

I love Handel...and what the heck does that have to do with PBK?

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I love George Frideric Handel, the composer who, I'm afraid to say, is known by many for just one work: *Messiah*. You may be thinking, "What does this have to do with Phi Beta Kappa?" Well, I think that I love his music not just because it's beautiful (beauty which one scholar has described as "life enhancing") or because it's moving, but also because I think that some of what makes Handel's work so extraordinary is that it embodies many of the values of Phi Beta Kappa—values we come together today to celebrate.

It's not a coincidence that I associate Handel and Phi Beta Kappa. Phi Beta Kappa was founded December 5, 1776, a date we keyholders are always supposed to remember; and Handel died in 1759. So we are talking about a man and an organization that come from the same time period: the 18th century, the Enlightenment, the age of light and of reason. And Handel was not just a musician but a man who embraced the ideas and ideals of the 18th century, which included many of the same liberal arts and sciences ideals that are at the heart of Phi Beta Kappa. How do we know this? We know it because in his youth he had signed his name "George Frideric Handel, dedicated to the liberal arts." We know it—among other reasons—because he spoke (and sometimes cursed in) four modern languages (not to mention also knowing Latin); because his library contained works of both classical and contemporary poets: and because he had an extensive art collection so fine that it included two Rembrandts.

As we look at Handel and the liberal arts and sciences, I am going to try to use as few of my own words and as much of Handel's music as possible not only to offer a hint of what he accomplished beyond *Messiah*, but also because I hope that the music of Mr. Handel will give you much more pleasure than any mere words I have to offer.

Let me start with the obvious date of 1776, which, of course, makes us think of liberty. This was an age when the essential importance of liberty was in the air. And so in Handel's oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus* we hear <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCLBOECjRzk>

Come, ever-smiling liberty,
And with thee bring thy jocund train.
For thee we pant, and sigh for thee,

Could liberty sound more wonderful, more desirable, more necessary? Listening, one can almost taste the sweetness of freedom.

And as side note, I'd mention that there are some very specific connections between Handel and our American Revolution. Francis Hopkinson, one of five New Jersey signers of the Declaration of Independence kept notebooks in which he copied down

pieces of music he enjoyed—including some by Handel. And even more locally, as George Washington proceeded from Mount Vernon to his inauguration in New York, he passed very close to where we are now. As he crossed a bridge over the Assunpink Creek, an arch was raised to commemorate the Battle of Trenton, and women and girls of the city (dressed in white and carrying baskets of flowers) sang an ode beginning “Welcome, mighty Chief once more” set to a march from the very oratorio we just heard another piece from, *Judas Maccabaeus*.

I think one reason liberty was so valued in the 18th century was that the preceding century was one that had been marked by dreadful religious warfare. One way to counter such religious wars was freedom or a culture of toleration. Handel, was German-born but a British subject by choice, and a friend of his wrote that “[Handel] would often speak of it as one of the greatest felicities of his life that he was settled in a country where no man suffers any molestation or inconvenience on account of his religious principles.” One path to freedom and tolerance in the Enlightenment 18th century was to focus on reason, humane values, and an understanding of the human condition—very much what Phi Beta Kappa still is concerned with. As the poet Alexander Pope, who was Handel’s contemporary and acquaintance, wrote:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of mankind is man.

And Handel did study mankind. In his music he drew exceptionally vivid and moving portraits of his subjects. Perhaps today we might say that he had “emotional intelligence.” Here—from from two different works—are such musical portraits. They are of women, one experiencing the greatest joy, the other the most profound wretchedness. The first is Semele, a Greek princess who has become the beloved of the god Jupiter. After their first lovemaking, she sings of “endless pleasure, endless love”. What a vivid musical depiction of a woman’s ecstatic and erotic love. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CbCnqoxmyCE> The second is Dejanira, who had been the loving wife of the hero Hercules. Misled into believing him unfaithful, she poisoned him and, overwhelmed by grief and guilt, she descends into the depths of frantic madness in which she thinks she sees snakes, scorpions, and the mythical Greek Furies. Mirroring a disordered mind, the music rages back and forth between loud and soft, fast and slow. Just listening leaves me shaken. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwMVrfKBmO8>

Finally, growing out of the Enlightenment as an age of reason was an emphasis on moderation: the middle ground rather than extremes. And so I shall end with one of my favorite works. Handel had decided to set to music two contrasting poems by John Milton, the great poet of the

previous century. They described two distinct opposites types of personality. One poem was “L’allegro,” the active and extroverted man; the other was “Il penseroso,” the pensive and introverted man. The first was marked by carefree mirth, the second by melancholy. But Handel did not want to leave matters with that dichotomy—those opposites; and so he commissioned a new poem to incorporate into his music: “Il moderato” the man of moderation—the golden mean—with which to reconcile Milton’s two types. The words from the moderato section (which Handel set to exquisite music) with its images of light and of the engaged mind seem particularly appropriate to thinking about Phi Beta Kappa <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfXQHJMctco>

As steals the morn upon the night,
And melts the shades away:
So truth does fancy's charm dissolve,
...
The fumes that did the mind involve,
Restoring **intellectual** [emphasis mine] day.

Thank you.