

BERLINER PHILHARMONIKER

Emmanuelle Haïm conducts Handel's Messiah at the Salzburg Easter Festival

Sunday, March 21, 2027 · 19:00 · Großes Festspielhaus

Emmanuelle Haïm, conductor · Sabine Devieilhe, soprano · Carlo Vistoli, countertenor · Eric Ferring, tenor · William Thomas, bass · Le Concert d'As-trée, choir

approximately 140 minutes

George Frideric Handel

1685–1759

Messiah, HWV 56

THE COMPOSER

George Frideric Handel was born in Halle in 1685. He learned his craft from the organist Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow and at eighteen joined the orchestra of the Hamburg opera as a violinist. A court appointment in Hanover followed, but the success of his opera *Rinaldo* in London in 1711 showed him where his future lay, and he soon settled in England for good. For the next three decades he was above all a composer of Italian opera for the London stage, and he wrote ceremonial music for the Hanoverian kings, the *Water Music* among it. When the taste for Italian opera faded in the 1730s he turned to oratorio in English, a form he largely made his own, with big choruses at its centre. He suffered a stroke in 1737 and recovered. He went blind in old age but continued to work, and died in London in 1759.

ABOUT THE WORK

Messiah is an oratorio in English for four solo singers, chorus and orchestra, and it is unlike almost everything else George Frideric Handel wrote for the theatre. It tells no story in the ordinary sense. Nobody on stage plays a character and there is hardly any quoted speech. The text is a sequence of short passages from scripture, and the piece asks its audience to think about them.

The words came first. Charles Jennens, a wealthy landowner, a man of letters and a devout Anglican, had already supplied Handel with librettos. In 1741 he put together a new one from the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, setting Old Testament prophecy beside New Testament fulfilment: the promise of a Messiah, the birth,

140 minutes

the suffering and death, the resurrection, and the hope of a life to come. He meant it as an answer to the Deists of his day, who doubted that God intervened in human affairs.

Handel needed something new. He had made his name in London with Italian opera, and by the early 1740s the public's taste for it had gone. His English oratorios had found a better welcome, and Jennens hoped to steer him further that way. Then came an invitation to give a season of concerts in Dublin. With that in prospect Handel began the score on 22 August 1741 and finished it on 14 September, 24 days later. The speed has fed a good many pious legends, but it was his normal working pace, and part of it came from his habit of reusing his own music. Several of the best-known choruses, "For unto us a child is born" and "All we like sheep" among them, started life a few weeks earlier as Italian love duets for two voices and continuo.

Jennens was not grateful. Handel, he wrote to a friend, "has made a fine Entertainment of it, tho' not near so good as he might & ought to have done." He thought the composer had been careless and pressed him for years to make changes.

The first performance was given in Dublin on 13 April 1742, for the benefit of local charities. To fit in as many people as possible, ladies were asked to come without hoops in their skirts. It was a triumph. London was another matter. Handel introduced the oratorio there at the Covent Garden theatre in 1743 and it was coolly received, partly because some people objected to hearing scripture sung in a play-house. Its fortunes changed only when he began to give it every year for charity at the Foundling Hospital, from 1750. By his death in 1759 it had become what it still is in the English-speaking world, a fixed point of the musical year.

There is no single authentic *Messiah*. Handel altered it for almost every revival, rewriting arias and moving them from one voice to another to suit the singers he had. Every conductor has to choose among the versions, and has to decide who sings the alto solos, which in this performance go to a countertenor.

Many listeners now associate *Messiah* with Christmas, but it was not written as Christmas music. Only the first of its three parts deals with the Nativity, the other two concern the Passion, the Resurrection and what follows from them, and the first performance took place in April. Hearing it on Palm Sunday and on Easter Sunday, as here, suits it well.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Part I deals with prophecy and the Nativity. After a grave overture in the minor, the tenor enters gently with “Comfort ye, my people” and the music turns to the major. The first sequence builds to the chorus “For unto us a child is born”, and its origin as a duet is easy to hear: for long stretches only two voice parts sing at a time, and the whole choir comes together for the shouts of “Wonderful, Counsellor”. Then comes the only real scene of narrative in the work. A short pastoral for strings, the *Pifa*, evokes shepherds’ pipes, the soprano tells of the angel appearing to the shepherds, and the chorus answers with “Glory to God”.

Part II is the heart of the work at Easter. It opens with the chorus “Behold the Lamb of God” and the alto aria “He was despised”, slow and bare, with the voice sometimes left alone. In its middle section the strings break into sharp dotted rhythms for the scourging, a figure that returns in the choruses that follow. The music then moves through death and resurrection to the spreading of the gospel. A run of violent numbers, the bass’s “Why do the nations so furiously rage together” and the tenor’s “Thou shalt break them”, leads straight into the “Hallelujah” chorus, which in this setting sounds as much like a cry of victory as a hymn of praise.

Part III is a meditation on the resurrection of the dead and the life to come. It begins with the soprano’s serene “I know that my Redeemer liveth”. The bass aria “The trumpet shall sound” brings a long solo for the trumpet. The oratorio closes with the chorus “Worthy is the Lamb” and a great fugue on a single word, “Amen”.

Listen throughout for how the chorus moves between two manners: quick, speech-like declamation that follows the rhythm of the English words, and long, sung lines.

Tonight's artists

Sabine Devieille *soprano*

Sabine Devieille has the soprano solos, from the angel's news to the shepherds in Part I to "I know that my Redeemer liveth" at the start of Part III. She and Emmanuelle Haïm are old colleagues in Handel: their recording of his Italian cantatas with Le Concert d'Astrée was made for Erato.

Sabine Devieille is a French soprano from Normandy. She studied the cello and musicology before training as a singer at the Paris Conservatoire. Soon after graduating she sang Serpetta in Mozart's *La finta giardiniera* at the Aix-en-Provence Festival, and she went on to the title role in Delibes's *Lakmé* and to the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute* in Lyon, high coloratura parts that made her name. She has since added Handel's Cleopatra and Morgana, Debussy's Mélisande and Sister Constance in Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*, and her repertoire runs from Baroque music to new works. She is an exclusive Erato artist.

Carlo Vistoli *countertenor*

Carlo Vistoli sings the alto solos, among them "He was despised", the long aria that opens the Passion sequence of Part II. A countertenor in this part gives the line a cooler, more instrumental colour than a mezzo-soprano would.

Carlo Vistoli is an Italian countertenor. He trained first as a guitarist and pianist and began his vocal studies in 2007, working with William Matteuzzi and Sonia Prina, and studied at the conservatory in Ferrara. He made his stage debut in 2012 in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, took first prize in the Baroque section of the Renata Tebaldi competition, and in 2015 was chosen for William Christie's academy Le Jardin des Voix. His roles include Ruggiero in Handel's *Alcina* at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Nerone in Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* at the Berlin State Opera and Athamas in Handel's *Semele* at the Royal Opera in London, and he sang in the first performances of Francesco Filidei's *Il nome della rosa* at La Scala.

Eric Ferring *tenor*

Eric Ferring sings the first words of the oratorio, “Comfort ye, my people”, and the tenor’s recitatives and arias in the Passion music of Part II. *Messiah* is a regular part of his concert work, and his season includes it with several American orchestras as well as in Salzburg.

Eric Ferring is an American tenor from Dubuque, Iowa. He studied at Drake University and the Boston Conservatory, and is a graduate of the Ryan Opera Center at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. His repertoire centres on Handel and Mozart: Tamino in *The Magic Flute* and Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni* are among his regular roles. A Lyric Opera of Chicago production of *Pagliacci* in which he appeared won an Emmy award in 2022. His first solo album, *No Choice but Love*, is a collection of songs released by Lexicon Classics.

William Thomas *bass*

William Thomas takes the bass solos, which include two of the most forceful numbers in the work: “Why do the nations so furiously rage together” and “The trumpet shall sound”.

William Thomas is a fast-rising British bass, admired for the depth, richness and nobility of his voice. A graduate of the opera course at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, he has won a string of major prizes, including the Kathleen Ferrier Award, the John Christie Award and the Veronica Dunne International Singing Competition, and his recent and forthcoming engagements include Daland in *Der fliegende Holländer* at the Opéra national de Lorraine and house debuts at the Staatsoper Berlin and Cologne Opera. His sonorous, weighty bass is well suited to the grave, authoritative roles of the Priest and the Angel of the Agony in Gerontius.

Le Concert d'Astrée *choir*

The chorus is the choir of Le Concert d'Astrée, Emmanuelle Haïm’s own ensemble. Its singers are specialists in the music of Handel’s time, and here they join a modern symphony orchestra rather than the period instruments they usually sing with.

Le Concert d'Astrée is a French ensemble of singers and period instrumentalists devoted to the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Emmanuelle Haïm founded it in 2000 and has directed it ever since. It has been in residence at the Opéra de Lille since 2004, takes part in staged opera productions there and elsewhere, and tours widely. It was named Ensemble of the Year at the Victoires de la Musique Classique in 2003 and records for Erato.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Messiah: The Composition and Afterlife of Handel's Masterpiece**

Jonathan Keates, Basic Books 2017

A short book given over to this one work: how Handel and Jennens came to write it, and what later generations made of it.

ACCESSIBLE **Every Valley: The Desperate Lives and Troubled Times That Made Handel's Messiah**

Charles King, Doubleday 2024

A history of the people and the times around the oratorio, for readers who want the world of 1740s London and Dublin as well as the music.

DEEPER **Handel: Messiah**

Donald Burrows, Cambridge University Press 1991

The Cambridge Music Handbook on the work: a compact scholarly study of its composition, its early performances and its versions.

SOURCES

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19. Carlo Vistoli, Royal Ballet and Opera. <https://www.rbo.org.uk/people/carlo-vistoli>
20. Carlo Vistoli, Berliner Festspiele. <https://berlinerfestspiele.de/en/artist/a60c7918-247f-4035-95c6-768b4f13667f/carlo-vistoli>
21. Eric Ferring, Tenor, Opéra national de Paris. <https://www.operadeparis.fr/en/artists/eric-ferring>
22. Eric Ferring, Rayfield Allied. <https://www.rayfieldallied.com/artists/eric-ferring>
23. Eric Ferring, Jacksonville Symphony. <https://www.jaxsymphony.org/featured-artists/eric-ferring/>

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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2027-03-21-haim>

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