Inside Masterworks

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Masterworks #3:
Handel: He Created a Gift That Keeps On Giving

Handel might not have been the first to create a benefit concert, but his best known work was written for precisely that purpose.

Philanthropy should be taking bigger risks than business. If there are easy problems, business and government can come in and solve them. ~ Bill Gates, Entrepreneur

Never respect men merely for their riches, but rather for their philanthropy; we do not value the sun for its height but for its use. ~ Gamaliel Bailey, journalist and abolitionist

Philanthropy is not a new concept. Rooted in Greek culture and meaning “love of humanity,” philanthropy was a civic duty, assumed voluntarily or under peer pressure at the risk of being ostracized; the rich were expected to subsidize the cost of temples, theaters, and music and drama festivals for the benefit of the greater community.

Musicians and artists have created a special version of philanthropy: the benefit concert. Examples include the 1971 concert for Bangladesh organized by George Harrison and the 43 musicians (including Quincy Jones and Michael Jackson) who united to create “We Are the World”, USA Aid for Africa. More recently and closer to home, this past spring the musicians of the Hartford Symphony organized and performed a benefit concert to raise money for earthquake victims in Nepal.

In so doing, HSO musicians followed a strong and proud tradition: musicians lending their talents to raise money for a cause. And leading that tradition is Handel’s Messiah, composed and performed to help individuals buy freedom from debtor’s prison.

As co-manager of an Italian opera company that went bankrupt in 1737, Handel understood the terror of facing debtor’s prison. In 1741, Charles Jennens asked Handel to write a score for his previously-written libretto. Around the same time, several groups of charities in Dublin approached Handel with the request that he compose a new work for a benefit performance. With a personal motive and the right text, Handel began composing the score on August 22, 1741; reports disclose he barely left his room, rarely touched his meals, and completed the 259-page masterpiece in 24 days.

There were high expectations for the Oratorio, which held a ticketed dress rehearsal on April 12, 1742, one day before the actual premiere, helping to boost sales and raise extra funds. Messiah premiered on April 13, 1742 in Dublin, Ireland and with the goal of using the concert to raise as much money as was possible, concert promoters found a way to maximize capacity in the theatre: gentlemen were asked to “come without swords” and ladies were asked to dress “without hoops” in their skirts. Handel expected about 600 patrons at the premiere; to everyone’s delight, an extra 100 were crammed in and the audience numbered 700.

Handel deliberately chose Dublin for the premiere of his piece, which, at the time, had a more prominent theatrical and musical audience.
than London. Handel’s choice of Dublin also coincided with the opening of a new venue, the Great Musick Hall on Fishamble Street. Handel proved to be a gifted entrepreneur, arranging a benefit concert, a ticketed dress rehearsal, an audience that exceeded capacity, plus the premiere of a new work in a brand new venue.

[All that remains of the famed venue today is the Music Hall door, but Fishamble, one of the oldest streets in Dublin, named for the fish “shambles” (market stalls) that used to line the streets, still exists.]

With positive reviews from the Dublin Journal the day after its premiere, Handel’s Messiah was deemed an instant sensation. The benefit concert had raised 400 pounds, and the funds were used to free 142 men from debtor’s prison. But this was not the end of the story. Handel continued to conduct his Messiah for a variety of charity events including London’s Foundling Hospital, starting in 1750 until his death in 1759. As Governor and benefactor of the Foundling Hospital, Handel conducted roughly 36 performances of Messiah to provide “vital sources of income for the Hospital”, raising “thousands of British pounds for relief.”

Messiah is an anthem of charity and unity. Following the April 13, 1742 premiere, Handel reportedly told an audience member, “I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wish to make them better.”

Philanthropy is part of the great tradition of Handel’s Messiah. Join the HSO on December 3 – 6, 2015 for “Joyful Voices,” featuring excerpts from this legendary work. In this season of Thanks and Giving, we thank all of our supporters for helping us serve this wonderful community. We could not do any of this without you. As 2015 comes to a close, we are grateful for your continued support and if you are not already, we invite you into our family by becoming a treasured HSO donor. (For a full list of donor benefits and giving levels, please visit our website at http://www.hartfordsymphony.org/individual-support/giving-levels/)


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Our very own Coleman Casey, HSO’s dear friend, Director Emeritus and in-house audiophile, has generously offered recommendations for recordings of the selections that will be featured on our upcoming Masterworks concert.

First, Jennifer Higdon’s *blue cathedral* has been elegantly recorded by Robert Spano and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, who have somewhat cornered the market on recordings of her works (TELARC).

The most beautiful version of Faure’s Requiem is in fact a rare version, one using the original reduced orchestration compared to the more modern orchestration that prevails today. The benefit is that there is greater clarity in the part writing and greater intimacy of scale, surely a necessity in this most delicate of requiems. John Rutter’s version is surely the one to have (COLLEGIUM), with his own choir and wonderful soloists.

And lastly, Trevor Pinnock’s version of Messiah still reigns supreme after thirty years, remarkable for its sheer joie de vivre (DG ARCHIV).

Enjoy!