

***Messiah* and the History of Philanthropy towards Children: London's Foundling Hospital**

On 17 October 1739 Captain Thomas Coram, a retired seaman, secured a royal charter incorporating the London Foundling Hospital “for the reception, maintenance, and education of exposed and deserted young children.” Less than two years later the “Governors and Guardians” of the Hospital opened a house in Hatten Garden on 25 March 1741 (a half-year before *Messiah* was written). **From the beginning this noble charity was entirely free, and all foundlings were admitted indiscriminately. Any person bringing a child rang a bell at the Hospital gate, deposited the foundling in a basket hung at an inner door, and waited to hear whether the infant was accepted at once or returned as diseased. No question whatever was asked about the child's parentage or background.** When the full quota of children had been admitted a notice was affixed to the door stating that “The House is Full.” Frequently as many as 100 children were offered when only 20 could be received, and after several serious riots the women were required to ballot for admission by drawing balls from a bag.

At length the Foundling Hospital outgrew its temporary home, and donations were accepted to meet its enormously increased expenses. More spacious accommodations were erected on a spot then known as Lamb's-Conduit-Fields, and on 19 January 1750 the new institution was formally opened with six hundred children. By then the Hospital had become a fashionable London charity. Its celebrated patrons numbered eminent painters and musicians as well as the King and the Prince of Wales. **In 1747 a Chapel was designed for the Hospital by Theodore Jacobson, and King George II contributed no less than three thousand pounds (over half a million dollars in 2021 currency) toward its immediate construction. Two years later Handel himself followed suit by presenting the Chapel with an excellent new organ** built by Richard Parker. On 4 May 1749 the composer attended a meeting of the Foundling Hospital Committee and there proposed a concert of “vocal and instrumental musick,” offering to apply all proceeds toward completing the Chapel. Handel's generous act was not unwelcome. He was immediately enrolled as one of the Governors and Guardians of the Hospital, and on May 27 the promised performance took place. Expressly for the occasion he composed his excellent Foundling Anthem upon the words “Blessed are they that consider the poor.”

The next year, Handel “opened the Organ” at the Foundling Chapel with a rendition of *Messiah* on 1 May 1750 (three months before the death of J. S. Bach). During the morning London's polite world, never slow to support fashionable charity, flocked to the Chapel; the audience of 1,200 exceeded the seating capacity by 200 and hundreds more were turned away at the door.

After “Opening the Organ” Handel continued to give at least one annual performance of *Messiah* for the benefit of the Hospital until his death in 1759. On 18 April 1751 *Messiah* was performed for the third time at the Chapel “under the direction of George Frederick Handel, Esq; who played a voluntary upon the organ” before “a great appearance of persons of distinction.” The London Magazine reported that tickets were “delivered out” to the sum of L600. Ladies of quality appeared “in small Hoops” and gentleman of fashion came “without Swords” in order “to make their Seats more convenient to themselves.” At the sixth performance in 1753 “there were above 800 coaches and chairs, and the tickets amounted to 925 guineas.” In 1751 Handel's sight began to fail, and by 1753 he had become totally blind, but he still remained faithful to his original intention, and each year personally superintended the annual performance of *Messiah* for the benefit of the Foundling Hospital and performed an organ concerto according to his usual custom. (From Handel's *Messiah*, A Touchstone of Taste, by Robert Manson Myers, © 1948, New York: The Macmillan Company; reprinted 1971, pp. 135-141.)



Promotion of *Messiah* at the Mansion encourages providing items for Lucy's Hearth, a local shelter for children and their families who are experiencing homelessness due to economic hardship, family crisis, divorce, eviction, and severe shortage of safe, affordable housing. Lucy's Hearth's primary goal is to foster independence and help the residents gain the life skills necessary to find stable housing and prevent future homelessness. To learn more or send added support: lucyshearth.org



Lucy's Hearth