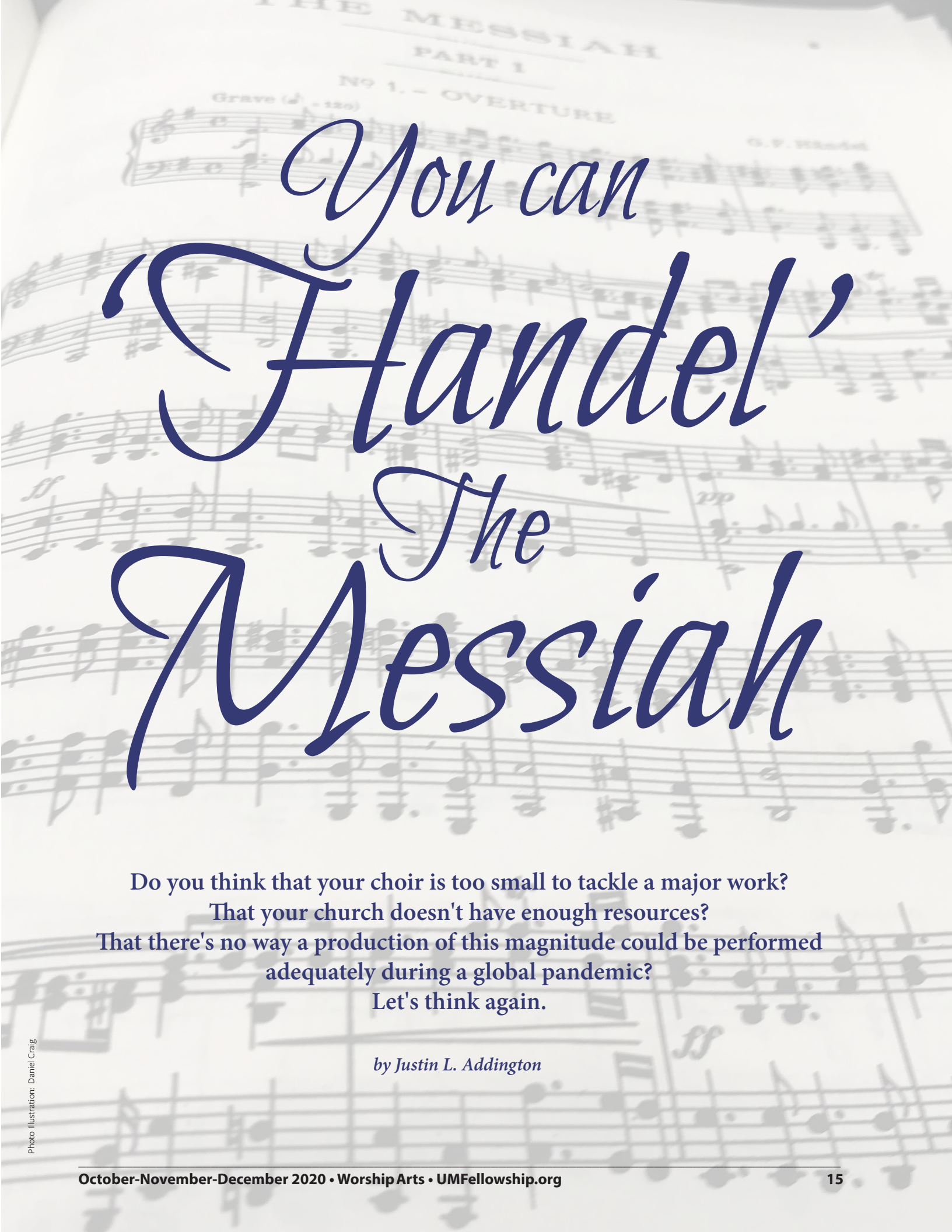




THE MESSIAH
PART I
No 1. - OVERTURE
Grave (♩ = 120)
G.F. Handel

You can 'Handel' The Messiah

Do you think that your choir is too small to tackle a major work?
That your church doesn't have enough resources?
That there's no way a production of this magnitude could be performed
adequately during a global pandemic?
Let's think again.

by Justin L. Addington

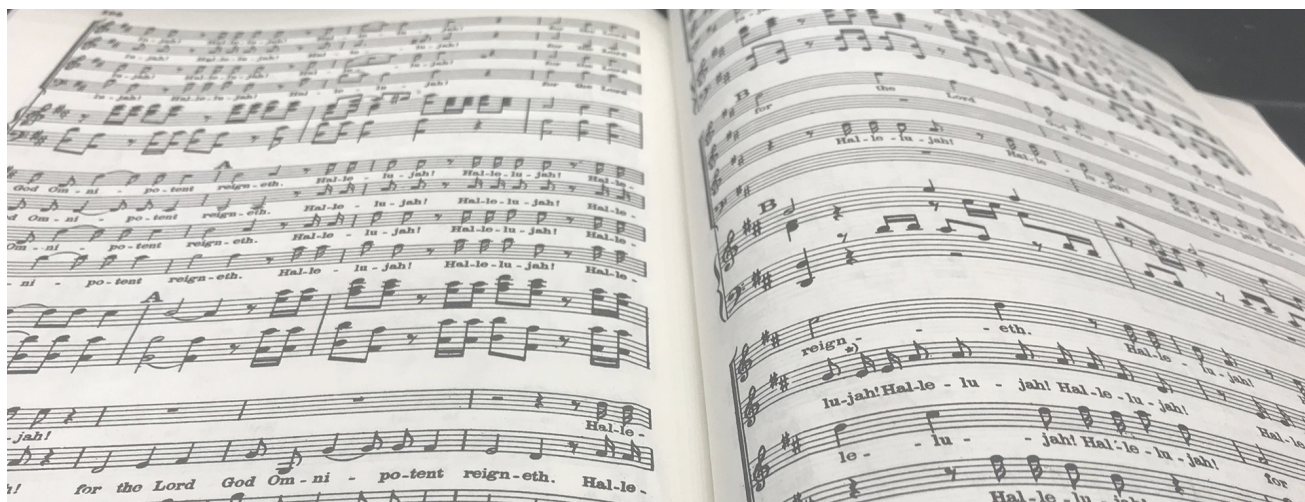


Photo Illustration: Daniel Craig

In the early days of the pandemic, musicians lamented the programs that were canceled as a result of the virus. While COVID-19 rages on, choral directors are now starting to dream about the music they will create when life returns to normal. Some conductors are even exploring repertoire that is stylistically different and more challenging than anything their ensembles would have attempted before. This includes rediscovering major works like George Frideric Handel's *Messiah*.

Performances of *Messiah* were once a staple for most church choirs. In recent years, however, many choir directors have come to regard the work as an impossible challenge. Such feelings are due to decreased choir numbers, lack of financial resources, overloaded schedules, and changes in musical tastes. Similarly, the academic trend of attempting “historically accurate” performances of *Messiah* has made the work even more intimidating to amateur musicians.

Performing *Messiah* with proper Baroque ornamentation and instrumentation can be satisfying, but it does not mean that we are performing the work exactly as Handel intended. In fact, it was rarely performed the same way twice during Handel's lifetime. Handel was continually rewriting the work to accommodate the needs of his context. It was not uncommon for Handel to turn a chorus into an aria or assign solos to different voice parts. Handel's true brilliance concerning *Messiah* was his ability to modify the work as needed.¹ This technique allowed Handel to

achieve the most successful performances possible.

I would argue that Handel's approach is a historically accurate method that we can use to make *Messiah* more manageable for church choirs today. With that in mind, allow me to debunk some of the excuses I often hear from colleagues about performing *Messiah*. Most of these thoughts are aimed at inspiring directors to program *Messiah* when traditional choral singing returns. However, a few of these ideas could be adapted to present a virtual *Messiah* performance during the COVID crisis.

1. My choir is too small.

Our visions of *Messiah* often include large choirs and orchestras like the legendary performances by Robert Shaw and the Atlanta Symphony. However, Handel did not have such resources. Larger and more romanticized performances of *Messiah* came about long after Handel's death. The first performance of Handel's masterpiece was presented by a group of singers numbering around 25.² The soloists also sang with the choir, providing additional support.³ Singing *Messiah* with a small choir (perhaps

Handel's **true brilliance** concerning *Messiah* was his ability to **modify the work as needed**.

even socially distanced) is as historically accurate as you can get.

2. My church can't afford to hire a large orchestra.

The first performance of Handel's *Messiah* used a small chamber orchestra, consisting of strings, a few woodwinds, trumpets, and tympani. Handel conducted the performance from the continuo organ or harpsichord.⁴ The larger orchestration of the work with which we are more familiar would have sounded very odd to Handel. Performing *Messiah* with a small orchestra is historically accurate!

If you can't afford a chamber orchestra, consider using a string quartet. Even a solo violin or cello playing along with the continuo accompaniment can add a great deal to a performance. Also, keep in mind that there is nothing wrong with performing *Messiah* with just a piano and/or organ.

3. I don't have professional soloists in my church.

Some church choirs are fortunate to have paid professionals amongst their numbers. Other choirs have incredibly talented amateur singers who, with some coaching, could easily tackle the solos found in *Messiah*. Remember that Handel was always adapting *Messiah*, so versions of certain solos exist in multiple keys and meters.⁵ If soloists do not exist in your church, consider asking for donors in your congregation to sponsor



Photo: Pixabay.com

The Handel Monument is located in the market square of Halle (Saale), Germany.

one or two. Similar fundraising could be done to hire the instrumentalists, as well. Contributions of this nature will give your people a sense of pride and ownership in the performance.

4. My choir can't do the entire *Messiah* or even an entire section.

Messiah is nearly three hours long when performed in its entirety. That's way too long for most audiences today. In recent years, it has become perfectly acceptable to perform only the portion of the work pertaining to the current season of the church year. I would encourage you, however, to feel free to cut the work down even more! Unlike Handel's other oratorios, *Messiah* does not tell a story

with characters. Instead, *Messiah* is organized in thematic scenes, which contain a recitative, an aria, and a chorus.⁶ Because of this structure, it is perfectly acceptable to leave out some of the more difficult movements in order to make the experience more successful for your singers. Be sure to leave out the relative recitatives, arias, and/or choruses, as well, so that the scene is not compromised.

5. *Messiah* is too difficult for my singers.

It is true that *Messiah* is more difficult than the average SATB literature of most church choirs today. However, a performance of *Messiah* in some fashion is absolutely attainable. The most common difficulty named by choir directors at Christmas is the runs (melismas) in "For Unto Us a Child Is Born." My advice to you is to leave them out. If you apply the Baroque concept of concerto grosso (the contrast of a smaller ensemble against a larger one) you can adapt this chorus and make it work for you. Have your four soloists learn the melismatic passages and perform them as a solo quartet. Then have your choir singers enter every time the "Wonderful Counselor" section appears in the score. Not only will this historically accurate change make the movement easier to sing, but also much more dramatic!

6. My choir can't read music.

Having music readers in your choir does make performing works

like *Messiah* much easier. However, having non-readers in your ensemble should not scare you away from this work. Thanks to advances in technology, there are now YouTube videos and rehearsal CDs available that separate each voice part of each chorus so that choir members can work on their parts at home.⁷ Yes, it requires a little more work and commitment on the part of the singers, but it can be done. I would also encourage the use of seasonal choir retreats and periodic sectional rehearsals. These can be useful reinforcement tools, but also good means of fellowship (include food!) and team building for your ensemble.

7. We don't have enough time to tackle *Messiah*.

Performing a work like *Messiah* can be an all-consuming experience. But being consumed by the Christ story and by such a magnificent piece of music can be a beautiful thing! I know of one church choir who worked for an entire year to prepare a portion of Handel's *Messiah*. They allowed the work to become a part of everything they did. They sang the choruses in worship as they learned them, studied the texts they were singing in their choir Bible study, and even bought some devotional books based on the oratorio to use at home.⁸ By the time of the performance, the choir members had grown tremendously as musicians and had grown more rooted in their faith, as well. If you are willing to prepare the materials, this pandemic seems to be the perfect time for your singers to get a head start on the work.

8. My church doesn't even have a choir!

The absence of a choir should not keep *Messiah* from being performed



Photo: Daniel Craig

in your church, especially during COVID! I once served a church whose choir sang Part I of *Messiah* in a mass group with the local philharmonic. Since the event was not held at our church and did not feature any of our talented soloists, we planned our own "Evening of *Messiah* Solos" for the next Sunday. It was a simple event using only piano, but it provided the church with a *Messiah*-related performance they would not have had otherwise. We ended the program with an audience sing-a-long of the "Halleluiahs Chorus," and the people loved it!

Speaking of sing-a-longs, you could also consider staging a "Sing-a-Long *Messiah*" performance for your community when the pandemic is over. These have become increasingly popular and could be your way of starting a new tradition at your church. With the "Sing-a-Long *Messiah*" method, the audience becomes the choir, removing the need for a

resident ensemble.

9. *Messiah* can't feature my entire music program.

Many churches want their seasonal presentations to showcase their full music program. I believe *Messiah* can achieve just that if you are willing to be creative. Certain movements of *Messiah* have been arranged for piano/organ duet,⁹ piano four-hand,¹⁰ handbells,¹¹ solo instruments,¹² and even children's choirs.¹³ Why not substitute some of these arrangements throughout your performance? You could also insert a few congregational hymns that correlate with particular scenes.¹⁴ The texts of choruses or solos that are not being used could even be read as narration between movements. This would help the work to feel more like a modern-day cantata and allow you to involve more participants.

Such an eclectic approach would



be especially useful for a virtual presentation and could allow for one of the most interesting and memorable performances your church has ever seen!

10. *Messiah* is too “classical” for my church.

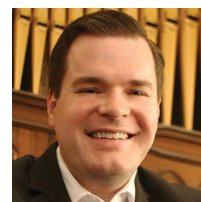
If the classical nature of *Messiah* is a problem for your church, there are other options. One of the most exciting versions of *Messiah* that I have ever heard was called “*Messiah — A Soulful Celebration*.”¹⁵ It used musical styles from the African-American musical tradition to present a version of *Messiah* that was unique, clever, and very enjoyable. I am sure that there are those among us who will also remember the infamous “rock” version of *Messiah* that came out in the 1970s.¹⁶ Programming a movement or two from one of these more modern versions would be quite dis-

tinctive, and could even involve your church’s contemporary worship band!

Handel’s *Messiah* has withstood the test of time, gaining more influence over our memories and emotions than perhaps any other piece of music in history. All church choirs who long to experience the joy of performing this work should have the opportunity to do so. If we want to present *Messiah* in the spirit of Handel, we must be willing to think outside the box and make the oratorio work for us and our current situation. I believe that Handel would be proud to see the innovative and sincere lengths to which directors will go to keep his music alive. In the COVID-19 era and beyond, unconventional yet historically inspired performances could help bring *Messiah* back into the canon of sacred music for churches of all sizes.

NOTES

- 1 Graydon Beeks, “Some Thought on Performing *Messiah*,” *American Choral Review* (April/June, 1985), 21.
- 2 Donald Burros, *Handel’s Messiah* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 30.
- 3 Watkins Shaw, *A Textual Companion to Messiah* (London: Novello and Co., 1965), 95.
- 4 Leonard Van Camp, *A Practical Guide to Performing, Teaching, and Singing the Messiah* (Dayton, OH: Lorenz Corporation, 1992), 5.
- 5 Example: The Coopersmith edition of *Messiah* (New York, NY: Carl Fischer Publishing, 1947), features “Rejoice Greatly” in 12/8 time, making the fast passages much easier to sing.
- 6 Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1977), 260.
- 7 Example: Al Booth and Joel Kabakov, *The Do It Yourself Messiah* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1994).
- 8 Example: Joseph E. McCabe, *Handel’s Messiah: A Devotional Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1978).
- 9 Example: Ellen Jane Lorenz, *Overture to the Messiah* (Dayton, OH: Lorenz Corporation, 1952).
- 10 Example: Larry Shackley, *The Christmas Messiah for Piano Four Hands* (Dayton, OH: Lorenz Corporation, 2008).
- 11 Example: Arnold Sherman, *Pastoral* (Columbus, OH: Beckenhorst Press, 2005).
- 12 Example: David Marlatt, *Rejoice Greatly from Messiah* (Eighth Note Publications – #81 – F2127)
- 13 Example: James Stevens and Daniel Landes, *Christmas Messiah for Young Voices* (Nashville, TN: SBW and Associates, 1991).
- 14 “Joy to the World” and “Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates” have *Messiah* connections.
- 15 Norman Miller and Gail Hamilton, *Handel’s Messiah: A Soulful Celebration* (Burbank, CA: Reprise Records, 1992).
- 16 David Axelrod, *Rock Messiah* (New York, NY: RCA, 1971).



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20 years of experience as a church musician and educator. The thoughts contained in this article are taken from his master’s thesis entitled, “Handel’s ‘Messiah’: A Historic Approach for the Church Choir.”