

# Handel's Messiah: A Timeless Testament of Faith and Music

By Andy Brierley, editor of *In-touch*

As we enter the Advent season, and find it increasingly difficult to leave the house without bumping into Cliff Richard and Mariah Carey, our minds may seek refuge in older musical traditions. Chief among these for me is *Messiah*, George Frederick Handel's magnum opus. This magnificent oratorio, composed in 1741, stands alone among Christmas music, continuing to inspire and uplift audiences nearly three centuries after its creation, despite being written for Easter by a composer at a low point in his career.

Handel, a German-born composer who had settled in London, was something of a busted flush when he conceived *Messiah*. Facing financial difficulties and declining public interest in his compositions, he needed a work that would reinvigorate his spirit and reputation. It was then that Charles Jennens, a devout Anglican and scholar, provided Handel with a libretto compiled entirely from Scripture, primarily the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer.

What followed was nothing short of extraordinary. In just 24 days, Handel composed the entire oratorio – a feat that many, including Handel himself, attribute to divine inspiration. The composer reportedly rarely ate or slept during this period, fully immersed in his creative endeavour. Upon completing the *Hallelujah* chorus, he was found in tears, exclaiming,

*"I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself!"*

Unlike traditional operas or oratorios of the time, which often focused on dramatic storytelling, *Messiah* is unique in its meditative and contemplative nature. It is divided into three parts:

1. **Part I** foretells the coming of the Messiah, drawing from prophecies in Isaiah and other Old Testament books. It reflects the anticipation and hope surrounding the birth of Jesus.
2. **Part II** covers the Passion of Christ, His suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. It culminates in the triumphant *Hallelujah* chorus, celebrating His victory over sin and death.
3. **Part III** focuses on the promise of eternal life and the final judgment, offering comfort and assurance of salvation to believers.

Through this structure Handel takes the audience on a spiritual journey, contemplating the whole life and mission of Jesus Christ from prophecy to fulfilment.

*Messiah* premiered in Dublin on April 13, 1742, as a charitable benefit for debtor's prisons and hospitals. The choice of location was strategic; Handel believed the city's audiences would be more receptive, and so they were; the performance was met with overwhelming acclaim. So many people attended that ladies were asked to wear dresses 'without hoops' and gentlemen to leave their swords at home to make more room. The success of *Messiah* in Dublin reignited interest in Handel's work, but when he brought the oratorio to London it initially received a lukewarm response, enthusiasm overshadowed by discomfort at a sacred work being performed in a secular theatre. Over time however, perceptions shifted, and *Messiah* slowly became a beloved fixture in both sacred and secular settings.

What makes *Messiah* particularly powerful is its universal message of hope, redemption, and divine love. The oratorio does not focus on specific denominational doctrines but draws directly from Scripture, making it broadly accessible. Its themes are timeless, resonating with audiences across different backgrounds and faiths. Handel also artfully blends musical styles, including elements of Italian opera, German choral traditions, and English church music. The result is a rich tapestry of melodies and harmonies that enhance the spiritual depth of the libretto. From the poignant aria *He Was Despised* to the exultant *For Unto Us a Child Is Born*, each piece serves to illuminate the corresponding Scripture in a profound way.

One of the most enduring traditions associated with *Messiah* is the audience standing during the *Hallelujah* chorus. Legend has it that King George II was so moved during a London performance that he took to his feet, compelling everyone else to follow suit. While this story may be apocryphal, the tradition persists.

Today, *Messiah* is performed worldwide, especially during the Advent and Easter seasons. Its ability to bring communities together in reflection and celebration is a testament to its enduring relevance. For many, attending a performance of *Messiah* is much more than a musical experience; it's a spiritual experience that reinforces their faith. *Messiah* remains a shining example of how art can elevate our understanding of the divine, its combination of scriptural depth and musical genius offering a unique setting for spiritual reflection. As we enter this sacred season, may we find inspiration in Handel's masterpiece, allowing its melodies and messages to draw us closer to God.