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CORO

§ The Sixteen Edition

Israel in Egypt

George Frideric Handel

The Sixteen
The Symphony of
Harmony and Invention
HARRY CHRISTOPHERS

THE VOICES OF
CLASSIC *fm*



§ The Sixteen Edition

Israel in Egypt Highlights

THE SIXTEEN

THE SYMPHONY OF HARMONY
AND INVENTION

Conductor,
HARRY CHRISTOPHERS



How things change - *Israel in Egypt* was a flop back in 1739; too many choruses, not enough arias for the divas, not what the public wanted at all and, in fact, only saved by the inclusion of some virtuosic organ concertos! Today, it is well loved; large choral sequences forming a drama for nations, so just what the public want! But of course some things don't change: sentiments like "*The Lord is a man of war*" reflected the political mood of the time when government was pressing for war.

Handel's work vividly portrays the story of the plagues, the tribulations of a captive tribe and finally celebrates the deliverance of the chosen people. It is quite simply a grand choral spectacular and, undoubtedly, the ideal work to celebrate The Sixteen's 25th anniversary. The choir and orchestra are my pride and joy; exhilarating choral singing, inventive playing and the ability to deliver solo arias with panache, epitomized on this highlights disc in the bass duet (*The Lord is a man of war*) sung by Robert Evans and Simon Birchall, who, for many years now, have exemplified that Sixteen spirit.

To the choir, orchestra, office, board and all our followers, thank you for your support.

Harry
Christophers

Since the late eighteenth century Handel's *Israel in Egypt* has generally been thought of as an oratorio in two parts. Handel did indeed compose those two parts together in the autumn of 1738 but he never considered them to be complete in themselves. To him they were the second and third parts of a three-part oratorio, the first part of which was a version of the magnificent and solemn anthem *The ways of Zion do mourn*, composed for the funeral of Queen Caroline in 1737. Handel had had some success with English Oratorio since the first London performance of *Esther* in 1732 – Deborah followed in 1733, reached London in 1735 – but throughout the 1730s he was still primarily a composer of Italian opera. A rival company known as the "Opera of the Nobility" challenged him in 1733, and in the following year Handel moved his operations from the King's Theatre in the Haymarket (the usual venue for opera) to the new theatre at Covent Garden. The absurdity and expense of two contending opera companies in London soon became obvious, and in 1737 the Nobility Opera was abandoned. Handel was able to return to the King's Theatre, though he shared the season with the Italian composer Pescetti, the latter perhaps a nominee of the Nobility Opera supporters. The operatic successes of former times proved elusive, however: the season was interrupted by the Queen's death and was

poorly patronised when it resumed in the new year. Plans for a further opera season the following winter collapsed because too few subscribers came forward to support it, and handle therefore turned once again to oratorio, deciding for the first time to offer a season consisting only of oratorios and other choral works performed without stage action.

The first new work of the season was to be the oratorio *Saul*, to a libretto by Handel's friend Charles Jennens. This was drafted between 23 July and 15 August, and, as originally conceived, was to include in its third act a substantial part of the Funeral Anthem as an Elegy on the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. However, Handel (or Jennens) thought better of this idea and the anthem was replaced with a new and entirely different Elegy when the oratorio was revised in September. Handel must nevertheless have remained anxious to give the anthem a life beyond its single performance at the Queen's funeral, and soon he (or perhaps Jennens again) had the idea of using it as the first part of a new oratorio. A few verbal changes converted the anthem into *The Lamentations of the Israelites for the Death of Joseph* (the opening words became "The sons of Israel do mourn"), inviting a continuation dealing with the fate of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt and their deliverance under the leadership of Moses. The scriptural text of the anthem prompted the use of biblical texts for the rest

of the oratorio, an unprecedented step which Handel was to repeat only in *Messiah*.

Composition of what was eventually to become *Israel in Egypt* proceeded quickly. Between 1 and 11 October Handel drafted a setting of verses 1-21 of chapter 15 of Exodus, which, under the title of “Moses’ Song”, became the conclusion of the oratorio. Four days later he began the draft of what he called “Part ye 2 of Exodus” (suggesting that “Exodus” was originally intended as the title of the whole oratorio) and completed it on the 20 October. (The words for this section may have been compiled by Jennens.) The orchestration of the newly composed parts was finished on 1 November. On 16 January 1739 the new season at the King’s Theatre opened with *Saul*. After some revivals of earlier works, *Israel in Egypt* followed on 4 April. The original soloists (who would also have sung in the choruses) were the soprano Elisabeth du Parc (known as La Franchesina), the counter-tenor William Savage, the tenor John Beard and the basses Gustavus Waltz and Henry Reinhold. The performance included a new organ concerto, almost certainly the one in F major now known as “The Cuckoo and the Nightingale” (Second Set no. 1, HWV 295) which Handel had completed two days earlier. It was probably played as an introduction to Part 2, which, as we will see later, became the first part of the oratorio on its publication in 1771.

Israel in Egypt had a mixed reception. There were those who appreciated its novel use of scriptural text and the “Sublimity of the great Musical Poet’s Imagination”, but others (no doubt those who preferred the Italian opera) found the long succession of choral movements hard to take. For the second and third performances, on 11 and 17 April, the work was advertised as “shortened and intermixed with Songs”, the “songs” being three Italian arias which Handel had previously introduced into *Esther* and an English aria (“Through the land”) derived from the discarded aria “Bramo di trionfar” in *Alcina*. There was a single revival in 1740. In 1746 Handel drew upon *Israel in Egypt* for three choruses and an aria in his *Occasional Oratorio*, adding another aria to the same work in 1747, but he never revived it in its original form. At the time of the next revival, at Covent Garden in 1756, Handel was prevented by blindness from directing his own concerts and had passed the job to the younger John Christopher Smith. For this, and for subsequent revivals in 1757 and 1758, the funeral anthem was dropped and an entirely new Part 1 substituted, largely compiled from the *Occasional Oratorio* and *Solomon*. Parts 2 and 3 were heavily cut, one of the more damaging losses being “The people shall hear” in Part 3. Variants of this version continued to be performed in the two decades after Handel’s death. In 1771 Randall

published the oratorio for the first time, printing only the newly-composed Parts 2 and 3, and thus inadvertently giving the work the two-part form in which it was taken up in the nineteenth century. In that form it became the invariable partner of *Messiah* in the massive Handel Festivals held in the Crystal Palace at Sydenham between 1857 and 1926 and has remained a great favourite with choral societies and their audiences. The extent and variety of its choruses, and its purely scriptural text – the very features which had caused its cool reception in 1739 – became the reasons for its popularity.

This version begins with a tenor recitative announcing a new ruler in Egypt in place of Joseph, and from then on it is mainly the chorus which has the burden of narrating the story of the ten plagues that fall on the Egyptians and force them to release the Israelites from slavery. (Their land brought forth frogs”, with its wittily hopping violins, is the only aria in this part of the oratorio.) Handel draws an amazing range of dramatic effects from his choral and instrumental forces. For the first time since a brief experiment in his *Nisi Dominus* of 1707 he writes several movements for a double chorus, sometimes to increase the intensity of the counterpoint but more often to create antiphonal exchanges, with one chorus echoing or answering the other. The addition of three trombones to the orchestra,

reinforcing the more usual trumpets and drums, often gives splendid weight to the sound. There are several delightful touches, such as the flutes briefly evoking a pastoral mood to the words “he led them forth like sheep” and the “buzzing” of the violins to illustrate the plague of flies. The depiction of the plague of darkness is especially memorable: eerie, unsettled harmonies coloured by the lugubrious tones of low strings and bassoons, usher in the choral voices, which soon break up into fragments of recitative as if blindly wandering away from each other.

The final part, “Moses’ Song”, celebrates the Israelites’ miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. The opening orchestral introduction, with a repeated phrase leaping unexpectedly from one tonality to another, is striking enough, but is swiftly capped as it leads into the superb chorus “I will sing unto the Lord”, one of those truly great Handelian movements in which thematic material of the most elemental nature is extended and combined to create a unified musical structure of tremendous power. No less powerful in its different way is the chorus “The people shall hear”, first building successive climaxes over a persistent dotted rhythm in the bass line, and then releasing the tension in rising phrases over held bass notes as the chorus sing of reaching the promised land. The return of “I will sing” makes a triumphant conclusion.

No discussion of *Israel in Egypt* can pass without mention of its status as the most remarkable exemplar of Handel's so-called "borrowing" – his re-use of musical material from earlier works of his own and, more controversially, the works of others. This was a habit to which Handel was addicted throughout his life, but his recourse to other composers' music seems to have been particularly intense in the 1730s and displays an unusual emphasis on composers of earlier generations. For *Israel in Egypt* Handel drew mainly upon two late 17th century works, Alessandro Stradella's serenata *Qual prodigio è chi'io miri* and a Magnificat by Dionigi Erba. Ideas from Stradella are used mainly in the first part of this version, and, as the original is for only three solo voices and a small orchestra, they are usually re-worked and expanded to a considerable degree. "He spake the word", for example, is based on a sinfonia in the serenata, but Handel adds such features as the "buzzing" strings and the thunderous bass line at the mention of the locusts. Erba's work, on the other hand, is actually written for a double chorus, allowing Handel to "quote" several passages with little musical change in the final part: "He is my father's God", for example, is almost pure Erba, though its continuation ("And I will exalt him") is based on a Ricercare attributed to Giovanni Gabrieli. A Te Deum by

Francesco Urio (drawn on more substantially in *Saul* and later in Handel's own Dettingen Te Deum), supplies material for "The Lord is a man of war". Two of Handel's own keyboard fugues provide the bases for the choruses "They loathed to drink" and "He smote all the firstborn of Egypt", the angular theme of the first being peculiarly appropriate to the words. The most puzzling borrowing, however, is the chorus "Egypt was glad when they departed" – a close transcription (slightly cut) of a keyboard canzona by Kerll which was published in 1686. Its strictly modal harmonies are sufficiently at odds with Handel's normal tonal style to suggest that it may have been included as a private joke (in any case Handel always omitted it after the first performance), but the fact that it is not the only "ancient" music employed in *Israel in Egypt* also suggests that Handel was deliberately seeking out early models, partly in homage to his forbears and partly to give the music an antique flavour suited to a tale of remote antiquity related in the archaic language of the King James Bible. Despite the borrowings – and in some respects because of them – *Israel in Egypt* remains an astonishingly original work, its greatest moments always being those where Handel deftly enriches his models or declares his independence from them.

ADAPTED FROM NOTES BY ANTHONY HICKS

Israel in Egypt Highlights

THE SIXTEEN

SOPRANO

Fiona Clarke, Libby Crabtree,
Ruth Dean, Sally Dunkley,
Lucinda Houghton,
NICOLA JENKYN, Carys Lane

ALTO

Andrew Giles, Natania Hadda,
Michael Lees, Philip Newton,
Christopher Royall,
CAROLINE TREVOR

TENOR

Simon Berridge,
Andrew Carwood,
Philip Daggett,
NEIL MacKENZIE,
David Roy, Matthew Vine

BASS

SIMON BIRCHALL,
Roger Cleverdon,
ROBERT EVANS, Charles Gibbs,
Timothy Jones, Michael McCarthy

THE SYMPHONY OF HARMONY AND INVENTION

VIOLIN

David Woodcock
(Leader),
William Thorp,
Jane Carwardine,
Theresa Caudle,
James Ellis,
Stephen Jones,
Helen Orsler,
Jean Paterson,
Claire Sansom

VIOLA

David Brooker,
Nicola Ackroyd

CELLO

Jane Coe,
Mark Caudle

VIOLONE

Timothy Lyons

THEORBO

Robin Jeffrey

FLUTE

Rachel Beckett,
Utako Ikeda

OBOE

Sophia McKenna,
Cherry Forbes

BASSOON

Sally Jackson,
Noel Rainbird

TRUMPET

David Staff,
Stephen Keavy

TROMBONE

Susan Addison,
Paul Nieman,
Stephen Saunders

TIMPANI

Benedict Hoffnig

ORGAN/HARPSICORD

Paul Nicholson

ORGAN

Laurence Cummings

Israel in Egypt

RECITATIVE – Tenor

(Neil MacKenzie)

- [1] Now there arose a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph; and he set over Israel taskmasters to afflict them with burthens, and they made them serve with rigour.

Exodus i. 8, 11, 13

CHORUS

- [2] And the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and their cry came up unto God. They oppressed them with burthens, and made them serve with rigour; and their cry came up unto God.

Exodus ii. 23

RECITATIVE – Tenor

(Neil MacKenzie)

- [3] Then sent He Moses, His servant, and Aaron whom He had chosen; these shewed His signs among them, and wonders in the land of Ham. He turned their waters into blood.

Psalms cv. 26, 27, 29

CHORUS

- [4] They loathed to drink of the river. He turned their waters into blood.

Exodus vii. 18, 19

ARIA – Alto (Caroline Trevor)

- [5] Their land brought forth frogs, yea even in their king's chambers.

Psalms cv. 30

He gave their cattle over to the pestilence; blotches and blains broke forth on man and beast.

Exodus xi. 9, 10

CHORUS

- [6] He spake the word, and there came all manner of flies and lice in all their quarters.

He spake; and the locusts came without number, and devoured the fruits of the ground.

Psalms cv. 31, 34, 35

CHORUS

- [7] He gave them hailstones for rain; fire mingled with the hail ran along upon the ground.

Psalms cv. 32; Exodus ix. 23, 24

CHORUS

- [8] He sent a thick darkness over the land, even darkness which might be felt.

Exodus x. 21

CHORUS

- [9] He smote all the first-born of Egypt, the chief of all their strength.

Psalms cv. 36, 37

CHORUS

- [10] But as for his people, he led them forth like sheep: He brought them out with silver and gold; there was not one feeble person among their tribes.

Psalms lxxviii. 53; cv. 37

CHORUS

- [11] Egypt was glad when they departed, or the fear of them fell upon them.

CHORUS

- [12] He rebuked the Red Sea, and it was dried up.

Psalms cvi. 9

CHORUS

- [13] He led them through the deep as through a wilderness.

Psalms cvi. 9

CHORUS

- [14] But the waters overwhelmed their enemies, there was not one of them left.

Psalms cvi. 11

CHORUS

- [15] And Israel saw that great work that the Lord did upon the Egyptians; and the people feared the Lord,

CHORUS

- [16] And believed the Lord and His servant Moses.

Exodus xiv. 31

- [17] Larghetto from Organ Concerto in F HWV 295
“The Cuckoo and the Nightingale”
Organ Paul Nicholson

Part Two

CHORUS

- [18] Moses and the children of Israel
sung this song unto the Lord,
and spake, saying:

CHORUS

- [19] I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath
triumphed gloriously; the horse and
his rider hath He thrown into the sea.
Exodus xv. 1

CHORUS

- [20] He is my God, and I will prepare
Him an habitation; my father's God,

CHORUS

- [21] and I will exalt Him.
Exodus xv. 2

DUET – Two Basses

(*Simon Birchall, Robert Evans*)

- [22] The Lord is a man of war: Lord is
his name. Pharaoh's chariots and
his host hath he cast into the sea;
his chosen captains also are
drowned in the Red Sea.
Exodus xv. 3, 4

CHORUS

- [23] The depths have covered them;
they sank into the bottom as a stone.
Exodus xv. 5

CHORUS

- [24] Thy right hand, O Lord, is become
glorious in power; Thy right hand,
O Lord, hath dashed in pieces
the enemy.
Exodus xv. 6

CHORUS

- [25] And in the greatness of Thine
excellency Thou hast overthrown
them that rose up against Thee.
Exodus xv. 7

CHORUS

- [26] Thou sentest forth Thy wrath, which
consumed them as stubble.
Exodus xv. 7

CHORUS

- [27] And with the blast of Thy nostrils
the waters were gathered together,
the floods stood upright as an heap,
and the depths were congealed in
the heart of the sea.
Exodus xv. 8

CHORUS

- [28] The people shall hear, and be afraid;
sorrow shall take hold on them; all the
inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away;
by the greatness of Thy arm they shall
be as still as a stone; till Thy people
pass over, O Lord, which Thou hast
purchased.
Exodus xv. 14, 15, 16

- [29] Largo from Organ Concerto in F
HWV 295
"The Cuckoo and the Nightingale"
Organ *Paul Nicholson*

CHORUS

- [30] The Lord shall reign for ever and ever.
Exodus xv. 18

RECITATIVE – Tenor

(*Neil MacKenzie*)

- [31] For the horse of Pharaoh went in with
his chariots and with his horsemen
into the sea, and the Lord brought
again the waters of the sea upon them;
but the children of Israel went on dry
land in the midst of the sea.
Exodus xv. 19

CHORUS

- [32] The Lord shall reign for ever and ever.
Exodus xv. 18

RECITATIVE – Tenor

(*Neil MacKenzie*)

- [33] And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of
Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and
all the women went out after her with
timbrels and with dances. And Miriam
answered them:
Exodus xv. 20, 21

SOLO Treble

(*Nicola Jenkyn*) and CHORUS

- [34] Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed
gloriously; the horse and
his rider hath He thrown into the sea.
Exodus xv. 21, 18

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