



On Sunday afternoon, 8 December 2024 at 2:30 pm the Newcastle University Choir (NUC) will perform Handel's *Messiah* at the Concert Hall, Newcastle City Hall (King St).

Conducted by Dr Christopher Allan, the Choir's Musical Director, the 100 voice Newcastle University Choir will be strongly supported by the Christ Church Camerata Orchestra. The soloists will be Anna Sandström, Soprano; Keara Donohoe, Alto; Phillip Costovski, Tenor; and Simon Lobelson, Bass.

Tickets are \$55 adult, \$50 Concession, \$30 Student, and can be obtained from www.civictheatrenewcastle.com.au or call 49291977, and available at the door (unless sold out!).

Messiah, composed by George Frederic Handel, is the most loved and most performed of any Oratorio. Charles Jennens provided a scriptural text, based on the King James Bible. *Messiah* was originally performed in April 1742 in Dublin, Ireland, in recognition of the importance of the resurrection of Christ at Easter. The first London performance came a year later. Much of the work describes, through choruses and by soloists, the celebration of the birth of Christ. Thus it is popular at Christmas.



Handel was born in Halle, Germany on 23 February 1685. He died in London April 6, 1759. His parents provided support for music theory and keyboard studies during his youth. He visited Italy and was introduced to opera in his early twenties. He became a highly accomplished and respected German musician.

When he was 27, He was brought to England in 1712 by George III for a visit. He remained for the rest of his life. The King wanted him to create an opera company. He composed a number of well-

known operas, still often performed today (*Alcina*, *Giulio Cesare*, *Xerxes* for example). There he also encountered a different kind of composition, music written for and sung by English choirs.

Handel was an excellent businessman. He was able to “read” the tastes and needs of his audiences. Thus, at the time of its creation, *Messiah* was a unique combination of the concepts of opera, and the use of the tradition of English choral music. The work also incorporated the English love for biblical stories at the time. It is the choruses that tell the core of the oratorio story. The soloists provide commentary: about the importance of the event; the passion surrounding it; and perhaps most importantly, the emotion that is so important for the birth of Christ.

The text structure of *Messiah* is in three parts. Part 1 describes the birth of Christ, but with considerable introduction beforehand. *Comfort Ye*, sung by the Tenor soloist, provides the initial encouragement to prepare for what is to come. The first chorus, *And the Glory of the Lord* indicates a revelation, for the Lord “hath spoken it”. The bass solo *Thus Saith the Lord* describes a messenger that will “shake the heavens and the earth”. After the Chorus, *He Shall Purify the Sons of Levi*, the alto announces *Behold a Virgin Shall Conceive and Bear a Son*. The chorus rejoices with *Oh Thou That Tellest Good Tidings to Zion*.

At last, the chorus announces the birth in *For Unto Us a Child is Born*, and he shall be called “Wonderful, Counsellor”. The soprano describes *Shepherds Abiding in the Field*, and the coming of the angels with the announcement of the birth. The chorus sings *Glory to God*, and the soprano, has her first major solo, *Rejoice Greatly, Oh Daughter of Zion*. Then, *He Shall Feed his Flock*, gathering the people as lambs into the bosom of the Lord. The chorus ends Part 1 with *His Yoke is Easy*,

suggesting the Messiah shall lift the sins of the world on his shoulders.

Part 2 is more somber and reflective, as an adult Messiah encounters prejudice in a difficult world. While the chorus announces his presence with *Behold the Lamb of God*, the alto describes how *He Was Despised* and rejected by men. Three choruses further emphasise this theme: *Surely He Hath Borne Our Grief; And With His Stripes We are Healed*; and *All We Like Sheep Have Gone Astray*. He is scorned in *He Trusted in God*, and rebuked by all, but *Lift up Your Heads* from the chorus indicates promise of salvation. The bass soloist then questions, *Why Do the Nations So Furiously Rage Together?* The detractors will be overcome in *Thou Shalt Break Them* from the tenor. The Lord God will reign forever, as joyously presented in the *Hallelujah Chorus*.

Part 3 focusses on the resurrection, beginning with the wonderful soprano solo *I Know That My Redeemer Liveth*, followed by the chorus announcing the triumph of the resurrection in *Since By Man Came Death*. The bass soloist follows with *Behold I Tell You a Mystery*, and *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, when “the dead shall be raised” and “we shall all be changed”. The Oratorio ends with *Worthy Is the Lamb* that was slain, and the powerful *Amen* chorus.

If you ever visit London, visit Handel’s original home on Brook St. Here is located the Handel House Museum, preserving many examples from his works. Here is where he composed *Messiah*. The rooms where he lived and composed his music are lovingly recreated.

Howard Bridgman, Editor