

**Handel's *Messiah* – Performance Thoughts**  
by Dr. Ronald Anderson, Director, SFA School of Music

Handel's *Messiah* has received many interpretations over the years, some guided by the latest scholarship, some performed intuitively and many with some mix of these two approaches. While I prefer performances that are solidly grounded in performance practice information, most conductors, I believe, do respect the need for intuition to fill in when scholarship just can't supply answers, especially answers about artistic expression and nuance.

The information below is designed to provoke thought and suggest possible solutions to performance problems found in Handel's *Messiah*. It is certainly not the last word, for I do not consider myself to be a performance practice expert. Rather, it is a digest of ideas I have gleaned from other conductors, from scholarly books and from my own performances of the *Messiah* in churches and at the university level.

**Tempo – look for proportional tempo relationships between movements.**

It should not be hard for one to imagine that composers who have the skill to produce works like *Messiah* with great care and genius (even in revising earlier works to produce several of the more popular choruses) might concern themselves with proportional tempo relationships within and between certain movements. Mensuration signs from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance suggested similar relationships. Metric signs used throughout the Baroque era, however, are not as clear to understand. Sir Neville Marriner, famous conductor of the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, believes that proportional tempo relationships do occur in Baroque music.

I usually discover that in the French-overture form, for instance, if you related the *grave* movement to the *allegro* which came sixteen bars later, unconsciously the listener finds this more rewarding than a sudden, violently divorced tempo. If you take the *grave* exactly half as fast as the *allegro*, the listener may not be aware of it, but there is something more satisfying in this direct relationship. It's like sometimes you go to a concert and you can't think why it is so boring, and then you come home and you think, 'My God! Everything was in E-flat.' It's an unconscious thing that you suddenly realize that the tonality of the whole evening has been the same. It's the same with the tempo. You need to think very carefully about how you relate your pieces. There's something enormously satisfying in a consistent structure or tempo. I certainly do this, not only within each piece, but from one piece to the next. [Quoted in Anderson, Ronald, "Marriner on Mozart," *The Choral Journal* (August 1985), 25.]

With this in mind, then, consider the suggestions below in relating tempos from one movement to another or within a movement:

### **Proportional Relationships in *Messiah***

1. Sinfonia [Overture] - Grave ♩ = ♩ in the Allegro [*i.e., the tempo of the quarter note in the Grave section equals the tempo of the half note in the Allegro section!*]
2. Recitative – “Comfort Ye” - ♩ [Larghetto] = ♩ in No. 3 Air – “Ev’ry Valley”
6. Air – “But Who May Abide” - ♩ [Larghetto] = ♩ in the Prestissimo
10. Recitative – “For Behold” - ♩ [Andante larghetto] = ♩ in No. 11 Air – “The People That Walked in Darkness”
16. Recitative – “And suddenly” - ♩ = ♩ in No. 17 – “Glory to God” [no pause between movements]
24. Chorus – “Surely He Hath Borne” - ♩ = ♩ in No. 25 – “And With His Stripes” ♩ = ♩ in No. 26 – “All We Like Sheep”
27. Recitative – “All They That See Him” - ♩ = ♩ in No. 28 – “He Trusted in God”
46. Chorus – “Since by Man Came Death” - ♩ [Grave] = ♩ [Allegro]

### **No. 4 – Chorus (“And the Glory of the Lord”) – Score Study**

The first chorus of *Messiah* was adapted from an earlier work by Handel, “Concerto for Two Choirs in B-flat.” It contains four easily identified motives:

- A – with the text “And the glory of the Lord”
- B – with the text “shall be revealed”
- C – with the text “and all flesh shall see it together”
- D – with the text “for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it”

The delight for the observer or performer is to label them and then see the interesting ways they are combined. At meas. 11 “A” is introduced vocally. At meas. 17 “B” is introduced. At meas. 22 “A” and “B” are combined (overlapping). This section concludes at meas. 38 with a tutti statement of “A” ending with a hemiola cadence in the dominant.

Motive “C” is introduced in meas. 43. Motive “D” starts at meas. 51 with motive “C” overlapping and alternating until meas. 71. At meas. 84, Handel combines motives “D”

with “A”, followed by “B”, then “C”. A free interplay of the motives lasts until meas. 106 when the motives return one more time “in order” in the tonic key accompanied by companion phrases.

What a wonderful conclusion to the first subsection of Part I. It is exciting to sing and rewarding for singers who look more closely at the interplay of the themes.

**Articulation:**

Because the vocal lines are adapted from original instrumental lines, some play with articulations seems appropriate. Thus, I have always liked singing the first two notes of the first phrase (“And the”) detached or in a light staccato. The fact that these two words are not very important contextually should allay anyone’s fear that they will not be understood. The effect, of course, is to make the much more important word (“glory”) stand out and receive an appropriate emphasis. The rest of the line is sung legato/connected.

## And the Glory of the Lord

G.F. Handel

Alto

And the glo - ry the glo - ry of the Lord.

Detailed description: This musical notation is for an Alto part in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It consists of a single line of music. The first two notes, 'And' and 'the', are marked with a staccato symbol. The remaining notes, 'glo - ry the glo - ry of the Lord', are marked with a slur, indicating they should be sung legato. The melody is: A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (half).

I like this same type of articulation with motive “C”. The first two words (“and all”) are sung detached, the words “flesh” and “see” are sung marcato with a quick release of the words “flesh” or “it” (i.e., a quick close to the final consonant of each word).

## And the Glory of the Lord

G.F. Handel

Alto

and all flesh shall see it to - geth - er,

Detailed description: This musical notation is for an Alto part in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It consists of a single line of music. The first two notes, 'and' and 'all', are marked with a staccato symbol. The remaining notes, 'flesh shall see it to - geth - er,', are marked with a slur, indicating they should be sung legato. The melody is: A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (half).

### No. 7 – Chorus (“And He Shall Purify”) – Score Study

This is another of the choruses that was adapted from an earlier Italian duet Handel wrote. It provides an introduction to note grouping of the melismas designed to produce

performances that are both more musical and helpful in aurally showing the musical structure.

When studying a melisma, such as the one that begins with the pickup to the third measure, I do two things: a) look for repeating patterns and b) look for natural stopping points within the pattern.

Some conductors envision the patterns in melismas as starting on strong beats and then will emphasize the first note either of each sixteenth-note grouping or perhaps every other grouping. Starting with my belief that Baroque phrases tend to begin “off” the beat and end “on” the beat, the note groupings I hear sound quite different from that approach.

In analyzing this first melisma, my ear hears the melody coming to a melodic stop on the fourth beat of measure three. If you slow down the first group of sixteenth notes in this measure, you will likely get a feeling of “conclusion” as the notes “wrap around” a single note – “F” in the soprano line, then “skip” a third to the start of an 8-note pattern that looks like it will continue, but is interrupted by the conclusion of the phrase.

## And He Shall Purify

G.F. Handel

Soprano

and he shall pu ri fy \_\_\_\_\_ the sons\_\_\_ of Le vi

Detailed description: This block shows the soprano part of the musical score for 'And He Shall Purify' by G.F. Handel. It is written on a single treble clef staff in 4/4 time. The melody begins with a pickup note on the first beat of measure 1, followed by a series of sixteenth-note patterns. A melisma is indicated by a long horizontal line under the lyrics 'and he shall pu ri fy' and 'the sons\_\_\_ of Le vi'. The notation includes various ornaments and phrasing slurs.

It may be easier to see the pattern in the bass line that begins with the pick up to measure 7. Using the same melodic approach, one can see that the first part of this long phrase ends on the fourth beat of measure 7 and is followed by three complete 8-note patterns ending on beat two of measure 9.

## And He Shall Purify

G.F. Handel

Bass

and he shall pu-ri fy - - - - -

- - - - - the sons of Le \_\_\_\_\_ vi,

Detailed description: This block shows the bass part of the musical score for 'And He Shall Purify' by G.F. Handel. It is written on two bass clef staves in 4/4 time. The first staff shows the beginning of the phrase with a pickup note and a melisma indicated by a long horizontal line. The second staff continues the melisma with three complete 8-note patterns. The lyrics 'and he shall pu-ri fy - - - - -' and '- - - - - the sons of Le \_\_\_\_\_ vi,' are placed below the staves.

How does one bring this structural element to the listener’s ear? Part of the answer is by leading the singers to mentally think of the melisma in this way; i.e., with this approach to the note grouping. It can also be encouraged by a slight increase of the vocal dynamic at the start of the 8-note pattern and by relaxing in dynamic as you reach the end of the pattern “on the beat!” This should not be exaggerated, however. Any exaggeration will seem “affected” and overdone instead of artistic. To fulfill the dictum that “true art conceals itself,” a measure of subtlety is needed so the listener is aware of the structural organization of the line, but attention is not called to it unnecessarily.

### No. 12 – Chorus (“For Unto Us a Child is Born”) – Score Study

The frequent two-part texture used in this chorus is again a give away that it is adapted from an earlier Italian duet. In this case, however, Handel added a brief refrain-like section (“Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace”) that transforms the work into one of the most memorable parts of the oratorio and one of the most beloved of all choral works.

Adapting an English text to a pre-existent piece was problematic for Handel. The first phrase of the text in particular is awkward because of the emphasis given to the first word “for” that would not normally be given to that word musically (i.e., it is the longest note, begins on a strong beat, and is higher in pitch than any of the others around it!). Thus it is best to sing this first note “lightly” so that emphasis can be placed on the words “us” and “born.”

## For Unto Us a Child is Born

G.F. Handel

Soprano

For un-to us a child is born

The phrase with the long melisma beginning in the soprano line in measure 13 should be analyzed in the same way as Chorus No. 7 above. First, you should look for a stopping place in the melisma. If you look again for a part of the phrase that “wraps” around a single note and then skips to start another pattern, you will find that the end of the pattern is found on beat two of measure 15. Then, unlike the 8-note pattern found in No. 7, the pattern in this melisma is extended to 16 notes! One way to describe this long soprano phrase then is that it begins with an abbreviated pattern, is followed by two full sequential versions of the pattern, ending with an abbreviated pattern that comes to a cadential conclusion. There are, of course, other note groupings that may make some sense, but I find this organization to be the most satisfying.

The jagged line that accompanies the text “and the government shall be upon his shoulder” presents a different problem for the performer. It should be performed with the sixteenth note always moving to the dotted eighth. This fulfills the dictum that “the weak note goes to the strong and the short note goes to the long!” Care needs to be taken, however, not to accent the short notes in a way that gives undue prominence to the unaccented syllables of the words.

### **Musical Structure**

Each part of *Messiah* is divided into very recognizable sections, most beginning with a recitative and aria and concluding with a chorus. As a result, each section should be conceived as a dramatic unit proceeding in performances with a limited amount of interruption to the musical and textual flow.

Nos. 2 – 4 are one such unit (Recit.: “Comfort Ye;” followed by Air: “Ev’ry Valley;” concluded by Chorus: “And the Glory of the Lord). They all flow from a continuous portion of the Bible: Isaiah 40:1-5.

Nos. 5 – 7 are similarly grouped as are Nos. 8 – 9, 10 – 12, 14 – 17, and 18 – 21, all in Part I.

The “suffering savior” is introduced in Part II by a Chorus: “Behold the Lamb of God.” Groupings that follow include Nos. 23 – 26 with three choruses in a row!; Nos. 17 – 28, Nos. 29 – 33, Nos. 34 – 35, Nos. 36 – 39, and finally Nos. 40 – 44.

Part III groups Nos. 45 – 46, Nos. 47 – 51, and Nos. 52 – 53.

### **Text Painting**

Many of the text painting devices employed by Handel in *Messiah* are probably well known. While some may have been unintended (especially if developed from earlier music that either had an Italian text or no text at all), most are a clear response to common practices of the time.

No. 3 – “Ev’ry Valley” provides several examples. The idea of “valleys” being exalted into “mountain” is obvious from the first few measures. In measures 24-5, the shape of the melodic line outlines two mountains and two valleys. Then look at measures 33f. as the words “crooked” and “rough places” are illustrated by angular melodies and larger melodic skips as contrasted by more sustained singing and more stepwise melodic motion on the word “plain.”

No. 5 – “Thus Saith the Lord” includes extended *marcato* melismas on the word “shake,” while in measures 7-8 the conventional depiction of “heav’n” and earth are illustrated by the octave drop in the melodic line.

In No. 9 – “O Thou that Tellest Good Tidings to Zion” simple examples include “get thee up” in measure 16-17 and “lift up” in measures 43-44 and 46-47. “Arise” in measure 75-76 follows a similar pattern as does the sequence on “is risen” in meas. 92f.

Nos. 10 – “For Behold, Darkness Shall Cover the Earth” and 11 – “The People that Walked in Darkness” provide several more examples. Handel describes “darkness shall cover the earth” as if a blanket or cloud of darkness was descending on the world in measures 6-7. But when the Lord “shall arise,” the melody sequences through a long melisma up a sixth in meas. 11-14. Then the word “glory” becomes more glorious as it is sung at the top of the range in this recitative and on an extended melisma.

No. 11 illustrates “light” and “darkness” in at least two ways. First the people that are walking in darkness (or perhaps we should say are melodically meandering) always seem to end up in the darkest regions of the lowest part of the singer’s range (i.e., to a low F#), before seeing “a great light” at the top of the singer’s range. But second, and more profoundly, “darkness” is always represented by the minor mode while the “light” is represented by a transition to the major mode (DM, EM, & AM).

Harmonic tension helps illustrate emotional words in No. 24 – “Surely He Hath Borne Our Griefs.” The word “griefs” is usually colored by a diminished 7<sup>th</sup> cord. Then poignant suffering is underlined by the 9-1 suspension (appoggiatura) in meas. 14 on the word “wounded.” Similar harmonic colorings are found on the word “bruised” and “chastisement.”

Notice in No. 26 – “All We Like Sheep Have Gone Astray” how the musical lines “go astray” on that text or how the melody “turns” around a single note.

A remarkable melodic line is found in No. 29 – “Thy Rebuke Hath Broken His Heart.” The diminished chord on the third beat of meas. 1 allows the singer to sing two descending tritones in succession (one written as an aug 4<sup>th</sup> and the other as a dim. 5<sup>th</sup>)! The effect is to “break” the octave exactly in half to illustrate the text. When the appropriate appoggiaturas are added to other portions of the text in the recitative, the effect is one of great sadness and poignancy.

In No. 39 – “Their Sound is Gone Out” Handel uses a melodic line that goes from the lowest note in the scale up to the “end” of the scale in illustrating the phrase “and their words unto the ends of the world.” In No. 40 – “Why Do the Nations So Furiously Rage Together” (the “Rage Aria” of the Oratorio), the bass appropriately “rages” in meas. 23f. and elsewhere. In meas. 74f., the “kings of the earth” rise a full octave.

\* \* \* \* \*

There are many other insights one can glean from score study of *Messiah*. Hopefully these notes will be your stimulus for many more personal discoveries in the oratorio.