

About the music . . .

Handel

George Frideric Handel was born in Halle, Germany, on February 23, 1685, the second son of Georg, a barber-surgeon to the court of Saxe-Weissenfels, and his second wife Dorothea. As a child he demonstrated "extraordinary musical gifts," but his father offered no encouragement, intending for him a career in civil law. While on a visit to the court at Weissenfels, however, the 7-year old was heard playing the organ by the Duke who then urged the father to provide his son with musical training. How could he refuse? Once back in Halle these instructions began with Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow, who taught Handel organ, harpsichord, violin, oboe, counterpoint and composition. By the time he was a teenager Handel was considered a virtuoso organist and oboist, as well as a promising composer.

Five years after the death of his father, Handel yielded to his father's plan for him and, in 1702, entered the University of Halle to study law. A month later he was appointed organist at the cathedral. Now faced with a choice of the law or the church, Handel traded both to pursue his love of opera. In 1703, he moved to Hamburg, the principal center of German opera, and, for the next three years, played violin and harpsichord in the opera orchestra. He composed his first two operas and produced them there with great success.

In 1706, Handel accepted an invitation from Gian Gastone d'Medici to visit Florence. There, surrounded by the leading musicians of the day, he completed his musical training and absorbed all he could learn about Italian opera. He also traveled to Rome, Naples and Venice. While in Rome he composed several sacred works, including the recently-discovered Gloria for soprano and strings; the Bach Society presented its St. Louis premiere to critical acclaim in 2002, featuring soprano Mary Wilson.

Four years later the 25-year old Handel accepted a position in Hanover as court Kapellmeister to Elector Georg Ludwig. Within a few months, however, he was granted permission for an extended visit to London where he presented his opera Rinaldo to enthusiastic acclaim. Anxious to pursue his future in this cosmopolitan city where Italian operas were the latest rage, he requested a second leave of absence in 1712; this time he left for London and never returned.

Handel's operas (he wrote over 40) quickly attracted a wide following in London and brought him international fame. After composing the Utrecht Te Deum for Queen Anne, she grant him a yearly income. In his Guide to Choral Masterpieces, Melvin Berger writes that Handel's operas attracted "huge throngs of fervent admirers among the nobility, the intellectuals, and the growing middle class." In a fickle world this connection with the middle class would prove to be a boon to Handel in the decades to come.

For almost 20 years Handel enjoyed tremendous financial and musical success. An astute businessman as well as a musician, he invested in his own operas and both earned and lost several fortunes. The success of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in 1728, however, confirmed that London was ready for a change. Within just a few years the public's passion for Italian operas based on mythology and filled with florid arias was replaced by English operettas filled with backstreet characters singing common street songs. Berger confirms that, "by 1737, Handel's opera company was out of business."

In April of that year Handel suffered an apparent stroke which left his right arm temporarily paralyzed. Bankrupt and unable to perform, he was written off by the public. Handel withdrew into seclusion, causing his librettist Charles Jennens to write, "Handel says that he will do nothing next winter, but I hope I shall persuade him to set another Scripture collection I have made for him. I hope he will lay out his whole Genius and Skill upon it, that the composition may excel all his former Compositions, as the Subject excels every other Subject. The Subject is Messiah."

Before the year was out Handel was back! Already in the early part of the 1730s, he recognized that support for Italian opera was fading and began to compose oratorios for the expanding middle-class. In 1732 he presented a revised version of Esther, and in 1736, Alexander's Feast. Both Saul and Israel in Egypt were presented in 1739, with the composer improvising at the organ during the intermissions.

While returning from a trip to Germany in the summer of 1750, Handel was seriously injured in a carriage accident between the Hague and Haarlem in the Netherlands. The following year one eye started to fail due to a cataract. The surgery by "the great charlatan Chevalier Taylor" led to uveitis and subsequent loss of vision. Handel's final public appearance was on April 6, 1759, when he played harpsichord at a performance of Messiah. He returned home and went to bed. A few days later he said, "I wish I may die on Good Friday, in the hope of meeting my dear Lord and Saviour on the day of His Resurrection." The Heavenly Choir was apparently not quite ready for him, and he died on Easter Saturday, April 14, at the age of 74. More than 3,000 mourners attended his funeral, and Handel was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Handel's oratorios

Handel's oratorios were originally presented during Lent when the performance of operas was prohibited by law, but they soon became more than 'substitute opera' and launched a tradition of choral singing that still exists in England and many other parts of the world. While they follow the structure of Italian opera, with recitatives, arias and dramatic scenes, Handel placed a greater emphasis on the chorus, "and it is in these mighty choral ensembles," according to Anthony Hopkins, "that he produced his greatest music."

Historian Donald Grout writes, "Handel...was a completely international composer; his music has German seriousness, Italian suavity, and French grandeur. These qualities were matured in England, the soil then most favorable to the development of such a cosmopolitan style; and England furthermore provided the choral tradition which made possible Handel's oratorios." Grout also observes that that the subject matter in many of the oratorios, including Saul, Judas Maccabaeus and Joshua, "had an additional appeal based on something besides familiarity with the ancient sacred narratives: it was impossible for English audiences in an era of prosperity and expanding empire not to feel a kinship with the chosen people of old whose heroes triumphed by the special favor of Jehovah."

Various writers credit Handel with anywhere from 18 to 29 works in this genre, but a more likely number is about 22. His oratorios fall into three categories. The majority is based on scriptural texts dealing with events or individuals: Esther, Deborah, Saul, Israel in Egypt, Joshua, Samson, Solomon, Jephtha, and others. Another group deals with mythological figures: Hercules, Semele, and Acis and Galatea; and a few are allegorical in nature: L'Allegro and The Triumph of Time and Truth.

Messiah

Messiah, however, stands alone: its text is drawn from the New Testament as well as the Old Testament and, with no characters or narrative, is more contemplative than dramatic in nature. Despite this meditative approach Handel's operatic background is revealed in many passages. Music historian Stanley Sadie describes the theatrical sense found in "the music announcing Christ's birth (with distant trumpets and the effect of a choir of angels), in the drama of the Passion music, above all in the grandeur of the most famous number, the Hallelujah chorus."

Handel composed his oratorio *Messiah*, based on a libretto compiled by Charles Jennens, in 1741. Writing with incredible speed—his usual manner of composing large works—he completed the two and a half hours of music in only 24 days, from August 22 to September 14. During this feverish process, Handel wrote to a friend, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God himself."

The work was first heard on April 13, 1742, in Dublin, with the composer conducting. The concert, which took place at the New Music Hall on Fishamble Street, was given as a benefit for the Society for Relieving Prisoners, the Charitable Infirmary and Mercer's Hospital. Anticipating a strong response to ticket sales, the city newspapers encouraged gentlemen to not wear swords and ladies to not wear hoops. The performance was attended by 700 people, crowded in a room that could hold 600. A reporter wrote, "words are wanting to express the exquisite delight it afforded to the admiring crowded audience. The sublime, the grand, and the tender, adapted to the most elevated, majestick and moving words, conspired to transport and charm the ravished heart and ear."

Messiah was performed in London the following season and it soon became a regular feature of the Lenten performances there. In fact, since 1749, there has been a continuous tradition of *Messiah* performances in England. Until his death in 1759, Handel conducted these performances as part of his Lenten oratorio series.

A description of the oratorio is provided by the Handel scholar Jens Peter Larsen: "Messiah is not, as is often popularly supposed, a number of scenes from the Life of Jesus linked together to form a certain dramatic whole, but a representation of the fulfillment of Redemption through the Redeemer, Messiah. *Messiah* is divided into three Parts, the contents of which can be summarized as follows:

- I. The prophecy and realization of God's Plan to redeem mankind by the coming of the Messiah;
- II. The accomplishment of redemption by the sacrifice of Jesus, mankind's rejection of God's offer and mankind's utter defeat when trying to oppose the power of the Almighty;
- III. A Hymn of Thanksgiving for the final overthrow of Death."