

ETERNAL HALLELUJAHS
MESSIAH
LISTENERS'
GUIDE

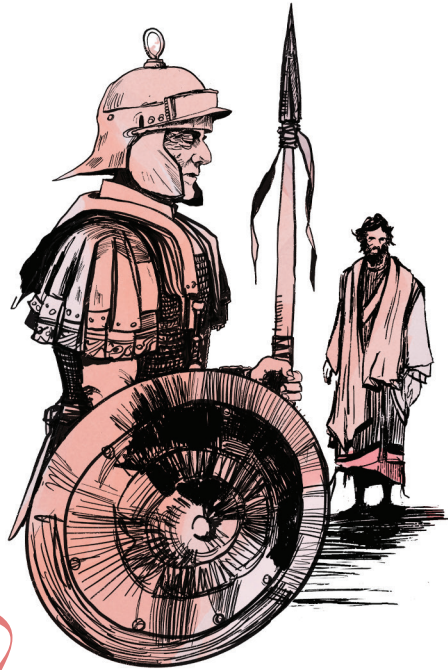




IMMANUEL
BIBLE CHURCH

6911 Braddock Road • Springfield • VA • 22151 • ibc.church

WHY MESSIAH?



Perhaps some of the first questions that came to mind when you learned that this year's Easter concert included selections from Handel's *Messiah* were, "Why include classical music in an Easter concert?" or "Why *Messiah*?" After all, isn't the Easter concert supposed to be about evangelism?

Chances are your understanding of *Messiah* is formed solely by bits and pieces you've heard from Part 1, The Christmas Section. You may have heard the dramatic overture and the first tenor aria, a solo entitled "Comfort Ye My People" (lyrics which led one curious young boy to ask, "Why did he keep singing 'Come For Tea, My People'?"). The fact is that outside of the works of J. S. Bach, *Messiah* may be one of the most evangelical works of the classical genre. This comes as a surprise if all you've heard is Part 1 and the "Hallelujah Chorus" (which actually is not in Part 1 but is done at Christmas every year.)

True, *Messiah* is not technically a sacred work since it was not composed for use in public worship. Still, I believe it's appropriate to consider *Messiah* an evangelical work for several reasons. First, *Messiah* is comprised solely of scripture. There is no narrative comment or extra-biblical dialog in *Messiah*. The inherent authority and power of the Bible ("living, powerful and sharper than a two-edged sword," 2 Tim 3:16) gives *Messiah* its spiritual strength.

Secondly, *Messiah* is evangelical because it tells the complete story of the gospel; the

good news of Jesus Christ is on full display in *Messiah*. Eighty-one passages of scripture are woven like a tapestry to tell the story, beginning with Old Testament passages prophesying Messiah's birth and culminating with the exultant worship of the saints of all the ages gathered around God's Throne in Heaven. Along the way we hear that Christ is a gentle Shepherd who feeds his flock, while at the same time he is "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." We are reminded that he was "despised and rejected of men" even to the mocking voices of those who jeered at him during his crucifixion. *Messiah* tells us that "He was bruised for our iniquities" and that "The chastisement of our peace was laid on him." *Messiah* teaches us about the substitutionary atonement of Christ; that "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" and that "Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead."

Many times I have attended a concert of *Messiah* presented by a major orchestra and chorus with thousands in attendance, my heart welling with joy because I know The Messiah of the *Messiah*. As the gospel story unfolds I've looked at the audience around me, thinking to myself, "Do you hear this?! Do you understand what this means?!" Anyone who hears *Messiah* hears the gospel story and is invited by faith to join the worship of Him "Who sits on the throne and unto the Lamb." Upon completing the work, Handel himself is reported to have said, "I did think I did see all heaven before me, and the great God himself."

A final reason to consider *Messiah* an evangelical work is its objective beauty. When the light of the Holy Spirit shines into our hearts, illuminating the glory of Christ, nothing appears more beautiful to the heart of man than the gospel.

Many of God's perfections are his alone, what theologians call his "incommunicable attributes." He alone is uncreated; he alone is sovereign; he alone is omnipresent. But other of his attributes he shares with humankind and one of those attributes is creativity and an appreciation for beauty. Psalm 96 commands us to "Worship the Lord in the beauty of his holiness." Psalm 50 declares, "From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth." Whether the majesty of the ocean's depths, the grandeur of a mountain range or the awesome expanse of the heavens, beauty is an essential characteristic of God and a lens by which we gaze into his person. Beauty misdirected, perverted by human sin, becomes pointless, or even worse burlesque, a gross distortion of God design. Spirit-led beauty leaves us awestruck, humbled, moved. Beautiful art reminds us that God is the Proto-artist, the source of all beauty and creativity. Beautiful art reminds us that we are made by God in God's image, ourselves beautiful works of divine art, and causes us to aspire to God's design in our creation.

It is said that upon hearing of an audience's great enjoyment of a presentation of *Messiah* Handel commented, "I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wished to make them better." This is our prayer as well, not that you would enjoy a concert but that you would be amazed by the love of Christ and transformed by the gospel.

Pastor Bill Price

WHAT IS AN ORATORIO?

Handel's Messiah is in a musical form called "oratorio." In the 1700s when Messiah was written, long before television or the internet, a popular form of entertainment was to go to the local theatre to watch a play or the concert hall to hear an opera. An opera is like "Frozen" or "Hamilton" featuring actors and live musicians. However, during this time it was frowned upon to go to the opera or theater in the months leading up to Easter Sunday. During this season of the year called "Lent" churches are focused on the sufferings and death of Christ. Back then it was considered inappropriate to enjoy public entertainment during Lent.

Yet composers and musicians still needed to make a living, so a compromise was reached. Composers like Handel continued to write powerful, moving music but the music was performed in a concert setting rather than by costumed actors in a theatre. Additionally, the first performances of Messiah did not only benefit the composer and performers. The initial presentations were fund-raising events for indebted prisoners and orphaned children.

THE THREE SECTIONS OF MESSIAH

Messiah is comprised of three sections: The Messiah's Advent, The Messiah's Suffering and The Messiah's Victory. Handel did not use these labels as such but the outline is clear. Because we hear it often at Christmas, Part One with its music about angels, shepherds and Jesus' birth is the most familiar to us. In this Easter concert we will hear selections from Part Two and Part Three.

THE LYRICS OF MESSIAH

Almost from the very first performances, Messiah has been popular with everyone who has heard it. Even today nearly 300 years later it is still being performed around the world. The appeal to many is purely musical, as it represents some of the best music Handel ever composed. Beyond that, those who love the story of Jesus have an even greater affection for Messiah. The music is beautiful and the subject of the music – Jesus our Savior – is worthy of worship. But there's yet another aspect of Messiah that has contributed to its power; it is comprised solely of the words of scripture. The lyrics of an opera or oratorio is called the "libretto." The lyrics of Messiah are comprised of 81 scripture passages taken from 14 books of the Bible. Most of the lyrics of Messiah come from the book of Isaiah.

OVERTURE

An Overture is an instrumental piece that introduces a much larger work like an opera. The role of the overture is to introduce musical themes that the audience will experience during the concert. Although this is not the case with Messiah, composers will often quote music from the complete work to create the overture.

In the Overture to Messiah, Handel doesn't quote music that appears later, but he introduces the central themes that comprise the rest of the oratorio; agony and victory. When all three parts of Messiah are performed the Overture of course is performed first. We are borrowing the Overture to begin our performance and then continuing to Part Two, Messiah's Suffering.

The Overture is in two parts. The first part is written in a minor key. It is dark and dramatic, representing the agony Messiah must endure. You can clearly hear the conflict and struggle the music portrays. Part two suddenly shifts from minor to major; it represents the joy and victory of Messiah. It sounds like dance music. Can you tell when the music shifts from agony to victory?

CHORUS: BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD (JOHN 1:29)

When you listen to Messiah you will hear a musical technique that was very popular during the Baroque period of music when Handel composed. The technique is called "word painting." Remember, composers of oratorios did not have stage backdrops and costumes to help tell the story, they had to rely on the music. So they developed the technique of word painting to dramatize the text. Word Painting is when the composer writes the melody to do what the lyrics are saying the same way the word "pop" sounds like a pop and the word "crash" sounds like a crash. In "Behold The Lamb Of God" Handel imagines us standing at the foot of Jesus' cross, looking up to see him hanging there. The melody is introduced by each section of the choir and begins with an octave leap, as if the singers are lifting up their eyes to "behold."



Be - hold the Lamb of God,

ARIA: HE WAS DESPISED (ISA 53:3)

Like an opera, Messiah is comprised of solos (called “arias”) and choruses sung by the full choir. The arias are sung by the four voice sections that comprise the choir: soprano, alto, tenor and bass.

The ladies voices are divided between soprano (the higher pitched voices) and alto (the lower voices). The men’s voices are divided between tenor (the higher voices) and bass (the lower).

As in the Overture, Handel pairs gentle, passionate music with agitated, violent music. The first part of the aria on the words “He was despised” move slowly and invoke pity and compassion. The second part describes the actual sufferings of Jesus with the words, “He gave his back to the smiters and his cheeks to those who plucked off the hair.” You can clearly hear the violence of these actions are mirrored in the violence of the music. This short piece is called a “da capo aria.” Da capo means “from the top,” like where you wear your “cap.” The soloist repeats from the top, or the beginning of the music, to complete the aria.

CHORUS: SURELY HE HAS BORNE OUR GRIEFS AND CARRIED OUR SORROWS (ISA 53:4-5)

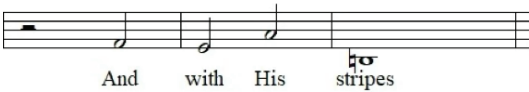
The next few short pieces are sung by the choir and are all taken from Isaiah 53. Isaiah wrote this description of Messiah’s sufferings over 500 years before Jesus fulfilled them, yet they accurately portray how much Jesus suffered on the cross.

Handel masterfully uses musical dissonance, chords that sounds harsh and clashing, to emphasize the ugliness of certain words in the text, especially “bruised,” “iniquities” and “chastisement.” But listen how the music softens on the word “... the chastisement of our peace was on him.”

CHORUS: AND WITH HIS STRIPES WE ARE HEALED (ISA 53:5)

In this chorus Handel beautifully uses word painting to musically illustrate the word “stripes” and “healed.”

The shape of the melody for “And with his stripes...” mimics the soldiers using a whip to beat Christ before his crucifixion. Handel puts these words on a melody that rises and falls like the arm of a man raising and dropping a whip:



The wonder of Isaiah’s message is that the very cruelty and violence that Christ experienced brought us spiritual healing, peace and reconciliation with God. The awkward melody that described the whip is replaced with a gentle, step-wise melody, almost as if a soothing balm is being applied to provide healing. Here’s how the “healing” motive appears in the bass part:



CHORUS: ALL WE LIKE SHEEP (ISA 53:6)

Handel's clearest word painting appears in the chorus on Isaiah's words, "All we, like sheep, have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way..." Have you ever tried to catch a disobedient, untrained dog? The more you move toward him with open arms, the more he jumps and scrambles to get away from you. This is what Handel has in mind when he writes the melody for the words "...have gone astray" and "we have turned..." The melody leaps, runs and wanders like a disobedient sheep:



all we like sheep have gone a-stray;

See how the melody "strays" away from where it started? You'll hear each of the sections of the choir sing this theme over and over again to illustrate how we have all scattered from God.

Handel does something similar on the words "We have turned everyone to his own way." Of course you would expect to see a melody with lots of turns on the word "turned," and that's what Handel does. The voices and the stringed instruments sound chaotic when singing this melody.

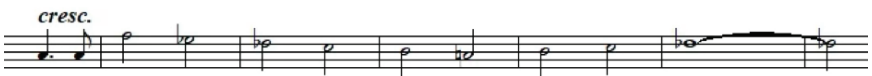


we have turn - ed

The sheep (that is, us) sound like they're taunting the shepherd as they sing. The melodies are playful, free-flowing and unrestrained. They seem to be rebelling and running away as quickly as possible. But everything comes to a screeching halt on the powerful words, "...and the LORD hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all." Listen for the basses as they introduce that line like a choir of powerful trombones.

Think of that! All our sin, all our rebellion, all our rebellious running from God and encouraging others to do the same may seem like playful fun until we learn that God took all our sin and laid it on Jesus, his dearly-beloved Son, the one who had never sinned.

At the appearance of these haunting words the music becomes very slow and somber. Listen carefully for the change in the music. It ends very quietly as we shamefully hear that "The LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

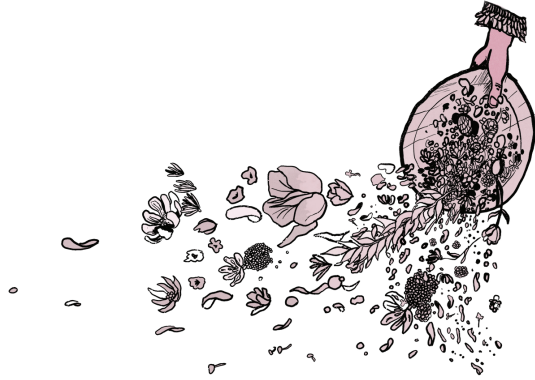


and the Lord hath laid on Him, hath laid on Him,



the in - i - qui - ty of us all.

RECITATIVE: THY REBUKE HATH BROKEN HIS HEART (PSALM 69:20)



ARIA: BEHOLD AND SEE IF THERE BE ANY SORROW (LAMENTATIONS 1:12)

The second solo in tonight's concert is sung by the tenor and is comprised of two pieces. Handel often introduced a longer aria (a solo piece) with a shorter piece called a recitative. You see the word "recite" in recitative as this piece seems to be more spoken than sung. The accompaniment is very sparse, played by the harpsicord and cello only.

These pieces are settings of Psalm 69:20 and Lamentations 1:12. The words of the psalm, "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" make us think of Christ's sufferings in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was emotionally crushed by the knowledge of what awaited him; the taunting, the cruelty and the suffering of the cross. He asked his closest friends to stay awake and pray with him, but one by one they fell asleep.

But perhaps he was even more distressed by the impending separation from God, his Father, something he had never experienced in all eternity-past. The aria presents the words, "Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto his sorrow." The emotional and physical sufferings of Christ are a part of what is called the "substitutionary atonement." The word "substitution" refers to one person taking the place of another and that's how God secured our salvation. All of the sufferings of Christ described in the Bible – the sorrow, the rejection, the pain and the death – all belonged to us because of our sin against God. But Jesus was sent by God and willingly stood as our substitute. In exchange for our sin and its penalty, Jesus freely gives us his righteousness and his merits. This is amazing grace.

RECITATIVE: HE WAS CUT OFF (ISA 53:8)



ARIA: BUT THOU DIDST NOT LEAVE HIS SOUL IN HELL (PSALM 16:10)

Another pairing of recitative and aria presents a turning point in the story of Messiah. The recitative brings the musical setting of Isaiah 53 to a close. The words “He was cut off from the land of the living...” is a poetic way of speaking of Messiah’s death. The recitative repeats the truth that it was “the transgression of his people” that caused the death of Messiah. These verses did not fit into the popular concept of Messiah. The people of Jesus’ day expected Messiah to be a revolutionary, a folk-hero who would lead Israel to throw off Roman bondage. Jesus’ own disciples did not understand – and even rebuked him! – when he spoke of his impending death. Death is the end. A Messiah who dies offers no hope for a future kingdom. Or does he...?

Listen to how the music changes from the recitative to the aria. The turning point in the story of Messiah – the story of God raising him back to life – is set to a beautiful melody that resembles a dance. From this point on in the oratorio we’ll be hearing music of triumph, victory and celebration, culminating in a final chorus of “Hallelujah.”

AN OBSOLETE INSTRUMENT

The 17th-18th centuries during which Messiah was written (the time of George Washington), is called the Baroque Period of classical music. “Classical” simply means formal music as opposed to popular (or “Pop”) music. Classical music is written for the concert hall; pop music is written for Spotify. The Baroque Period is interesting for many reasons including the fact that this was a time of important development in the design and manufacture of musical instruments. Instruments made during this period show better craftsmanship than earlier instruments, allowing them to play louder and with a wider range than previously.

This development is most obvious in the keyboards. When Handel’s time there was no instrument like our modern piano. The keyboard instrument of the Baroque Period was the harpsichord. You can tell by the name that the harpsichord is a keyboard instrument based on the structure of a harp. Of course, a modern piano is also fundamentally a harp laid on its side. The difference between a harpsichord and a piano is the way the strings are played. In a piano a system of levers causes a small felt hammer to strike the string when the key is pressed. Instead of a hammer the harpsichord used a quill, the tip of a bird’s feather, that plucked the string, giving a very different sound. The harpsichord plays much more softly than the pianoforte (the full name of a piano because it can play both piano (softly) and forte (loudly)). Because harpsichords are very difficult to keep in tune tonight’s harpsichord is played on a digital keyboard.

ARIA: I KNOW THAT MY REDEEMER LIVETH (JOB 19:25-26)

The next aria comes from one of the oldest stories in the Bible, the story of Job. Job was a righteous man who suddenly suffered the loss of all his earthly belongings. His property was stolen by an enemy, his family was killed in a sudden storm and finally even his health was lost to a terrible disease. His well-meaning friends offer clumsy theology and even his own wife advised him to abandon his faith and die.

But Job was a man who loved God in adversity as well as in prosperity. God revealed himself to Job, reminding him of his sovereignty over all creation. God sustained Job through his sufferings and in the end he was blessed and restored by God.

When his physical sufferings were at their worst and it looked like he might not survive, Job uttered one of the most faith-filled prophecies in scripture. God gave him faith to see beyond his current circumstances to know that even if disease ended his life and decay destroyed his body, one day he would live again and would see his Redeemer face-to-face.

“As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, Yet in my flesh I shall see God; Whom I myself shall behold, and whom my eyes will see.”



SINCE BY MAN CAME DEATH

You'll remember that at the very beginning of the concert Handel introduced the themes of suffering and victory in the Overture, one represented by dark, foreboding music and the other by joyous dance music. Here Handel continues the dramatic progression from death to victory with a quotation from Romans 5, "Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection from the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." As in the Overture, death is presented in dark, somber tones but the music breaks away and begins to dance as life in Christ is celebrated.

BEHOLD, I TELL YOU A MYSTERY/ THE TRUMPET SHALL SOUND

Handel's music now begins to look beyond the events of Easter Sunday morning toward the final victory of Messiah. The resurrection is not the end of the story, it's just the beginning for "Even so in Christ shall all be made alive." The next phase of Christ's unfolding victory will be the day when God's trumpet sounds and all those who have trusted in Christ will be summoned from earth and raptured into God's eternal kingdom.

WORTHY IS THE LAMB; BLESSING AND HONOR

The scene now shifts from earth to heaven as we hear the eternal worship of the saints. Raised with Christ, exalted with Christ and now seated with Christ the Church of all the ages sings an eternal song of worship and adoration, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!" Throughout Messiah Handel has used two very different forms of music for the choir, homophonic and polyphonic music. The prefix homo- means "one" or in this case "together." Poly- is the prefix that means "many." When coupled with -phonic we hear music that is either all the voice together (homophonic) or many voices sounding different musical lines distinct from one another (polyphonic).

If you were listening carefully during "All We Like Sheep" you would have heard Handel masterfully alternating between homophonic and polyphonic writing. When the choir sang "All we like sheep" all the voices sang the same words at the same time. But when Handel wanted to musically illustrate "...We have turned everyone to his own way," the sopranos, altos, tenors and basses scattered musically like disobedient sheep running away from the shepherd.

"Worthy Is The Lamb" is written homophonicly. It is the unified voice of the Universal Church gathered before the Throne of God. But then the fugue begins, all the voices in repeating cascades of praise as every people, tribe, nation and language takes up the song of adoration, "Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto Him who sits on the Throne!"



HALLELUJAH

The famous “Hallelujah Chorus” is not the finale of Handel’s Messiah. Messiah actually concludes with the word “Amen.” But not just any amen, this amen goes on and on for nearly five minutes. A grand and glorious work like Messiah needs a grand and glorious “Amen” to bring it to a close.

With apologies to Handel, we are taking The Hallelujah Chorus from its original location – immediately after the resurrection of Jesus – and using it for the finale for the first half of tonight’s concert. To be honest, the Amen Chorus is one of the most difficult pieces in Messiah, so we thought we’d save it for a future performance.

We have no idea if the story is true or not, but tradition has it that upon hearing the Hallelujah Chorus for the first time Charles II, the reigning King of England stood to his feet. Was he powerfully moved by the music or did he simply need to stretch his legs? We’ll never know, but we’ve been standing for the Chorus ever since!





IMMANUEL
BIBLE CHURCH