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The Trinity Presbyterian Church in Palm Coast kicked the holiday season off with a sold-out crowd for Handel's "Messiah" on Sunday. The church's Chancel Choir was joined by guest soloists from Trinity Wall Street Church in New York City.

## A HANDEL ON CHRISTMAS

### Church choir's 'Messiah' performance packs in crowd

By MARK ESTES  
CORRESPONDENT

A sold-out crowd followed a centuries-old tradition and rose to their feet simultaneously for the Hallelujah Chorus during Sunday's performance of Handel's "Messiah" at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Palm Coast.

The tradition dates back to when King George II of England stood as the first notes of the Hallelujah Chorus were played, and following royal protocol, everyone at the concert rose with him.

"Messiah" is an oratorio in three parts written by Handel in London in 1741 that premiered in Dublin in April 1743. The uncut oratorio concentrates more on the Passion and Resurrection than Christmas, but Advent performances, such as Trinity's, usually consists of the first part followed by the Hallelujah Chorus from the end of the second part.

Trinity Presbyterian Church's Chancel Choir delighted the crowd with a performance that featured a distinguished cast of guest soloists from New York and Jacksonville. Last year's presentation was so well received that it made this year's production virtually a command performance.



Sunday's performance of Handel's "Messiah" produced a sold-out crowd at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Palm Coast.

Trinity director of music Linda Hodges said last year's initial event — where 200 people had to be turned away — gave organizers a plan for the second time around.

"We did it last year for the first time and it was an overwhelming response," she said. "We're only selling enough tickets for the seats we have in the church this year. Last year we didn't sell tickets because we had no idea it would be as popular as it was. Our church seats 564 and we miraculously got about 700 in and turned away another 200. We had about

a 100 people in the chapel just standing because we ran out of chairs. We had people sitting in the narthex on the floor. It was unbelievable."

Performing "Messiah" was something new for the 39-member choir last year, and required quite a bit of work.

"When we decided to do it I took a poll and the majority of the choir had never done any part of 'Messiah,'" Hodges said. "So we started from square one a year ago last summer and spent the entire summer learning it from the very beginning. This year we really

didn't start working on it until October and we just basically brushed it up with about 45 minutes out of every rehearsal."

Rodney Cleveland, director of music at Lakewood Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville and dean of the Jacksonville Chapter of the American Guild of Organists, accompanied the choir while Delphine Overfield, Trinity's organist, played the harpsichord. Guest soloists were Francesca Scott, also from Jacksonville, and Nacole Palmer, soprano, Timothy Hodges, tenor, and Charles Evans, baritone, all professional singers at the Trinity Wall Street Church in New York City. Trinity Wall Street was the site of the "Messiah's" New World premier in October 1770.

"I'm happy to have an 'in' in New York," Hodges said. "My son is one of the soloists at Trinity Wall Street, so they did it last year because they were friends of his and agreed to come down. They had such a good time they said they would come down again. We've been very lucky to get soloists of that caliber from that church with its history. They will be going back to perform 'Messiah' in New York next week."

Jan Roberts, Trinity's music administrative assistant,

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Trinity Presbyterian Church choral director Linda Hodges, left front, and guest soloists Timothy Hodges, Charles Evans, Francesca Scott and Nacole Palmer, clap for the church choir following the presentation of Handel's "Messiah" on Sunday.

## HANDEL

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seconded Hodges' sentiment.

"It is so amazing that our little church could put on this beautiful performance with these amazing soloists," she said.

The logistics for handling the travel arrangements can be a bit daunting. Hodges had

to arrange pickups at Orlando and Jacksonville airports the day before the performance, and a third drove down from a wedding in Georgia to arrive in the wee hours Sunday morning.

Why King George stood when he did is unknown, but explanations range from the prosaic, such as he needed to stretch his legs an hour into the performance or that his gout was bothering him, to the

sublime — he was so moved by the performance that he was impelled to rise to his feet.

An anecdote told of Handel's assistant illustrates the divine effect of the Hallelujah Chorus. The assistant is said to have walked into Handel's room to find him in tears. When asked what was wrong, Handel held up the score to this movement and said, "I thought I saw the face of God."