



Intro: [Video http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXh7JR9oKVE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXh7JR9oKVE)

That is what happened at the Welland Seaway Mall food court in Welland Ontario on Nov. 13/2010 during lunch. This clip has gone viral with over 20 million hits partially because it is fun to watch the expressions on people's faces as the singing began. But there has to be more to it than that! There is something about the Hallelujah Chorus from the Messiah that touches many people at a very deep level. It is the music written in 1742 by a man named George Frederic Handel, which our choir will be singing at tonight's orchestra and choir presentation. It has words taken directly from scripture and music which will stretch our choir and a history of bringing Kings to their feet and people to tears as they have listened to it. Some of you love the Messiah and it is an important part of your Christmas tradition. But I think that sometimes we forget that things don't happen in a vacuum and this piece of music came out of a man's walk with God and out of profound eternity shaking events that are chronicled within scripture. So this morning I want us to look at the story behind the music in the Messiah.

## I. The Story

George Fredrick Handel was born in 1685 in Halle Germany. His father was a surgeon and his mother was a Lutheran preacher's kid. He was raised in a home where faith was very important. Even as a young boy George showed a remarkable gift for music to the point that his father was afraid that he would become a musician instead of a Lawyer and forbade him to play any music (so late at night when his dad was asleep he would sneak into the attic and play a clavichord, a mini-piano). Through a few amazing circumstances Handel ended up studying music at university and then becoming a star in Germany, Italy and eventually England, composing opera's and other arias. However, by the late 1730's either due to exhaustion, a stroke or temporary paralysis in his arms he was unable to play. This linked with financial set backs with his operatic management company and left George at age 55 financially broke, physically broken and contemplating leaving music all together. He was afraid that he would end up penniless and destitute in debtor's prison. It was the darkest time of his life. It was at this exact moment that two things happened. First, the Duke of Devonshire sent him a letter requesting that he come to the Irish capital of Dublin and produce a series of benefit concerts for 'the relief of the prisoners in several jails(debtor's prisons) and several other charities'. This letter was followed by a second letter. It was from a friend named Charles Jennens who was passionate that people understood that God breaks into history and that in Jesus' birth is exactly what God has done. Jennens had sat down and wove together prophetic scriptures from the O.T. that talked about Jesus' coming into our world, with the N.T. Christmas and Easter stories and ending with the triumphant words from Rev. 5:12-13 where it says '*Worthy is the lamb who was slain, and has redeemed us to God by his blood, to receive power and honor and glory and power ... for ever and ever amen*'. As Handel read Jennens' words they grabbed his heart. He locked himself in his study and didn't appear until seven days later when he had finished the Christmas part of the oratorio (what we will hear tonight).

Handel showered, shaved and had something to eat, then locked the door and didn't appear for another nine days later until part II (which dealt with Jesus' death/resurrection) was completed. Another week later appeared again with the portion which deals with the future reign of Christ finished.

Let me stop there for just a moment! For awhile Handel's style of composing was to at times lock the door and not appear until he had completed his work, I think that there was something more to his passionate 23 days marathon of composing the Messiah. I think it came from 2 places. First, don't forget that the Messiah was written on the heels of his physical and business failings which had caused him to believe that he would never be able to do what he loved again, which was to write and produce music. And with this commission to write for the benefit, Handel was given a second chance to do what he thought he would never be able to do again. I can understand that a little as there was a time when I thought my days of pastoring were over and that it was time for a new vocation. Then, when God placed this calling back in my hands, each sermon felt like a gift and not a burden, and what had been taken for granted before became a great joy to me. This is what the Messiah was for Handel, a gift placed in Handel's hands, a chance to play where he was passionate again and so I think the Messiah expresses the overflow of Handel's heart to God for 'breaking into his personal world' and that is why it soars as it does. Secondly, something my brother Phil said to me last week rings true here in Handel's life. Sometimes we forget when Jesus came into our world! It was at a time when Roman rule was harsh in Israel; it was not an easy time. And while we may read a passage of scripture which begins with a struggle and ends nicely in victory, we can easily miss that the passage covers a number of months, even years (i.e. Gideon/ David's life) which are full of day after day of faithfully following God. And to be honest, in most of our lives we spend a lot of times in the valleys between the mountain top experiences. It is during those times 'in the middle of life's experiences', during the sickness, money struggles, the set backs and just plain every day life as we live one day at a time that we experience - as Jennens wrote, 'God breaking into our lives' - where we are called to live a day at a time with our Jesus as Christ followers. Those times when we catch glimpses that Jesus is enough even when other things fall apart around us. I say that because you listen to the Messiah there is a triumphal shout that runs through it, which I believe comes from Handel's personal experience through the up's and downs of life. This allowed him to see that not only 'does Jesus break into our lives' but he is more than enough! He is the brilliant, eternal life changing God of the Universe, our Savior and God. The Messiah not only speaks of God breaking into Handel's personal life but it flows out of a day by day experience of God being enough in his life.

When the Messiah was sung for the first time on April 13, 1742 (Easter) in "Fishamble Street Hall", they had a minimal orchestra with 26 boys and a 5 man choir which rocked the house. That night they raised enough money to free one hundred and forty one men from debtor's prison. When Handel died, probably because he saw the Messiah as a gift from God that changed his life, he left the rights to the music to a public hospital where it kept on supporting the care of the poor and the sick. Actually, Charles Burney, an 18th century music historian remarked that Handel's Messiah 'had fed the hungry, clothed the naked and fostered the orphans'. It became an instrument through which God continued to break into people's lives.

This is why tonight we will give people an opportunity to give money towards the Calgary Herald Christmas fund which helps 14 different organizations help those who are disadvantaged. We will carry on his tradition.

So, as you hear this Handel's Messiah remember that it wasn't written in a vacuum. It came out of the life experience of a musical genius who through his music wanted people to experience what he knew was true and that God does break into people's lives in profound ways.

## II. The Scripture

Just as Handel's music was not written in a vacuum so is the scripture which is in the Messiah did not come from a vacuum. It is set in the context of God breaking into people's lives. Handel's Messiah has three specific parts to it: The first is words of prophecy about the coming of Jesus from the O.T. and the Christmas story. The second runs from the agony of the cross to the wonder of the resurrection. The third is the believer's response to the second coming. Let me show the context of the Messiah.

### i) Old Testament Preparation

The Messiah begins with a Narrator singing Isaiah 40:1-5 (King James Version), *"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it."* You remember it was Isaiah who had this encounter with God in the Temple sanctuary one morning, where the church shook and was filled with smoke and it was there that God called him to speak on his behalf. Now years later around 668 BC, Isaiah is speaking to his people who were stuck between the Assyrian armies to the north and Egyptians to the south. Samaria (part of northern Israel) had been sacked and twenty-seven thousand people marched away as captives, and now Assyria has its eye on Jerusalem.

Now, Isaiah speaking about the present with a view to the future wrote in Isaiah 40:1-2 to have hope, be comforted for God has a plan to break into your situation (just like he broke into Handel's situation, see why this passage grabbed Handel's heart). He is saying, Jerusalem in your situation, have hope, for God will come to your rescue. Now look at vs. 3, for he overlaps hope for the situation that they are presently facing with a glimpse at something God is planning for the future. Where have you heard those words before? They come from Matthew 3:1-3, *"In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert,*

*'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" These are the very words used to describe what John the Baptist says as he challenges people to get ready for the coming of Jesus. Stop for a moment and ask yourself what Isaiah 40:4 is talking about.*

He is saying that God IS moving toward us but if we want to experience the presence of the Lord in our lives (his coming to rescue us) then we might need to clean away some things in our lives which are hindering God entering our life situations. What is in your valley (your life) which is keeping you from experiencing more of God? Is it a sin you want to keep hanging onto? Is it so much busyness that He can find 'no room in your inn'? Is it anger towards God because he has not done something which you wanted him to do for you? Or, is it a place where life has so hurt you, that the pain of it has made you keep God at arms length? The Messiah begins with a call to lay those things aside, to push them out of your life so that vs. 5 can be possible in your life. *"So the glory of the Lord may be revealed to you and in you"*. And if that happens, then they sing Haggai 2:6-7, *"This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty."* He will shake all nations, (what happens will touch all the world, every nation, every creed, every people group) and the desire of all nations will come (those chosen by God from all the nations of the world will be drawn towards God) and experience the Glory of God. The music rises to a crescendo as they hear God saying, "I will draw people from around the world to myself in a new and profound way." What a picture!

But then a question is asked from Malachi 3:2, *"But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap."* If God is holy, and if people from around the world flock to him then how can they or we even stand in His presence? For God is like a Refining Fire, He is so holy, it is beyond us on how will we not die or be consumed by the power which flows from him. It is like a Star Gate/Star Trek comment ... as we stand too close to powers within the universe how will we as simple sinful people be able to with stand the magnitude of the power which flows off of our holy God. A fair Question.

Then the singing narrator replies in Malachi 3:3, *"He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness."* That somehow God will purify us so we may stand in his presence. How is that possible? Isaiah 7:14 (Matt. 1:23) helps us understand. It will happen in the strangest, most outlandish, unbelievable way! Isaiah 7:14, *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."* This will happen in the only way God knew it could happen. He will bring His holiness, His wonder and His pathway to God in the form of a child who will also be God, who will be GOD WITH US. And then Handel ends this section with two prophecies which you know so very well. Isaiah 9:2, *"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."* It is as if God, with his hands, pushed back the darkness and in his hands he holds the radiant baby Jesus (full of all the glory of God himself) and places him as a new light in our world. Then he adds in Isaiah 9:6, *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."*

And now we know why he began by saying, "Comfort you; Comfort you for the glory of the Lord will be revealed (Isa. 40:5).

ii) The Christmas story

From seven hundred year old prophecies Handel then retells the Christmas story by putting Luke 2:8-14 to music. *“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ[a] the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”*

Don't miss the context of what he was doing. The Messiah was not written as church music. It was written in a time before people were singing Christmas Carols in church. It was written as a 'Spiritual Opera' using English (remember the bible has only been allowed to be printed in the English language for a century by this time). Handel puts the English words of the biblical story almost in the form of a musical so that people will hear the story of Jesus sung in their own English language. He is taking the story of Jesus and framing it in the best music of his day and then placing it out in public theaters for all to hear it. With that in mind let me read Luke 2:8-14 to you and think of it being sung in a theater so people will hear the story of Jesus in a fresh creative way.

iii) Salvation Forever and Ever

It is easy to forget that the Messiah was not initially written for the Christmas season! The Messiah was first performed at Easter. The third section (part II is salvation and part III is the End times) of the Messiah circles back to John 1:29 and tells the story of John the Baptist saying, *“Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”*. And then systematically walks us through the OT scripture which talks about how Jesus would be wounded for our sins (Isa. 53:4, 5) and that because we have all gone astray, God has laid on Jesus the sins of the world, in verse 6. And that he would suffer on our behalf and then lose his life to give us eternal life, verse 8. And Handel step by step turns our face from the joy of the Christmas scene and tells the rest of the story about how the manger led to the cross so that your sins and mine might be paid for. This is the part of the Messiah which should cause us to be overwhelmed with how much he loved us. That the wonder of the story pales in comparison to the facts of the story. The music seems to stall as it tries to express the pain of the story! Then and only then comes the Hallelujah chorus. As if the truth of what Jesus has accomplished overtakes the very soul of Handel and he pictures Jesus risen, bursting forth out of the grave the King of the world. Whose kingdom will wash over the world. A Kingdom which will rule over the world forever and forever and forever! Why? Well, the next song explains that! It is because His Redeemer lives! It is as if Handel gets completely caught up with what Jesus has done and the choir soars to the crescendo found in Job 19:25-26, *“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God;”*

My only comment is. Do you know this Jesus? And if you do, have you allowed the wonder of what he has done to overwhelm your soul the way it must have

overwhelmed Handel's soul as he wrote the music and led that first presentation of the Messiah?

### III. The Savior

As we began, we said the Messiah was not written in a vacuum it had the context of the story of Handel's life in which he saw God break into his life situation and make a profound difference. And then as we looked at scripture we saw how the OT prophecies keyed on the idea that we could find Comfort. Jesus at Christmas can break into our lives and become the King of Kings and the Lord of all. Now, after singing for an hour and a half, how do you conclude such an opera? Handel felt that after seeing how God could break into people's lives and into the history of our world there was only one way to end. It was to use Rev. 5:12-13, *"In a loud voice they sang:*

*"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength  
and honor and glory and praise!"*

*Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and  
on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:*

*"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb  
be praise and honor and glory and power,  
for ever and ever!"*

Amen

For information about Brentview Baptist Church and its ministries,  
please contact the church office at:  
3512 Charleswood Dr NW, Calgary, AB T2L 2C3  
Phone: 403-284-4691 Fax: 403-284-0132 email: [mail@brentviewbaptist.com](mailto:mail@brentviewbaptist.com)  
Website: [www.brentviewbaptist.com](http://www.brentviewbaptist.com)