

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

EARS WIDE OPEN ONLINE FOR SCHOOLS

Deconstructing the Classics

MESSIAH

SECONDARY LEARNING RESOURCE

Script: Nicholas Bochner

INTRODUCTION

Hailed as a masterpiece at its 1742 premiere and with an unbroken history of performance since 1749, Handel's *Messiah* has spanned the globe and endured through centuries. We're going to look at exactly what it is that makes this unique composition so captivating and enduring. The performance we are going to look at features Sir Andrew Davis' arrangement of *Messiah* which he conducted for his final performance as chief conductor of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra at the end of 2019.

Handel was a truly international composer able to assimilate eclectic influences into his composition. He was born in Germany and received his early training there before moving to Italy where he was profoundly influenced by opera and the local version of oratorio. He moved to London aged 25 bringing Italian opera to that country and spent the rest of his life based there. So *Messiah* has a truly international background.

The opening *Sinfony*, or overture as we would better understand it, is in French style. Not necessarily an obvious choice for a German-born and trained composer heavily influenced by Italian opera and oratorio composing a work in England that would be premiered in Dublin, but it was associated with royal pomp and splendour and was commonly used at the time to start large works. The French style of overture is characterised by dotted rhythms. In this case the tempo and minor key give it an air of great seriousness entirely appropriate to the subject matter and previews *Messiah*'s eventual journey from darkness to light.

After the gravity of the opening orchestral movement we are surprised by the mood and movement of the first vocal number, an accompanied recitative. The key shifts from E minor to E major, the style of composition changes from high baroque to something gentler, more approachable and modern.

This brings us to another reason for the enormous appeal of *Messiah*: Handel was first and foremost a composer for the theatre, and he approached the task of setting these words in the same way he approached any dramatic text. He had

at his command a breadth of musical styles and techniques that allowed him to shape the drama so that it would have maximum impact for all listeners. Refer to Discussion Point 1. In this way *Messiah* is very different from something like Bach's Passions, which were written for a liturgical purpose by a composer employed by the church. In the example we've just heard the change in compositional style and texture works as effectively as a scene change to make us feel the comfort, peace and hope the words are prophesying. These changes in musical character are crucial since in the text of *Messiah* there are no specific characters portrayed, yet in the course of the work we are transported from heaven to earth, we are with shepherds and kings, we hear from the faithful and the heathen. When we shift to another voice this is signalled with another change in the music:

DISCUSSION POINT 1

Drama in music. Handel was a master of creating drama in his music, listen to Holst's *Mars* from *The Planets* and Prokofiev's *Montagues and Capulets* from *Romeo and Juliet* in the *Messiah* playlist. What compositional techniques do Holst and Prokofiev use to create drama – in the case of *Mars* by representing in music the “Bringer of War” and in *Romeo and Juliet* by depicting the tension between the rival houses?

The insistent dotted rhythms punctuate the text and give it emphasis. We have a powerful example of Handel bringing the words to life when the bass sings of the darkness that covers the earth and how its people will be brought into the light. The passage opens with dissonant murmuring to create a sense of dark fog. When the voice tells that the lord will arise, there is a sudden shift of tonality and a steady rising pure harmonic figure. This creates in us the clearest possible sense of the hope and light we are being promised.

As easily as he can lift us up, Handel can dash us into despair. The chorus *All we, like sheep* is a brilliant example of his theatrical rather than liturgical approach. The words are describing the people who have turned from god's path

to sin. Rather than making the passage stern and accusing, Handel sets these words to make us feel that straying is actually great fun. He uses a complicated polyphony with voices coming in one after another to create a sense of cheerful chaos.

At the point the text reminds us of the iniquity of our behaviour, the music changes completely and the resulting pain and anguish is driven home with powerful harmonies.

A style of writing at the time was *stile concitato* used to represent rage and anger, with fast repeated notes in the orchestra and melismatic writing for the voice, where a single word is sung over a sequence of many fast notes. Handel uses this to great effect toward the end of part 2 when the bass sings of the kings of the earth vainly taking counsel together against the lord.

This wonderful bass aria is part of a sequence that brings us to one of the great dramatic peaks of *Messiah*: the *Hallelujah* chorus. In fact, it is a point so dramatic that many listeners wonder why the work goes on. Haven't we reached the pinnacle here? The sense of finality of the *Hallelujah* chorus stems to some extent from a misunderstanding of what exactly we are cheering for and this brings us to another of the great strengths of the work. Charles Jennens, who compiled the libretto, avoided direct quotes from or depictions of Jesus Christ, using primarily Old Testament prophecy that is interpreted by Christians as foretelling the coming of Jesus Christ. This means that there is some ambiguity about the words for those not familiar with the passages and their interpretations. While confusion about the text may seem more like a weakness than a strength, it has meant that when combined with Handel's music, the complete work has a great capacity to speak across faiths and denominations, bringing out the message of hope, peace and redemption. In context, the *Hallelujah* chorus is a coronation anthem celebrating god's smiting of his enemies: the previous tenor aria has just described the smashing of them like a potter's vessel. On its own, the chorus speaks to us of the coming of our saviour and a promise of everlasting peace.

Charles Jennens was a wealthy landowner 15 years Handel's junior, a scholar, music lover and devout Anglican. He had provided a few librettos to Handel before, but this one was special. He said: the subject "excels every other Subject" and he hoped that Handel would "lay out his whole Genius & Skill upon it, that the Composition may excel all his former Compositions."

Jennens' intention in this use of prophecy of course was not ambiguity, but to make a particular point: his aim in carefully selecting these texts and sending them to the greatest theatrical composer of the time was to reinforce the idea of Jesus Christ as the true son of god on earth and to combat the rise of deism by stressing the importance of faith in the great mystery.

One moment in the work crystallises the enormous breadth of Jennens' ambitious aim: the transition from the *Hallelujah* chorus to the following aria. In an instant we are transported from the very throne room of heaven, with choruses of angels singing, to the most intimate statement of personal faith.

We associate *Messiah* with both Christmas and Easter, but even these two momentous occasions put together don't account for its whole story, and these pivotal moments are

dealt with in the most matter-of-fact way. For example, the moment of Christ's death is announced in the simplest of recitatives before moving immediately to the resurrection in the following aria.

In the end Jennens proved difficult to please: he afterwards wrote to a friend saying: "Handel has made a fine entertainment of it, though not near so good as he might and ought to have done. There are some passages far unworthy of Handel, but much more unworthy of the *Messiah*." He may have been influenced when he discovered that Handel only took 24 days to complete the manuscript – an incredible achievement – but there is no evidence of haste. The following 3 centuries have proven Jennens to be in the minority with this view. The music responds perfectly to the text and is rich with detail and real creativity. Another wonderful aspect of the music that contributes to its great appeal is the word painting Handel employs throughout. Word painting was a technique commonly employed in baroque music to heighten the expression of text. It involved using the features of the music to match the meaning of the words. Refer to Discussion Point 2. A great example is in *Ev'ry valley*. In the sentence "and ev'ry mountain and hill made low", the word "mountain" is the highest note of the phrase, the word "hill" is on a shape that rises and falls, and the word "low" falls to the lowest note. The word "crooked" is sung over quickly changing notes, and when the rough places are made plain, the vocal line has a long smooth contour.

DISCUSSION POINT 2

Word Painting. Listen to Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* and The Who's *Smash the Mirror* and identify the examples of word painting.

There are many examples of this word painting technique throughout *Messiah* – listening out for them is just one of the ways you can enjoy the piece. In his reorchestration of *Messiah*, Sir Andrew Davis has in some places taken the idea of word painting to the next level, introducing a rather contemporary angle to it. In "All we like sheep" Sir Andrew couldn't resist using the brass to produce a startlingly realistic bleat.

And when we get to the part of the story where the preachers go forth to spread the word he was put in mind of the Salvation Army, so added their trademark tambourines.

Sir Andrew's arrangement of *Messiah* belongs to a long tradition of reorchestrations, with many being produced over the years including by Mozart and Goossens, to name just two. The two additions we've just heard demonstrate Sir Andrew's great sense of humour which is quite in keeping with Handel's. For the most part though, he provides a delicate enhancement, rather like the digital remastering of a classic film, demonstrating great understanding of the original intention and taking the practice of interpretation one small step further.

Messiah was premiered in Dublin as an event for charity 'For the Relief of Prisoners in the several Gaols, and for the Support of Mercer's Hospital ... and of the Charitable Infirmary'. It raised a significant sum of money, perhaps because in the lead up to the performance ladies were

requested to refrain from wearing hooped skirts and gentlemen were requested to leave their swords at home to maximise the possible attendance. After some initial concern in London about the suitability of the subject matter for theatrical performance, *Messiah* became a fixture of charitable events for the rest of Handel's life and beyond.

Traditions have sprung up around the work in many places over the centuries, from the massed performances in the UK in the late 19th and early 20th centuries which saw orchestras of some 400 with choirs of around 3000 singers, to the inclusion in many professional and community music organisations of presenting an annual *Messiah* at Easter or Christmas. The late 20th century brought the benefit of scholarship and research to the piece so we now have the choice of a performance that is very similar to what Handel would have heard or something like the performance we have referred to here, with a great contemporary musician providing his version of the work.

Few works can lay claim to being crucial to the success of an entire musical genre – such was the tremendous impact of the *Messiah* on oratorio itself. Refer to Discussion Point 3. Handel's inspired choral writing, dramatic use of text and inventive orchestration captivated audiences from *Messiah*'s first performances, and has continued to do so, across the centuries and around the world. And though its story may be a religious one, the transcendent power of Handel's music allows the work to speak to millions of music lovers, regardless of their faith or culture. One of the great icons of classical music, through all its revisions and additions, *Messiah* remains grand, spiritual and ultimately uplifting.

DISCUSSION POINT 3

Pieces which shape an entire genre. Listen to the finale from Beethoven's 9th Symphony. This work changed the Symphony forever – it was revolutionary in employing larger musical forces than ever before for a longer symphonic work and for introducing the use of voices into the genre.

PLAYLIST LINK: [Spotify](#)

CREATIVE COMPOSITION ACTIVITY:

Write a song using Word Painting, record or perform it for friends and see if they can hear the word painting devices you've used.

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