

Handel's Messiah

Georg was a complicated boy. His father thought music a trifle, a waste of intelligence, but his mother helped him to smuggle a clavichord into the attic where he could practice secretly. By age six he had mastered the instrument, and within a few years he could also play the violin, harpsichord, oboe, and organ.

Dutifully following his father's wishes, Georg studied law, though he hated it. But after his father died, he traveled widely in Italy and became a master of Italian music, particularly opera. Oddly enough, Italian music was extremely popular in Germany and England. When one of his patrons, a German duke, became England's king, Georg Friedrich Handel left Germany for England and founded an Italian opera company. As one would imagine, this German-English composer of Italian music was a complicated man.

Even his friends thought so. "He was in his person a large-made and very portly man," said one. "His gait, which was ever sauntering, was rather ungraceful, as it had a rocking motion, which distinguishes those whose legs are bowed." Another recalled, "His general look was somewhat heavy and sour; but when he did smile, it was the sun bursting out of a black cloud."

Handel claimed that knowing the Bible like a bishop gave him strength. No doubt he needed it, for running the opera house proved to be a great deal of trouble. In 1737, after overwork and exhaustion, he suffered a stroke and paralysis, which took away his skill, his genius, as a performer. He tried again to compose in the Italian vein, but tastes were changing, and two of his operas failed to please audiences in London.

Handel had run short of money; creditors dogged him. At the age of fifty-six, he shut himself in his house, dejected and alone, and prepared to return to Germany.

Then he received a new libretto, in English, drawn from the Bible, about the Savior, the suffering servant by whose stripes we are healed. The first part told of Christ's Advent and his birth; the second of his Passion and triumphant Resurrection, ending with an Hallelujah chorus; and the third part of a Resurrection for all humankind.

The texts gave him heart, gave him purpose. Day and night he worked, often ignoring the meals brought to him by servants. A friend called upon Handel when he was setting to music the words *He was despised and rejected of men*, and found him "absolutely sobbing." He was so moved by the Hallelujah chorus that he put the words in his journal, and of it he later said, paraphrasing St. Paul in Second Corinthians, "Whether I was in my body or out of my body as I wrote it, I know not. God knows." Amazingly he finished *The Messiah* in a mere three weeks.

Finances desperately thin, he took a job in Dublin and brought with him the score, but he refused to premier *The Messiah* for his own gain; now and for the rest of his life, it would raise money for charity. The premier took place at the Dublin Cathedral on April 13, 1742, a benefit concert for the "prisoners of several jails, for Mercer's Hospital and for the Charitable Infirmary," and the musicians performed for free. The audience numbered 700 in a church built for 600. Mrs. Susannah Cibber, who had been disgraced in an adulterous relationship three years before, sang the contralto part. After she sang of Christ's sufferings, the chancellor of the cathedral rose and cried, "Woman, for this, all thy sins be forgiven thee!"

The work was a great success. Since its premiere, there has never been a year in which the *Messiah* has not been performed. It is the most popular work in the classical repertoire, perhaps the most popular music the world has ever known.

In 1749 and for years afterwards, Handel performed the *Messiah* for London's Foundling Hospital, which cared for children who had been abandoned. This immense and sometimes difficult man removed from the country of his birth, partially paralyzed on his left side, with cataracts in both eyes, had no children of his own. Yet through him the *Messiah* came to the foundlings.

Handel's messiah was born in a small town to obscure parents who may have traveled more than a hundred miles on foot in the last weeks of his mother's pregnancy. Apparently there were questions about who really was the boy's father. He was a Semitic boy who spoke a language known by only a few thousand people in all history. His boyhood is lost to the waters and sands.

Handel's messiah was a man of flesh and blood, hair and hunger, family, shelter, sleep and work. He was a human being. Whether or not he was also the eternal God, the Creator of all that he now touched, he was certainly a human being. Companions who traveled with him for three years wondered aloud at what sort of man he was, yet he sought out retreats in quiet places because he, like they, grew weary. When his friends died, he wept.

Handel's messiah died at a young age, even though he very much wanted to live. Despite seeing the sadness and baseness of this world, he loved it very much, and loved nothing better than sitting down at a table with friends. He was acclaimed as a teacher, a rabbi, a prophet, a king, yet he gave up every title and position, and then gave up much more than that.

When he died, many of those closest to him thought he had accomplished absolutely nothing. No one would have thought of setting this life to music.

And yet soon after his death, many people did write down that life, and its holiness made those pages scripture. Handel's *Messiah* came straight from scripture. He was not a character created by a librettist; the words of the oratorio came from the Bible, and the portrait is timeless and true.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God; speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem; and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight, and the rough places plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them has the light shined. For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

The words themselves are musical, the very summit of Hebrew and Greek poetry, but they were not written for the pleasure of their sound. They testify to a music beyond the hearing of ears, an order and beauty from another realm. We would do the scriptures a disservice simply to applaud them; they want us to be moved by their subject. Indeed, they introduce us to someone who lived a stubbornly human life. Listen:

Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him. And with His stripes we are healed.

The man who put this other man's life to music inspired various feelings. Joseph Haydn is said to have "wept like a child" at the Hallelujah chorus. Mozart is said to have remarked, "Handel understands effect better than any of us – when he chooses, he strikes like a thunderbolt." Beethoven said, "Handel is the greatest composer that ever lived...I would uncover my head and kneel down on his tomb." Hector Berlioz, however, called Handel "a tub of pork and beer."

Yes, he was a complicated man. He could swear in five languages. Once he threatened to throw a soprano out of a window. And yet he had the physical courage to endure three operations on his eyes at the hands of the same surgeon who had unsuccessfully operated on Johann Sebastian Bach, and the spiritual courage to accept the same result – complete blindness. Even then he continued to perform.

An Englishwoman, deeply moved by the *Messiah*, asked him how it was possible for him, "who understood the English language imperfectly, to enter so fully into the sublime spirit of the words." Handel answered, "Madam, I thank God I have a little religion."

He hoped to die on Good Friday so that he might rise with his Christ on Easter Sunday. In April of 1759, Handel collapsed following another charity performance of his great work. As it turned out, he died on Maundy Thursday.

Though he had had no children of his own, he felt so deeply about them that in his will he left *The Messiah* to the Foundling Hospital.

The word *messiah* is not a personal name, and yet it has very personal implications.

Handel's messiah could hear the plight of an overage, overweight German lost in another country, broke, discouraged. He could make a sick old man a holy person, redeemed and revived. Handel's messiah was not a mere work of music, but a man.

Who is your messiah? Is there someone who knows you as no one else does, and still loves you more than anyone else? Is there someone who makes sense, even art, of your discordant life?

There is. Beyond music, there is a man; and beyond the man, there is a messiah – for all the lostlings and all the foundlings.