

PROGRAM NOTES

Why mess with *Messiah*? So that more people can share in its power.

Messiah, by George Frideric Handel (1685–1759), tells the story of one man’s work to make his world a better place. The original composition was conceived as an Easter offering that chronicled Jesus’s birth, death, and resurrection. On a macro level, this is a story of creation, struggle, and transformation. This macro narrative is universal, and Handel’s music manifests these human experiences with incredible eloquence, but on a micro level, the details are limiting to other religions and frameworks of identity. *Messiah Multiplied* employs Handel’s powerful music, modifying and emboldening the libretto to reflect a more universal and inclusive story.

To be clear, we do not intend this project to be anti-religion or anti-classical canon. Quite the opposite. Repositioning the story allows it to resonate with Jewish and ecumenical traditions. Reimagining the text lets it speak to a 21st-century audience. *Messiah Multiplied*, like so much of Classical Uprising’s work, is inspired by a belief that classical music must rise up, challenge current norms, and re-envision where, how, and for whom we are making music. Our era is marked by an unwillingness to listen to one another; we choose communities and news sources that reinforce our existing views and villainize alternative opinions. *Messiah Multiplied* galvanizes Handel’s seminal work to help people better understand themselves and each other, and to serve as a tool for discussion, connection, and acceptance.

While this approach may seem brazen, the ethos of *Messiah Multiplied* is anchored not only in Handel’s music but in the artistic traditions of the Baroque era. Handel, like many Baroque composers, prioritized the performance experience over an “accurate” rendition of the original score.¹ From the work’s inception in 1741 to Handel’s death in 1759, the composer constantly modified *Messiah*, as academics explain, to bring new interest to audience members, to oblige the needs of a particular soloist, or to compensate for changing performance conditions.² Ultimately, nearly a third of *Messiah* underwent revision during Handel’s lifetime, with some arias and choruses existing in three or four different versions.³ As scholar Jens Peter Larsen explains:

The basic question is whether we can talk at all correctly of an “authentic” form of *Messiah*, understood in our later sense as a final version which as a whole and in details presents the composer’s ultimate view of the form in which he wished to hand down his work to posterity. Strictly speaking, there is no such version.⁴

For Handel, *Messiah* was a fluid document intended to be altered for different audiences, not a rigid work of art.

The form of *Messiah*'s libretto, arranged by Charles Jennens, not only makes these alterations possible but arguably encourages the modifications. *Messiah* is distinct from most Bible-story compositions—Bach's *St. John Passion*, Handel's *Esther*, or Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, to name a few—in that there are no fixed characters who explain or dramatize the story.⁵ This is a unique format for an oratorio, one which the musicologist R.A. Streatfeild describes as “the first instance in the history of music of an attempt to view the mighty drama of human redemption from an artistic standpoint.”⁶ In the absence of specific characters, any individual aria can be transferred from one soloist to another without the coherence of the text being affected. Handel made significant use of this freedom; he substituted recitatives for arias, converted choruses to solos, and transposed or even rewrote solo movements, all in an effort to create the most effective and evocative performance for that moment.⁷

As the first continuously performed piece of music in the Western canon, *Messiah* continued to be adapted after Handel's death. The late 18th century favored large-scale ensembles, so the orchestra arrangements grew to include “twelve horns, twelve trumpets, six trombones, and three pairs of timpani (some made especially large).”⁸ One performance boasted: “The Band will consist of Eight Hundred Performers,” while another claimed a choir of 600 (don't worry, our production only has 70 singers and a chamber orchestra).⁹ The music critic Dana Gioia from *San Francisco Magazine* counts “no less than 43 versions of 15 arias.”¹⁰

This tradition of reinventing *Messiah* to prioritize the performance experience is continued with *Messiah Multiplied*. Whereas Mozart and other 18th-century musicians re-orchestrated Handel's music to create a sumptuous version of *Messiah*, *Messiah Multiplied* employs the music written by Handel but reorders the movements and modifies the pronouns of Jennens's text to create a more inclusive version of *Messiah*. This involves making the pronouns for God and Messiah gender neutral and the central character “we” instead of “he.” The foundation for this concept can be found in the narrative itself. *Messiah* is an allegorical story of the triumph of humanistic virtue over the forces trying to kill it: civil society, government, religion, and military establishments.¹¹ And yet, the specifics of Jesus's experience, and the language Jennens chooses for the *Messiah* libretto, precludes many people from connecting to the allegory. *Messiah Multiplied* un-genders and de-theologizes the text to tell a universal story of trying to repair the world.

In addition, *Messiah Multiplied* makes room for what may be Handel's more authentic voice by proposing that Handel's alterations were made not just for logistical reasons but to represent and embrace the fluid vision of gender and sexuality that was present among his 18th-century aristocratic communities. Early in his career, Handel was invited to Italy by the Medici family. During this period, he composed 120 secular cantatas which are remarkable for their innovative scoring but also for their explicit and implicit connection to homoeroticism and gender fluidity. As musicologist Ellen Harris explains, interest in same-sex relationships was common in English and Italian culture at the time; as can be found in:

the clear archival evidence concerning the homosexual activities of the Medici princes, to the homosexual undertones of poetry written for the Arcadian Academy based on classical models, to the same-sex erotic atmosphere of Burlington House.¹²

The most striking examples of these “decidedly homosocial and homoerotic” cantatas are those commissioned by, and with text from, Cardinal Pamphili.¹³ Their collaboration on *Handel, non può mia musa* uses Pamphili’s flattery of Handel as its text and compares Handel to Orpheus, who was stoned to death for his homosexuality.¹⁴

In addition to these textual and historical implications of homosexuality in the cantatas, there is an androgynous element: Handel chose texts which reveal neither the gender of the subject nor the gender of the singer, thereby rejecting traditional categories of gender and sexuality.¹⁵ Today, we would call this “queering,” but in the 18th century it was standard performance practice to take a gender neutral approach, having *castrati* (male singers castrated to retain the soprano range) playing women and women playing men.¹⁶ ChamberQUEER, soloists and featured instrumentalist for this program, specialize in “queering the canon.” All professional musicians who primarily perform standard works with the nation’s top ensembles, they formed ChamberQUEER as a space to question the existing norms of classical concerts. From repertoire and programming, to concert dress and audience etiquette, they question, reconsider, and reimagine the Western canon from a perspective that questions traditional categories of gender and sexuality.

Classical Uprising and ChamberQUEER aspire to make classical music more inclusive, but this project strives for an even loftier goal: to encourage our audience to ask what we can all do to bring about acceptance. Our world is suffering from our inability to speak without yelling and to listen to ideas different from our own. Without civil discourse and without accepting our shared differences as being worthy of kindness and compassion, we will be our own undoing. Messiah Multiplied aims to encourage open-minded conversation, to foster acceptance, and to ask, “What if ‘Messiah’ is not someone but something: an ethic of care, a movement of inclusivity? What if ‘Messiah’ is a change we can bring about together?”

Further Reading

Alwes, Chester L. *Messiah: The Solo Variants*. Dayton, OH: Roger Dean Publishing Company, 2009.

Burrows, Donald. *Handel: Messiah*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Harris, Ellen T. *Handel as Orpheus: Voice and Desire in the Chamber Cantatas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Larsen, Jens Peter. *Handel’s Messiah: Origins, Composition, Sources*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1972.

Marissen, Michael. *Tainted Glory in Handel’s Messiah: The Unsettling History of the World’s Most Beloved Choral Work*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

Notes

1. Robert Manson Myers, *Handel's Messiah: A Touchstone of Taste* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1948), 78; John Eliot Gardiner, English Baroque Soloists: *Handel Messiah*, 14; Nicholas McGegan, Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, 9.
2. Chester L. Alwes, *Messiah: The Solo Variants* (Dayton, OH: Roger Dean Publishing, 2009); Jens Peter Larsen, *Handel's Messiah: Origins-Composition-Sources* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1957); Robert Manson Myers, *Handel's Messiah: A Touchstone of Taste* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1948); H. Watkins Shaw, *Handel's Messiah: The Story of a Masterpiece* (London: Hinrichsen, 1946); H. Watkins Shaw, *A Textual and Historical Companion to Handel's Messiah* (New York: Novello, 1965); John Tobin, *Handel at Work* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964); John Eliot Gardiner, English Baroque Soloists: *Handel Messiah*, Philips Recordings 411 041-2; Nicholas McGegan, Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra: *Handel Messiah*, Harmonia mundi 907050.52.
3. Chester L. Alwes, *Messiah: The Solo Variants*; Jens Peter Larsen, *Handel's Messiah: Origins-Composition-Sources* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1957); Robert Manson Myers, *Handel's Messiah: A Touchstone of Taste*; H. Watkins Shaw, *Handel's Messiah: The Story of a Masterpiece* (London: Hinrichsen, 1946); H. Watkins Shaw, *A Textual and Historical Companion to Handel's Messiah* (New York: Novello, 1965).
4. Jens Peter Larsen, *Handel's Messiah: Origins-Composition-Sources*, 186.
5. H. Watkins Shaw, *Handel's Messiah: The Story of a Masterpiece*, 7; Jens Peter Larsen, *Handel's Messiah: Origins-Composition-Sources*, 96.
6. R.A. Streatfeild, *Handel* (London: 1909), 96.
7. Chester Alwes, *Messiah: The Solo Variants*, 3; Jens Peter Larsen, *Handel's Messiah: Origins-Composition-Sources*, 187; John Eliot Gardiner, English Baroque Soloists: *Handel Messiah*, 14.
8. Malcolm Sargent, "Messiah," *Gramophone*, January 2013.
9. "Advertisement," *The Daily Universal Register*, May 30, 1787. "The Great Musical Festival in Boston," *New York Times*, June 4, 1865.
10. Dana Gioia, "Handel's Many Messiahs," *San Francisco Magazine*, December 2001. <https://danagioia.com/essays/film-and-music/handels-many-messiahs/>
11. My gratitude to Marshall Green for articulating this concept so eloquently that I have borrowed his language.
12. Harris, Ellen T., *Handel as Orpheus: Voice and Desire in the Chamber Cantatas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 8.
13. Judith Ann Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).
14. Harris, Ellen T., *Handel as Orpheus*, 26.
15. Harris, Ellen T., *Handel as Orpheus*, 49.
16. Harris, Ellen T., *Handel as Orpheus*, 38.