

Instruments (timbre) /Ensemble

SATB choir accompanied by string orchestra with **continuo** (played by cello, double bass and organ in this recording)

Background/General Information

The Messiah is an Oratorio – a work for vocal soloists, chorus and orchestra that uses religious text from the Bible.

It would have traditionally been performed at Easter, but is now often performed at Christmas. Handel composed it in only three weeks in 1741 and it was first performed in Dublin.

The whole work 'Messiah' is a huge work in three sections that lasts nearly 3 hours. Within each section there are lots of shorter pieces (movements) that include Arias & Recitatives (solo songs/duets), Choruses (with the choir) and some instrumental pieces.

The piece we are studying 'And the glory of the Lord' is the first chorus in the whole work.

Melodic/Musical Devices

Lots of **imitation** in the vocal parts – when one or more parts copies an idea first heard in another part.

Most of the singing is **syllabic** (one note per syllable) but the word 'revealed' is **melismatic** – it has a **melisma** (when a syllable is sung over several notes)

There are some **hemiolas** – this is a **rhythmic device** - music that is in triple time (3/4) temporarily sounds like it is in duple time (2/4) for two bars – it is very common in baroque music at cadences.

The music has many **perfect cadences** throughout but a **plagal cadence** at the end

Structure

This chorus is based on three lines of text that repeat throughout the whole song. *And the Glory of the Lord shall be revealed ... And all flesh shall see it together ... for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it*

There are four main musical ideas, one for each line of text (the first line is split into two phrases, hence four ideas). Handel introduces each idea simply, usually in one part (final phrase begins in tenors and basses) then weaves them into the rest of the music as other parts join in, often **imitating** each other and overlapping. There is also a short instrumental introduction called a '**ritornello**' (= 'a little return' = a short section that keeps coming back in the piece)

The last four bars of the song are marked Adagio – they are much slower and there is a **plagal cadence (chords IV – I)**. The texture is also **homorhythmic** with all parts playing/singing to help give a sense of finality.

Style - Baroque Features (general features)

- **Ornamented melody**
- **Diatonic chords/harmony**
- **Basso continuo** (literally continuous bass – play chordal support with the bass line usually played by the cello)
- **Baroque orchestra** – strings play the melody, a few woodwind, brass and timpani used.
- **Prevalence of one mood or 'affection'**
- **Terraced dynamics** - contrasting volumes on two levels, loud and soft

'And the glory of the lord'

from *Messiah*

G. F. Handel



Three musical points about this piece that I like:

Justify your points and use musical vocabulary.

Three musical points about this piece that I don't like:

Justify your points and use musical vocabulary.

Tonality and Harmony

The piece is in major keys throughout to create a constant happy mood. It is mostly in A major but it does modulate to E major and B major at certain points. Chords are **diatonic** (all belong to the key) and there is a fast **harmonic rhythm** (the speed at which chords change). Most cadences are **perfect** but the final cadence is **plagal**.

Texture

Mixture of **homophonic** (parts moving together with similar rhythms) and **polyphonic** (different rhythms in the vocal lines that weave in and out of each other). Also **monophonic** when only one part is singing at the start of lines.

The string parts support and accompany the vocal lines and very often double the vocal lines. If you look at the bass (vocal) part you can see the nearly all its notes are identical to the Basso Continuo line.

Sometimes, two or more vocal parts sing in unison (exactly the same notes) or together in harmony (same rhythm and words, different notes).

The continuo players (cello, double bass and organ) play throughout – the other instruments play most of the time but there are some short sections where the other strings drop out and only the continuo players accompany the singers.

Dynamics

There are hardly any dynamics marked in the score, and those that are marked are only *p* and *f* - this is typical of baroque music that rarely has crescendos or diminuendos marked (actually has very few dynamic markings at all).

In the recording, only contrasts of *p* and *f* are used.

Melody & Pitch

All the parts keep to a modest pitch range.

There is lots of **imitation** in the vocal parts – when one or more parts copies an idea first heard in another part.

Most of the singing is **syllabic** (one note per syllable) but the word 'revealed' is **melismatic** – it has a **melisma** (when a syllable is sung over several notes)

Tempo & Rhythm

In triple time (3/4) and quick tempo (marked **Allegro**)

There are some **hemiolas** (this is when music that is in triple time (3/4) temporarily sounds like it is in duple time (2/4) for two bars – it is very common in baroque music at cadences).

Almost continuous crotchet movement keeps the piece moving forward until the final bars where there are sustained chords.

Structure

Starts with an instrumental introduction that is then used again several times to break up the singing throughout the piece – this section is called a **ritornello**
4 main musical ideas, one for each line of text

Each line of text is introduced simply, often only in one part, and then the other parts join in, overlapping and often imitating each other

Ends with a slow adagio section, which is 4 bars long, the final cadence is **plagal**.