

## THE SAYLOR FOUNDATION'S ELEMENTS OF MUSIC AND MEANING IN HANDEL'S *MESSIAH*

**Introduction:** The purpose of this assignment is to encourage you to analyze a musical work. Using precise, focused descriptions of its formal elements and design, you will examine and describe a selection from Handel's *Messiah*.

**Instructions:** Listen to the *Messiah* by Handel, using the Saylor Foundation's "Guided Listening 2: Handel's *Messiah* Libretto and Study Guide." It is optional to listen to the entire work. Choose your favorite section from the work to analyze for this assignment. (Note: Please do not choose any of the instrumental Sinfonias or the "Hallelujah" chorus.)

Then, use the knowledge and skills you have acquired in this course to write a brief essay on the elements of melody, harmony, rhythm, form, style, and texture as they create meaning in your piece. Your essay should be between 500 and 800 words. More advanced students may choose to make an "aural map," such as the one given for the "Hallelujah" chorus in the "Guided Listening 2" document. You may also consult any or all of the sources listed in the bibliography in the "Guided Listening 2" document.

Begin with a brief introduction identifying the piece you have chosen, where it appears in the work, and why you have chosen it. Then, address the elements of music present in this piece. Analyze how these elements come together to form a whole according to fundamental principles of musical design, and Baroque aesthetics studied in this course. How do the musical elements of this piece contribute to expressing the meaning of the text? Be sure to relate what you have discussed to the content of the *Messiah* as a whole. You may consider using the following questions as a guide to writing your analysis.

### Questions for Musical Analysis

- 1. On the subject matter of the work and role in the story:**
  - What type of song is it? aria (solo song), recitative (more laid back, speech-like song) or chorus (a work for a large group of singers)? For which voice type(s): soprano, tenor, bass? How do you think this choice relates to the subject of the piece?
  - Where does this work appear in the libretto and how does it relate to the story
  - What is the apparent subject matter and mood of this piece?
  - Consider, what role does this piece play in the story and why did Handel chose this type of song for this work? (You may address this later in your essay, or at the end.)



**2. Discuss the musical elements of this work**

- Describe the melody for this piece (conjunctive, disjunctive, etc.) What role does melody play in the work's development? Describe the contours of the piece and their expressive qualities.
- Describe the use of rhythm in this piece. What is the tempo? Are there any apparent moments of syncopation, or any abrupt changes in the rhythm? What role does this play in the piece? Identify the meter of this piece—is it duple or triple? Does it have the feel of a march, dancing, or any other recognizable activity?
- Describe the use of texture, and Instrumentation. Which voice(s) and instruments are featured in this piece? Describe the quality of the individual solo voice, if used. Is Handel emphasizing virtuosity or skill? If there is a chorus used, is their role clearly important in the piece? If this is a piece for multiple instruments and voices, is there a sense of depth and power? Which instruments or sections really seem to stand out, and which blend into the background?
- Does this piece make use of dynamics? For what effect? Are there sharp changes in volume?
- What moods and musical “colors” are being created, and what effect does this have on you the listener? Are there any contrasts apparent between this piece and the rest of *Messiah*? Can you detect some ways in which Handel makes use of these moods and effects to create meaning?

**3. On the elements of harmony and formal design in music:**

- Is this piece in major or minor? Where do the modulations occur? Does that relate to the meaning of the text? Does Handel make use of dissonance? How is tonality used to create meaning?
- Which form do you detect in the piece (A-B-A, ABBA, etc.) Is the A or B section more heavily weighted, or does the piece seem balanced?
- Does the form of the piece have any effect on you (i.e., the return of the A, the contrast between A and B, etc.)?
- How do the elements of formal design relate to the subject matter, if at all?
- Is there a “big moment” or focal point of the work, or more than one—and how and why is this moment emphasized? How does that relate to the text?

**4. On music and culture:**

- Which elements of Baroque style are present in this piece?
- How does *Messiah* connect to artistic, social, and political culture of the eighteenth century?
- What does Handel communicate through the language of music in this piece, and how does it contribute to *Messiah* as a whole? Which aspects of the piece and its performance seem particularly significant to you?

