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by

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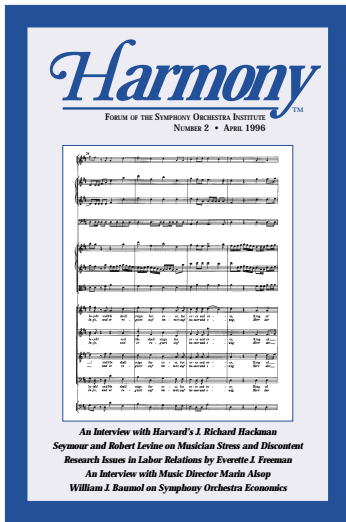
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About the Cover . . .



If you recognized the music on our cover, you may have felt an involuntary urge to stand, as Americans customarily do during the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s *Messiah*. Many of our habits as audience members can be traced back to the earliest days of public concerts.

George Frideric Handel, a clever musician with a keen commercial sense, was arguably the first important composer to adjust his career to suit a changing marketplace. In the 1730s, he switched from writing Italian operas to composing oratorios which were based on well-known biblical subjects and were sung in English—a shrewd attempt to reach a potentially large middle-class British public.

His strategy was right on target, and a succession of oratorios, climaxing with *Messiah*, scored huge successes in England, making Handel one of the most popular composers who ever lived. He composed *Messiah* in just 24 days (an impressive feat, and especially so considering that the 56-year-old composer had already suffered a stroke and survived a crippling bout of depression). Almost immediately, *Messiah* was recognized as his masterpiece.

Messiah was enthusiastically received at its first performance, given at noon on April 13, 1742, in Dublin. The performance was held in a new music hall that had opened the previous year for the presentation of subscription concerts (a concept new at the time). And although *Messiah* was not immediately loved there, the tradition of standing for the “Hallelujah Chorus” dates from the first London performances in 1743, when King George II was so moved by this magnificent and stirring music that he impulsively rose to his feet. Within a few years, *Messiah* caught on in London and Handel initiated a series of annual charity concerts there featuring his best-known work. No year has passed since without performances of this great score in the English-speaking lands. (The oratorio’s sphere of influence continues to grow: in 1993 *Messiah* was translated into Zulu.)

The popularity of Handel's oratorios in England, followed by that of Haydn's two great works, *The Creation* and *The Seasons*—introduced in the first decade of the 19th century—corresponded to the rise of the public concert and the growth of performing organizations in British cultural life. (Our word “concert” derives from the Latin consortium, for society or participation.) Handel rightly predicted the shift from elite, aristocratic entertainment to charitably funded concert societies designed to appeal to the new middle class.

It is no coincidence that when a group of Boston merchants met in 1815 to found an orchestral and choral organization based on the British model, they called it the Handel & Haydn Society. (One of the Society's first orchestra members was Gottlieb Graupner, a double bass player who had played in Haydn's London orchestra for the celebrated Salomon concerts of 1791-92.) The Handel & Haydn Society was in effect the first orchestral organization in the United States and is today the oldest continuously operating performing-arts institution in this country. The Society's first concert, given on December 25, 1815, included excerpts from Haydn's *Creation* and Handel's *Messiah*, and ended, not surprisingly, with the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.