

Living Up to its Name: *The Messiah* as a Universal Vehicle of Deliverance

Dearest William,

I write to you in the aftermath of the premiere of Mr. Handel's inspiring oratorio *The Messiah*. It is a great pity that you, on account of having urgent business in England, could not have been here to witness a performance that was nothing short of magnificent. Mr. Neale's grand new Musick Hall resounded with each aria as we sang the praises of the Lord, and the audience, which was so crowded that measures were taken to avert the possibility of congestion in Fishamble Street prior to the concert, reacted favorably and with considerable admiration. Moreover, yesterday's *Dublin Journal* discussed with great warmth the delightfulness of Mr. Handel's composition and the majesty of Mr. Jennens' libretto. I must say, however, that our performance of *The Messiah* was fundamentally different in its motivations from any oratorio or play that I have ever been fortunate to be a part of. Indeed, the proceeds of our concert are to be donated for such charitable causes as relieving the imprisoned and the sick from their sufferings. For this and other reasons that I shall describe in the balance of this letter, I believe that *The Messiah* has accomplished far more than merely describing in musical terms the story of how our Lord Jesus Christ achieved deliverance for humanity from the burden of original sin. Rather, I contend that this greatest of oratorios is itself a vehicle of liberation, one that empowers performers and listeners alike, regardless of their background or familiarity with musick, to overcome the darkness of times past and to seek a future guided by the brilliance of God's divine light.

To begin with, *The Messiah* projects a sense of universality to both performers and members of the audience in ways that are reminiscent of how the teachings of our Lord have a universal appeal to human beings around the world, irrespective of their heritage. While in numerous other oratorios I have found myself at the centerpiece of the performance, with the audience expressing impatience during recitatives and eagerly waiting for me to begin my arias, *The Messiah* does not concern itself with flaunting the talents of a celebrity soloist (notwithstanding Mr. Handel's fabulously improvised organ concertos, which did little but to reestablish his genius if it were not already obvious). Instead, I am convinced that Mr. Handel intended the numerous recitatives, arias, and choruses in *The Messiah* to be largely free of soloistic flair, so as to make the composition more easily accessible to performers of diverse musical capabilities. I myself am something of a contralto, and although Mr. Handel tasked me with the soprano part, he kindly transposed a few of the songs, like "He shall feed his flock" and "If God be for us," to a lower register so as to make them easier for me to sing. Furthermore, I am given to understand that the entire oratorio was composed last year in London, so that Mr. Handel had little knowledge of who would be available to sing in the chorus and was therefore compelled to write musick suitable for performers of general proficiency. Indeed, the Reverend Jonathan Swift has disapprovingly described the musicians under Mr. Dubourg's direction as being merely "a club of fiddlers," and the choiristers were all locals, drawn from St. Patrick's cathedral and Christ-church. In sum, *The Messiah* has the universal characteristic that it can be performed in any town and on any occasion, for all it requires is a standard orchestra together with the choir from a local church and a few reasonably competent solo singers.

I am yet to describe how the universality that characterizes *The Messiah* extends to members of the audience. I believe that Mr. Handel has designed this oratorio so that it can be appreciated by anyone, regardless of having prior exposure to the musick of our times. Given that the first words of the first aria in *The Messiah* are “Ev’ry valley shall be exalted,” it seems likely that Mr. Handel wanted to establish from the very beginning that the message of our Lord applies to human beings all over the world. Moreover, it can hardly be an accident that throughout the oratorio, the musick not only serves as accompaniment to Mr. Jennens’ verses, but also reinforces their meaning through vivid passages that I like to call “word paintings.” For example, consider the aria “Ev’ry valley shall be exalted,” in which Mr. Handel sets up a word painting around the words “crooked straight”: even a musically untrained listener would have noticed that the musick underlying the word “crooked” consists of quickly alternating pitches, whereas the word “straight” is sung on a single sustained pitch. Perhaps one of the most poignant word paintings in the oratorio occurs during the arioso “The people that walked in darkness,” in which every note seems so slither into the next one, and the musick appears to stumble from one spooky key to another, thereby creating an aura of mystery and confusion. These murkier motives contrast deeply with the more uplifting major chords that Mr. Handel writes to support the words “have seen a great light,” which refers to the sense of enlightenment one experiences upon comprehending the message of our Lord. Additionally, this arioso has a largely monophonic texture, perhaps to suggest that all peoples throughout the world have been walking in darkness together. This stunning correspondence between the rhythmic, tonal, and structural characteristics of the musick and the meaning of the associated verses enables the listener to grasp the message of *The Messiah* very easily – much like how the real Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ, managed to transform his profound philosophical teachings on life into readily comprehensible parables.

Finally, I would like to discuss how I have been personally affected by *The Messiah*. The past five years have been nothing but tumultuous, with Mr. Cibber squandering nearly all of my hard-earned money and then falsely accusing us of committing adultery as part of a nefarious plot to secure the funds to repay his creditors. Suffice it to say that you and I have suffered greatly, and as you know only too well, it was with the view of escaping the glare of the publick eye that we moved to Dublin last year. When Mr. Handel informed me of the opportunity to perform in the premiere of his grand new oratorio, I seized upon it without hesitation, because I was fervently looking forward to reestablish myself as one of the most popular actresses and singers in all of Great Britain. Little did I know that *The Messiah* would not only serve as the instrument by which I could restart my floundering career, but also help liberate me from my own personal struggles with marriage and morality. As I described earlier in the course of this letter, Mr. Handel had taken additional care while composing *The Messiah* to ensure that the soprano part would be not be too difficult for a semiprofessional singer like me to perform. I thereby found myself at liberty to concentrate on infusing my performance with considerable expressiveness, and the pathos with which I sang my part had a palpable impact on many members of the audience. Most notably, after I finished singing “He was despised and rejected of men,” a song concerned with the abuses weathered by our Lord Jesus Christ during his passion, the Reverend Dr. Delaney shouted to my greatest surprise, “Woman, for this be all thy sins forgiven thee!” Upon hearing this exclamation, I no longer felt the burden of Mr. Cibber’s mendacious allegations. Although it may not be my place to draw the comparison, I can relate to the travails of our Lord as he was ridiculed by the publick for a crime that was indeed no crime at all, and singing about His ordeal aided me in achieving deliverance from my own sufferings. And what better way to conclude the part of the oratorio that deals with the passion of our Lord than the magnificent “Hallelujah” chorus, in which the wide-

open major chords and largely homophonic texture brought all performers together in a grand celebration of positivity that impelled me to forget past troubles and look to the future with hope.

Given how expensive it is to post letters longer than two pages, I had better put an end to this soon-to-be dissertation. To summarize, I have found *The Messiah* to be a masterpiece among oratorios that has the ability to empower human beings, irrespective of their heritage or knowledge of musick, to attain liberation from life's burdens. In this way, the social function of *The Messiah* as a piece of musick greatly resembles the fundamental purpose of our Lord Jesus Christ, who served as a physical Messiah from God to help humanity escape the bonds of original sin. Just as the message of our Lord has been carried down through the ages to the present day, I expect that the legacy of *The Messiah* will continue to impact human society for centuries.

Yours Truly,

Susanna

April the Eighteenth, 1742