

Handel's *Messiah* Moderator Comments  
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Streamed Concert of *Messiah*  
by The Tabernacle Choir and Orchestra at Temple Square  
April 10, 2020

(The “Specific Comments” below were inserted into the live chat on the Choir’s YouTube channel and Facebook page for this performance, originally recorded in 2018 and streamed again on Good Friday, April 10, 2020. “General Comments” about the *Messiah* oratorio follow the specific comments section.)

**Specific Comments**

(numbers correspond to those in the program found [here](#) and at [TabChoir.org/Messiah](http://TabChoir.org/Messiah).)

**Part I**

(1) “Overture”

- *Messiah*’s overture is in the form a French Overture—a form Handel did not typically use for his oratorios, but one that carried powerful, historical connotations of royalty and majesty, dating back to Louis XIV.
- With its musical evocation of royalty, this overture introduces not only the oratorio itself, but also the “King of Kings, and Lord of Lords” that *Messiah* celebrates.

(2) “Comfort Ye” (recitative)

- In *Messiah*, Handel (and Jennens) actually begin with the end of the story. This opening recitative offers comfort and assurance that the House of Israel’s warfare has already ended and that “iniquity is pardoned.” The rest of the oratorio is then more like a flashback.

(3) “Ev’ry Valley” (aria)

- In this aria, Handel wrote the tenor melody to directly trace the contours suggested by the words. This text-painting is especially evident on words such as “exalted,” “low,” “mountains,” “hills,” “crooked,” “straight,” and “plain.”

(4) “And the Glory of the Lord” (chorus)

- The long, repeated notes on the text “For the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it” suggest rock-solid assurance and security. It was a device Handel had used for divine pronouncements in earlier works, too, including the oratorio *Israel in Egypt*.
- The final cadence in this chorus is a “plagal” or “Amen” cadence. Handel’s use of this particular kind of cadence throughout *Messiah* helped solidify its now-traditional association with an “Amen” at the conclusion of a hymn.



- (5) “Thus Saith the Lord” (recitative)
- This recitative brings back the dotted rhythm from the Overture, signifying royalty, and includes dramatic text-painting on the word “shake.”
- (6) “But Who May Abide (aria)
- Handel originally set these words for the same bass voice that just sang the recitative, in two versions: as a second recitative and as a bass aria. He later adapted it and expanded it for contralto in the version most frequently performed today. But he also wrote a soprano version.
  - The lilting Siciliano rhythm of the opening sets up a stark contrast with the fiery second part.
  - The rapid string tremolos in the aria’s second part illustrate instrumentally the flickering flames of the “refiner’s fire.”
- (7) “And He Shall Purify” (chorus)
- The music for the opening of this chorus was borrowed from an Italian duet Handel had composed in 1741, a few weeks before he wrote *Messiah*. The musical setting of the words “that they may offer unto the Lord” was, however, newly-composed for the oratorio.
- (8) “Behold, A Virgin Shall Conceive” (recitative)
- (9) “O! Thou that Tellest” (aria, chorus)
- Handel uses text-painting again on the words “lift up thy voice,” with rising contours in the vocal line.
  - This is the only part of *Messiah* that combines a soloist with the chorus in the same number.
  - The choir repeats the rising melodic intervals on the word “arise.”
- (10) “For Behold! Darkness Shall Cover the Earth” (recitative)
- This recitative begins in the key of B-minor, a traditional baroque-period key for denoting grief and pain in sacred music.
  - Several years earlier, Handel had also written “darkness” music for his oratorio *Israel in Egypt*, similar in effect to the instrumental writing here.
- (11) “The People that Walked in Darkness” (aria)
- The sparse octaves at the beginning of this aria, in the same key and using the same motif as the previous recitative, signify emptiness and desolation.
  - As in the prior recitative, too, the key modulates to D major as the light and glory of the Lord replace darkness.
- (12) “For unto Us A Child is Born” (chorus)
- The music for this chorus comes originally from another of Handel’s Italian duets in which the singers playfully tease the twin influences of Love and Beauty.
  - But the music for the celebrated fanfares of “Wonderful, Counsellor,” is newly-composed for this oratorio.



- (13) “Pastoral Symphony” (orchestral interlude)
- Handel labelled this pastorale a “Pifa,” in reference to the Italian *pifferari* or shepherds who played their pipes at Christmas time.
  - The 12/8 meter and gentle tempo suggest a cradle song or lullaby.
  - Early versions of the score of *Messiah* include a shortened version of this interlude.
- (14a) “There Were Shepherds” (recitative)
- This recitative is the first time the soprano soloist sings in this oratorio, introducing the Nativity scene.
- (14b) “And Lo! The Angel of the Lord” (recitative)
- Handel had used these rising string arpeggios earlier in his career, as an instrumental introduction to the Coronation Anthem *Zadok the Priest* in 1727. Here they also prefigure the arrival of a King.
  - Handel also composed an aria version of this text, rarely performed today.
- (15) “And the Angel Said unto Them” (recitative)
- (16) “And Suddenly There Was with the Angel” (recitative)
- (17) “Glory to God” (chorus)
- This is the only passage in *Messiah* that sets actual dialog as part of the dramatic narrative.
  - It is also the first appearance of the trumpets in *Messiah*, playing celebratory fanfares.
  - In the chorus, Handel divides the choir into high voices (“Glory to God in the highest”) and low voices (And peace on earth”), symbolizing the distinction between the divine and the earthly.
  - When these words are repeated later in the chorus, however, the whole choir sings both phrases together—heaven and earth are unified in one.
  - The instrumental postlude suggests the gradual disappearance of the angels back into heaven with a diminuendo and progressive simplifying of rhythms.
- (18) “Rejoice Greatly” (aria)
- The increasingly wide leaps at the start of the soprano part were a common baroque motif for signifying joy.
  - Long, elaborate melismas had been used as a musical symbol of rejoicing in sacred music as early as the medieval period.
  - Handel wrote an earlier version of this aria in 12/8 meter.
  - This is perhaps the most conventionally “operatic” aria in *Messiah*.
- (19) “Then Shall the Eyes of the Blind” (recitative)
- (20) “He Shall Feed His Flock / Come unto Him” (duet)
- This duet also exists in two other versions, one each for solo alto and solo soprano, both of them with two verses in the same key.



- Later Handel changed it to a duet for alto and soprano, with a key change between the verses.
- In the same meter as the Pastoral Symphony, this duet also uses the same opening motif, but inverted so that it descends instead of rises.
- The blend of pastoral imagery and lullaby was also foreshadowed by the Pastoral Symphony.

(21) “His Yoke Is Easy” (chorus)

- This chorus is based on music from the same Italian duet Handel had already borrowed for the chorus “And He Shall Purify.”
- The opening melisma on the word “easy” in this chorus was originally used as an imitation of laughter in the Italian duet version.

End of Part I

Part II

(22) “Behold the Lamb of God” (chorus)

- Part II of *Messiah* opens with a funeral march, a reminder that the burden Christ bore was neither easy nor light.
- As in the Overture, the dotted rhythms symbolize royalty, while the text refers to the Lamb of God. This juxtaposition of “King” and “Lamb” is the first of a number of sacred metaphorical paradoxes in the ensuing choruses—contrasts that reveal deeper truths about the Messiah’s sacrifice.
- The descending melodic line is also a variation on “He Shall Feed His Flock / Come unto Him.”
- The open-5<sup>th</sup> harmony at the end of this chorus symbolizes utter emptiness and desolation. It is the only place in *Messiah* that Handel employs this musical effect.

(23) “He Was Despised” (aria)

- This is the longest musical selection in *Messiah*, placed at the exact midpoint of the work.
- Handel also composed a version of this aria for soprano.
- The sighing motifs in the orchestral accompaniment were a traditional baroque device for expressing pain and grief.
- Relentless dotted rhythms in the middle section (sometimes omitted in performance) illustrate the mocks and whip lashes of Christ’s accusers.

(24) “Surely He Hath Borne Our Grievs” (chorus)

- The whip lashes from the previous aria return at the beginning and end of this chorus.
- Intense chromaticism at the words “He was wounded for our transgressions” create a harmonic tension that corresponds to the emotional pain.



(25) “And with His Stripes” (chorus)

- “And with His Stripes” is the first of only a small handful of choruses in *Messiah* in which the orchestral instruments simply double the voice parts. This is the original musical definition of *a cappella* style.
- The first four notes in this chorus create a “cross motif,” an angular melodic shape that Bach used extensively in his own sacred music to symbolize the crucifixion.
- There are 13 entries of the fugue theme in this “crucifixion” chorus, just as there are 13 statements of the ground bass in the “Crucifixus” from Bach’s Mass in B Minor.
- Mozart borrowed this same four-note theme for the “Kyrie” from his Requiem Mass.

(26) “All We Like Sheep” (chorus)

- This music is freely adapted from the same Italian duet Handel used in “For unto Us A Child Is Born,” with a similarly taunting text.
- The musical motifs that seem here like text-painting on the words “astray” and “turned” were originally written to depict an escape from love’s entrapment.
- The Adagio conclusion to this chorus was newly-composed for *Messiah*, and re-uses the same symbolic descending scale heard at the start of “Behold the Lamb of God.”

(27) “All They That See Him” (recitative)

- In this short recitative, the orchestral strings illustrate the words with three symbolic motifs: the dotted-note “whips,” a “laughing” figure, and the rocking neighbor-note motion that had earlier signified “darkness.”

(28) “He Trusted in God” (chorus)

- Another *a cappella* chorus in which the orchestra doubles the voice parts.
- The fugue form of this chorus enhances the drama with repeated taunting entries of “Let him deliver him.”

(29) “Thy Rebuke Hath Broken His Heart” (recitative)

- Intense chromaticism and unexpected chord progressions underscore the text’s expression of loneliness and distress.
- As in Bach’s sacred works, it is the solo tenor that narrates the story of Christ’s crucifixion.

(30) “Behold and See” (aria)

- The breaking up of the text into short phrases is an imitation of weeping, lamenting, and sighs—a popular device in dramatic baroque music.

(31) “He Was Cut Off” (recitative)

- This brief recitative covers Christ’s crucifixion and death. It begins in B minor—the key of pain—but turns to E major even before the crucifixion text is complete, foreshadowing the hope of the resurrection.



(32) “But Thou Didst Not Leave” (aria)

- Christ’s resurrection takes place in the quiet space between the preceding recitative and this joyful aria.

(33) “Lift Up Your Heads” (chorus)

- Handel divides the choral sopranos to help create the effect of a double chorus in this back-and-forth dialog of questions and answers.
- The plagal cadence at the end of this chorus repeats the formula previously heard in the opening chorus, “And the Glory of the Lord.” It consolidates the musical association of this cadence with God’s glory.

(34) “Unto Which of the Angels” (recitative)

(35) “Let All the Angels of God” (chorus)

- D major was favored key in the baroque period for rejoicing.
- The main fugue theme is in the style of a trumpet fanfare.

(36) “Thou Art Gone Up on High” (aria)

- This aria is both intensely chromatic and joyful—an odd juxtaposition, but one that is called for by the text itself.
- The optimistic rising line on “Thou art gone up” is a simple case of text-painting, but it takes place over a descending “baroque lament” bass line.
- This tension between victory and death illustrates the doctrine that Christ’s resurrection provides the gift of life “yea even for [His] enemies.”
- Handel wrote four versions of this aria: one for bass, two different versions for alto, and one for soprano.

(37) “The Lord Gave the Word” (chorus)

- The majestic statement that opens this chorus is written in similar sturdy rhythms and steady melodic contours as other divine pronouncements in Handel’s music.
- The embellished 16<sup>th</sup>-note runs in this chorus symbolize the proliferation of preachers willing to spread Christ’s gospel.

(38) “How Beautiful Are the Feet” (aria)

- Handel originally combined this aria and “Their Sound Is Gone Out” into a single soprano aria. Later he separated them into an aria and chorus, but continued to experiment with numerous other permutations of solo and chorus.
- The aria’s Siciliano rhythm again symbolizes peace and pastoral rest, as it had in the Pastoral Symphony.

(39) “Their Sound Is Gone Out” (chorus)

- Handel originally set this text as a tenor recitative, and only later turned it into a chorus.
- Rapid entries in this fugal chorus exemplify the global dissemination of God’s word.



- The wide melodic range for the words “unto the ends of the world” illustrates the gamut of the gospel’s reach. (“Gamut,” by the way, was originally a medieval musical term that referred to the complete range of a musical scale.)
- For one performance, Handel added another choral section setting the text “Break forth into joy.”

(40) “Why Do the Nations” (aria)

- This is the first text in Handel’s *Messiah* to explicitly reference the “anointed [one],” the literal translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah.”
- Agitated string figures in this aria represent the anger of those whose power and influence are threatened by Christ’s gospel.
- The fragmented impressions of rage and vain imaginations are expressed in cross-rhythms—the solo voice singing triplet rhythms over duplets in the accompaniment.
- In one of Handel’s versions of the score, the middle section (“The kings of the earth rise up”) was set as a recitative instead of a section of an aria.

(41) “Let Us Break Their Bonds Asunder” (chorus)

- The jagged, angular theme, closely-spaced vocal entries, and frequent rhythmic syncopations in this fugue illustrate the wanton demolition of faith spoken of in the text.

(42) “He That Dwelleth in Heaven” (recitative)

(43) “Thou Shalt Break Them” (aria)

- Using many of the same musical effects as the previous chorus, this aria manifests that is the Lord who will destroy the plans of the wicked, not the other way around.
- Very wide leaps in the strings and fragmentary, disjunct motion depicts the Lord breaking into shards and dashing to pieces the disruptive strategies of the faithless.
- One of Handel’s alternate versions of *Messiah* has the tenor sing this same text in recitative.

(44) “Hallelujah” (chorus)

- The tradition of standing for the “Hallelujah” chorus began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But there is little direct evidence—only distantly-remembered anecdotes—to connect it to King George II standing during a performance of *Messiah*.
- The key of D major here, as in other places in *Messiah*, is a key of triumph and celebration. It was the easiest key for baroque trumpets to play, and so became associated with victory fanfares.
- The victory celebrated in this chorus is a spiritual victory over the worldly politics of nations and governments.
- The fugue theme at the words “And He shall reign” is remarkably similar to the cross-motif in the chorus “And with His Stripes.”
- The same plagal cadence that has signified “glory” in so many other places in *Messiah* ends the “Hallelujah” chorus with a musical representation of glory.

End of Part II



### Part III

(45) “I Know that My Redeemer Liveth” (aria)

- Simple, effective text-painting is heard throughout this beloved aria, including long-held notes on “stand,” a leap upward for “Christ risen” followed by a descent on the words “from the dead.”
- The contour of the melodic line in this aria traces the same shape as the violin introduction for “Thou Art Gone Up on High.” Both arias speak specifically about the resurrection.
- The interval of a rising fourth that accompanies the words “I know” is used elsewhere throughout *Messiah* (e.g., “Rejoice Greatly”) as a musical symbol of firm assurance.

(46) “Since by Man Came Death” (chorus)

- This chorus contains the only unaccompanied choral passages in *Messiah*.
- The two hushed declarations about death are answered by joyful eruptions of faith in the resurrection.

(47) “Behold, I Tell You A Mystery” (recitative)

(48) “The Trumpet Shall Sound” (aria)

- The same rising D-major arpeggio that begins the recitative is used as the main theme of the aria that follows. Both imitate a trumpet fanfare.
- In the German Bible, it is a trombone instead of a trumpet that calls the dead out of the graves. But as trombones were used exclusively for church music in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (and much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), Mozart’s German-language edition of *Messiah* gives these fanfares to a solo French horn instead of a trumpet.
- The orchestra’s dotted rhythms connote royalty, as they had in the oratorio’s Overture.
- The solo trumpet part, intended to be played on a natural baroque trumpet, was considered too difficult for later performers, who typically use a modern valve trumpet instead.
- Handel, whose English was far from perfect, set the word “incorruptible” with the accent on the second and fourth syllables (in-COR-rup-TI-ble), instead of the first and third syllables (IN-cor-RUP-ti-ble). Most performances since Handel’s day have adjusted the word-setting to make it sound more natural to English-speakers.

(49) “Then Shall Be Brought to Pass” (recitative)

(50) “O Death, Where Is Thy Sting” (duet)

- The music for this alto/tenor duet is based on an Italian love duet Handel composed in 1722. It serves as a reminder to Handel’s London audiences that his Italian operas also typically included a love duet in the final act.
- This is the only musical number (not including recitative) in *Messiah* in which the orchestra does not participate. Only the continuo instruments of keyboard and cello accompany the two singers.
- Handel also set this text as an alto recitative in one version of *Messiah*.





(51) “But Thanks Be to God” (chorus)

- A companion to the preceding duet, this chorus uses the same key, rhythms, and musical motifs as the duet.
- The word “thanks” is articulated 75 separate times in this chorus.
- The fugal treatment of “who giveth us the victory” is a symbol of widespread distribution, as it was in the passage “good will toward men” earlier in *Messiah*.

(52) “If God Be for Us” (aria)

- As with the aria “I Know That My Redeemer Liveth,” this aria is an intimate personalization of the global gift of Christ’s atonement.
- The melody at the words “who makes intercession for us” quotes a 1524 hymn tune by Martin Luther, “*Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*,” (“Out of the depths I cry to Thee”)

(53) “Worthy Is the Lamb” (chorus)

- Another triumphant chorus, with full orchestra, this opening is also actually a mirror counterpart to the unaccompanied chorus “Since by Man Came Death,” with similar rhythms, textures, and keys.
- The two stanzas of “Since by Man Came Death” were in A minor and D minor. The two parallel stanzas of “Worthy Is the Lamb” are in D major and A major.
- At the words “Blessing and honor, power, and glory,” the fugue theme includes repeated notes that emphasize the idea of eternity, and also recall the repeated notes from “For the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it” in the oratorio’s opening chorus.
- At the chorus’s conclusion, the words “forever and ever” are repeated 16 times, using the same rhythm as the setting of those same words in the “Hallelujah” chorus.
- The final cadence ends on dominant harmony, setting up a powerful harmonic segue into the “Amen” that follows.
- Beginning gently and humbly, the “Amen” builds into a majestic blend of counterpoint and chorale.
- With the eventual entry of trumpets and drums, the chorus reaches a magnificent apex that conductor Christopher Hogwood described as “the final storming of heaven.”

### **General Comments about Handel and *Messiah***

- Handel wrote *Messiah* in 24 days, from August 22 to September 14, 1741. This was not unusually fast for Handel, who was a remarkably expeditious composer.
- Several well-known musicians later re-orchestrated Handel’s score for *Messiah*, adapting the size and instrumentation to suit current tastes and circumstances. These include W. A. Mozart, Michael Costa, Robert Franz, Sir Henry Wood, Ebenezer Prout, Sir Eugene Goossens, and most recently, Sir Andrew Davis.
- Mozart once proclaimed, “Handel knows better than any of us what will make an effect. When he chooses, he strikes like a thunderbolt.” Beethoven agreed, stating, “Handel was the greatest composer that ever lived. I would uncover my head and kneel before his tomb.”



- J.S. Bach said “[Handel] is the only person I would wish to see before I die, and the only person I would wish to be, were I not Bach.”
- In 1993, a popular recording of excerpts from *Messiah* titled *A Soulful Celebration* brought together Stevie Wonder, Quincy Jones, Al Jarreau, the Boys Choir of Harlem, and others in a gospel-style interpretation of Handel’s music.
- The style of English oratorio that Handel cultivated was considered a popular “entertainment” at the time, not necessarily a sacred work, even though oratorios were typically settings of biblical topics.
- In Handel’s day, oratorios (including *Messiah*) functioned more like contemporary musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, and *The Prince of Egypt* do today.
- When Handel scheduled a performance of *Messiah* in Westminster Abbey, some members of the clergy declared it sacrilege for a “public entertainment” to take place in a consecrated church.
- Others in Handel’s day thought it blasphemous for actors and opera singers to declaim sacred scripture in a theater.
- *Messiah* is unlike most other oratorios in that there are no characters, no traditional plot or storyline, and very little dialog. Handel’s other bible-based oratorios typically dramatize the familiar stories with new dialog, making them more like an opera.
- The lyrics for *Messiah* were compiled for Handel by his associate Charles Jennens, using scriptural texts from the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible with some minor adjustments.
- Unusually for Handel, he started at the beginning of the *Messiah* texts and composed the musical settings consecutively through to the end, tracing the work’s powerful dramatic arc as he went.
- Charles Jennens, the librettist, was not entirely pleased with Handel’s work on *Messiah*, declaring it “a fine Entertainment, tho’ not near so good as he might and ought to have done.”
- Handel borrowed from his own earlier compositions in a handful of selections of *Messiah*, including some Italian duets he had composed earlier in 1741, adjusting and recomposing the music to fit the new words.
- Although he became an English citizen, Handel was never fluent in spoken or written English. Examples of awkward declamation abound in *Messiah*, though many have been corrected by later editors. Some have become so familiar to audiences that they no longer sound awkward to modern ears.
- The first public performance of *Messiah* took place in Dublin, Ireland, on 13 April 1742.
- The premiere of *Messiah* was designated a benefit performance for charity. The ladies were asked not to wear hoop dresses, and the men to leave their swords at home, in order to accommodate more people in the hall. It raised £400 and freed 142 men from debtors’ prison.
- Handel later directed annual charity performances of *Messiah* at London’s Foundling Hospital, beginning in 1750. He willed a copy of the score and performance parts to the Foundling Hospital on his death in 1759.



- Easter-time performances of *Messiah* continued each year at London’s Foundling Hospital until the 1770s.
- In Handel’s day, *Messiah* was typically performed in the period leading up to Easter. Opera theaters in London were closed during Lent, so the oratorio season was Handel’s principal source of income in that period.
- Handel led about twenty performances of *Messiah* during his lifetime, periodically customizing and altering the score to suit particular singers and circumstances. Consequently, there is no “definitive” version of the score to Handel’s *Messiah*.
- The tradition of Christmas performances of Handel’s *Messiah* began in London in the 1790s, long after the composer’s death.
- During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, performances of *Messiah* took on gargantuan proportions, which choirs of up to 4000 singers accompanied by orchestras of more than 500 players.
- In the United Kingdom during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most performances of *Messiah* were given to raise money for the benefit of the poor and infirm. These charitable *Messiah* performances were described by one critic as the “great scheme of musical benevolence.”
- George Bernard Shaw once said, “Handel is not a mere composer in England: he is an institution. What is more, he is a sacred institution.”
- A critic at the 1864 Three Choirs Festival in Hereford described *Messiah* as “the sacred oratorio inspired by genius, sanctified by religion, and perpetuated by faith.”
- In 1885, a music critic hailed *Messiah* as “the one great work that not only embodies a religion but is a religion itself.”
- Singalong community *Messiah* performances, or “Scratch” *Messiahs*, began in the 1960s in England, and remain a popular mode of performance today.
- After an early performance of the work in London, Lord Kinnoul congratulated Handel on the “noble entertainment” he had recently brought to the city. Handel is said to have replied, “My Lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better.”
- Part of *Messiah*’s popularity lies in its universality. The personal pronouns in the libretto— “All we like sheep,” “For unto us a child is born,” “I know that my redeemer liveth”—refer to the entire human race. Everyone is a performer in the story of Handel’s *Messiah* by virtue of being children of God.
- The Tabernacle Choir’s first recording session in 1910 included the “Hallelujah” chorus in what is almost certainly the first recording of a *Messiah* excerpt made outside of England, and the first ever recorded by an established choir. Although the recording was not deemed suitable to include in published form, it is still a milestone in Choir recording history.
- The Choir’s 1959 *Messiah* with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra was inducted into the National Recording Registry in 2005.
- The Tabernacle Choir has made recordings which the “Hallelujah” Chorus from *Messiah* at least 17 times and performed it literally thousands of times.

