

Thursday, December 18, 2008

Celebrating *Messiah*

I hope that many of you have celebrated the season with a performance of Handel's *Messiah*. Oddly, I associate it with the sweet scent of pine because we always decorated our tree to this music. I can still hear the LPs dropping onto the turntable as we untangled lights and hung treasured family ornaments on the tree to the music of *For Unto Us a Child is Born* or the *Hallelujah Chorus*. Often when the tree was finished, we would lie under it and squint our eyes to blur the lights while listening to Handel's great lullaby *He Shall Feed His Flock*.

Although *Messiah* has become as precious to Christmas as *Silent Night*, here are some facts about it that you might not know about this great classic.



dollars for poor children.

- Handel donated a copy of *Messiah* to the Foundling Hospital which you see here. Although this orphanage was then on the outskirts of London, it is now well within city limits in walking distance of the British Museum. You can still visit "Coram's Fields" to see the gates and some of the buildings. In Handel's time, wealthy Londoners would take their carriages out to visit the orphanage on Sunday afternoons – to hear the choirs, to watch the girls being taught to be housemaids and to see the boys learning naval skills.

- To this day, a portion of all performance funds should be given to children's charities. *Messiah* has raised millions of

- *Messiah* was first sung in a pub in 1742. The musicians were traveling to Ireland for its first performance, but bad weather kept them in Chester where they tried out the parts for the first time.

- Although it was not an instant success, 25 years after Handel's death in 1784, 500 performers packed Westminster Abbey to sing *Messiah*. Three years later, their numbers rose to 806.

- In 1791, the year of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, the performers filled the entirety of Westminster Abbey while the audience overflowed all the way to Trafalgar Square. In a time before giant jumbo-screens, families brought their own music to sing along with a concert blocks away!



- Workers from the industrial mills of Victorian England walked miles to rehearse *Messiah* just for love of this timeless piece.



- In 1882, 4,500 performers filled London's Crystal Palace to sing *Messiah*. Even today's rock concerts seldom match its record audience of 87,869 people!
- Handel is buried in Westminster Abbey. This picture of St. Paul's shows London's other famous church, where Bach's St. Matthew Passion was brought to England by young Mendelssohn... but that's another story!

If you want to learn more, get the [Teacher's Notes](#) to [Hallelujah Handel](#). The CD is full of music from *Messiah* and *Julius Caesar*. It tells the story of young Thomas, a boy from the dark streets of London who sings like an angel but will not speak. Get the CD to find out why, in the company of Katarina from [Vivaldi's Ring of Mystery](#). It's a good

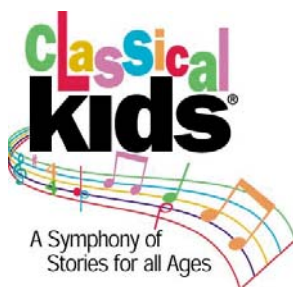
mystery, but it is Handel's music that is the star. You'll find scores for *See the Conqu'ring Hero Comes*, *O Lovely Peace*, *Water Music* and *Lascia* in the Teacher's Notes.

Stay tuned for 2009! Happy Holidays and we'll meet again in the New Year. Now go put on *Messiah* and sing along!

Sue Hammond

[Contact Sue by clicking here.](#)

Next Blog: Thursday, January 22, 2009



Thursday, December 4, 2008

'Tis the Season...



I'm one of the few people who genuinely enjoys the darkening days of winter. I take pleasure in watching the lights and decorations transform our city streets into magical places lined by music-box houses. Writing this by the fire, I'm watching my neighbor across the street teaching piano and remember the line from [Beethoven Lives Upstairs](#): "... I see an old woman nodding her head in time to the music. Perhaps it is her student playing."

December reminds me of my last CD, [A Classical Kids Christmas](#). To be honest, I'd like to rename it **Christmas on Main Street**. I made it because I was determined that we don't lose some of those great carols like *Silent Night*, *We Three Kings* and *The Friendly Beasts*. I especially enjoyed superimposing the American, British and Canadian forms of *Away in a Manger* on top of each other with children's choirs, guitar, and flute descant.

Although **A Classical Kids Christmas** can be enjoyed by the family as a CD, teachers and community choirs might be interested to know that we also released it as a [Songbook with Accompaniment CD](#). It offers a ready-made Pageant, complete simple blocking and lighting cues, plus over twenty

seasonal songs, poems, and activities. It follows the Christmas story from the Wise Men setting through to Epiphany.

Medieval Poem Some of the most compelling sections include poems read by children over hummed verses. The best poems were written from the point of view of the "animals at the manger".

Here's an ancient poem that tells How the Robin got its Red Breast:

*The robin flew in the stable door,
And felt its bitter cold.
She beat her wings by the dying fire,
To make its embers glow.*

*And as she fanned those feeble flames,
Her breast turned brightest red,
And so remains until this day,
The gift of the Baby, 'tis said.*

Child's Poem: What the Mice Saw On the next blog, I'll tell you how the Stork became the patron bird of Babies. But first, I'd like to quote a poem written by Amanda when she was in Grade 5. Notice how the repeated cadences show her understanding of the craft of poetry-making. Amanda's called her poem, "What the Mice Saw". Read it aloud, or have three children speak the verses, over your class quietly singing or humming *Silent Night*:

*They arrived on a cold winter's
night:
As the snow fell from the sky...
And we were there.
Wondering, whispering,
watching.*

*The manger was to be His bed.
The doves were perched above
it...
And we were there.
Shivering, skittering,
scampering.*

*Even the stable cats were quiet.
The dog curled, watching in the
hay...
And we were there.
Quivering, quaking,
questioning.*



Art and Architecture In closing, you'll notice three pictures in this blog from the three great religions intimately associated with this season. The top picture is from Cordoba. It's a huge mosque that is now a Christian Church. The dazzling decorative arches are definitely Arabic.

The middle picture (just above) is a famous synagogue in Toledo. There you see a different style of intricate art.

The bottom picture (to the left) shows the inner quadrangle of St. John's in Toledo. Christian churches are usually adorned

with representative statuary of saints and people, rather than geometric shapes. Closer to Christmas, I'll include some more pictures of cathedrals and medieval art. But until then, try decorating a page or gift like the first two pictures.

Now, go enjoy the "Darkest Days" of the year – unless of course, you're now looking up at the Southern Cross and enjoying your coming summer vacation!

Yours Blogospherically, Sue Hammond

[Contact Sue by clicking here.](#)

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