



Messiah
verture



George Frideric Handel

Handwritten musical notation, including notes and stems, is visible in the background.



By Elder
Spencer J. Condie

Served as a
member of the Seventy
from 1989 to 2010



HANDEL AND THE GIFT OF MESSIAH

*At the end of our divinely ordained days,
may we be able to acknowledge, with Handel,
that God has visited us.*

George Frideric Handel seemed to have been born a musician. As a young lad in Germany, he became proficient on both the violin and the organ. After composing his first opera in Germany, he moved to Italy, the operatic center of the world, to try his hand at musical composition in the Italian style. There he achieved some success in composing operas and chamber music.

In 1711, at age 26, Handel decided to move to England, where his operas and oratorios initially gained acceptance. By the late 1730s, however, British audiences had become less enthusiastic about operas sung in German or Italian; instead, they favored comedic performances such as *The Beggar's Opera*. Thus, for several years Handel struggled to keep the wolves—his creditors—away from the door.



In 1737, after pushing himself to his physical limits by composing four operas within 12 months, the 52-year-old composer suffered a stroke, leaving his right arm temporarily paralyzed. A doctor told Handel's faithful secretary: "We may save the man—but the musician is lost forever. It seems to me that his brain has been permanently injured."¹

The composer defied the diagnosis. Over time his body responded to treatment in the thermal springs at Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen, Germany), and he recovered his physical strength. After testing his ability to play the organ at a nearby cathedral, he jubilantly proclaimed, "I have come back from Hades."²

When he returned to London and resumed composing operas, his work was not well received, and creditors began to hound him again. In the depths of despondency, he

A poet and previous collaborator left Handel a manuscript that quoted liberally from the scriptures, particularly the words of Isaiah, foretelling the birth of Jesus Christ and describing His ministry, Crucifixion, and Resurrection.



began to wonder, “Why did God permit my resurrection, only to allow my fellow-men to bury me again?”³ In April 1741 Handel held what he assumed would be a farewell concert. His creativity was spent. A biographer wrote: “There was nothing to begin or to finish. Handel was faced with emptiness.”⁴

Late one August afternoon that same year, Handel returned from a long and tiring walk to find that a poet and previous collaborator,

Charles Jennens, had left him a manuscript. This libretto quoted liberally from the scriptures, particularly the words of Isaiah, foretelling the birth of Jesus Christ and describing His ministry, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. The work was to be an oratorio. Given his previous failures, Handel was apprehensive as he began to read through the text.

“Comfort Ye,” the first words of the manuscript, seemed to leap from the page. They dissipated dark clouds that had been pressing upon Handel for so long. His depression waned and his emotions warmed from interest to excitement as he continued to read of angelic proclamations of the Savior’s birth and of Isaiah’s prophecies of the Messiah, who would come to earth to be born as other mortal infants. A familiar melody Handel had composed earlier flooded into his mind as he read “For unto Us a Child Is Born.” The notes distilled upon his mind faster than he could put pencil to paper as he captured the image of the loving Good Shepherd in the aria titled “He Shall Feed His Flock.” Then came the overpowering exultation reflected in the “Hallelujah Chorus,” followed by the soft, supernal testimony of “I Know That My Redeemer Liveth.” The work came to its majestic conclusion with “Worthy Is the Lamb.”

After all the music he had composed throughout his lifetime, Handel would eventually be known worldwide for this singular work, *Messiah*, largely composed in just three weeks during the late summer of 1741. Upon completing his composition, he humbly acknowledged, “God has visited me.”⁵ Those who feel the touch of the Holy Spirit as they experience the overpowering testimony of Handel’s *Messiah* would agree.

“IF I WERE THERE”

Words and music written by a young man from South Africa encourage each of us to think deeply about the Savior, not only at Christmas but always.

The tune begins as gently as a whisper, a melody that fills your soul as quickly as it fills your ears. It becomes even more memorable when the choir begins singing:

*If I were there to see this man arrive,
this man, a carpenter called Jesus,
When I would see thousands flock
to Him, would I not follow them
and hear Him?*

*When I would see Him, with one
glance would I know Him
instantly?*

Would I know that He is the Christ?

Look at the choir, and you can see that all the members are singing from their hearts. Look at the accompanists carefully constructing each chord and the sound technicians balancing the entire performance into well-blended harmony. Look and see the young adults of the Pretoria South Africa Stake, themselves a blend of backgrounds and experiences, joining their voices together in praise of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And at the center of it all is a 20-year-old conductor who penned every word, composed every note, coordinated each rehearsal and performance, and created what ended up as a Christmas present for his friends, for Church members, for the community, and even for his Savior and his Father in Heaven.

Michael McLeod, who will soon be serving a full-time mission, didn't expect his celebration to grow into such an event—performances at four chapels, each one filled to capacity with hundreds

of thrilled audience members. He was simply responding to an assignment given to the young single adults (YSA) of his stake to prepare a cantata, a program of music and words to help people worship the Savior. In fact, the program was originally scheduled for June or July 2009 but after several delays was moved to December.

“When the stake YSA representatives told me what they'd been asked to do, I instantly said, ‘Why don't we use original music instead of borrowing other people's music?’” Michael remembers. The YSA representatives agreed. And they also knew just the right person to put it all together—Michael McLeod.

Michael is a University of Pretoria student, majoring in English and mathematics education. “What I really want to be is a teacher,” he says. But Michael has always been interested in music. In fact, he studied it seriously until he was 17.

“Music became my hobby,” he explains, “and I still love it. I love the way music is able to touch people's hearts. I love to conduct and to feel the energy that comes from a choir, especially when it's a gospel song. I love to watch the

congregation as the music draws them in and to feel the Spirit as they feel the Spirit. I think I'll be involved with music my whole life because it means so much to me.”

But most of all, Michael loves to share his testimony of the Savior, and doing that with music at Christmastime became a perfect opportunity. “The whole point was to share our testimonies of the Savior through the music and the words of the cantata,” he says. “We wanted powerful music and at the same time to have powerful testimonies, so we used the testimonies from the scriptures of people who knew the Savior: Mary, Joseph, Anna, Simeon, Peter, James, John the Beloved, Mary Magdalene, and those Christ healed and taught. We tried to convey what they knew, and it's powerful. We also used the Savior's own testimony. It came together wonderfully.”



TO SEE A VIDEO OF PORTIONS OF THE CANTATA, GO TO WWW.LIAHONA.LDS.ORG.

Each of us, like Handel, is engaged in a creative spiritual enterprise in this life. I pray that we may be sensitive to inspiration from on high, that we may be inspired in such a way that the fruits of our labors are inspiring to others.



To the sponsors of the first performance of the oratorio, Handel stipulated that profits from this and all future performances of *Messiah* “be donated to prisoners, orphans, and the sick. I have myself been a very sick man, and am now cured,” he said. “I was a prisoner, and have been set free.”⁶

Following the first London performance of *Messiah*, a patron congratulated Handel on the excellent “entertainment.”

“My lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them,” Handel humbly replied. “I wish to make them better.”⁷

He had finally been relieved of his restless quest for fame, fortune, and public praise—but only after composing his crowning work for an audience that included those not of this earth. The things that mattered most were no longer at the mercy of the things that mattered least. Handel, the restless composer, was now at rest.

Lessons from Handel’s Life

What lessons may we learn from the life of George Frideric Handel and the composition of a piece of music that has become a spiritual landmark?

- 1. We must develop confidence in our abilities and learn to live with criticism of our work.** In the words of poet Rudyard Kipling: “Trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make allowance for their doubting too.”⁸
- 2. Quantity is no substitute for quality and variety.** Handel’s earlier operas have largely been forgotten. Their predictable, formulaic templates simply failed to inspire; each opera sounded much like the others he had composed.
- 3. When we act on inspiration, we are doing the work of heaven.** We cannot force the Spirit, but when inspiration and revelation come, we must listen and act upon the promptings. The Lord has promised that “the power of my Spirit quickeneth all things” (D&C 33:16).



4. We must acknowledge our source of inspiration and revelation.

We are only instruments in the work we do that blesses others. We must realize, as Handel did when he deflected the honor given upon his achievement, that “God has visited [us].”

5. We must never underestimate the power of the word. There is a power in the word of God that far surpasses the narratives of this world’s most gifted writers (see Alma 31:5).

6. Real spiritual meaning in a work is conveyed by the witness of the Holy Ghost. “When [an individual speaks or sings] by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 33:1).

7. Power is in God and His works, not in our words. Speaking of the professors of religion of the day, the Savior told Joseph Smith, “They draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, . . . having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). Handel had composed other oratorios and operas with biblical texts, but the form of his

music did not match the power of the scriptures—Isaiah’s powerful prophecies of the Savior’s birth and ministry or the fulfillment of those prophecies as found in Revelation and the Gospels of Luke and John. In Handel’s *Messiah*, we find both the form of godliness *and* the power thereof. In *Messiah*, lips *and* hearts are drawn nearer to heaven.

Each of us, like George Frideric Handel, is engaged in a creative spiritual enterprise in this life. Both the physical fostering of mortal life and the righteous living of our days on earth are spiritual achievements. I pray that we may be sensitive to inspiration from on high, that we may be inspired in such a way that the fruits of our labors are inspiring to others. As we seek to rescue others, may we not be bound by time-tested templates and self-imposed perceptions that restrict our spiritual creativity and lock out revelation.

In her epic poem, *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed the eloquent thought:

*Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.⁹*

May each of us unlatch our shoes and cram our labors with the essence of heaven, and may none of us be found plucking blackberries when a much grander, loftier work needs to be done.

And at the end of our divinely ordained days, may we be able to acknowledge, with Handel, that God has visited us in our labors. ■

NOTES

1. In Stefan Zweig, *The Tide of Fortune: Twelve Historical Miniatures* (1940), 104.
2. In *The Tide of Fortune*, 107.
3. In *The Tide of Fortune*, 108.
4. In *The Tide of Fortune*, 110.
5. In *The Tide of Fortune*, 121.
6. In *The Tide of Fortune*, 122.
7. In Donald Burrows, *Handel: Messiah* (1991), 28; see also “A Tribute to Handel,” *Improvement Era*, May 1929, 574.
8. Rudyard Kipling, “If—,” in *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*, sel. Hazel Felleman (1936), 65.
9. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in John Bartlett, comp., *Familiar Quotations*, 14th ed. (1968), 619.