

# Tafelmusik

## Handel *Messiah* Programme Notes

*Handel says he will do nothing next Winter, but I hope I shall persuade him to set out another Scripture collection I have made for him, and perform it for his own Benefit in Passion week. I hope he will lay out his whole Genius and Skill upon it, that the Compositon may excel every other Subject. The Subject is Messiah.*

Charles Jennens to Edward Holdsworth, July 10, 1741

And so in August 1741 Jennens sent the libretto of *Messiah* to Handel to be set to music. It did not, however, keep Handel busy that winter, as he completed the entire score in just three weeks. He had been invited to Dublin that November to present a series of oratorio concerts and it was there that *Messiah* was first performed. The Dublin performance was very well received, but the first London performance in 1743 had a more mixed reception – controversy raged over the suitability of a theatre as a place to perform a sacred oratorio, particularly when the subject was to be the Messiah. It was not until 1750, when Handel turned to it for benefit performances for the Foundling Hospital and thus stilled the controversy, that *Messiah* was fully accepted and applauded by London audiences. By the time of Handel's death in 1759, it had become the most frequently performed of all his oratorios, a position it has never relinquished.

During his lifetime Handel made frequent revisions to the score of *Messiah*, sometimes for artistic reasons and sometimes to suit new singers or conditions of performance. In fact, the oratorio was never performed exactly as it had been written in those weeks of 1741. Tonight's performance is based on a performance directed by Handel himself at Covent Garden, London, in 1753. By using similar instrumental and vocal forces and by researching Handel's various revisions, we hope to revive the content, sound, style and spirit of that 1753 performance.