

## March 19<sup>th</sup>

Scandinavia, lacking much of an industrial revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, began to shed people to America. Eventually there were more Swedish immigrants in the USA than left in Sweden. The major immigration was after the Civil War and it especially included landless peasants who came to the upper Midwest and Kansas looking for homestead farmland. But among the poor were also some middle class Swedes. When they arrived at Salina, Kansas, where there was virgin prairie, they founded a small town, Lindsborg. The settlers of this area wanted to start a college in Lindsborg with the purpose to educate the much-illiterate Swedes. So what did they do to raise money? Not a bake sale or rummage sale but a performance of *Messiah*. One must realize the Swedish church was very formal and highly valued music. Instrumental musicians were assembled, singers volunteered and advertising went out to Kansas City. The performance drew a reasonable crowd and the seed money was raised.

Why did they pick *Messiah*? It was an oratorio in English, an accomplishment for the singers, and the composer, Handel, had a compelling story of achievement through difficulty, like pioneering. George Frideric Handel was born to good means in Halle, Germany. His father was a surgeon but as a second son, he was not expected to follow his father's trade. When he showed signs of loving music, his father forbade him to playing any musical instrument and deemed him a lawyer-to-be. But a relative owned a clavichord and gave little George access to it where he taught himself to play. When he was six years old he accompanied his dad to the court of the duke who had appointed his father the town surgeon. The six year old saw a clavichord, sat down and played. The duke was fascinated and applauded the boy and told his dad he should give George a formal musical education. He began studying with the organist at Halle's cathedral and by 12 was so proficient he could substitute for his teacher. His father died and it left his mother in financial straits. Handel moved around, first to Berlin, then Hamburg. He was particularly interested in secular opera, that Italian invention of a singing play. In 1712, he moved to England where he found patrons including Queen Anne. They would pay him for compositions for special events and as a house composer. Queen Anne died in 1715 at which point England had to find a protestant king. The closest relative was George of Hannover who spoke no English. Handel composed *Water Music* and then, when George I died, *Coronation* for George II. Opera was his favorite medium, and he wrote 37 operas over his lifetime. The usual system was that the play and lyrics, the libretto, were written by someone with playwriting skills, then turned over to a composer who added music. Oratorios were church versions of this, with only a choir and soloists and no play. Handel wrote *Zadok, The Priest* which was also performed at the 1727 coronation and has been done at every coronation of a British monarch since. Meanwhile, he was popularizing the Italian opera in London. Nonetheless, the life of a composer isn't easy. He started three opera companies but competitors began as well leaving him with massive debt and financial ruins. In 1737 he had a breakdown. From that point forward, he scrounged jobs from nobility to make ends meet and fretted that nothing he had ever done amounted to much.

Then in 1741 a friend gave him a libretto for the life of Christ. He sat down and began to compose. The lyrics were entirely from scripture, a no-no for music of the day – thought sacrilegious. Yet Handel became so absorbed he could hardly take time to eat. If this regime ruined his health, he didn't care. In 49 days he wrote 260 pages of full musical score, perhaps a record of composing. He later described this as like the apostle Paul, "Whether I was in the body or out of my body, I know not." He had a job lined up in Dublin which would raise money for hospitals sponsored by the Duke of Devonshire. Ireland might be a good place to try this controversial oratorio, *Messiah*. On April 13, 1742, the first performance was performed to entertained nobles and parsons. Whether they knew the rule against setting literal scripture to music or not, isn't clear. Perhaps they were so moved they didn't care? The word of the arousing oratorio spread fast and King George II had to hear it. A year later it was performed. When the chorus *Hallelujah!* Started, the deeply moved king rose to his feet, and of course all his retinue followed suit, like a congregation rising when a verse to the Trinity is sung in church. That *Messiah* tradition continues to this day. *Messiah* was done repeatedly for years thereafter, usually not to nobility but to common audiences. In 1759, Handel passed out at the organ a few seconds after a performance. He is buried at Westminster Abbey where his statue shows him holding the score to "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth"

If you visit friends in Lindsborg these days and you are likely to see a much worn book lying on a table or the piano, the choir music for *Messiah*. It has been performed by dedicated voluntary folks of the area every year around Easter time and again around Christmas ever since 1869. We attended the year King Carl Gustav of Sweden was there knighting the conductor and performers in 1977.