



HILLSDALE COLLEGE

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CONTACT:

Emily Stack Davis

517-803-3745

PR@hillsdale.edu

Hillsdale College Music Department Presents Handel's 'Messiah'

The Hillsdale College Choir, Chamber Choir, and Orchestra perform the oratorio every four years.

HILLSDALE, Mich. — The Hillsdale College Choir, Chamber Choir, and Orchestra performed George Frideric Handel's "Messiah" on April 25 and 27 in Christ Chapel, the seventh time the oratorio has been presented by the College. Students, family members, faculty, staff, and members of the community attended the performances. Tickets were free, and both performances were entirely sold out.

"Our performances of Handel's 'Messiah' have become an anticipated tradition for our music students as well as the campus and the community," said James Holleman, music director of choirs and orchestras. "The students have put a lot of effort into practice, and their performance was a beautiful way to tell the complete story."

First performed by the Hillsdale College ensembles in December 2000, "Messiah" is held every four years — now around Easter instead of Christmas.

"When I was appointed director of orchestras and choirs in the fall of 1997, I committed to present Handel's 'Messiah' when my freshman became seniors, and then every four years thereafter," Holleman said. "Every student since has had the opportunity either to perform in 'Messiah' or to experience it from the audience."

The performances created variety and contrast within the succession of recitatives, arias, and choruses, without straying from Handel's score. They alternated the use of harpsichord and organ, a core string section with the full orchestra, 49 soloists over the two performances, and three different sized choirs — college choir, chamber choir, and combined. Each of the weekend's performances featured different student soloists.

“I was so nervous about doing my solo, and then I went up there to the steps down there and sang it for the first time,” said Emily Griffiths, a senior American studies and theatre major from Nashville, Tennessee. “I realized, ‘This is a chapel. Why are we doing this?’ And then I decided to actually listen to the words I was saying — the words of my aria come from the book of Romans — and I realized that, though this is a performance, and though a lot of people are watching me, ‘Messiah’ is ultimately an act of praise. And that gave me a lot of peace.”

The performances included the “Hallelujah” chorus, for which audience members rose, and the “Worthy is the Lamb” finale.

Christ Chapel, completed in 2019, serves as a focal point of worship and community life at Hillsdale College. Designed in the classical architectural tradition, the chapel seats approximately 1,300 guests and features 64-foot painted barrel ceiling, creating an ideal venue for sacred and choral music performances.

The event involved 200 student vocalists and instrumentalists. Preparation for the performances began in January, with students participating in ensemble and sectional rehearsals. The soloists worked with studio voice faculty in individual weekly lessons.

“I think the dedication from all the faculty and the opportunities that they give to the students for this — they have a lot of confidence in us and our abilities, and that’s a big responsibility that we have to undertake, but with that is a lot of encouragement and a lot of really excellent preparation,” said Samuel Jarzab, a junior music major from Smyrna, Tennessee.

Handel’s “Messiah” is a demanding work that requires extensive preparation. The oratorio spans more than two and a half hours and features a wide range of vocal and instrumental challenges, from intricate fugal choruses to virtuosic solo arias. Mastering the work calls for sustained focus, technical skill, and understanding of Baroque performance traditions.

“It’s always moving to see the dedication of our students,” Holleman said. “Their commitment to musical excellence and to offering their talents in worship exemplifies the spirit of Hillsdale College.”

The Hillsdale College Music Department plans to continue offering summer music workshops and performances.

For videos of the performances, click [here](#) and [here](#). For photos, click [here](#). For video clips and interviews, click [here](#). For a high-resolution copy of the Hillsdale College clocktower logo, click [here](#).

About Hillsdale College

Hillsdale College is an independent, nonsectarian, Christian liberal arts college located in southern Michigan. Founded in 1844, the College has built a national reputation through its classical liberal arts core curriculum and its principled refusal to accept federal or state taxpayer subsidies, even indirectly in the form of student grants or loans. It also conducts an outreach effort promoting civil and religious liberty, including a free monthly speech digest, *Imprimis*, with a circulation of more than 6.8 million. For more information, visit hillsdale.edu.

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