

Messiah is Here to Stay

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Messiah is Here to Stay!

As a piece that has permeated through many generations, George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* can be classified as a historical work. This historical work took only twenty-four days to write in the summer of 1741. Once the elapsed time of composition became known, many were surprised at how little time it took to write such a large work even though the short amount of time was a characteristic of his composing habits. "The shortness of this composition period was sometimes interpreted as a sign of specific religious inspiration... However, the composition of *Messiah* was typical of Handel's normal work pattern..."¹ Handel borrowed much of the material he used throughout the *Messiah* from his earlier compositions which also aided in explaining aspects of his quicker writing timeline. One example of this is in *For unto us a Child is Born*. Handel used *No, di voi non vo' fidarmi* as a basis for *For unto us a Child is Born*. This did create some controversy because "reusing a secular piece like *No, di voi non vo' fidarmi* only seems incongruous if we regard *Messiah* as being church music, which it was not,"² but it took many audience members time to realize this. Charles Jennens, writer of the libretto for *Messiah*, also felt that for the amount of time he had put into writing a quality libretto, Handel's musical quality did not compare. This put a strain on Handel and Jennens' relationship. Despite this conflict, the *Messiah* premiered April 13, 1742 in Dublin, Ireland. As the April date shows, the *Messiah* was intended for the Lent/Easter season, but today's society often performs this work during the Christmas season. Despite its longevity of being

¹ Donald Burrows, *Handel: Messiah* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 8.

² Richard Taruskin and Christopher Gibbs, *The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2013), 362.

successfully passed through generations, very few actual scores, specifically scores in Handel's original hand, have survived. The history leading up to the *Messiah*'s performance provides an aid with which modern performances have created accurate and consistent interpretations of Handel's original performances.

One of the main purposes that Handel had for writing the *Messiah* was that "during the six-week Lenten season before Easter [was] when theaters were forbidden to produce operas and operagoers had no place to go for such music."³ Handel wanted the society to still have music during these sacred times, and therefore he composed music! Although the *Messiah* was intended for Easter and Jennens used text from the Old and New Testament as well as the Book of Common Prayer, there is no set agreement on whether the *Messiah* was intended to be a direct relation to the story of Christ or a symbolic representation that could take on other meanings.

Dublin and London are the two initial and prominent locations in which the *Messiah* was performed. New Music Hall in Dublin, Ireland was graced with the *Messiah*'s premiere performance on April 13, 1742. The audience and critics in Dublin such as *The Dublin News Letter* on April 10, 1742 appeared to have enjoyed this piece of work. "Yesterday Morning, at the Musick Hall...there was a public rehearsal of the Messiah, Mr. Handel's new sacred Oratorio, which in the opinion of the best Judges, far surpasses anything of that Nature, which has been performed in this or any other Kingdom. The elegant Entertainment was conducted in the most regular Manner, and to the entire satisfaction of the most crowded and polite

³ Thomas Kelly, "George Frideric Handel, *Messiah*: Tuesday, April 13, 1742." In *First Nights*, edited by Thomas Kelly, (New Haven: Yale University, 2000), 65.

Assembly.”⁴ The *Messiah* had a positive reputation in Dublin, and all of this positive feedback contributed to Handel being nervous to attempt to move and replicate its success in London, England.

Despite these reservations, Handel took this production to London where he was not thrilled about presenting it because he did not expect to come away with the copious amounts of praise he was received in Dublin while in London. A way that Handel made an effort to positively draw in the London community was to give this piece of work a chance was by changing the name to *Messiah* and calling the oratorio ‘musical entertainment’ in an attempt to allow London to think that they were receiving something new. The first performance was in 1742 and named “A New Secret Oratorio” which was followed by “A Sacred Oratorio” in 1745. It wasn’t until 1749 “when the name *Messiah* appeared in print in London.”⁵ One reason the society in London did not approve of the *Messiah* was because they believed it was improper etiquette to perform sacred works in secular venues. Philalethes, an anonymous writer for the *Universal Spectator* in London stated the following in relation to performance venues: “I must again assert [that theaters are] very unfit for sacred Performances. Nor can it be defended as Decent, to use the same Place one Week as a Temple to perform a sacred Oratorio in, and the next as a Stage, to exhibit the Buffooneries of Harlequin.”⁶ This did cause some citizens from

⁴ Donald Burrows, *Handel: Messiah* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 17.

⁵ Kelly, Thomas. “George Frideric Handel, *Messiah*: Tuesday, April 13, 1742.” In *First Nights*, edited by Thomas Kelly, 60-107. New Haven: Yale University, 2000.

⁶ Calvin Stapert, *Handel's Messiah: Comfort for G-d's People*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2010).

London to feel a certain amount of animosity toward the *Messiah* being performed in venues around their city.

After hearing a performance in London, one letter from Jennens shares that he is frustrated with what Handel has done with the music and libretto: “Tis after all, in the main, a fine composition, notwithstanding some weak parts, which he was too idle and too obstinate to retouch...”⁷ The performances in the year of 1750 helped the London community begin to accept the *Messiah* because the large work was performed in Foundling Hospital. This performance also acted as an event to raise money for charity and would turn into a popular tradition of an annual event held at Foundling Hospital.

In the first years of its existence, the *Messiah* was never performed the same way from performance to performance and especially from venue to venue. Handel wrote the first version of the score and ever changed it before the first Dublin performance. This also happened when Handel was taking the production to London. Handel changed vocal parts based upon the soloist at the performance and added in miscellaneous items/parts he thought were missing. Soon, other composers began picking up Handel’s *Messiah* and writing arrangements, adding parts, and attempting to improve the initial simple score. Despite the original work that went into the *Messiah* by Handel and Jennens, these arrangements and constant changes, by others and Handel himself, do not make it easy to replicate performances in the current time yet the information we do have, makes it possible.

A modern day performance of the *Messiah*, entitled ‘Handel: *Messiah*’, was recorded by the Dunedin Consort & Players located in Edinburgh, United Kingdom. This was directed by

⁷ Donald Burrows, *Handel: Messiah* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 29.

John Butt and released November 27, 2006. A review by Stephen Eddins states that this “recording of Messiah by the Dunedin Consort is based on a reconstruction of the original version premiered in Dublin in 1742.”⁸ This becomes noticeable when the personal and style are examined.

In the recordings of *For unto us a Child is Born*, the audience is graced with many attempts at the Dublin performance. One example lies in the number of choral members used; this number is twelve which is the original number that Handel wrote for and performed in Dublin. These twelve singers fill up the sound of the hall with confident, accurate sounds. By listening to the recording, there appears to be a balance where the singers are more prominent than the orchestra. This seems logical based upon the historical knowledge of Handel’s writing because he had a tendency to compose choral works as opposed to orchestral works. In Dunedin Consort & Players version of *For unto us a Child is Born*, the harpsichord timbre is clearly present throughout. As the instrument parts are scored, the harpsichord appears to have its own part whereas the strings generally play together with similar motion and are written in harmony with each other. The style of this contemporary interpretation has a staccato sass to it. The Dunedin Consort & Players make clear efforts to replicate the first performance in Dublin.

Another example of a contemporary performance of the *Messiah* is by the London Symphony Orchestra from 1966 conducted by Sir Colin Davis. “This new version has an orchestra of 31 strings, two oboes, two bassoons, trumpets, tympani, harpsichord and chamber

⁸ “John Butt, Dunedin Consort, Handel: Messiah (Dublin Version, 1742)” Accessed September 24, 2013, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/release/handel-messiah-dublin-version-1742-mr0002133044>.

organ with a mixed choir of 40.”⁹ As the orchestration shows, this modern performance has quite a few more performers than were claimed to be in Handel’s original Dublin performance. This implies that although this performance can still make an attempt to replicate the early performances, this arrangement does not allow the London Symphony to accomplish a performance synonymous with the 1742 original in Dublin. This performance has a shared responsibility of balance between the instrumentalists and vocalists. The London Symphony’s interpretation allows the listener to clearly hear the brass parts and the additional exposed woodwind parts. Legato and connected can also be used to describe the style. Despite the orchestration difference, the London Symphony still makes an honest effort at being as similar to the 1742 version as allowed.

When comparing these two outstanding performances by the Dunedin Consort & Players and the London Symphony, there are more similarities than there are differences. For example, the presence of the harpsichord plays the same role of timekeeper and accompaniment driver throughout both performances. Vocally speaking, neither recording could truly capture the sound of the castrati that Handel so typically cast in his productions. Men and women’s voices can fill out a choir quite well, but the timbre is much different than a true castrati. Another difference is that the London Symphony took *For unto us a Child is Born* a few metronome clicks slower in comparison to the Dunedin Consort & Players. This tempo difference emphasized the Dunedin Consort and Players more articulate, staccato approach to the music and style. Both interpretations could be considered fair interpretations and an attempt at historical accuracy.

⁹ Yusup Himawan,, "Handel Messiah, by London symphony orchestra & Sir Colin Davis 1966." USS hancock. Accessed September 25, 2013. <http://usshancock.cu.cc/music/video/bEy1ktHTPaM/Handel-Messiah-by-London-Symphony-Orchestra-Sir-Colin-Davis-1966.html>.

By learning the history of the *Messiah*, groups are able to become more aware of the piece they are executing in performance. Despite hundreds of years of separation, groups that attempt to play the *Messiah* as it was originally intended are bridging a giant time gap and are also helping to preserve the universal language of music. The consistency across the board of performances but also differences in the Dunedin Consort & Players performance versus that by the London Symphony can be shown by the sound and performance comparisons of *For unto us a Child is Born*. While these two performances have enough similar characteristics to classify as both attempts at a 1742 performance, the differences highlight Handel's desire to keep adding and changing the *Messiah*. "His [Handel's] adaptable nature, his uncanny ability continually to remake himself and his works in response to the conditions and the opportunities that confronted him—that was Handel's great distinguishing trait."¹⁰ Although these recordings spanned different time periods and different geographical locations, they all had common elements that were made possible by the historical knowledge each group held about Handel's *Messiah*.

¹⁰ Richard Taruskin and Christopher Gibbs, *The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2013), 364.

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