

# CLEVELAND BALLET

## BRINGING HANDEL'S *MESSIAH* TO LIFE THROUGH DANCE

*A conversation with choreographer Robert Weiss*



### WHAT FIRST INSPIRED YOU TO CHOREOGRAPH HANDEL'S *MESSIAH*, AND HOW DID YOU APPROACH TRANSLATING SUCH A BELOVED ORATORIO INTO MOVEMENT?

I can't tell you the exact moment I decided to choreograph *Messiah*, but I can tell you where it began. Around the age of 10 a friend invited me to church to hear *Messiah*. Even then, the music struck me. The joyous sections were so joyous, the rhythm had such momentum – I remember wanting to get up and dance down the aisles. That feeling stayed with me. As I began choreographing in my teens and continued throughout my career, I kept returning to the recording. It felt monumental, almost untouchable. There's a sense that you can't choreograph to *Messiah* because it's already complete – Handel doesn't need any help. But that challenge drew me in.

I didn't have the opportunity to take it on until after I retired from dancing and founded Carolina Ballet. When we were unable to present *The Nutcracker* in our early seasons, it opened the door to premiere *Messiah* instead. I created a libretto with the help of Opera Director Will Graham outlining the story from birth through resurrection and imagined a small congregation celebrating the life of Christ, allowing the audience to follow that journey. The first year we presented Part I; the next year I completed it. Little by little, I carved out the mini-stories within the larger arc. Truly, the music tells you what to do – its joy, its sorrow, its harmony. We simply listened, and let it lead.

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**YOU FIRST PREMIERED THIS CHOREOGRAPHY IN 1998. HOW HAS THE PIECE GROWN OR EVOLVED OVER TIME AS IT HAS BEEN PERFORMED BY MANY COMPANIES?**

Initially, the ballet quite literally grew in length. After the premiere, I added Parts II and III so that it became a full, sweeping work. It was so successful that we expanded performances, and eventually shifted it from December into the Easter season – which is actually more historically accurate. Handel was commissioned to compose *Messiah* as an Easter offering, and in Europe it has long been associated with that season of reflection and celebration.

In terms of choreography, the steps themselves haven't changed. The choreography is the choreography. But what does evolve – and always will – is the artistry of the dancers performing it. Each company brings its own energy.

**FOR AUDIENCE MEMBERS WHO MAY ONLY KNOW *MESSIAH* FROM THE "HALLELUJAH" CHORUS, WHAT CAN PATRONS EXPECT, OR WHAT DO YOU HOPE THEY TAKE AWAY FROM THE PERFORMANCE?**

The "Hallelujah" chorus is only a small portion of the full work – and while it's thrilling, there are so many other passages that are equally beautiful and powerful. There are moments in the music where, simply by listening, you can practically see the resurrection. In the ballet, we actually show it.

The choreography is entirely inspired by the music. Handel's score is glorious and transporting on its own. What the ballet offers is another dimension – a visual and emotional embodiment of what you're hearing. It becomes theatrical and imaginative. My hope is that audiences feel lifted. The music has the ability to take you out of yourself and into something larger, more spiritual. With the addition of dance, that transportive quality deepens. You're not just hearing the story – you're seeing it unfold.

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**AS EVERY COMPANY BRINGS SOMETHING SPECIAL TO *MESSIAH*, WHAT DO YOU THINK CLEVELAND BALLET'S DANCERS WILL BRING TO THIS PRODUCTION?**

Every company brings its own artistry, and Cleveland Ballet has very fine dancers. I'm especially excited about the two artists portraying the Messiah. That role is demanding both technically and emotionally, and they have some very difficult material to perform. That alone will be something extraordinary to witness.

Beyond that, each dancer brings individuality to the work and gives it fresh life. I anticipate it will be a wonderful performance for Cleveland audiences.

**IS THERE A MOMENT IN THE BALLET THAT FEELS ESPECIALLY MEANINGFUL TO YOU, OR THAT YOU'RE MOST EXCITED FOR AUDIENCES TO EXPERIENCE?**

There are so many moments in the show that are special to me, but one in particular carries personal significance. There are two principal women in the ballet, and one section, which portrays the biblical angel who foretells the coming of Christ, was originally choreographed on my wife, retired ballerina Melissa Podcasy. We called this part "Angel Wings." It's danced by a tall man and a shorter woman, and the visual concept, designed by Jeff Jones, includes wings manipulated by four additional dancers. Jeff had an incredible imagination and a deep understanding of theatrical design, and the effect remains powerful even nearly three decades later.