

## PROGRAM NOTES

### GEORGE FREDERIC HANDEL (1685-1759)

#### *Messiah*, HWV 56

It was on the 22nd of August 1741 that Handel, at the age of fifty-six, began the score of *The Messiah*. He finished it on the 14th of September, twenty-four days in all. It was all original work except for the choruses, 'And he shall purify,' 'For unto us,' 'His yoke is easy,' and 'All we like sheep,' all of which were adapted from a set of Italian duets he had written in July 1741. But although he wrote the first copy so quickly, in the end he spent more time and thought over this work than over any previous oratorio. He left more than one version of several numbers and altered others by deleting from or adding to them. Only the solos were published in Handel's lifetime.

In response to an invitation from the Lord Lieutenant, Handel visited Ireland in November 1741, and took the score of *The Messiah* with him. It was first performed in Dublin on 13 April 1742, and again on 3 June. Both performances were for charities and were successful from every point of view. Handel took with him from London Mrs. Cibber and Signora Avoglio as soloists. The tenor and bass solos were sung by men from the Dublin cathedral choirs. Handel wrote to Jennens of the Dublin musicians as follows: 'I have found another tenor voice which gives great satisfaction; the basses and counter-tenors are very good, and the rest of the chorus singers (choir boys) by my direction do exceedingly well; as for the instruments they are really excellent, Mr. Duborough being at the head of them, and the music sounds delightfully in this charming room, which puts me in such spirits, and my health being so good, that I exert myself on my organ with more than usual success.' Mrs. Cibber sang so well that Dr. Delany, the great friend of Swift, exclaimed as he sat in his box, 'Woman, for this be all thy sins forgiven.' One Dublin journal spoke of the work as 'the finest composition

of music that was ever heard.' Another said that 'it far surpasses anything of that nature which has been performed in this or any kingdom.' For the second performance the ladies were requested to 'lay aside their hoops.' If they would abandon fashion 'for one evening only, however ornamental, the hall will contain an hundred persons more, with full ease.'

The Messiah was not performed in London until 23 March 1743 at Covent Garden, nor did it create any great stir then, for no mention of it is found in the journals of the time. It was not until Handel began his performances in aid of the Foundling Hospital in the chapel of that institution that The Messiah came into its own. These were so crowded with the fashion of the time (even wider hoop skirts) that extra performances had to be given each year. The one in 1759 was the last concert Handel attended only three weeks before his death. Nearly L7,000 went to swell the funds of the hospital from these annual renderings. This sum was largely augmented after Handel's death. In 1784 performances took place in Westminster Abbey on a huge scale with an orchestra and chorus of over five hundred. These were so successful that they continued until 1791 and no doubt gave the idea for the great triennial Handel festivals at the Crystal Palace inaugurated in 1857. The orchestra in Handel's day was a very different thing from what it has become. It is not so much that different instruments have been introduced in later days; the only new groups are the clarinet and tuba families, for flutes, oboes, bassoons, horns, trumpets, tympani, and strings were all used in Handel's time. The main difference was in the way the instruments were used. The idea of grouping them to produce a tone or 'colour' that would express the particular feeling or emotion of the music was only in its infancy. In a modern score the tone-color is constantly changing with kaleidoscopic frequency; in the scores of Bach and Handel, even where something in the music or the words suggested a particular tone, as of the bassoons in the witch's music in Saul, or of the trumpet in 'The trumpet shall sound' in The Messiah, this color was kept up more or less throughout the whole movement.

Conducting with the baton did not begin before the second decade of the nineteenth century and was not general until long after that. Prior to that the 'conductor' sat at the harpsichord or organ and directed things as far as he could, assisted by the leader of the violins, who beat time with his bow whenever he was able. Orchestral technique was therefore limited, and it was for this reason that the lowest stave of every full score was devoted to the continuo or figured bass. This was simply the bass part with figures beneath it, indicating by a sort of shorthand what chords the composer intended to be heard above it. It was this line of the score to which the director, or conductor, devoted himself. Playing the continuo was a very skilled art. No doubt Handel was a great master of it. The strings did not always play continuously throughout a movement, except in the louder choruses; the organ and voices carried on by themselves, strings coming in here and there by way of contrast until towards the end, when strings, organ, and voices all united in the climax. Flutes, oboes, and bassoons were used pretty much in the same way. Very often the oboes and bassoons only doubled the string parts. In the bigger choruses, trumpets and drums were added, and occasionally trombones. The recitatives were either accompanied by chords on the harpsichord or organ (recitativo secco), or by the strings with some sort of rhythmic figure (recitativo stromentato). The solos were accompanied in various ways. Some had only continuo, others had an obbligato part for violins in unison, the filling up of the chords being left to the continuo player ('Rejoice greatly' and 'How beautiful are the feet.')

Others had an obbligato part for a wind instrument, with a background of strings and continuo alternating. Others, again, were accompanied throughout by the strings in harmony ('He shall feed his flock.')

Thus, the harpsichord, or organ, was going nearly all the time. When played by a great musician this free improvisation on the figured bass could be made intensely interesting, especially when the conductor was the composer. (Handel conducted all the performances of *The Messiah* during his lifetime.) In any case whether the continuo is improvised, or played from a printed

version, the personal element is bound to enter into it.

The Messiah occupied and still occupies a place in the program of nearly every great music festival in this country. It is sung once a year by almost every choral society and has saved many from bankruptcy. The sum earned by it for charitable objects must be far greater than that earned by any other musical composition. Handel inevitably performed it in the aid of some charity, and yet never seemed to be in financial straits from the time when it was written to his death.

In the **Newport Classical** version heard today, the Christmas portion (Part I) is joined by interpolations of later movements leading up to the *Hallelujah* chorus's Easter placement within the larger narrative.

Notes by Sir Edward C. Bairstow (1874-1946), an English organist and composer in the Anglican church music tradition, for *The Musical Pilgrim*, Oxford University Press, 1928. After holding posts in London, Wigan, and Leeds, Bairstow served as organist of York Minster from 1913 to his death, He was knighted in 1932.

# ARTIST BIOS

## THE CHOIR SCHOOL OF NEWPORT COUNTY

**The Choir School of Newport County** was founded in 2014 to form lives of character and service through the joy and discipline of intergenerational choral music. Choristers are paid for their work, and have the opportunity to sing in the community, attend a summer camp, and travel (Argentina, summer 2024; past tours to England in 2018, Washington, DC in 2016, and New York City in 2022). Their educational travel is supported by sales of the board game Newportopoly© developed by the Choir School; copies of the Tenth Anniversary Edition are available in the lobby today, and at Newport retailers including the Preservation Society Mansion Stores. Recent performance highlights are *Messiah at the Mansion* in 2021 and 2022, Newport Folk Festival 2021, 2022, 2023, and annual Concerts of Remembrance that raise money for humanitarian aid in the US and abroad. The School is an independent 501(c) 3 non-profit organization. Rehearsals are held at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Portsmouth, serving children from all of Newport County. Piano lessons are provided to income-eligible families. The tuition-free program is dependent on grants and individual community support. For further information: [choirschoolri.org](http://choirschoolri.org)

## PETER STOLTZFUS BERTON

**Peter Stoltzfus Berton**, Founding Executive Director of The Choir School of Newport County, is an educator, church musician, and composer who holds degrees from the University of Michigan School of Music and the Yale University School of Music. Integral to his training was serving as Assistant Organist at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Detroit, Trinity Church on the Green, New Haven, and Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, New York. Prior to his appointment in Newport in 2014, he developed

intergenerational choirs at St. John's Church, West Hartford CT, All Saints Church, Worcester MA, and Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, Brooklyn Heights, NY. In addition to his primary role with the Choir School, he is Chapel Organist and Adjunct Music Faculty at St. George's School, Middletown, accompanist for The Anglican Singers, New London, CT, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Arts and Cultural Alliance of Newport County.

## ENSEMBLE ALTERA

A chamber choir of "seamless ensemble perfection" (The Boston Musical Intelligencer), **Ensemble Altera** was founded to be the beating heart of professional choral music in the United States. Led by internationally celebrated countertenor Christopher Lowrey, the group has quickly become known for thoughtful programming, passionate performances, and tireless advocacy for the importance of ensemble singing in the broader music culture.

Recent programs include *Dazzling Light*, an exploration of illumination in the physical and metaphysical worlds, *Sure on this Shining Night*, featuring American choral music of the last century, a boldly reimagined chamber version of Handel's *Messiah*, co-presented with Newport Classical, *The Lamb's Journey*, drawing on many periods and styles to depict the Christ narrative, *We Watch & Welcome: Feminine Voices at Christmas*, featuring works by seven female composers for treble voices arrayed around Britten's Ceremony of Carols, and *We Remember*, a musical journey of healing and reflection in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout its short history, Altera has received universally rave reviews, creating "some of the best choral singing by an American choir". Upcoming projects include *A Christmas Present*, a sumptuous collection of seasonal music written in the

new millennium, and *A New Song: Psalms for the Soul*, charting a survey of the Psalms of David, in all their dizzying variety. Additionally, in 2024 Altera undertakes their first tour, to Texas, and makes their debut at Carnegie Hall in Brahms' *Requiem*, with the Orchestra of St. Luke's.

Deeply committed to championing new works and lifting up new voices, over the past few seasons Altera has premiered works by Motshwane Pege, Toby Young, Joanna Marsh, Daniel Gledhill, Zuzanna Koziej, and Michael Garrepy. In addition to performing, Ensemble Altera undertakes an extensive education and outreach program. Such activities include clinics and interactive presentations with school students in a variety of settings, with a particular focus on opening musical horizons to those from underserved backgrounds. Additionally, Altera has a profound faith in the healing power of music both in and out of the concert hall and is proud to offer its complete recorded music library free of charge in collaboration with select partners in music therapy.

## CHRISTOPHER LOWREY

Director **Christopher Lowrey** was born and raised in Johnston, RI, and trained at Brown University, the University of Cambridge, where he sang under Stephen Layton with Trinity College Choir, and the Royal College of Music. In addition to conducting, he enjoys a dynamic international solo career as a countertenor, working at some of the world's leading opera houses and concert platforms, including the Metropolitan Opera, Royal Opera House, the Philharmonie de Paris, The London Symphony Orchestra, and this season he makes debuts with Theater an der Wien in Vienna, The National Symphony Orchestra, Opera Australia, and the Grange Festival in the UK.

## CHLOE FEDOR

Violinist **Chloe Fedor** is known for her “lovely, plush, seductive tone” (*New York Times*), “soulful, Virtuositic” playing, and “impeccable technical control” (*Opera News*). She is a member of the Grammy award-winning group Apollo’s Fire, co-concertmaster of Lyra Baroque Orchestra, and concertmaster and artistic advisor of Baroque programming at Lakes Area Music Festival. Chloe will also appear several times this season with Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, Seraphic Fire, Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra, and as soloist and chamber musician with Four Nations Ensemble.

In 2018, Chloe was featured on Broadway as the onstage Baroque violinist in *Farinelli* and *The King*, a Shakespeare’s Globe production starring Sir Mark Rylance. She is a graduate of The Eastman School of Music and a double graduate of The Juilliard School, winning concerto competitions at both conservatories as well as the Juilliard Career Advancement Fellowship in 2015.