

SOME THOUGHTS ON
MESSIAH

October, 2011

Dear People,

I am writing to you about *Messiah*. Below are some notes that I have culled from a letter I wrote to the RI College Chorus some thirty-five years ago on the occasion of our first performance together. Parts of it were then later reworked and appeared as articles in music journals. Having tenure for a number of years, I no longer have to worry about that sort of thing.

Messiah was personal then and remains so today. Even though my musical ideas have changed through the years, its meaning to my soul has not, so I offer you what is basically the unaltered form of that letter, albeit with some of the more student oriented sections deleted. Also, for any footnoted items, the citations have been irretrievably lost. For that I apologize.

Although I have conducted this work many times (after somewhere between 15 and 20 performances, I've lost count), each day that I open the score some new discovery is made, some new delight is found. When I was an undergraduate student, I looked forward to the annual circus we called the *Messiah* concert – a chorus of 300, an orchestra of 70, two performances on Sunday in a packed concert hall seating 4,000 people. What did we know then; scholarly research had not “uncovered” the original instrument syndrome. *Messiah* is probably the most maligned and abused oratorio in the repertoire. I have had the privilege of performing this work as a chorister, as a soloist (My Rhode Island debut as a soloist was with the Rhode Island Civic Chorale, conducted by Ronald Morris at Veterans Memorial Auditorium, in December 1975.), as a conductor; in full and partial performances; in those which were superbly done and in those which tried very hard to destroy this work. I do not want us to give just “another *Messiah*, and I don't want us to be part of the element which has desecrated the work for over two a half centuries. There are enough of those around. On the other hand, I firmly believe that *Messiah* should be a part of every musician's musical soul, and that music only lives through performance; it does not live in textbooks or on CDs.

I hope that some of the following information will enhance not only your performance of Handel's masterpiece, but your appreciation of his genius and this composition as well. I can think of no other work as popular with the masses, nor another work which has been tried by so many and done well by so few. I have confidence that the excellent tradition of the Rhode Island Civic Chorale and Orchestra and the potential that lies within each of us for a super performance on November 27, will enable us to say proudly that we have given life to the inherent beauty of the printed page; that, indeed, we have done *Messiah*, not undone it.

“The characteristic trait of all authentic masterpieces is their capacity for infinite self-renewal,” Lawrence Gilman once observed. This trait is probably no more clearly evidenced than in the over two and a half centuries of *Messiah* performances. Gilman goes on to say, “It has overcome, and in the most literal sense, survived performances that set out to bury it. It has put up with presentations that observed the letter and lost the spirit, and with many more that somehow found the spirit without observing more than a minimum of the letter. It has influenced and repelled; it has created styles and crushed minor talents. To some it has represented religion personified; to others, religious art, and yet to others, art. For some it has been made hateful by distortion, by overuse, by sheer boredom. For others it has been the one artwork, the regular consumption of which was their primary contact with great music. And for still others who had avoided hearing it until conditions were likely to be right...it has proved revelatory. All these things, and more, *Messiah* has been and continues to be. It takes a work of extraordinary substance to exert such perennial power over mankind.”¹

Is *Messiah*, then, a religious work? I suppose that depends upon what the word “religious” means to you. In the traditional sense the text certainly intends it to be so. For the first time in musical history the mighty drama of human redemption was treated as an epic poem. It portrays in succession every shade of devotional sentiment from piety, resignation and repentance, to hope, faith and exultation. Jennens’ libretto is an epitome of Christian faith. Logically, Handel’s masterpiece should be called “Redemption;” for its author celebrates the “idea” of redemption rather than the personality of Christ (*vis-a-vis* the two *Passion* settings of J.S. Bach). *Messiah* is not a number of scenes from the life of Jesus linked together but a representation of the fulfillment of redemption through the Redeemer, Messiah. It is the first instance in the history of music of an attempt to view the mighty drama of human redemption from an artistic standpoint. Whatever Handel’s religious beliefs may have been, they were certainly of the sort, which sensible men entertain but do not discuss. His profound emotion while composing *Messiah* sprang not from a disordered mental state, but rather from a militant faith in a God of splendid power. In 1741, he was defeated and disillusioned (particularly as he saw his vast output of almost fifty operas disdained and ignored), and his unfortunate struggles drove him inevitably to the real and earnest in art. As a strong man of the earth who bravely faced his trials and failures, he appeals to twenty-first century minds no less forcibly than as a musician of conviction and eloquence. It is this conviction and eloquence that I hope we can capture in our performance.

Messiah, the eleventh of Handel’s twenty-three oratorios, was composed in the incredibly short span of three weeks: from August 22 to September 14, 1741. Why would the most gifted and successful opera composer of his day turn from the stage to the realm of oratorio? His operas simply had fallen into disfavor. Not only Handel, but also others writing in the Italian style and language in an English-speaking country faced the same fate. This demise had been forecast in 1728 by the wide acceptance and popularity of John Gay and Samuel Pepush’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (later the subject of the Brecht-Weill *Three Penny Opera*). Based, as it was on folk songs and taking pot shots at the establishment, including, of course, Handel’s patron, people began to clamor for more of the same and avoided the opera and its snob appeal. In short, it was not only religious conviction that forced him to write oratorios; Handel needed something for the current market. We must not forget that this genius composed in order to eat (no more nor less than J.S. Bach.). As an operatic composer Handel sought never to reveal his own personality, but always depict some subject or to render some dramatic scene. Never did he cling with greater conviction to this laudable intention than in *Messiah*. I personally believe that in some measure he failed. Despite its theological subject, *Messiah* is as much a “hymn to joy” as Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, and into its buoyant strains Handel poured an “infinitely contagious delight in living.” 2

Here well may be one of the keys to the performance of this work. Above all we must feel and convey not pomp nor majesty and all the heaviness and clumsiness that goes with them; but rather delight and joy and the clarity and lightness which are needed to convey them. The late Robert Shaw stated in an article in which he relates his preparation of performances in Cleveland, “I should like to report, on behalf of the chorus, soloists and myself...that once we had divested ourselves of old associations – the heaviness of sonority, tempo and accent – once we had achieved chamber music clarity and lightness, the spiritual aspects of the piece were extraordinarily enhanced. All that had been daubed, stuccoed and garmented for public display now became simple, genuine, human and convincing. That grandest of ‘Hallelujahs’...’is become’ a gleeful...iridescent madrigal of man and angels.” Mr. Shaw further wrote, “...but the point is not to be avoided that *Messiah* has been drugged, smothered and finally buried by nearly two humorless centuries of the civilization which bore his name.” 3

Look at the closing movements of each part: they dance! And cannot our performers, audiences and critics be allowed to say with the Psalmist, “my heart danceth for joy?” As George Bernard Shaw once said after not attending a London performance, “Most of us would be glad to hear the work seriously performed once before we die.” If we force ourselves to think of the work as we now believe Handel intended it, a chamber work, (There are, I know, myths and some truths relating the numbers Handel used at times. His typical forces in his later years were 6 boy singers, 12 adults, 5 soloists and an orchestra of 35 [Remember, the instruments were not as

powerful as their modern counterparts.] There was an outrage at the use of 50 singers.) Does this mean that we have to deny this masterpiece to the thousands of choral societies (including our own) which often have more than one hundred members? No, that would be a pity. But we can strive for “chamber music” clarity, rhythmic vitality, madrigal-like textures, and above all, we can dance. The greatest symphony orchestras in the world all have achieved this sort of clarity. Perhaps we can begin by trying to achieve an instrumental clarity with our voices. Forget the words for a moment, except the mood of the various movements, and try to bring out the contrapuntal lines, the marvelously vital rhythmic turns. If we are clear, and light, and crisp, we can move ahead – always. And when we move ahead, the work becomes breathless and uncontained in its over-riding joy. Now, think of the text and what Handel, the master word-painter at his best, has done with it. View each successive movement as it relates to the prior one by text or key or both. In most cases we find that the fifty-three movements comprising this composition, or at least very well marked sections of it, can be performed attacca. To demonstrate this I have outlined texts, keys, and choice of soloists for our performance as well as general statements about each Part. I think that Jennens’s choice of texts and juxtaposition of them is so right and Handel’s key scheme simply inspired.

Beethoven wrote, “Handel is the unequalled master of masters. Go and learn to produce such great effects by such modest means.” Handel was a secular composer who, because of circumstances, set a tremendous religious text to music without really shaking off his belief in man’s joy and wonder at being a “human” creature of the Almighty. I must confess to you that I am unashamedly in love with this work, its music and the mystery of its sermon – if it has one. (I wrote those words in 1978, and they still ring true in 2004.) I hope, above all, that after your hard labor, you will find infinite and life-long joy in performing *Messiah*. I know what it means to me; discover what it means to you.

P&L,
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1. Lawrence Gilman (1878-1939): American music critic and author; music critic for Harper’s Weekly, North American Review, New York Herald Tribune. From 1921 on annotator for the New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra
2. Robert Shaw; *Dear People*.
3. Robert Shaw; liner notes for the Robert Shaw Chorale recording, 1965 .

MESSIAH

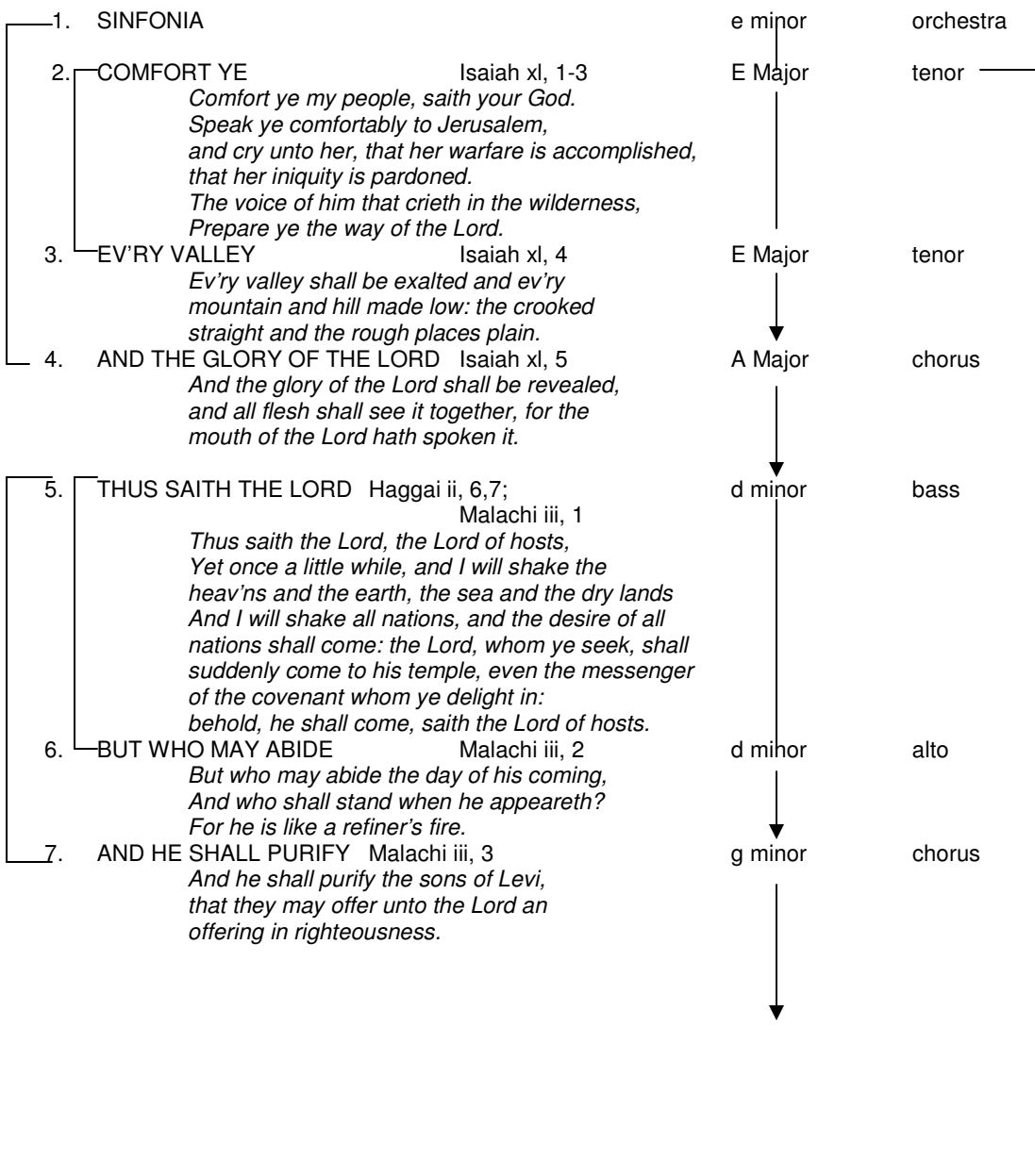
Words selected from Holy Scripture by Charles Jennens
Music by George Friedrich Handel

*And without controversy, great is the mystery of Godliness:
God was manifested in the Flesh, justified by the Spirit, seen of
Angles, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world,
received up in glory.
In whom are hid all the Treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge.
(1 Timothy iii, 16; Colossians ii, 3)*

These words, selected by Jennens, the librettist, formed a preface to the wordbook of the first performance in April 1742, in Dublin. They were repeated on the wordbooks published in London 1749-59 and later.

PART I

The prophecy and realization of God's plan to redeem mankind by the coming of the Messiah



8.	BEHOLD, A VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE	Isaiah vii, 14 Matthew i, 23	D Major	alto
9.	O THOU THAT TELLEST	Isaiah xl,9; lx, 1	D Major	alto/chorus
↓				
10.	FOR BEHOLD	Isaiah ix, 2, 3	b minor	bass
11.	THE PEOPLE THAT WALKED	Isaiah lx, 2	b minor	bass
12.	FOR UNTO US A CHILDS IS BORN	Isaiah ix, 6	G Major	chorus
↓				
13.	PIFA (PASTORAL SYMPHONY)		C Major	orchestra
14a.	THERE WERE SHEPHERDS	Luke ii, 8	C Major	soprano
14b.	AND LO, THE ANGEL OF THE LORD	Luke ii, 9	F Major	soprano
15.	AND THE ANGEL SAID UNTO THEM	Luke ii, 10,11	A Major - f-sharp minor	soprano
16.	AND SUDDENLY	Luke ii, 13	D Major	soprano
17.	GLORY TO GOD	Luke ii, 14	D Major	chorus
18.	REJOICE GREATLY	Zechariah ix, 9,10	B-flat Major	soprano
↓				

19.	THEN SHALL THE EYES <i>The 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.</i>	Isaiah xxxv 5, 6	D Major	alto
20.	HE SHALL FEED HIS FLOCK <i>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.</i>	Isaiah xl, 11 Matthew xi, 28,29	F Major B-flat Major	alto soprano
21.	HIS YOKE IS EASY <i>His yoke is easy, and his burthen is light.</i>	Matthew xi, 30	B-flat Major	chorus

END PART I, composed August 22-28, 1741

PART II

**Accomplishment of redemption by the sacrifice of Jesus; mankind's rejection of God's offer
And mankind's utter defeat when trying to oppose the power of the Almighty; triumph of the
Almighty.**

22.	BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD <i>Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.</i>	John I, 29	g minor	chorus
23.	HE WAS DESPISED <i>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 the hair: He hid not his face from shame and spitting.</i>	Isaiah liii, 3; 1,6	E-flat Major	alto
24.	SURELY, HE HATH BORNE <i>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.</i>	Isaiah liiii; 4,5	f minor	chorus
25.	AND WITH HIS STRIPES <i>And with his stripes we are healed.</i>	Isaiah liiii, 5	f minor	chorus
26.	ALL WE LIKE SHEEP <i>All we, like sheep, have gone astray; we have turned ev'ry one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.</i>	Isaiah liiii, 6	F Major	chorus
27.	ALL THEY THAT SEE HIM <i>All they that see him laugh him to scorn; they shoot out their lips and shake their heads, saying,</i>	Psalm xxii, 7	b-flat minor - E-flat Major	tenor

28.	HE TRUSTED IN GOD <i>He trusted in God that He would deliver him: let Him deliver him, if He delight in him.</i>	Psalm xxii, 8	c minor	chorus
29.	THY REBUKE <i>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.</i>	Psalm lxi, 21	e minor	tenor
30.	BEHOLD, AND SEE <i>Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto his sorrow.</i>	Lamentations I, 12	e minor	tenor
31.	HE WAS CUT OFF <i>He was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgressions of thy people was he stricken.</i>	Isaiah liii, 8	b minor - E Major	tenor
32.	BUT THOU DIDST NOT LEAVE <i>But thou didst not leave his soul in hell; Nor didst thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption.</i>	Psalm xvi, 10	A Major	tenor
33.	LIFT UP YOUR HEADS <i>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 in battle. The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory.</i>	Psalm xxiv, 7 – 10	F Major	chorus
34.	UNTO WHICH OF THE ANGELS <i>Unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee?</i>	Hebrews I, 5	A Major	tenor
35.	LET ALL THE ANGELS OF GOD <i>Let all the angels of God worship him.</i>	Hebrews I, 6	D Major	chorus
36.	THOU ART GONE UP ON HIGH <i>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.</i>	Psalm lxxviii, 18	d minor	alto
37.	THE LORD GAVE THE WORD <i>The Lord gave the word: great was the company of the preachers.</i>	Psalm lxxviii, 11	B-flat Major	chorus
38.	HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET <i>How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.</i>	Romans x, 15	B-flat Major	soprano
39.	THEIR SOUND IS GONE OUT <i>Their sound is gone out into all lands, and their words unto the ends of the world.</i>	Romans x, 18	E-flat Major	chorus
40.	WHY DO THE NATIONS <i>Why do the nations so furiously rage together: 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 his anointed.</i>	Psalm ii; 1,2	C Major	bass
41.	LET US BREAK <i>Let us break their bonds asunder and cast away their yokes from us.</i>	Psalm ii, 3	C Major	chorus

42.	HE THAT DWELLETH	Psalm ii, 4	A Major	tenor
	<i>He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh them to scorn: the Lord shall have them in derision.</i>			
43.	THOU SHALT BREAK THEM	Psalm ii, 9	a minor	tenor
	<i>Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.</i>			
44.	HALLELUJAH	Revelations xix, 6 – Revelations xi, 15; 16	D Major	chorus
	<i>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 forever and ever. KING OF KINGS, and LORD OF LORDS.</i>			

END PART II, finished September 6, 1741

PART III

A hymn of Thanksgiving for the final overthrow of death.

45.	I KNOW THAT MY REEDEMER	Job xix; 25,26 1 Corinthians xv, 20	E Major	soprano
	<i>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.</i>			
46.	SINCE BY MAN CAME DEATH	1 Corinthians. xv; 21, 22	a minor	chorus
	<i>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.</i>			
47.	BEHOLD, I TELL YOU	1 Corinthians xv, 51-52	D Major	bass
	<i>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:</i>			
48.	THE TRUMPET SHALL SOUND	1 Corinthians xv, 52-54	D Major	bass
	<i>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.</i>			
49.	THEN SHALL BE BROUGHT	1 Corinthians xv, 54	B-flat Major	alto
	<i>Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory.</i>			
50-51.	O DEATH BUT THANKS	1 Corinthians xv, 55-57	B-flat Major E-flat Major	tenor/alto chorus
	<i>O death, where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, The strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory Through our Lord Jesus Christ.</i>			
52.	IF GOD BE FOR US	Romans viii; 31, 33-34	g minor	soprano

*If God be for us, who can be against us?
Who shall lay anything to the charges of God's elect?
It is God that justifieth.
Who is he that condemmeth?
It is Christ that died, yea rather, is risen again,
Who is at the right hand of God,
who makes intercession for us.*



53. WORTHY IS THE LAMB Revelations v; 12,13 D major 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 honor, and glory, and blessing.
Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto him
that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever.
AMEN.*

**END PART III, finished September 12, 1741.
Two more days were required to complete the orchestration.**