

The Life of G.F. Handel



George Frideric Handel was born on February 23rd, 1685 in Halle, Germany. Handel had a passion for music from the time he was capable of understanding it. His father Georg was a highly respected barber/surgeon (Cavendish, vol. 4, pg. 60), which did not believe in music as a career and wanted his son to study law. Georg thought a career in law would offer more prospects and stability (60). Handel's father was so against having his son play music, he took all of his son's instruments out of the house. However, Handel was so interested in music he managed to sneak a clavichord into the loft of the house on which he practiced secretly (60). In his early years, up until he went to college, he had not yet composed a piece; rather he simply kept learning different types of instruments to play.

In the history of music, there are many different styles of music and six different time periods. Handel was in the Baroque period. Baroque can be defined as grotesque, in bad taste or of irregular and disproportionate shape (McGee 45). Meanwhile pieces during this time period were anything but grotesque—they were masterpieces. The styles during the baroque time period lasting from 1600-1750 consisted of operas, oratorios, cantatas, orchestras, concerto grosso, and rococos (McGee 48-55). Handel's specialty was opera, thus during the baroque time period the most popular piece composed was "Messiah" which was first performed in 1742 (McGee 49).

During the baroque time period, there were many composers that specialized in different areas of instruments. Arcangelo Corelli was an Italian musician that led the way for Antonio Vivaldi (Carlin 52). Corelli is considered to be the "father" of the concerto grosso. Vivaldi was also a violinist like Arcangelo; his work was influential with his contemporaries to composers who followed him. While never actually

working together, J.S. Bach copied many of Antonio's works in trying to unravel the mystery that was behind his compositions. Then there's Francesco Geminiani, which was a student of Corelli's (Carlin 59). Unlike the previously mentioned composers, Geminiani was a soloist choosing to play the violin. The man responsible for teaching G.F. Handel how to play the keyboard and compose was Friedrich Wilhelm Zachau, who was an extraordinary musician himself.

Aside from the violins there were also masters of the keyboards, such as a gentleman named Dietrich Buxtehude. Buxtehude had a determination to make the church a center of musical activity (Carlin 62) and founded a series of religious-oriented music. He is remembered today for his inspiration for Bach and other younger and greater composers. Bach and Handel are considered the Classical Giants. While their music was a strong influence to the Baroque time period, it was also their achievements that made them the most influential. There were also masterminds such as Hayden and Mozart who added to the culmination marking the development to what we consider classical music.

Handel composed well over two hundred pieces in his lifetime. Ranging from oratorios, operas, cantatas, sacred and secular vocals, masques, odes, spurious to instrumentals and stage performances. Of course as previously stated, "Messiah" is one of Handel's most popular and successful pieces, dating back to 1742, the composition is based on Christ and his life from the bible. However, he had many other pieces, his first composition dates back to 1705 and it was called "Almira" based on the seventeenth-century dramatic situation of the queen who secretly loves a commoner (Keates 24). However, his most popular oratorios were Saul, Belshazzar, and Jephtha. Saul was written in 1739, about the king's jealousy harriving of David,

and the romantic interest of the hero's relationship with Saul's daughters, and his friendship with Jonathan. In *Belshazzar*, written in 1744, it summed up the realities of power and destiny on the one hand and the human beings who confront them on the other. Last but not least is *Jephtha*, written in 1751, is about the lord hiding from all mortal sight.

Some of his other pieces were: *Rodrigo*-1706, *IL trionfo del tempo e del disinganno*- 1707, *La Resurrezione*-1708, *Agrippina*-1709, *Rinaldo*-1711, *IL pastorfido*-1712, *Teseo*-celebrates the peace of Utrecht, *Te Deum*, and *Jubilate*-1713, *Water Music*-1717, eleven *Anthems* and two dramas- *Acis and Galatea*-1720, *Siroe and Tolomeo*-1728, *Lotario*-1729, *Partenope and Poro*-1730, *Ezio and Sosarme*- 1731, *Esther*-1732, *Orlando and Deborah*- 1733, *Athalia*-1734, *Ariodante and Alcina*- 1735, six concertos for organ and harpsichord -1738, *Saul and Israel in Egypt* -1739, *Deidamia*-1740, *Samson*- based on poems of Milton- 1741, *Messiah*-dramatic story of Christ by the bible-1742, *Semele*, *Belshazzar*, and *Hercules*- 1744, *Solomon and Susana* 1747-1748, *Theodora*-1750, and *Jephtha*- Lord hiding from mortal sight-1751 are his more popular pieces.

George Frideric Handel was important in history because he represented the culmination of contrapuntal writing but also looked ahead to the harmonic, balanced style of classical composition (Carlin 75). In other words, he didn't just compose music rather he broke it down. Handel moved freely from patron to patron and was one of the first musicians to produce works for a popular audience without a noble patron. His career came to a halt when he started to get sick. In his lifetime he had only two medical problems. The first one was rheumatism, which is a paralytic disorder and the other medical issue was his blindness, which was first noted in

1751 when he was sixty-six years old. However even with a handicap such as blindness, Handel continued playing and played just as beautifully as before. He played his works by memory almost up until the time of death. His death was shortly after a performance of Messiah in 1759, when he collapsed. After he died on April 14, 1759, Handel was buried in Westminster Abbey alongside England's kings and queens.

Messiah is Handel's most popular piece; I chose it as my listening exercise. Messiah's libretto-meaning lyrics, comes completely from biblical text. It is divided into three sections to tell the story of Christ from the Old Testament and prophecies to the New Testament for accounts of his death, resurrection, and ascension. The piece itself has 53 movements, ranging in different tonality, tempo, and dynamics, and is a solo piece, only involving the piano/keyboard, using all the keys available to create this piece.

The first movement, Sinfonia, involves the keyboard in a range of dynamics from deep to high pitched, setting a mood of something happening in slow motion. In the second movement, Comfort Ye My People, the tempo is slow, and the dynamic is moderate, not too high nor too deep. Once again the keyboard seems to be the only instrument used and is used as a solo. Movement eighteen, Rejoice Greatly O Daughter of Zion, the tempo is upbeat and fast, setting a mood of excitement or happiness, then in the later portion of the movement, the tempo slows down, in the last few seconds it picks back up and changes in range and signifies the conclusion of the movement.

Skipping a few movements to movement thirty-three, Life Up Your Head, the beat itself is a bit faster, sense of excitement. It is for the most part high pitched

rarely deep in sound. The music sort of reminds me of the song "Joy To The World". In the final movement, number fifty-three, Worthy Is The Lamb, the start of this portion sounds like the music played at a wedding when the bride comes walking down the aisle, tempo slow, dynamics in all ranges, it also tells you without saying the conclusion of the piece is near by the way the dynamics change and at the rate in which they switch. Overall the Messiah was very soothing and I enjoyed listening to it. It helps to take your mind off of what is bothering you. I normally do not like classical music but I must say that this piece gave me interest.

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