

G. Fr. Handel, *Overture to Messiah*



George Frideric Handel (23 February 1685 – 14 April 1759) was a German-British Baroque composer who became famous for his operas, oratorios, and concertos. Handel was born in Germany in the same year as Johann Sebastian Bach and Domenico Scarlatti. He received critical musical training in Italy before settling in London and becoming a naturalised British subject. His works include *Messiah*, *Water Music*, and *Music for the Royal Fireworks*. He was strongly influenced by the techniques of the great composers of the Italian Baroque and the middle-German polyphonic choral tradition. Handel's music was well-known to many composers, including

Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

Composed in London during the summer of 1741 and premiered in Dublin, Ireland on 13 April 1742, it was repeatedly revised by Handel, reaching its most familiar version in the performance to benefit the Foundling Hospital in 1754. *Messiah* is scored for SATB soloists, SATB chorus, 2 oboes, bassoon, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings, and basso continuo (cellos, contrabass, and bassoon).

Messiah is one of Handel's most famous works as well as one of the most popular works in the Western choral literature. The composition is an English oratorio with libretto by Charles Jennens, drawn entirely from the King James and Great Bibles, and interprets the Christian doctrine of the Messiah, or "the anointed one" as Jesus the Christ. Divided into three parts, the libretto covers the prophecies concerning the Christ, the birth, miracles, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and finally the End Times with the Christ's final victory over death and sin.

Although the composition was conceived for secular theatre and first performed during Lent, it has become common practice since Handel's death to perform *Messiah* during Advent, the preparatory period of the Christmas season, rather than in Lent or at Easter. *Messiah* is often performed in churches as well as in concert halls. The world record for an unbroken sequence of annual performances of the work by the same organisation is held by the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic, in Melbourne, Australia, which has performed *Messiah* at least once annually for 157 years, starting in its foundation year of 1853.

In the summer of 1741 Handel, depressed and in debt, began setting Charles Jennens' Biblical libretto to music at a breakneck speed. In just 24 days, *Messiah* was complete (August 22 - September 14). Like many of Handel's compositions, it borrows liberally from earlier works, both his own and those of others. Tradition has it that Handel wrote the piece while staying as a guest at Jennens' country house (Gopsall Hall) in Leicestershire, England, although no evidence exists to confirm this. It is thought that the work was completed inside a garden temple, the ruins of which have been preserved and can be visited.

It was premiered during the following season, in the spring of 1742, as part of a series of charity concerts in Neal's Music Hall on Fishamble Street near Dublin's Temple Bar district. Right up to the day of the premiere, *Messiah* was troubled by production difficulties and last-minute rearrangements of the score, and the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Jonathan Swift, placed some pressure on the premiere and had it cancelled entirely for a period. He demanded that it be retitled "A Sacred Oratorio" and that revenue from the concert be promised to local hospitals for the mentally ill. The premiere happened on 13 April at the Music Hall in Dublin, and Handel led the performance from the harpsichord with Matthew Dubourg conducting the orchestra. Dubourg was an Irish violinist, conductor and composer. He had worked with Handel as early as 1719 in London.

Handel conducted *Messiah* many times and often altered the music to suit the needs of the singers and orchestra he had available to him for each performance. In consequence, no single version can be regarded as the "authentic" one. Many more variations and rearrangements were added in subsequent centuries—a notable arrangement was completed in 1789 by Mozart (K. 572), translated into German. In the Mozart version woodwinds parts were added as well as a French horn replaces the trumpet on 'The Trumpets shall sound', even though Luther's bible translation speaks of a last trombone. Due to performance constraints, the organ part was eliminated. The parts for the four soloists were also expanded into several purely choral movements, such as 'For Unto Us a Child is Born' and 'His Yoke is Easy'. This version was commonly heard until the mid-20th century and the rise of historically informed performance. In 1959, Sir Thomas Beecham conducted a larger arrangement by Sir Eugene Goossens for the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra which expands the instrumentation to 3 flutes (one doubling on piccolo), 4 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings; today this version is rarely heard live.