Voices of Sisters
Arts and Media



(Unsplash/Kael Bloom) *Due to a copy editing error, a previous photo of people playing string basses was mistakenly identified as people playing cellos.



by Sr. Nancy Linenkugel

Contributor

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"There's no greater honor for a string player," I said in appreciation to the conductor who invited me to be part of the chamber orchestra group for his parish's biennial presentation of Handel's "Messiah."

I meant every word because there's no other work comparable. I've played a broad variety of musical styles — classical, pop, show tunes, contemporary liturgical music — but nothing compares to playing "Messiah."

Never mind that George Frideric Handel shut himself away for 24 days in 1741 with a scriptural text compiled by Charles Jennens from the King James Bible to produce this inspired, now world-renowned work. Never mind that it is a masterful co-mingling of both Old and New Testament passages that provides the lyrics. Never mind that the music itself provides an overall musical tone poem to express what the theological words are saying. Never mind that every voice in the chorus — soprano, alto, tenor, bass — has an interesting, contrapuntal melody that collaborates with a similar style in the orchestra parts. "Messiah" is simply a thrill to play.

It was first performed in Dublin as an Easter concert in 1742 — 278 years ago — and it's been performed annually somewhere over the centuries. Its inception was at the height of Baroque music, which is characterized by many notes filling in each measure of music to create melodies and countermelodies that achieve an interesting whole.

With 10 fingers spanning both hands, a pianist can theoretically play 10 notes at once. Add two feet for organ pedals, and an organist can theoretically play 12 notes at once. All those notes together create a huge sound from one instrument.

Add the beauty of all the other individual orchestral instruments, with flute, clarinet or oboe, or brass instruments like trumpet or French horn playing only one note at a time. Classical stringed instruments, like violin, viola, cello and bass, can play chorded notes (playing more than one string at a time), but that's actually rare and used for special effect.

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The "Messiah" music is a book over 40 pages long, with 53 arias, airs, choruses, recitatives and symphonic pieces telling the life of Christ through the church year, spanning Advent, Christmas, the life of Jesus, Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and the end of time. It is based on biblical text, including Old Testament passages of Isaiah, Lamentations, Malachi, Zechariah and the Psalms, and New Testament passages from the Gospels, Romans, Hebrews and Revelation.

There are three parts:
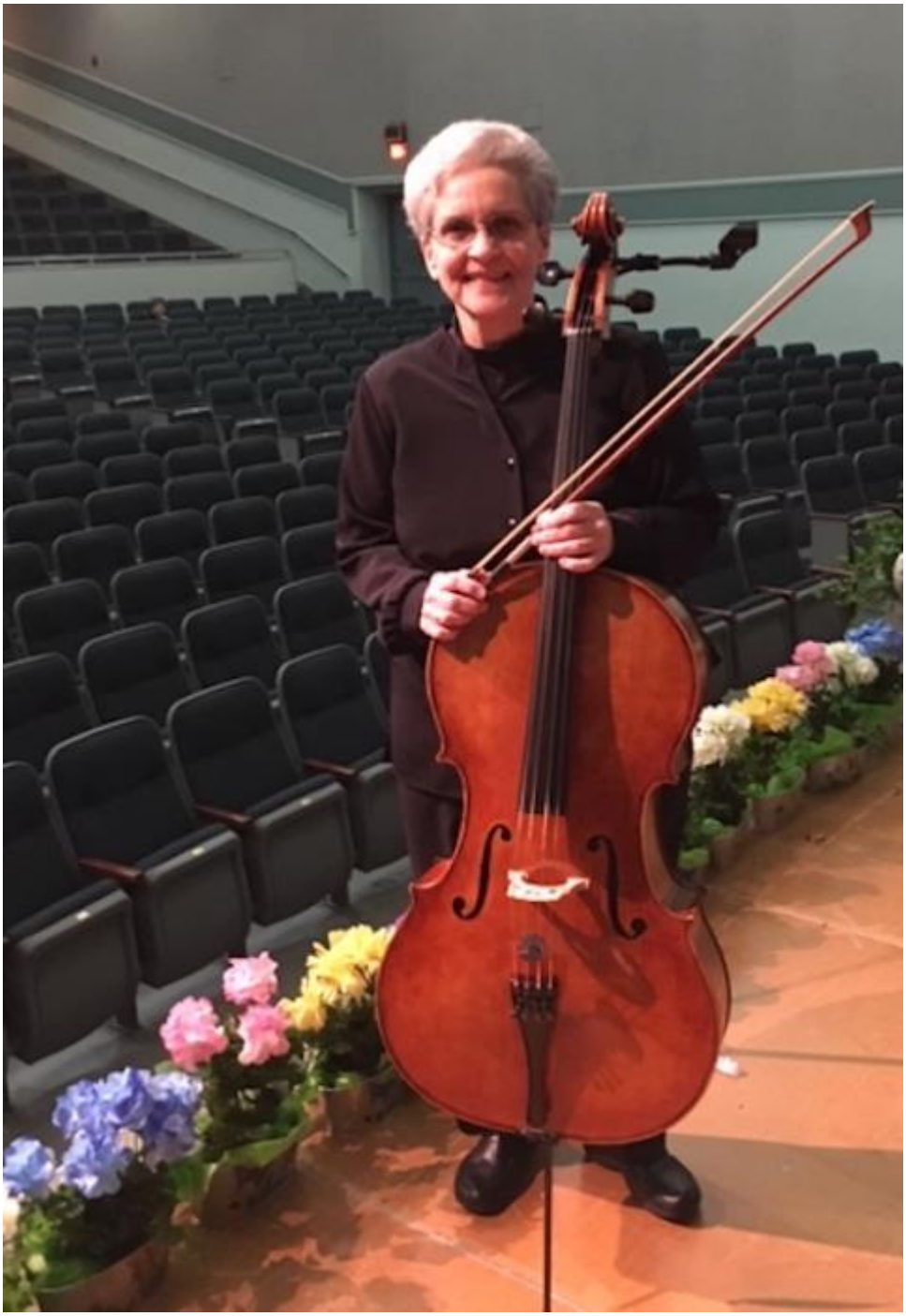
- The prophecy of God's plan to send Christ, the Redeemer
- The accomplishment of redemption by the sacrifice of Christ
- Thanksgiving in Christ's triumph over death

Here's what it's like to play "Messiah" as a cellist.

The "Messiah" orchestra is a small chamber group having two each of first violins, second violins, violas, celli and basses, all arrayed in a semi-circle in front of the conductor. It also has tympani and two each of clarinets, flutes, oboes, bassoons, French horns, trumpets and trombones, all arranged behind the strings. The chorus is a substantial-sized group of sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses. There are also vocal soloists for each choir voice.

My stand partner is the principal cellist who sits on the outside, or closest to the audience. It's my job as the inside player to turn the pages in plenty of time so the principal can keep playing without interruption.

As we ready ourselves in our seats, I make sure to fold a small corner of each right-sided music page so I have something to grab for fast page turns. As we play, I stop a few measures before the end of the page, shift my bow to my left hand, turn the page, then grab the bow back in my right hand and rejoin the principal cellist as we continue playing.



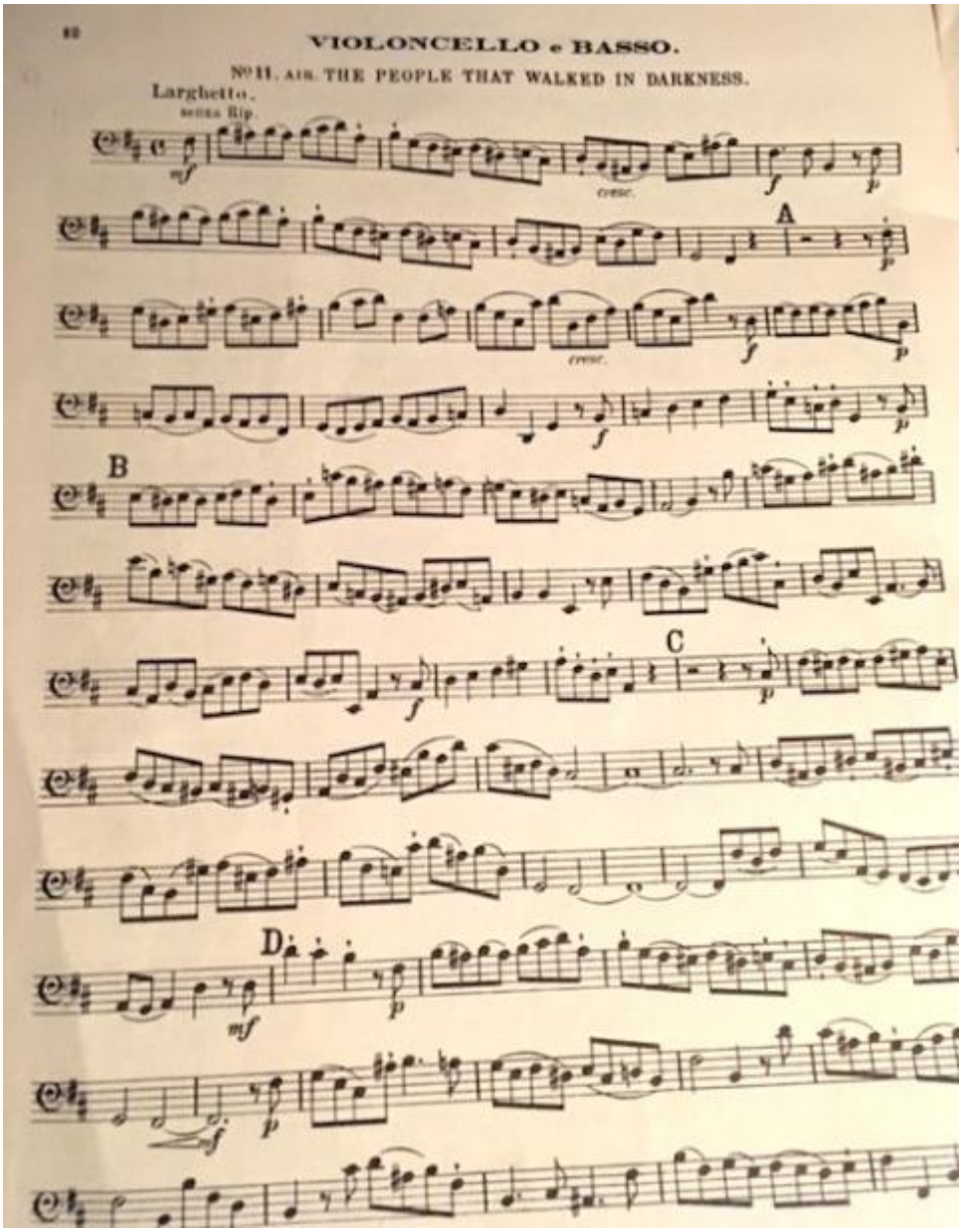
Sr. Nancy Linenkugel with her cello (Provided photo)

The entire orchestra tunes up close to the performance start time. The concert master, who is the principal first violin, stands up, signals to the oboe to sound the A for tuning, and we all tune to that pitch. The oboe handles this duty since the instrument itself has a true pitch; due to its complexity the oboe can't adjust itself to pitch variations like other instruments can.

Once we're tuned, the conductor comes to the podium to audience applause, raises the baton, and away we go with No. 1 "The Overture." The pieces come one after another, most with no pause in between, so the page turns have to be perfect! The woodwinds, brass and tympani play when written for effect, but we strings play everything.

One of my favorite pieces to play is No. 11 "The People That Walked in Darkness," sung by the bass soloist. The harmonies in this complicated piece eventually resolve into a strong, uplifting melody on the words "have seen a great light."

My stand partner and I continue on through the score, closely following the notations of soft, loud, slowing down, and the all-important "*calla voce*," or follow the voice. The vocal soloists take liberties with their melodies and the orchestra follows. All string players use as much vibrato as we can to produce a rich, rounded sound on each note. (Vibrato is a full sound produced by wavering the fingering hand back and forth on a pitch.)



Score for cello part of "The People Who Walked in Darkness" from Handel's "Messiah" (Nancy Linenkugel)

Too soon we have completed the Christmas pieces and are quickly into Part 2 for the Passion pieces. I love the haunting "Behold the Lamb of God," the inspiring "Lift Up Your Heads, O Ye Gates" and the much-awaited "Hallelujah Chorus."

After an intermission, we complete the oratorio's Part 3 about the end of time that features the uplifting "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth" and the memorable "The Trumpet Shall Sound." We end with the soaring "Worthy Is the Lamb" with its great Amen that fittingly ends everything.

Why do I like playing "Messiah" so much? Quite simply, it's such an incomparable work, a total experience — not a theatrical show or a performance just for entertainment. Its portrayal of the life of Christ through Scripture set to music just gets into your soul. Handel's masterful melodies shape the music in almost theological terms. It's a joy to play, but it's life-changing to think about it.

Handel himself didn't just set out to entertain, which he did with operas and other pieces, but with "Messiah" he wanted to take the message of Scripture to everyone — including into secular theaters — and inspire all to be better persons.

At the end of the manuscript Handel wrote the letters "SDG" for "*Soli Deo Gloria*" — to God alone the glory. Handel wanted all to glorify God when people listen to or perform "Messiah." After Handel composed the "Hallelujah Chorus," his assistant found him in tears saying, "I did think I saw heaven open and I saw the very face of God."

In "The Trumpet Shall Sound" the bass soloist sings "we shall be changed." While that refers to the end of time, how can we not be changed right now?

[Nancy Linenkugel has been a member of the Sisters of St. Francis, Sylvania, Ohio, since 1968 and writes blogs for her community's website. She is an alumna of Xavier University's Master of Health Services Administration program and serves as its director. She was president and CEO of Providence Hospital and Providence Health System from 1986 to 2001.]