

Handel's Messiah

Music by George Frederic Handel (1695-1759); Libretto by Charles Jennens

Majora Canamus (“Let us sing of greater things”)

And without Controversy, great is the Mystery of Godliness: God was manifested in the Flesh, justified by the Spirit, seen of Angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the World, received up in Glory [1 Tim 3:16]. In whom are hid all the Treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge [Col 2:3].

Part I: The Messiah's Birth and Ministry

1. Overture (3:07)

Anticipation for the Messiah (Isaiah, Malachi)

SCENE 1: THE COMING OF THE LORD BRINGS HOPE (ISAIAH)

2. Comfort ye my people (2:51)

Isaiah 40:1-3: Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. . . . The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

3. Every valley (3:15)

Isaiah 40:4: Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight, and the rough places plain.

4. And the glory of the Lord (2:48)

Isaiah 40:5: 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.

SCENE 2: THE COMING OF THE LORD BRINGS JUDGMENT (HAGGAI, MALACHI)

5. Thus saith the Lord (1:26)

Haggai 2:6-7: Thus saith the Lord of Hosts; Yet once, a little while and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come.

Malachi 3:1: The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: Behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of Hosts.

6. But who may abide the day of His coming? (4:26)

Malachi 3:2: But who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner's fire.

7. And He shall purify (2:53)

Malachi 3:3: And He shall purify the sons of Levi . . . that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.

The Messiah's Birth (Isaiah, Luke)

SCENE 3: THE MESSIAH'S BIRTH PROPHESED (ISAIAH)

8. Behold a Virgin Shall Conceive (0:30)

Isaiah 7:14 (Matthew 1:23): Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call his name EMMANUEL, God with us.

9. O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion (5:41)

Isaiah 40:9: O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain; O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, and be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!

Isaiah 60:1: Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.

10. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth (2:07)

Isaiah 60:2-3: For, behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people; but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.

11. The people that walked in darkness (3:47)

Isaiah 9:2 (Matthew 4:16): The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

12. For unto us a Child is born (4:18)

Isaiah 9:6: 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.

SCENE 4: THE MESSIAH'S BIRTH FULFILLED (LUKE)

13. Pifa/Pastoral Symphony (1:14)

14. There were shepherds abiding in the field (0:17)

Luke 2:8-9: There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo! the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

15. And the angel said unto them (0:40)

Luke 2:10-11: And the angel said unto them, Fear not; 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 Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

16. And suddenly there was with the angel (0:19)

Luke 2:13: And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying

17. Glory to God (1:48)

Luke 2:14: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Scene 5: The Messiah's Ministry (Zechariah, Isaiah, Matthew)

18. Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion (4:13)

Zechariah 9:9-10 (Matthew 21:5): Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee. He is the righteous Savior. . . And he shall speak peace unto the heathen.

19. Then shall the eyes of the blind (0:35)

Isaiah 35:5-6: Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.

20. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd (4:54)

Isaiah 40:11: He shall feed his flock like a shepherd; and he shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

Matthew 11:28-29: Come unto [Him], all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and [He shall] give you rest. Take [his] yoke upon you, and learn of [Him]; for [he is] meek and lowly of heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

21. His yoke is easy (2:31)

Matthew 11:30: [His] yoke is easy, and [his] burthen is light.

Part II: The Messiah's Suffering, Death, and Establishment of his Kingdom

The Messiah's Suffering (Isaiah 53, Psalm 22)

SCENE 1: THE MESSIAH'S SUFFERING (ISAIAH 53, PSALM 22, OTHERS)

22. Behold the Lamb of God (3:13)

John 1:29: Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world.

23. He was despised (11:11)

Isaiah 53:3: He is despised and rejected of men: a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. . .

Isaiah 50:6: [He] gave [His] back to the smiters, and [His] cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: [He] hid not [His] face from shame and spitting.

24. Surely He hath borne our griefs (1:52)

Isaiah 53:4-5: Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows. . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him.

25. And with His stripes we are healed (1:34)

Isaiah 53:5b: and with His stripes we are healed

26. All we like sheep have gone astray (3:59)

Isaiah 53:6: All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

27. All they that see him laugh him to scorn (0:46)

Psalm 22:7: All they that see [him] laugh [him] to scorn: they shoot out their lips, they shake their heads, saying:

28. He trusted in God (2:08)

Psalm 22:8 (Matthew 27:43): He trusted [in God] that he would deliver him; let him deliver him, if he delight in him.

29. Thy rebuke hath broken His heart (1:46)

Psalm 69:20: [Thy] rebuke hath broken [his] heart; [He is] full of heaviness. [He] looked for some to have pity [on Him], but there was none; neither found [He] any to comfort [Him].

30. Behold, and see if there be any sorrow (1:22)

Lamentations 1:12: Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto [his] sorrow. . .

Scene 2: The Messiah's Death and Resurrection

31. He was cut off out of the land of the living (0:16)

Isaiah 53:8b: He was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of [Thy] people was He stricken.

32. But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell (1:32)

Psalm 16:10 (Acts 2:27): [But] thou [didst] not leave [his] soul in hell; neither [didst] thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption.

The Messiah's Ascension and Exaltation (Psalms, Hebrews)

SCENE 3: THE MESSIAH'S ASCENSION

33. Lift up your heads, O ye gates (3:01)

Psalm 24:7-10: Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in. Who is the King of Glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in. Who is the King of Glory? The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of Glory.

SCENE 4: THE MESSIAH'S EXALTATION

34. Unto which of the angels said He at any time (0:22)

Hebrews 1:5 (Psalm 2:7): For unto which of the angels said He at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee?

35. Let all the angels of God worship Him (1:26)

Hebrews 1:6b: Let all the angels of God worship Him.

Scene 5: The Messiah's Gospel to the World (Psalms, Isaiah)

36. Thou art gone up on high (2:59)

Psalm 68:18 (Ephesians 4:8): Thou art gone up on high, Thou hast led captivity captive, and received gifts for men; yea, even for Thine enemies, that the Lord God might dwell among them.

37. The Lord gave the word (1:12)

Psalm 68:11: The Lord gave the word: great was the company of [the preachers].

38. How beautiful are the feet (2:19)

Romans 10:15 (Isaiah 52:7): How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!

39. Their sound is gone out (1:44)

Romans 10:18 (Psalm 19:4): Their sound is gone out into all lands, and their words unto the ends of the world.

The Messiah's Establishment of His Kingdom (Psalm 2, Revelation)

SCENE 6: THE NATIONS REJECT THE MESSIAH

40. Why do the nations so furiously rage together? (1:22)

Psalm 2:1-2 (Acts 4:25-26): Why do the heathen rage, and why do the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against His Anointed.

41. Let us break their bonds asunder (1:45)

Psalm 2:3: Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their yokes from us.

SCENE 7: THE MESSIAH DEFEATS THE NATIONS

42. He that dwelleth in heaven (0:12)

Psalm 2:4: He that dwelleth in the heavens shall laugh them to scorn; the Lord shall have them in derision.

43. Thou shalt break them (2:07)

Psalm 2:9: Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

SCENE 8: THE MESSIAH RULES

44. Hallelujah (3:45)

Revelation 19:6: Hallelujah! for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.

Revelation 11:15: The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ: and He shall reign for ever and ever.

Revelation 19:16: KING OF KINGS, LORD OF LORDS.

Part III: Our Resurrection through the Messiah

SCENE 1: THE MESSIAH, THE FIRSTFRUITS OF THE RESURRECTION

45. I know that my Redeemer liveth (5:34)

Job 19:25-26: I know that my redeemer liveth, And that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though worms may destroy this body, Yet in my flesh shall I see God.

1 Corinthians 15:20-21: For now is Christ risen from the dead, the firstfruits of them that sleep.

46. Since by man came death (2:05)

1 Corinthians 15:21: For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.

SCENE 2: OUR HOPE OF RESURRECTION

47. Behold, I tell you a mystery (0:39)

1 Corinthians 15:51-52: Behold, I tell you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump:

48. The trumpet shall sound (8:49)

1 Corinthians 15:52-53: The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

SCENE 3: OUR HOPE OF DEATH'S CONQUEST

49. Then shall be brought to pass (0:19)

1 Corinthians 15:54b: Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

50. O death, where is thy sting (1:43)

1 Corinthians 15:55-56: O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.

51. But thanks be to God (2:10)

1 Corinthians 15:57: But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

52. If God be for us (4:39)

Romans 8:31: If God be for us, who can be against us?

Romans 8:33-34: Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.

SCENE 4: ALL PRAISE TO THE VICTORIOUS LAMB

53. Worthy is the Lamb that was slain (7:30)

Revelation 5:12, 9, 13-14: Worthy is the Lamb that was slain and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. . . . Amen.

Note: Divisions (parts and scenes) follow original. Titles for divisions by Todd Bolen.

Additional Notes

PERFORMANCES

“The *Messiah* phenomenon has no parallel in music history. No work of music has survived, let alone thrived, on so many performances, good, bad, and indifferent, by and for so many people, year after year, for such a long time” (Stapert 2010: xi).

“Since its first performance in Dublin in 1742, there has been no year in which it hasn’t been performed” (Stapert 2010: 53).

“There is no way that anyone can listen to *Messiah* especially a believer, and not find heart, and mind, and soul literally cresting and rising exhilarated by the music” (Al Mohler in interview with Stapert).

Handel’s oratorios were usually performed by an orchestra of about 35 people and a choir of 20 (Stapert 2010: 54-56).

MUSIC

Three main types of songs:

- **Recitative:** Solo that is straightforward statement of text, usually without repetition, and one note per syllable. Moves storyline forward. Accompaniment not allowed to obscure words. Example: Virgin will conceive...
- **Aria:** Solo sung in lyrical or virtuoso style with much repetition. Portrays emotional response to recitative.
- **Chorus:** Response sung by choir

Handel created a general movement from recitative to aria to chorus in many of his scenes. “The cumulative effect of such a sequence is not only musically effective, but it also underscores the climax toward which the texts typically progress” (Stapert 2010: 83). Part I is pretty regular in this way, but II and III much less so.

“The score for the oratorio was composed in a mere 24 days, from August 22 to September 14, 1741 (Part I, 7 days; Part II, 9 days, Part III, 6 days; instrumentation, 2 additional days). The oratorio consists of three parts: I, texts 1-21; II, texts 22-44; III, texts 45-53. The text consists entirely of biblical quotations, for the most part taken from the Authorized (King James) Version, though the text is modified slightly in some cases for lyrical and musical reasons” (Block 1).

COMPOSITION

53-56 songs, depending upon arrangement. Part 1: 21; Part 2: 23; Part 3: 9

“*Messiah* is much more than a series of arias with comforting Bible texts mixed in with some celebratory choruses. It is the dramatic story of Salvation—God’s rescue of His people from the clutches of Satan, sin, and death” (Stapert interview with Taylor).

“It’s a story of salvation. It’s the story of the rescue of the fallen people from the clutches of Satan, and sin, and death. And the story begins with the comings of the savior, and it ends around the throne in Revelation with the lamb that was slain being honored by the four beasts, the four and twenty

elders, the myriads and myriads of angels and all of creation singing worthy is the lamb” (Stapert interview with Mohler).

“The composition provides a remarkable musical survey of biblical Heilsgeschichte, the history of salvation. In fact, some have opined that this represents the first time in musical history that ‘the mighty drama of human redemption was treated in an epic poem’” (Block 3).

“The adventure has led us through winding and circuitous paths, playing with our emotions like a roller coaster, taking us down with the Messiah to the depths of our own depravity and then lifting us to the heights of “Hallelujah,” sending us down to the Netherworld to taste the bitter gall of death, but then escorting us into the heavenly throne room to join the myriads of angels and other creatures and especially the redeemed to sing the praises of the Lamb! In Handel’s Messiah all, regardless of their spiritual condition, are invited to a spiritual experience, for one really must be dead not to be moved by this piece” (Block 23).

“Above all I want to help listeners hear the work as a musical drama that tells the greatest story ever told. Although it’s not without value to hear the work as a medley of favorite Bible texts sung to beautiful music, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Stapert interview with Taylor).

Scripture:

- Total verses: 73; 43 from OT; 30 from NT
- Isaiah: 22 verses: 7:14; 9:2,6; 35:5-6; 40:1-5,9,11; 50:6; 52:7; 53:3-6,8; 60:1-3
- Psalms: 14 verses.
- More from Isaiah and Psalms than all of NT.
- 1 Corinthians: 10 verses, all from chapter 15
- Only 9 verses from the Gospels.

“Handel has caught the spirit of the book [of Isaiah] better than most contemporary scholars” (Block 4).

RESOURCES

Daniel I. Block, “Handel’s *Messiah*: Biblical and Theological Perspectives.” *Didaskalia* 12/2 (2001).
Online at <http://www.sbts.edu/documents/icw/messiah.pdf>

Calvin R. Stapert, *Handel’s Messiah: Comfort for God’s People* (Eerdmans, 2010).

Calvin R. Stapert, Interview with Al Mohler, online at:

<http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/12/07/the-meaning-of-handels-messiah-a-conversation-with-calvin-stapert-2/>

Calvin R. Stapert, Interview with Justin Taylor, online at:

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2010/12/15/handels-messiah-an-interview-with-calvin-stappert/>