

Handel's Messiah

SCHERMERHORN SYMPHONY CENTER  
LAURA TURNER HALL

December 18, 2008 at 7 p.m.

December 19 & 20, 2008 at 8 p.m.

Nashville Symphony

Nicholas McGegan, *conductor*

Dominique Labelle, *soprano*

Daniel Taylor, *countertenor*

John McVeigh, *tenor*

Philip Cutlip, *baritone*

Nashville Symphony Chorus

George Mabry, *chorus director*

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL                      *Messiah*

Symphony

PART I

Accompagnato: Comfort ye, comfort ye my people

Air: Ev'ry valley shall be exalted

Chorus: And the glory, the glory of the Lord

Accompagnato: Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of Hosts

Air: But who may abide the day of His coming

Chorus: And He shall purify

Recitative: Behold, a virgin shall conceive

Air and Chorus: O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion

Accompagnato: For behold, darkness shall cover the earth

Air: The people that walked in darkness

Chorus: For unto us a Child is born

Pifa (Pastoral Symphony)

Recitative: There were shepherds abiding in the field

Accompagnato: And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them

Recitative: And the angel said unto them

Accompagnato: And suddenly, there was with the angel

Chorus: Glory to God in the Highest

Air: Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion

Recitative: Then shall the eyes of the blind be open'd

Duet: He shall feed His flock like a shepherd

Chorus: His yoke is easy, His burthen is light

## PART II

Chorus: Behold the Lamb of God

Air: He was despised

Chorus: Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows

Chorus: And with His stripes we are healed

Chorus: All we like sheep have gone astray

Accompagnato: All they that see Him, laugh Him to scorn

Chorus: He trusted in God

Accompagnato: Thy rebuke hath broken His heart

Arioso: Behold, and see if there be if there be any sorrow

Accompagnato: He was cut off out of the land of the living

Air: But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell

Chorus: Lift up your heads

Air: How beautiful are the feet of them

Air: Why do the nations so furiously rage together

Chorus: Let us break their bonds asunder

Recitative: He that dwelleth in heaven

Air: Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron

Chorus: Hallelujah

## PART III

Air: I know that my Redeemer liveth

Chorus: Since by man came death

Accompagnato: Behold, I tell you a mystery

Air: The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be rais'd

Chorus: Worthy is the Lamb that was slain

## GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

(born in Halle, Germany, 1685; died in London, 1759)

*Messiah*

*Scored for 2 oboes, 1 bassoon, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings, harpsichord, organ and strings*

estimated length: 2 hours, 20 minutes

No one could have predicted that *Messiah* would become the most widely performed oratorio of all time, with performances occurring every Christmas season across the world. Yet circumstances converged that in hindsight offer some explanation of the phenomenon. At their center was a consummate composer who in 1741 had come to a financial dead end, but who had creativity to spare. Italian opera, which Handel had produced for over 30 years in London, could no longer draw the aristocratic crowds necessary to sustain the enterprise. In February Handel gave his last Italian opera performance in London, and proposed to do “nothing” the following season. That spring he received a masterful unsolicited libretto by wealthy, cultured country squire Charles Jennens, who had written the librettos for *Saul*, *L'Allegro* and possibly *Israel in Egypt*.

Jennens had based his libretto on passages from the 1611 Authorized King James Version of the Bible, supplemented with texts from the Book of Common Prayer. The librettist wrote to a friend on July 10, 1741:

“Handel says he will do nothing next Winter, but I hope I shall persuade him to set another Scripture Collection I have made for him, & perform it for his own benefit in Passion Week. I hope he will lay out his whole Genius & Skill upon it, that the Composition may excell all his former Compositions, as the Subject excells every other Subject. The Subject is Messiah.”

Handel, whose usual practice was to compose during the summer months for the following season, began working at breakneck speed, setting the entire three-part oratorio between August 22 and September 14. It is not known whether he intended *Messiah* for a London performance during Lent the following spring, or whether he wrote it with a performance in Dublin in mind. Whatever the case, Handel was invited to spend the 1741-42 season in Ireland. Arriving in mid-November, he gave two series of six subscription concerts each at the new Great Music Hall in Fishamble Street, then announced a charity matinee concert of his “new grand sacred Oratorio” for Monday, April 12, 1742, to benefit “Prisoners in several Gaols,” a hospital and an infirmary. (The actual performance took place a day later.) Ladies were requested to “come without Hoops” and gentlemen to “come without their Swords” in order to squeeze in as many audience members as possible.

For his soloists Handel had to rely on several local singers previously unknown to him. One soloist, however, the London actress Mrs. Susannah Cibber, brought a certain notoriety with her on account of highly publicized divorce proceedings. She seems to have mesmerized the audience with the pathos of her singing, prompting one member of the clergy to stand up and shout, “Woman, for this be all thy sins forgiven.” Dubliners were ecstatic over Handel’s new oratorio. One critic wrote:

“Words are wanting to express the exquisite Delight it afforded to the admiring crouded Audience. The Sublime, the Grand, and the Tender, adapted to the most elevated, majestick and moving Words, conspired to transport and charm the ravished Heart and Ear.”

By contrast, London had mixed feelings about *Messiah* when it was finally produced there in the following Lenten season on March 23, 1743. Objections were raised about the appropriateness of having a theater (Covent Garden) present a religious work and a “Company of Players” serve as “Ministers of God’s Word.” But the music itself was almost universally admired. Jennens, notoriously cantankerous, was one of the few to express reservations when he finally heard the work: “As to the *Messiah*, ’tis still in [Handel’s] power by retouching the weak parts to make it fit for a publick performance; & I have said a great deal to him on the Subject; but he is so lazy & so obstinate, that I much doubt the effect.” Oddly enough, one of Jennens’ greatest objections was not to a texted section, but to Handel’s majestic overture, or Symphony; he may not have liked it simply because he was unaccustomed to the French-overture style, with its dotted rhythms and fast, decisive fugue.

Even for the premiere in Dublin, Handel had to make revisions to his original score to suit the singers at hand. This was to be his practice for many performances to come, notably for the 1750 Covent Garden performance, when he rewrote several bass and soprano arias for the celebrated alto castrato Gaetano Guadagni. Modern performers thus have numerous viable versions from which to choose, including the autograph score of 1741; the Dublin 1742 version; Covent Garden versions in 1743, 1745, 1749 and 1750; the 1759 version from the Foundling Hospital where Handel had given charity benefit performances since 1749; and Handel’s own conducting score with emendations from many different performances.

The outstanding organization of *Messiah* belies the speed with which it was composed. Jennens, following opera tradition, had crafted three “acts,” the first setting out the major prophecies concerning the Messiah; the second dealing with Christ’s suffering, death, resurrection and the spread of the Gospel; and the third reflecting on the promise of eternal life through Christ’s victory over sin. Jennens had also planned where recitatives,

arias and choruses would fall, but it was up to Handel to linger or hurry through sections, fashion a satisfying tonal structure and shape the drama. One of the reasons the work immediately appealed to listeners was its novel, subtle presentation of the story line — obliquely, without character roles and with few direct quotations. Audiences were also attracted by the pleasing balance between arias and choruses (where *Israel in Egypt* was perceived to be chorus-heavy) and the decreased instances of lengthy recitatives accompanied only by continuo. A perfectly legitimate response to time pressure was Handel's recycling of previous materials, mostly Italian duets written in July 1741. One became the basis for the choruses "And He shall purify" and "His yoke is easy," and another for the choruses "For unto us a Child is Born" and "All we like sheep."

Despite his lightning-quick response to the text, Handel's genius shows in countless details, making *Messiah* entirely worthy of its popularity. Aside from making each recitative-aria-chorus grouping cohere harmonically, Handel carefully chose his contrasts of key, texture and character. After the stern tone of the overture, for example, a wonderful contrast occurs with the sublime shift to the major mode for the serene opening accompanato "Comfort ye." It was no accident that Handel brought back the same major key at the opening of Part III for the lovely soprano air "I know that my Redeemer liveth."

A set of startling juxtapositions comes with the blazing outbursts for the "refiner's fire" in the alto air "But who may abide the day of His coming," and a glorious change in texture creates a veritable shimmer for the sudden appearance of the heavenly host before the chorus' jubilant "Glory to God in the Highest." Throughout, Handel is keenly attuned to the ways that music can enhance even single words. All one need do is mention "exalted," "shake," "rejoice," "astray" or "rage," and *Messiah* lovers everywhere can instantly bring to mind the composer's apt musical depictions.

If some of his word treatments require serious breath control, performers agree that Handel wrote both idiomatically and rewardingly for the voice. His seemingly effortless ability to make climaxes occur comfortably as well as resonantly applies not only to solos but to choruses, which are universally acknowledged as some of the most skillful and beloved examples of the art. Their variety is remarkable, not only in shifting between imitative interplay and large blocks of sound, but in incorporating myriad gradations between. He also uses a seemingly spare number of orchestral parts in endlessly different combinations. With his supreme dramatic sense, he saves the trumpets for the most celebratory choral movements: "Glory to God"; the Hallelujah chorus; the concluding "Worthy is the Lamb" — and naturally, he also features a solo trumpet in the air "The trumpet shall sound." Further, he invokes the timpani, traditionally paired with trumpets in ceremonial music, only to conclude Part II and Part III.

Finally, we might address the question, "To stand or not to stand?" Tradition has it that King George II rose to his feet during the "Hallelujah" chorus at an early London performance, and since no one could remain seated while he stood, the audience also rose. It cannot be proven, however, that the king even attended one of these performances. Then again, if he *was* in attendance, did he rise in awe or because of some physical discomfort? Whatever actually happened, audiences have risen at this point in the performance for centuries.

Should the tradition continue? The choice is up to each listener, but one would hope that any thrill the experience might provide comes not out of duty but out of respect for Handel's art.

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## **text for 'MESSIAH'**

### **Symphony**

#### **Part One**

**ACCOMPAGNATO:** *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people (Tenore)*

Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God; speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem; and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplish'd, that her iniquity is pardon'd. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord: make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

**AIR:** *Ev'ry valley shall be exalted (Tenore)*

Every valley shall be exalted, and ev'ry mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain.

**CHORUS:** *And the glory, the glory of the Lord*

And the glory, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

**ACCOMPAGNATO:** *Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of Hosts (Basso)*

Thus saith the Lord of Hosts; Yet once, a little while, and I will shake the heav'ns and the earth, the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all nations; and the desire of all nations shall come. The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, ev'n the messenger of the Covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of Hosts.

**AIR:** *But who may abide the day of His coming (Alto)*

But who may abide the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner's fire.

**CHORUS:** *And He shall purify*

And He shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.

**RECITATIVE:** *Behold, a virgin shall conceive (Alto)*

Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, "God with us."

**AIR AND CHORUS:** *O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion (Alto)*

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain; O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.

**ACCOMPAGNATO:** *For behold, darkness shall cover the earth (Basso)*

For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people; but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.

**AIR:** *The people that walked in darkness (Basso)*

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. And they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

**CHORUS:** *For unto us a Child is born*

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His Name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace!

**PIFA**

**RECITATIVE:** *There were shepherds abiding in the field (Soprano)*

There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

**ACCOMPAGNATO:** *And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them (Soprano)*

And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid.

**RECITATIVE:** *And the angel said unto them (Soprano)*

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

**ACCOMPAGNATO:** *And suddenly there was with the angel (Soprano)*

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heav'nly host, praising God, and saying,

**CHORUS:** *Glory to God in the highest*

Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, goodwill towards men.

**AIR:** *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion (Soprano)*

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: He is the righteous Saviour, and He shall speak peace unto the heathen.

**RECITATIVE:** *Then shall the eyes of the blind be open'd (Alto)*

Then shall the eyes of the blind be open'd, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.

**DUET:** *He shall feed His flock like a shepherd (Alto, Soprano)*

He shall feed His flock like a shepherd, and He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. Come unto Him, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and He will give you rest. Take His yoke upon you, and learn of Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

**CHORUS:** *His yoke is easy, His burthen is light*

His yoke is easy, His burthen is light.

## **Part Two**

**CHORUS:** *Behold the Lamb of God*

Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world.

**AIR:** *He was despised (Alto)*

He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.

**CHORUS:** *Surely, He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows*

Surely, He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him.

**CHORUS:** *And with His stripes we are healed*

And with His stripes we are healed.

**CHORUS:** *All we like sheep have gone astray*

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned ev'ry one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

**ACCOMPAGNATO:** *All they that see Him, laugh Him to scorn (Tenore)*

All they that see Him, laugh Him to scorn; they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying:

**CHORUS:** *He trusted in God*

He trusted in God that He would deliver Him, let Him deliver Him, if He delight in Him.

**ACCOMPAGNATO:** *Thy rebuke hath broken His heart (Tenore)*

Thy rebuke hath broken His heart; He is full of heaviness: He looked for some to have pity on Him, but there was no man, neither found He any to comfort Him.

**ARIOSO:** *Behold, and see if there be any sorrow (Tenore)*

Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto His sorrow!

**ACCOMPAGNATO:** *He was cut off out of the land of the living (Tenore)*

He was cut off out of the land of the living; for the transgression of Thy people was He stricken.

**AIR:** *But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell (Tenore)*

But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell; nor didst Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption.

**CHORUS:** *Lift up your heads*

Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in! Who is the King of Glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in! Who is the King of Glory? The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of Glory.

**AIR:** *How beautiful are the feet of them (Soprano)*

How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.

**AIR:** *Why do the nations so furiously rage together (Basso)*

Why do the nations so furiously rage together: why do the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord, and against His anointed.

**CHORUS:** *Let us break their bonds asunder*

Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their yokes from us.

**RECITATIVE:** *He that dwelleth in heaven (Tenore)*

He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh them to scorn; the Lord shall have them in derision.

**AIR:** *Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron (Tenore)*

Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

**CHORUS:** *Hallelujah*

Hallelujah! for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever. King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. Hallelujah!

### **Part Three**

**AIR:** *I know that my Redeemer liveth (Soprano)*

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And tho' worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God. For now is Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep.

**CHORUS:** *Since by man came death*

Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

**ACCOMPAGNATO:** *Behold, I tell you a mystery (Basso)*

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be chang'd in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

**AIR:** *The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be rais'd (Basso)*

The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be chang'd.

**CHORUS:** *Worthy is the Lamb that was slain*

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His blood, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. Blessing and honour, glory and pow'r, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen.