



# Handel's E A S T E R Music

By Keith Bassham

Christ's death and resurrection is the main thing Messiah

**S**peak of Handel's Messiah, and thoughts instantly turn to what we call the Hallelujah Chorus and Christmas. The chorus's main theme and most of the words are known throughout the English speaking world. But did you know that Messiah was actually first performed during an Easter season, and not at Christmas? Or that the parts we usually associate with Christmas make up less than half the entire concert? Or that some clergy considered it more a worldly entertainment than ministry – John Wesley liked it while John Newton was critical.

And just as there is more to Messiah than the Hallelujah Chorus, there is far more contained in the score than we generally think.

First, consider the name. It is not the Messiah, but simply Messiah, and it was part of a great musical innovation of the day, even by the standards of Britain in the 1740s. The fashionable and most popular performances were Italian-style operas when George Handel came to London in the early 1700s, and he fit right in. He was a childhood prodigy winning a musical prize at the age of 11, and over the next 30 years, Londoners received his music, both opera and instrumental pieces, with enthusiasm. But musical tastes change – local critics poked fun at the Italian-based plots and absurd story lines, and besides, the British wanted their own music.

Enter the musical form called oratorio. Oratorio was similar to opera. There were the choruses and solos and other musical groups on a stage accompanied by an orches-

tra, but gone were the scenery, sets, plotlines, and costumed actors. The words were in English, language the British could understand, and without all the props, the music could be performed in concert halls and churches (in fact, many oratorios had sacred themes) rather than opera houses where people were known to get a little rowdy if the performance was boring.

On this scene, two figures meet and collaborate, and a near miracle takes place. Charles Jennens provided a libretto (literally, a “little book,” referring to the text of an opera or oratorio) to Handel just before he journeyed to Ireland. Jennens, a curious figure, had been lately influenced by a book called *A Demonstration of the Messias*. In which the Truth of the Christian Religion is proved, against all the Enemies thereof; but especially against the Jews, written by Richard Kidder and published in three volumes in 1684, 1699, 1700. (Some recent scholarly publications allege an anti-Semitic element in Messiah, and this is one of the sources referred to. Though these men connected with the composition were children of their time, I think religious rather than racial controversy provides the better lens for seeing their motivation. Certainly nothing is said in Messiah against the Jews that God himself does not say.) Evidently the Messianic theme inspired him to put together a selection of scriptures that he wanted Handel to set to music.

Handel, perhaps financially down, went directly to work, and the impressive score for the oratorio was composed in just a little over three weeks, from August 22 to Septem-



“But, alas! How few are disposed to praise and commemorate Messiah himself! The same great truths, divested of music, when delivered from the pulpit, are heard by many admirers of the Oratorio with indifference, too often with contempt.”

*John Newton, on Handel's work*

## G.F. Handel

ber 14, 1741. Jennens is reported to have been disappointed, hoping that Handel would take much more time. Millions of music lovers the world over disagree with the librettist.

Messiah opened in Dublin April 13, 1742, a couple of weeks after Easter, to an overflow crowd.

Part I of Messiah describes on the birth and life of Jesus, beginning with prophetic passages from the Old Testament. It begins with prophetic promises of the birth of the Christ, many from the Old Testament, as in these opening phrases:

*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplish'd, 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. (Isaiah 40:1-3).*

By the end of the first part, the virgin has conceived (Isaiah 9:6), the birth of Christ has taken place (but again instead of taking us to Luke for the birth, Messiah keeps us in Isaiah 7:14), and we have a summary of Christ's earthly ministry as a shepherd. The first part ends with the invitation

to “Come unto me,” although here the librettist rephrased slightly to make the Matthew 11:28 invitation third person: “Come unto him.”

Part II takes us immediately to a salvation message: “Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Again we learn about the events of his death more from Old Testament texts rather than the narratives of the Gospels. The Psalms provide the resurrection texts, as in Psalm 24:7-10: “Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in.” And what should come next but the sending out of gospel preachers: “The Lord gave the word; great was the company of the preachers” (Psalm 68:11) and “How beautiful are the feet of them: that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things” (Romans 10:15).

Finally, this is where the Hallelujah Chorus comes, not in the first part with the Christmas material, but here, after the resurrection and connected with the Great Commission. The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever,” (Revelation 11:15), King of Kings, and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16), Hallelujah!”

Messiah's concluding section continues the resurrection narrative and the implications for the world, and except for the opening “I know that my Redeemer liveth” from Job, is made up entirely of New Testament texts, mostly from 1 Corinthians 15:51-57. The final chorus is “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His blood, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. Blessing and honour, glory

and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever" (Revelation 5:12-13), concluding with more than three minutes of "Amen."

As you may have assumed by the quotations from the libretto, the text is taken directly from the King James Version of the Bible, though some texts were altered slightly (as in the "Come unto him," referred to). According to an analysis by a former teacher of mine, Daniel Block, the passages are from the following sources:

|                      |           |
|----------------------|-----------|
| Job                  | 2 verses  |
| Psalms               | 14 verses |
| Isaiah               | 22 verses |
| Lamentations         | 1 verse   |
| Haggai               | 2 verses  |
| Zechariah            | 2 verses  |
| Malachi              | 3 verses  |
| Matthew              | 3 verses  |
| Luke                 | 5 verses  |
| John                 | 1 verse   |
| Romans               | 3 verses  |
| 1 Corinthians        | 10 verses |
| Hebrews              | 2 verses  |
| Revelation           | 6 verses  |
| Total Old Testament: | 43 verses |
| Total New Testament: | 30 verses |
| Total                | 73 verses |

Mr. Block's complete analysis is "Handel's Messiah: Biblical and Theological Perspectives," available for download at [ww.sbts.edu/pdf/ICW/Messiah.pdf](http://ww.sbts.edu/pdf/ICW/Messiah.pdf).

Theologically, the interesting point is that far from being a group of songs about the coming of Jesus in his birth, Messiah's primary subject is in the center section: his death and resurrection, and it is thus far more appropriate for Easter music. Everything in the oratorio previous leads to the gospel event, and everything after is based upon it. Jennen and Handel appear to have captured what Messiah was all about.

There is a tradition that during Handel's composing of Messiah his meals were often left uneaten, so intensely did he work. Once, while writing the "Hallelujah Chorus," his servant discovered him weeping, with Handel supposedly saying, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself!" Whether this is a truthful story or not, Messiah has had similar effect on many since. However, Handel never saw most of the success of his work. He died in 1759, and though Messiah was performed regularly only in the last few years of his life, 25 years later it was revived and has remained popular ever since.

In 1784, performances commemorating Handel were held in Westminster Abbey in London. John Newton, of "Amazing Grace" fame, was preaching in a London Church the same time.

If, after reading this essay about Messiah, a preacher thinks a sermon series based on the production is a good

idea, I would say he is right. Mr. Newton thought it a good idea himself, especially since everyone seemed to be attending and talking about the concerts, and the result was a series of 50 sermons based on the Messiah texts.

The sermons were published, and you can download and read them at the Google book site ([www.books.google.com](http://www.books.google.com)). The complete title is Messiah: Fifty Expository Discourses on the Series of Scriptural Passages which Form the Subject of the Celebrated Oratorio of Handel Preached in the Years 1784 and 1785 in the Parish Church of St. Mary Woolnoth, Lombard. Naturally, if you search for Newton and Messiah on the Google book site, you will find it easily.

The surprise is, though Newton used Messiah texts, he was not enthusiastic about sacred material being used for what he thought was purely entertainment. Along with William Cowper (Cowper was one of Newton's favorite hymn writers. He is responsible for these lines: "There is a fountain fill'd with blood, Drawn from EMMANUEL's veins; And sinners, plung'd beneath that flood, Lose all their guilty stains.") he believed that the people were stirred by Handel's music and nothing more. In the fourth sermon in the series, based on "The Lord coming to his temple," from Malachi, he said,

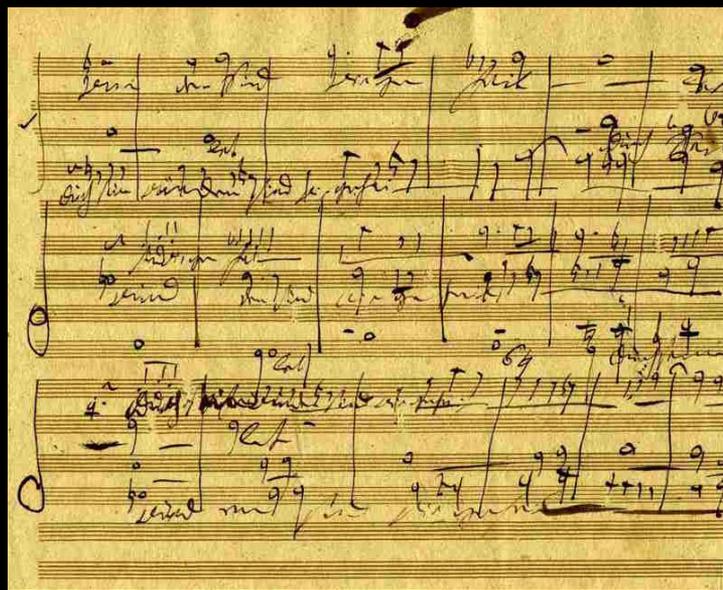
*"But, alas! How few are disposed to praise and commemorate Messiah himself! The same great truths, divested of music, when delivered from the pulpit, are heard by many admirers of the Oratorio with indifference, too often with contempt."*

Keep in mind that while these sermons were being preached, Messiah was being performed to great public applause, so not only is Newton swimming against the current in his cultural critique, he is also appealing to current events in his preaching. Some modern preachers think they have just now invented the concept of "cultural relevance" for their day.

Understand, Newton was appreciative of the subject matter. If the reader will allow me an extended quote, you will see what I mean. In his preface to the first volume of sermons he lays out how the sermon series came about. He says he was,

*"...desirous of adopting some plan, which might lead me to exhibit the principal outlines of the Saviour's character and meditation in a regular series of discourses; so as to form, if not a picture, at least a slight sketch, of those features of glory and of his grace, which endear him to the hearts of his people. Such a plan has lately, and rather unexpectedly, occurred to me. Conversation in almost every company, for some time past, has much turned upon the commemoration of Handel; the grand musical*

*Beethoven* so admired Handel's work that he wrote it out so as to get the "feeling of its intricacies" and "to unravel its complexities". Handel exerted considerable influence on Beethoven at various stages of his career. With this transcription of Handel's vocal fugue "And With His Stripes" from *The Messiah*, Beethoven sought to learn from the older composers fugue techniques. Many of Beethoven's fugues are strongly influenced by Handel, with their long, sectional themes and their occasional unconventional procedures.



Portion of *Messiah* written in Beethoven's hand  
 Courtesy of Karpeles Manuscript Library

*entertainments, and particularly his Oratorio of the Messiah, which have been repeatedly performed in Westminster Abbey. If it could reasonably be hoped that the performers and the company assembled to hear the music, or the greater part, or even a considerable part of them, were capable of entering into the spirits of the subject; I will readily allow that the Messiah, executed in so masterly a manner, by persons whose hearts, as well as their voices and instruments, were tuned to the Redeemer's praise; accompanied with the grateful emotions of an audience duly affected with a sense of their obligations to his love; might afford one of the highest and noblest gratifications, of which we are capable in the present life."*

To Newton, both the subject and the music were worthy of attention, but the subject was the main thing. He wrote,

*"Messiah, the great subject of the Oratorio, is the leading and principal subject of every sermon. His person, grace, and glory; his matchless love to sinners; his ability and willingness to save to the uttermost; his kingdom, and the present and future happiness of his willing people; are severally considered, according to the order suggested by the series of texts. Nearly connected with these topics, are the doctrines of the fall and depravity of man, the agency of the Holy Spirit, and the nature and necessity of regeneration, and of that holiness, without which, no man shall see the Lord."*

And since the person and work of Messiah was the main attraction, Newton felt that if a believer in Christ missed a performance of the music, there was something better:

*"But they who love the Redeemer, and therefore delight to join in his praise, if they did not find it convenient, or think it expedient, to hear the Messiah at Westminster, may comfort themselves with the thought, that, in a little time, they shall be still more abundantly gratified. Ere long death shall rend the veil which hides eternal things from their view, and introduce them to that unceasing song and universal chorus, which are even now performing before the throne of God and Lamb. Till then, I apprehend, that true Christians, without the assistance of either vocal or instrumental music, may find greater pleasure in a humble contemplation on the words of the Messiah, than they can derive from the utmost efforts of musical genius ... There is no harmony to a heaven-born soul like that which is the result of the combination and coincidence, of all the Divine Attributes and perfections, manifested in the work of redemption .... There is no melody upon earth to be compared with the voice of the blood of Jesus speaking peace to a guilty conscience, or with the voice of the Holy Spirit applying the promises to the heart."*

But again, I stress that Newton was not censuring Handel's *Messiah* or prohibiting church members from attending. On the contrary, in his final sermon in the series, noting that he may appear to have been harsh and critical, he acknowledged that others thought differently from him and said, "...permit me to hope and to pray, that the next time you hear the *Messiah*, God may bring something that you have heard in the course of these sermons, nearly connected with the peace and welfare of your souls, effectually to your remembrance."

My prayer is the same.