



### **George Frideric Handel (1685 – 1759):**

Handel trained in Halle, Germany, then worked as a composer in Hamburg and Italy, before settling in London in 1712, where he spent the majority of his career, becoming naturalised as a British subject in 1727.

Consistently recognised as one of the greatest composers of his age, Handel is renowned for his operas, oratorios, anthems and organ concertos.

Influenced by middle-German polyphonic choral tradition and also the composers of Italian Baroque, Handel's style was 'high baroque'; bringing Italian opera to its highest development, creating the genres of English oratorio and organ concerto, and introducing a new style into English church music.

Handel started three commercial opera companies to supply the English nobility with Italian opera. However, he had a physical breakdown in 1737 and changed creative direction to provide more for the middle classes and made a transition to English choral works, and after his success with *Messiah*, he never composed an Italian opera again.

Handel died, almost completely blind, in 1759. He was a greatly respected and rich man, and was given a state funeral at Westminster Abbey.

### **Programme Notes: Messiah:**

After abandoning the Italian opera genre, Handel turned to English oratorio, and in August 1741 *Messiah* became Handel's sixth composition in the genre.

Composed in 24 days, its structure resembles that of opera, but its format is not dramatic; with no direct speech and impersonations of characters, no single dominant narrative voice.

The text was compiled by Charles Jennens, from 14 books of the New and Old Testaments.

Charles Jennens (1700-43) was from a wealthy landowning family, but his religious and political views; opposing the Act of Settlement of 1701 which secured the accession of the House of Hanover to the British throne, prevented him from receiving his degree from Oxford University and from pursuing any form of public career.

However, his family's prosperity enabled him to devote himself to his literary and musical interests.

There is division over whether Jennens had undoubted musical literacy, or was a conceited man of no special ability. However, he was certainly devoted to Handel's music and assisted in financing the publication of Handel's scores since the mid 1720s, with them developing a warm friendship.

In July 1741 Jennens sent Handel a new libretto for an oratorio, and in a letter of 10<sup>th</sup> July to his friend Edward Holdsworth, Jennens wrote: "I hope (Handel) will lay out his whole Genius & Skill upon it, that the Composition may excel all his former Compositions, as the Subject excels every other subject. The Subject is Messiah."

Jennens was a devout Anglican and believer in scriptural authority, with intention to challenge advocates of Deism and atheism, rejecting the doctrine of divine intervention in human affairs.

The collection of scripture selected by Jennens was designed to be an extended reflection and 'meditation of our Lord as Messiah in Christian thought and belief' (*Watkins Shaw*).

There is no evidence that Handel himself had any active role in the selection or preparation of the text, it seems that he felt no need to make any significant changes to Jennens' text selection.

It is said that Handel's swift completion of his composition proved a strain between he and Jennens. The speed was seen by Jennens as 'careless negligence' rather than a sign of ecstatic energy.

However, the truth may lie more in the financial straits that Handel found himself in and the need to make a success of his commission.

The original score of 259 pages shows blots, scratchings out, unfilled bars and other uncorrected errors; showing signs of apparent haste. But, music scholars consider these to be few for a document of such length.

At the end of the manuscript Handel wrote "SDG" Soli Deo Gloria (To God alone the glory) which encourages the belief that he wrote the music in a fervour of divine inspiration.

However, writing so much music in such short time was not unusual for Handel and his contemporaries.

Within a week of finishing Messiah, Handel was onto his next composition: Samson, which he also finished within a month.

Although in the years after Handel's death, Messiah was adapted for performance on a much larger scale, with huge orchestras and choirs being more popular, his original composition was for much more modest vocal and instrumental ensembles (2 trumpets, timpani, 2 oboes, 2 violins, viola and basso continuo), with optional settings for many of the individual movements.

To an audience of 700, at its premiere in Dublin, Ireland, on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1742, Handel's Messiah was a triumphant success; maybe due to the fact that he had been in town for most of the Winter offering a concert series that attracted considerable attention to his music.

The work was performed in London in March the following year, retitled as a 'New Sacred Oratorio', to a more subdued reception.

Jennens urged Handel to make improvements, although it is said that he stubbornly refused, with Jennens having stated that Handel 'is so lazy and so obstinate'.

However, it seems that Jennens' desire for Handel to pay more attention to this sacred work and 'fix the weaker parts' won out in the end, as Handel did indeed continue to work on the piece over the years.

Handel supervised 36 performances of Messiah in his lifetime, with each occasion requiring the music to be adapted, transposed, abridged, expanded and rewritten... with him finally arriving, in 1754, at the version that we know today.

Handel's Messiah comprises 3 Parts of a total 53 movements.

In Christian theology the Messiah is the saviour of humankind. And the verses used in the text of Handel's work is drawn from three parts of the Bible: Old Testament prophecies of Messiah's birth; New Testament stories of the Birth of Christ, his death, and his resurrection; and verses relating ultimately to Judgement Day, and final victory over sin and death; with the final chorus text drawn from the Book of Revelation.

Part 1 begins with the Old Testament prophecies of Christ's coming and considers what the Messiah's arrival will mean for the world. Onto the annunciation to the shepherds; which is the only scene taken from the Gospels.

Part 2 concentrates on the Messiah's redemptive sacrifice; the Passion of Jesus, the crucifixion, the resurrection, ascension back to heaven and eventual triumph over those who reject the gospel, ending with the rousing Hallelujah chorus which has become one of the most famous pieces of Baroque choral music, and is by far the most widely-known section of the whole work.

Part 3 covers the physical resurrection and spiritual redemption to all of us, exhorting man's mortality and the Day of Judgement and Christ's glorification in Heaven.

Handel's ability to capture the mood – from passionate rage to serene pastoral moments – is what makes Messiah one of the most enduring choral works of all time, and arguably Handel's crowning achievement.

Movements Performed on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2022

1	Overture	
2	Comfort Ye My People	Tenor
3	Ev'ry Valley Shall Be Exalted	Tenor
4	And The Glory Of The Lord	Chorus
5	Thus Saith The Lord	Bass
6	But Who May Abide The Day Of His Coming - version 1	Alto
7	And He Shall Purify	Chorus
8	Behold, A Virgin Shall Conceive	Alto
9	O Thou That Tellest Good Tidings To Zion	Alto - Chorus
10	For Behold, Darkness Shall Cover The Earth	Bass
11	The People That Walked In Darkness	Bass
12	For Unto Us A Child Is Born	Chorus
13	Pastoral Symphony - bars 1-11	
14a	There Were Shepherds Abiding In The Field	Soprano
14b	And Lo, The Angel Of The Lord Came Upon Them	Soprano
15	And The Angel Said Unto Them	Soprano
16	And Suddenly There Was With The Angel	Soprano
17	Glory To God	Chorus
18	Rejoice Greatly, O Daughter of Zion	Soprano
19	Then Shall The Eyes Of The Blind - version 2	Alto
20	He Shall Feed His Flock	Alto/Soprano
21	His Yoke Is Easy, And His Burthen Is Light	Chorus
22	Behold The Lamb Of God	Chorus
23	He Was Despised	Alto
25	And With His Stripes We Are Healed	Chorus
26	All We Like Sheep Have Gone Astray	Chorus
27	All They That See Him Laugh Him To Scorn	Tenor
28	He Trusted In God	Chorus
29	Thy Rebuke Hath Broken His Heart	Tenor
30	Behold And See If There Be Any Sorrow	Tenor
31	He Was Cut Off Out Of The Land Of The Living	Tenor
32	But Though Didst Not Leave His Soul In Hell	Tenor
33	Lift Up Your Heads, O Ye Gates	Chorus
37	The Lord Gave The Word	Chorus
38	How Beautiful Are The Feet	Soprano
40	Why Do The Nations So Furiously Rage Together?	Bass
42	He That Dwelleth In Heaven	Tenor
43	Thou Shalt Break Them	Tenor
44	Hallelujah	Chorus
45	I Know That My Redeemer Liveth	Soprano
46	Since By Man Came Death	Chorus
47	Behold, I Tell You A Mystery	Bass
48	The Trumpet Shall Sound - to bar 156	Bass
53	Worthy Is The Lamb That Was Slain	Chorus