariah, along with a few New Testament quotes from the gospels

of Luke and Matthew. It begins with Isaiah's prophecy of salvation and the gospel of "good news"; next, the judgment that will accompany the appearance of the Saviour; third, the specific prophecy of Christ's birth; fourth, the incarnation, announced by the shepherds near Bethlehem (this section from Luke); and finally, the redemption and healing brought by the Saviour.

Part One consists of 21 numbers. After a brief overture, numbers 2 to 4 deal with God's promise and comfort: the introductory tenor recitative "Comfort ye" is an example of the *accompagnato* recitative, that is, with orchestra. Here, we note the pleading tone of "comfort ye," and note also the first examples of Händel's word painting, stressing various words in specific ways, like "CRY unto her," and the tension on "iniquity," and resolution on "pardoned." (2)

In the tenor aria which follows, "every valley shall be exalted," note melisma on "exalted" and "crooked," and "the rough places plain" on a sustained note. (3)

The chorus which completes this set, "And the Glory of the Lord" is a masterpiece of choral writing. (4)

Numbers 5 to 7 announce the coming of the Lord: first, the bass recitative "Thus saith the Lord," in which we have another wonderful example of Händel's word-painting on "shake . . ." (5) followed by the lovely air "But who may abide the day of his coming." Then comes the chorus "and he shall purify," which, incidentally, is based on one of the Italian Duets.

Numbers 8 and 9 bring the message of joy, the prophetic "behold a Virgin shall conceive," and example of recitative *secco* (6) and the remarkable solo and chorus "O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion;" the solo is light and airy, almost operatic, and the chorus enters thrillingly, unexpectedly. Note Handel's emphasis on such words as "Arise," "Glory," and "Lord." (7)

Nos. 10 -12 consist of a recitativo, air and chorus: the movement from darkness to light: the air "The People that walked in darkness have seen a great light," is darkly orchestrated in the deep strings, contrasting with the sprightly chorus, "For unto us a Child is born." This is a marvelous chorus, also derived from one of the Italian Duets: (8); and take note of the brilliant "lift-off" moment: (9)

A brief orchestral passage reminds us of the arrival of the shepherds to view the Christ Child, recalling the Italian type of Christmas Concerto popular at this time. A recitativo recalls the vision of the Shepherds, and the Chorus proclaims the angels' hymn of praise, "Glory to God," the strings imitating the fluttering of wings (10).

Did you note the high, celestial treatment of “Glory to God,” and the lowly “Peace of Earth?”

The last four numbers of Part I represent Christ’s sojourn on the earth: the soprano air “Rejoice Greatly,” the recitativo “Then shall the eyes,” the beautiful alto duet “He shall feed his flock,” ending with the chorus “His yoke is easy.” This chorus is not a very strong or dramatic conclusion to the Christmas section, but this is understandable, since Händel is anticipating the Passion sequence which follows in Part II.

Part II is the Easter sequence, which describes Christ’s passion, scourging and crucifixion; His death and resurrection, the Ascension, Christ’s reception in Heaven; Pentecost and the subsequent preaching of the Gospel; the world’s hostile reception to the Gospel, and God’s ultimate victory. The alto air “He was despised” is profoundly emotional (11), followed by three brooding choral sections in a row, culminating in the bouncy chorus “All we like sheep have gone astray.” Note how certain choral passages like “we have turned” go “astray” in all directions (12), but the peace ends darkly with a brief homophonic choral declamation, “And the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (13)

Part II ends with the glorious “Hallelujah Chorus.” It is without a doubt the most famous choral piece in the literature. When Händel completed writing it on September 6, he remarked that “I think I did see all heaven before me, and the great God himself.” In MESSIAH, the Hallelujah Chorus serves two functions: in the previous section, God has been rejected; but now, the Hallelujah Chorus demonstrates that the conflict has been resolved: “the Kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our God, and of his Christ.”

The famous Chorus begins with the Hallelujah motive repeated, repeated thereafter more than 30 times, followed by the dramatic statement “For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth!” (14) In hushed tones the Chorus proclaims “The Kingdom of this world” crescendo “is become the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ.” (15) Here too, we find a typical Händelian “lift-off” moment. (16)

By the way, it is a common practice anywhere in the world to stand during the performance of the Hallelujah Chorus, based on the belief that King George did so upon his first hearing it back in 1749, thus requiring the audience to do so as well. This is a common myth concerning MESSIAH must be clarified at this point. According to the memory of one writer at the time, “When Händel’s MESSIAH was first performed, the audience was exceedingly struck and affected by the music in

general; but when the chorus struck up ‘For the Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth’ they were so transported that they all, together with the king . . . started up, and remained standing till the chorus ended, and hence it became the fashion in England for the audience to stand while that part of the music was performing.” This was according to a recollection long after the fact, but the evidence is quite clear that the King was not present on this occasion. A performance of music taking place on May 27, 1749—not MESSIAH—including as one of the numbers the Hallelujah Chorus was attended by the Prince and Princess of Wales, and perhaps on this occasion the royalty first stood for the performance. Still, for me it has always been a profoundly emotional thrill to stand up with the entire audience when the first notes of that beloved Chorus are sounded.

Part III is a short, culminating section which describes the promise of eternal life and the triumph over original sin, through Christ’s victory; the general resurrection that will accompany the day of judgment; the final conquest over sin; and finally, acclamation of the Messiah. The text of this portion is largely derived from the Church of England’s Service for the burial of the dead, except the final chorus.

Three numbers stand out in Part III that deserve our attention, the first the heart-rending soprano air “I know that my redeemer liveth,” a deeply moving affirmation of faith. (17) Trumpets declare the resurrection of the dead in the bass air “The Trumpet shall sound,” and we will hear a bit of this section later in a different context.

There follows the highly charged final Chorus which tests the vocal ensemble to their very limits: “Worthy is the lamb of God that was slain.” The interplay of voices in this chorus is, even more so than the Hallelujah Chorus, I think, a gigantic masterpiece of choral writing (18); the fugal “Amen” which follows concludes MESSIAH on a huge forte passage, which should leave any audience breathless. (19)

Less than half a century after Händel wrote MESSIAH, and 30 years after his death, Mozart made an arrangement of this work wishing to brighten it with more instrumental color and richness. The first performance of Mozart’s version—sung in German—was on March 6, 1789 in the palatial home of Count Johann Esterhazy. Mozart made various changes and cuts, redistributing some of the vocal pieces, adding flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, trombones, trumpets and timpani. “The trumpet shall sound” posed technical problems, because in German scripture,

“Posaune” or the trombone is used. Here is Händel’s original version with trumpet: (20), followed by Mozart’s augmented trombone version. (21)

The popularity of MESSIAH grew—as did the size of the chorus and orchestra—through events such as the Händel Centenary Commemoration in 1784 at Westminster Abbey, where the collective ensemble totaled approx. 500 bodies. In 1859 at the Crystal Palace exhibition hall, MESSIAH was performed with a chorus of 2,765 voices and an orchestra of 460 members. Of course, the instrumentation was enlarged in proportion, often with “new” parts created for extra effect. All such events progressively strayed further and further from Händel’s musical world, causing Berlioz—the master of orchestral exaggeration—to describe a version he had heard of MESSIAH as “a barrel of roast pork and beer.”

The 20th century brought about two performance extremes: Several ensembles endeavored to reproduce “authentic” performances with Baroque orchestras and modest choral forces, and these include the superior version by Apollo’s Fire. On the other hand, there have been other tamperings by a number of highly respected composers and conductors who really should have known better. In the 1960s, sing-in performances were popular—remember them here in Canton?—and these made use of really big, really inexperienced amateur choral forces. MESSIAH never sounded bigger, and we all did our best to sound as good as possible. In the late 1950s, Sir Eugene Goossens prepared his “up-dated” version of MESSIAH, complete with huge orchestral forces including tinkling triangle and crashing cymbals, and Sir Thomas Beecham had the audacity to record it with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (23). But at least he was comprehensive, by including eight items generally excluded from full performances of MESSIAH. Somewhat more respectful versions—still with a large modern orchestra and full chorus—include Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir (300 voices?), and Leonard Bernstein conducting the New York Philharmonic with the Westminster Choir. But lets bring Händel even closer to our own time, here’s a performance of the Hallelujah Chorus arranged for brass ensemble, but *without* the chorus! (24)

So what would Händel think of such modern performances? According to Sir Thomas Beecham, the old halls of Händel’s time held no more than about 700 people . . . today’s concert halls range in size from 1,000 to 3,500 or more . . . a small orchestra and chorus would be lost in such a vast auditorium. Händel himself “reveled in great demonstrations of sound,” proven by such compositions as the

“Water Music” and the “Royal Fireworks Musick.” I hate to say this, but I don’t think he would be offended at all!