

Program Notes

Messiah (1741).....George Frideric Handel

Composed in 1741 for a performance in Dublin, *Messiah* came approximately in the middle of Handel's thirty or so oratorios and was apparently written in an astonishingly short time; on August 22 he began composing and completed the draft for Part III September 12. In creating his unique kinds of oratorio, both Biblical and non-Biblical, Handel drew upon several sources, including the dramatic Italian oratorio, the German Passion-oratorio, and the English choral anthem. Charles Jennens compiled the text of *Messiah* entirely from the Bible and, although there are no characters and no action, it aims to present in a dramatic way the redemption that man achieved through the Messiah. In its theme and its reliance upon the chorus, *Messiah* is an oratorio of the anthem type, perhaps the least common of Handel's five basic types.

Messiah unfolds in three large parts: The Prophecy and the Coming of the Messiah, The Redemption of Man, and Thanksgiving for Victory of Death. The Temple Symphony Orchestra will be performing numbers 1 through 20 of the Part One and The *Hallelujah Chorus* from the end of Part II. Each part is organized by the layout of the text, and each is made up of several groups of numbers consisting generally of a recitative—aria—chorus sequence, though sometimes merely of recitative and chorus. Although the expressive language you will hear was derived from the doctrine of affections, an aesthetic theory that was developed in baroque opera, the extensive use of choruses (which outnumber arias) and the nature of the forms employed differentiated *Messiah* very clearly from opera of the period.

An examination of what you will be hearing in Part I will illustrate Handel's approach to structure and form. After the opening overture in the French style, there are no fewer than six groups of numbers: (1) accompanied recitative, aria in two-part form (*Every Valley*), chorus, these three being linked by key relationships (E major-E major-A major); (2) accompanied recitative, aria in four parts (ABA'B') with some tempo changes (*But Who May Abide*), and chorus, these three also being linked tonally (d minor-d minor-g minor); (3) recitative and three part aria (*O Thou That Tellest*) with chorus (D major-D major); (4) accompanied recitative, aria in two subdivided parts (*For the People that Walked in Darkness*) and chorus (b minor-b minor-G major); this last chorus (*For Unto Us a Child is Born*) brings the Prophecy section to a close, and its powerful contrast of imitative opening with ensuing chordal section is repeated with increasing force four times; (5) the Coming of the Messiah begins with an orchestral interlude entitled "Pastoral Symphony," then continues with two alternations of recitative and accompanied recitative, and closes with a chorus (*Glory to God*); (6) a three-part aria (*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion*), recitative, two-part aria (*He Shall Feed His Flock*), and closing chorus (*His yoke is easy, and His burden is light*) with the tonal relationships of B-flat-a minor-F/B-flat-B flat. The use of textural complexity and of unifying tonal relationships bind the small groups together, the development of the plot links several groups (1-4 and 5-6) within the larger framework of Part I.

As is tradition, the Temple Symphony Orchestra and Chorale will end their performance of Handel's *Messiah* with the *Hallelujah Chorus*. This chorus is actually the last number in Part II, but has become standard performance practice to end with,

when performing the “Christmas” section of the *Messiah*. Handel himself wrote that the whole host of Heaven stood before him when he wrote this chorus. And the mighty affirmation of the music caused King George I to rise to his feet at the first performance of oratorio, giving rise to the custom—observed ever since—of the entire audience rising to its feet for the performance of the Hallelujah.¹

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¹ Martin Bookspan. *101 Masterpieces of Music and Their Composers*. (Doubleday & Co, Inc., New York), p.197.