

Special Study

Handel's Messiah

(This is just a part of an article that appeared in the June 22, 1963 Christian Standard by J. D. Strauss)

The language of human praise, so much enriched by the musical works of George Frederick Handel - especially in such passages as "The Hallelujah Chorus" from *The Messiah* - may find an occasional word of thanks for the evidently providential circumstances that gave the great writer's music to the world.

Redemption in Prophecy and Praise

George F. Handel's was the first artistic effort to portray the gospel in great music.

Often people think that *The Messiah* is composed of scenes from the Gospel records, but this is only partly true. Its central theme is the fulfillment of redemption through the Redeemer-Messiah. Contemporary authors have much to say about the use of drama in religious education - in *The Messiah* we have the great presursor to these efforts.

The Messiah has many intricate parts, but it can be nearly divided into three broad sections: (1) The prophecy and realization of God's will and purpose through the coming of the Messiah; (2) The accomplishment of redemption by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and hence the rejection and utter defeat of mankind when it opposes the living God; (3) Hymn of thanksgiving for the final overthrow of death.

The Messiah was performed first in London, England, but it had to overcome many adversaries before the public finally heard the dramatic truths of the Christian gospel set to music. *The Messiah* was forbidden production under that name. The critics claimed that it would be sacrilegious!

The entire first part of Handel's work is a majestic echo of the great prophetic pronouncements concerning the Messiah of God. The vivid, picturesque portrayal of mankind anxiously waiting in hope of God's redemption is a musical and linguistic marvel. As though led by the Spirit, Handel chose the highest phrases uttered by the prophets to declare that the prophetic hope was realized in the coming of the Messiah.

Isaiah, Joel, Malachi, Daniel, *et al.*, had given grave warning and powerful promises, that if all mankind were to assemble

against Jehovah their efforts would be futile. Men shall be utterly defeated when they strive against God or seek to salve their conscience by pious neutrality.

Now, in an age when human genius is seen in feats such as hurling massive steel structures through space on a split-second schedule, men need again the reminders that redemption still depends on God's Messiah.

The third section of *The Messiah* is the hymn of thanksgiving for the final overthrow of death. This Christian belief stands in radical contrast with the contemporary ideology which strives to face death without the God of the Christian hope.

Throughout the whole of Handel's work two themes predominate - suffering and the work of redemption. The latter theme is merged into the triumphal hymn of the last two choruses.

The brilliant "Hallelujah Chorus" (the Hebrew word *hallelujah* means "praise Jehovah") is grounded in the finished work of Christ—the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. The experience of listening to a competent rendering of *The Messiah* is abundant proof that the gospel can be expressed in more than the usual, verbal form. The tradition by which audiences rise to their feet at hearing this chorus is singularly appropriate.

The Messiah was written in about three weeks. If it were the only work Handel ever produced he would merit the endearing words of his fellow musicians. Beethoven declared, "Handel is the greatest composer who ever lived." Franz Liszt said that the "genius of Handel is as great as the world itself."

In light of the fact that more advancement has been made in the physical sciences during the past forth years of civilization than in the preceding four hundred years, it is to be noted that little or no great Christian music has been produced in our day. We pray God that the great Christian themes of redemption may kindle once more the creative fires, one that our Lord may be magnified by one of many great channels of expressing the work of God in Christ - music!

George F. Handel died April 14, 1759, appreciated by England as no composer had been before or after. Our concern is that men shall know *The Messiah*, not as a work of art composed, but rather as the Redeemer of the souls of men. Then shall the whole body of Christianity sing the new song—"Hallelujah—praise Jehovah!"—for He has touched fallen man with eternal healing in Christ.