



A guide to Celebrating the British Masters

For our December concert we are singing works by eight different composers! Our very own Courtney Price and Teresa Lenssen have researched interesting facts and created trivia about each composer, and Handel's Messiah. Enjoy!

COMPOSER TRIVIA!

Can you match the fact with each composer? (Clue: pay attention to the years they lived). The facts are numbered below to make it simpler to match them; they are not in chronological order.

__Byrd (c.1539-1623) __Willan (1880-1968) __Rutter (1945-) __Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)
__Taverner (1944-2013) __Handel (1685-1759) __Howells (1892-1983) __Britten (1913-1976)

1. He composed *This is the Day* for the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton.
2. At age 18, this composer attended the premier of Vaughan William's *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* and sat next to the composer for the remainder of the concert. Vaughan Williams even showed him the score for his newest composition!
3. He was a pacifist and conscientious objector in WWII. He then composed his famous *War Requiem* for the dedication of the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral, which had been bombed in WWII. He conducted a high school choir for the first recording of *War Requiem*, and John Rutter sang in that choir.
4. This "Father of English Music," along with Thomas Tallis, was given an exclusive license to print music. Since they were the only ones in England allowed to print music legally, this made them both quite wealthy.
5. He loved Gregorian chant. After he emigrated to Canada, he was one of the first composers to appear on a Canadian postage stamp.
6. As a boy, he had to sneak to the attic to play the clavichord because his father wanted him to become a lawyer.
7. His great-uncle is Charles Darwin. When the composer asked his mother about Darwin's Origin of the Species, she replied, "The Bible says that God made the world in six days. Great Uncle Charles thinks it took longer; but we need not worry about it, for it is equally wonderful either way."
8. He went to school with John Rutter. His *Song for Athene* was performed at the funeral of Princess Diana of Wales. Composer John Rutter attended this composer's funeral and paid tribute to him.
9. **BONUS:** (After all, no quiz would be fun without a bonus question!) Which fact is NOT true about Handel?
 - He was born in the same year and country (Germany) as J.S. Bach but never met him.
 - He was almost killed by another composer in a sword duel. Luckily, his opponent's sword hit a button on his coat rather than his chest.
 - He was such a popular opera composer that two rival sopranos got into a tiff onstage and had to be dragged off before ripping off parts of each other's costumes.
 - He became blind later in life due to a botched eye operation for his cataracts.

1. Rutter 2. Howells 3. Britten 4. Byrd 5. Willan 6. Handel 7. Vaughan Williams 8. Taverner
BONUS: They are all true! Ok, this was a trick question because I didn't offer an
"e. all of the above" answer. At least this sneaky teacher isn't giving you a grade!

KEY



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THE COMPOSERS!

Handel (1685-1759) harpsichordist, organist, composer

- The only composer in this concert born outside of England – Germany to be exact
- Won the King of England's favor by composing Water Music for a boat procession on the River Thames
- Became blind by the end of his life
- Famous for writing oratorios (large musical compositions for orchestra, choir and soloists)
- He was born in the same year and country as J.S. Bach but never met him
- As a boy, he had to sneak to the attic to play the clavichord because his father wanted him to become a lawyer
- Was almost killed by another composer in a sword duel. Luckily his opponent's sword hit a button on his coat rather than his chest.
- He was such a popular opera composer that two rival sopranos got into a tiff onstage and had to be dragged off before ripping parts of each other's costumes off.
- Survived a coach crash and a sword duel before becoming blind later in life due to a botched eye operation for his cataracts
- During his Hallelujah chorus, King George stood up, causing the entire audience to stand in the king's presence. This practice of standing has turned into a tradition that continues to this day.
- Beethoven said of his music, "Go to him to learn how to attain great affects, by such simple means."

Tavener (1944-2013) composer, organist, pianist, singer

- His first major successful work was *The Whale*, a cantata based on the life of the prophet Jonah
- His Song for Athene was performed at the funeral of Princess Diana of Wales
- As a child, the works of Mozart and Stravinsky most inspired him
- John Rutter attended his funeral and paid tribute to him
- Many of his texts were drawn from his collaboration with Mother Thekla, an abbess

Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) violinist, composer

- His great-uncle is Charles Darwin. When the composer asked his mother about the Origin of the Species, she replied, "The Bible says that God made the world in six days. Great Uncle Charles thinks it took longer; but we need not worry about it, for it is equally wonderful either way."
- Much of his music is inspired by traditional folk songs he collected from his youth
- Studied music in college alongside Gustav Holst
- Studied orchestration with Maurice Ravel in Paris
- Composed the opera "A Pilgrim's Progress"
- Composed "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis"
- Composed "The Lark Ascending," his most famous work, for violinist Marie Hall
- The gunfire from his service in WWI which caused severe deafness in his old age



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THE COMPOSERS! *(continued)*

Healy Willan (1880-1968) organist, composer

- At the age of 30, joined the London Gregorian Association dedicated to the preservation and revival of plain-chant
- Emigrated to Canada and was one of the first composers to appear on a Canadian postage stamp
- He was commissioned to write O Lord Our Governor for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II
- He was inspired by plainsong and the music of the Renaissance; much of his music has a modal theme
- His larger choral works were Romantic in nature, which is fitting since he admired the music of Brahms and Wagner
- Composed *Faire is the Heaven*

Howells (1892-1983) organist, teacher, composer

- At age 18, attended the premier of Vaughan William's *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* and sat next to the composer for the remainder of the concert
- -studied under Charles Villiers Stanford in college
- Diagnosed with Graves' disease at age 22, which precluded him from WWI
- Loved and drew inspiration for his music from the English Renaissance style
- Composed *Hymnus Paradisi* after losing his nine-year-old son to polio

Britten (1913-1976) composer, conductor, pianist

- Composed the opera "Peter Grimes"
- Composed Ceremony of Carols and The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra
- Wrote his famous War Requiem for the dedication of the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral, which had been bombed in WWII
- Studied with John Ireland and Ralph Vaughan Williams
- Was a pacifist and conscientious objector during WWII

Rutter (1945-) singer, teacher, composer

- Attended the same school as John Tavener
- As a high school chorister, took part in the first recording of Britten's War Requiem under the composer's baton
- Conducted the premiere performance of his "Gloria" cantata in Omaha, Nebraska
- Was influenced by English and French choral traditions
- Composed This is the Day for the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton
- Founded the Cambridge singers



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ABOUT MESSIAH!

Messiah was composed in 1741 by George Frideric Handel, with a scriptural text compiled by Charles Jennens from the King James Bible, and from the version of the Psalms included with the Book of Common Prayer. It was first performed in Dublin on 13 April 1742 and received its London premiere nearly a year later. At first, the public was not passionate about the oratorio. But it slowly gained in popularity, eventually becoming one of the best-known and most frequently-performed choral works in Western music.

DID YOU KNOW?

1. Many thought it was blasphemous at the time it was written and performed.

Handel was breaking new ground with *Messiah* and many religious leaders were wary of it. The fact that it was a religious work that would be performed in a secular setting bothered them. They worried about a lack of reverence in a venue that might hold a comedy one night and *Messiah* the next. It was also concerning to many that the musical form oratorio was created to be an answer to religious leaders looking down on opera because it was too vulgar. Actors singing scripture was suspect.

2. It is not just about Christmas.

Though it is often performed at Christmastime, *Messiah* also includes the Resurrection. For this reason, it was originally intended as an Easter oratorio, but may have been used for Christmas because there simply was not as much sacred music written for Christmas.

3. It was written quickly.

Handel wrote *Messiah* in roughly three to four weeks (most accounts say 24 days).

4. King George may have stood...

The long standing story is that King George stood for Hallelujah and that now, we do the same to carry on the tradition. But there is no evidence to suggest that he attended a performance (and this would have been noted by the press at the time) and the story began circulating 37 years after it was supposed to have happened.

5. Much of the proceeds from early performances went to charity.

In fact, as well as benefiting orphans, Handel helped get people out of debtors prison and even helped redeem the bad reputation of one performer by giving her an important role.

6. The argument may continue, but most agree that the work is called *Messiah*...

not *The Messiah*.