

Handel's Messiah

December 7, 2017

Program Notes

by Tom Strini ©2017

"I can still vividly recall my first experience of Handel's Messiah: in middle school, I accidentally wandered into a community chorus rehearsal and begged them to let me join. My voice hadn't dropped yet, so my first performance of Messiah was singing the alto parts in the chorus! As famous as the work is and as much as I've heard it over the years, it still feels fresh to me and I never get tired of the amazing musical journey.

Handel is one of the few composers who I would definitely want to join for a beer. His genius as a composer was matched by his generosity and love of humanity as he would frequently donate his profits from performances to local charities. For me, his Messiah is the single greatest artistic response to the life of Jesus because he focuses on the human aspect of the story. The joy, love, doubt, anger, fear, and faith felt by the characters in the story are compellingly represented in the music and the drama unfolds so forcefully that we become a part of the story."

— Francesco Lecce-Chong

GEORG FRIDERIC HANDEL (1685–1759)

Messiah, HWV 56 [1742]

Libretto by Charles Jennens

In addition to the four solo voices and chorus, this work is scored for two oboes, two bassoons, two trumpets, timpani, harpsichord, organ, and strings. First performed by the Eugene Symphony in December 1970 under the direction of Royce Saltzman, and last performed in December 2005 under the direction of Giancarlo Guerrero. Performance time is approximately 110 minutes excluding one intermission.

In December of 2013, Christopher Seaman led the Milwaukee Symphony Chorus and Orchestra in the annual performances of Handel's Messiah. Francesco Lecce-Chong, then the MSO's assistant conductor, was there.

"Everything I know about Messiah, the germ of all of this, was there," Lecce-Chong said, in a recent interview.

Seaman conducted from the harpsichord, as Handel would have in Dublin at the first performance, April 13, 1742, and as Lecce-Chong will December 7, 2017, in Eugene.

Lecce-Chong did not let it go at that. When he determined to lead a Seaman-style Messiah, he arranged to spend a day with the London-based conductor when he was in America. They met in Rochester, N.Y., in 2015. For eight hours, they worked through the score together. Lecce-Chong left that session with a deeper understanding of the music and how to present it.

"It's been a year-long process," Lecce-Chong said. He referred not only to learning the harpsichord part well enough to be comfortable both playing and conducting, but also to incorporating Seaman's judicious edits of the score and thinking of how to achieve Seaman's level of focus, clarity, transparency, and drama.

Part of it involves conducting and rehearsal technique. Part of it is conceptual and philosophical.

"We had a long talk about embodying the essences of the three parts of the oratorio and the role of the chorus," Lecce-Chong said. "In Part 1, they're angels. In Part 2, God comes down to earth, and they're humans—it's the chorus as *us*. In Part 3, they're the souls in Paradise."

Sharon Paul, director of the Eugene Symphony Chorus (and Director of Choral Activities at the University of Oregon), must prepare her 100 or so

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singers to play those roles. And, of course, hit those thousands of notes.

"The piece is harder than it looks," she said, in a separate interview. "I like clean articulation, and it's really hard for 100 people to sing those fast 16th-notes with the precision they require."

Like Lecce-Chong, Paul won't take anything for granted or rely on routine in her approach to this very familiar seasonal piece.

"In general, people are always happy to sing it, even if they've sung it a million times," she said. "But I always try to dig deeper into the score, to get at the Baroque rhetoric in the musical gestures."

She cited, as an example, "All We Like Sheep," the ditty gambol that takes the treble voices astray in all directions. They aren't just notes. They paint a picture.

Another part of preparing the chorus is setting them up for success when Lecce-Chong takes over during the final rehearsals and performance.

"I enjoy collaboration," she said. "I enjoy preparing for someone else, and then watching the music evolve. In rehearsal, I give them different ways to sing the same passage. The singers have to be flexible."

The audience might have to be open to new ideas, too. You may have attended performances of *Messiah* in which everyone stands for the "Hallelujah" chorus. Lecce-Chong invites you to stay seated this time and experience it anew. He has his reasons.

"In asking people to remain seated for the 'Hallelujah' chorus, I am inviting us all to let go of the presumption of what's to come. Be captivated by this work, as its very first audiences were, and gripped by the drama that unfolds on stage."

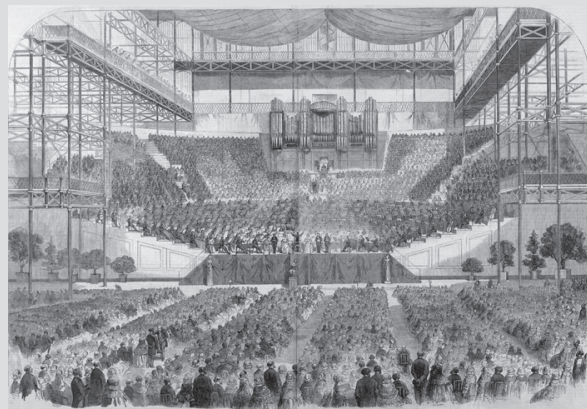
"Hallelujah," the most famous choral number in Western music, closes Part 2 of the oratorio. But it's only Part 2, the earthly, human part, with the Passion, crucifixion and conflicted human feelings around those events. We haven't arrived in Paradise. In Lecce-Chong's view, making too much commotion at "Hallelujah" time—which, remember,

has to do with Easter and the Resurrection, not with Christmas and the Nativity—breaks the momentum.

"That's what I love about Part 2," Lecce-Chong said. "The people constantly change their minds about Christ. The oratorio can't end there. If the audience stands, 'Hallelujah' takes on a different meaning. It's too final. Plus, focus is distracted and we have a hard time even hearing the beginning of the movement!"

Standing during that number, the 44th of 53 in the complete score (and the 39th of 47 in this performance), is traditional but not authentic. Critic Michael Guerrieri, in a very entertaining *Boston Globe* piece from 2009, surveyed the many theories behind that tradition. The most often cited is that King George II, at the London premiere in 1743, stood for the chorus. When the king stood, everyone stood, and it became customary. But according to Guerrieri, the only evidence favoring that theory comes from someone claiming, 37 years later, to have been present for the occurrence. Otherwise, there is no record of the king even attending the London premiere.

(Continued on page 32)



A gargantuan *Messiah* production in 1857 in London's Crystal Palace. *Messiah* performances of this nature became all the rage in 19th-century England.

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Program Notes

(Continued from page 31)

Lecce-Chong thinks standing might have to do with the churchly practice of standing for hymn-singing. Which recalls the confusion and controversy that wafted about Messiah, despite its vast popularity in England in the 18th century: Is it liturgical or is it secular?

In Messiah, Handel takes the universally known life of Jesus and brings out the human element in the story. We feel the joy, love, pain, anger, and confusion of the people—it's no wonder that the work inspires both Christians and non-Christians alike!

Despite Handel's objections, much of his audience and many still today assume the work to be liturgical. When the London premiere of Messiah was announced at Covent Garden (one of the most famous concert venues in the city), a scathing op-ed in one of the major papers denounced the excitement: "An Oratorio either is an Act of Religion, or it is not. If it is one I ask if the Playhouse is a fit Temple to perform it, or a Company of Players fit Ministers of God's Word."

To understand how Handel conceived of his Messiah as a musical drama intended for concert performance, let's back up a bit in music history.

Handel settled in England in 1712, on the heels of the great European success of his opera, *Rinaldo*, composed during an extended stay in Italy.

Italian opera, sung in Italian by Italians, was all the rage throughout Europe. But it was slow to gain a footing in England. Nonsensical English translations, English singers with no feel for Italian style, and, worse, mixed Italian-English casts singing in two languages made the medium look and sound silly. Handel cannily saw opportunity in England for someone who could do Italian opera right. He imported singers, established a company, and made a great deal of money composing and producing Italian-language opera in London.

By the 1730s, that business sagged. Competition from John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, a smash hit in 1728, made Handel's companies look effete and foreign. Gay and a raft of imitators put on rough-

and-tumble shows in English and reset popular songs of the day. *The Beggar's Opera* openly satirized the upper classes and the Italian opera they adored. Handel continued to stage opera in London until 1741, but knew that he needed another mode.

He turned to English-language oratorio, which

—Francesco Lecce-Chong

answered all the criticisms about the decadence of Italian opera and was high-minded enough to distinguish the genre from *The Beggar's Opera* and its successors. Oratorios could be put on in theaters or in churches at lower expense than full-blown opera. But the music was the key: Handel retained the musical conventions—minus the castrati—of Italian opera, and, more importantly, the dramatic, evocative music of his earlier operas.

The formula worked brilliantly, especially in the case of Messiah, his sixth oratorio. By the mid-19th century, Messiah, originally performed with a chorus of 16 boy sopranos and 16 adult singers, became a Romantic spectacle with hundreds of choristers and orchestra players at Easter time in England. In 20th-century America, choruses from the most modest church group to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir took it up as a Christmas staple.

Lecce-Chong spoke to Messiah's universal appeal: "The popularity of Messiah among people of all backgrounds and ages from around the world speaks to Handel's ability to portray the human condition. Handel had a strong sense of empathy for those around him as he consistently donated proceeds from his performances to charities throughout his life. In Messiah, Handel takes the universally known life of Jesus and brings out the human element in the story. We feel the joy, love, pain, anger, and confusion of the people—it's no wonder that the work inspires both Christians and non-Christians alike!" 🌿

Historical sources:

Matthew Guerrieri, "Taking a Stand," *Boston Globe*, Dec. 19, 2009; University of Michigan Student Projects, *Beggar's Opera: Seen and Heard International*, Interview with Christopher Seaman, Dec. 7, 2016; Wikipedia pages on Handel and Messiah; *Eighteenth Century Reception of Italian Opera in London*, by Kaylyn Kinder, master's thesis, University of Louisville, 2013.