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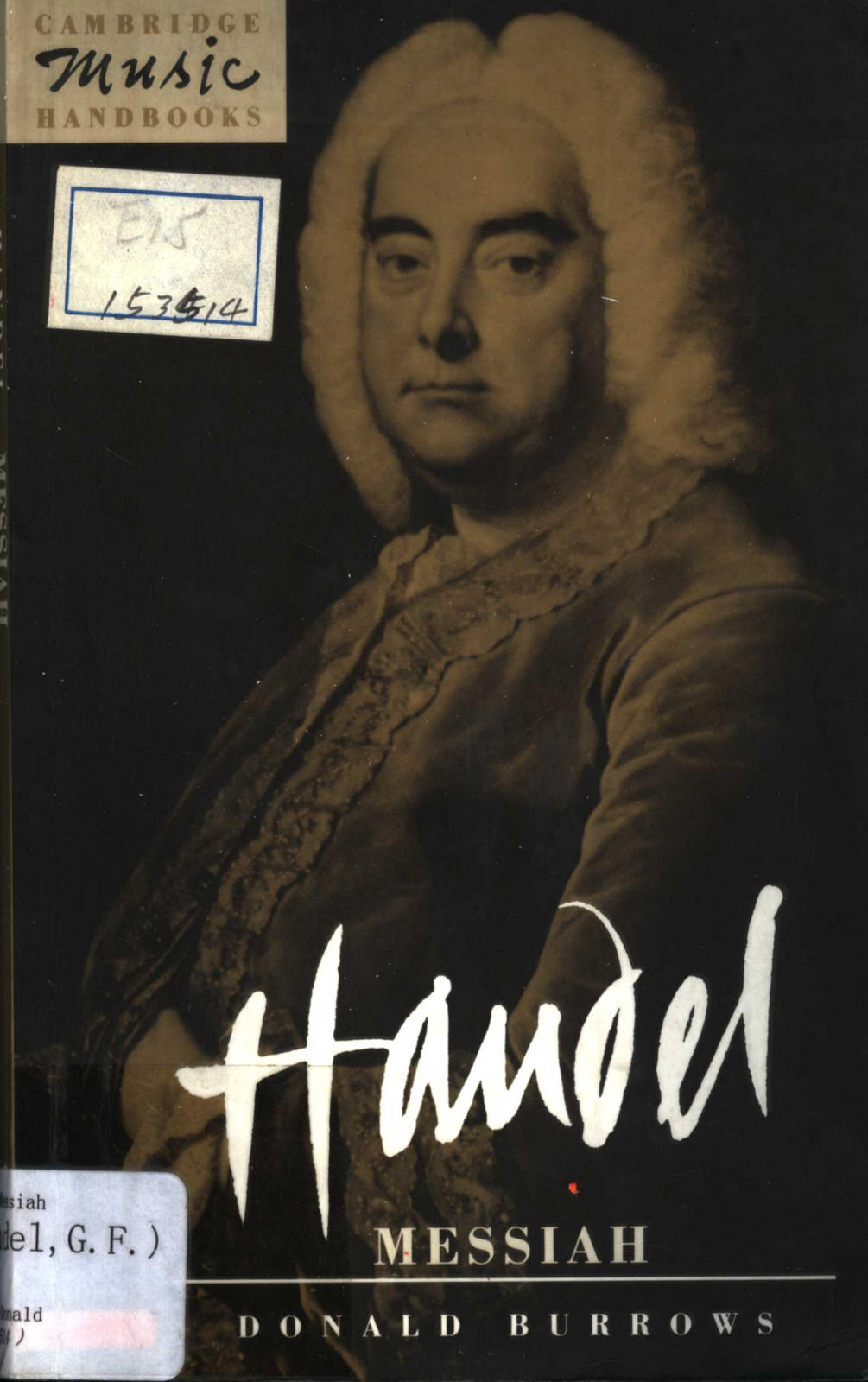

Handel

MESSIAH

DONALD BURROWS

Handel: *Messiah*

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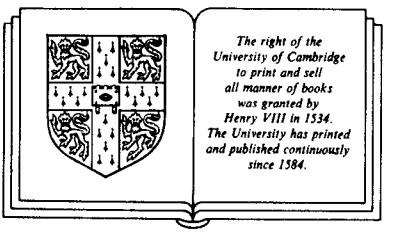

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Preface

> And from that time to the present, this great work has been heard in all parts of the kingdom with increasing reverence and delight; it has fed the hungry, clothed the naked, fostered the orphan, and enriched succeeding managers of the Oratorios, more than any single production in this or any country.
>
> [Burney, *An Account of the Musical Performances*, 'Sketch of the Life of Handel', p. 27]

Charles Burney's assessment of the position that Handel's *Messiah* had gained in the English-speaking world during the forty years since its first performance has been reinforced during the succeeding two centuries. Under modern economic conditions, charities and 'managers' can no longer anticipate automatic profits from performances of *Messiah*, yet the work has retained its hold over performers and audiences, and the oratorio has a 'classic' status among the artefacts of western culture. The reasons for this are various, related partly to wider musical and social practices and partly to the nature of the work itself. Burney was writing at a moment when *Messiah* was about to take on a new musical guise – or *dis*guise – as a celebratory work for mass performance at the first Handel Commemoration. During the second half of the nineteenth century, when choral singing became a popular movement in Britain, more people came into active contact with *Messiah* than ever before, through large-scale performances in churches and concert halls in London and the provinces. At the same time, small provincial choirs discovered that Handel's music, designed for professional singers to learn on a couple of rehearsals, could be mastered by amateurs in a couple of months. Church and chapel choirs found in *Messiah* a repository of anthems for the ecclesiastical year: in putting Handel's music to such use, they were catching up with an idea that had been familiar in cathedrals since the 1760s.

The continued popularity of *Messiah* can partly be explained by the healthy survival of choral institutions. But only partly. It is still remarkable that a work originally advertised as 'A New Sacred Oratorio' should survive

with such vigour through the colder secular atmosphere of the later twentieth century. *Messiah* is at the same time a typical and an unusual Handel oratorio. Typical, in that we can relate most of its musical features to an opera-derived genre in which Handel regularly worked. Unusual, in that the libretto is uncharacteristic of the main run of Handel's oratorios in both its content and its presentation of the story. While the story and its interpretation are matters of religious significance, the tone is not aggressively dogmatic: Handel and Jennens treated their subject as a drama observed and interpreted, as a matter for contemplation. Unbelievers too may appreciate the story and its symbolic interpretation, and ponder on the wider related themes of life and death, providence, sacrifice and resurrection. *Messiah*, like the celebration of Christmas, is sufficiently rich and complex to speak to a range of human needs and emotions, irrespective of its immediate Judaeo-Christian framework.

It is ironic that some of the very qualities that have ensured *Messiah*'s survival were controversial in the years of its first London performances, and even possibly damaging to Handel's immediate professional career. Yet this begs the question of what 'the work' actually is. Performance practices and social changes certainly modify perceptions of such a work: the 'Festival' performances not only altered the sound of *Messiah* into something very different from that heard by Handel's own audiences, but also changed the nature of the piece more subtly by turning it into a 'choral' work. A choral society that rehearses *Messiah*, and then hires an orchestra (or a one-man keyboard substitute) and vocal soloists, is working under artistic premises different from those under which the composer created it. An understanding of the creative process behind *Messiah* requires us to look at the circumstances (themselves changing) in which Handel composed and presented it.

In dealing with the early history of *Messiah*, the writer acknowledges that he himself stands within a historical process. Without the labours of A. H. Mann, Jens Peter Larsen and Watkins Shaw (to mention only the most recent major figures in a 250-year process of scholarly refinement) the materials for my own starting point would have been less tractable. I acknowledge my debt to my predecessors, and count myself fortunate to have been able to discuss *Messiah* topics in person with Watkins Shaw and the late Jens Peter Larsen. For most recent and immediate assistance during the preparation of this book I gratefully acknowledge my debt to Julian Rushton, Anthony Hicks, Ruth Smith, Hildegard Wright and the late Gerald Coke.

References to 'Messiah' editions

Many movements of *Messiah* exist in variant forms composed or adapted by Handel for his own performances. Reference is complicated by the fact that the three principal performing editions in use today number the movements differently. The system of references employed in the left-hand column of the libretto (Appendix 1, pp. 86–100) serves as a guide to the contents of these editions. The three editions are:

B Peters Edition, ed. Donald Burrows, vocal score 1987. This adapts the numbering system from the previous editions by Kurt Soldan (1939) and Soldan/Arnold Schering (1967).

S Novello Edition, ed. Watkins Shaw, vocal score 1959, and subsequent revised reprints. This adapts the numbering system from the previous edition by Ebenezer Prout (1902).

T Bärenreiter Edition, ed. John Tobin, vocal score 1972, derived from Tobin's full score in the Hallische Händel-Ausgabe (Serie I, Band 17, 1965). This edition provided the basis for the movement numbers in the thematic catalogue of Handel's works by Bernd Baselt in W. Eisen and M. Eisen (eds.), *Händel-Handbuch Band 2, Thematisch-systematisches Verzeichnis* (Leipzig, 1984), HWV 56 *Messiah*, pp. 178–97. Where Baselt's designations differ from or supplement *T*, the catalogue numbering is given under 'Comments' preceded by *HHB*.

B and **S** include many variant movements that are not in the preceding editions by Schering/Soldan and Prout, which explains why the numberings of the preceding editions required adaptation. Full scores of all three editions are in print from time to time. One other full score is fairly easily available, edited by Friedrich Chrysander and Max Seiffert for the *Händelgesellschaft* (vol. 45, Berlin, 1902, and several modern reprints). Where it is useful to make reference to this edition, it is called *HG*: it adds no music to that available in **B**, **S** and **T**.

Throughout the book, references to movement numberings are given in the order **B/S/T**. '–' indicates that the movement or variant concerned is not included in the edition. 'O' indicates a movement included but unnumbered. If a variant is not printed out in full, but is indicated within the text of another variant, the notation 'x' is used (for example, '2x'). All the music of **B** and **T** is included within the covers of their vocal scores, arranged as main text and appendices. In the case of **S**, music in the vocal score (main text and appendix) is supplemented by further movements printed as a Musical Appendix to Watkins Shaw: *A Textual and Historical Companion to Handel's 'Messiah'* (London, 1965): the movements in this appendix are indicated by 'A', followed by the page number of the opening bars. Where particular variant movements are identified as 'versions' in **S**, the following notation is used: '6i' indicates No. 6 version I.

I

The historical background

Messiah was composed within the specific genre of English theatre concert oratorio that Handel himself had developed. Its historical and artistic background can therefore be understood without extended examination of the problems of semantics and categorisation that surround the word 'oratorio'. However, a brief consideraton of the genre is desirable because Handel encountered, and composed music for, various oratorio-type works before embarking on his English theatre oratorios. While any influences from these earlier experiences must have been fully absorbed before he composed *Messiah*, the other traditions may nevertheless have contributed something significant to his decisions about the musical treatment of particular sections. Moreover, the oratorio genre incorporated features that could in certain circumstances produce a conflict between creative expression and social acceptance. In *Messiah*, the artistic and practical issues were focused in their sharpest form, and critically affected the work's initial reception.

Oratorio was created by the application of theatrical musical techniques to a sacred story. While the idea of dramatic presentation of sacred subjects, with or without any musical component, was not new – it was one clear strand of medieval theatre – oratorio itself was a 'twin' creation with opera in Italy at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The first significant landmark, Emilio Cavaliere's *Rappresentatione di Anima, et di Corpo* ('The Representation of the Soul and the Body'), first performed and published in Rome in 1600, was staged and semi-acted in a consecrated building rather than a public theatre; but it was not undertaken within any liturgical framework. The first oratorio merged the forms and techniques of secular entertainment (three acts, continuo-accompanied monody-recitative, choruses and dances) with the circumstances of a devotional exercise.

The subject-matter of subsequent oratorios was quickly broadened to include incidents from the Old Testament, and eventually to embrace

subjects from the lives of St John the Baptist or early Christian saints. Oratorio could thus capitalise on the development of musical techniques for the operatic characterisation of 'real' people. As Italian opera moved towards emphasis on solo singing, with extended arias, oratorio ran in parallel. But as opera also became the dominant form of Italian secular theatre, a whole-hearted adoption of a theatrical musical ambience in oratorio brought suspicion or opposition from ecclesiastical authorities.

From motives of puritanical dogma or desire for social and intellectual control, church authorities at various times sought to place restrictions on theatrical performances where they were in a position to do so, and the church's attitude to secular drama was generally uneasy. In Rome, where papal secular control was effective, operas were banned entirely from time to time: when they were allowed, restrictions included a ban on actresses (all female roles were played by men). Where operas were prohibited during the penitential season of Lent, otherwise unemployed musicians could perform oratorios. While the naturalistic representation (within accepted operatic conventions) of biblical or saintly characters in oratorio was generally acceptable, an exception was made for the central figure of Christ, whose impersonation by an actor–singer would have been regarded as offensive, if not blasphemous.

Where any doubt about propriety or ecclesiastical approval was anticipated, oratorio could be distanced from its operatic origins by adopting a concert style without theatrical movement, and sometimes without special costumes or scenery. Inadequate resources could obviously encourage the same trend: oratorios, unlike operas, were presented in a variety of semi-staged and 'unstaged' ways.

Handel in Germany and Italy: passion and oratorio

The more ambitious musical practices of the German Lutheran church in which Handel grew up had adopted from Italian oratorio the principle of applying opera-derived forms of recitative and aria to the setting of religious texts, but on a smaller scale. Zachau, Handel's teacher, composed German church cantatas,[1] but whether they were performed in Halle during Handel's time there is not known: Handel produced no such cantatas as organist of Halle's Calvinist Domkirche. He moved in 1704 to Hamburg, an important centre in the development of extended musical performances of the Passion narrative during Holy Week. In these Passions the German church came closest to Italian oratorio, though they

were never staged theatrically and were usually performed within a clear devotional or liturgical framework. It was this non-theatrical presentation that allowed a solo singer to take on the words of Christ in the biblical Passion narrative.[2]

Unfortunately it is not possible to identify the Passion settings that Handel may have heard at Hamburg. Reinhard Keiser's *Der blutige und sterbende Jesus* ('The Bleeding and Dying Jesus') was first produced in 1704, presumably just before Handel's arrival, and the 'St John Passion', formerly attributed to Handel's Hamburg years, is now considered inauthentic. However Handel's *Brockes Passion* ('Der für die Sünde der Welt gemartete und sterbende Jesus', HWV 48), composed in London in around 1716 for performance in Germany, shows that he had a close acquaintance with the genre. Though in a subtly different musical idiom, Handel's treatment of arias, recitatives, choruses and chorales makes an interesting comparison with J. S. Bach's masterpieces of the next decade.[3] His experience of this passion-oratorio genre stood Handel in good stead when he came to set the Passion narrative in Part Two of *Messiah*.

During his period in Italy (1706–10) Handel came into direct contact with Italian oratorio. In Rome, the centre of his professional activity to which he returned between visits to the other cities, opera was currently under a papal ban. For his Roman patrons Handel composed Latin church music, Italian cantatas and two oratorios. The text of the first oratorio, *Il Trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (later translated for English performance as 'The Triumph of Time and Truth') was supplied by Cardinal Pamphili, but little is known of the circumstances of its first performance in 1707. As is clear from the title, this is an allegorical 'morality' oratorio. Much more is known about the circumstances of Handel's second oratorio, *La Resurrezione*, composed for his most constant Roman patron, the Marquis Ruspoli, and first performed on Easter Sunday 1708 as a contrasted companion piece to an Italian passion oratorio by Alessandro Scarlatti, performed the previous Wednesday. The performances took place in a large (secular) room in Ruspoli's Bonelli Palace. Although it was normally forbidden to act oratorios, an elaborate stage setting was erected, including painted backcloths depicting key scenes. The libretto deals with the events between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. The representation of Christ himself as a participating character is avoided: a dialogue between Lucifer and an Angel culminates with the harrowing of hell, and the events of the Resurrection are dramatised through the discovery of the empty tomb and the appearance of the Angel.

Esther, Handel's first English oratorio

Ten years passed before Handel composed his next oratorio. His career in London revolved around the Italian opera house: it would have needed exceptional prophetic insight to have forseen a musical genre growing from some sort of marriage between Handel's operatic experience and his ceremonial English church music as exemplified by the 'Utrecht' *Te Deum* and *Jubilate* of 1713. Handel's first English oratorio was an accidental consequence of the period between the closure of the Haymarket opera company in 1717 and the establishment of a new permanent opera company, the Royal Academy of Music, in 1719. In the interim, Handel successfully obtained the private patronage of James Brydges, Earl of Carnarvon and subsequently Duke of Chandos. Tantalisingly, just as little is known about the first performance of his first English oratorio as about his first Italian one. On the basis of later secondary testimony, it seems likely that *Esther* was composed for Brydges and performed at one of his residences, probably Cannons, Edgware. Like other works composed for Brydges (*Acis and Galatea* and the 'Chandos' Anthems), *Esther* was probably performed on a chamber scale, with perhaps nine singers and a small orchestra.[4] Handel's title for the work was almost certainly 'The Oratorium',[5] which seems to suggest a generic cross-reference to his earlier Italian oratorios, although the new work was in English. Whether it was acted, with costumes and scenery (or with any of these elements in isolation) is not known.

More than another decade passed before Handel's next venture into oratorio. The route by which he returned to, and eventually developed, English oratorio contains many coincidences and surprises, and certainly did not follow an evolutionary path. In circumstances that are once again tantalisingly obscure, and from motives that are even more so, *Esther* was revived by the Children of the Chapel Royal (presumably with some adult help) under the direction of Bernard Gates, the Master of the Children, in February and March 1732 at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in the Strand. It seems that these performances were staged and acted in theatrical costume, as far as the circumstances of the Tavern's meeting room allowed.

In March 1732 Handel was in the midst of his normal opera season at the Haymarket theatre, but at the end of the season – possibly stimulated by competition from a pirate performance of *Esther*, as well as by the support of those who had seen the recent revival – he took the novel step of

performing the oratorio in his opera theatre. This was not, however, a straight transference of Gates's performance onto the public stage. The librettist Samuel Humphreys collaborated with Handel to expand the original six-scene oratorio into a three-act piece of a length comparable to a normal operatic entertainment. The solo parts were taken not by the Chapel Royal boys but by four star singers from Handel's Italian opera company and two English sopranos; the boys, presumably joined by some of the men from the Chapel Royal choir and possibly a few other singers, supported the soloists in the choruses. The performance was not acted, and apparently neither costumes nor decorated scenery were involved.

The intervention of the Bishop of London (who would nót permit the Chapel Royal choir to act in the Opera House 'even with books in the children's hands')[6] may be held accountable for this last modification, but its significance can be over-rated. Although the first Italian oratorios were acted in a theatrical style, the alternative path of concert-style presentation was equally legitimate: Handel's *La Resurrezione* was no less an oratorio because it was not staged. More significant was the fact that in 1732 Handel's musical strengths came together into a form of oratorio that suited his time and place. If the new form of *Esther* was unsatisfactory because it inflated the original short work rather more than it could bear, the compensation was that the musical attractions of the operatic style – expert singers and good characterisation – were mixed with those of Handel's grand 'anthem' style, and the whole was in English.[7] Not only was 'the Musick ... disposed after the manner of the Coronation Service', but music from two of Handel's 1727 coronation anthems was worked in. The combination went down well with London's theatre-goers, and there were six well-attended performances. Far from self-consciously creating a new genre for the future with his 1732 *Esther*, Handel seems to have regarded the performances as an extra and varied bonus on the end of his opera season.

1732–1741: from *Esther* to *Messiah*

In the following years, Handel continued to give prime attention to Italian opera, but English oratorio-type works were slipped into his theatre seasons to diversify the programmes, *Esther* being joined by *Deborah* and *Athalia*. Nevertheless oratorio remained peripheral to Handel's main musical programme until the summer of 1738, when two major works –

Saul and *Israel in Egypt* – suddenly claimed his full attention. Compared with its predecessors, *Saul* saw a major advance in musical coherence and dramatic characterisation within the conventions of a non-staged drama. Here Handel worked closely with a new librettist, Charles Jennens, who may also have been responsible for *Israel in Egypt*, an oratorio of a new type: instead of following opera-derived conventions by relying mainly on recitative-dialogue and arias to carry the story-line, the librettist of *Israel in Egypt* took narrative texts from the Bible and arranged them as a succession of choruses, with relatively little solo participation. Here the 'Coronation Anthem' aspect of Handel's oratorio genre was expanded into its ultimate form – too much so, in fact, for contemporary audiences: after the first performance Handel cut down the choruses a little and added some Italian arias.

The new oratorios were first performed in Handel's next season at the King's Theatre, Haymarket during the early months of 1739, together with the English ode *Alexander's Feast* and a revised Italian version of *Il Trionfo del Tempo*. The season ended with the 'Dramatical Composition' *Jupiter in Argos*, an Italian pasticcio, with music derived largely from other works by Handel, and probably only semi-staged. The relative weight of Italian and English works was now entirely reversed: seven years previously, it had been the English works that had come in as the final performances on the end of Italian opera seasons.

1741 marked a decisive break for Handel. The performance of *Deidamia* on 10 February 1741 was the last he ever gave of an Italian opera in London. While Italian opera had hitherto formed the centre of his interests, he had no sympathy with the new management that was seeking to set up a new, high-status Italian opera company.[8] Handel may have foreseen some long-term prospects for his English works in London, though the future appeared uncertain in view of factious divisions among his audiences, which had always been an important concern for his career as a composer-impresario-performer. The success of Handel's operas and oratorios was, for him, measured in terms of the success of the series of performances for which he composed them. Management of performances and performers was Handel's professional concern, no less than composition.

An invitation in 1741 to produce a season at Dublin no doubt came at a welcome time: it gave Handel breathing-space away from London during which he could consider his future, as well as providing him with an opportunity to present his music in congenial circumstances. After his

return from Dublin to London in 1742 Handel gave no more operas. His only subsequent compositions in the Italian language were some elegant chamber duets. *Messiah* was composed in the summer of 1741, at exactly this turning-point in Handel's career.

2

From composition to first performance

The composition of *Messiah* took place in a little over three weeks during the summer of 1741. As it came to take its place as one of the 'classic' works within the musical culture of English-speaking communities, the shortness of this composition period was sometimes interpreted as a sign of specific religious inspiration. Handel certainly wrote *Messiah* in an intense burst of activity: even the physical labour of committing the notes to the pages during that period is remarkable.[1] However, the composition of *Messiah* was typical of Handel's normal work pattern: most of his operas and oratorios were written with similar concentration between theatrical seasons. After the completion of a series of performances, Handel naturally turned to the repertory needs of the next.

His method of working resembled that of other composers professionally or temperamentally based in the theatre, such as Mozart or Sullivan. With the libretto already arranged into recitatives, arias and (for oratorios) choruses, the first step was to lay out the whole score, composing the arias and choruses in skeleton draft with the leading voices and instrumental parts, and writing in the recitative texts between the arias. The overall scheme was thereby committed to paper, and the musical shape and tonality of the concerted movements (arias, accompanied recitatives, choruses) established. The hard work went into this 'framing' stage. Handel completed the 'filling-up' of the skeletal outline with composed recitatives and fully-orchestrated movements in two days.[2]

While Handel no doubt used some preliminary musical sketches either before or during the drafting process – though the surviving evidence is small, since most such sketches could immediately be discarded – his real starting-point was literary rather than musical. By 22 August 1741, when Handel began the 'official' composition of *Messiah*, he must have had the libretto to hand. In examining the genesis of the oratorio, the libretto and its compiler–author, Charles Jennens, must receive our first attention.