

Handel: *Israel in Egypt*

Performed October 24, 1998

It is one of the great ironies of music that the composer who is associated with the greatest choral music in the English language was in fact a German whose lifelong interest was Italian opera. Handel wrote and produced more than forty operas, composed some of the most engaging keyboard and orchestral music of the Baroque period and was one of the great organ virtuosi of all time, yet he is largely remembered for a single musical form, the oratorio, to which he turned only when Italian opera fell out of favor.

Early Years

George Frideric Handel was born in 1685 in Halle, son of a prominent surgeon at the court of the Duke of Saxony. Handel's father intended a career in law for him, but did allow him to study with Friedrich Zachow, organist at the Liebfraukirche in Halle. Zachow was also a competent composer, well versed in the modern Italian style, and the young Handel was given a firm grounding in composition and theory as well as organ, harpsichord and violin. By the age of thirteen he was already composing cantatas for performance at church and at seventeen was appointed organist at the Domkirche in Halle.

In 1703 Handel moved to Hamburg, where he obtained a position as a back desk violinist at the opera. By the next season, at age nineteen, he had become conductor, leading productions from the harpsichord, and had an increasing influence on the artistic direction of the company. It was in Hamburg that he composed his first four operas, two of which were premiered a month apart in 1705. The first, *Almira*, was a modest success with twenty performances that year. Handel finally left the opera in 1706 when it became apparent that he would not be appointed music director. Handel's meteoric rise at the Hamburg opera was typical of his career. He not only created a musical sensation wherever he was but he also had an uncanny ability to make influential social connections. He was a polished and impeccably mannered gentleman who spoke four languages fluently and was completely at ease with the highest nobility. (His legendary irascibility was evidently reserved for his fellow musicians.)

Handel in Italy

Handel had made the acquaintance of the Grand Duke of Tuscany while in Hamburg, and the Duke had suggested a visit to Italy. Handel's four years in Italy had a profound influence on his music. Italy was then the musical capital of Europe, and Handel threw himself wholeheartedly into the whirlwind of musical life. He amazed all who heard him play the organ or harpsichord not only for his technical virtuosity but also for his extraordinary improvisational abilities, and supposedly once bested Domenico Scarlatti in an impromptu competition. He composed a great deal of music for the voice, including

operas, sacred music and numerous cantatas. More importantly, he became acquainted with the Italian oratorio.

Italian oratorio had become a sort of surrogate for opera, especially in Rome where opera performances were periodically banned by the Pope. It was a sacred drama, with recognizable characters and a dramatic story line, and generally presented in a staged manner, with scenery, costumes and stage business. There was no chorus, but there were ensemble numbers for the combined soloists. While in Rome Handel wrote two oratorios which were privately performed with much success. Private did not necessarily mean small, and the performance of *La Resurrezione*, written under the patronage of Marquis Ruspoli, was truly an impressive event, with costly scenery, a huge orchestra led by Arcangelo Corelli, for whom Handel wrote an extensive solo violin part, and the printing of 1500 libretti.

To England via Hanover

While in Venice Handel had made the acquaintance of the brother of the Elector of Hanover, and in 1710 he was appointed *Kapellmeister* to the Elector. He immediately obtained leave to go to London, and except for a brief return to Hanover, remained in England for the rest of his life. Handel's choice of employment at Hanover seems bizarre on the face of it, since there was no opera at the court (mostly for financial reasons) and the post of Kapellmeister was largely ceremonial and created especially for Handel. It can be better understood in light of the complicated politics of Europe at that time. Georg Ludwig, Elector of Hanover, was also the great-grandson of James I of England. The Stuart line had finally come to an end with the childless Queen Anne, and Georg stood next in line for the succession to the throne of England. Anne was quite adamant that Georg play no role in English politics or even come to England in his legitimate role as a member of the House of Lords until the inevitable succession occurred. It is likely that Handel's sojourn to London served both his and Georg's interests, with Handel acting as an informal advance man for the House of Hanover. It is known that Handel was able to pass along information about the state of Queen Anne's health through his friendship with John Arbuthnot, the royal physician. Handel's extended stay in London ultimately forced him to resign his post in Hanover, but he remained on good terms with Georg Ludwig, who became George I of England in 1714.

London at the turn of the 18th century had developed an insatiable taste for Italian opera and Italian singers, and Handel immediately threw himself into the operatic scene. His first London opera *Rinaldo*, written in 1711 and produced at the new Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket was an immense success. Handel continued to write for the opera company, but it was poorly managed and failed after a few years. In 1720, the king chartered a new opera company, the Royal Academy, and Handel became music director, acting as conductor, composer, and impresario. The Academy was founded with subscriptions from various of the nobility, but its financial base was predicated on the dubious assumption that it would fill the house for every performance and meet expenses from ticket sales. Handel recruited the greatest Italian singers, paying them lavishly, and composed more than a dozen operas between 1720 and 1728. The Academy was an

artistic success but a financial disaster and eventually dissolved amid internal dissention. Handel promptly founded a Second Academy in 1729, but it ultimately suffered the same fate in 1733. English taste for Italian opera was waning and there was severe competition from new English language opera like John Gay's 1728 *Beggar's Opera* and from the theater. Handel made one last attempt at an opera company, this time at a new theater in Covent Garden, but it too endured only a few years. Handel suffered a stroke in April of 1737, which left him partially paralyzed and unable to conduct. Miraculously, he made a complete recovery by October, but he had already begun to turn to oratorio to supplant the opera. From 1741 onward, he devoted himself exclusively to oratorio.

The Oratorio Years

Handel had composed his first English oratorio, *Esther*, in 1718 for the Duke of Chandos. The libretto was adapted from Racine by Alexander Pope and John Arbuthnot, and it initially received a private performance. *Esther* had much in common with the Italian oratorio as a sacred drama with characters and a linear plot. The Duke had assembled a large musical establishment, so there may have been a chorus to double the ensemble numbers, and it may have been staged as well. In 1732, Bernard Gates, a friend and supporter of Handel and Dean of the Chapel Choir in London revived *Esther*, again for private performances. He supplied a chorus from the Chapel Choir and these productions were definitely staged. They were a great success and Handel determined to produce the oratorio himself the next year at Covent Garden. The Bishop of London, who had oversight over the Chapel Choir, expressly forbade the use of the choir in a staged, commercial production (there was still something a bit unsavory about the theater), so the oratorio was presented in concert format, which has become the standard for oratorio production ever since. The success of *Esther* established the English oratorio as a new musical form, and although Handel continued to cling to the outmoded Italian opera long after its popularity had declined, he was also pragmatic enough to see the potential of oratorio and began to feature it in his opera seasons.

Oratorical Success

After the collapse of his Covent Garden venture and his stroke, Handel was determined to reestablish his preeminence with a pair of blockbuster oratorios, *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt*. Both were composed in 1738 and premiered within a month of each other in 1739. While *Saul* was well received, *Israel in Egypt* was a complete failure. *Israel in Egypt* is quite uncharacteristic of Handel's oratorios in general. It has very little plot, no characters, few solo arias and consists almost entirely of choruses. Its original version was in three parts, the first being the previously written *Funeral Anthem* for Queen Caroline, retitled for this occasion *Lamentation of the Israelites for the Death of Joseph*. Opening with a long funeral anthem, the tone of this original performance was decidedly dark, unenlivened by brilliant arias featuring popular soloists, and it lacked an engaging plot. Handel quickly revised the oratorio, eliminating the first section entirely and adding several extraneous Italian arias, but the work still failed to please the public. He continued to tinker with the production, adding an organ concerto to a performance in 1740 and an entire new first

movement with characters and plot for a revival in 1756, but the oratorio was never popular in his lifetime. Restored to a two-part oratorio after his death, and minus the Italian arias, organ concerto and ersatz first movement, *Israel in Egypt* steadily grew in popularity, and now stands second only to *Messiah* as Handel's most beloved oratorio.

English as a Second Language

Despite his German origins, Handel had an amazing facility in setting the English language, matching the musical rhythms with the natural cadences of the text. In fact the phrase of text was Handel's basic unit of composition, and each phrase typically was given its own unique melody and rhythm. This gives his music an unusual degree of clarity, for the individual phrases are readily identifiable even when they are interwoven or overlaid one on top of the other. Adjacent phrases are often given contrasting treatment, as in *They loathed to drink*, where the angular phrase "they loathed to drink of the river" is followed by the more sinuous "He turned their water into blood." *Israel in Egypt* contains some of Handel's most vividly descriptive music: buzzing flies, hopping frogs, the patter of rain, the boom of thunder. Many of the effects are more subtle and quite wonderful. He makes extensive use of a double chorus, a typical Italian technique. In *He spake the word*, the flies and lice appear in various combinations of voices, first from one chorus and then the other, as if they are appearing first here, then there. The double chorus finally becomes a single chorus as the locusts appear from all sides, so innumerable as to cover the entire ground. Handel can be equally descriptive using the harmonic structure of a section; the "thick darkness" in *He sent a thick darkness* is reflected by tonal obscurity as the music moves in an unusual progression from C major to the final cadence in E major. Rhythm is also used to create graphic effects, like the hammer-like chords in *He smote all the first-born of Egypt* and the relentless, rolling triplets of the waters which inundated the pursuing Egyptians in *But the waters overwhelmed their enemies*.

A Liberal Borrower

Handel often made use of musical themes and ideas both from his own work and from other composers, and *Israel in Egypt* is notorious as containing some of the most extensive borrowings, which appear in some eighteen of the thirty-nine sections. It is difficult for us to understand exactly how this figured into Handel's creative process. The practice was by no means uncommon among Handel's contemporaries, although he seems to have taken more advantage of this than most. Improvisation and elaboration on themes of other composers was an important part of a musician's technical portfolio even well into later times (Mozart had been unimpressed with the young Beethoven until he set him a theme on which to extemporize, whereupon he declared him "a genius"). Handel's own keyboard performances drew heavily on this technique. There was also an element of recognizing the possibilities of music which could be used in an altogether different context, and the skill to bring that off. Handel was especially adept at picking out phrases of music which would fit a line of text beautifully. In *Israel in Egypt*, however, this was not the occasional random snatch of a theme from Handel's musical subconscious. He

systematically mined two relatively obscure works, a *Magnificat* by Dionigi Erba and a wedding cantata by Alessandro Stradella, both composers of the previous century.

The borrowed music is least successful when cut from whole cloth, like *Egypt was glad when they departed*, which was taken almost entirely from a canzona by Johann Kaspar Kerll, another composer of the previous century. But when Handel elaborates, adapts or rearranges the musical ideas, his genius shines through. Sometimes he takes just a single phrase, but uses it to marvelous effect, such as the line "shall melt away" from *The people shall hear* and "He led them forth like sheep" from *But as for His people*, both from Stradella but fitting perfectly not only the cadence of the text but the underlying mood as well. In *He gave them hailstones*, Handel has combined themes from two different movements of Stradella's cantata, but set them for double chorus, punctuating the hail with cries of "Fire," creating a wonderfully graphic picture of the fire intermingled with the hail. In *And with the blast*, Handel takes three themes from Erba's *Magnificat*, "the flood stood upright as an heap," "the waters were gathered together," and "the depths were congealed," and layers them transparently over each other in an extended sequence with a typically idiosyncratic harmonic progression, creating one of the most striking and distinctive movements of the entire oratorio. In the final analysis, *Israel in Egypt* must be judged as a whole, with any borrowings viewed in the context in which Handel utilized them. The verdict of history is clear, for Erba and Stradella are largely forgotten while *Israel in Egypt* remains one of the most beloved of all choral works, more than 250 years after its composition.

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