Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2018-2019 Series

December 7, 2019

OSMO VÄNSKÄ, CONDUCTOR
NOLA RICHARDSON, SOPRANO
EVE GIGLIOTTI, MEZZO-SOPRANO
KARIM SULAYMAN, TENOR
RICHARD OLLARSABA, BASS-BARITONE
MENDELSSOHN CHOIR OF PITTSBURGH
MATTHEW MEHAFFEY, MUSIC DIRECTOR

George Frideric Handel *Messiah*

Sinfonia
PART I
Arioso: Comfort ye, my people
Mr. Sulayman
Aria: Ev'ry valley shall be exalted
Mr. Sulayman
Chorus: And the Glory of the Lord
Recitative: Thus saith the Lord
Mr. Ollarsaba
Aria: But who may abide the day
Ms. Gigliotti
Chorus: And he shall purify
Recitative: Behold, a virgin shall conceive
Ms. Gigliotti
Air and Chorus: O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion
Ms. Gigliotti
Recitative: For behold, darkness shall cover the earth
Mr. Ollarsaba
Chorus: For unto us a Child is Born
Pifa (Pastoral Symphony)
Recitative: There were shepherds abiding;
Ms. Richardson
Arioso: And lo, the angel of the Lord
Ms. Richardson
Recitative: And the angel said unto them
Ms. Richardson
Arioso: And suddenly, there was with the angel
Ms. Richardson
Chorus: Glory to God in the Highest
Air: Rejoice greatly
Ms. Richardson
Recitative: Then shall the eyes of the blind
Ms. Gigliotti
Air: He shall feed his flock
Ms. Richardson
Ms. Gigliotti
Chorus: His yoke is easy, and His burthen is light

Intermission

PART II

Chorus: All we like sheep have gone astray
Air: He was despised
Ms. Gigliotti
Recitative: Thy rebuke hath broken His heart
Mr. Sulayman
Airioso: Behold and see if there be any sorrow
Mr. Sulayman
Recitative: He was cut off
Ms. Richardson
Air: But Thou didst not leave His soul in Hell
Ms. Richardson
Air: Why do the nations so furiously rage
Mr. Ollarsaba
Chorus: Let us break their bonds asunder
Recitative: He that dwelleth in Heaven
Mr. Sulayman
Air: Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron
Mr. Sulayman
Chorus: Hallelujah

PART III

Air: I know that my Redeemer liveth
Ms. Richardson
Chorus: Since by man came death
Recitative: Behold, I tell you a mystery
Mr. Ollarsaba
Air: The trumpet shall sound
Mr. Ollarsaba
Recitative: Then shall be brought to pass
Ms. Gigliotti
Duet: O death, where is thy sting?
Ms. Gigliotti
Mr. Sulayman
Chorus: But thanks be to God
Air: If God be for us
Ms. Richardson
Chorus: Worthy is the Lamb.

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

Messiah, An Oratorio (1741)

George Frideric Handel was born in Halle, Germany on February 23, 1685, and died in London on April 14, 1759. He composed his iconic *Messiah* in 1741, and it was premiered in Dublin at Neale's Music Hall on April 13, 1742, with Handel on the podium. The Pittsburgh Symphony premiered the work at Syria Mosque under the direction of Vladimir Bakaleinikoff on December 22, 1950. Most recently, the Pittsburgh Symphony performed the work in Heinz Hall under the direction of Manfred Honeck on December 1, 2018. Other notable performances include a staged production by Manfred Honeck and stage director Sam Helfrich in 2011. The score calls for two oboes, two bassoons, two trumpets, timpani, continuo and strings.
Performance time: approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes

It was Gay and Pepusch's satirical romp of 1729, *The Beggar's Opera*, that first soured the fashionable London taste for what Samuel Johnson described in his 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* as "an exotic and irrational entertainment" – Italian opera. As both composer and impresario, Handel was London's most important producer of opera, and he toiled doggedly for the entire decade of the 1730s to keep his theatrical ventures solvent, but the tide of fashion (and the virulent cabals of his competitors) brought him to the edge of bankruptcy by 1739. As early as 1732, with the oratorio *Esther*, he had begun to cast about for a musical genre that would appeal to the changing fancy of the English public. Neither that work nor the oratorio *Alexander's Feast* of 1736 had the success that he had hoped, however, and the strain of his situation resulted in the collapse of his health in 1737, reported variously as a stroke or as acute rheumatism and depression. Much to the surprise and chagrin of his enemies, he recovered and resumed work. The oratorios *Israel in Egypt* and *Saul* appeared in 1739, but created little public stir. Determined to have one last try at saving Italian opera in London, Handel spent the summer of 1740 arranging production details and searching for singers on the Continent for his upcoming winter season. After returning to England in early autumn, he completed what proved to be his last two operas, both of which failed ignominiously on the stage: *Imeneo*, premiered on November 22nd, closed after only two performances; *Deidamia* (January 10, 1741), after three. In February, Handel largely withdrew from public life and seldom left his house in Brook Street, near Grosvenor Square. His rivals rejoiced.

Rumors began to circulate that Handel was finished in London. Some held that his health had given way for good; others, that he had died. The story given greatest credence, one fueled by Handel's composition of some Italian duets – pieces useless in London – was that he planned to return to the Continent. However, in the summer he suddenly sprang back to creative life, inspired by a small book of Biblical texts that had been compiled by Charles Jennens, a moneyed fop of artistic pretensions but a sincere admirer of the composer who had earlier supplied the words for the oratorio *L'Allegro, il Penseroso e il Moderato*, based on Milton's poem. Handel's imagination was fired, and he began composing on August 22nd. The stories have it that he shut himself in his room, eschewing sleep and leaving food untouched, while he frantically penned his new work. Twenty-four days later, on September 14th, he emerged with the completed score of *Messiah*. "I did think I did see Heaven before me and the great God Himself!" he muttered to a servant.

It was long thought that Handel, a devout Christian and Bible scholar, composed *Messiah* out of sheer religious fervor, with no thought of an immediate performance. In his study of the composer, the distinguished scholar of 18th-century music H.C. Robbins Landon contended that the work was written at the request of William, Duke of Devonshire, the Lord Lieutenant of Dublin, who visited London early in 1741. William, who knew Handel largely through his sacred vocal music, apparently asked him to provide a new work for performance at a series of concerts in Dublin that would aid various local charities. Handel's newly regained creative enthusiasm stirred by William's request continued to percolate, and he began *Samson* immediately upon finishing *Messiah*, completing all but two numbers of that score within six weeks.

Handel was undoubtedly glad to leave London and its bitter disappointments in November 1741 for the journey to Dublin to produce his new oratorio; he arrived in the Irish capital on November 18th, being "universally known by his excellent Compositions in all Kinds of Musick," trumpeted the city's press.

Choristers were assembled from Dublin's cathedrals, the best available soloists and instrumentalists were enlisted, and the date of the premiere was set for April 13th. *Messiah* was a triumph. "It gave universal Satisfaction to all present; and was allowed by the greatest Judges to be the finest Composition of Musick that ever was heard," announced *Faulkner's Journal*. Though it took some time before *Messiah* enjoyed an equal success in London, where, in the words of Robbins Landon, "there was strong opposition to hearing the words of the New Testament in a theatre peopled by actors and actresses of loose morals and dubious sexual habits," the oratorio came to be recognized during the next decade as Handel's masterpiece. It was the last work he directed, only eight days before he died on 14 April 1759.

For all of its unparalleled popularity, *Messiah* is an aberration among Handel's oratorios, the least typical of his two-dozen works in the form: it is his only oratorio, except *Israel in Egypt*, whose entire text is drawn from the Bible; it is his only oratorio without a continuous dramatic plot; it is his only oratorio based on the New Testament; it is his only oratorio presented in a consecrated space during his lifetime, a reflection of the sacred rather than dramatic nature of its content ("I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better," he told one aristocratic admirer); it has more choruses than any of his oratorios except *Israel*; the soloists in *Messiah* are commentators on rather than participants or characters in the oratorio's story. None of this, of course, detracts a whit from the emotional/artistic/(perhaps) religious experience of *Messiah*. (Handel and Jennens never appended the definite article to the title.)

Its three parts — *The Advent of the Messiah*, *The Passion of Christ*, and *His Resurrection* — embody the most sacred events of the Christian calendar, yet its sincerity and loftiness of expression transcend any dogmatic boundaries. In the words of George P. Upton, the American musicologist and turn-of-the-20th-century critic of the *Chicago Tribune*, "Other oratorios may be compared one with another; *Messiah* stands alone, a majestic monument to the memory of the composer, an imperishable record of the noblest sentiments of human nature and the highest aspirations of man."

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda