BACH AND HANDEL: PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Two of history's greatest composers came from the Baroque period: Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel. These two great composers epitomized the music of the Baroque period. Drawing on all of the tools and developments in music up to their time, they developed two of the most important musical forms still used today: the oratorio and the cantata.

J.S. Bach (1685-1750) was born in Eisenach, Germany, to a family of musicians who had supplied musicians to churches and town bands in that area for a century and a half. Early in his career it was evident that he was destined for greatness. He became one of the first great organ virtuosi (the plural of virtuoso, a performer who has great technical ability on an instrument). During his lifetime, he would be invited to cities throughout Europe to both perform on and try out new organs in churches.

The cantata is a work for vocalists, chorus, and instrumentalists based on a poetic narrative of a dramatic nature. While cantatas may be based on either secular or sacred themes, all of Bach's cantatas were on sacred themes. The difference between a cantata and an opera is that the cantata is not dramatized. (There is no action put to the musical words.) It is generally to be performed in a church service. Bach's cantatas generally had anywhere from five to eight movements that could be made up of solo arias, choruses, or a combination of the two.

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) was born in Halle, Germany. He was a violinist by trade. He wrote numerous operas, orchestral works, and chamber pieces, as well as keyboard music and secular vocal music, but he was best known for his twelve oratorios.

An oratorio is a large-scale musical work for solo voices, chorus, and orchestra, and it is based, as a rule, on a story from the Bible. The first oratorios were sacred operas and were produced as operas, complete with scenery and drama. Later, however, toward the middle of the seventeenth century, the oratorio ceased to be staged and became a work to be performed in a church or concert hall.

Perhaps the most famous oratorio is Handel's Messiah, written in 1742, near the end of the Baroque period. This work, like all the oratorios, had numerous movements for soloists, duets, quartets, chorus, and orchestra. Oratorios often have as many as 40-plus movements.

The works of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel embody all of the elements of music that culminated in the end of the Baroque period.