

Handel's 'Messiah,' and the Decline of Knowledge in the West

The other day, I heard an announcer on a local classical radio station gently chide his listeners, saying, "It's almost Easter, and I haven't had one request from our audience for selections from Handel's *Messiah*!"

For those who think of the *Messiah* as a Christmas tradition, this announcer's request seems a bit odd. But historically speaking, he's right on track. The *Messiah* was originally [intended for Passion Week](#)—the time in which Christians remember the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ—and was first performed shortly after Easter in 1742. Indeed, a much larger portion of the [Messiah text](#) focuses on Christ's death and resurrection than his birth.

In [Stories Behind the Great Traditions of Christmas](#), author Ace Collins further describes *Messiah*'s Easter connections:

"By 1900, the Messiah was so closely linked to Easter that people began to expect to hear the oratorio each year. A performance of the Messiah was the surest way to fill up a church or a concert hall. In small English towns, as well as in large cities, the annual presentation of Handel's work brought out throngs of people. It had become such a tradition that many could not imagine Easter without Handel's Messiah.

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So how did *Messiah* move from Easter to Christmas performances? Collins explains:

"The Messiah's move to Christmas was based more on marketing than on anyone's suddenly realizing that the 'Hallelujah

Chorus' and other parts of the oratorio would magnify the significance of the celebration of Christ's birth. The large crowds that turned out each Easter to hear the oratorio prompted marketers to rethink the timing of the annual presentation of Handel's work. Those raising money for charities knew that people's spirit of giving was far greater at Christmas than at Easter. Another knock against Easter was its very short holiday season, which lasted only three days.

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For some years, Handel's oratorio was part of both the Christmas and Easter holiday experiences, especially in England. But by the 1960s, the Messiah had been almost completely transformed into a Christmas event."

Regardless of whether or not the *Messiah* is performed at Easter or Christmas, it's evident that the oratorio is a great work explaining one of the most famous cornerstones of Western Civilization.

Many young people are fast forgetting these essential cornerstones. When I attended a *Messiah* concert last Christmas, I happened to overhear a young woman grumble to her companion, "You didn't tell me it was going to be all Bible verses." Her complaint likely stemmed from the fact that any religiously-minded art, culture, or thinking is anathema to an increasingly secularized society.

But should it be? Even if one disagrees with the religious undertones of Handel's *Messiah*, are they an important part of the store of knowledge which must be passed down if we want Western Civilization to continue on as we have known it for centuries?