

The History in This Program

'Tis the prelude to Christmas, and all through the Hall, not a musician is stirring ... except to play Handel's *Messiah*, of course.

Handel's oratorio is programmed the world over during the holiday season, including in annual New York Philharmonic performances that are a tradition for many. That's why it might be surprising to learn that *Messiah* was not always the ubiquitous offering it is today. The Philharmonic did not perform the complete oratorio on a subscription concert until the 1956–57 season (possibly because the Oratorio Society of New York had performed the work each year since 1874) — concerts that marked the first and only time that Leonard Bernstein conducted the work with the Orchestra.

As could be expected, Bernstein did not take a standard approach to the work. Instead of presenting the oratorio in its standard three-part form, he regrouped it into two sections corresponding to Christmas and Easter, reflecting the Biblical texts related to the story of Christ. The presentation rankled some purists. Critic Harold Schonberg of *The New York Times* grumbled that Bernstein's "high-handed" rearrangement scrambled the order of the arias, recitatives, and choruses in some places and required "wholesale musical transpositions" and "several major cuts" in order to flow.

However, others noted that Bernstein's version demonstrated an unusual sensitivity to historically informed details. He traded the typical piano continuo for a period-appropriate harpsichord and featured a countertenor in place of the mezzo-soprano soloist — a practice common in Handel's time but almost unheard of in the 20th century. (The concerts helped launch the career of 28-year-old Russell Oberlin, who would later be credited with leading the countertenor renaissance in the United States.)

Bernstein defended his version in liner notes for a studio recording of the work, captured on December 31, 1956 and released as the Philharmonic's first stereo LP in 1958, after he became Music Director. He pointed out that, in one way or another, every performance of *Messiah* is but a version of Handel's work, and added:

I sincerely believe that there is much to be gained by these changes in terms of form, meaning, and dramatic presentation. And if our changes are generally in the direction of a more



dramatic *Messiah*, so much the better. Handel was first and foremost a dramatic composer.

— The Archives

To learn more, visit the **New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives** at archives.nyphil.org.

Countertenor Russell Oberlin and soprano Adele Addison during the 1956 *Messiah* recording session

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Messiah

George Frideric Handel

When George Frideric Handel received an invitation to produce a series of concerts in Dublin in 1741, the idea of a change of scenery from the failing fortunes of his operatic ventures in London appealed to him. He traveled to Ireland in November of that year and remained until August 13, 1742. He took along with him the score to his new oratorio *Messiah*, which would become the highpoint of his Dublin season when it was premiered in April 1742.

Early in the summer of 1741 Charles Jennens had assembled a libretto that drew creatively on Biblical passages from the Books of Isaiah, Haggai, Malachi, Matthew, Luke, Zechariah, John, Psalms, Lamentations, Hebrews, Romans, I Corinthians, and Revelation to create a loose story comprising narrative and reflections about the life of Jesus. This he organized in three discrete sections: the first relating to the prophecy of Christ's coming and the circumstances of his birth; the second to the vicissitudes of his life on earth; and the third to events surrounding the Resurrection and the promise of redemption. Handel leapt into action on August 22. He finished the draft of Part One on August 28, of Part Two on September 6, and of Part Three on September 12 — and then he took another two days to polish details on the whole score.

Messiah was unveiled in an open rehearsal on April 9, 1742, and two official performances, on April 13 and June 3. The premiere was given as a benefit, organized with the assistance of the Charitable Musical Society, "For Relief of the Prisoners in the several Gaols, and for the Support of Mercer's Hospital

in St. Stephen's-street, and of the Charitable Infirmary on the Inns Quay" (as *The Dublin Journal* announced a couple of weeks in advance). After the open rehearsal, *The Dublin News Letter* pronounced that the new oratorio "in the opinion of the best judges, far surpasses anything of that Nature, which has been performed in this or any other Kingdom." The *Journal* concurred that it "was allowed by the greatest Judges to be the finest

IN SHORT

Born: February 23, 1685, in Halle, Prussia (Germany)

Died: April 14, 1759, in London, England

Work composed: August 22–September 14, 1741, in London

World premiere: April 13, 1742, at the Great Music Hall in Dublin, Ireland; an open rehearsal had been held four days earlier

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 28, 1878, by the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928), Leopold Damrosch, conductor, with Minnie Hauk, soprano, Anna Drasdl, contralto, George Simpson, tenor, Myron William Whitney, bass, and the Oratorio Society of New York Chorus

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: December 17, 2016, Alan Gilbert, conductor, with Christina Landshamer, soprano, Sasha Cooke, mezzo-soprano, Matthew Polenzani, tenor, John Relyea, bass, and the Concert Chorale of New York

Estimated duration: ca. 120 minutes

Composition of Musick that ever was heard, and the sacred Words as properly adapted for the Occasion.” It continued with advice for persons lucky enough to hold tickets for the official premiere:

Many Ladies and Gentlemen who are well-wishers to the Noble and Grand Charity for which this Oratorio was composed, request it as a Favour, that the Ladies who honour this Performance with their Presence would be pleased to come without Hoops as it will greatly encrease the Charity, by making Room for more Company.

To which it added in a follow-up article:

The Gentlemen are desired to come without their Swords, to increase audience accommodation yet further.

Messiah was an immense success, and its reputation spread to London, which had to wait nearly a year to hear it. That event finally took place on March 23, 1743, at Covent Garden. The *Universal Spectator* ran an article that wondered about the propriety of performing such a sacred work in any setting but a church:

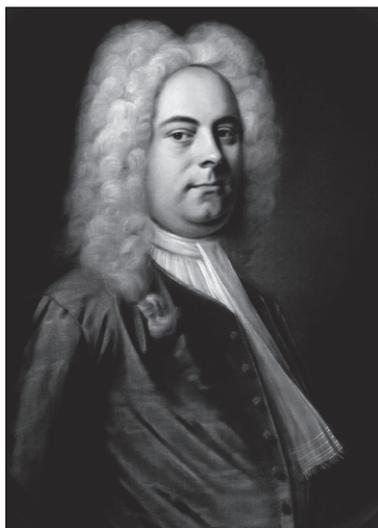
Views and Reviews

At the end of May and beginning of June 1784, a grand commemoration of Handel was held in London. The indefatigable music historian Charles Burney published a detailed description of the events the following year, under the title *An Account of the Musical Performances at Westminster-Abbey and the Pantheon*. Two of the five festival concerts were given over to *Messiah*, and Burney waxed ecstatic over the *Hallelujah* chorus:

I hasten to speak of the Allelujah, which is the triumph of HANDEL, of the COMMEMORATION, and of the musical art.

The opening is clear, cheerful, and bold. And the words, “*For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth*” (Rev. xix. 6), set to a fragment of canto fermo, which all the parts sing, as such, in unisons and octaves, has an effect truly ecclesiastical. It is afterwards made the subject of fugue

and ground-work for the Allelujah. Then, as a short episode in plain counter-point, we have “*The kingdom of this world*” (lb. xi. 15) — which being begun *piano*, was solemn and affecting. But the last and principal subject proposed, and led off by the base — “*And he shall reign for ever and ever*,” is the most pleasing and fertile that has ever been invented since the art of fugue was first cultivated. It is marked, and constantly to be distinguished through all the parts, accompaniments, counter-subjects and contrivances, with which it is charged. And, finally, the words — “*King of Kings, and Lord of Lords*” (lb. xix. 16), always set to a single sound, which seems to stand at bay, while the other parts attack it in every possible manner, in “*Allelujah — for ever and ever*,” is a most happy and marvelous concatenation of harmony, melody, and great effects.



Handel, in a portrait by Balthasar Denner, ca. 1726–28

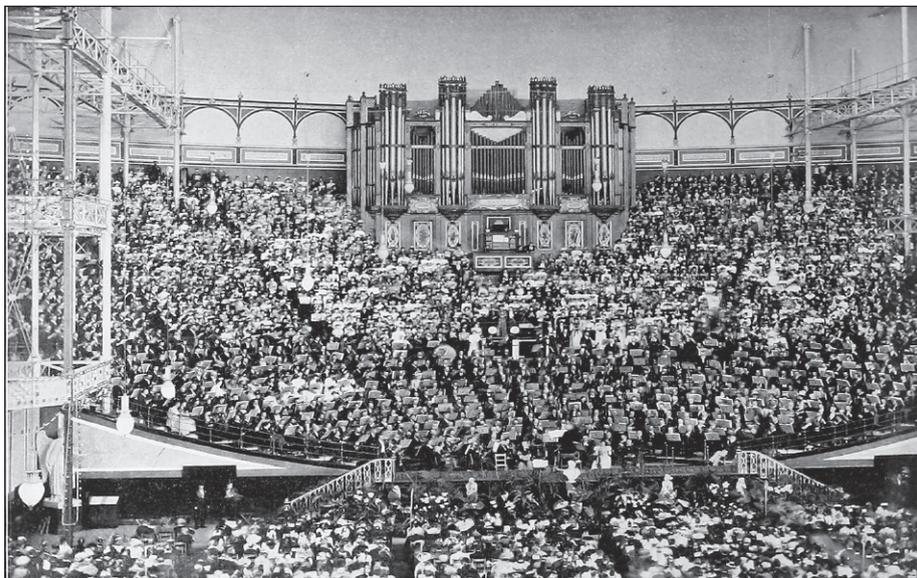
An *Oratorio* either is an *Act of Religion*, or it is not; if it is, I ask if the *Playhouse* is a fit *Temple* to perform it in, or a *Company of Players* fit *Ministers of God's Word*, for in that *Case* such they are made ... In the other *Case*, if it is not perform'd as an *Act of Religion*, but for *Diversions* and *Amusement* only (and indeed I believe few or none go to an *Oratorio* out of *Devotion*), what a *Prophanation* of *God's Name* and *Word* is this, to make so light *Use* of them?

Many a London wag lent his voice to the ensuing fray, either in poetry or prose; but it all added up to a tempest in a teapot and audiences seem to have enjoyed Handel's "New Sacred Oratorio" all the more for the altercation it provoked.

Instrumentation: two oboes, bassoon, two trumpets, timpani, strings, and basso continuo (cello, bass, trumpet, organ, and harpsichord), plus a mixed chorus and four vocal soloists — soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, and bass-baritone.

Handel on a Grand Scale

The Crystal Palace in London became the venue of choice for Handel displays in the second half of the 19th century. The high point — or low point, depending on one's point of view — came in 1883 when Sir Michael Costa, a conductor much chastised by critics for lapses of taste (his additions to the score of *Messiah* included crashing cymbals and more), stood on the podium before an ocean of 500 players, 4,000 singers, and an audience of 87,769. It was just then that Thomas Edison's phonograph came into existence, and naturally somebody thought to record one of these mammoth Handel performances. It had to be on location, of course, since 4,500 performers couldn't have fit into a recording studio, then or now!



A Handel performance at London's Crystal Palace, between 1887 and 1889

Text

Handel's *Messiah*

Libretto assembled by Charles Jennens from passages in The Bible

Part I

Sinfonia (Overture)

Recitative (Tenor)

Comfort ye my people, saith your God.

Isaiah XL: 1

Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplish'd, that her iniquity is pardon'd.

Isaiah XL: 2

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.

Isaiah XL: 3

Air (Tenor)

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

Isaiah XL: 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 XL: 5

Recitative (Bass-Baritone)

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,

Haggai II: 6

and I will shake all nations; and the desire of all nations shall come.

Haggai II: 7

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.

Malachi III: 1

Air (Mezzo-Soprano)

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

Malachi III: 2

Chorus

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

Malachi III: 3

Recitative (Mezzo-Soprano)

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

Isaiah VII: 14

Air (Mezzo-Soprano and 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 XL: 9

Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.

Isaiah LX: 1

Recitative (Bass-Baritone)

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.

Isaiah LX: 2

And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.

Isaiah LX: 3

Air (Bass-Baritone)

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 IX: 2

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 IX: 6

Pifa (“Pastoral Symphony”)

Recitative (Soprano)

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

Luke II: 8

Recitative (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.

Luke II: 9

Recitative (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.

Luke II: 10

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”

Luke II: 11

Recitative (Soprano)

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

Luke II: 13

Chorus

“Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will towards men.”

Luke II: 14

(Please turn the page quietly.)

Air (Soprano)

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee. He is the righteous Saviour,

Zechariah IX: 9

and He shall speak peace unto the heathen.

Zechariah IX: 10

Recitative (Mezzo-Soprano)

Then shall the eyes of the blind be open'd, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Isaiah XXXV: 5

Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.

Isaiah XXXV: 6

Duet (Soprano and Mezzo-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.

Isaiah XL: 11

Come unto Him, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and He will give you rest.

Matthew XI: 28

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.

Matthew XI: 29

Chorus

His yoke is easy, His burden is light.

Matthew XI: 30

PART II**Chorus**

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

John I: 29

Air (Mezzo-Soprano)

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

Isaiah LIII: 3

Chorus

Surely, He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows!

Isaiah LIII: 4

He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him.

Isaiah LIII: 5

Chorus

And with His stripes we are healed.

Isaiah LIII: 5

Chorus

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.

Isaiah LIII: 6

Recitative (Tenor)

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

Psalm XXII: 7

Chorus

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

Psalm XXII: 8

Recitative (Tenor)

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.

Psalm LXIX: 20

Air (Tenor)

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

Lamentations I: 12

Recitative (Soprano)

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

Isaiah LIII: 8

Air (Soprano)

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

Psalm XVI: 10

Chorus

Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in!

Psalm XXIV: 7

Who is this King of Glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

Psalm XXIV: 8

Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in!

Psalm XXIV: 9

Who is the King of Glory? The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of Glory.

Psalm XXIV: 10

Air (Soprano)

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

Romans X:15

Air (Bass-Baritone)

Why do the nations so furiously rage together, and why do the people imagine a vain thing?

Psalm II: 1

The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord, and against His anointed.

Psalm II: 2

Chorus

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

Psalm II: 3

Recitative (Tenor)

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

Psalm II: 4

(Please turn the page quietly.)

Air (Tenor)

Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.
 Psalm II: 9

Chorus

Hallelujah! For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.

Revelation XIX: 6

The Kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and
 He shall reign for ever and ever.

Revelation XI: 15

King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.

Revelation XIX: 16

PART III**Air (Soprano)**

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.

Job XIX: 25

And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.

Job XIX: 26

For now is Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep.

I Corinthians XV: 20

Chorus

Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.

I Corinthians XV: 21

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

I Corinthians XV: 22

Recitative (Bass-Baritone)

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be chang'd,

I Corinthians XV: 51

in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

I Corinthians XV: 52

Air (Bass-Baritone)

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

I Corinthians XV: 52

For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

I Corinthians XV: 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.

Revelation V: 12

Blessing and honour, glory and pow'r be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and
 unto the Lamb, for ever and ever.

Revelation V: 13

Chorus

Amen.

Revelation V: 14