



Georg Friedrich Handel was born in Halle, Germany on 23 February 1685. His father initially prevented music studies, wanting him to be a lawyer. But Handel somehow found ways to study music theory and keyboard studies during his youth. When he was 10, the Duke of Saxon-Weissenfels recognized his talent. He convinced Handel's father that his career was in music. He moved to Hamburg in 1703 and fell in love with opera. While there he became a highly accomplished and respected musician, especially as a harpsicord player, and composer.

On Sunday afternoon, 14 December 2025 at 2:30 pm, the Newcastle University Choir (NUC) will perform the very popular oratorio *Messiah*, by G.F. Handel in the Concert Hall, Newcastle City Hall, King Street Newcastle. Conducted by Dr Christopher Allan, the choir will be supported by Christ Church Camerata string orchestra, augmented with trumpets and timpani. We are delighted to be joined by soprano Amy Moore, alto Hannah Fraser, tenor Louis Hurley, and bass Andrew O'Connor

Tickets are \$55 adult, \$45 Concession, \$25 Student, and can be obtained from civictheatrenewcastle.com.au or by scanning the QR Code (next column). This concert is co-presented by the Newcastle Civic Theatre.



Handel Miniature
25years (C Platzer)



Handel in later Age

The left portrait above suggests that Handel was a handsome young man. In 1707 he went to Rome to further his career. He wrote both Italian-style opera (i.e. *Rodrigo*) and began writing oratorio. He became

known as “Il Caro Sassone”, the beautiful Saxon. He also learned to “borrow” music from previous works and other composers to enhance his writing.

When he was 25, he was brought to England in 1710, initially on leave of absence. King George I wanted him to create an opera company. He composed several well-known operas, still often performed today. *Rinaldo* was his first “big hit”; also *Alcina*, *Xerxes* for example. There he also encountered a different kind of composition, music written for and sung by English choirs. He remained in England for 49 years until he died in London April 6, 1759.

Messiah, composed in about 4 weeks by Handel in the early 1740s, is the most loved and most performed of all Christmas/Easter oratorios. Now older and more mature, Handel could combine all his experience and music skills. Charles Jennes provided a scriptural text, based on the King James Bible.

At the time of its creation, *Messiah* was a unique combination of the concepts of opera, the use of the tradition of English choral music and the English love for Biblical stories. It is the choruses that tell the core of the oratorio story, the celebration of the birth and resurrection of Christ. Thus it became popular at both Christmas and Easter. 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 depiction of the birth of Christ. Handel rearranged or recomposed the arias many times depending on the singers available at each performance.

The text structure of *Messiah* is in three parts. Part 1 describes the joy of the birth of Christ. Part 2 is more sombre and reflective. An adult Messiah encounters prejudice in a difficult world. Part 3 focusses on the resurrection.

Messiah was originally performed in April 1742 in Dublin, to an audience of about 700, in recognition of the resurrection of Christ at Easter. The first London performance came a year later on 23 March 1743, at Covent Garden. However, it did not receive the same positive reaction from audiences. Reviews suggested that a theatre was not the proper venue for such and “exalted” religiously-based work. This caused Handel to reduce the number for performances from six to three, and to substantially revise parts of the oratorio. The newer version was much more successful. Regular performances occurred from 1745 onwards.

The most famous question is: Did King George stand for the *Hallelujah Chorus* at the end of Part 2? The answer is likely yes, but the reason(s) why are open to speculation. A blog by Dr Roy Atwood suggests the most likely reason was the musical tribute to King of Kings, a Lord greater than himself. The tradition began for the audience to stand for this wonderful chorus, but is less commonly observed nowadays. There is some question whether the King was actually at the performance!

The first performance of *Messiah* in America was in New York City. The concert took place in the Burns’ Coffee House, a tavern in lower Manhattan, on January 16, 1770. Not quite the venue Handel envisioned.

Howard Bridgman, Editor

(References: C. Padget, A Knight at the Opera, Limelight, November 2023; various Wikipedia and internet sources)