

## Programme Notes

### George Frideric Handel (1685-1759): *Messiah*

To many English music-lovers, 'Choral Music' suggests Handel more than any other composer. In particular it recalls performances of *'Messiah'*, whether sung in its entirety by choral societies with an orchestra as in this evening's concert, or hearing one of its airs sung by a single voice and accompanied by an organ in a village church one Sunday morning.

Handel was born in Germany, studied in Italy, but lived in London for nearly fifty years, dying in his house in Brook Street in 1759. He was a truly international composer: equally at home with Italian opera, German instrumental suites, and English anthems and works for special occasions.

Handel arrived in England as a young composer of Italian opera, the fashionable entertainment of the day. He became so popular that he was commissioned to compose a birthday ode for Queen Anne and received a lifetime allowance from her. The story of his finding that his former employer, the Elector of Hanover (whose service he had left without permission) becoming King George I after Queen Anne's death in 1714 is well-known. Suffice that good relations were swiftly repaired and Handel's salary was doubled.

During the following years, Handel composed anthems for a wealthy patron, the Duke of Chandos, the oratorio *'Esther'* and the pastoral opera *'Acis and Galatea'*, both to English words. The oratorios that he composed in the latter part of his life, when the public had tired of Italian *'opera seria'* are among the greatest sacred musical works of all time.

The text of *'Messiah'* was selected from passages in the Bible by Charles Jennens (1700-1773), a literary scholar and editor of Shakespeare's plays. Jennens had admired Handel's music since 1725 and by the mid-1730s was working with him. He provided him with libretti for the dramatic oratorio *'Saul'* (1738) and the masque, *'L'Allegro'* (1740), before writing the libretto for *'Messiah'* in 1741. Despite a difficult working relationship – Handel preferred lesser-known writers – Jennens remained a life-long admirer and supporter of his music.

*'Messiah'* was composed in the amazing time of 24 days, and first performed in Dublin in 1742. A year later, Handel performed it in London. The story of King George II attending the concert and standing as the first notes of the triumphant *'Hallelujah Chorus'* rang out is famous. It claims that, following royal protocol, the entire audience stood too, initiating a tradition that has lasted ever since and will doubtless be repeated this evening.

Handel personally conducted more than thirty performances of *'Messiah'*. Many of them were benefit concerts for the Foundling Hospital, and the fortune they raised led one biographer to write, *'Messiah' has fed the hungry, clothed the naked, fostered the orphan... more than any other single musical production.* By the end of his long life, *'Messiah'* was firmly established in the standard repertoire. Today it remains part of our musical heritage and its influence on English choral music is unique and lasting.

Margaret Withers  
Rochester Choral Society  
November 2009