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## Handel's Messiah:A Heaven on Earth

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## Handel's Messiah: A Heaven on Earth

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* has been an oratorio that has attracted me to its music since the beginning of high school. Every year in December my high school performs selections from *Messiah* as a community event. In my sophomore year of high school my chorus class studied *Messiah* and its origins. [I feel that] Handel's work is attractive to me because it gives life to Biblical events. I have never read the Holy Bible straight through, but I have learned that Handel took the exact words from the Holy Bible and put them to music to create his *Messiah*. This particular oratorio still has relevant messages for our world today because it is timeless. The oratorio, *Messiah*, can speak to those who may not understand words on a page, but receive them when to music."

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# Handel's *Messiah*: A Heaven on Earth

By: Erin Hurd

## Introduction

George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* has been an oratorio that has attracted me to its music since the beginning of high school. Every year in December my high school performs selections from *Messiah* as a community event. In my sophomore year of high school my chorus class studied *Messiah* and its origins. [I feel that] Handel's work is attractive to me because it gives life to Biblical events. I have never read the Holy Bible straight through, but I have learned that Handel took the exact words from the Holy Bible and put them to music to create his *Messiah*. This particular oratorio still has relevant messages for our world today because it is timeless. The oratorio, *Messiah*, can speak to those who may not understand words on a page, but receive them when to music.

Handel's *Messiah* is a very powerful oratorio because it has a historic and biblical context that makes it timeless so that it is both a landmark of the past and a classic that is well known to the present day. It is also known that Handel composed this piece in twenty-four days, a feat that is unusual for the creation of any artistic work. The oratorio has had significant success in the past, and that has an effect on how it is perceived in the modern day. The story of Christ as our savior has meaning to Christians all over the globe and because of this Handel's work has become famous and celebrated everywhere. It is significant among all oratorios because it relates messages essential to understanding

the telling of the Birth, Life, Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Second Coming of Christ. Handel reinforces the greatest teachings of the Bible with messages of glory and praise to the God that has allowed us to be filled with the hope that the Lord will return and create a Heaven on Earth.

### **Discussion of Music**

To discuss the music in *Messiah*, it needs to be established that Handel's *Messiah* is an oratorio, and not an opera. The main difference between the two comes historically from the Church's prohibition of performances of operas during Lent. An oratorio is an opera essentially without staging or costumes, including large chorus numbers. It has action although the audience does not see it as it would in an opera. According to Donald Burrows, a scholar of Handel's work, Handel was one of the very first composers to really define English oratorios with *Esther* in 1732, followed by *Deborah* and *Athalia* in 1733.

There are three major sections in Handel's *Messiah*. Part I is known as The Prophecy and Fulfillment of the Nativity. "The first part dramatizes the great expectancy in Israel for the promised Messiah" (Mansfield). Mansfield further notes that the first part draws upon a few different prophecies of the Old Testament that foretell the coming of the Messiah. Part II is entitled The Passion and the Resurrection. This section includes Jesus' death as well as his second coming which eventually leads to the Hallelujah Chorus. Many mistake this magnificent piece as the end of the oratorio; however, Handel

included a third part known as The Resurrection of All Mankind to the Glory of God. In Part III the oratorio focuses on what the people represent. “These relate to things of individual hope and...personal triumph of those who have accepted the message of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Mansfield 8). Handel created Part III so that he could peacefully wrap up the end without leaving any element unsettled.

### **Part I**

Every oratorio opens with an overture which acts as a preview of what the entire oratorio will sound like. Handel’s *Messiah* is no different, opening with its own unique overture. Daniel Block, a professor of Old Testament, states that Handel’s opening creates “a mood without hope” for the audience. Block comments that the overture accurately represents the Biblical texts of Isaiah chapters 1 through 39. These chapters relate how the people of Jerusalem first rebel against God and then realizing their sins, despair because it is too late. Block explains that Handel may have composed his oratorio to reflect despair “giving way to light and hope.” Handel demonstrates this by composing a downcast and dreary opening. The overture is the expression of despair that Block refers to; however, Part I brings hope to the people.

The first recitative of the oratorio changes the mood and tone dramatically by representing the quotations pulled from chapter 40 of Isaiah. In this chapter an unknown seer is communicating with God and giving the people a commission involving the following: comfort the people, speak consoling words to Jerusalem, and proclaim good

news. Here we see the prophet actually acting as a herald for God, clearing His way so that He may lead his people back from Babylon. We can hear a great difference in the music of this recitative, “Comfort Ye My People,” compared with the overture. This song is written for a tenor voice which is high and unrestrained, sounding as if it is floating and resonating. Handel composed the overture in E minor, and to make a dramatic difference wrote “Comfort Ye My People” in E major. His recitative focuses on the ringing voice of the tenor as well as the string instruments. Handel uses lengthy whole notes and creates a piece that raises the spirits of his listeners and symbolically raises the hopes and spirits of the people of Jerusalem who have been in despair.

Handel continues with this uplifting mood and tone in the first aria of *Messiah*, “Ev’ry Valley Shall Be Exalted.” The words for this aria also come from Isaiah. They relate to the people the coming of the Lord. This piece announces that no mountain or valley shall stand in the way of the coming of the Messiah. This aria for tenor is very upbeat, lighthearted, and the strings are featured to create a bouncy and light mood. Handel composed this piece in the key of E major just as he did the recitative because the recitative leads right into the aria without breaking off. Despite the fact that the first recitative and aria are in the same key, each is unique in itself.

The first part of *Messiah* recognizes the proclamation of the coming of the Lord. The prophecies announce that the coming Messiah will have great power and establish a glorious rule. The people of Jerusalem express their disappointment with the weak-

looking Nazarene that was sent to them. The people do not believe that this man is the savior that God intended for them. H.P. Mansfield, a scholar of religion, states that the Pastoral Symphony displays this calm and slow state of disappointment and despair of the people once again. However, the peace and slow manner of the music is broken by the recitative of an Angel proclaiming that he brings good tidings. This leads to the mighty chorus of "Glory to God." The harmonies in this piece are remarkable and the tone changes with the words of the song. The men sing "and peace on earth" in a very low and solemn tone. Then the chorus breaks out again in a triumphant "good will towards men." This piece changes the tone and mood from the overture and the lyrics relate the hope of the people of Jerusalem.

Part I continues to tell how the Lord then travels through Judea and calls upon those who have committed many sins. He tries to teach them and help them learn so that they can be forgiven their sins and be at peace. "His Yoke is Easy and His Burthen is Light," is the example of how the Lord is trying to reach out to the people. The song opens with the sopranos presenting a very light and airy sounding piece of music. This song accentuates the oboe in the orchestra throughout its length and we get the message from the sound of the song that the Lord is peaceful and is reaching out to the people of Jerusalem so that their sins may be forgiven. The song ends with a decrescendo which ends the piece and also end Part I.

## **Part II**

We learn in Part II that the Jewish people have rejected the Messiah because they see him as a weak and lowly Messiah. At this point in the oratorio, the Messiah is recognized as the Lamb of God taking upon himself the sin of the world. He can only attain power and strength in his ascension to Heaven. Handel composes this in “Behold the Lamb of God.” The tone and mood of the music are dramatically changed from “His Yoke is Easy, His Burthen is Light” which ended Part I. This part of the music is much slower and again it features the oboe beneath the chorus. The soprano voices seem almost to be crying in the beautiful notes that they sing and the song overall seems to be very sad and somber just as the overture is.

The Lord’s suffering and grief are told in a few of the choruses and solos in Part II. “He Was Despised And Rejected Of Men” is an aria for alto, which accurately reflects the pain and suffering that the Lord feels; he was a Messiah sent from God and his feelings become very apparent in this particular aria. The alto voice is very clear and low so that it delivers the lyrics in a very objective and unaffected way.

According to Mansfield, “Christ’s mission was to open a way from sin and death for all who would accept him” (5). In order to do this, Christ had to submit himself to power of death. The very somber and solemn undertone of the beginning of Part II is representative of the great burdens that the Lord had to carry. The music changes as more and more action takes place. Its sound becomes more intense and dramatic to represent

the scorn and rejection of the Messiah by the people of Jerusalem. The chorus, “Lift Up Your Heads, O Ye Gates,” praises God for bringing Jesus back from the grave. There is an obvious tone of joy and triumph in this chorus number reflecting hope in the people once again. The beginning of this song brings back themes and elements of “Glory to God” from Part I. However, at his second coming, Christ is rejected once again by the people. “Why Do the Nations so Furiously Rage,” “He That Dwelleth in Heaven,” and “Thou Shalt Break Them With an Iron Rod,” express the rejection and confusion that the people of the world have towards the returned Messiah. However, the people soon find out that he has come back as a mighty ruler and they rejoice in the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

The “Hallelujah Chorus” is a magnificent and glorious piece that is celebrated throughout the world. It is majestic, royal and triumphant. The music is uplifting and indescribable featuring the brass announcing the greatness of the Lord and his reign on earth. This song proclaims the omnipotence of the Lord. Handel does justice to this with the music to celebrate this feeling and idea. The breakdown of the word ‘Hallelujah’ is first *praise* and then *Yah*, which is the Hebrew name of God; essentially, ‘Hallelujah’ means “praise Yahweh.” The “Hallelujah Chorus” is not merely a masterpiece of music, but it relates the greatest teachings of the Bible. This is why it is so compelling to listen to and learn from. Mansfield suggests that “the kingdoms of this world are literally to become the possession of Christ, and praises to his name as King of kings and Lord of lords are yet to ascend on high” (7). It has become a tradition in the performance of

*Messiah* that the audience stands in honor of the Lord himself and sings the “Hallelujah Chorus” along with the chorus of performers. This magnificent piece closes Part II leaving the audience full of spirit and a deep feeling of religious triumph; the “Hallelujah Chorus” also demonstrates the triumph and celebration of Jerusalem, for God has given her a powerful king and Lord.

### **Part III**

Part III presents personal triumphs of the people of Jerusalem. This section is the shortest; in it Handel was trying to bring his masterpiece to a close without leaving any element of the religious events open ended. In the third part he focuses on the individuals reflecting on the Messiah and how he has affected their lives. The Soprano sings a beautiful and slow aria, “I Know That My Redeemer Liveth.” Charles Jennens, the librettist of *Messiah*, took these words from Job chapter 19; they read: “He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.” Handel and Jennens collaborated in their work on the *Messiah* and their underlying message throughout has been that the Lord will return someday. They felt that we should be learning from these Biblical texts what will and should happen when the Lord does return. This is the purpose behind the composition of this oratorio.

The chorus, “Since By Man Came Death,” has a very eerie quality to it because it is written in A minor. Handel continues Part III with a recitative for bass followed by an aria. Handel closes his oratorio with “Worthy is the Lamb,” a chorus which contains a

triumphant and glorious sound. Handel composed this piece in a slow and melodic tempo, leaving the audience in serious thought of these past events as well as what may come in the future. The closing to *Messiah*, “Amen,” once again rejoices in the Lord and how he will succeed in the battle between good and evil, and will reign on earth as King.

## **Conclusion**

Handel’s *Messiah* tells of the Promise, Passion and the Triumph over Death in an oratorio, rather than an opera which would require staging, costumes and other theatrical elements. Charles Jennens chose fitting and appropriate words and Handel excellently fitted each music note to express adequately every syllable of every word. We do not need to see Handel’s *Messiah* to understand what events are taking place and what the underlying messages are. Handel uses his musical talent and genius to provide a masterpiece that will retell an important part of the Bible in a magnificent and majestic manner.

The underlying theme that is emphasized throughout the entire work is that people still continue to believe and follow God and the Lord Jesus Christ today by practicing religion. Handel’s *Messiah* is successful because it delivers Biblical messages and lessons through very beautiful music. Handel creates magnificent music and songs that tell the tale of the coming of the Lord. He also leads his audience into a better understanding of the Biblical messages of glory and praise to the Lord. “Glory to God,” “Lift Up Your Heads, O Ye Gates,” the “Hallelujah Chorus” and “Worthy is the Lamb” are the most

significant pieces of this masterpiece because they reflect triumph and glory. The trumpets and resonating voices of the choir in combination with the orchestra make these particular pieces stand out not only musically but also because they find the most significant meaning in the coming of the Lord. Handel has created a work that lifts the spirits of all who hear his music and also brings hope to many because of the magnificence of his conception. By the end of *Messiah* we are left to wonder what our future world will be like and when the Lord will return to rule as “King of kings and Lord of lords.” I believe that this was ultimately Handel’s purpose in composing such a masterpiece; to make his audience think of and appreciate the Biblical meaning of the story he retells with his magnificent music.

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