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Handel: Messiah (Cambridge Music Handbooks)



Synopsis

Donald Burrows brings many new insights to this fascinating account of one of the favorite works of the concert hall. He traces the course of *Messiah* from Handel's initial musical response to the libretto, through the oratorio's turbulent first years to its eventual popularity with the Foundling Hospital performances. The book addresses such questions as the position of *Messiah* within the oratorio genre, Handel's treatment of structural design, tonal relationships in the work and problems of English wordsetting, as well as contemporary issues such as Handel's relationship with his librettist, Charles Jennens, and with his performers and audience.

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Customer Reviews

"Handel scholarship has come long way...notably in important articles on "*Messiah*" and its versions by Donald Burrows published in *Music and Letters* in 1975 and 1985. (The material has been pulled together admirably in Mr. Burrows's new Cambridge Music handbook on the oratorio.)" *New York Times* "...the music lover who would like to know more about Handel and *Messiah* will find succinct history of English oratorio, a genre that Handel himself invented under circumstances and for reasons that remain unclear to this day, and a concise survey of the evolution of the genre to 1741 (Ch. 1). ...presents for the first time in English a clear and detailed chronology of the composition and the events leading up to the first performance of *Messiah* on 13 April, 1742." Charles Michael Carroll, *The Eighteenth Century*

The course of the Messiah is traced from Handel's initial musical response to the libretto, through the oratorio's turbulent initial years to its eventual rise to popularity with the Foundling Hospital performances.

Great!

My favorite book about Handel's iconic work remains Jens Peter Larsen's definitive study of 1957. However, getting through Larsen's painstakingly researched and densely written volume is a forbidding task for even a trained musician, let alone a casual music lover wanting to know more about the oratorio. This shorter guide by Donald Burrows offers a worthy alternative and supplement (though a fairly high degree of musical literacy is still presupposed). Burrows' portrait of Handel's librettist Charles Jennens and the uneasy relationship between Jennens and the composer brings both figures vividly to life, in part through frequently quoting primary source material. His chronology of Messiah's composition and early performances is both more concise and more interesting than Larsen's somewhat ponderous background text. On the other hand, for cogent, detailed analysis of each individual number, as well as in thorough dissections and balanced conclusions regarding Messiah's changing versions, Larsen comes out far ahead. I also do not agree with Burrows' contention in a separate essay that Handel's original text-settings, with their frequently faulty accentuation of the English language, must be kept at all costs. Still, in terms of packing quantities of useful, interesting information into a small space without sacrificing readability, this Cambridge Musical Handbook is a winner.

These Cambridge Music Handbooks are geared for specific background and analysis on specific musical works. I own another Cambridge book about Haydn's Creation, which is also very good. Burrows begins with historical background of the Messiah, recounts the initial performances in Dublin, and then covers the revisions and revivals in London. Other chapters cover later versions of Messiah (e.g. Mozart's orchestration), a short analysis of the overall design of the work, short comments on individual movements of interest, and Handel's word-setting. There are also two appendices and a wonderful bibliography. Although brief and concise, the work is quite scholarly, containing many citations. It is clear that Burrows knows his stuff regarding Handel and Messiah. My only disappointment with the book (and subsequent reason for four stars) is that many of Burrows' good points are buried within his scholarly prose and these gems are easy to overlook. Despite this,

I would recommend this book to anybody involved in a performance of Handel's Messiah, and it is a must for any conductor. It provides a great deal of necessary background information in a concise manner, and is a great resource for program notes.

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