

Messiah

George Frideric Handel (1685 – 1759)

Written: 1741

It was that satirical romp of 1729, *The Beggar's Opera* by Gay and Pepusch, that first soured the fashionable London taste for what Samuel Johnson described in his 1755 *A Dictionary of the English Language* as “an exotic and irrational entertainment” — Italian opera. As both composer and impresario, Handel was London's most important producer of opera, and he toiled doggedly for the entire decade of the 1730s to keep his theatrical ventures solvent, but the tide of fashion (and the virulent cabals of his competitors) brought him to the edge of bankruptcy by 1739. As early as 1732, with the oratorio *Esther*, he had begun to cast about for a musical genre that would appeal to the changing fancy of the English public. Neither this work nor the oratorio *Alexander's Feast* of 1736 had the success that he had hoped, however, and the strain of his situation resulted in the collapse of his health in 1737, reported variously as a stroke or as acute rheumatism and depression. Much to the surprise and chagrin of his enemies, he recovered and resumed work. The oratorios *Israel in Egypt* and *Saul* appeared in 1739, but created little public stir.

Determined to have one last try at saving Italian opera in London, Handel spent the summer of 1740 arranging production details and searching for singers on the Continent for his upcoming winter season. After returning to England in early autumn, he completed what proved to be his last two operas, both of which failed ignominiously on the stage: *Imeneo*, premiered on November 22, closed after only two performances; and *Deidamia* (January 10, 1741), after three. Handel's publisher, Walsh, despite having good success selling the recent *Opus 6 Concerti Grossi*, could not find enough subscribers to warrant printing the score of *Deidamia*. In February, Handel largely withdrew from public life and seldom left his house in Brook Street, near Grosvenor Square. His competitors rejoiced.

Rumors began to circulate that Handel was finished in London. Some held that his health had given way for good; others, that he had died. The story given greatest credence, one fueled by Handel's composition of some Italian duets— pieces useless in London—was that he planned to return to the Continent. However, in the summer he suddenly sprang back to creative life, inspired by a small book of Biblical texts that had been compiled by Charles Jennens, a moneyed fop of artistic pretensions but a sincere admirer of the composer who had earlier supplied the words for the oratorio *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, based on Milton's poem. Handel's imagination was fired, and he began composing on August 22. The stories have it that he shut himself in his room, eschewing sleep and leaving food untouched, while he frantically penned his new work. Twenty-four days later, on September 14, he emerged with the completed score of *Messiah*. “I did think I did see Heaven before me and the great God Himself!” he muttered to a servant.

It was long thought that Handel, a devout Christian and Bible scholar, composed *Messiah* out of sheer religious fervor, with no thought of an immediate performance. In his book on the composer, the distinguished scholar of 18th-century music H.C. Robbins Landon contends that the work was written at the request of William, Duke of Devonshire, Lord Lieutenant of Dublin, who visited London early in 1741. William, who knew Handel largely through his sacred vocal music, apparently asked him to provide a new work for performance at a series of concerts in Dublin which would aid various local charities. Handel's newly regained creative enthusiasm stirred by William's request continued to percolate, and he began *Samson* immediately upon finishing *Messiah*, completing that score, except for two numbers, within six weeks.

Handel was undoubtedly glad to leave London and its bitter disappointments in November 1741 for the journey to Dublin to produce his new oratorio. He arrived in Dublin on November 18, being “universally known by his excellent Compositions in all Kinds of Musick,” as the city’s press trumpeted. It was the beginning of one of the happiest periods of the composer’s life, when, as he wrote to Jennens, he passed his time during the ensuing nine months “with Honour, profit and pleasure.”

Preparations for the presentation of Handel’s grand new oratorio went on throughout the winter of 1742. Choristers were assembled from Dublin’s cathedrals, the best available soloists and instrumentalists were enlisted, and the date of the premiere was set for April 13. The public rehearsal on April 9 roused excitement to such a pitch that the following announcement had to be placed in Faulkner’s Dublin Journal concerning the official first performance: “The Stewards of the Charitable Musical Society request the Favour of the Ladies not to come with Hoops [i.e., hoop skirts] this Day to the Musick-Hall. The Gentlemen are desired to come without their Swords, as it will greatly encrease the Charity, by making Room for more company.” Through these sacrifices, the capacity of the hall was raised from 600 to 700 on April 13. An almost equal number, hoping for a ticket, are said to have milled about outside.

Messiah was a triumph. “It gave universal Satisfaction to all present; and was allowed by the greatest Judges to be the finest Composition of Musick that ever was heard,” announced Faulkner’s Journal. Handel repeated Messiah on June 3, and lingered a while longer before leaving Dublin on August 13 with sincere but never-fulfilled promises to return.

The Irish triumph of Messiah did not follow Handel back to London, at least not immediately. He wanted to present his new oratorio as soon as he returned, but he knew that there would be, in the words of Robbins Landon, “strong opposition to hearing the words of the New Testament in a theatre peopled by actors and actresses of loose morals and dubious sexual habits.” He chose instead to give the Old Testament-based Samson on February 18, 1743, and it proved to be the first of his oratorios that won unqualified acclaim in the British capital. Messiah was ready for its London premiere on March 23 at Covent Garden, though he chose not to bill the work under its true title but called it, simply, “A New Sacred Oratorio,” hoping to skirt some of the indignation of the more puritanical audience members and of Edmund Gibson, the Bishop of London. Not until the death of Bishop Gibson and his succession by the more liberal Thomas Sherlock in 1748 did Handel again mount Messiah, at last under its original title, for a single performance at Covent Garden on March 3, 1749. It was, finally, the following year that Handel’s surpassing masterpiece began to receive its due. After the April 13, 1750 Covent Garden performance, Handel presented it again, on May 1, for the benefit of the London Foundling Hospital. Messiah, buoyed by a wave of public good will inspired by Handel giving its proceeds to a worthy cause, was a huge success. He presented it for the Hospital annually thereafter. It was the last work he directed, only eight days before he died on April 14, 1759.

For all of its unparalleled popularity, Messiah is an aberration among Handel’s oratorios, the least typical of his two dozen works in the form: it is his only oratorio, except Israel in Egypt, whose entire text is drawn from the Bible; it is his only oratorio without a continuous dramatic plot; it is his only oratorio based on the New Testament; it is his only oratorio presented in a consecrated space during his lifetime, a reflection of the sacred rather than dramatic nature of its content (“I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better,” he told one aristocratic admirer); it has more choruses than any of his oratorios except Israel; the soloists in Messiah are commentators on rather than participants or characters in the oratorio’s story. None of this, of course, detracts a whit from the emotional/ artistic/(perhaps) religious experience of Messiah. (Handel and Jennens never appended the

definite article to the title.) Its three parts — The Advent of the Messiah, The Passion of Christ, and His Resurrection — embody the most sacred events of the Christian calendar, yet its sincerity and loftiness of expression transcend any dogmatic boundaries. In the words of George P. Upton, the American musicologist and turn-of-the-century critic of the Chicago Tribune, “Other oratorios may be compared one with another; Messiah stands alone, a majestic monument to the memory of the composer, an imperishable record of the noblest sentiments of human nature and the highest aspirations of man.”

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