

## 'MESSIAH' MEETS MODERN COMPANY

Susan Elliott - For the Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
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Several Dancers Core and Atlanta Baroque Orchestra perform Handel's "Messiah" 8 p.m. Saturday. \$16-\$42. Rialto Center for the Performing Arts, 80 Forsyth St., Atlanta. 404-651-4727, [www.rialtocenter.org](http://www.rialtocenter.org)

George Frideric Handel, whom Beethoven called "the greatest composer who ever lived," is said to have composed his 1742 magnum three-hour opus in a mere 25 days, working as if possessed, refusing to leave his house until its completion. He finally emerged with perhaps the most universally beloved piece of music ever crafted.

Despite its sacred biblical text, "Messiah" was premiered in a music hall and is more at home in the theater than the church. Although written for Eastertide --- describing the Nativity, passion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ --- the piece has since become a staple of the Christmas repertoire. The "Hallelujah" chorus in particular resonates in spaces as disparate as cathedrals and shopping malls --- clearly it can be all things to all people. The famed oratorio is scored for orchestra, chorus and four vocal soloists.

But dancers?

On Saturday, Atlanta's best known contemporary dance company, Several Dancers Core, will offer, in timely seasonal fashion, its own interpretation of the Handelian masterpiece at the Rialto Center for the Performing Arts. Founding SDC artistic director Sue Schroeder first choreographed "Messiah" in 2000, in commemoration of the company's 20th anniversary. This iteration, she explains, is markedly different.

Anyone who saw it before won't recognize it," she says. "First of all, we used recorded music, and it was only 55 minutes long." This time, the piece runs 80 minutes and uses the real thing: 16 choristers, four vocal soloists and the 15-piece Atlanta Baroque Orchestra on period instruments --- that is, instruments similar to those used during Handel's time. The occasion marks the 9-year-old baroque orchestra's official debut as a pit band and its first-ever performance with a dance company.

Houston-based early-music specialist Antoine Plante will conduct. (Several Dancers Core also has studios in Houston.) "I cannot tell you how many conductors I talked to in various cities about doing this work with us," says Schroeder. She was looking for a true collaborator but could find no musicians flexible enough. Then she met Plante.

"He has been so open," she says. "When he worked with us in the studio, he would actually conduct us, our bodies." Plante worked from a recording he had made with his own Mercury Baroque Orchestra.

"I explained the background of the piece to them," Plante says, "how Handel worked as a composer, how an orchestra works, the role of the conductor. I would, for instance, cue them when the soprano solo began, and they would move with my baton -- just to understand the feeling of the music."

Schroeder, who sees her role as "creating ways for art-making to unfold," calls the choreography "very theatrical, very physical. The dancers are in stamina mode right now --- we just started running the full 80 minutes this week." (The work has been excerpted.) "Messiah" is a presenting partnership among the Woodruff Arts Center, the Rialto and Several Dancers Core, the three of which have linked arms in search of an audience for contemporary dance in Atlanta. It's a long shot, but one well worth pursuing.

