

## Hallelujah! It's Messiah time at the TSO

Patricia D'Cunha



Soprano Shannon Mercer performs in TSO's "Messiah" (Photo courtesy of: ShannonMercer.com)

For some heavenly musical inspiration this festive season, classics such as George Frideric Handel's treasured *Messiah* stand the test of time. It's a holiday staple in Toronto and in other countries around the world.

And in keeping with tradition, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra brings the city's "favourite Messiah" back to Roy Thomson Hall December 16 to 21.

"It's kind of like the Nutcracker for the music world, it really brings people back to the Christmas story," said soprano Shannon Mercer who performs in TSO's *Messiah*, along with countertenor Matthew White, tenor Colin Balzer, baritone Tyler Duncan and The Toronto Mendelssohn Choir. The piece is conducted by Jean-Marie Zeitouni.

"And if you are Christian or if you're not Christian, people know the story [...] the music is just beautiful to listen to, and you don't have to work at it, you just have to sit back and enjoy it," she added.

Handel's *Messiah* has been enjoyed by music enthusiasts since the 18th century, making its debut in Dublin, Ireland in April of 1742. When Handel composed the music of *Messiah* a year earlier, with librettist Charles Jennens, he could have hardly predicted how popular it would become.

Part of its popularity also came for the composition's libretto, which is mostly based on the Old Testament texts from the King James Bible dealing with the prophecies of Christ. Jennens also incorporated some parts of the New Testament that reflect Christ's miracles, death and glorification, as well as events in the Book of Revelation.

One of the signature sections of *Messiah* is the jubilant "Hallelujah Chorus," which concludes the second part of the three-part composition. This energy-driven section often brings people to their feet.

For Mercer, the *Messiah* is a treasured part of her repertoire. "It's one of my personal favourite pieces that I've been singing since I was very young," she said. "It's always such a joy to do it every year [...] everybody knows a little bit about it, whether they know anything about classical music or not, and it's something that ties into the whole Christmas experience for me," she added.

One of her favourite moments, is after the "Hallelujah Chorus," in the third part of the piece, when she sings an aria called, "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth." "It's the only aria that refers to the first person [...] it's the only piece that becomes very personal. And I really enjoy singing that piece because it's like I'm telling the story at that point," said Mercer, who performed at Royal Albert Hall in October of this year.

Mercer also has a new CD coming out in the spring of 2010, which will consist of 16th century early-Italian music by Francesca Caccini.

"She's kind of a very important figure not only in the late-Renaissance or early Baroque world, but because she's a female composer and one of the first that we know that wrote opera and that was highly esteemed amongst her male colleagues," Mercer explains. "It's very beautiful to sing it from a woman's point of view."

December is a busy month for Mercer because of the number of concerts performed during the holiday season, so she looks forward to spending it with her family in Ottawa. "All the concerts leading up the Christmas for me is like my ritual," she said. "So, I look forward to going home and experiencing that there."

---

Performances of TSO's *Messiah* are Dec. 16, 18-21 at Roy Thomson Hall. For more information or to buy tickets, go to: [www.tso.ca](http://www.tso.ca). For more information on Shannon Mercer, go to: [www.shannonmercer.com](http://www.shannonmercer.com)