



# Traditions

2025-2026 Season

VALDOSTA  
SYMPHONY  
ORCHESTRA



Good evening,

As our Valdosta Symphony Orchestra steps into its 36th season, I am both honored and delighted that you have chosen to spend your time supporting the Arts. More than just an award-winning symphony, the VSO represents a special relationship between education and community, students and professionals, and artists and audiences. The VSO is the perfect embodiment of why we do what we do at Valdosta State University, and it would not be possible without your support. As artists, educators, and performers, the College of the Arts prides itself on growing our students while pouring into our community—the VSO allows us to do just that. It is a testament to the collaborative spirit of the Arts and the role that the Arts play in a thriving community.



I would like to express my gratitude to our attendees, season ticket holders, generous donors, and sponsors. Your investment in the Valdosta Symphony Orchestra reflects a shared belief in the transformative power of music and the value of the Arts. It is because of you and your generosity that the VSO can continue.

I would also like to thank our outstanding faculty and student performers, the Executive Director, and the Director/Conductor of the VSO. Their passion for music drives the success of this enterprise; they are truly the unsung heroes of each performance.

Many thanks, again, for choosing to spend your evening with us. Enjoy!

*Nicole B. Cox*

**Nicole B. Cox, Ph. D.**  
Dean, College of the Arts

## Concert Sponsor

# Houston and Tittle Family

Mary Erneste Houston of Nashville, Georgia, was a founding member of the Valdosta Symphony Guild and member of the Valdosta Symphony Board. When the Valdosta Symphony Orchestra was just in the planning stages, Mrs. Houston heard of these plans. As a music lover and talented musician herself, she was thrilled at the possibility of a symphony orchestra in South Georgia. She knew that the orchestra would require financial support to become a reality, so she asked her son, N. G. Houston III, to become a sponsor. His immediate reply was, "Mama, you know I will!" The Valdosta Symphony Orchestra gained its first sponsor, and the Houston and Tittle family have remained sponsors for all 36 years of the VSO.

# About the Music Director



Photo: Paul Leavy

## Howard Hsu, conductor

Howard Hsu is the Music Director of the Valdosta (GA) Symphony Orchestra, which performs a vital cultural role in the South Georgia region, and he also serves as Professor of Music and Director of Orchestra Studies at Valdosta State University. Under his leadership, the Valdosta Symphony was selected as the 2014 winner of the American Prize in Orchestral Performance (community division), and has had performances aired statewide on Georgia Public Broadcasting Radio's "Midday Music," "Orchestras of Georgia," and "Front

Row Georgia" programs. Hsu has performed with the Canadian Brass, Robert McDuffie, Simone Dinnerstein, Jennifer Frautschi, Wendy Warner, Christine Brewer, Rachel Barton Pine, Orion Weiss, Stanford Olsen, Alexander Ghindin, Alexander Schimpf, Awadagin Pratt, Elena Urioste, the Empire Brass, Chris Brubeck, Jon Nakamatsu, Geneva Lewis, Maria Ioudenitch, Melissa White, Natasha Paremski, Kelly Hall-Tompkins, Katia Skanavi, Amy Schwartz Moretti, and the Melodica Men. He conducted the world premiere of James Oliverio's Trumpet Concerto No. 1: *World House*; the U.S. premiere of Ned McGowan's Concerto for iPad and Orchestra (*Rotterdam Concerto 2*); and the Georgia premieres of Jessie Montgomery's *Rounds*, Jeff Beal's *Body in Motion*, James MacMillan's *Larghetto for Orchestra*, Fernande Decruck's Sonata for Saxophone and Orchestra, several Debussy/Matthews *Preludes*, and Jonathan Bailey Holland's *Motor City Dance Mix*. Through the Symphony's Youth Concert Series, he has introduced live classical music to thousands of children in the area.

Howard Hsu has appeared as guest conductor with the Hartford (CT), Fox Valley (WI), Wyoming, Mankato (MN), Macon (GA), Johns Creek (GA), and New Britain (CT) Symphonies, as well as the Bronx (NY) Arts Ensemble, with whom he conducted the world premiere of Eleanor Cory's *O'Keeffe's Flora*. He was a Visiting Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Connecticut and Associate Conductor of the University of Connecticut Symphony Orchestra, and was Visiting Instructor of Music and Director of the Orchestra at Connecticut College.

Howard Hsu has worked closely with groups dedicated to training young musicians, including the Lake George (NY) Opera Festival, where he served as Associate Conductor and Music Director of the Apprentice opera scenes concerts. Hsu has conducted the Pennsylvania Music Educators Association All State Orchestra, Georgia Music Educators Association All State 9/10 Orchestra, and the Georgia Governor's Honors Program Orchestra and String Ensemble. Through the Hartford Symphony's Mentoring Program he served as a Master Teaching Artist, and was a faculty member with The Harlem (NY) School of the Arts. Hsu received his D.M.A. from the University of Connecticut, his M.M. from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and his B.S. from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

[www.howardhsuconductor.com](http://www.howardhsuconductor.com)

# ABOUT THE CONDUCTOR

## Dr. Clell E. Wright, conductor

Dr. Clell E. Wright serves on the faculty of Valdosta State University as Director of Choral Activities where he gives direction to five choral ensembles and teaches classes in Choral Conducting and Choral Repertoire. Prior to his appointment in 2019, Dr. Wright served for 18 years on the faculty of Hardin-Simmons University where his choirs toured regionally, nationally, and internationally. Dr. Wright's choirs have performed for the American Choral Directors Association and the Georgia Music Educators Association and have been invited to perform in such prestigious venues as St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, the Dom zu St. Jakob in Innsbruck, the Jesuitenkirche zu Heilige Dreifaltigkeit in Innsbruck, and Cannongate Kirk in Edinburgh. His choirs have also been invited to sing for Mass at San Marco Basilica in Venice and Evensong at Glasgow Cathedral in Scotland. In June of 2019, Dr. Wright has also served as a conductor for Mid-America Production's Italian Choral Festival at the Duomo in Florence, Italy and in their Carnegie Hall Festival in New York City.



Dr. Wright has conducted numerous large-scale choral orchestral works, including performances of the Mozart Requiem, the Fauré Requiem, the Poulenc Gloria, Haydn's Creation and Handel's Messiah among many others. He has also prepared choral works for performances by the Abilene Philharmonic Orchestra, the Fort Worth Chamber Orchestra, the Albany Symphony Orchestra and the Valdosta Symphony Orchestra. He currently serves as Chorus Master for the VSO.

Dr. Wright is active as a choral clinician and has been a guest conductor for several All-Region choirs and Honor Choirs. He has also given presentations at conferences of the American Choral Directors Association, Texas Music Educators Association, Georgia Music Educators Association, and Texas Choral Directors Association.

Dr. Wright holds degrees from Samford University, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and the University of Missouri, Kansas City Conservatory.



# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

## Susan Boddie, soprano

Susan Boddie, soprano was described as giving a performance that was, “otherworldly,” by New York music critic Joseph Dalton, noting “the piece that so transfixed me” in reference to her singing “Apparition” by George Crumb. Dr. Boddie has performed opera roles with Opera Nova Scotia, Westchester’s Newman Theatre,



Boston Summer Theatre, and New York’s Cultural Arts Playhouse. She has performed Musical Theatre roles in New York, Boston, and throughout eastern Canada. Roles included Susanna in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Fiordiligi in *Così fan Tutte*, Nanetta in *Falstaff*, Mother Abbess in *The Sound of Music*, Emma in *Jekyll and Hyde*, Lily in *Secret Garden* and Narrator in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. She has also been a featured soprano soloist in Bach’s *Weihnachtsoratorium*, Beethoven’s Choral Fantasy, Handel’s *Messiah*, Mozart’s *Requiem*, *Coronation Mass*, and *Vesperae Solennes de Confessore*, Faure’s *Requiem*, Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, and Poulenc’s *Gloria* - as well as frequent recital and

concert appearances. Dr. Boddie proudly serves as Assistant Professor of Voice and Voice Area Chair for Valdosta State University teaching in the Music, and Theatre and Dance departments. She holds degrees from the New England Conservatory, Manhattan School of Music and the University of Calgary.

## Lynnette Chambers, mezzo soprano

Dr. Lynnette Chambers, mezzo-soprano, is a native of Houston, Texas, and has just completed her 22nd year of teaching as a voice professor at Hardin-Simmons



University. In addition to her School of Music duties, Dr. Chambers divides her time between homeschooling her son and performing. She received a D.M.A and M.M. degree from The Ohio State University and a B.M.E. degree from Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Dr. Chambers has performed with such organizations as the Las Vegas Philharmonic, Arkansas Symphony, Valley Symphony Orchestra, Abilene Opera, Abilene Philharmonic, Lake George Opera, Muddy River Opera, and Des Moines Metro Opera. She won “Singer of the Year” at the Texoma Regional NATS convention and was a National Semi-Finalist in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Awards.

## Samuel Cook, tenor

Samuel Cook is a native of Port Arthur, Texas. He received his undergraduate degree from the Johns Hopkins University's Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, Maryland. He finished his graduate degree studies at Indiana University, in Bloomington, Indiana. Professor Cook continued his vocal training in Milan, Italy.

Samuel is an international performing artist and has sung as opera and concert soloist throughout Europe, South America, South Africa, & The USA. He was engaged as Tenor Soloist with the Graz City Opera, in Graz Austria, and Bregenzer Festival, Wiesbaden Opera, Frankfurt Opera. He is the 1st Prize winner of the Francisco Vinas Vocal Competition In Barcelona Spain. 3rd Prize in The Munich International Voice competition.



His most recent engagements include performing as tenor soloist in Handel's Messiah and Haydn's Creation, both with the Memphis Symphony Orchestra. Mr. Cook has also received international and critical acclaim for his passionate and stirring performances of Negro Spirituals. He was the featured artist for the 2023 Martin Luther King celebration in Winston Salem N. Carolina.

Prof. Cook is the former director of the Abilene Christian University Opera Theater. He is currently founder and director of the ACU Gospel ensemble at ACU in Abilene.

After residing in Austria & Germany where he was engaged as soloist for over ten years, Mr. Cook, and his wife Jean, moved to Abilene, TX. He is currently Associate Professor of Voice/Artist in Residence, and Director of the ACU Gospel Choir at Abilene Christian University.

## Bradley Sowell, baritone

Dr. Bradley Sowell, baritone, has performed in various operas with roles including Guglielmo (Cosi fan tutte), Buffo (Der Schauspieler), Count Almaviva (Le nozze di Figaro), Sam (Trouble in Tahiti), Sir Roderic (Ruddigore), Dater #12 (Speed Dating Tonight), and Bartolo (Le nozze di Figaro). As a baritone soloist, he has performed with orchestra for Faure's Requiem, Handel's Messiah, and Orff's Carmina Burana, among others. He has also performed recitals and given masterclasses across the country.

Dr. Sowell is currently an Assistant Professor of Voice at Valdosta State University. Before this, he was a limited-term lecturer at Georgia College & State University. He has taught major and non-major voice lessons, aural skills, diction, music appreciation, vocal methods, and opera scenes. Additionally, he served as music director for a fully staged production of the musical Cabaret by John Kander and Fred Ebb. He also served as a vocal coach for the Austrian American Mozart Academy in the summer of 2023. Dr. Sowell received his Doctor of Musical Arts (Vocal Performance) from the University of Memphis, his Master of Music (Vocal Performance) from the University of South Dakota, and his Bachelor of Music Education (Choral Music Education) from Georgia College.



# About the Assistant Conductor

## Daniel Marcos Rodriguez



Daniel Marcos Rodriguez is an orchestral and opera conductor from Miami, FL. He began conducting at sixteen years old under Dr. Adalberto Yanes. He embarked to sharpen his skills at Miguel Harth-Bedoya’s Conducting Institute for three consecutive years. Consequently, Daniel has been a conducting fellow in numerous international workshops and received an Honorable Mention for the Respighi Prize in Conducting.

Daniel made his debut with Opera Orlando as their Associate Conductor in 2022 and remained for the 2023 - 2024 season contributing to numerous productions including *Tosca*, *Frida*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and was part of the fourth ever production of Philip Glass’s and Robert Moran’s *The Juniper Tree*. He currently serves as their Orchestral Librarian. In 2024, Daniel was appointed as the Assistant Conductor of the International Opera Festival of Morelia.

Daniel continues to be an effective conductor who truthfully communicates the intentions of the composer in order to inspire empathy within himself and the musicians he leads, while creating more access for all audiences to experience the power of classical music.

### CONCERT ETIQUETTE

#### PLEASE DO

- Turn off your pager and watch alarms.
- Consult the program for the number of movements in a piece to know when to clap at the end.
- Unwrap your cough drop before the music starts so it's ready if you need it.
- Cover your mouth to cough/sneeze to muffle the sound.
- Put your cell phone on silent.

#### PLEASE DON'T

- Talk or whisper during the performance.
- Sing, or tap your fingers/feet to the music.
- Bring young children to the concert – our Youth concerts are specially geared towards developing attention spans.
- Leave or take your seat during the music (unless you did not follow the previous rule - in that case, please escort your disruptive child out as quickly as possible). Please wait until you hear applause.
- Clap between movements thinking it's the end of the piece. When in doubt, wait for others to clap first.
- Use flash photography or recording devices during the concert (these actions are illegal in this hall).



# The Valdosta Symphony Orchestra 36<sup>th</sup> Season

Howard Hsu, Music Director

## “MESSIAH”

February 14, 2026

*This concert is sponsored by Houston and Tittle Family.*

### **Messiah, HWV 56**

George Friderick Handel (1685–1759)

#### **Part the First | 50 mins**

Overture (orchestra)  
Comfort ye my people (tenor recitative)  
Every valley shall be exalted (tenor aria)  
And the glory of the Lord (chorus)  
Thus Saith the Lord (bass recitative)  
But who may abide the day of his coming (mezzo soprano aria)  
And he shall purify (chorus)  
Behold, a virgin shall conceive (mezzo soprano recitative)  
O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion (mezzo soprano aria and chorus)  
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth (baritone recitative)  
The people that walked in darkness (baritone aria)  
For unto us a child is born (chorus)  
Pifa (pastoral symphony – orchestra)  
There were shepherds abiding in the field (soprano recitative)  
And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them (soprano recitative)  
And the angel said unto them (soprano recitative)  
And suddenly there was with the angel (soprano recitative)  
Glory to God (chorus)  
Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion (soprano aria)  
Then shall the eyes of the blind (soprano recitative)  
He shall feed his flock (mezzo soprano and soprano aria)  
His yoke is easy (chamber chorus)

\* \* \* \* \* INTERMISSION \* \* \* \* \*

#### **Part the Second | 36 mins**

Behold the Lamb of God (chorus)  
He was despised (mezzo soprano aria)  
Surely he hath borne our griefs (chorus)  
And with his stripes we are healed (chorus)  
All we like sheep have gone astray (chorus)  
All they that see him laugh him to scorn (tenor recitative)  
He trusted in God (chorus)  
Thy rebuke hath broken his heart (tenor recitative)  
Behold and see if there be any sorrow (tenor aria)  
He was cut off out of the land of the living (tenor recitative)  
But thou didst not leave his soul in hell (tenor aria)  
Lift up your heads, O ye gates (chorus)  
Hallelujah (chorus)

(Continued on page 10)

## **Part the Third | 28 minutes**

*I know that my redeemer liveth* (soprano aria)  
*Since by man came death* (chorus)  
*Behold I tell you a mystery* (baritone recitative)  
*The trumpet shall sound* (baritone aria)  
*Then shall be brought to pass* (mezzo soprano recitative)  
*O death, where is thy sting* (mezzo soprano and baritone duet)  
*But thanks be to God* (chorus)  
*If God be for us* (soprano aria)  
*Worthy is the Lamb that was slain* (chorus)

Susan Boddie, soprano

Lynnette Chambers, mezzo soprano

Samuel Cook, tenor

Bradley Sowell, baritone

Clell E. Wright, chorus master and conductor

Valdosta State University Chamber Singers

Valdosta State University Concert Choir

Valdosta State University Musical Union

Carra Bell and Craig Heacox, Assistant Choral Conductors



## **Sponsors**

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Allan & Joan Dear   Valdosta Symphony Guild

# THE VALDOSTA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

**Howard Hsu**, *Music Director • Lougenia and William Gabard Chair*

**Clell Wright**, *Chorus Master • Daniel Marcos Rodriguez*, *Assistant Conductor*

## Violin I

Kristin Pfeifer Yu,  
*Concertmaster*  
**Leona Strickland**  
**Hudson Chair**

Stacey Sharpe  
Petra Bubanja  
Edward Charity  
Alex Reshetnichenko  
Sergio Sabillon  
Kevin Chaney  
Alysia Johnson  
Jacqueline Hagen  
Marina Volynets

## Violin II

Erika Sciascia, *Principal*  
Catherine Yara,  
*Acting Principal*  
Sophia Han  
Elma Groetsch  
Livia Vieira  
Jennifer Clyde  
Aubrey Lawson  
Cale Brandon  
Ethan Cannon

## Viola

Laurel Yu, *Principal*  
**Brantley and Barbara**  
**Jenkins Chair**

Miriam Tellechea  
Hunter Sanchez  
Tarcis Ostiano  
Justin Pham  
Benjamin Suarez

## Violoncello

Kathryn Troy, *Principal*  
**Daniel and Carolyn**  
**Coleman Chair**

Steve Taylor  
Lee Holbrook

## Contrabass

Tod Leavitt, *Principal*  
Gabriel Monticello,  
*Assistant Principal*  
Rene De Leon  
Vadim Volynets  
Samuel James

## Flute

Sarah Jane Young, *Principal*  
Ana Ribot Dominguez  
Elizabeth Downs  
Mackenzie Taylor

## Oboe

Sherwood Wise, *Principal*  
**Allan and Joan Dear Chair**  
Jillian Camwell,  
*Acting Principal*  
Lindsay Wood

## Clarinet

Julie Detweiler, *Principal*  
**Kay Jennett Chair**

Jeriah Howard  
Tyson Huff  
Dennis Savoie  
Christian Windish

## Bassoon

Shannon Lowe,  
*Acting Principal*  
Sherwood Wise,  
*Acting Principal*

## Horn

Matthew Monroe, *Principal*  
Alex Burch  
Theo Horton

Jacob Posey  
Caden Powell

## Trumpet

Paul Morelli, *Principal*  
**Valdosta Symphony**  
**Guild Chair**

Johnny Dixon  
Brody Johnson  
Samuel Jones  
Noah Tomas

## Trombone

Douglas Farwell, *Principal*  
**Jerry Jennett Chair**  
Riley Carr  
Natalie Savoie

## Bass Trombone

Michael Lurie

## Tuba

Ryan Sorenson, *Principal*  
Justin McKinney

## Timpani

Ryan Smith, *Principal*

## Percussion

**Bette and Bernard**  
**Bechtel Chair**

Jakalin Bryant  
Ramiyah Fulton  
Jacob Walden  
Zachary Whitesides

## Keyboard

Valerie Holton Smith,  
*Principal*  
**Cecil "Monty" and**  
**Marilyn Miller Chair**

## Chorus Spring 2026

### Soprano

Sienna Bettis (CC)  
Carra Bell (CS)  
Lily Burnham (CC)  
Bryanna Elliott (CS)  
Kelsie Everson (MU)  
Donna Farwell (MU)  
Barbie Floyd (MU)  
Lillian Gregory (CS)  
Alexia Griffin (CC)  
Allyson Huneycutt (MU)  
Hannah Johnson-Mauldin (CC)  
Hanae Kanno (MU)  
Laurie Lane  
Isis Lorenzo (CC)  
Ava Peebles (CS)  
Diamond Poole (CC)  
Debbie, Ragans (MU)

Jenna Reed (CS)  
Alexandra Salazar-Cox (MU)  
Karire Sanchez (MU)  
Mia Sanchez (MU)  
Jada Sanders (CS CC)  
Julie Savoie (MU)  
Anna-Marie Scherr (MU CC)  
Kayla Strickland (CC)  
Danarieza Villa (CC)  
Katlyn Vinson (CS)  
Liyah Wells (CS)  
Britney White (CS)

### Alto

Jillian Abarca (CS)  
Alessia Aristhomene (CC)  
Jordyn Austin (MU)

Natalee Ballangee (CC)  
Syniah Coleman (CS)  
Lenese Colson (MU)  
Denise Dupras (MU)  
Anaiyah Edwards (CS)  
Shanya Garnett (CS)  
Caroline Goodwin (MU)  
Kayla Griffin (CS)  
Zenobia Harris (CS)  
Sierra Helms (CS MU)  
Aili Jo Johnson (CS)  
Jenna-Marie Melvin (CC)  
Akira Montgomery  
Alana Pablo (CC)  
Elle Perryman (CC MU)  
Patrina Rogillio (CC)  
Debbie Stephen (MU)  
Ella Stephenson (MU)

Hannah Sutherland (CC)  
Alexandria Willis (CC)

### Tenor

Pedro Arce (MU)  
Andrew Baker (MU)  
Jason Bennett (CS)  
Bradley Dennis (MU)  
Jaden Giles (CS)  
Aryn Herndon (MU)  
Jan Hobson (MU)  
Stephen Holman (MU)  
Tyler Hunt (CS)  
Cameron Parker (CS)  
Forrest Parker (MU)  
Sarah Riddle (MU)  
Ian Rumley (CS)

(Continued on Page 12.)

## Chorus Spring 2026 *Continued*

Chris Rutland (MU)  
Ed Self (MU)  
AJ Shaw (CS)  
Brad Stephenson (MU)  
Jamyen Williams (CS)  
Christian Windish (MU)  
Yakov Woldman (MU)

**Bass**  
Shawn Ault (MU)  
Ethan Bailey (CS)  
Bradley Cox (MU)  
William Burnett (MU)  
Craig Heacox (CS)  
Jerry Jennett (CC MU)

Austin Newbern (CS)  
Dhani Rhodes (CS)  
Walter Sinkler (CS)  
Don Thieme (MU)  
Ryan Tuff (CS)  
Robert Wallace (MU)  
Donavan Wells (CS CC)

Roosevelt Williams (CC)  
Bryan Wright (MU)  
Kenneth-Wright-Gross (CC)  
Issa Young (MU)

CS - Chamber Singers

CC - Concert Choir

MU - Musical Union

## Valdosta Symphony Orchestra

### ABOUT THE MUSIC

by Alan M. Rothenberg

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#### “Let us Sing of Greater Things” — Handel’s *Messiah*

On the January 22, 2026, episode of the television game show *Jeopardy!*, the Final Jeopardy answer was “A word-book for the London premiere of this work began with the quote *Majora Canamus*, ‘Let us sing of greater things.’” Esther Crookshank, a musicologist specializing in church music, writes that the inclusion of this quote from the Roman poet Virgil indicates the librettist “was stating emphatically: ‘We are about to sing of something infinitely higher and greater than all this world’s wisdom and enlightened human reason can offer.’” The work in question? The oratorio that became George Frederic Handel’s greatest work, *Messiah*.

The details and chronology of George Frederic Handel’s early years are difficult to establish; most of the information we have is from John Mainwaring, Handel’s first biographer, but his accounts are generally considered unreliable. Handel was born in 1685 in Halle, a city near Leipzig. His father was a barber and was not in favor of the small amount of musical instruction his son received while attending school. However, the young Handel must have received some training—around 1692 Duke Johann Adolf I of Saxe-Weissenfels heard young Handel’s organ playing and convinced his father of the boy’s talent. Handel studied organ and composition with a local organist and entered the University of Halle in 1702. But the following year he moved to Hamburg, obtaining a position as a violinist and harpsichordist in an orchestra. He also wrote four operas. By 1706 he was in Italy, though the circumstances of that move are unclear. Handel achieved opera successes in Florence, Rome, and Venice.

#### A Pragmatic Musician and Businessman

Handel settled in London in 1712, becoming a naturalized British subject in 1727 and stayed in England for the rest of his life. He brought to London an expertise in Italian-style opera, and, capitalizing on the popularity of this form, enjoyed the considerable income that his forty operas brought him. But by 1735 the public’s desire for opera had declined—Fredrick the Great, the Crown Prince of Prussia and a composer of no small talent, wrote that “Handel’s great days are over, his inspiration is exhausted, and his taste behind the fashion.”

Nearly bankrupt and in poor health, the composer devised a plan: since performing opera during Lent was prohibited in London, he began presenting concert performances of oratorios. Consisting of separate “numbers”—arias, choruses, recitatives—and based on biblical stories, these oratorios were essentially operas without the theatrical trappings of opera. Knowing that the English loved grand chorus numbers and easily understood songs (tastes that contributed to the success of Gilbert and Sullivan over one hundred years later), his popularity began to rise again.

#### An Unsolicited Text

The idea of an oratorio on the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus did not originate with Handel. One of the composer’s frequent collaborators during this time was Charles Jennens (1700–1773). A wealthy landowner, art collector, and confirmed bachelor, Jennens amassed a large collection

of European art and owned many musical manuscripts, including an early copy of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. He was particularly supportive of Handel; Jennens even commissioned a portrait of the composer and provided him with libretti for a number of oratorios. Jennens frequently made "suggestions" and corrections to Handel's music. At some point in the late 1730s Jennens gave Handel a libretto consisting entirely of scripture quotations from the King James translation, carefully ordered and divided into three major sections. In July 1741, Jennens wrote to a friend his hope that Handel "will lay out his whole genius and skill upon it, that the composition may excel all his former compositions, as the subject excels every other subject."

## The Birth of *Messiah*

The following year, Handel received an invitation to present a series of concerts in Dublin. Using Jennens' text, Handel composed *Messiah* over twenty-four days, and the April 13, 1742 first performance in Dublin, staged as a benefit for hospital charities, was quite a success, but *Messiah* was slow to take hold after the first performances in London the following year, mainly because the London clergy considered it unseemly to present a piece with sacred text in a theater. This objection was never raised with Handel's previous works on biblical texts presented in these venues. But *Messiah* was the first oratorio to include text from the New Testament—the previous ones used only texts from the "Jewish" Old Testament. Handel himself, wary of the Church's reaction, usually referred to the piece in advertisements and publications not by name but as "The Sacred Oratorio."

Handel presided over thirty-six performances of *Messiah* until his death in 1759. A thoroughly pragmatic composer, Handel often revised pieces to fit the circumstances at hand, transposing arias for particular singers, adjusting the number of singers or instruments to fit the performance venue, and reordering, or even dropping, particular numbers. Even today, *Messiah* is seldom performed in its entirety—a complete performance would take over three hours.

Handel did not consider himself a religious composer, he was more interested in the human drama of the story than in expressing piety. Unlike most of Handel's other oratorios, the *Messiah* story is presented entirely in narrative by both soloists and chorus; at no time do any of the soloists speak as one of the dramatic characters. When the text of an aria expresses emotions, it is not a personal statement, but the feelings of humanity. Handel was, above all, a dramatist of the human condition.

While it is primarily associated with Christmas, the oratorio's subject matter is much broader, telling the story of the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. The first part includes prophecies of the *Messiah*'s arrival, taken from Isaiah and others, followed by the annunciation to the shepherds—the only part of the text taken from the Gospels. Part II recounts the death of Jesus, ending with the Hallelujah chorus. Part III recounts Paul's teachings on the resurrection of the dead and Christ's glorification in heaven. King writes, "It is not so much a series of scenes in a plot as legs of a theological and philosophical journey...From 'Comfort ye' near the top of the performance to the three-minute-long 'Amen' at the end, *Messiah* still sounds fresh and unexpected...[its] common message, expressed in the language of faith, still plays well in our own secular age: we should never discount the staggering possibility that the world might yet turn out all right."

## *Messiah* Lives On

After the composer's death in 1759, *Messiah* took on a life of its own. It is unlikely that there has been a year since without a performance taking place somewhere in the world. It even inspired its own mythology—sometime in the nineteenth century, a story circulated, certainly apocryphal, that when Handel remembered that when he completed the "Hallelujah" chorus, "I did think I saw all of heaven before me, and the great God himself." Reorchestrations (including one by Mozart) were common, and as the nineteenth century progressed performances of the piece became large affairs. Performances with singers in the thousands became a frequent occurrence, especially in England. In recent years, spurred by modern musicological scholarship and the "historically informed performance" movement, there has been a trend toward smaller ensembles more in line with what Handel himself probably heard. These are not signs of disrespect toward the work or its creator; rather they are homage to the essential humanity of *Messiah*, and of its ability to move an audience, over 275 years after its creation.

*Messiah* is now the most frequently performed choral work in Western music. "Because the music is so deeply familiar," writes Charles King in his recent book *Every Valley*, "it's easy to



miss *Messiah*'s sheer weirdness. Its structure isn't linear or chronological. It has nothing that could be called a plot. Its form is more like that of a found poem, but from Bible verses that have been rearranged and, here and there, edited." Conductor and early music specialist Christopher Hogwood wrote, "Messiah is not typical Handel oratorio; there are no named characters, as are usually found in Handel's setting of the Old Testament stories, possibly to avoid charges of blasphemy. It is a meditation rather than a drama of personalities, lyrical in method; the narration of the story is carried on by implication, and there is no dialogue." Musicologist and Handel scholar Donald Burrows observes that Jennens' careful selection and ordering of texts created a work that "although dealing primarily with the abstract idea of 'the Messiah,' progressions can still be appreciated by believers and unbelievers alike."

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## VALDOSTA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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All inquiries are confidential. To explore how you can leave a lasting legacy with the VSO, please contact: **A. Blake Pearce with our Valdosta State University Foundation Development Team at (229) 333-5939.**

# Valdosta Symphony Orchestra

## 2025-26 Season Upcoming Events

**March 28, 2026 • 7 pm**

### **PROGRESSION**

Higdon *City Scape: Peachtree Street*

Kevin Day *DEPARTURES*: Double Concerto for Trombone,  
Piano, & Orchestra  
(Georgia premiere)

Constanze Hochwartner, piano

Peter Steiner, trombone

Gershwin *An American  
in Paris*



Bernstein *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*  
**Whitehead Auditorium**



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Stage Crew – Samuel Jones, *Head*

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(\*INDICATES VSO GUILD MEMBERS)

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