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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Baltimore, MD – Handel's infinitely renewable *Messiah* – a rare opportunity to hear *Messiah* with period instruments in honor of Handel's original sound ideal, plus a choice of two dates in two locations. As Baltimore's most durable holiday music tradition, this year's performances of *Messiah* mark Handel Choir's 75th anniversary of consecutive annual performances.

Handel's *Messiah*

Saturday 12 December at 8pm, St. Ignatius Church
740 North Calvert Street, Baltimore 21202

Sunday 13 December at 4:00pm, Church of the Redeemer Church
5603 North Charles Street, Baltimore 21210

Handel Choir of Baltimore
Handel Period Instrument Orchestra
Katharine Dain *soprano*
Ian Howell *countertenor*
Steven Brennfleck *tenor*
Craig Phillips *baritone*
Melinda O'Neal *conductor*

A pre-concert lecture takes place one hour before each concert, presented by Andrew Talle, Department of Musicology, Peabody Conservatory of The Johns Hopkins University.

Tickets \$45/\$35; students-at-door \$10. Tickets may be purchased online at www.handelchoir.org or by calling 1.800.838.3006 (ask for Event #76635, or by event title "Handel's *Messiah*"). For further information call 410.366.6544.

Distinguished guest vocal soloists Katharine Dain (soprano), Ian Howell (countertenor), Steven Brennfleck (tenor) and Craig Phillips (bass) join Handel Choir from New York and

Philadelphia. Each singer is acclaimed for his/her stylistic performance of baroque music. **Melinda O'Neal**, now in her sixth season with Handel Choir, comes to Baltimore following twenty-five years of conducting the Handel Society of Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH where she continues as professor of music teaching conducting and music theory. A Maryland native, she received her masters and doctorate in conducting from the Indiana University School of Music. Tim Smith of *The Baltimore Sun* wrote in December 2004, "Melinda O'Neal, in her debut as artistic director and conductor of the Handel Choir, drew appealing intimacy and clarity from these forces...this was historically informed, but never dry, music-making." And in May 2005 "...in a particularly inspired move, O'Neal decided to supplement the chorus with an orchestra of period instruments, providing a touch of historical coloring and perspective."

HANDEL CHOIR OF BALTIMORE

An oratorio ensemble presenting baroque, classic, and early romantic works with period-instrument orchestras, Handel Choir also performs modern repertoire, commissioned works and joins in collaboration with orchestras and opera companies in the Baltimore-Washington area. In 2008, *The Baltimore Sun's* Tim Smith called the Choir "a potent chorus" and wrote, "Two Bach cantatas received dynamic performances from the choristers," and he lauded Handel Choir's "stylish" period instrument orchestra.

Recent collaborations include performances with Baltimore Chamber Orchestra of Fauré's Requiem, Vaughan Williams' *Five Mystical Songs*, Jonathan Leshnoff's *Requiem for the Fallen* commissioned by Handel Choir, and appearances with Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. Handel's *Ode for the Birthday of Queen Anne* presented with Pro Musica Rara and Peabody Early Music was called by *The Baltimore Sun* "... a vivid, vital performance...elegantly conducted by Melinda O'Neal."

During Handel Choir's 75-year history, performance of Handel's *Messiah* has been an uninterrupted annual tradition, expanded in 2009 to two performances with period instruments. Handel Choir also sponsors Chandos Singers, a 16-20 voice ensemble, which will perform in American Opera Theatre's staged version of Handel's oratorio *Jephtha* in April 2010.

BACKGROUND ON PERFORMANCE TRADITIONS OF *MESSIAH*

Handel Choir's pairing of period instruments and smaller vocal forces creates a special color and transparency, in honor of Handel's performances of the work in 1740s and -50s England. Handel rarely performed *Messiah* in the same way, from the première in Dublin in 1742 to annual performances at London's Foundling Hospital or the three performances he led in 1759, the year of his death. He varied the content to suit the occasion, sometimes re-writing arias or recitatives and assigning them to different voices to showcase the singers he had available. Because *Messiah* was so popular in England, Mozart arranged it in 1788 for performances in Vienna, adding woodwinds, more specific dynamic markings, a German translation, modernized phrasings and larger performing forces. But *Messiah* fell into obscurity; it was rediscovered in the 1820s and subsequently performed with expanded "romantic" forces and performance conventions. In 1834 there were 644 performers in Westminster Abbey for the Royal Music Festival, and for later renditions in the gigantic Crystal Palace there were 3,000 performers and 10,000 in the audience.

Handel Choir's performances will not be authentic by virtue of simply returning to smaller performing forces and using period instruments, for such a thing as authenticity is not attainable. But we hope our audiences will enjoy hearing this work in a performance closer to those of Handel's time, all the while sharing in the "infinite self-renewal" of this marvelous work.

RECENT REVIEWS OF HANDEL CHOIR

on the Handel Choir's *O Eternal Fire* concert

"Melinda O'Neal has steadily and rapidly honed this formerly uneven ensemble into quite a potent chorus. The Handel and Bach program ... found the singers maintaining solid intonation, clarity of articulation and sensitivity to the shape of phrases. There was a telling sign early on of how much O'Neal has done for the group — the firm, colorful way individual voices started off the contrapuntal flurry of the Alleluia in Handel's *Coronation Anthem*, "The King shall rejoice." That was the kind of detail that would not have been so beautifully realized in the pre-O'Neal days that I experienced. Two Bach cantatas received dynamic performances from the choristers, who were backed stylishly by a period instrument orchestra. ... It was a thoughtfully constructed, entertaining program delivered with an informed sense of historic style.

— Tim Smith, *The Baltimore Sun Clef Notes*, November 10, 2008

on the Handel Choir's collaboration with the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra

"Handel Choir artistic director Melinda O'Neal took the podium for the *Five Mystical Songs* by Vaughan Williams.... O'Neal was adept at bringing out the unmistakable inner glow that animates nearly all of his music and that flows with particular power in this score.... The chorus, which sounds more confident and cohesive every time I hear it, demonstrated admirable sensitivity."

— Tim Smith, *The Baltimore Sun Clef Notes*, October 20, 2008

on the top fifteen classical music concerts of the Baltimore/Washington 2006-2007 season

In Tim Smith's review of the 2006-2007 classical music season, the Handel Choir was one of fifteen "highest-highpoints." Smith stated, "the Handel Choir of Baltimore, Pro Musica Rara, Peabody Renaissance Ensemble and Baltimore Baroque Band collaborat[ed] on a vivid, vital performance of Handel's *Ode for the Birthday of Queen Anne*, elegantly conducted by Melinda O'Neal."

— Tim Smith, *The Baltimore Sun*, June 19, 2007

on the Handel Choir of Baltimore's performance of Haydn's *The Creation*

"The turnout — and the performance level — reaffirmed the strides the ensemble has been making in recent years. ... Melinda O'Neal, the choir's artistic director, shaped Haydn's wonderfully descriptive music with an ear for drama and flow. Her choristers were attentive to subtleties of articulation, phrasing and balance. The orchestra of period instruments ... played with vibrant color. The guest soloists brought vocal refinement and eloquence of line to their assignments."

— Tim Smith, *The Baltimore Sun*, May 1, 2007

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