

## Reflections on “Messiah” from Earl F. Palmer

(As Appeared in the New College Berkeley Blog)

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During this season of the Christian year we sing the wondrous songs of the birth of Jesus, just as a choir of angels did in a nighttime surprise long ago to shepherds near Bethlehem. Since then music and words about this Jesus have been in our hearts and voices. For me, there is no musical masterwork as inspiring and beloved as *Messiah* by George F. Handel. This music soars in dynamic splendor and also in quietly moving tenderness. Added to the glory of the music are the texts that take me on a journey that begins with the Old Testament narratives of coming hope for a people in danger “speak tenderly to Jerusalem that her warfare is ended” (Isaiah 40). What follows is the prophetic hope of the coming of Jesus “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given ...And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9). The New Testament texts then take us through Christ’s life as teacher, shepherd, and his death and victory over death in our behalf as risen King of Kings. In the finale chorale of *Messiah* we hear the words of thankfulness in “Worthy is the Lamb” (Rev.5). This is followed with the grand *Amen*, the Hebrew word for “faithful.”

George F. Handel begins this incredible portrayal of Jesus Christ as the one who fulfills the ancient hope for the Messiah. It might have been expected that such a total story about the Christ would begin at the very beginnings of the Biblical account in Genesis, the books of the Law and the Exodus out of Egypt but Handel begins with the Prophets of the Old Testament who write mid-story in the holy history of Abraham’s family. They write in the dangerous years during and after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The event of Christ’s birth shakes the world with the promise of hope in the midst of crisis.

Handel born 1685, was a contemporary of other giants of Christian music who wrote some of the greatest Christian music still ringing forth in our time – “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” (JS Bach), “Joy to the World the Lord has Come” (Isaac Watts) and “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus” (Charles Wesley). *Messiah* was performed in Dublin with Handel conducting in April of 1742. The orchestra was modest and Handel wrote each chorale so that singers of ordinary choirs with little training could sing them. This sheer simplicity of harmony and melody may help us to explain why we all love and hum the tunes of the great chorales. In my view, the apex of the work is the most beautiful single piece of musical composition. It is the companion solo for contralto “He will feed His Flock” followed by the soprano solo “Come unto him all ye who labor and are heavy laden.” These moving solos become the Gospel invitation to all who are alone and hurting –longing for hope. In 1743 with more instruments added by Handel to the orchestra he conducted the work in London to instant and permanent praise. That response has continued into our present century.

The words in *Messiah* help us to discover for ourselves the significance of the birth of Jesus in bringing hope as brought forth in the biblical texts of the prophets, the Gospel writers and New Testament letter writers – even including “I know that my redeemer liveth,” (from the book of *Job*). Yes, *Messiah* is a masterwork but most importantly it brings comfort. For those who listen to the Lord of the Story they are invited to turn to the one who can heal brokenness that the prophets tell of and who can make what is broken whole. This invitation makes us want to sing the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

(12/3/15)

