

Messiah Listening Guide

Worcester Chorus
December 6, 2025

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Welcome to “Messiah!” This book is designed to teach you a little bit about the music you’re going to listen to and help you hear some of the things that make the music of “Messiah” so special.

“Messiah” tells the story of the life of Jesus Christ, who Christians believe is the son of God. You don’t have to be a Christian to understand the story or enjoy the music that Handel uses to tell it!

While “Messiah” tells the story of Jesus’s whole life, not just his birth, it’s popular for people to listen to and perform “Messiah” at Christmas in the United States. In fact, you may have heard some of the music from “Messiah” before if you listen to Christmas music. In some other places, it’s popular to perform “Messiah” around Easter time, which is usually in March or April.

You probably already know that music is often written to bring out emotions. For example, you know music that makes you happy or excited and music that makes you sad or scared. Sometimes we’ll ask you to listen closely and think about what you feel. It’s important to know that there are no right answers! You feel what you feel, and that’s OK.

There are going to be a lot of people on the stage! The chorus is divided into four parts – sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses. If you’re watching a Worcester Chorus concert, the **sopranos** are the women on the left of the stage, and the **altos** are the women on the right. **Tenors** are the men (and some women) to the right of the organ in the back, and **basses** are the men to the left of the organ in the back. The **orchestra** is in front of them, and the **soloists** stand with the **conductor** in the front, the soprano and alto to the left of the conductor, and the tenor and bass to the right of the conductor.

Before the concert begins, see if you can identify all of the instruments on the stage. **Violins, violas, cellos, and double basses** are stringed instruments that look a lot alike. The main difference is their size. Violins are the smallest, and the double bass is the largest. Violins and violas are played by putting the instrument on the player’s shoulder. Cellos and double basses rest on the floor.

There are wind and brass instruments, too! You should be able to see **oboes** and **trumpets**. There are also some drums that are called **timpani**, and something that looks like a small piano that’s called a **harpsichord**.

As you listen to the music, there are questions for you to answer, things for you to do, and special music to listen for! There’s a small task for every movement – different

piece – or for two or three movements together if they’re very short. You can skip them if you don’t like them, or you can read ahead if you want to know what’s coming up!

We hope that you’ll be able to hear some of what makes “Messiah” so special to us, the people on the stage who are performing it for you!

Movement 1: Sinfonia

Listen to the music. What does the music make you feel? (Hint: There’s no right answer! And you might feel different emotions at different times.) Check as many emotions as you want.

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sad | <input type="checkbox"/> Restless | <input type="checkbox"/> Something else? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Happy | <input type="checkbox"/> Angry | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sleepy | <input type="checkbox"/> Excited | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bored | <input type="checkbox"/> Dreamy | _____ |

Movement 2: Comfort Ye My People

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.

Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness; prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Who is singing?

- Soprano Alto Tenor Bass Chorus

Movement 3: Ev’ry Valley Shall Be Exalted

Ev’ry valley shall be exalted, and ev’ry moutain and hill made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain.

“Exalted” means “celebrated” or “lifted up.” Listen to the music. Can you hear music that makes you think of something being lifted up or celebrated?

He also sings about crooked things being made straight. Listen to the music. Can you hear “crooked” music and “straight” music when he sings those words? This is called **word painting**.

Movement 4: And the Glory of the Lord

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

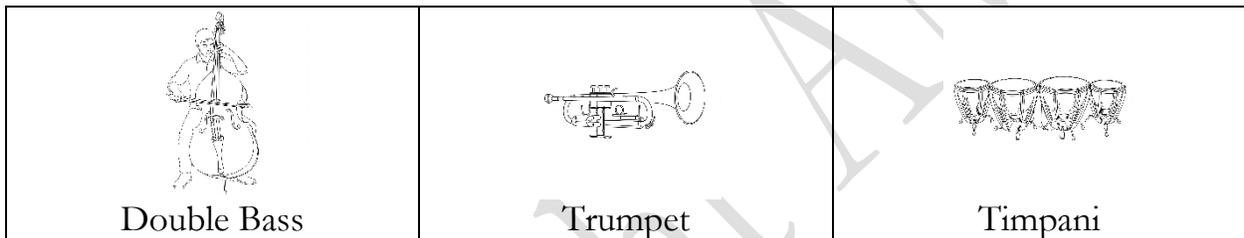
Who is singing?

Soprano Alto Tenor Bass Chorus

Is this movement a happy one or a sad one? Happy Sad

Why do you think so?

There is an instrument that plays in this movement that hasn't played before. What is it? Circle the instrument.



Movement 5: Thus Saith the Lord

Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts: Yet once a little while and I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land.

And I will shake all nations; and the desire of all nations shall come.

The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the Covenant, whom you delight in; behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.

Who is singing?

Soprano Alto Tenor Bass Chorus

He sings about "shaking" all nations. Can you hear the music shake, too? Why do you think the music is like that?

Movement 6: But Who May Abide

But who may abide the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner's fire.

This movement has two very different types of music.

At the beginning, which instruments play when she's **not** singing? Circle the ones that play.

 Violin	 Cello	 Harpsichord
 Oboe	 Trumpet	 Timpani

Which instruments play when she's singing? Circle the ones that play.

 Violin	 Cello	 Harpsichord
 Oboe	 Trumpet	 Timpani

The music changes in the middle! How is the music different? Think of two words to describe the difference.

Movement 7: And He Shall Purify

And He shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.

At the beginning, each section sings "And he shall purify." Number the sections in order of when they sing this line.

_____ Sopranos _____ Altos _____ Tenors _____ Basses

Movement 8: Behold, A Virgin Shall Conceive

Movement 9: O Thou That Tellest Good Tidings to Zion

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel, God with us.

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain. O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, behold your god!

Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.

These two movements begin the story of the birth of Jesus. Movement 8 is an angel predicting Jesus's birth. "Emmanuel" is another name for Jesus.

Listen carefully at the beginning of Movement 9. She will repeat the beginning of this movement, but many people who sing this movement make changes to it when they repeat it. These are called **embellishments**. If you listen, you might hear these embellishments when she repeats the beginning!

Embellishments were common when "Messiah" was written! The composer wrote the piece, but soloists would often add their own touch to the performance.

Which section of the chorus begins when they come in?

Soprano Alto Tenor Bass

"Good tidings" is good news. The angel is telling the people to go out and give the good news of Jesus's birth, and to go to the high mountain to shout to all of the people.

The chorus repeats the soloist's tune. Do you think they're going out and repeating the good news to the people?

Movement 10: The People That Walked in Darkness

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light;

and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

What emotions do you feel when you hear this music? Think of two words to describe it.

Why do you think Handel chose the bass to sing this movement? How do you think it would be different if the soprano or alto sang it?

Movement 11: For Unto Us a Child Is Born

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

You may have heard this movement before! It's very popular at Christmastime because it represents the people rejoicing because Jesus was born.

Listen for **melismas** in this piece. A melisma is one syllable of a word that is sung over many notes. You'll hear many of them sung with the words "born" and "shoulder."

Movement 12: Pastoral Symphony

This movement fits into the story of Jesus's birth. When Jesus was born, the angels appeared in the sky above some shepherds watching sheep in the fields. This music is meant to represent the shepherds and sheep.

Close your eyes and listen to the music. Can you imagine a field with some sheep and someone watching over them? Does the music help you imagine that picture?

Movement 13: There Were Shepherds Abiding in the Field

Movement 14: And, Lo, The Angel of the Lord Came Upon Them

Movement 15: And the Angel Said Unto Them

Movement 16: And Suddenly There Was With the Angel

There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

And suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying:

Who is singing?

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Chorus

She is beginning to tell the story of how the angels came to the shepherds. When you hear the violins, can you imagine the wings of the angels in the sky?

Movement 17: Glory to God

“Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will towards men.”

Who is singing?

- Soprano Alto Tenor Bass Chorus

Who does the chorus represent in this movement? (Hint: Look at the words for Movement 16.)

- The narrator, telling the story
 The angels in the sky, talking to the shepherds
 Mary, talking to the baby Jesus

Movement 18: Rejoice Greatly, O Daughter of Zion!

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Behold, thy King cometh unto thee; He is the righteous Saviour, and He shall speak peace unto the heathen.

At the beginning and the end, the soloist is telling the audience to “rejoice,” or cheer and get excited, about the birth of Jesus. If you listen carefully, you might also hear embellishments here when the soloist repeats the beginning text!

In the middle section, the tempo (or pace) of the music slows down. Which of the soloist’s words do you think Handel is showing with the slower music?

Movement 19: He Shall Feed His Flock

He shall feed His flock like a shepherd; and He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Come unto Him, all ye that labour, come unto Him that are heavy laden, and He will give you rest. Take his yoke upon you, and learn of Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

Who sings first? Who sings second? Put a 1 next to the soloist who sings first, and put a 2 next to the soloist who sings second.

_____ Soprano _____ Alto _____ Tenor _____ Bass

The music the two soloists sing is very similar! Because the music is repeated, this is also a place where you might hear embellishments by the soloists.

Pay attention throughout this movement and the rest of the piece. Do the soloists ever sing together?

Movement 20: His Yoke Is Easy

His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.

This movement uses more word painting. A “yoke” is something you carry, like a burden. Notice when Handel uses the words “yoke” and “burden,” the music goes up, as if to signal that they are light (like a balloon filled with helium)!

Notice also, though, that when the chorus sings “easy,” those notes are not so easy!

There’s a break after this song that’s called an **intermission**. The lights will go on, and the people will leave the stage, and you’ll be able to get up, walk around, and talk for a few minutes.

Part II

Movement 21: Behold the Lamb of God

Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world.

Part II of “Messiah” begins to tell the story of Jesus’s death. The story goes that powerful people in Jesus’s life were afraid of him because he called himself the Son of God (“the lamb of God”). As Jesus got older, people who didn’t believe that he was the son of God made fun of him and bullied him, and this eventually led powerful people to put Jesus in prison and then kill him.

This movement uses words that should be uplifting and happy – it would be nice to have someone who takes away all of our sins! But the music is different. Think of two words that you would use to describe the music of this movement.

Movement 22: He Was Despised

He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He gave His back to the smiters, and His cheeks to them that plucked off His hair: He hid not His face from shame and spitting.

“Despised” means “hated.” This movement describes some of the things that people who hated Jesus did to him, and it also describes how he reacted. He didn’t hide his face when people spit at him. He turned his back to the people who hit (“smited”) him.

Like many movements before this, there may be some embellishments when the soloist repeats the beginning. Listen carefully!

Why do you think the tempo and tone of the music is different in the middle, when the soloist describes how Jesus reacts to the bullying? Think of two words to describe how the music is different.

Movement 23: Surely He Hath Borne Our Griefs

Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows! He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him.

Listen to the violins at the beginning. This song talks about how Jesus was hurt because he took the punishment for all of our sins. The violins are meant to imitate the sound of someone being beaten because they have done something wrong. Can you hear how the violins sound like someone hurting someone else?

Movement 24: And With His Stripes, We Are Healed

And with His stripes we are healed.

The “stripes” in this movement are the stripes on Jesus’s back after he was whipped. Christians believe that Jesus took all of the punishment for our sins. So after Jesus was whipped as punishment, our sins go away – we are healed.

In this movement, the sound of the whip appears in the notes the chorus sings when they sing “And with his stripes.” Notice how the notes and the tone change when they sing “we are healed.” Think of two words to describe the notes on “and with his stripes,” and two words to describe the notes on “we are healed.” How are they different?

Movement 25: All They That See Him

Movement 26: He Trusted in God

All they that see Him laugh Him to scorn; they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying: "He trusted in God that He would deliver Him: let Him deliver Him, if He delight in Him."

This movement describes how people who hated Jesus reacted when he was beaten and whipped – they laughed, and they said that if God loved him, God would stop his punishment.

(go on to the next page)

When the soloist sings “laugh him to scorn,” listen to the violins. Do they sound like people laughing?

Notice that the soloist tells the story, and the chorus sings the words of the people. Why do you think Handel did this?

Movement 27: Thy Rebuke Hath Broken His Heart

Thy rebuke hath broken His heart: He is full of heaviness. He looked for some to have pity on Him, but there was no man, neither found He any to comfort Him.

This quick movement talks about how Jesus looked for people to take pity on him and comfort him, but no one did. Does the music seem sad to you?

Movement 28: But Thou Didst Not Leave His Soul

But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell, nor didst Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption.

Often, when a soloist sings, only some instruments in the orchestra play. Which instruments play when the soloist is singing in this movement? [Hint: There are three.]

Movement 29: Lift Up Your Heads

Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in. Who is this King of Glory? The Lord strong and mighty, The Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in. Who is this King of Glory? The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of Glory.

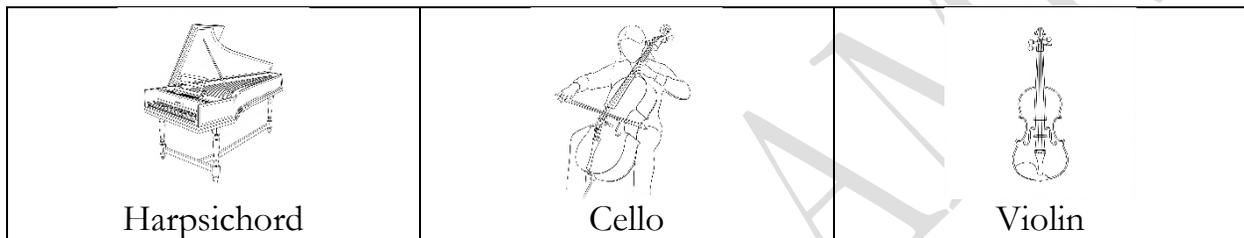
The music and the emotions begin to change here, and we begin to pivot towards Jesus’s resurrection (rebirth) from the dead, which Christians believe proves that Jesus

was the son of God. How is the music different from the music of the last few movements? Think of two words to describe it.

Movement 30: Unto Which of the Angels

Unto which of the angels said He at any time: “Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee?”

This is a **recitative** (reh-sit-a-TEEV). In a recitative, the soloist “recites,” or narrates, part of the story. Recitatives are quick, and they are often accompanied by only a few instruments. Which instrument doesn’t play in this movement?



Movement 31: Let All the Angels of God

Let all the angels of God worship Him.

This movement begins with the chorus singing the words at the same time, but then it changes to a **fugue** – a style of music where the different parts all sing the same (or a similar) melody at different times. There are two different melodies – one quick one, and one slower one. Can you hear them? Each voice part sings them at different times. See if you can hear one of the melodies in each of the four voice parts.

Movement 32: Thou Art Gone Up On High

Thou art gone up on high, Thou hast led captivity captive, and received gifts for men, yea, even from Thine enemies, that the Lord God might dwell among them.

You’ve heard many examples of word painting (like “crooked” music for the word “crooked”). There’s an example in this movement, too! Can you hear it? What is it?

Movement 33: The Lord Gave The Word

The Lord gave the word, great was the company of the preachers.

Notice the difference between how the chorus sings “The Lord gave the word” – the chorus is in unison (singing as one) – and how they sing “Great was the company of the preachers” – each part sings something different, and there’s a lot happening all at

once! Think about the music and the words. How does the music show “the word” that the Lord gave? Then how does it show “the company” of the preachers? [Hint: think about how noisy it is when there is a large group of people (a “company”) vs. one person saying a word.]

Movement 34: How Beautiful Are the Feet

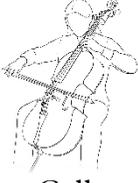
How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.

This movement is an **aria**. In this case, it’s a duet between the soprano soloist and **unison** violins (all of the violins play the same notes). Listen for the “conversation” between the soloist and the violins.

Movement 35: Why Do the Nations So Furiously Rage Together

Why do the nations so furiously rage together, and why do the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord, and against His anointed.

This is probably the best example of word painting! When the nations “rage together,” they are at war. The music here shows the anger of the words. Other than the soloist, what instruments can you see “furiously rage together?”

 Violin	 Cello	 Harpsichord
 Oboe	 Trumpet	 Timpani

Movement 36: He That Dwelleth in Heaven

Movement 37: Thou Shall Break Them

*He that dwelleth in Heav'n shall laugh them to scorn, The Lord shall have them in derision.
Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron, thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.*

Movement 36 is another recitative. Movement 37 is another aria. Using these two movements, can you name two differences between a recitative and an aria?

Movement 38: Hallelujah

Hallelujah! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever. King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. Hallelujah!

Don't forget to stand up for this movement! Some people say that King George II was so moved by hearing this movement the first time, that he stood because the music was so powerful. But many people question whether that actually happened. Now, standing for the Hallelujah Chorus is simply tradition.

This is the movement that celebrates when Jesus rose from the dead three days after he was killed. You might have heard it before. It's very popular to play at Christmastime, even though it really celebrates the events of Easter.

Listen carefully to this movement if you haven't heard it before. You'll get to sing it later!

Movement 39: I Know That My Redeemer Liveth

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God. For now is Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep.

After Jesus rose from the dead, his followers believed that it was a miracle, and that it was proof that Jesus was the son of God. Listen when the soloist sings "For now is Christ risen from the dead." What happens to the music?

Movement 40: Since By Man Came Death

Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

There are some really big changes in the music here! This is the only time in the piece when the chorus sings without the orchestra.

Why do you think some of the music is very quiet and slow, and some of the music is fast and loud? [Hint: Look at the words! “Resurrection” means rebirth after death.]

Movement 41: Behold, I Tell You a Mystery

Movement 42: The Trumpet Shall Sound

Behold, I tell you a mystery, we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

The trumpet hasn’t played much so far, but this is their movement! Listen to the trumpet at the beginning of this movement. It sounds a lot like a trumpet fanfare, or celebration. Why do you think that Handel uses a trumpet to celebrate Jesus’s rise from the dead?

Movement 43: Worthy Is The Lamb

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His blood, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. Blessing and honour, glory and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen.

Is this movement happy (a celebration) or sad (a funeral)? How do you know?

In this movement, there are two times when the basses sing with only the cellos and double bass, and everyone is on the same notes. See if you can notice when they happen.

This movement is the end of “Messiah.” There’s one word that’s repeated a LOT that gives you a clue when a prayer or religious ceremony is ending (in Christianity, but there are similar words in Islam and the Jewish faith). What word is it?

Please give us feedback on this listening guide! The QR code will lead you to a survey where you can tell us whether you liked the guide and whether it was helpful for you to understand more about “Messiah.” (You may need a parent to help you!) Thanks for offering your help to test this guide!



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