

Columbia Pro Cantare Program Notes

Handel's Messiah

Barbara A. Renton, Ph.D.,
Domus Musicae Slavicae, Bainbridge, NY

Some may think of George Frederic Handel as one of the first modern public personalities. He was born in what is now part of Germany (Halle) in the same year as Johann Sebastian Bach (1685) and died in 1759 as a naturalized English citizen. His entire life was lived during the period of the settlement of the American colonies and before the American Revolution. He was not only an inventive and ingenious composer, but also an able capitalist who understood how to use social systems and economic systems, patronage and the marketplace, popular impressions and wealthy support, to enable public performances of his works -- not once, but many times over.

His early professional life and emigration from Germany to England could form the basis of a romantic novel, and, as luck would have it, he wound up on the right side of the English Channel just at the point when his erstwhile patron, King George I of Hanover (Germany), succeeded to the British royal throne. In England Handel continued to write and produce operas, but with varying success, despite his renown in other types of music and his reputation for organ playing (which at that time meant a high degree of improvisation). After the failure of his operas (and those of many others), in 1739 Handel began to exchange staged dramatic compositions (opera: primarily on secular and mythical themes) for unstaged dramatic ones (oratorio: primarily on biblical themes). Here he struck gold with the public. In 1742, Handel's reputation as a composer of church music led to an invitation on behalf of three Dublin charity organizations to compose an oratorio, to be performed exclusively for charitable purposes: "For the relief of the Prisoners in several Gaols, and for the support of Mercer's Hospital in Stephen Street, and of the Charitable Infirmary on the Inn's Quay." The resulting work, *Messiah*, proved to be not only a unique work for Handel, but the most magnificent triumph of his life. Evidence shows that not only did Handel not accept a fee, he persuaded the soloists -- of high quality and reputation -- to forego payment also. Charles Burney, the celebrated English musician and music historian, noted that *Messiah* continued to be a work that "fed the hungry, clothed the naked, fostered the orphan," so great were the power of its reputation and the number of charity performances.

Messiah was unlike any of Handel's works, because Dublin was unlike any other city in its cultivation of music and numerous charity performances. The text, by Charles Jennens, is unusual in that it is drawn entirely from the Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament) and the Christian revelation (new Testament). The

subtle sequence is that of Promise, Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection, giving an epic quality that replaces a dramatic plot. It is not a reenactment, but a lyric contemplation of the idea of Christian redemption (in the Christian church year: Advent, Christmas and Easter). The many choruses, particularly the stately ones, relate the work more closely to the English anthem than to the German or Italian oratorio. There is little doubt that it is the choruses that have contributed largely to this work's popularity. So artful was Handel's craft in the sequence of pieces and their artistic balance and contrast, that at the first notes of *Hallelujah* the first London audience was literally lifted to its feet by a swell of emotion – a custom that has persisted to this day – but less by custom than by a similar swell of enthusiasm. "I just can't help it," many persons have said, "I know it's not logical, but I feel I just can't sit there; I have to *do* something."

The original chorus was a small number of singers from the two Dublin cathedrals. The Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Jonathan Swift (of *Gulliver's Travels*, and other well-known pieces of literature, who was known for his dislike of music), had to be persuaded to grant permission for the use of the Cathedral's singers "to assist at a club of fiddlers in Fishamble Street..." as he put it. The alto arias were composed for Mrs. Susanna Cibber, a stage tragedienne who played opposite the great David Garrick on the London stage. Male soloists were drawn from local choirs. The orchestra of the Dublin State Band was modest in size, not grandiose as we sometimes, think, and was directed by Handel from the harpsichord.

Rich in invention and craft, amazing in musical inspiration and illuminated by an unending number of details that delight the ear, the mind, the heart, Messiah continues to claim a central place in the public's affection.

On April 6, 1759, eight days before his death, afflicted by blindness, Handel accompanied a performance of Messiah on the organ. He was buried with the honors of state in Westminster Abbey. The performances continue...