

## HANDEL'S MESSIAH

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(In December Issue The Kiwanis Magazine)

The glorious music of the Messiah that gladdens the world at Christmastide was created out of the depths of despair and affliction. Handel was fifty-six years old, sick, destitute and apparently finished as a composer when the miracle occurred. The story of Handel's great oratorio is one of the most dramatic episodes in musical history. It is also a testament to the power of faith.

George Frederick Handel was the musical-prodigy son of a German barber. At twenty-five, after four triumphant years in Italy, he arrived in London, where he proceeded to compose and produce Italian operas. He wrote an incredible amount of music (of which his forty-four operas were only a small part) and he worked at such phenomenal speed that as soon as interest in one production began to wane, he was ready to stage another. For years Handel and his Italian operas were the rage of London. King George I was his host and patron. He was made director of the Royal Academy of Music and he became an English citizen.

But Handel had a talent for making enemies as well as friends in high places. Arrayed against him were many influential writers and the leaders of smart society. Gradually his fortunes declined—the public abandoned opera in favor of French farces and he lost his influence with the King. To ridicule Handelian music, rival impresarios filched his best-known melodies and staged a ruinous burlesque called The Beggar's Opera. One failure followed another in the theater and his creditors threatened him with prison. Finally, at fifty-two, Handel suffered a paralytic stroke from which he never fully recovered.

On the night of August 21, 1741, after wandering aimlessly through the streets of London, Handel returned to his flat in Hanover Square, feeling in his heart the bitterness of utter defeat. Nothing mattered now, for he had lost faith in his own ability. Mechanically going about his study to light the candles, he noticed a package on his desk. Beside it was an envelope addressed in a familiar hand. Charles Jennens, his librettist, it turned out had sent him a compilation of Scriptural texts called Messiah. Jennens hoped that perhaps Handel would find in it an inspiration for the new oratorio he had been planning.

A wealthy, conceited dilettante, Jennens had been a devoted friend through the composer's misfortunes and had written the librettos for his earlier oratorios, Saul and Israel in Egypt. Although Handel had only a meager knowledge of English, he knew that Jennens' rhymes were faulty and amateurish. Not even the best music could redeem them.

Warily he opened the new manuscript and began to read: Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for your God.

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

No lumbering verses these, he marveled, but poetry of power and wondrous beauty. He read on:

For behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, which is called the Lord.

Hallelujah! for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords; and He shall reign for ever and ever. Hallelujah!

And it was then that one of the great miracles of musical creation took place. Suddenly the harmonies of mighty choruses, the music of violins and organ and trumpet flooded the barren mind and heart of George Frederick Handel. He reached for his pen and began to stab the notes onto paper.

Night and day the music poured forth, always faster than the crippled fingers could capture the melodies and write them down. For three weeks Handel worked in such a fever of intensity that afterwards he was to confess: "Whether I was in my body or out of my body as I wrote it, I know not."

He slept at intervals, but never soundly—never out of hearing of the music that tormented him. His man-servant brought food from time to time, but usually returned to find the tray untouched. Peeping into the study, he would see Handel sitting motionless and staring into space, while tears dripped down his face and fell upon the paper. More than once he discovered his master with his head on his arms, his giant frame racked with sobs.

On September 14 he wrote the final note and autographed his work. The manuscript was a maze

of notes, blots and fierce erasures that only the master himself could decipher. But it was the imperishable music of the Messiah. Emotionally and physically exhausted, Handel stumbled to his bed and slept for seventeen hours.

He awoke refreshed. He had written all the bitterness out of his heart and, miraculously, his creative power had been so restored by the ordeal that within a few days he was able to fling himself into the composition of a new oratorio.

Handel could not bear the thought of submitting to a capricious society audience the sacred music that had been born of his own profound emotion. So at first he refused to present Messiah in London.

That fall he received from the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland an invitation to visit London and perform some of his music for that "generous and polite nation."

Handel accepted at once, and early in the winter he journeyed to Dublin, taking with him the oratorio and his own carefully selected soloists. The Messiah was saved until the very end of the season and, expecting the profits to be large, he announced that every penny would be used for the relief of men who had been imprisoned for debt.

For weeks he trained instrumentalists and the choir of boys and men from Dublin's two cathedrals. On April 13, 1742, in the Music Hall in Fishamble Street, a reverent and spellbound audience first heard the oratorio that now is loved throughout the world. The profits were more than 2,000, and Handel, whose misfortunes had brought him within the shadow of a debtor's prison, rejoiced that his music had been the means of freeing less fortunate men.

Back in England, he waited almost a year before he had the courage to offer Messiah to the London public. Finally, he advertised a series of performances to be given in March of 1743 at Covent Garden Theater.

Immediately his enemies launched a campaign of vilification that has had no parallel in musical history. Street urchins were hired to tear down his posters as fast as he could have them put up. To rob Handel of his audiences, society women organized balls and private concerts on the oratorio nights and pointedly sent invitations to Handel's faithful patrons. Theatergoers who could giggle over the lewd farces then current on the English stage raised hypocritical protests that Handel had profaned the Scripture by setting it to dramatic music. Bigots took up the cry. Branding the Messiah as sacrilegious, they tried to obtain an injunction against its performance on the grounds that Covent Garden was a place of worldly amusement. Clerics denounced the blasphemy of printing the word "Messiah" on a playbill, and until 1749 it was advertised only as "A Sacred Oratorio."

In the face of all this opposition, Handel went ahead with his plans, but each of the three performances in 1743 was a flat failure. He presented Messiah twice in 1745 and once again four years later, but with no more success.

It is an odd fact that during the first eight years of its existence, the oratorio which today fills every church or auditorium in which it is sung was heard with chilling indifference. Genuine music lovers must have appreciated the beauty of Messiah, but they were not numerous or powerful enough to overcome the pressure of bigotry and social ostracism.

If the gruff and sometimes ill-tempered Handel had been a less charitable person at heart, the rejected oratorio might have perished. But Handel, although a bachelor, loved children. He was one of the governors of London's Foundling Hospital, an institution devoted to "the reception, maintenance and education of exposed and deserted young children. When wealthy sponsors of the hospital contributed funds for a chapel, Handel promptly donated a splendid organ and offered to dedicate it on May 1, 1750, with a special performance of his "Sacred Oratorio."

The Foundling Hospital was a fashionable charity and on the day of the concert the chapel was crowded to its capacity of 1,000. Many had to be turned away. Here in the solemnity of the chapel, the music made so profound an impression that Handel was begged to repeat it.

Scorned for eight years, Messiah suddenly became London's best-loved oratorio—and the composer's most profitable work. The Church endorsed it, and eventually it was performed in Westminster Abbey with full orchestra and a choir of

500 voices. To Handel it seemed especially fitting that the music he had written to glorify the birth of a Babe in a manger should be consecrated to the welfare of homeless and unwanted infants. At least once a year, as long as he lived, he conducted Messiah for the Foundling Hospital, and from these concerts he contributed a total of more than \$35,000. For many years after his death, Messiah was the favorite composition for charities of all kinds. One writer of the time reported, "It fostered the orphan, fed the hungry, clothed the naked and relieved suffering more than any single musical production in any country in the world."

With the success of Messiah, Handel's star rose again. All his neglected compositions were brought out and London rediscovered her adopted genius. But Handel was

old and broken in health. His eyesight was failing and while writing Jephtha (the oratorio containing a chorus significantly titled "How Dark, O Lord, Are Thy Ways"), Handel went blind.

Despite the loss of his sight and his feeble health, Handel continued to compose and conduct. On April 6, 1759—when he was seventy-four—the aging genius was led to the organ at Covent Garden and there he directed Messiah for the last time. At the end of the concert he collapsed and was taken to his rooms and put to bed. Handel knew that posters were already up announcing that the traditional performance of Messiah for the Foundling Hospital would take place in the chapel on May 3, "under the direction of the author." But Handel knew he would not be present.

"I should like to die on Good Fri-

day," he said, "in the hope of joining my Lord and Saviour on the day of His Resurrection." And at midnight, as Good Friday passed into a new day, George Frederick Handel died.

He was buried with pomp and ceremony in Westminster Abbey. On the appointed day, as Handel would have wished, the audience gathered in the chapel of his beloved orphanage. There, under the direction of a trusted assistant, once again the immortal music proclaimed:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

### CREDITORS' NOTICE

All persons having claims against the estate of Claude Vernon Monroe, deceased, are hereby notified to file same duly verified, with the undersigned and those indebted to said estate will please make payment likewise.

MINNIE MONROE,  
Clinton, S. C.,  
CLAUDE B. MONROE,  
Newberry, S. C.,  
Executors of Estate.

Dec. 8, 1953 3p-24

**Dr. Felder Smith**  
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Phone 794



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