

A NOTE FROM THE CONDUCTOR

A confession: I never tire of Handel's *Messiah*. By now I have conducted it many times. In years past, when it would come around again, I occasionally worried that I wouldn't enjoy rehearsing it anymore, or that listeners wouldn't be inclined to hear it afresh. These concerns reliably evaporated from the moment I set to work on it, and now I never think of them. On the contrary, I cannot wait to hear the first chords. I know I will be immediately and completely won over by the music's radiant beauty, its expressive range, its effortless technique, and its ineffable rightness for the voices and instruments, perhaps a by-product of its famously compressed period of composition (three weeks).

As I work with an ensemble on the choruses and in my studio with the soloists, I have the privilege of being, again and again, visited by new ideas. A pitch or transition that proves slippery in rehearsal discloses a subtle innovation by Handel: a quicksilver modulation, or an unexpected asymmetry or compression in the phrasing. Emotions shift, too, as I come to the realization that a chorus that I once thought should be bitter could be tender. Playing the piano while a singer is rehearsing, I might be quietly astounded as the vocal color of a young soloist discloses new possibilities in an aria I have known for years.

I am continually reminded that Handel was first and foremost a man of the theater. In both his oratorios and his operas, he wanted above all to tell a story, to put onto the stage authentically human characters whose emotions we immediately recognize and care about as they reckon with the tensions and challenges of a heightened situation. The chorus and soloists lack names, but they are fully realized characters, each of whom traces a dramatic arc.

Deceptively, the title *Messiah* might lead us to think that it is, statically, a pageant, masque, or passion, whose purpose is to revisit a familiar story about a well-known religious figure to an audience already well-acquainted with the narrative. It isn't, exactly: or at least, not only or entirely. Rather, it is *a drama* about the spiritual journey – the before, during and after – of a people to whom Something Extraordinary happens. In this aspect it is universal. The music unfolds the action in an absolutely riveting way, carrying the choral persona – which is, after all, a proxy for you the audience as well as for us the performers, for each and for all of us, singly and collectively – from a place of light innocence and fearful ignorance through episodes of discovery, conflict, tragedy, resolution and transcendence. Its harmonic, rhythmic and textural variety, its sheer power of expression, never flag.

Evolutionary theorists tell us that human storytelling may have evolved as a means of transmitting cultural practices and solutions. From the first strains of the overture, signaling a world in distress, an anxious portrayal of nations confusedly at war, *Messiah* is a mirror. We hear it, and know it is of our own time and place. The truism holds: everything old is new again.

It is a tremendous honor and privilege to succeed my one-of-a-kind colleague David Randolph as Music Director of St. Cecilia, and I could not be happier to begin my tenure than by conducting *Messiah* here in Carnegie Hall, as he did, memorably, for so many remarkable years.