

PROGRAM NOTES
A SONG OF HOPE - HANDEL'S *MESSIAH*
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2009
THE NORTH SHORE CHORAL SOCIETY

George Frideric Handel was born in Germany in 1685 as Georg Friederich Händel. Familial expectations were that he would go into law; but after years of hiding his musical aspirations, his father permitted him to study both organ and violin. He was appointed organist of the Calvinist Cathedral at seventeen but a year later left for Hamburg to play violin and harpsichord for the opera house. His first operas were premiered there. Handel's years in Italy saw the performances of many Italian language operas and cantatas in Florence, Rome, Naples, and Venice. In 1710 Handel moved to Hanover but almost immediately accepted an invitation to go to London, England, for a production of his opera *Rinaldo*. In 1717 Handel entered the service of the Earl of Carnarvon (later Duke of Chandos) just outside of London. There he wrote eleven anthems and two dramatic works. In 1718 Handel was appointed musical director of the Royal Academy of Music, a newly formed company that endeavored to elevate Italian opera in London. Handel recruited fine singers, many from Italy, and saw the success of many of his (and others') operas. With unsure financial backing, the company collapsed in 1728. Handel remained focused on opera until the 1730s, when he began to move between opera and oratorio, likely to secure his future both financially and artistically.

Handel began working on *Messiah* in the summer of 1741, possibly while staying with the librettist, Charles Jennens. Handel completed the music in just twenty-four days. *Messiah* was premiered in Dublin in April of 1742 as part of a series of charity concerts. Unlike many of his other oratorios, the text is meditative rather than explicitly telling a story. It includes material from both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible as well as the Prayer Book Psalter. Handel continued to revise *Messiah* throughout his life, depending on the musical forces available to him for various performances. Further arrangements of *Messiah* appeared after Handel's death, including one by Mozart that expands the orchestra. Remarkably, *Messiah* has been consistently performed ever since it was composed.

After the premiere of *Messiah*, Handel abandoned opera and gave oratorio performances, many in or close to the Lenten season in the new Covent Garden theatre. During his last years, regular performances of *Messiah* were given in aid of the Foundling Hospital. Handel died in 1759 and is buried in Westminster Abbey. He is accepted as one of the finest composers of the Baroque era.

Messiah is organized into three parts - the first about the prophecy and reality of the Messiah, the second about the passion of Christ and his resurrection and ascension, the third rejoicing in thanks for Christ's triumph over death. While originally conceived as a secular, theatrical piece, *Messiah* is frequently performed during the Advent/Christmas and Lenten/Easter seasons. Certainly one can clearly experience Handel as an operatic/dramatic composer in *Messiah*. There is a great deal of word painting - a technique where the music mimics what the text states - especially in "Ev'ry valley," "Thus saith the Lord," "The trumpet shall sound," "All we like sheep," and others. Handel also makes exciting use of texture, moving swiftly from many independent lines to homophonic writing where all parts move together rhythmically.