

“Messiah” - George Frederic Handel (1685-1759)

Handel’s sacred oratorio Messiah is without question one of the most popular works in the choral/orchestral repertoire today. In what has become an established Christmas tradition, musicians throughout the country perform this work as a seasonal entertainment, and are rewarded with the satisfaction of taking part in one of the great communal musical events.

Tonight’s performance omits certain numbers from the original oratorio to help fit in the work to an acceptable time for modern audiences. In Handel’s day, the audience would have listened to the entire work without break, with extra organ works added by Handel.

We are very pleased to welcome tonight our soloists from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Stuart Laing, Krystal MacMillan and Jamie Rock and the wonderful Taunton Sinfonietta led by Mary Eade.

The text for Messiah was selected and compiled from the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible by Charles Jennens, an aristocrat and musician/poet of modest talent and exceptional ego. With Messiah, Jennens seems to have outdone himself in compiling a libretto with profound thematic coherence and an acute sensitivity to the inherent musical structure. With the finished libretto in his possession, Handel began setting it to music on August 22, 1741, and completed it 24 days later. He was certainly working at white-hot speed, but this didn’t necessarily indicate he was in the throes of devotional fervor, as legend has often stated. Handel composed many of his works in haste, and immediately after completing Messiah he wrote his next oratorio, Samson, in a similarly brief time-span.

The tradition of performing Messiah at Christmas began later in the 18th century. Although the work was occasionally performed during Advent in Dublin, the oratorio was usually regarded in England as an entertainment for the penitential season of Lent, when performances of opera were banned. Messiah’s extended musical focus on Christ’s redeeming sacrifice also makes it particularly suitable for Passion Week and Holy Week, the periods when it was usually performed during Handel’s lifetime. But in 1791, the Cæcilian Society of London began its annual Christmas performances- establishing a tradition that continues to this day.

Following the pattern of Italian baroque opera, Messiah is divided into three parts. In the first, the way is paved for the Redeemer’s coming, drawing heavily from messianic texts in the Book of Isaiah. After His Advent is announced, there follow descriptions of the events of the nativity. Part One ends with the chorus singing “His yoke is easy, His burden is light.”

Part Two describes the Passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It concludes with the familiar *Hallelujah Chorus*. It was at this point in the oratorio, during one of the early London performances, that King George II spontaneously rose to his feet in a spirit of exaltation. Audiences have traditionally repeated this practice ever since.

In Part Three, the spiritual messages represented by Christ’s teachings are set forth for the instruction and benefit of all. It opens with the moving soprano aria *I Know That My Redeemer Liveth*, and concludes with a final chorus of Amen.

Part One

1. *Sinfonia (Overture)*

2. *Tenor recitative*

Comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfort ably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. 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.

3. *Tenor Air*

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

4. *Chorus*

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. (*Isaiah 40:1-5*)

5. *Bass recitative*

Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of Hosts: Yet once a little while, and I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, and I will shake all nations; and the desire of all nations shall come. (*Haggai 2:6-7*)

The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple; even the messenger of the Covenant, whom ye delight in, behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of Hosts.

6. *Alto Air*

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

7. *Chorus*

And He shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness. (*Malachi 3:1-3*)

8. *Alto recitative*

Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel – “God with us”. (*Isaiah 7:14*)

9. *Alto Air & Chorus*

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! (*Isaiah 40:9*) Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.

10. *Bass recitative*

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.

(*Isaiah 60:1-3*)

11. *Bass Air*

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. (*Isaiah 9:1*).

12. *Chorus*

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! (*Isaiah 9:6*).

13. *Pifa - ‘Pastoral Symphony’*

14. *Soprano recitative*

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

15. *Soprano recitative*

And the angel said to 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.

16. *Soprano recitative*

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying:

17. *Chorus*

Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will towards men! (*Luke 2:8-14*)

18. *Soprano Air*

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. (*Zechariah 9:9-10*)

19. *Alto recitative*

Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.

20. *Alto & Soprano Air*

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. (*Isaiah 40:2*)

Come unto Him all ye that labour, come unto Him that 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.

21. Chorus

His yoke is easy, His burthen is light. (*Matthew 11:28-30*)

INTERVAL

Part Two

22. Chorus

Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. (*John 1:29*)

23. Alto Air

He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. (*Isaiah 53:3*)

24. Chorus

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.

25. Chorus

And with His stripes we are healed.

26. Chorus

All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way. (*Isaiah 53:4-6*)

27. Tenor recitative

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

28. Chorus

He trusted in God that He would deliver Him: let Him deliver Him, if He delight in Him! (*Psalms 22:8-9*)

42. Tenor recitative

He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh them to scorn, the Lord shall have them in derision. (*Psalms 2:1-4*)

43. Tenor Air

Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron. Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. (*Psalms 2:9*)

44. Chorus

Hallelujah! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth! (*Revelation 19:6*) The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of

our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever. (*Revelation 11:15*) King of kings and Lord of lords.

(*Revelation 19:16*)

Part Three

45. Soprano Air

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God. (*Job 19:25-26*) For now is Christ risen from the dead: the first fruits of them that sleep.

46. Chorus

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. (*1 Corinthians 15:20-22*)

47. Bass recitative

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, and we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,

at the last trumpet.

48. Bass Air

The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised, incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

53. Chorus

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 an honour, glory and power be unto Him

that sitteth upon the throne and unto Lamb for ever and ever. Amen. (*Revelation 5:12-13*)