

A young boy with curly hair, wearing a dark coat with a white ruffled collar, is seated and playing a wooden harpsichord. The room is dimly lit, with a single candle in a brass holder providing light. A window in the background shows a full moon and a castle silhouette. The room has a wooden floor and several large wooden trunks or chests in the background.

The Boy Who Made Heaven Sing

A Living Story of George Frideric Handel

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Eight little chapters to read aloud — one for each week of our term with Handel's Messiah. Read the chapter, let your child tell it back, then listen to the week's music together.

Chapter 1 — The Attic Secret

Read with Week 1: the Sinfony (Overture)

Long ago, in the year 1685, in a town in Germany called Halle, a baby boy was born. His name was George Frideric Handel, and from the very beginning, music seemed to live inside him. When church bells rang, little George stopped to listen. When a fiddler played in the street, George could not walk past.

But there was a problem. George's father was a barber-surgeon, a serious man, and he had decided his son would become a lawyer. "Music," said Father Handel, "is no work for a clever boy. There will be no instruments in this house!"

But you cannot tell a river to stop flowing. Somehow — no one knows quite how — a small, quiet keyboard called a clavichord found its way up into the attic of the Handel house. And at night, when the whole town was asleep, a small boy in a nightshirt would creep up the attic stairs, sit down in the moonlight, and teach his own fingers to play, so softly that no one below could hear a single note.

Downstairs, everyone slept. Upstairs, in secret, a great musician was being born.

Tell it back: Ask: "Tell me the story of the boy in the attic." Then listen to the Sinfony — the very beginning of Messiah — and ask: does it sound like a door opening on a great story?



Chapter 2 — The Duke Hears Something

Read with Week 2: Ev'ry Valley Shall Be Exalted

When George was about seven years old, his father traveled to the palace of a Duke, and George begged to come along — some say he ran behind the carriage until his father had to stop and take him in!

At the palace there was a chapel, and in the chapel there was an organ — the grandest instrument George had ever seen, with pipes reaching up like silver trees. When the service ended, someone lifted the little boy onto the bench. George's feet barely reached the pedals. He spread his small hands on the keys... and played.

The music rolled through the chapel like sunlight. The Duke turned around. "Who is playing?" he asked. "Why — it is a child!"

The Duke spoke kindly but firmly to George's father: "Sir, a gift like this comes from God. It would be wrong to bury it." And he filled George's pockets with gold coins. From that day on, George had music lessons — real ones, with a wise teacher named Zachow, who taught him organ and violin and how to write music of his very own.

The valley had been low, but it was being lifted up, just as the old prophet wrote: every valley shall be exalted.

Tell it back: Ask: "What happened when the Duke heard the organ?" Then listen for the melody climbing UP on the word 'exalted' — like George lifted onto the organ bench.

Chapter 3 — Across the Sea

Read with Week 3: For Unto Us a Child Is Born

George grew tall and strong, and his music grew with him. He traveled to Italy, the land of sunshine and singing, where the greatest musicians of the world gathered. The Italians called him *il caro Sassone* — "the dear Saxon" — and crowds cheered his music in Rome and Venice.

But George's heart was restless. He had heard of a foggy, busy, exciting city across the sea: London! Ships crowded its river; its streets rang with a thousand voices. George packed his trunks, sailed to England, and decided this was home. In time, he even changed his name to the English way: George Frideric Handel, gentleman of London.

Londoners loved him. He wrote operas full of storms and heroes; he wrote music for weddings and for great celebrations. When he walked down the street — a big man now, fond of good dinners, with a quick temper and a quicker laugh — people would nudge each other and whisper, "There goes Mr. Handel!"

He had been born a barber's son in a little German town. Now his music was born again in a new country — and the best of it was still to come.

Tell it back: Ask: "Tell me about Handel's travels." Then listen to the joyful chorus and count how many times the voices toss the melody to each other, like good news passed around a city.

Chapter 4 — Music on the River

Read with Week 4: Pifa (the Pastoral Symphony)

Now here is a curious thing that happened. Before London, Handel had worked for a German prince — and had left that job rather rudely, without asking! And then, of all the surprises in the world, that very same prince was crowned King George the First... of England. Handel's old master was now his new king, and the king was not pleased.

What could a musician do? Handel answered the only way he knew: with music. One summer evening in 1717, as the King's golden barge floated down the River Thames, a second boat drifted near, filled with fifty musicians. And across the water came the most delicious music London had ever heard — horns calling, strings dancing, melodies skipping like stones across the river.

"Whose music is this?" demanded the King. "Handel's, Your Majesty." The King smiled. He asked for it to be played again — and again — three times through, till past midnight. All was forgiven. We still call it the *Water Music*.

Handel had learned something he never forgot: music can say *I'm sorry*, and music can make peace — sometimes better than words can.

Tell it back: Ask: “How did Handel make peace with the King?” Then listen to the Pifa — quiet shepherd music — and ask: what would you see if this music floated past you on a river at night?

Chapter 5 — The Hard Years

Read with Week 5: Glory to God

Not every year was golden. Fashions changed; Londoners grew tired of Handel's operas. Money ran low. Rivals wrote unkind things about him in the papers. And then came the hardest blow of all: one day in 1737, Handel's right side suddenly would not move. His strong right hand — the hand that had played for dukes and kings — lay still.

The doctors shook their heads. "He is finished," people whispered. "Poor Mr. Handel will never compose again."

But they did not know what was inside the man. Handel went away to some hot healing springs, and he worked at getting well the way he did everything — mightily. Within a year, to everyone's amazement, he was back at the organ, playing better than ever. His friends said it was like watching a man come back to life.

Trouble had knocked Handel down, but it could not keep him down. And though he did not know it yet, his greatest music — music about the greatest Good News of all — was waiting just ahead.

Tell it back: Ask: "What happened to Handel, and what did he do about it?" Then listen for the far-away trumpets in *Glory to God* — Handel asked them to sound 'da lontano,' from a distance, like hope coming closer.

Chapter 6 — Twenty-Four Days

Read with Week 6: All We Like Sheep

One summer day in 1741, a friend named Charles Jennens sent Handel a gift: a little book of words, all chosen from the Bible — words about a promised Child, a Good Shepherd, a King of Kings. Jennens called it *Messiah*.

Handel read it... and something caught fire inside him. He shut his door. He barely ate; his servant would bring meals and carry them away untouched. Day after day, Handel wrote as if his pen could not keep up with the music pouring through him. Page after page after page!

When his servant peeked in one day, he found the great man with tears running down his face. Handel had just finished the Hallelujah Chorus. "I did think I did see all Heaven before me," Handel said, "and the great God Himself."

In just twenty-four days — barely more than three weeks — the whole enormous *Messiah* was finished: two hundred and sixty pages of music that the world has never stopped singing since. Some gifts, it seems, come rushing all at once, like a river let loose.

Tell it back: Ask: “Tell me about the twenty-four days.” Then enjoy *All We Like Sheep* — listen to the melodies wander off in every direction like naughty sheep, and hear how the ending suddenly turns gentle and serious.

Chapter 7 — Music That Set People Free

Read with Week 7: The Trumpet Shall Sound

Now, where should such music be heard for the first time? Not in London, as you might guess — but in Dublin, Ireland! And here is the most beautiful part: the very first *Messiah* was performed to raise money for people in trouble — for hospitals, for the sick, and for men locked in prison because they could not pay what they owed.

On the thirteenth of April, 1742, the music hall on Fishamble Street was packed so full that gentlemen were asked to leave their swords at home, and ladies to come without hoops in their skirts, so more people could squeeze in!

Then the music began — the valleys were lifted, the Child was born, the trumpet sounded — and when it ended, Dublin knew it had heard something that would live forever.

And the money? It set one hundred and forty-two fathers and sons free from debtors' prison. Handel's music — the music of the great Deliverer — began its life by delivering real people, walking out of real prison doors into the sunshine. Handel never took the riches of *Messiah* for himself; to the end of his life, he gave its earnings away.

Tell it back: Ask: “What did the first *Messiah* concert do for people?” Then listen to *The Trumpet Shall Sound* — the bright trumpet and the deep voice talking to each other — and march royally.

Chapter 8 — The King Stands Up

Read with Week 8: the Hallelujah Chorus

Messiah came home to London, and a famous story is told of the night King George the Second came to hear it. When the Hallelujah Chorus burst out — *King of Kings! Lord of Lords!* — the King himself rose to his feet and stood. And when the King stands, everyone stands! To this very day, all over the world, audiences still stand for the Hallelujah Chorus.

Handel grew old in London. Every year he conducted *Messiah* to raise money for the Foundling Hospital, a home for children who had no one to care for them. Even when his eyes grew dim and at last went dark, blind old Mr. Handel still sat at the organ, playing from memory, while the choir sang the music he could no longer see.

He died in the spring of 1759, an old man full of years and full of honor, and three thousand people came to say goodbye. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, where the kings of England sleep. Above his statue there, his hand rests on a page of music. If you look closely, you can read the notes. They say: *I know that my Redeemer liveth.*

And every time *Messiah* is sung — this year, and next year, and in a hundred years — the boy from the attic makes Heaven sing again.

Tell it back: Ask: “Tell me your favorite part of Handel’s whole story.” Then stand up, all of you, and listen to the Hallelujah Chorus from beginning to end.

A Note for Mama

This little book follows the true shape of Handel's life, told the living-book way — as a story, not a lesson. Read one chapter per week, slowly, with delight. Let your child narrate before you discuss anything. One detail is tradition rather than certain fact: no one is sure King George II really stood at the Hallelujah Chorus — but the world has stood ever since, and that is true. The attic clavichord, the Duke's gold coins, the Water Music evening, the twenty-four days, the 142 men freed from debtors' prison, the Foundling Hospital concerts, and the inscription at Westminster Abbey are all part of the historical record.