

# George Frideric Handel

1685-1759

George Frideric Handel was born in Germany and was a contemporary of J.S. Bach. Although Handel's father wanted him to be a lawyer, the Duke of Weissenfels convinced him that he should encourage his son's talent. Handel proceeded to be instructed by Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow in organ, harpsichord, violin, and oboe.

Handel traveled and composed in Italy, and finally in 1712, settled in England. This was the Baroque period, which highlighted great works of Protestant music rooted in the Bible. Handel added numerous operas, oratorios, concertos, hymns, and other compositions to this era.

As with many famous composers, Handel had great highs and lows in his career. In 1741, at age fifty-six, experiencing one failure after another, Handel thought he would end up in debtor's prison. It was at this time that his friend Charles Jennens gave him a libretto based on the life of Christ, taken from the Bible. At this low point in his life, Handel sequestered himself in his home for 24 days, until he emerged with the completed score for Messiah. The original completed score ended with Handel's signature and the words "Soli Deo Gloria"—to God alone be the glory. It is also said that when Handel's servant brought him food, he found him with tears in his eyes as he worked on "Hallelujah Chorus." Handel exclaimed, "I did think I did see all heaven before me and the great God Himself!"<sup>1</sup>

The first performance of Messiah was in Dublin in 1742 with the proceeds going to three charitable undertakings. When Handel was complimented on the great entertainment of the work he replied, "My Lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better."<sup>2</sup> It is in this spirit that we hope you hear Messiah tonight; not as a concert, but rather, as worship-filled expression of the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ.

By 1759, Handel was blind, yet he managed to conduct 10 concerts during the oratorio season. He ended with Messiah on April 6. He died 8 days later on April 14, 1759. His wish was to die on Good Friday, "...in hope of rejoining the good God, my sweet Lord and Savior, on the day of His resurrection."<sup>3</sup> He died on Holy Saturday.

