

**!f** London  
Handel  
Festival

# **MESSIAH HWV 56**

**George Frideric Handel**

**St George's Church, Hanover Square  
Thursday 1 December  
7:00pm**

Most of Handel's English oratorios are dramas about Old Testament or Classical heroes. Messiah is an exception, being a setting of words, verbatim, from the Bible. It is not unique in this respect: *Israel in Egypt*, composed in 1739 (and performed at the last London Handel Festival) was also a setting of Biblical passages.

But *Messiah* has a further exceptional quality: its libretto was sent to, rather than commissioned by, Handel. Normally Handel would choose a subject or a libretto and find a poet to beat it into a musical shape: he did this with Nicola Haym in the early 1720s and with the Reverend Thomas Morell in the 1740s and 1750s. With Charles Jennens, however, he had a slightly different relationship. In 1739 Handel asked Jennens to write a third section (*Il Moderato*) to the adaptation of Milton's poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* by Jennens' good friend James Harris. But before this, Jennens had asked Handel to set his libretto of *Messiah*.

Jennens was a life-long admirer of Handel: he had an enormous collection of the composer's music (and lent Handel scores of other composers' music); he went to every Handel performance he could during his winter sojourns in London, and he even commissioned Thomas Hudson to paint that famous portrait of Handel. The admiration was mutual: Handel left Jennens two pictures from his noteworthy collection; his letters, as we will see below, show the warmest regard for Jennens; and furthermore, Jennens was one of the very few people whose musical criticisms Handel would accept. It was natural

that Jennens should turn to Handel to set his compilation of Old and New Testament passages telling the life of Christ: for the best librettist (God Almighty), one should have the best composer. As he wrote to his friend Edward Holdsworth,

'Handel says he will do nothing next Winter, but I hope I shall persuade him to set another Scripture Collection I have made for him, & perform it for his own Benefit in Passion Week. I hope he will lay out his whole genius & Skill upon it, that the Composition may excell all his former Compositions, as the Subject excells every other Subject. The Subject is *Messiah*.'

Jennens himself was deeply religious, and believed firmly in the importance of the mysteries of revelation, resurrection and redemption. He was filled with concern at the rise of Deism, which argued the mystery out of Christianity: reason was all you needed; revelation was irrelevant. God created the universe; He had no need to act in it through history and miracles. Deism pounded the pillars of Christianity which Jennens felt should remain untouchable. *Messiah* was Jennens' refutation of Deism, and his restatement of the centrality of mystery.

The oratorio is in three parts, corresponding with the three mysteries mentioned above: revelation, resurrection and redemption. Most of the text of *Messiah* comes from the Old Testament, which is to be expected for the first part, the prophecies of Christ's coming. To describe Christ's birth, however, Jennens mingles passages from the Gospels with more Old Testament prophecies, highlighting

the reciprocity of the two Testaments. The third part is largely taken from St Paul, but starts with a passage from Job; the two Pauline passages in the second part, 'How beautiful are the feet' and 'Their sound is gone out', are Paul's own quotations from the Psalms and Isaiah - showing the connexion between Old and New Testaments which the Deists would disconnect.

Handel started setting Messiah in 1739, but laid it aside when he decided that he needed something of 'gayer turn' for that season - l'Allegro. He returned to Messiah eighteen months later, composing it in twenty-four days in August and September 1741. Handel took it with him to Dublin, performing it, for charity, on 13th April 1742. This was not what Jennens had planned - he thought that Handel 'would be a year about it,' and perform it in London during Lent; he was, not surprisingly, a little peeved. As he wrote to Holdsworth,

'he has made a fine Entertainment of it, tho' not near so good as he might & ought to have done. I have with great difficulty made him correct some of the grossest faults in the composition, but he retain'd his Overture obstinately, in which there are some passages far unworthy of Handel, but much more unworthy of the Messiah.'

Dublin audiences disagreed, and Handel wrote to Jennens of the excitement 'his' oratorio had caused:

'The Nobility did me the Honour to make among themselves a Subscription for 6 Nights, which did fill a Room of 600 Persons, so that I needed not sell one single Ticket at the Door, without Vanity the

Performance was received with a general Approbation.'

Jennens' implication that Handel did not take Messiah seriously enough was unfair.

Handel's speed in composing Messiah was not a sign of shallowness, for his best operas were composed in similarly short periods. Handel revised Messiah at various points, which was quite normal for him, but he was also receptive to Jennens' emendations, suggesting that he himself wanted the work to be the best it could: the changes were improvements, and not just variants to suit different singers. Handel felt very sincerely about the subject matter: from what we know of his own personal beliefs, he agreed with Jennens about the centrality of mystery - this suffuses his music. He signed off the manuscript SDG (Solo Deo Gloria, 'To God alone be glory').

Handel performed Messiah thirty-six times; it became a fund-raiser for the Foundling Hospital, to which he bequeathed his score and parts. It is, of course, his most performed work, and ironic that it is the chief reason for Jennens' own fame. Jennens himself vowed that 'I will put no more sacred words into his hands, to be thus abus'd', but he soon relented, and included various Biblical passages in Belshazzar two years later - perhaps he was not so disappointed with Messiah after all.

Katie Hawks

## PART ONE

1. Sinfonia
2. Comfort ye my people (tenor-recit)
3. Ev'ry valley shall be exalted (tenor-air)
4. And the glory of the Lord (chorus)
5. Thus saith the Lord (bass-recitative)
6. But who may abide the day of his coming (alto-air)
7. And he shall purify (chorus)
8. Behold, a virgin shall conceive (alto-recitative)
9. O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion (alto-air and chorus)
10. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth (bass-recitative)
11. The people that walked in darkness (bass-air)
12. For unto us a child is born (chorus)
13. Pifa (Pastoral Symphony)
- 14a) There were shepherds abiding in the field (soprano-recitative)
- 14b) And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them (soprano-recitative)
15. And the angel said unto them (soprano-recitative)
16. And suddenly there was with the angel (soprano-recitative)
17. Glory to God (chorus)
18. Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion (soprano-air)
19. Then shall the eyes of the blind (alto-recitative)
20. He shall feed his flock (alto-soprano-air)
21. His yoke is easy, and his burthen is light (chorus)

## PART TWO

22. Behold the lamb of God (chorus)
23. He was despised (alto-air)
24. Surely he hath borne our griefs

- (chorus)
25. And with his stripes we are healed (chorus)
26. All we like sheep have gone astray (chorus)
27. All they that see him laugh him to scorn (tenor-recitative)
28. He trusted in God (chorus)
29. Thy rebuke hath broken his heart (tenor-recitative)
30. Behold, and see if there be any sorrow (tenor-air)
31. He was cut off out of the land of the living (soprano-recitative)
32. But thou didst not leave his soul in hell (soprano-air)
33. Lift up your heads, O ye gates (chorus)
34. Unto which of the angels said he at any time (tenor-recitative)
35. Let all the angels of God worship him (chorus)
36. Thou art gone up on high (alto-air)
37. The Lord gave the word (chorus)
38. How beautiful are the feet (soprano-air)
39. Their sound is gone out (chorus)
40. Why do the nations so furiously rage together? (bass-air)
41. Let us break their bonds asunder (chorus)
42. He that dwelleth in heaven (tenor recitative)
43. Thou shalt break them (tenor-air)
44. Hallelujah (chorus)

## PART THREE

45. I know that my redeemer liveth (soprano-air)
46. Since by man came death (chorus)
47. Behold, I tell you a mystery (bass-recitative)

48. The trumpet shall sound (bass-air)  
49. Then shall be brought to pass  
(alto-recitative)  
50. O death, where is thy sting?  
(Alto-tenor duet)  
51. But thanks be to God (chorus)  
52. If God be for us (soprano-air)  
53. Worthy is the Lamb that was slain  
(chorus)

## **BIOGRAPHIES**

### **HILARY CRONIN | SOPRANO**

Selected by BBC Music Magazine as a Rising Star of 2022, Hilary Cronin won First Prize and the Audience Prize at the 2021 London Handel International Singing Competition.

Engagements during 2021 / 2022 included *Télaïre Castor et Pollux* with The Rameau Project, J. S. Bach *St John Passion* with VOCES8, *Messiah* with English Chamber Orchestra, *Handel Silete venti* for the London Handel Festival, a *Handel Gala* with Bath Minerva Choir, *Haydn Stabat Mater* with Istante Baroque, *Ode to Purcell* on tour with Freiburg Baroque Orchestra, *Telemann Cantatas* on tour with Solomon's Knot and Vaughan Williams *Benedicite* with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Current engagements include include *Poppea Agrippina* with English Touring Opera, tours of J. S. Bach *B Minor Mass*, *Christmas Oratorio* and *Music of Consolation – Music by J. S. Bach*, *Schein and Schütz* with The English Baroque Soloists, *Blow and Purcell* with The English Concert, *Fauré Requiem* at Teatro La Fenice, *Handel Chandos Anthems* with Arcangelo, *Messiah*

with the Irish Baroque Orchestra, the London Mozart Players and The Sixteen, *Mendelssohn A Midsummer Night's Dream* with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, a recording for La Nuova Musica as *Second Woman Dido and Aeneas* and a recital at the 2023 Halle Handel Festival.

### **ALEXANDER CHANCE | COUNTERTENOR**

Alexander Chance was a Choral Scholar and read Classics at New College, Oxford. Recent solo appearances include a recital in Paris's Salle Cortot of *Vivaldi's Stabat Mater* and other baroque works, with Les Accents and Thibault Noally; *Britten's Canticles* with Ian Bostridge and Julius Drake at the Ravenna Festival; *Bach's St John Passion* with John Eliot Gardiner and the English Baroque Soloists (recorded for Deutsche Grammophon); *Bach's B Minor Mass* with Masaaki Suzuki and Bach Collegium Japan; works by *Purcell and Handel* with Kristian Bezuidenhout and Freiburger Barockorchester; *Handel's Messiah* with orchestras such as the Academy of Ancient Music, the London Handel Players and the Instruments of Time and Truth; regular appearances with ensembles such as Arcangelo and Jonathan Cohen, Vox Luminis and Lionel Meunier, and La Nuova Musica and David Bates; 2021 saw Alexander's stage debut as Oberon in The Grange Festival's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in 2022 he featured in several stage roles at the Vache Baroque Festival. In 2022, he became the first countertenor to win the International Handel Singing Competition, also

winning the Audience Prize. 2023 highlights include performing the role of Tolomeo in English Touring Opera's production of Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, and a tour of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* with Freiburger Barockorchester and Vox Luminis.

## **RUAIRI BOWEN | TENOR**

A graduate of King's College, Cambridge, and a finalist in the 2020 International Handel Singing Competition, Ruairi Bowen has collaborated with some of the leading conductors in the Baroque field including Emmanuelle Haïm, Sir John Eliot Gardiner and Stephen Layton. An experienced Evangelist of Bach's Passions, Ruairi Bowen made his debuts at Wigmore Hall, Bachfest Leipzig and Snape Maltings with Solomon's Knot, with whom he most recently sang J. S. Bach's Christmas Oratorio at London's Wigmore Hall.

He sang in the world premiere and recording of Stanford's *Mass Via Victrix* with BBC NOW conducted by Adrian Partington, and his wider engagements have included Dvorak's *Requiem* with the Philharmonia Orchestra at Three Choirs Festival, Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in Worcester Cathedral and Vaughan Williams' *A Cotswold Romance* with Lebanese Philharmonic Orchestra.

Current engagements include *The Indian Queen* with Le Concert d'Astrée in Caen, Antwerp and Luxembourg, J. S. Bach *B Minor Mass* with Opole Philharmonic and *Christmas Oratorio* with Britten Sinfonia, *Motets* with Solomon's Knot and *St John Passion* with Polyphony, *The Creation* with the

Hanover Band and Vaughan Williams *Sancta Civitas* with Oxford Bach Choir.

His recordings further include participation in *Proud Songsters*, an album of English Solo Song with Simon Lepper.

## **FELIX KEMP | BARITONE**

A Finalist at the 2021 London Handel International Singing Competition and A Britten-Pears Young Artist, Felix Kemp's recent engagements have included *Songs by Schubert* (arranged by Brahms) for the Royal Scottish National Orchestra's Spring 2021 Digital Season, *Luke Styles' Awakening Shadow* at the Cheltenham and Presteigne Festivals, *Verdi Requiem* at Winchester Cathedral, *Recitals* with Roderick Williams through Barbara Hannigan's *Momentum: Our Future*, *Now initiative* and recording Robert Fürstenthal's *Die Sonnengesang des Heiligen Franz von Assisi* for *Toccatà Classics*.

Highlights of his engagements in 2022 / 2023 include *Papageno The Magic Flute* for the Dorset Opera Festival, *Adham* in the world premiere of Will Todd's *Migrations* for Welsh National Opera, his debut at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, as *Flemish Deputy Don Carlo*, the *B Minor Mass* with Opole Philharmonic, the *St John Passion* with Bournemouth Symphony Chorus, *Messiah* with the London Handel Orchestra, *Silent Noon* (*Songs by Ireland, Philips, Vaughan Williams and Watkins*) at the Presteigne Festival and *A Celebration of the Britten Pears Young Artist Programme at 50* at Snape Maltings.

Previous highlights have included Don Fernando Fidelio for Lyric Opera, Dublin, Giove La Calisto for Longborough Festival Opera, Le Brigadier in Hérold's Le Pré aux Clercs at the Wexford Festival, Marchese d'Obigny La traviata as an Opera Holland Park Young Artist, Melot Tristan und Isolde for Grange Park Opera, J. S. Bach Lutheran Mass and Mozart Requiem with the Israel Camerata, the 2021 Leeds Castle Open Air Classical Concert with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, An Obsession with Hedonism – Baudelaire for the opening of the 2021 London Song Festival and, recitals with Simon Lepper at Rye Arts Festival and with Sholto Kynoch for Oxford Lieder.

He sings Juan in Nova Music Opera's recording of Joseph Phibbs' Juliana, now available on Resonus Classics CD, and his recordings further include Pierrot in Ethel Smyth's Fête Galante for Retrospect Opera and The Herald in Stanford's The Travelling Companion for SOMM Recordings.

### **London Handel Orchestra**

Conductor  
Adrian Butterfield

Violin I  
Naomi Burrell (leader)  
Diane Moore  
Kathryn Parry  
Maxim Del Mar

Violin II  
William Thorp  
Theresa Caudle  
Ellen O'Dell  
Laura Cochrane

Viola  
Rachel Byrt  
Peter Collyer

Cello  
Katherine Sharman  
Melanie Woodcock

Bass  
Carina Cosgrave

Oboe  
James Eastaway  
Mark Radcliffe

Bassoon  
Nathaniel Harrison

Trumpet  
Neil Brough  
Stephen Keavy

Timpani  
Benedict Hoffnung

Harpsichord & organ  
Alastair Ross

Organ & harpsichord provision & tuning  
Andrew Wooderson

Choir of St George's, Hanover Square

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