

Introduction

Hello, my name is Al Sturgis. I'm the Music Director of the North Carolina Master Chorale. I'd like to welcome you to this unique Messiah singalong: *Every Valley, Every Voice*, where you will have the opportunity to hear real, live soloists singing the recitatives and the arias. We will work together, at a distance, on the choruses.

I'm joined today by several colleagues and friends of the North Carolina Master Chorale, several of whom have journeyed with me for at least 25 years now, as we have experienced numerous performances of this piece and discovered wonderful things about this great oratorio together. They are: soprano, Abby Nardo; alto, Carol Ingbretsen; tenor, David Wiehle; bass, Lewis Moore; and our accompanist today is, as always, the wonderful Susan Lohr. I'm very appreciative today of these artists for their help today in this production. Our technical director today is Stephen Aber.

We're going to focus primarily, or exclusively, I should say, on the Christmas portion – Part One – and then we will conclude with the "Hallelujah Chorus." I've asked the soloists if they would help us mark along during the Choruses to give you an aural sense of where we are in the texture, and I think that will help us all to stay together. So, with the overture, Susan Lohr, take it away.

And the glory of the Lord

The most important feature or characteristic of this opening chorus is the fact that it is a joyous dance, all felt in one – never stodgy, never heavy. It should have a feeling of being uplifted and joyous. So, to that end, I suggest a couple of articulatory things:

1. Detach the first two quarter notes, the pickup notes.
2. Stress the downbeat.
3. Make a little space after the dotted figure.
4. Connect the last three: "ry-of the Lord." "Ry-of" goes close to the second beat.

It should have a feeling of lilt to it. Nice and bright; nice and light.

And he shall purify

This next chorus offers some technical challenges, primarily in the melismatic passages – or the running sixteenth notes. I suggest looking for ways of organizing the long strings of sixteenth-note passages, in this case, a 5 + 3 pattern: 1-2-3-4-5, 1-2-3. Try to find a way to bring some internal organization to those runs. It might help you negotiate them.

1. It's also, like the opening chorus, very light stylistically.
2. There's a little space between the pickup note and the downbeat: "and – he."
3. Taper away the phrases.
4. Make the four eighth notes "he shall pur-i" light and connected.
5. Just keep it light and breathy.

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion.

This next chorus I'll speak a little bit about before Carol sings the aria so that we can go right into it and segue.

1. A light, gentle, pastoral lilt, so we feel length on the quarter note.
2. Feel the stress and elongation on the long note in the 6/8 so it has a nice, pastoral lilt to it.

There are some dynamic things that I think are interesting to do around measure 117: "Say unto the cities of Judah, behold, your god." If we put a *subito piano* (suddenly soft) and crescendo to the peak of the phrase: "behold your god."

The other nice dynamic thing we can consider doing is at the very end, the last choral phrase, around measure 134. The alto pickup, "The glory of the lord," and we all answer – soprano, tenor, bass – in *mezzo piano* (softly), and then, on the next bar, where you have "of the Lord," put a crescendo there, "is risen upon thee."

Why don't we try the pickup to 131 –

The excitement is on the word "Lord" in bar 136. That's where you want to do the growth. Ok, from the beginning, with the recitative leading into the aria and chorus.

For unto us a child is born

This next chorus is certainly one of the best-known choruses from *Messiah*. It's a jubilant chorus, "For unto us a child is born." An ironic little trivia bit about this chorus: it was actually repurposed by Handel from an Italian secular duet, but thank goodness it made its way to this wonderful oratorio.

So again, we're looking for internal groupings of the melismatic writing – the moving sixteenth notes. I suggest looking for groupings of 2s and 3s that make sense according to the way the direction the notes go. You'll see sequential patterns in the way it's written as well. For example: 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2 | 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2.

When we rehearse and prepare it for performance, we have the singers mark those groupings of 2s and 3s so they can look for those internal groupings.

- The opening is light and spacious.
- I suggest lifting between the first two notes – a little space, "For un-to" and then the four eighth notes that go to the downbeat: think forward motion there, arriving on the word "born."
- Taper each phrase.
- Notice how the eighth notes are slightly detached.
- Anything that has a pickup feeling, add a little space before it, just to give it that little breath of light between the notes.

His yoke is easy, and his burden is light

And so, we come now, to what is unquestionably, the most technically-challenging chorus in the oratorio, "His yoke is easy," and there's nothing easy about the way this is written.

Some of the problems inherent in the piece, first of all, are the very sporadic dynamic changes that Handel writes into this chorus, and there's no other chorus in the whole oratorio, in all of the parts, that have those very sudden dynamic shifts. Just the direction of the line is challenging. The tempo is challenging to negotiate.

A lot of you watching probably or singing along have either seen or participated in the Carolina Ballet's production of this piece, and the particular female solo dancer for this chorus liked a pretty bright tempo, so we got very accustomed to singing what was an impossible tempo to negotiate for this. I'll try not to give you the ballet tempo today, so you don't fall out of your lazy-boy while you're singing along at home.

A couple of little notes:

1. Again, detach the pickup notes.
2. I would suggest dropping the tied note going into the first melisma. Feel the little lift before the first sixteenth note.
3. Connect "bur-den is light."
4. Find little places to detach. Make space.
5. Keep it light. Keep it buoyant.

Hallelujah

And so that completes Handel's Part One the so-called "Christmas portion." Of course, we can't let you turn of the tv without singing the "Hallelujah Chorus" with us. But I want to give Handel the last word, so before we start this, I'd like to say again: thank you to my colleagues and friends Abby, Carol, David, Lewis, and, of course, our one-woman orchestra, Susan Lohr. Thank you, Susan. We will remember this experience as the time the duck people and the dental hygienist sang the *Messiah* at you for an hour and a half. We hope you had as much fun as we did. It was so great to get together with real-live musicians and to have an opportunity to do this together today.

The "Hallelujah Chorus," what is there to say about this? You know it, you love it.

1. Remember, when you approach this piece, it is still in the Baroque repertoire.
2. So, let's not be too heavy with it.
3. Look for places to find space.
4. Find little places to lift after the dotted figures.
5. Even the one-bar phrase, "hallelujah," has shape to it.
6. Look for the shape. Look for the space to keep it light and clear and vibrant.
7. Joyful, but not too heavy.
8. "Forever and ever:" dot-line-dot, for-e-ver.

Thank you so much for tuning in today. Don't forget to watch our *Joy of the Season* on December 15th for a totally different experience with even more singers wearing duck faces. We hope to see you then and there.