



GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL 1685-1759

For more than a week, a waiter has faithfully continued to deliver a tray full of food he fully expects will not be eaten by his eccentric composer-employer. Once again he steels himself to go through the same routine as he swings open the door to the composer's room, and stops in his tracks. The startled composer, tears streaming down his face, turns to him and cries out, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself." George Frederic Handel had just finished writing a movement which would take its place in history as the "Hallelujah Chorus."

George Frederic was born in 1685, son of a "surgeon-barber" in Germany. A contemporary of Bach, raised a Lutheran and showing extraordinary musical talent as a child, his father refused for several years to permit him to take lessons. However, at the age of nine, a duke heard him play an organ postlude following a worship service and summarily requested that his father provide formal music training for the boy. By the time he turned twelve, Handel had written his first composition and was proficient on the organ. In 1702 he entered the University of Halle to study law out of respect for his late father's desire, but soon abandoned legal studies to devote himself entirely to music.

A master of the clavichord, oboe, and violin as well as the organ and composition, Handel worked in an opera theater in Hamburg and later in the courts of Italy. In 1712 he moved to England where he lived the rest of his life. Although Handel wrote his greatest music in England, he suffered personal setbacks there as well. He fell in and out of favor with changing monarchs, and many felt that presenting biblical dramas in secular theaters was notorious. Yet, even in his deepest poverty, he was known for his generosity and concern for those who suffered. He was often noticed in church services, caught up in the emotion of his devotion to God and would frequently declare in conversation his pleasure in setting Scripture to music.

On April 8, 1741, deeply in debt and miserably discouraged, he felt forced to retire from public activities at the age of 56. Then two unforeseen events converged to change his life. A wealthy friend, Charles Jennings, gave Handel a libretto based on the life of Christ, taken entirely from the Bible. He also received a commission from a Dublin charity to compose a work for a benefit performance. Handel set to work on August 22 in his little house on Brook Street in London. He was so absorbed with his work, he rarely left his room or stopped to eat. Within six days Part One was complete. In nine days more he had finished Part Two, and in another six, Part Three. The orchestration was completed in another two days. In all, 260 pages of manuscript were filled in the remarkably short time of 24 days. Handel's title for the commissioned work was, simply, "Messiah."

"Messiah" premiered on April 13, 1742, as a charitable benefit, raising 400 pounds to free 142 men from debtor's prison. The King of England rose in emotion at the strains of the "Hallelujah Chorus" beginning a tradition that has lasted more than two centuries. Handel personally conducted more than thirty performances of "Messiah," many of which were benefits for the Foundling Hospital. A few days before he died, he expressed his desire to die on Good Friday, "in hopes of meeting his good God, his sweet Lord and Savior, on the day of his Resurrection. He lived until the morning of Good Saturday, April 14, 1759. He was buried in Westminster Abby with over 3,000 in attendance.