

George Frideric Handel: *Messiah*

Towards the end of the movie “Dumb and Dumber” (with Jim Carrey and Jeff Daniels), when our two idiotic heroes seem to have hit rock bottom, Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus is played as a large charter bus—full of models on their national bikini tour—pulls over to pick them up. And let’s not forget how the Hallelujah Chorus accompanies a father carving a Thanksgiving turkey for his well-behaved children in an Oscar Mayer commercial. Despite the singular fame of this piece, Handel (1685-1759) is by no means a one-trick pony: he rightfully earned his place as one of the greatest composers of the early 1700s with a considerable number of large-scale masterpieces to his credit. Perhaps only Johann Sebastian Bach (born the same year as Handel) is more highly regarded from the musical Baroque era.

Handel grew up in Halle, Germany (formerly Prussia) with an unquenchable thirst to learn music. At first Handel’s father wasn’t too keen on the idea of his son studying music, so the young Handel would secretly practice the clavichord up in the attic. (A clavichord is similar to a harpsichord, but smaller and more delicate sounding.) Upon recognizing his son’s gifts, he relented and got him proper music lessons on the organ. As Handel entered adulthood, he moved to Hamburg, and then to Italy, where he was exposed to the great operas of the time. In 1709 Handel established his reputation in front of an international public with tremendously successful performances of his comic opera *Agrippina*. It was also around this time that Italian opera was becoming quite popular in England. Handel, now armed with Italian opera cred, visited, and eventually settled down in London as a German composer of Italian opera.

So how did Handel make his way from Italian opera to composing *Messiah*, a work that uses English text from the King James Bible? In the 1730s and 1740s, the London audiences’ appetite for Italian opera was already beginning to diminish, and Handel pivoted his creative energies to un-staged dramatic works, many with biblical subjects. (Think: opera, but without the acting and only the singing.) Out of Handel’s 25 oratorios, *Messiah* is the ninth, composed in 1741, and was successfully premiered in Dublin as a charity benefit concert. It went on to receive additional performances in 1743 at London’s Covent Garden Theatre to mixed reviews: many critics felt that it was inappropriate for sacred music to be performed in a secular playhouse.

The structure of Handel’s *Messiah* goes far beyond the iconic Hallelujah Chorus: when performed in its entirety, it is well over 2 hours long, with three distinct parts. Part I focuses on the Old Testament prophecies of Christ and the rejoicing of angels as told in the Book of Luke. Part II centers around Christ’s passion, crucifixion, and resurrection, culminating with the Hallelujah Chorus (books of Isaiah, Psalm, Hebrews, Romans, and Revelations). And Part III is a reflective commentary with text coming largely from First Corinthians.

Messiah switches between smaller and larger performing forces throughout its entirety. The different movements include “recitatives,” where a vocal soloist moves the story along in a declamatory singing style with sparse instrumental accompaniment; “arias” (or Airs), where the vocalist sings much more lyrically and

expressively, again with light accompaniment; and the choruses, where the entire choir and orchestra perform together to spectacular effect. Modern-day performances of *Messiah* typically don't feature the entire work: it is much more common to hear a trimmed-down version that features most of Part I with the Hallelujah Chorus from Part II added in as the grand finale.

Perhaps the enduring popularity of *Messiah* is that it can be profoundly meaningful to so many people in so many ways. For some, the message of Christ's life and sacrifice is enough to get them to a concert hall. For others, it is the sublime elegance and grace of Handel's vocal melodies. And there are also those who forever marvel at Handel's technical mastery of imitative counterpoint, sequence, and the many clever layers of musical activity that are constantly embedded beneath the surface of the music. Whichever it may be for you, you are certainly in for a treat, much like the children who discovered those Oscar Mayer turkey slices in their lunchbox.

--David H. Johnson

Comments? Questions? Email me at david.johnson@gcsu.edu.