

*Messiah*, music by George Frederick Handel (1685-1759) with libretto by Charles Jennens (1700-1773), made its modest debut on 13 April, 1742 in a music hall on Fishamble Street, Dublin as a fundraiser for local charities. In the 273 years since its first performance, this oratorio has become a staple of choral repertoire and its famous *Hallelujah* chorus has had its own life outside of the work, regularly referenced in movies and advertising. The libretto for *Messiah* was assembled by Jennens from various biblical passages into a three part plan that follows the prophecy of the Messiah, through to Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection, and finally to judgement and eternal life. Unlike other oratorios, there are no dramatic characters within *Messiah*. The characteristics of Jesus are explored mostly through the eyes of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. The *Annunciation to the Shepherds* taken from the Gospel of Luke provides a theatrical scene of sorts, Revelation is used for the *Acclamation of the Messiah*, and the version of Psalms used comes from the *Book of Common Prayer*. After Jennens had formed the libretto the Lord Lieutenant of Dublin commissioned Handel to write the accompanying music.

Handel, originally from Germany, made his living in London as a composer for royalty and as an opera company entrepreneur. He famously composed *Messiah* in three weeks but this had come to be his usual practise with large works. *Messiah* reflects his cosmopolitan experience as it uses a large range of styles including Italian florid lines, French dances, English anthems, and German fugues. Some of the music was taken from his earlier Italian cantatas which explains some of the uneasy word setting and there are also references to well-known hymns, for example *Watchet Auf* in the *Hallelujah* chorus. Handel uses word painting and recognisable Baroque styles to give life to the well-known text. Giggles, such as *O thou that tellest* joyfully dance while pastorals such as the *Pifa* and *He shall feed his flock* paint a picture of peaceful contentment. The opening French overture, a regal style, establishes the serious nature of the work. Melismas are crafted to musically describe action words, for example the wandering 'astray' in *All we like sheep*. His orchestral writing depicts scenes such as the angels leaving after their celebratory praise *Glory to God* as heard in the fading of the final strings' melodies. The concluding *Amen* chorus, a fugue with each subject entry occurring one beat apart, projects an image of thousands of voices singing one unifying word as it echoes across the corners of the world.

The convergence of worldly music with the sacred has always been a contentious issue within churches and often, particular styles of music have been considered unworthy for sacred use. Such was the case with Handel's music for *Messiah*. Handel's vast experience in was in creating florid operas but the Bishop of London would not let religious stories be staged as operas, so oratorios became the solution to appeal to conservative, religious audiences, and reignited Handel's popularity. Just as operas have recitatives that narrate a story, arias that communicate emotion, and larger ensemble choruses that project drama, so did Handel's oratorios. Essentially, oratorios were operas without the theatrical staging. Church leaders often advised congregations to avoid such performances and the work was banned from being performed in places such as Westminster Abbey for many years after its premier. The style was considered to be entertainment but Handel himself said: "I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better." Jennens was unimpressed with Handel's setting of his words: "Messiah has disappointed me, being set in great haste, tho' said he would be a year about it, and make it the best of all his Compositions. I shall put no more Sacred Words into his hands, to be thus abus'd." Later, Jennens stated: "I have with great difficulty made him correct some of the grossest faults in the composition, but he retained his Overture obstinately in which there are some passages far unworthy of Handel, but much more unworthy of Messiah."

*Messiah* was originally written for a small orchestra and choir and the recent early historical movement has sought to recreate this. Its Dublin debut received positive reviews in the local paper: "Words are wanting to express the exquisite Delight it afforded to the admiring crowded Audience. The Sublime, the Grand, and the Tender, adapted to the most elevated, majestick and moving Words, conspired to transport and charm the ravished Heart and Ear." Similarly, the work continues to be enjoyed in large massed choirs, orchestras, and singalongs, ensuring its popularity for the ages to come and continually proclaiming the message of the Messiah.