

Total performance time: approximately 150 minutes, including a 20-minute interval

# Messiah

**Aldeburgh Voices**  
**The Suffolk Ensemble**  
**Dominic Ellis-Peckham** conductor

**Mimi Doulton** soprano  
**Alexandra Meier** mezzo-soprano  
**Ruairi Bowen** tenor  
**Stephen Whitford** bass

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

Messiah (1741)

Text by Charles Jennens (1700–1773),  
after the King James Bible and Coverdale Psalter

## Part I

50'

### Isaiah's prophecy of salvation:

Overture  
Comfort ye my people  
Ev'ry valley shall be exalted  
And the glory of the Lord

### The coming judgment

Thus saith the Lord of hosts  
But who may abide the day of his coming  
And he shall purify the sons of Levi

### The prophecy of Christ's birth

Behold, a virgin shall conceive  
O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion  
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth  
The people that walked in darkness  
For unto us a child is born

### The annunciation to the shepherds

Pifa ('pastoral symphony')  
There were shepherds abiding in the fields  
And lo, the angel of the Lord  
And the angel said unto them  
And suddenly there was with the angel  
Glory to God in the highest

### Christ's healing and redemption

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion  
Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened  
He shall feed his flock like a shepherd  
His yoke is easy

## Part II

35'

### Christ's Passion

Behold the Lamb of God  
He was despised and rejected of men  
Surely he hath borne our griefs  
And with his stripes we are healed  
All we like sheep have gone astray

### The beginnings of Gospel preaching

The Lord gave the word  
How beautiful are the feet  
Their sound is gone out

### The world's rejection of the Gospel

Why do the nations so furiously rage together  
Let us break their bonds asunder  
He that dwelleth in heaven

### God's ultimate victory

Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron  
Hallelujah

## Part III

30'

### The promise of eternal life

I know that my Redeemer liveth  
Since by man came death

### The Day of Judgment

Behold, I tell you a mystery  
The trumpet shall sound

### The final conquest of sin

Then shall be brought to pass  
O death, where is thy sting?  
But thanks be to God  
If God be for us, who can be against us?

### The acclamation of the Messiah

Worthy is the Lamb  
Amen

INTERVAL

George Frideric Handel was one of the great Baroque composers, and is often compared to his near exact contemporary J.S. Bach. Stylistically, they both incorporated the same Italian influences of Vivaldi and Corelli into German Baroque music, and composed prolifically in many of the same genres (concertos, oratorios, cantatas, instrumental suites and more). Their careers looked very different, however. Bach was primarily a church musician, creating music of unprecedented technical refinement and intellectual depth while achieving a sublime aesthetic beauty; he never left Germany. Handel reached similar artistic heights, but was a cosmopolitan man of the theatre. He composed more than 40 operas and over 20 oratorios, travelled widely and became immensely wealthy, eventually settling permanently in London in 1712.

Handel's early career was a whirlwind, moving to Hamburg to make a name for himself and then being poached by the Medici family in Florence; here and elsewhere in Italy, he produced operas – *Agrippina* ran for 27 consecutive nights in Venice – and in Rome he composed sacred music. He came to London in 1710, where he completed *Rinaldo*, the first ever Italian-language opera composed for a London stage.

The internationalism is staggering: a German who became an opera composer in Italy and then brought Italian opera to England (a country with a German royal family). His journey also follows the flow of wealth and power towards England, a new seat of empire. Handel was entrepreneurial, and London was the right place to be: a vast, outward-looking city where interest in exotic luxuries such as Italian opera was high and financial risk-taking was widespread. Many of his patrons were involved in the wild and unregulated growth in share trading at the time – particularly in the burgeoning African slave trade – and Handel joined them in many ventures, becoming hugely wealthy.

One of the investments his patrons made was in Handel's new opera company, the Royal Academy of Music (separate from the conservatoire of the same name). Established with a royal charter, it enabled Handel to compose 36 operas at the King's Theatre on Haymarket, and several at Covent Garden, before a rival opera company, the Opera of the Nobility, began to take the competitive edge in the 1730s.

Forced out of the opera business, Handel sensed a new opportunity presented by a rising current of English nationalism. Oratorios – religious works for solo voices, chorus and orchestra – composed in English and concerned with the sacred texts of England's national religion, would surely appeal more than Italian-language stories of obscure historical figures. His assessment was astute, and the growing demand for English oratorio was proved when he revised his rather unsuccessful 1718 oratorio *Esther*, presenting it at the King's Theatre in 1732 – this time to great acclaim.

Despite the religious subject matter, Handel's oratorios were essentially stage works designed to be performed in theatres, like operas; there is a sense that these works contain more drama than piety, and only Handel's sixth English oratorio, *Messiah*, would ever be performed in a

church in his lifetime. However these oratorios had none of the expensive costumes, sets and stage action of opera or theatre, and could thus be produced at comparatively low cost.

Handel's *Messiah* is a true oratorio, in which the word of God is presented but not dramatised – the characters do not 'speak' to one another. The text is an adaptation by Charles Jennens of passages from the King James Bible and the Coverdale Psalter, and is almost unique in Handel's output of oratorios in including texts from the New Testament rather than the Old. *Messiah* describes the life of Jesus in three parts: the prophecy and events surrounding Jesus' birth; the difficulties faced during Jesus' life on Earth; and finally the Resurrection and promises of redemption. It was composed between August and September of 1741, performed in April and June 1742 in Dublin, and then in March 1743 in London, to a much more lukewarm reception – some questioned the propriety of staging a New Testament work in a bawdy London theatre.

Two long-running traditions associated with *Messiah* are anachronistic and began long after Handel's death. First, the use of large choirs and orchestras – which started with a commemorative performance in 1784 that was supported by King George III, and continued with a 1787 revival in Westminster Abbey featuring 800 musicians. This remained a feature of performances in English-speaking countries (including America) where amateur choral societies were popular, but was not true of European presentations. Such spectacle contrasts with the original forces required for the Dublin performance: a chorus of 16 boys and 16 men, two female soloists and a small orchestra, possibly using just two violinists.

Second, the association of *Messiah* with Christmas. Most of the performances during Handel's lifetime took place during the Lenten months of March or April, and it is only Part I of *Messiah* that deals with the Nativity. Though the section covering the story of the crucifixion is often left out at Christmastime performances (as in today's concert), *Messiah* has always also had strong associations with Easter.

The idea of Christmas as a time for charitable giving may provide part of the explanation; indeed, the very first presentations of *Messiah* in Dublin were charity concerts. Handel put his wealth to good use – notably Thomas Coram's Foundling Hospital where, from 1750, the composer began a tradition of annual *Messiah* performances.

The festive associations of *Messiah* probably have more to do with practical realities, however: music involving large choirs, a feature of English and American musical life from the 18th century onwards, lacked serious yet approachable works depicting the Nativity, and Part I of *Messiah* fulfilled this requirement perfectly – and was conveniently written in English rather than German or Latin. Combined with the contrapuntal vigour, melodic intuitiveness and message of joy expressed in *Messiah*, the work has become the perfect expression of Christmas spirit.