

Douglas, J. D., Comfort, P. W., & Mitchell, D. (1997, c1992). *Who's Who in Christian History*.

## **HANDEL, GEORGE FRIDERIC** (1685-1759)

*German composer; famous for his composition, Messiah*

Handel was born in Halle, Saxony. Except for his extraordinary musical gifts and his Lutheran background, Handel's career stands in marked contrast to that of his distinguished contemporary and fellow-countryman, Johann S. Bach. Unlike Bach, Handel did not come from a musical family; his father, a physician, wanted him to study law. Only grudgingly did he permit his son to receive musical instruction. Possessing unqualified genius, at seventeen Handel had mastered harpsichord and organ, violin and oboe, as well as the elements of composition. Handel's career as a composer began about 1703 in Hamburg, where German opera was flourishing at the time. He then moved to Italy where he spent 1707 through 1710 advancing his skills through contact with such noted composers as Arcangelo Corelli, and Alessandro and Giuseppe Scarlatti. Returning to Germany in 1712 he briefly entered the service of the future George I of England, then Elector of Hanover. The next year Handel moved to London, which became his home for the rest of his life. He was buried there in Westminster Abbey.

It was the growing taste of London aristocracy for Italian opera that had drawn Handel there. Throughout his life, he wrote about forty such works. Even after changing taste brought him financial crisis and a resultant physical collapse in 1737, he did not lose interest in the form. But it was with oratorios that he rebuilt his popularity and fortune. The oratorio had begun in Italy as a sort of sacred opera. It was normally performed without costumes, however, and only sometimes with stage scenery. Handel combined his particular gift for the dramatic in music with his mastery of the English choral tradition to create a new type of oratorio that appealed to the cultured English middle class. Although a few of his nearly thirty such works are secular, most employ plots drawn from the Old Testament.

Handel's first English oratorio was *Esther*. Among others are *Jephtha*, *Samson*, *Saul*, *Solomon*, and *Judas Maccabaeus* (from the Apocrypha). Only in *Israel in Egypt* and *Messiah* did he not present soloists as specific characters and use the actual words of Scripture exclusively for his texts.

*Messiah* (1741) is unique in Handel's output, not because its music is his greatest but because of the way in which the messianic theme from prophecy to fulfillment is given continuity in music of utmost appropriateness. No major work in any category has enjoyed such continuous and widespread popularity over so long a period of time. In addition, it was composed in a remarkably short time-about three weeks. Handel repeatedly presented it during the rest of his life, making numerous revisions and alterations.

Handel wrote a number of fine anthems, including three for coronation ceremonies, and several festal settings of the *Te Deum*. He also produced numerous cantatas, sonatas, and concertos of great excellence. The English oratorio, however, was his most individual achievement. His works in that genre provided models for such later composers as Joseph Haydn, Ludwig Spohr, and Felix Mendelssohn.

See: George Frideric Handel. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*.

[George Frideric Handel](#)