

# tradition

## OF MORE THAN 80 YEARS

*Handel's 'Messiah' may be billed as the 38th annual performance, but its history at DC is far greater*

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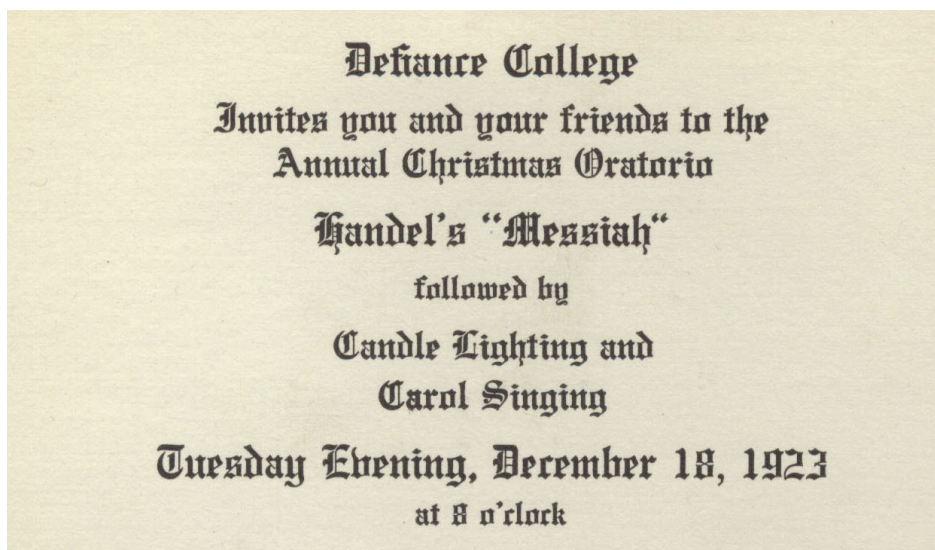
While the 2009 performance of Handel's *Messiah* is billed as the 38th annual performance, the beloved work has an even longer, if non-consecutive, history of Defiance College-sponsored performances.

The first mention in the college archives is from 86 years ago, in the form of a program from the December 18, 1923 performance. Singers were the College Choral Society, with Blossom Jean Wilcox as the "directress," and two names that loom large in DC history, Flossie Whitney and Elizabeth Latchaw, accompanied the singers on piano and organ. Most of the Christmas selections from the work were sung, minus the bass solos, ending with "Hallelujah."

The next year, 1924, three of the soloists were Defiance College students, and this time the bass solos were included. Upon exiting, the audience was treated to the sight

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of lit candles in every window of the college buildings. Current harpsichordist Carolyn Small remembers this tradition continuing into the late 1930's.



Early programs from this era assumed that the audience may not know proper musical etiquette. Programs included a notice: "The audience is kindly requested to refrain from applause during the program, and to stand during the singing of the Hallelujah Chorus."

After a hiatus in 1929 and 1930, *Messiah* reappeared in 1931, with soloists from the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, imported along with director Edgar Gosney. Sixty people formed the chorus, with the audience filling every seat in Weston Hall's auditorium, plus an overflow.

Nineteen thirty-two was the first time the program credited "sung by the combined College and City Choral Societies." It was also the first time the performance was given in the Community Auditorium. Clearly, the overflow crowd in the previous year convinced the organizers that a larger venue was needed.

No reference was found in the DC archives for a performance in 1933, but it was performed again in 1934 and 35. In 1936 and 37, the programs for December concerts list carols and other sacred music comprising the first half of the concert, and selections from *Messiah* as the second half.

Nineteen thirty was the first program listing for Mary and Keith Tustison as soprano and bass soloists. Their daughter Sally Myers sings in the present incarnation of the chorus, and she is not alone in being a second-generation singer. Other names well-known to DC alumni of the era were also involved that year. W. Oscar Jones continued his 1930's reign as director, Robert Compo was the bass soloist, and Richard Phillips the tenor that year.

Performances continued from 1940 to 1942, but after that, there was no mention in the archives again until 1952. A brief article in the student newspaper, the Tom-Tom, announced that DC Professor George

Arkebauer would lead the newly-organized Defiance Choral Society in “a revival of a tradition in Defiance which has been suspended since 1949.” Arkebauer is most noted in DC history for being director of the college chorus which had the privilege of singing for Dwight Eisenhower’s inauguration in 1953.

The publicity for the 1953 performance of *Messiah* stated that Arkebauer would conduct the work in both Fort Wayne and Defiance, with members of the Fort Wayne Philharmonic Orchestra playing the accompaniment.

Nineteen fifty-four is the first year that Carolyn Small was mentioned in connection with the Defiance *Messiah* performances. She was listed then as a member of the Defiance Choral Society. The 1955 publicity lists her as accompanist, but she says that she never played during the performances which Prof. Arkebauer conducted, only serving as rehearsal pianist.

The 1956 performance was notable for the small audience, a result of poor winter weather that day. Only a small number of Defiance residents managed to brave the snow to hear the soloists imported from Detroit, Illinois, and Windsor, Ontario.

The 1957 publicity mentions that George Arkebauer had conducted the work for 21 years for the Fort Wayne Lutheran Choral Society. It was billed as the “sixth annual” performance in Defiance. The audience that year was estimated at 300.

No records for performances from 1958 to 1961 exist. Nineteen sixty-two marked the first time that Carolyn Small accompanied the singers during the actual performance. That year was also interesting in that there were two performances. The Easter section of the work was presented in April, and the Christmas parts in December. Naturally, the crowd favorite “Hallelujah” was included in both performances. This scheme of presenting it in two parts was repeated again in 1974.

The next program found in the archives was for a performance in 1964 by “The College-Community Choral Union and Orchestra.” Charles Partchey conducted the orchestra, which included strings and some wind instruments not used in the present incarnation, such as French horn, oboe, and trombone. Edwin Foot directed the singers that year.

*Messiah* was performed again in 1966 in the College Community Center. Nineteen sixty eight saw the first performance in the newly-built St. John’s United Church

of Christ. Next, an undated program was found in an archive file marked “1969/70,” so likely there was a performance between 1968 and the next one found, dated 1972. That performance began the present-day series, the first one listing Richard Stroede as director, with Carolyn Small on the organ. The organ-only accompaniment continued until 1996, when Stroede established a new tradition using harpsichord, string players from Toledo, and area wind instrumentalists.

The community involvement continues today, as all interested singers from the

area are invited to participate. The strings and trumpet performances are paid for by donations, with the majority coming from the singers themselves, as it represents the only chance many of them have to sing with a good orchestra. *Messiah* performances have provided as much enjoyment for the singers and musicians as they have for audiences over the last 86 years. They are part of Defiance College’s long tradition of providing arts experiences for the college family and surrounding community. ♦

**Defiance College**  
**Christmas Service**

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**The Messiah**  
by **George Frederick Handel**

given by

**The College Choral Society**  
**Blossom Jean Wilcox, Directress**

followed by

**The Eighth Annual**  
**Candle-Lighting**  
and  
**Carol-Singing**

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**Weston Hall**  
**Tuesday Evening, December 18, 1923**  
at 8 o'clock

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**SOLOISTS**

**BLOSSOM JEAN WILCOX, Soprano**  
**MRS. J. A. DEINDORFER, JR., Contralto**  
**DONALD FOLTZ, Tenor**

**Flossie Emeline Whitney at the Piano**  
**Elizabeth Rimer Latchaw at the Organ**