

Georg Friedrich Handel (1685-1759)



Born: 1685 (Halle, Germany)
Died: 1759 (London, England)

FAST FACTS

- Snuck a keyboard into his attic so he could practice
- Learned how to write and stage operas in Italy
- Wrote *Water Music* for the King, who wanted to hear it three times in one performance
- Wrote famous oratorio *Messiah*
- Over 3000 people attended his funeral

Few composers in history have the privilege and the talent for writing music that was exactly what people wanted, but that was also purely beautiful music. Georg (GEY-org) Frederick Handel is famous today for doing just that.

Handel had recognizable talent as a boy, but his father was not supportive of it, so Handel had to sneak a keyboard into his attic to practice. He eventually took organ lessons with a local church organist. He found that he did not enjoy playing organ much when he took a job in college, so he switched to playing violin in the orchestra there. A few years later, he moved to Italy, the opera center of the world at that time, where he learned the traditions and conventions for composing opera. Handel eventually moved to England with his new patron, King George I, and impressed the King by composing *Water Music* for him. King George wanted the music to be played on a barge sailing down the River Thames. He loved *Water Music* so much that he requested it be played three times!

Throughout his career, Handel continued to compose Italian-style operas—the most popular genre of music in all of Europe—that were based on classic stories, such as *Giulio Cesare* (Julius Caesar). Handel's operas always featured extravagant stage designs, costumes, and arias (long and beautiful solo pieces sung by a famous singer). The Church, however, did not allow operas to be performed around holidays, such as Easter. As a result, Handel composed opera-like pieces centered on Bible stories called oratorios in order to keep the public happy and to keep up his income while he could not produce opera. Perhaps the most famous of his oratorios is *Messiah*, which tells the story of Jesus Christ through music. Unlike operas, oratorios did not have costumes, used choirs instead of famous soloists, and had a narrator. The story goes that King George II was so moved by a performance of the “Hallelujah” chorus from *Messiah* that he stood up, as did everyone else. Today, it is customary for people to stand when they hear a performance of the “Hallelujah” chorus.

Nearly all of Handel's music was performed many times while he was still alive, and he often conducted performances of his music himself. Over 3000 people attended his funeral in 1759, and he is remembered today for his compositions that almost everyone found satisfyingly beautiful.



Let's Listen!

- Watch the London Symphony and the Tenebrae Choir perform the world-famous “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel's oratorio *Messiah*: [click here](#).
- The Berlin Philharmonic performs *Water Music*: [click here](#).