

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 18 December 2021 7.00pm

## Dunedin Consort

**John Butt** director

**Mhairi Lawson** soprano

**Owen Willetts** countertenor

**Nicholas Mulroy** tenor

**Robert Davies** bass

**Christine Buras** soprano

**Claire Evans** soprano

**Judy Louie Brown** alto

**Christopher Bowen** tenor

**Jon Stainsby** bass

**Matthew Truscott** violin, leader

**Sarah Bevan-Baker** violin

**Hilary Michael** violin

**Huw Daniel** violin

**Rebecca Livermore** violin

**Kristin Deeken** violin

**John Crockatt** viola

**Emilia Benjamin** viola

**Carina Cosgrave** bass

**Paul Sharp** trumpet

**Nick Walker** trumpet

**Stephen Burke** timpani

**George Frideric Handel** (1685-1759)

Messiah HWV56 (1741-50)

*Part I*

Interval

*Part II*

*Part III*

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The 18th Century, Handel's own era, was obsessed with classifying and categorizing the world around it. It was the age of the great French *Encyclopédie*, of Carl Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* and of Doctor Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*. Order and arrangement dominated every aspect of cultural life and things not easily pigeonholed or labelled were by their very nature unsettling to a rational outlook.

So where exactly, amid all this mania for sorting and docketing, does **Handel's** *Messiah* belong? It is like nothing else in the composer's oeuvre and has no obvious counterpart in the music of its own age. Handel was used to playing fast and loose with conventional forms - the Opus 6 Concerti Grossi, composed only a few years earlier, bear lively witness to this kind of creative impatience - but basically everything he had so far written followed the outlines of an established genre. Operas came in three acts with a happy ending, sonatas alternated fast and slow movements and keyboard suites mingled fugues and dances. As for his sacred oratorios, these had a clearly theatrical profile, with names, characters and a plot drawn from Old Testament narrative.

The singularity, the specialness, the nonesuch qualities of *Messiah* are due in no small part to its librettist, the plutocrat aesthete Charles Jennens of Gopsall Hall, Leicestershire, and Great Ormond Street, London. Shy, sensitive and unmarried, with 'a delicate Texture of the nervous System' and given to 'an extreme Lowness and Depression of the Spirits', Jennens saw music as the perfect therapy and Handel as his salvation. The pair had collaborated on the oratorio *Saul* and Jennens had supplied the text for *Il Moderato*, providing a third 'act' for the composer's magnificent setting of Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*.

At some stage during 1741 this ardent Handelian gathered together what he called a 'Scripture Collection' of biblical texts focused on the birth, passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The material used is almost all taken either from the prophets of the Old Testament - Isaiah, Malachi, Zechariah and others - or from various Psalms, and from the epistles of St Paul. Apart from the episode of the angel's appearance to the 'shepherds abiding in the fields' detailed by St Luke, there are comparatively few extracts from the Gospels and to all intents and purposes Jennens's compilation is not concerned with using the Bible narrative of Christ's life as a basis for the story it has to tell.

What interests him instead is the subtext, the spiritual drama behind the facts. He was accustomed, after all, to being subversive. His politics (which Handel pretty obviously did not share) encouraged him to think of the ruling Hanoverian dynasty

as usurpers of a British throne that by divine right should belong to the exiled house of Stuart. The libretti both of *Saul* and of *Belshazzar* (the latter written by Jennens for Handel in 1744) explore themes of royal succession and inheritance, while *Messiah* itself reflects the kind of conservatism in the librettist's theological outlook which mirrored his dissident views on the current monarchy. Fundamentally his scripture collection is anti-rational, out of sympathy with its era in a continuing emphasis on the mysterious and the miraculous, expressed in everything from 'the crooked straight, and the rough places plain' to the paradox inherent in 'though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God'.

Handel's sublime eclecticism in his treatment of this text mirrors his sense of its groundbreaking singularity written within the context of his creative experience so far. There are recollections of German Passion oratorios, skilful remodellings of material from his recently-written Italian duets and what has been identified as a retracing of the various steps in the journey to Italy itself that he had made some 30 years earlier. The opera house, what's more, is not left behind. 'Rejoice greatly' and 'Every valley' are each of them ebulliently operatic; so too is the classic bass-and-brass conjunction in 'The trumpet shall sound', while 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' is, in a final analysis, a love song.

*Messiah* was an experiment, not written to meet a deadline or a commission, a work with no definite cast of singers in mind, thus easily adaptable to whatever musical forces Handel might be able to bring together for its first performance during his triumphant visit to Ireland in 1741-2. In its own way this trip was as crucial to him as the Italian sojourn had been. He had left the jaded appetites and faddish sophistications of London behind him, to give his more original work its première, in Dublin's Fishamble Street Music Hall on 13 April 1742, amid a livelier, more eagerly receptive audience. 'I cannot sufficiently express the kind treatment I receive here', he wrote to Jennens, 'but the Politeness of this generous Nation cannot be unknown to You'. One of its earliest listeners, Edward Synge, Bishop of Elphin, elegantly summed up the impact *Messiah* continues to make on us all. The work 'seems to be a Species of Musick different from any other and this is particularly remarkable of it, that tho' the Composition is very Masterly & artificial, Yet the Harmony is So great and open, as to please all who have Ears & will hear, learned unlearn'd.'

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# George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

## Messiah HWV56 (1741-50)

*Liturgical text*

### Part I

#### *Tenor*

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.

#### *Tenor*

Ev'ry valley shall be exalted, and ev'ry mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain.

#### *Chorus*

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.

#### *Bass*

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

The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the Covenant, whom you delight in; behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.

#### *Bass, Alto or Soprano*

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

#### *Chorus*

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

#### *Alto*

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel, God with us.

#### *Alto*

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, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, behold your God!

Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.

#### *Chorus*

O thou that tellest. . .

#### *Bass*

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.

#### *Bass*

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.

#### *Chorus*

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.

#### *Soprano*

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.

#### *Soprano*

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."

#### *Soprano*

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

#### *Chorus*

"Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will towards men."

#### *Soprano*

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, thy King cometh unto thee; He is the righteous Saviour, and He shall speak peace unto the heathen.

Rejoice greatly...

#### *Alto*

Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.

#### *Soprano and Alto*

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

Come unto Him, all ye that labour, come unto Him that are heavy laden, and He will 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.

*Chorus*

His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.

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**Interval**

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**Part II**

*Chorus*

Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world.

*Alto*

He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

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

He was despised...

*Chorus*

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.

*Chorus*

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.

*Tenor*

All they that see Him laugh Him to scorn; they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying:

*Chorus*

"He trusted in God that He would deliver Him; let Him deliver Him, if He delight in Him."

*Tenor*

Thy rebuke hath broken His heart: He is full of heaviness. He looked for some to have pity on Him, but there was no man, neither found He any to comfort him.

*Tenor*

Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto His sorrow.

*Soprano or Tenor*

He was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgressions of Thy people was He stricken.

*Soprano or Tenor*

But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell; nor didst Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption.

*Chorus*

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 this 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 this King of Glory? The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of Glory.

*Tenor*

Unto which of the angels said He at any time: "Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee?"

*Chorus*

Let all the angels of God worship Him.

*Bass, Alto or Soprano*

Thou art gone up on high; Thou hast led captivity captive, and received gifts for men; yea, even from Thine enemies, that the Lord God might dwell among them.

*Chorus*

The Lord gave the word; great was the company of the preachers.

*Soprano or Alto*

How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.

*Chorus*

Their sound is gone out into all lands, and their words unto the ends of the world.

*Bass*

Why do the nations so furiously rage together, 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.

*Chorus*

Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their yokes from us.

*Tenor*

He that dwelleth in Heav'n shall laugh them to scorn; The Lord shall have them in derision.

*Tenor*

Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

*Chorus*

Hallelujah: for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth.

The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever.

King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.

Hallelujah!

**Part III**

*Soprano*

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.

For now is Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep.

*Chorus*

Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

*Bass*

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 trumpet.

*Bass*

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.

The trumpet...

*Alto*

Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

*Alto and Tenor*

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.

But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

*Soprano*

If God be for us, who can be against us?

Who shall lay anything 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 makes intercession for us.

*Chorus*

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His blood, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. Blessing and honour, glory and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen.