

The singers of Princeton Pro Musica and I are delighted to return again this year to a perennial favorite, G. F. Handel's *Messiah*. This astounding piece of music is truly an ever-renewing font of musical inspiration, capable of showing us something new each time we revisit it. Hearing our favorite solo arias performed through the voice and spirit of new artists and hearing the ways the chorus' interpretations ripen grants us new perspectives. And as much as the musical journey *Messiah* takes us on helps us to escape from everyday life, it is impossible not to experience the work in the context of our daily, current lives. Last season we offered *Messiah* just two days after the shootings in Newtown, CT, and the music helped me understand grief, consolation, and hope. I have also performed *Messiah* during times of utter joy, the choruses ringing in my heart, a blockbuster soundtrack for my inner exhilaration. Preparing to perform the work this season, I realize that all of these past performances are a part of any new *Messiah* performance. *Messiah* is a musical-emotional palimpsest that sings and sounds our histories.

Handel began work on *Messiah* on August 22, 1741 and famously completed it twenty-four days later. In the 1730s, he had abandoned opera for oratorio, had completed several works in the genre before *Messiah*, and would compose several after. But in harnessing this particular burst of creative energy to create *Messiah*, Handel fashioned a work of art that would prove more contagious and long-lasting than anything he had written up to that point or thereafter.

*Messiah* owes its unparalleled ubiquity and resilience to a powerful marriage of music and message. Contemporary reactions to *Messiah* suggest that its music was immediately appealing. A reviewer, responding to the work's Dublin premiere, remarked: "*The Whole is unlike any thing I had a notion of until I Read and heard it. It seems to be a Species of Musick different from any other, and this is particularly remarkable of it. That tho' the Composition is very Masterly and artificial, yet the Harmony is So great and open, as to please all who have Ears & will hear, learned & unlearn'd.*" In other words, Handel's music demonstrated his craftsmanship and deft command of "artifice" but also his ability to create music whose structures resonate instantly and clearly with audiences. Taken together, the penetrating, grand choruses in the English anthem style; the concentrated, intimate solo arias in the Italian opera style; and the effervescent and elegant orchestral writing resplendently display all the rich musical resources of the High Baroque.

Surely the grandeur of Handel's music arose in part from his awareness of the import of the subject matter. *Messiah* can be heard through an explicitly Christian framework to great satisfaction. The texts that Handel's librettist Charles Jennens drew together from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament encapsulate the essence of the Christian faith. Jennens recognized that he and Handel were taking on not "a" historical biblical figure but "the" figure. Jennens hoped that "the Composition may excell all [Handel's] former compositions, as the Subject excells every other subject. The Subject is Messiah." The title itself betrays the importance with which Jennens regarded this endeavor and the significance given its subject. The oratorio is not titled after its subject's name, "Christ," the way so many of Handel's other oratorios are (Deborah, Samson, Saul, Solomon, Esther), but after its subject's purpose.

And yet, Jennens' approaching the story of Christ with an eye to big ideas and ultimate significance ensured greater universality of message. He presents Christ's birth, suffering, resurrection, and triumph in heaven one step removed from the action, as the fulfillment of prophecies from the Old Testament rather than directly quote from the New. For example, unlike Bach's passions, in which Jesus and Pilate themselves sing and events are recounted from the gospel, the so-called "passion" section of *Messiah* offers a third person view more evocative than explicit, using texts not from the gospel accounts but from the Old Testament. Only for a few moments in Part I of *Messiah* do we get a narrative series of events with the angels and shepherds at the manger, drawn from the book of Luke. Any dramatic thrust felt in *Messiah* is not the result of our identifying with a named character relaying a dramatic narrative in first person but the consequence of the reflection required by Jennens' making us read (or hear) between the lines. His selection of passages turns our focus from the details of the story itself to its broader concepts and resonances. The highs and lows of this most famous of stories are relayed to "us all," and Handel's music amplifies and deepens their impact. Together, Jennens and Handel have opened the central story of Christianity to all lives. Expectation and fulfillment, suffering and triumph, assurance and joy: these are touchstones for any ear and every era.

Given the effortlessness of instant gratification in contemporary life, it's no wonder that this season of waiting and expectation – for the arrival of a holiday or a special gift, for the return of daylight or the promise of a new year – still holds sway. Pausing to listen to a performance of *Messiah* lets us cut through the din and tune in to this spirit of hopefulness. Prophecy and prophesying lie at the heart of *Messiah*. The first aria promises that a messiah's advent will permanently transform the world as we know it, leveling mountains and raising up valleys. The final chorus heralds that transformation and celebrates the receipt of power, wisdom, strength, honor, glory, and blessing. Whether or not this has been or will be so, Handel's music expresses the triumph and the eager expectation perfectly. "We shall be changed," the bass solo portends. Musically speaking, we know he speaks the truth. There can be little doubt that the advent of the oratorio *Messiah* brought about a permanent transformation of our musical landscape. Which other work has rung in the ears and rattled in the hearts of so many? In the 18th century, the eminent British music historian Charles Burney described *Messiah*'s fruitful relationship with charity organizations and its impact in general: "it has fed the hungry, clothed the naked, fostered the orphan ... more than any single musical production of this or any country." In the 21st century, nearly 270 years after *Messiah*'s premiere and countless transformative performances later, Burney's words are truer than ever. Prophetic indeed.

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