

# Handel's 'Messiah' The English Concert

Thursday 12 December 2024, 7pm



**Harry Bicket** - director/  
harpsichord

**Chiara Skerath** - soprano

**Katie Bray** - alto

**James Way** - tenor

**Neal Davies** - bass

## **Violin 1**

Nadja Zwiener

Elizabeth MacCarthy

Rodrigo Checa Lorite

Sara Deborah Struntz

Eleanor Legault

## **Violin 2**

Anna Curzon

Mark Seow

Ruiqi Ren

Lydia Becker

## **Viola**

Alfonso Leal del Ojo

Louise Hogan

Joanna Patrick

## **Violoncello**

Jonathan Byers

Madeleine Bouissou

Samuel Ng

Edward Mead

## **Double bass**

Alexander Jones

## **Trumpet**

Mark Bennett

Simon Munday

## **Timpani**

William Lockhart

## **Harpsichord/Organ**

Tom Foster

## **Soprano**

Rachel Ambrose Evans

Christine Buras

Catherine Hooper

Helena Moore

Maryam Wocial

## **Alto**

Rosemary Clifford

Helena Cooke

Daniel Gethin

Madeleine Morris

Finn Lacey

## **Tenor**

Gareth Edmunds

Peter Harris

Matthew Howard

Robert Jenkins

James Savage-Hanford

## **Bass**

Dominic Bowe

Frances Brett

Gabriel Gottlieb

Michael Hickman

James Quilligan

## **Tuning**

Simon Neal

## George Frideric Handel (1685-1756)

### 'Messiah'

There can be few among us who are not in some way already familiar, at least in part, with Handel's finest oratorio. We might need only a brief reminder that it was written during the summer of 1741 to a text compiled largely from the Bible by Charles Jennens, and first performed the following year in Dublin.

'Messiah' is so ingrained in our consciousness that the work has achieved the status of a national monument. So why is this oratorio so widely loved?

Firstly, 'Messiah' is revered because of its English words. Their inspired selection is Jennens's supreme artistic achievement, regardless of grudging admiration from those who perceived the author as a pompous literary amateur. He had previously provided the text to 'Saul' (1738), which followed the conventional 18th century method amongst librettists of setting words to rhyming verse, which frequently produced pedestrian lines bearing little eloquence or dignity. In this respect, the libretto for 'Messiah' is markedly different from Handel's other oratorios, in that the words are taken directly from the Authorised version of the King James Bible of 1611 as well as the 1539 Book of Common Prayer.

Jennens's text is especially effective because he avoids direct statement; in references to Christ's birth and death there's no mention of manger or crucifixion. Rather, the words concern prophecy and meditation and, apart from St Luke's description of the angel's visitation, there is virtually no narrative. The soloists, without a character role to sing, function as commentators on the Christian message, and the chorus variously celebrate ('For unto us a child is born'), condemn ('He trusted in God') and reflect ('Since by man came death'). Part One prophecies Christ's

coming, the Annunciation and the Nativity, Part Two concerns his sacrifice, consequent suffering, resurrection and ascension, and Part Three celebrates Christ's redemption and the immortality of the Christian soul.

Secondly, 'Messiah' is cherished because of its subject matter, still familiar to many people today. During the last two centuries, generations of devotees would have been attracted to 'Messiah's traditional beliefs and Christian message. Neither author nor composer impose any didactic intention, there is no sermonising or hard-sell dogma, and while Handel was undoubtedly a religious man he was not in any sense a religious composer. His few liturgical works are more ceremonial than devotional in character, and his conversion to oratorio following the commercial failure of his operas was merely typical of his entrepreneurial flair rather than any guiding religious motivation. Jennens declared 'Messiah' a 'fine entertainment', while the Handel authority Winton Dean claimed, 'Messiah' sums up to perfection and with the greatest eloquence the religious faith...of the average Englishman'.

Thirdly, 'Messiah' is valued because of Handel's ability to reach the 'average Englishman' through the emotional power of its music. Handel was primarily a dramatist and having acquired thirty years operatic experience his theatrical instincts are hardwired into 'Messiah'. This is evident in the key relationships deployed between the various arias and choruses. Handel controls drama in purely musical terms with a key scheme that generates harmonic tension and release. The dramatic impact of 'For unto us a Child is born' is engineered by the solemnity of the preceding bass arias ('For Behold, Darkness shall cover the earth' and 'The people that walked in darkness'), which are in minor keys. Similarly, the tonal swing from the tenor aria 'Thou shalt break them' to the D major of the

'Hallelujah' chorus heightens its jubilation, not least owing to the addition of festive trumpets and timpani.

Handel also achieves drama through his distribution of the choruses. One such example is the gathering momentum built into 'Surely he hath borne our griefs', 'And with his stripes' and 'All we like sheep', a sequence of choruses where tension develops from the sustained rhythmic energy, the variety of weight and, once again, striking tonal contrasts. Except for 'He was despised' and

'The trumpet shall sound', Handel rejects the conventional da capo aria scheme (where the first section is repeated) thereby bringing further momentum from one movement to the next. Thus, the crucifixion episode takes on a dramatic urgency owing to the brevity of each solo section. Lastly, it should not be forgotten too that Handel reaches 'the average Englishman' through his natural gift for melody without which 'Messiah's formal devices would be empty gestures.

**David Truslove, 2024**

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**Harry Bicket conductor**  
**Artistic Director, The English Concert**  
**Music Director, Santa Fe Opera**

Born in Liverpool, Harry Bicket studied at the Royal College of Music and the University of Oxford where he was Organ Scholar at Christ Church. He is an Honorary Member of the Royal Academy of Music and was awarded an OBE in the 2022 Queen's birthday honours.

Harry Bicket is internationally renowned, especially for his interpretation of baroque and classical repertoire. Since 2007 he has been Artistic Director of The English Concert, one of Europe's finest period orchestras, with whom he has recently undertaken a project to record all of Handel's works as an on-line resource for all. This season, in addition to their London season and recording projects, includes tours to the United States and Asia with Handel's Rodelinda.

Following his tenure as Chief Conductor of Santa Fe Opera since 2013, he was appointed Music Director in 2018. His productions with the company include 'Orfeo', 'Pelleas et Melisande', 'Carmen', 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', 'Le nozze di Figaro', 'Fidelio', 'La Finta Giardiniera', 'Romeo et Juliette', 'Alcina',

'Candide' and 'Cosi fan tutte', and in 2019 he conducted Strauss' 'Vier letzte Lieder' with Renée Fleming. He returns in 2024 for 'Don Giovanni'.

Elsewhere this season, he returns to Opera North for 'Masque of Might', Sir David Pountney's staging of selected works by Henry Purcell; to the Paris Opera for 'Giulio Cesare', and to the BBC National Orchestra of Wales for a choral programme of Nunes Garcia, Bach, Haydn and Vaughan Williams.

He is a regular guest at the Metropolitan Opera where his recent productions have included 'Rodelinda', 'Die Zauberflöte' / 'Le nozze di Figaro', 'La clemenza di Tito', 'Giulio Cesare', 'Agrippina' and 'Cosi fan tutte'. His many titles at the Lyric Opera of Chicago include 'Carmen' and 'Rinaldo'. At the Canadian Opera Company he has conducted 'Le nozze di Figaro', 'Maometto II' and 'Hercules' and at Houston Grand Opera, 'Le nozze di Figaro' and 'Rusalka'. He is regularly invited to the North American symphony orchestras including the Chicago Symphony Orchestra – most recently in a collaboration with the Joffrey ballet, Cleveland Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra,

San Francisco Symphony, Detroit Symphony, Houston Symphony, Orchestra of St Luke's, Seattle Symphony, St Paul Chamber Orchestra, NACO Ottawa, Indianapolis Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra and Boston Symphony Orchestra.

In Europe, he made his debut at the Paris Opera last season with 'Ariodante' in a new production by Robert Carsen. At the Bavarian State Opera, Munich, he has conducted 'Rinaldo', 'Ariodante', 'Serse', 'Orlando', 'Orfeo ed Euridice', 'Il Barbiere di Siviglia', 'Die Entführung aus dem Serail' and 'Die Zauberflöte'. At the Liceu, Barcelona, he was awarded the Opera Critics Best Conductor Prize for 'Giulio Cesare', and has also appeared at Theater an der Wien ('Iphigenie en Tauride', 'Mitridate') and Opera de Bordeaux ('Alcina').

A regular favourite in the UK, he made his Glyndebourne Festival debut in 1996 in Peter Sellars's landmark production of 'Theodora' and has made numerous appearances with the English National Opera, Scottish Opera and Welsh National Opera. His Theodora at the Royal Opera House in 2022 was nominated for an Olivier Award for best new production.

His vast orchestral experience includes repertoire from Bach to Britten with the Bayerischer Rundfunk Orchestra, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Oslo Philharmonic, Prague Philharmonic, Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte Carlo, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, RTE National Symphony Orchestra, Royal Northern Sinfonia, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Israel Philharmonic and the Tokyo Symphony.

He is a prolific recording artist and has made numerous recordings with The English Concert, most recently, Handel's 'Rodelinda' and 'La Resurrezione' and 'Serse' released in 2023 for Linn Records to great critical acclaim. His discography also includes five recordings with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment,

among them a collection of Handel opera arias with Renée Fleming (Decca) and Ian Bostridge (EMI), as well as selections from Handel's 'Theodora', 'Serse', and the cantata 'La Lucrezia' with Lorraine Hunt Lieberson (Avie), nominated for a Grammy Award. His solo recordings with David Daniels for Virgin Veritas and Susan Graham for Erato were both nominated for Gramophone Awards.

### **Chiara Skerath soprano**

Praised by Opera Magazine for her 'brilliant technique' and her 'velvety timbre,' Swiss soprano Chiara Skerath has recently made acclaimed debuts as Eurydice in Gluck's 'Orphée et Eurydice' at Zürich Opera House, as Ilione in Campra's 'Idoménée' at the Staatsoper Berlin as well as Micaela (Carmen) at Opéra National de Bordeaux.

Chiara's recent engagements include the title role of Mélisande in Debussy's 'Pelléas et Mélisande' at the 2024 Aix-en-Provence Festival, her debut as Armida in Handel's 'Rinaldo' at the Festival d'Opera Baroque de Beaune, as well as her debut as Donna Elvira in a new production of 'Don Giovanni' at Opéra de Lille conducted by Emmanuelle Haïm, marking the continuation of her journey towards the lyric soprano repertoire. She also sang Almirena in Handel's 'Rinaldo' with Les Accents at the Palau de la Musica Catalana in Barcelona and at the Auditorio Nacional de Musica in Madrid, and performed Mendelssohn's 'Vom Himmel Hoch' with Laurence Equilbey at Opéra de Rouen as well as a staged version of Mozart's C Minor Mass at Opéra de Limoges. Other recent operatic roles include Antigone in Enesco's 'Œdipe' at the Salzburg Festival and a European tour as Ännchen in 'Der Freischütz' with the Insula Orchestra and Laurence Equilbey, Scylla in Leclair's 'Scylla et Glaucus' for Opera de Versailles, and Mélisande in 'Pelléas et Mélisande' at Opéra National de Bordeaux.

Highlights of her 24/25 season include a tour of 'Messiah' to the UK, Italy and Spain with The English Concert, Schubert's Mass in A flat with the Orchestre National d'Île de France, Micaela in 'Carmen' at the Opera Royal de Versailles, recitals with Antoine Palloc featuring the songs of Duparc, Fauré, Satie and Weill, including at the Opera de Lille.

Chiara has a core Mozartian repertoire singing Zerlina in 'Don Giovanni' at Opéra de Versailles and Drottningholm Slottstheater, Despina in 'Cosi Fan Tutte' at Oper Frankfurt, Licenza in 'Il Sogno di Scipione' with the Classical Opera Company, Servilia in 'La Clemenza di Tito' at Opéra de Rouen, Ninetta in 'La finta Semplice' at Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, Susanna in 'Le Nozze di Figaro' at the Operklosterneuburg Festival, Ilia in 'Idomeneo' for Opera Avignon, Pamina in 'Die Zauberflöte' at Opéra de Saint-Etienne, and Cinna in 'Lucio Silla' at Theater an der Wien and at La Seine Musicale Paris, Opéra de Versailles and the Philharmonie de Paris. Further repertoire has included the title role in Monteverdi's 'L'Incoronazione di Poppea' for Opera Anger-Nantes, Rosalinde in 'Die Fledermaus' for L'Opera Comique, Megacle in Vivaldi's 'L'Olimpiade', and Erste Dame in 'Die Zauberflöte' and 'Clothilde' in Francesconi's Trompe-la-Mort at the Opera National de Paris.

On the concert stage she has sung Handel's 'Agrippina condotta a morire' with Le Concert d'Astree, 'Apollo e Dafne' with Harry Bicket and The English Concert, 'Messiah' with La Chapelle Harmonique, Mozart Requiem with Les Musiciens du Louvre and C minor Mass with Ensemble Matheus, 'Brahms Ein Deutsches Requiem' with the chorus of Radio France, Gluck and Myslivecek arias with the Mozartists at London's Wigmore Hall, Pergolesi's 'Stabat Mater' with B'Rock, and Haydn's 'Die Schopfung' at the Salzburg Festival. She has performed under the batons of eminent conductors, including Christian Thielemann,

Marc Minkowski, Susana Malkki, Thomas Hengelbrock, Jean-Christophe Spinosi, Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Ben Glassberg, Leonardo García Alarcón and Ingo Metzmacher.

Chiara's discography includes 'Pelléas et Mélisande' and 'La Clemenza di Tito' for Alpha Classics, 'Der Freischütz' for Erato, Leclair's 'Scylla et Glaucus' and Handel's 'Salve Regina' and 'Saeviat Tellus' for Chateau de Versailles Spectacles, and the music of Jommelli, Haydn and Traetta for the Mozartists' 'Sturm und Drang' series, and Iris in Handel's 'Semele' for Ricercar. She was awarded prizes at several international competitions including the Queen Elisabeth Competition, the Nadia et Lili Boulanger Competition and the Emmerich Smola Förderpreis. After studying with Glenn Chambers at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris, she continued her studies of German Lied and French Mélodie at the Fondation Royaumont with the late Ruben Lifschitz.

### **Katie Bray Mezzo-soprano**

Winner of the Dame Joan Sutherland Audience Prize at Cardiff Singer of the World, British mezzo-soprano Katie Bray has become known for her magnetic stage presence and gleaming, expressive tone.

'Katie Bray's Rosina, who sets off sparks at the top and bottom of her voice and plays the role as a deliciously skittish 'live wire', a classic screen goddess' Richard Fairman, Financial Times

In the opera house her roles have included Hansel 'Hansel and Gretel', Rosina 'Il Barbiere di Siviglia', Varvara 'Katya Kabanova', Nancy 'Albert Herring', Zerlina 'Don Giovanni', Juno 'Semele', Zenobia 'Radamisto', Minerva 'Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria', Zaida 'Il turco in Italia', Isolier 'Le Comte Ory' and Vivaldi's 'Griselda' (title role) for companies including English National Opera, Irish National Opera, Welsh National Opera, Scottish Opera,

Garsington Opera, Grange Park Opera and Opera Holland Park. Her interest in the music of Weill and cabaret has led to staged productions of this music, including 'Effigies of Wickedness', based on songs banned by the Nazis, at the Gate Theatre Notting Hill. Her debut Weill album will be recorded with Chandos Records in early 2025.

On the concert platform she has appeared with orchestras including London Philharmonic Orchestra, Halle, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Aalborg Symphony, Britten Sinfonia, Scottish Chamber Orchestra and Orchestre de Chambre de Paris in repertoire ranging from 'Messiah' and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to Verdi Requiem, 'Elijah and The Dream of Gerontius', as well as mixed programmes of classical and baroque arias. She recently gave the premiere of 'Spell Book' by Freya Waley-Cohen with the Manchester Collective.

Noted for her interpretations of baroque repertoire, she has received regular invitations from early music groups including Academy of Ancient Music, Irish Baroque Orchestra, The English Concert, Barokksolistene, Monteverdi Choir, Wroclaw Baroque, La Nuova Musica and Spira Mirabilis with conductors including Harry Bicket, Laurence Cummings, Bjarte Eike, Peter Whelan and John Eliot Gardiner.

A keen recitalist, she has performed Schumann and Schubert with Sholto Kynoch for Oxford International Song Festival, Britten, Berlioz and Barber with Michael Pandya at Glenarm Festival, music by Pauline Viadot in Dorset, Kurt Weill in Deal and a semi-staged 'Italienisches Liederbuch' by Hugo Wolf with Christopher Glynn and Roderick Williams at Milton Court Concert Hall and Ryedale Festival.

Upcoming highlights include concerts with Academy of Ancient Music, The English Concert, Ulster Orchestra, Scottish Chamber Orchestra and Haydn's 'Seven Last Words' with RIAS Kammerchor at Konzerhaus Berlin, as well

as productions with English National Opera and Grange Park Opera.

Katie Bray graduated as a Karaviotis Scholar from the opera course at the Royal Academy of Music, was awarded the Principal's Prize and won First Prize in the Richard Lewis Singing Competition.

### **James Way Tenor**

James Way is fast gaining international recognition for the versatility of his voice and commanding stage presence. James is passionate about a career taking in a variety of music as both performer and artistic director. Having followed his initial interest in baroque music through the young artist programmes of Les Arts Florissants and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, he immediately became in demand as a soloist for conductors including William Christie, Rene Jacobs, Harry Bicket and Trevor Pinnock.

Equally comfortable in later repertoire, his performances include Flute in Britten's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' with Dalia Stasevska at Glyndebourne Festival and also for Garsington Festival under Douglas Boyd, The Son in Laurent Pelly's production of 'Les Mamelles de Tiresias' (winner of Best New Opera Production at the 2022 Opera Awards) with Robin Ticciati also for Glyndebourne Festival, Holy Fool 'Boris Godunov' with the Philharmonia Orchestra under Jakub Hruška. Lechmere 'Owen Wingrave' for Grange Park Opera, Sellem in Stravinsky's 'The Rake's Progress' with the Munich Philharmonic and Barbara Hannigan and a number of performances of Stravinsky's 'Pulcinella' with orchestras including the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Swedish Radio Orchestra, Copenhagen Philharmonic with Barbara Hannigan, Scottish Chamber Orchestra and Orchestra Sinfonica de Milano with Alpesh Chauhan OBE.

This coming season's highlights include a return to the Göteborgs Symfoniker for Mozart Requiem under Barbara Hannigan, 'Die Schöpfung' with the CBSO under Kazuki Yamada, several performances of Handel's 'Il Trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno Tempo' with the Irish Baroque and on tour with Les Arts Florissants under William Christie, Handel 'Solomon' Zadok at the Goettingen Handel Festival with Georg Petrou and with the Gabrieli Consort and tours with The English Concert and Harry Bicket. Recitals this season include collaborations with Julius Drake and Richard Watkins, Lute songs with Elizabeth Kenny and the complete Britten Canticles at Milton Court alongside pianist Natalie Burch. He will also release a new recording of the Canticles for Delphian Records.

In demand as an interpreter of Handel, his performances of 'Messiah' have won praise with orchestras internationally including Handel & Haydn Society Boston, Les Arts Florissants, Freiburger Barockorchester, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Dunedin Consort. His debut as Jupiter in Handel 'Semele' at the Musikverein was the start in a long line of Handel roles including Samson (title role), Acis and Damon 'Acis & Galatea' and 'L'allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato'. He performed Zadok 'Solomon' with Harry Bicket & the English Concert at Carnegie Hall, Lurcanio 'Ariodante' with Il Pomo d'Oro and 'La Resurrezione' with Marc Minkowski and Les Musiciens du Louvre.

Other recent highlights include the Young King in George Benjamin's 'Lessons in Love and Violence' with Orchestre de Paris conducted by the composer, Bach St Matthew Passion with Les Talens Lyriques under Christophe Rousset and as the Evangelist with the Irish Baroque Orchestra and Peter Whelan and 'Acis & Galatea' Acis and 'L'incoronazione di Poppea' Lucano with Harry Bicket and The English Concert.

James has a growing discography including Handel 'L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato' with Les Arts Florissants and William Christie and Stanford Requiem with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, on Hyperion, 'Songs of Faith, Love and Nonsense,' a disc of Stanford songs recorded with Roderick Williams and Andrew West, Purcell's 'Fairy Queen' with Gabrieli Consort, conducted by Paul McCreech and 'King Arthur', which won BBC Music Magazine's Recording of the Year.

James is a former Britten-Pears Young Artist, and was awarded an Independent Opera Voice Fellowship. He was the winner of the Second Prize in the 62nd Kathleen Ferrier Awards at Wigmore Hall.

### **Neal Davies Bass**

Neal Davies is a British bass-baritone. Recent operatic engagements include performances of 'Jephtha' (Zebul) with Music of the Baroque and Jane Glover, 'Yeoman of the Guard' (Sergeant) and Don Alfonso 'Cosi fan tutte' for English National Opera, and Papageno in Welsh National Opera's production of 'The Magic Flute'.

24/25 includes concerts of Berlioz's 'L'Enfance du Christ' at the Festival Berlioz La Côte Saint André with Paul McCreech and the NFM Wroclaw Philharmonic. Neal will also join Bernard Labadie and the Kansas City Symphony for Mozart's Requiem Mass in D minor, make a 'Messiah' concert tour with The English Concert and Harry Bicket, sing Elgar's Dream of Gerontius with Ryan Wigglesworth and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, and join Jonathan Cohen and the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra for Bach's St Matthew Passion. Neal will also sing Dr Bartolo in the English National Opera's production of 'The Marriage of Figaro'.

Notable collaborations include concerts with the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra under Mariss Jansons, BBC Symphony Orchestra under

Pierre Boulez, The Cleveland and Philharmonia orchestras under Christoph von Dohnányi, Chamber Orchestra of Europe under Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment under Frans Brüggen, English Concert with Harry Bicket, Gabrieli Consort under Paul McCreesh, Hallé Orchestra with Sir Mark Elder, Concerto Koeln under Ivor Bolton, Scottish Chamber Orchestra with Adam Fischer, Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra with Edward Gardner, Deutsches Symphonie Orchester Berlin with David Zinman, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra with Sir Andrew Davis, and the London Symphony and Vienna Philharmonic orchestras under Daniel Harding. He has been a regular guest of the Edinburgh Festival and BBC Proms.

Neal Davies studied at King's College, London, and the Royal Academy of Music, and won the Lieder Prize at the 1991 Cardiff Singer of the World Competition.

**The English Concert** is an outstanding orchestra: exceptional, in the world-renowned quality, ambition and variety of its live and recorded output; unique, in the zeal of its players for working and performing together; unwavering, in its desire to connect with its audience throughout the world. Founded by Trevor Pinnock in 1972 and under the present artistic direction of Harry Bicket and principal

guest Kristian Bezuidenhout, The English Concert has earned a reputation for combining urgency, passion and fire with precision, delicacy and beauty. Highlights of the orchestra's calendar include an international Handel opera tour, a regular London series at venues including the Wigmore Hall, St Martin-in-the-Fields and the Barbican Centre, and an annual residency at Garsington Opera. In 2023, The English Concert launched its ambitious 'Handel for All' project, which aims to film and make freely available all of Handel's works online. For more information, visit [englishconcert.co.uk](http://englishconcert.co.uk)

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