

AT two of the New Zealand stations next week the oratorio "Messiah" is to be presented. An interesting history is attached to the writing of this magnificent work. No other musical composition ever created has such drawing power. It crowds concert halls and churches; it is the one work that never fails to fill the Albert Hall. And yet this composition, with all its genius, was a failure when it was first produced in London. The following article is from the pen of Mr. Norman Flower, the well-known London publisher and authority on Handel:—

"MESSIAH" was the outcome of the most torturing period in Handel's life. The cabal of his enemies had well-nigh broken him. It had bought all his singers, taken the theatre from over his head. His purse was empty; his health failing. In desperation he composed two operas, "Imeneo" and "Deidamia." When he put them on his enemies tore down his playbills; footpads, rounded into service for the purpose, molested in the dark lanes those who, still faithful to Handel, went to the theatre. The two operas only ran five nights between them. Then he shut the theatre, a broken man, and retired to his house in Brook Street. This was the state of Handel when in 1741 he achieved the greatest feat in the history of music. He composed the whole of the "Messiah" from the overture to the last Amen in twenty-four days. He composed Part 1 in seven days; the second part in nine days; the third in six days.

IT was as if tragedy had beaten him into some stupendous effort—almost a superhuman effort. Whilst the work was in progress he did not leave his house in Brook Street (now a furniture shop). He scarcely slept; he

Handel's "Messiah"

An Interesting History

scarcely ate. His friend, and man-servant, John de Bourke, brought him food, and as often as not took it away when, an hour later, he entered the room. On one of these occasions the servant found the master in tears. He had just completed the "Hallelujah Chorus." He was weeping heavily. "I did think that the heavens opened and that I did see the Great God himself," he exclaimed.

THE words of the "Messiah," which are selections from the Bible, were supposed to have been made by a man of wealth and pomposity, Charles Jennens. But whilst delving about some years ago for a life of Handel, I was engaged upon, I discovered that the selection was not made by Jennens at all, but by a half-starved curate named Poley, whom Jennens employed as a secretary.

WHEN Handel completed "Messiah" he put it in a drawer. He had no immediate intention of producing it. London hated him; the venom of his enemies had gone too deep. Indeed, only a fortnight after he completed "Messiah" he began the composition of "Samson." For two months "Messiah" lay in that drawer in Brook Street. Then the Governors of three charitable institutions in Dublin asked him to go to the Irish city and give some concerts for the prisoners there. The ob-

ject of these concerts was this: The prisoners were not fed by the State; they had to subsist on food provided by their relatives or by charity. If these sources failed they starved. The call of charity ever appealed to Handel. When he closed the theatre in London on "Deidamia" and was practically without a shilling, he promptly gave a concert for the Society for Decayed Musicians. He could never resist the cry of the unfortunate; the human understanding of the man figures in all his notes.

HE arrived in Dublin in November. His singers followed at intervals. Mrs. Cibber, the greatest actress of her age, a contralto in whose voice lay all the fullness of human emotion, followed, and a little later Signora Avolio, the soprano, came in a yacht. A fierce gale raged in the Irish Sea and the singers had a terrible time.

HANDEL took rooms in Abbey Street, Dublin. A music publisher named Neal had recently built a music-hall, and he set it at the disposal of Handel for the concerts. Here, on April 13, 1742, Handel produced "Messiah" after having given some performances of his other works for the same charity. Expecting a crowd, Handel issued an announcement asking ladies to come without their hoops and gentlemen without their swords.

"MESSIAH" created a sensation. So wonderful was Mrs. Cibber's singing of "He Was Despised" that Dr. Delaney, well aware of the singer's turbulent past, rose up in the audience, and exclaimed, "Woman, for this thy sins be forgiven thee."

IN June Handel gave a second performance of "Messiah." A heat wave had set in, so he announced that, in order to ventilate the hall, he would have one pane of glass removed from each window. The hall was again crowded. From the first performance of "Messiah" each of the three charities received £127.

WHEN Handel returned to London and sought to produce "Messiah" he was attacked by the Churches for having used words from the Bible for his music. So bitter was the onslaught that he changed the name of the work to "A Sacred Oratorio," and under that title "Messiah" was known in London for many years. But when it was produced it was only performed three times that season. London frankly did not want it.

NOT until 1767—a quarter of a century after its production—was the work put into print as "Messiah," so violent was the ecclesiastical antagonism. It was then sold by Randall and Abell at a guinea a copy by subscription, plus another half-guinea on delivery of the book.

IN his later years of blindness, Handel performed "Messiah" frequently. The eyes of London were opened; its ears that would not listen came to hear. We, who are accustomed to hear eight hundred singers in "Messiah" at the Albert Hall, and 4000 at the Handel Festivals, may well remember that Handel never had more than thirty-five singers in his choir. And, as the years of his life waned to their close, he packed Covent Garden Theatre at each performance of "Messiah" with these small choirs.

ON April 6, 1759, he gave his last concert at Covent Garden. It was "Messiah." Weeks beforehand every seat had been sold. The blind figure sat there by the organ emotionless, so it seemed, to the riot of applause.

BUT when the audience poured out of the theatre he fainted. They carried him to the dressing-room, and then back to Brook Street. His old friend, Dr. Warren, came in; for hours he watched the slowly-breathing figure on the bed. He could do nothing; there was nothing he could do. Handel said he was waiting for Good Friday. Good Friday came and he died alone in the night.

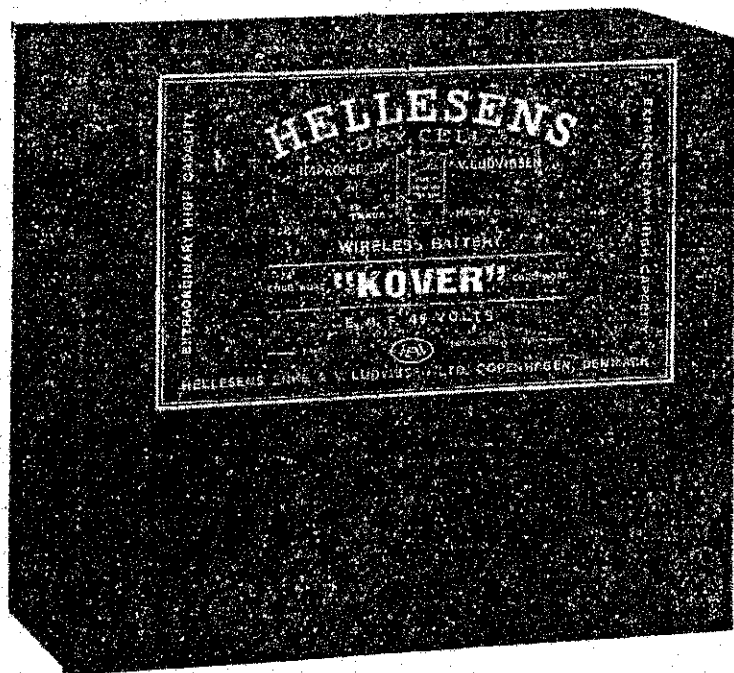
ON the H.M.A.S. "Australia," 55 loudspeakers have been fitted in all quarters, in order that a command given by one man in an ordinary speaking voice may be heard throughout the ship. Hearing the speakers in operation, one is struck by the extraordinary clarity and mass of volume.

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