“We have no language to do justice to the feelings experienced in attending the inimitable execution of a most judicious selection of pieces from the fathers of sacred song.”

This is part of a review, published in the Boston Columbian Centinel, of the first Handel and Haydn Society performance on Christmas Day 1815. Featuring excerpts from George Frideric Handel’s Messiah in addition to Part 1 of Haydn’s oratorio The Creation, the performance at King’s Chapel began at 6pm and lasted about three hours. The church was full; there were about 1,000 people in the audience, a number that is even more remarkable considering the population of Boston at that time was about 25,000. There were 113 performers: 100 singers (90 men and 10 women), 12 instrumentalists, and an organist. In addition to the “Hallelujah” chorus that concluded the concert, two arias, “I Know that my Redeemer liveth” and “He shall feed His flock,” and one chorus, “Lift up your heads” from Messiah were performed. The concert was a musical success with one performer noting, “Such was the excitement of the hearers and the enthusiasm of the performers that there is nothing to be compared with it at the present day.”

Three years to the day after its inaugural concert, H+H gave the first complete performance of Messiah in America and H+H has been performing Messiah each December since 1854. The oratorio concluded two-thirds of H+H’s 19th century music festivals and has been

PROGRAM NOTES
MESSIAH: A BOSTON TRADITION
H+H and Messiah Through the Years

December 25, 1815: The first concert of the Handel and Haydn Society features two choruses and two arias from Messiah. Tickets cost $1.00 each, but there are incentives for purchasing multiple tickets: with the purchase of 5 tickets, the 6th was free; with the purchase 6 tickets, the 7th and 8th were free.

December 25, 1818: H+H gives the first performance of the complete Messiah in America.

1854: H+H begins its tradition of performing Messiah each December, often on or near Christmas Day.

1857: The first H+H Music Festival closes with a performance of Messiah “with a chorus of six hundred and an orchestra of eighty performers.” Three of the next five music festivals also close with Messiah.

1875: Composer Robert Franz (1815-1892) is commissioned by H+H to create a new Messiah arrangement based on the Mozart version of 1789.

1924: H+H gives two concerts for children, featuring six numbers from Messiah, including the “Hallelujah” chorus.

1955: Messiah, H+H’s first commercial recording, is released.

1963: H+H presents the first complete televised performance of Messiah for National Educational Television.

2014: H+H releases Messiah recorded live at Symphony Hall, Boston in 2013 with Harry Christophers conducting. This is H+H’s fourth recording of the oratorio.

a fixture in H+H anniversary celebrations as well. Moreover, H+H frequently sang the “Hallelujah” chorus as the last work for benefit concerts and for civic events.

H+H’s annual December performances of Messiah connect the oratorio with the Christmas season. However, the piece premiered in Dublin in April 1742 and when Handel conducted the work himself, he routinely presented it prior to Easter.

Messiah became a cultural icon even during Handel’s lifetime and its impact has not diminished since the composer’s death. With a history so rich and far-reaching, it is hard to imagine that the oratorio caused a scandal in London and that even in Dublin there were obstacles to the first performance.

Charles Jennens, who had supplied Handel with texts for other oratorios, sent the composer a new word-book in 1741. Rather than telling a continuous story, Jennens’ text was a collection of scripture passages from the Old and New Testaments which referred to the prophesy and birth of Christ (Part the First), his death and resurrection (Part the Second), and the redemption and response of the believer (Part the Third).

Also in 1741, William Cavendish, the Duke of Devonshire and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, invited Handel to Dublin, a major cultural center, to participate in a season of oratorio concerts to benefit local charities. Handel accepted the invitation and began composing; he wrote Messiah in just 24 days.

With Handel’s arrival in Dublin, anticipation for his new oratorio ran so high that an announcement in the Dublin Journal requested that ladies “would be pleased to come without hoops [in their skirts] … making room for more company.”

In January 1742, the deans of St. Patrick’s Church and Christ Church, Dublin, were asked to allow their choir members to participate in the first performance of Messiah. Christ Church agreed and at first it seemed that St. Patrick’s Church concurred. However, the dean of St. Patrick’s Church, Jonathan Swift, then revoked permission, claiming never to
The story goes that at one of the first performances of *Messiah* in London in 1743, King George II was so moved by the “Hallelujah” chorus that he sprung to his feet. In deference to their sovereign, the crowd was obliged to rise along with the king, and all remained standing through the end of the chorus. This sparked a tradition of standing for the “Hallelujah” chorus. It is a tradition that has survived centuries. Joseph Haydn is said to have participated during a visit to London. Throughout the world, audiences regularly take to their feet at the opening bars of the “Hallelujah” chorus.

As it often goes with traditions, however, the true story remains unclear. There is not much evidence that anything like that actually happened in 1743. The first mention of the tradition came in 1780, nearly 40 years after it was said to have started. There was a great deal of first-hand accounts of *Messiah* performances from Handel’s lifetime, but none refers to the audience rising en masse for the “Hallelujah” chorus. In recent decades, a number of conductors—including Robert Shaw and Christopher Hogwood—have argued against the tradition, suggesting it is a distraction from Handel’s powerful opening to the chorus.

Both practices remain very common among Boston’s music lovers. We invite you to make your own choice on how to honor Handel’s outstanding musical legacy.
**Messiah Through the Years**

**1741:** Charles Jennens sends Handel the word-book (text) for *Messiah*.

**1741:** Handel composes the oratorio between Saturday, August 22 and Monday, September 14. Some music is adapted from other works.

**April 13, 1742:** Dublin premiere with a combined ensemble of about fifty players and singers. The concert benefits three charities (Relief of the Prisoners in several Gaols, the Support of Mercer’s Hospital in Stephen’s Street and the Charitable Infirmary on the Inns Quay). The oratorio continues to be performed in Dublin, often during the Christmas season.

**1743:** First London performance at Covent Garden. Handel titles the work *A Sacred Oratorio* to help quell objections from the clerical community.

**1745:** First London performance using the title *Messiah*.

**1750:** First performance to benefit the Foundling Hospital for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Young Children founded in 1740 by Captain Thomas Coram. Handel, who prefers to perform the oratorio just before Easter, conducts from the organ and performs organ concertos during the intermissions. Handel conducts *Messiah* annually at the Foundling Hospital for the remainder of his life.

**1767:** The full score is published for the first time.

**1770:** The overture and sixteen numbers are performed in New York.

**1773:** Portions are performed at Boston’s Faneuil Hall in honor of King George III.

**1784:** First Handel commemoration at Westminster Abbey, including two performances of *Messiah*. With approximately 600 performers, this marks the beginning of large-scale *Messiah* performances.

**1786:** Portions of the oratorio are performed at concerts in Boston, Charleston, New York, and Philadelphia.

**1789:** Mozart creates an updated version for performances in Vienna.

**1803:** First performance in Halle, Handel’s birthplace.

**1815:** The first concert of the Handel and Haydn Society features two choruses and two arias from *Messiah*.

Handel returned to London and, in 1743, gave that city’s premiere of *A Sacred Oratorio*; he refrained from titling the work *Messiah* because of objections to the use of Biblical texts in a concert setting. Some of these complaints were voiced in the press on the same day the London concert was advertised. An anonymous letter to the *Universal Spectator* raised concerns about the use of Biblical texts as well as the propriety of theater performers, whose morals were assumed to be questionable, singing these sacred texts: “I ask if the Playhouse is a fit Temple to perform it [a sacred oratorio] in, or a Company of Players fit Ministers of God’s Word.”

The first London performances were not as successful as those in Ireland; however, beginning with a 1750 concert to benefit the Foundling Hospital, *Messiah* performances have granted it in the first place. This turn of events was potentially disastrous because both churches had to agree in order for the performance to proceed. Eventually Swift did agree and *Messiah* was premiered in Dublin at the Music Hall on Fishamble Street on April 13, 1742.
became an annual event in London. Objections to Handel’s sacred oratorio had subsided and were replaced with descriptions similar to that written by Miss Catherine Talbot in 1756: “The only public place I have been to this winter was to hear the Messiah, nor can there be a nobler entertainment.”

Handel composed other oratorios, both before and after Messiah, but none continually captivated concert-goers in quite the same way. Messiah remains one of the few compositions in the history of music that has never waned in popularity and critical appeal. It has been performed by large and small ensembles and arranged by other composers, including Mozart in the 18th century and Robert Franz (at the request of H+H) in the 19th century.

For the 1742 premiere of Messiah in Dublin, it is estimated that Handel had a combined ensemble of approximately 50 performers, divided almost evenly between vocalists and instrumentalists. For the London performances, Handel had more singers available to him and after the composer’s death Messiah performances were given with ever-increasing numbers. In the 20th century, however, this trend began to reverse as musicians began reconstructing performances that matched, as closely as possible, those heard during the composer’s lifetime, commonly known as historically informed performance.

For the Handel and Haydn Society that trend began in earnest in 1967 under H+H conductor Thomas Dunn. Before Dunn’s arrival, the H+H chorus numbered about 250 singers; an ensemble of this size sang on the first H+H recording of Messiah in 1955, under conductor Thompson Stone. After leading one last large-scale Messiah, Dunn began reducing the size of the chorus to a core group of 30 singers. Dunn’s interest in historically informed performance did not extend to the orchestra which continued to accompany the chorus using modern instruments.

With the appointment of Christopher Hogwood in 1986, H+H’s commitment to historical performance practice was solidified. Hogwood established the use of period instruments (instruments from the time of the composer or instruments newly built to specific historical standards). Today’s performance reflects the historical awareness of the size of the ensemble, the instruments available, and the way those instruments were played in Handel’s day.

The enduring appeal of Messiah lies in the sum of its parts: Each solo or chorus is beautiful on its own, but together the numbers create a whole that is transcendent. Although his librettist Jennens had expressed disappointment with Handel’s setting of this Scripture collection, posterity has determined that Handel did indeed fulfill Jennens’ wish that the composer “lay his whole Genius and Skill upon it.”