

Incredibly, two of the greatest musicians in all of history were born in the same year, in the same country, Germany and both were Lutherans. George Frideric Handel and Johann Sebastian Bach were both born in 1685. However, they never met. And while Bach came from a musical family, Handel was the first musician in his family.

George Frideric Handel's father was a surgeon-barber, who discouraged his son's musical career at every turn. He intended his son to become a lawyer. George studied law until 1703. However, he was permitted to take music lessons from age 9. By age 12, Handel was substituting for his organ teacher and had written his first composition.

After studying music in Germany and Italy, Handel moved to England, where he stayed for the rest of his life, becoming a composer for the Royal Chapel. However his great interest in the opera was apparently ill-timed as the form was falling out of fashion in England at that time. Into the 1740s Handel continued to compose operas, losing more and more money. When his friends expressed concern that the concert halls were nearly empty, Handel responded that an empty venue means great acoustics!

In 1737 Handel's opera company went bankrupt and he suffered a stroke. His first oratorio, *Esther*, was condemned by church leaders for allowing the Words of God to be spoken in a theatre! The Bishop of London prohibited the oratorio from being performed. However, when Handel proceeded with *Esther* anyway, the Royal Family attended and it met with success. In 1739 advertisements for Handel's *Israel in Egypt* were torn down by church leaders who also disrupted his performance.

George Handel was convinced that his call was to set the Scriptures to music. "*I have read my Bible very well and will choose for myself.*"

Handel declared that he knew his Bible as well as any bishop. However their attacks had the effect that he was threatened with the debtor's prison. By 1741 George Frideric Handel was a failure. He was financially bankrupt, in great physical pain and the victim of several plots to sabotage his career. Deeply depressed, Handel began to plan his farewell appearance in London for April 1742.

That summer however, he composed *Messiah*, which was at once hailed to be "*The epitomy of Christian Faith.*"

Handel began composing

*Messiah*

on 22 August 1741. Within six days, part 1 was finished, in nine more days, Part 2. Six more days and part 3 was completed. Handel composed like a man obsessed. He rarely left his room and seldom touched his meals. In 24 days he had composed 260 pages of what has been recognised as one of the greatest compositions ever. When he had finished writing, what would become know as the

*Hallelujah Chorus*

, he exclaimed: "

*I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself.*"

The premiere of *Messiah* on 13 April 1742, to an over capacity crowd of 700, was a sensation.

The demand for tickets were so great that men were asked not to wear their swords, and women not to wear hoops in their skirts, to allow 100 extra people into the audience. When

*Messiah*

was performed in London, the King attended, and when he stood at the opening notes of the

*Hallelujah Chorus*

he began a tradition that has been carried on in the English-speaking world ever since.

Evangelist John Wesley attended a performance of *Messiah* at Bristol Cathedral, commenting afterwards: "

*I doubt if that congregation was ever so serious at a sermon as they were during this performance.*"

By the time of his death Handel had conducted 30 performances of *Messiah*. He died on the day before Easter Sunday 1759, hoping to "

*meet his good God, his sweet Lord and Saviour, on the day of His Resurrection.*"

A friend remarked that George had "

*died as he lived, a good Christian, with his true sense of his duty to God and to man, and in perfect charity with all the world.*"

Dr. Peter Hammond

A printable programme of Handel's Messiah is available for download [here](#)

A printable tract is available [here](#)