



**A WORSHIPPER'S  
GUIDE TO HANDEL'S**

**MESSIAH**



## A WORSHIPPER'S GUIDE TO HANDEL'S *MESSIAH*

When I was a sophomore in high school, we were invited to bring our favorite piece of music to English class. There wasn't a lot of heavy reading in that class, so I suppose the teacher thought we'd just as soon listen to music.

My classmates brought *Nirvana*, *Pearl Jam*, *Alabama*, *Garth Brooks*...and I brought Handel's *Messiah*.

*For unto us a child is born...unto us...a Son is given* played out on the teacher's stereo as the class sat in stunned and polite silence. I found the music soul stirring and about as high culture as anything I'd ever heard. My classmates thought it was just, well, nerdy.

As I listened to *Messiah* over the years, the richness of the piece continues to grow and become more complex. Is it possible for most of us to even hear the words from Isaiah—*for unto us a child is born*— and not hear the heavenly chorus or the orchestral accompaniment?

*Messiah* is divine music which proclaims the arrival of a divine gift: the gift of Jesus Christ, Messiah to the whole world. As such, Handel's music is perfectly "Advent-Ful."

Advent is about the coming of God in past, present, and future tense. God has come; God is coming; God will come again in glory.

From Haggai to Luke, the sweep of messianic expectation is on full and glorious display in *Messiah*. We hope these brief essays written by NDBC "insiders" will elevate and deepen your appreciation of *Messiah*. But more than that, may God come into your hearts even now.

Rev. Daniel Headrick



Associate Pastor

***Do You Hear What I Hear?***  
**Dr. W. Irwin Ray**

*It is not enough that the artist should be well prepared for the public.  
The public must be well prepared for what it is going to hear.*  
Author Melvin Berger quoting Hector Berlioz in *Guide to Choral  
Masterpieces*

Music so thoroughly surrounds us each day that we have learned to ignore and filter anything we don't choose to hear. The ubiquity of sounds, especially music, often becomes a matter of unconscious choice that allows our ears to hear what we want to hear. That creates a dichotomy between hearing and listening. Unless we are impaired, we "hear" every audible sound in our environment, but we only "listen" to that which we choose. Consequently "listening" requires concentration and thought, not just emotions. To fully incorporate music into our offerings of worship, we must truly listen as we do to the spoken word – with an open mind and heart.

The ability to listen to a story was the genesis of two musical forms: oratorio and opera. They both set their stories in three acts using solos, ensembles, choruses and an orchestra. Using a broad historic brush, opera usually tells a non-biblical story with acting, costumes, lighting and singing with emphasis on specific singers.

Oratorio usually tells a biblical story without acting, costumes, and lighting and with emphasis on singing, but not specific singers. There is continuing debate as to which came first, opera or oratorio, but early on, they were always closely related as musical forms that had their roots in the middle ages. For opera, it was entertainment; for oratorio, it was the liturgical drama (*ora* = place of prayer). Oratorio, however, has never been part of a religious service like the cantata, but rather a free-standing musical event separate from the church.

In the case of Handel, each selection comprising an oratorio (and most operas) represents roles of the story. A solo can be a *recitative* which is like a narrator (*testo*) who carries the plot of the story forward; as such it emphasizes clarity of textual declamation. A solo or small ensemble can also be an *aria* which in its lyricism reflects on parts of the story; it is more florid, allowing the music to be more expressive of the text. The chorus usually represents a crowd, or group which comments upon or emphasizes certain parts of the story, though the chorus can function like an *aria* as well.

Finally, the orchestra provides the continuing musical surround for the story. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the keyboard and a bass instrument form the *basso continuo* (most easily heard in *recitatives*, but playing throughout) with the other instruments (strings, oboe, bassoon with occasional trumpet and timpani) performing the orchestra's role for accompanying. Only occasionally does the orchestra play without singers – usually in an overture and/or a short sinfonia such as *Messiah's* “Pastoral Symphony” (or Pifa – a shepherd's bagpipe tune). Handel uses the orchestra more prominently to “enhance the mood and stir the imagination”.

Handel often made both small and large changes in his works between performances, rewriting portions if he could improve it or changing it if too difficult. Like the orchestra, he gave the chorus a more expanded and important role. As in his operas, his soloists were the personification of the characters. Dr. Homer Ulrich in *A Survey of Choral Music* has called *Messiah*, “a series of meditations on the significance of Christ's redemption for the world”.

Another element of the era for which one can listen with profit is the use of “word painting.” A renaissance concept that continued into the baroque period, word painting uses musical ideas to support the meaning of the text. For instance, in the first tenor aria (“Every Valley”) the text says, “Every valley shall be exalted”. After the first statement of the word “exalted” the music becomes more and more jubilant and excited, symbolizing that the joy of the word can hardly be contained, and so finally bursts forth from the singer.

Later the words, “the crooked straight and the rough places plain” occur. When “crooked” is sung, the music sounds rough and jagged, but when the word “plain” is sung, the music sounds even and gently floating. Similarly, in the chorus “Glory to God”, the opening text is set in descending pitches as though the angels were coming down from heaven as they sing; you also hear an increase in volume as they get nearer the shepherds. *Messiah* is wall-to-wall with such musical enlightenment and playfulness. Indeed, all of the oratorio awakens visual imagery through Handel's vivid aural effects.

As you might guess, *Messiah* is the single most frequently performed of all the choral masterpieces in music. Many would be surprised to learn that, at least during Handel's lifetime, it was always performed during Lent, never Advent or Christmastide. Originally operas could not be

performed during the season of Lent, since it was unseemly to enjoy entertainment during the time of penitence. But most civic and church officials found it acceptable to perform oratorios during that time due to the biblical nature of the stories. Also during Handel's lifetime, all singing parts were performed by adult men along with boys and girls. Finally, much of *Messiah* is based upon folk dances, dance rhythms of the era, all of which combine to make Handel's *Messiah* among the best known of all large choral works.

By investing your thoughts with these facts, then concentrating as you truly listen to the work, I pray you will be able to bring a "more perfect gift" to our worship through Handel's *Messiah*.

***A Conductor's Perspective on 'Messiah'***  
**Dr. Keith Walker**  
**Director of Music Ministries**

One of the many myths surrounding *Messiah* by George Frideric Handel is that it was a Christmas piece intended for church use. *Messiah* was commissioned for Dublin, Ireland, and was first performed in a secular hall on April 13, 1742. The entire work was intended as a piece for Lent/Easter. Handel conducted or oversaw thirty-six performances during his lifetime, always in March, April, or May, and never in a church. The annual Christmas performance tradition was introduced in Great Britain in 1791 by the Caecilian Society of London and in America in 1818 by The Boston Handel and Haydn Society.

The performing forces for the 1742 premier consisted of about two dozen singers and approximately the same number of instrumentalists, though Baroque orchestras for oratorio tended to be slightly larger than the chorus. Handel used a variety of soloists, numbering five or more. The scores for the Dublin performance indicate that the soloists also sang the choruses, unlike the modern practice of using professional soloists who only sing the recitatives and arias. The presentation on December 15 will follow Handel's model.

*Messiah* is classified as an oratorio, a musical form that developed alongside opera, and with which it shares many characteristics. The distinguishing difference between the two forms is that oratorio is not staged or costumed. Oratorio was originally performed during Lent when

theatres, by law, were closed. The oratorio form is similar in structure to Italian opera, but Handel increased the importance of the chorus in his works.

There are differing schools of thought on the use of ornamentation in the recitatives and arias. The practice of ornamentation was common in opera performances of Handel's day, and was used by opera singers in the Baroque Period to display their vocal skill. This practice eventually found a place in oratorio. Because Handel drew his soloists from the ranks of the English choir singers who presented these works, and not trained opera singers in the Italian tradition, the practice of ornamentation was abandoned.

The tempi for the 2019 presentation may be more spritely than the listener is accustomed to hearing. Music of the Baroque Period (1600-1725) was based on popular dance forms. Scholars have discovered that Handel performed his music faster than many conductors do today. This conductor is approaching the tempi from the idea of *tempo giusto* or a "just tempo." The majesty of the music is still preserved without feeling like the singers are "trudging through mud."

*Messiah* is unique and remarkable in many respects. The libretto or text is taken exclusively from scripture. The work is divided into scenes as an opera would be. Part 1, the Christmas portion, begins with "God's Comforting Promise" and takes us through "Christ, the Shepherd-King's Ministry on Earth."

"Hallelujah" that ends Part II is often tacked on to presentations of Part I, but will not take place in this performance. Because the function of this beloved chorus is to dissolve the antagonism between God and man, the listener will have to return on Easter Sunday to hear it.

***Handel's Messiah...a Love Affair from Afar***  
**Dr. James Lamkin, Pastor**

Before the first note of *Handel's Messiah*, I sit listening for something other than music.

I listen for the sound of orchestral rustling. Violins and violas fidget. Cellos tweak and tune. Their strings twitch with kinetic energy, like racehorses at the starting gate. Like a flock of birds, restless and ready for flight.

And then, out of the nervous silence, comes the orchestra's first notes. "Dahhhh, dah-dum..." and I am moved to tears. Moved, not because of what I've heard, but because of what I'm about to hear...a yearning, an aching, a kind of longing that wallows in fitful, faith-fatiguing nights.

The first chords carry the weight of that kind of waiting.

Yet, the strings are not timid. They are confident, convinced of their invitation's power. "Come along," they say. "Come along and join us on a journey of joy. Trust us. We know the way." They create hope *ex nihilo*.

I want to follow their lead; but, I am skeptical and untrusting. Then, the tenor soloist, *aria* in hand, holds my hand. "Comfort ye," he sings. "Comfort ye, my people."

That's when the real miracle happens—when comfort comes. Why then? Because of the tenor's perfect pitch? No. I am comforted by the song's source: "Saith your God. "Saith your GOD!" And against all odds, the comfort of God washes over me.

And at that point, I lean back and take a deep, calming breath.

I was in college when I first heard *Handel's Messiah* in its entirety. I remember asking my father-in-law, "Why do people stand-up for *The Hallelujah Chorus*?" He replied, "If you've been sitting on the bleachers of H.O. West Field House for two hours...you'd stand too!" Eventually, Louisiana College, my *alma mater*, added a more suitable auditorium. (What one sits on, changes how one hears.)

Years later, in seminary, I sang it. Sang among the basses as we purified...make that *puri-fi-i-i-i-i-i-y*...the sons of Levi.

It was at that singing that my love affair began.

Every year since, I've tried to get in on "a singing" of *The Messiah*. I confess that every *Messiah* is a sing-along for me. I try not to be loud. I try not to be off pitch. It is more like humming. And when we sing the *Hallelujah Chorus* at Easter, I try shut up just in time before the whole thing slams on the brakes right before the end: *Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah*. STOP. Breathe. *Hal-le-lu-jah!*

*Gaudete* (rejoice) Sunday is the third Sunday of Advent when we light the candle of joy. On that day, at 10:30 a.m., our Sanctuary Choir, accompanied by harpsichord and chamber ensemble, will give the gift of *Handel's Messiah, Part I* (the Christmas portion).

I will be on the front pew. I will anticipate the ensemble's rustling, ready for the first notes. And then: "*Dahhhh, dah-dum....*" Ah, yes. Amen.

### ***Music and Words*** **Dr. Steven Sheeley**

The music from Handel's *Messiah* is often transcendent. But so are its words. And their communion makes a deep connection with and within me.

Charles Jennens had compiled the texts (called a "libretto") for one of Handel's earlier works, and he was often a financial supporter of Handel's productions. Jennens took his excerpts of Scripture primarily from the Authorized (King James) Version; his Psalm texts came from Myles Coverdale's translation, then included with the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer.

*Messiah* provides us with some of the most familiar combinations of music and words. Handel's Sacred Oratorio, however, does not re-narrate or dramatize Jesus's story. We will hear many of Advent's prophetic words in Part I of *Messiah*, and we will experience the angelic chorus in all its glory. But Charles Jennens' libretto did not lead Handel through the Archangel's Annunciation or Mary's Magnificat. There is no trio of Magi or chorus of shepherds at Jesus' manger.

Rather, the words and music of *Messiah* enhance and embellish the familiar story; they interpret it. After centuries of Jewish messianic hope and Christian messianic faith, the linkage between certain prophetic texts from the Hebrew Bible and the story of Jesus the Christ/Messiah was well established. The original context for the words of Isaiah, Haggai, and Malachi was no longer as important as the way in which they guided believers to God's gift in Jesus.

Long ago, the prophet Isaiah had exhorted God's people to "prepare" YHWH's way in the desert. That announcement of a voice crying in the wilderness had easily been applied to John the Baptizer, as he announced



the imminent appearance of God's chosen, God's Messiah. The words of other prophets remind us that the Messiah enters our world with a dual purpose of salvation and purification. He brings light in the midst of darkness and righteousness in the midst of sin. They proclaim the eternal truth that the Heavenly Ruler brings both grace and judgment, peace and justice.

There are famous and familiar choruses in this part of Handel's work. They echo the words of Isaiah in the ancient court of Judah and announce the birth of a child who is wonderful, mighty, and everlasting...who rules in peace. They thunder with the angelic cry of "Glory" at the news of Jesus's birth in David's tiny town of Bethlehem. And – as the first section of *Messiah* closes – they proclaim the strong gentleness of God's grace in Jesus. We need not fear the burden of God's call or the "yoke" of serving Jesus. Our Savior sent from God on high will care for us like a shepherd for sheep; in serving Jesus, we find "rest" for our souls.

These words of Scripture and Handel's music share an almost mystical union. When they soar, they do so together. When they walk through the valley of the shadow of death, they are dark and ponderous. And when they dance, they move our body and soul.

The words and music of Part I of Handel's *Messiah* are, by now, skillfully woven into the fabric of our Advent and Christmas tapestry. They are familiar, yet still fresh. May they "speak" peace to us once again.