

George Frideric Handel

Jorj Frid'ric Hahn'dl

A composer of the Baroque era.

As a child, George Frideric Handel showed a great deal of musical talent and planned to pursue music as a career. His local music teachers taught him as much as they could and encouraged his parents to further George's musical studies. His father, however, wanted George to become a lawyer. At the age of 17, George entered the University of Halle, in Germany, to study law. He maintained his interest in music by playing the organ at a nearby cathedral.

When his father died during George's first year at the university, George left school and joined an **opera** orchestra in Hamburg, Germany as a violinist. Here he began composing his first opera.

At 22, he moved to Italy to study opera. Italian audiences enjoyed opera and Italy had dozens of excellent **opera companies**. Europe's finest opera singers and composers all spent time in Italy, hoping to achieve success with Italian audiences. Most of Handel's early operas and **oratorios**, had Italian texts and were first performed in Italy.

In 1710 (age 25), he returned to Germany but soon left for England. Here he continued to write operas and sacred choral music, now with English instead of Italian texts. After a brief return to Germany in 1712, he moved back to England, where he lived for the rest of his life. He became a British citizen in 1726.

In 1720 (age 35), Handel was named artistic director of a new opera company, the Royal Academy of Music. During the next seven years, he wrote 14 operas for this group, as well as several oratorios. He also conducted the performances of his own operas. When the Royal Academy went bankrupt in 1728, he formed his own opera company for which he wrote 13 more operas. In 1737 this company also failed. Financially, Handel lost everything and suffered a stroke. It was the lowest point of his life, and he never totally regained his health.

Now, at the age of 53, Handel virtually gave up writing operas and turned his attention to oratorios. His oratorios, all in English, were hugely successful and popular in England and Ireland. He wrote his most famous oratorio, *Messiah*, in 1742, and it was an immediate success.

Handel was blunt and outspoken, and a tyrannical conductor of his music. But he was an honorable and respected composer, and except for the failure of his opera company he handled his finances well. He took his work seriously and wrote rapidly; in fact, he composed almost as fast as he could copy the notes.

George Handel wrote his first vocal music in German, his first operas in Italian, and his most famous oratorios in English. No other composer of vocal music has successfully written vocal music in so many languages.

born

February 23, 1685
Halle, Saxony (Germany)

died

April 14, 1759
London, England

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After the first performance of the *Messiah*, Handel said of the audience, “I am sorry if I have only succeeded in entertaining them; I wished to make them better.

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George Frideric Handel

What I composed	Orchestra	Concerto	Chamber Music	Keyboard	Opera	Theater/Film	Ballet	Band	Choral	Vocal Solos
George Frideric Handel	>	>	>	>	>				>	>

Handel Factoids:

- For a performance of Handel's *Water Music*, a 50-piece orchestra performed the work on a barge which floated down the river behind a boat carrying King George of England.
- Handel and **Johann Sebastian Bach** were born the same year in towns less than 100 miles apart. But they never met.
- At the time of his death, Handel's operas were thought to be old fashioned and fell out of favor with audiences. Many were not performed again until the 1920s.
- Although Handel was a deeply religious man, very few of his works were written for the church.

1685: Birth of George Frideric Handel and **Johann Sebastian Bach**.

1688: Plate glass is used for the first time.

1702: Earliest form of pantomime given at Drury Lane Theater, London, England.

1711: Clarinet used for the first time in an orchestra.

1717: Handel's *Water Music* first performed on the Thames River, London, England.

1721: **Johann Sebastian Bach** composes his *Brandenburg* Concertos.

1732: Benjamin Franklin publishes his first *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

1747: Birth of John Paul Jones, American Revolutionary naval officer.

1759: Death of George Frideric Handel; British gain Quebec from France.

What in the world is happening?

Listen!

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) *Hallelujah Chorus from Messiah*



Handel wrote this **oratorio** when he was 56 years old, and it is probably his most appealing and popular work. He wrote the *Messiah* during a troubling time in his life. He was bankrupt, in debt, seriously ill, forgotten by his public.

Handel set the *Messiah* text to music in less than a month, which may be the greatest compositional feat in the history of music. He stayed in his room the whole time and his servant brought him food. One time, after he just completed the *Hallelujah Chorus*, his servant found him weeping. Handel said, "I think I did see all heaven before me and the great God Himself!" Unfortunately, once he had written the *Messiah*, Handel had no opportunities to produce the work and he put it in a drawer. However, a few weeks later, he received an invitation to perform the work in Dublin, Ireland, where it was first performed in 1742 with a very favorable reception.

At the first London performance, King George II was so excited by the words, "For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth" in the *Hallelujah Chorus*, that he stood up. When the king rose, so did the entire audience. That tradition has followed this work for over 200 years, and even today many audiences stand during the performance of the *Hallelujah Chorus*. Does it make you want to stand?

- The names given to the four sections of voices in a choir are Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. Which voice sings the highest?
- When you hear "For the Lord God Omnipotent" for the first time, is the chorus singing in unison or harmony?

TIMING

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Handel once complained that his publisher made too much money from his operas.

“Next time I will have him write an opera and I will publish it,” he said.

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- :01 The strings play the introduction.
- :10 The voices sing "Hallelujah!" There are four voice parts: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass.
- :28 Voices sing "For the Lord God, omnipotent." (Omnipotent means "having unlimited authority or influence.") They then sing "Hallelujah!" again.
- :50 "For the Lord God, omnipotent," is sung by the sopranos with other voice parts singing "Hallelujah" and "For the Lord God, omnipotent." This is known as counterpoint or polyphonic style: the voice parts do not sing the same melodies and the same rhythms at the same time. Each voice part sings a different phrase, independent of the other parts. Listen for the entrances of the various voice parts.
- 1:16 Voices sing "The kingdom of this world..." The dynamic level is much softer and contrasts with the previous loud section. Suddenly it is sung loudly again, at 1:26. Listen for the trumpet here.
- 1:34 The men begin the phrase, "And He shall reign for ever and ever." Other voice parts enter on this phrase.
- 1:56 Sopranos (the highest vocal part) sing "King of Kings" and "Lord of Lords." The other voice parts answer with "Hallelujah" and "for ever and ever." Listen for the trumpet in the orchestra.

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Review!

Hallelujah!



George Frideric Handel Name _____

Place the letter of the correct answer in the space provided.
For True/False questions, print True or False in the space provided.

- Handel composed vocal music with texts in _____.
A. Italian
B. German
C. English
D. all of the above
- Handel wrote many _____.
A. operas
B. oratorios
C. both A and B
D. neither A nor B
- While living in Italy, Handel wrote music for _____.
A. opera companies
B. ballet companies
C. both A and B
D. neither A nor B
- Handel wrote the *Messiah* in approximately _____.
A. one hour
B. one day
C. one month
D. one year
- True or False: The text of the *Messiah* is from the Bible. _____
- Handel was born in _____, but later became a citizen of _____.
A. England
B. Germany
- At the time of his death, Handel's operas were thought to be old fashioned. Many were not performed again until _____.
A. the 1620s
B. the 1720s
C. the 1820s
D. the 1920s
- Handel's oratorios were especially popular in _____.
A. England and Ireland
B. Germany and Austria
C. France and Germany
D. Holland and Italy
- True or False: Handel composed almost as fast as he could write the notes.

- In the Listening Example, how many vocal sections sing in the *Hallelujah Chorus*? _____.
A. one
B. two
C. three
D. four

Bonus:

What composer was born the same year as Handel? _____