

## Musical Treasure Chest #33

December is such a wonderful month: though the days are brief and the nights long, there is an undercurrent of excitement and anticipation, perhaps a remnant of childhood dreams of Christmas morning. I wait with eagerness for the first snow, which I find rather magical (that enchantment wears off later in the winter!). The silence as traffic thins out, the whispering of the snow as it touches down and the contrast of the warmth in the house all seem so special. December also brings certain musical associations reinforced through years of performing and listening.

One of the first orchestra jobs for which I received pay was playing for a performance of **Handel's *Messiah*** when I was a senior in high school. I was delighted to be hired, and I was the only student instrumentalist, so felt quite "grown-up." My exposure to the piece up to that time consisted of only a few selections: *Hallelujah chorus*, *Trumpet Shall Sound*, *I Know that my Redeemer Liveth*, etc., playing the entire oratorio was an exceptional experience. To this day two of my favorite choral pieces are *For Unto Us a Child is Born* and the final *Amen*. For many years, playing *Messiah* defined the start of the holiday season for me. And, the oratorio is such a monumental work that as you start to play the awareness of the nearly three hours ahead seems almost impossibly long, but you settle in for the musical ride (or it's rather like a chef's table, I guess, with multiple courses) and savor every moment. When it's over you feel a sense of great accomplishment and satisfaction. I have played a variety of *Messiahs* over the past 40 years, from simple church choir performances to highly professional oratorio societies with internationally renowned vocal soloists, and I never lose the thrill of beginning the overture and knowing what is ahead.

Handel's *Messiah* has remained in the choral repertory ever since its premiere in April of 1742 in Dublin, Ireland. Handel, himself, following the premiere, continued to revise and adapt several of the movements. And later versions were huge affairs with hundreds of performers and reorchestrations adding instruments, such as clarinets, that Handel had little knowledge of. I thought today that I might share with you some of my treasured moments in the oratorio, and perhaps ones that are

not as familiar as *Hallelujah* and *For Unto Us...*

The oratorio is in three parts, and I have selected a favorite number from each. For the Prophecy section (Part 1), I have picked the bass recitative and aria "**For Behold Darkness Shall Cover the Earth**" and "**The People that Walked in Darkness.**" The slightly ominous quality and the incredible word painting throughout the two movements so brilliantly capture the essence of the text. The "walking" of the string accompaniment in the aria and the insistent chromaticism emphasize each work of the text. Listen to the harmonic color Handel chooses for the words 'shadow' and 'death;' pure genius. Here is a wonderful live performance with baritone Phillipe Sly and the Trinity Baroque Orchestra led by Julian Wachner. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13DpmWPV9IU>

In Part 2, I have chosen "**But thou didst not Leave his Soul in Hell.**" Handel has changed the mood of the material to reflect the change of message, as Part 2 is about the fulfilment of redemption. Once again the musical movement has a walking quality to it, but now the voice and upper strings are separated in their statements, giving a sense of answer. The key has switched to major and there is little chromaticism. Here is tenor Mark Padmore (who was a guest artist with Albany Pro Musica many years ago) and Boston Baroque with Martin Perlman. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCYwukL79Ww>

From Part 3, which is a Hymn of Thanksgiving and draws its text from a number of Biblical books including Job, Revelations and Corinthians, I selected the incredible chorus "**Since by Man Came Death.**" The stunning chorus juxtaposes incredible pathos with great joy, and Handel has the chorus sing *a capella* for the darkness of man's sins, with the orchestra only joining in when the gift of life is given. This chorus once again displays Handel's full power of musical expression. I chose a performance with the Canadian group Tafelmusik choir and orchestra. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMuDHH0f56E>