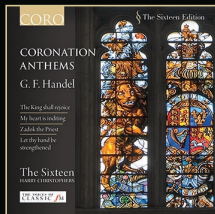


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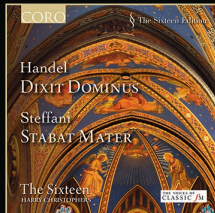
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# HANDEL Choruses



The Sixteen  
HARRY CHRISTOPHERS



Photograph: Marco Borggreve

I doubt whether there is any composer who could match Handel's genius for writing choruses. The day he decided to forego opera and turn to a new art form, the oratorio, is a day all chamber choirs and large choruses should be thankful for. We are lucky if, in his operas, we get a chorus at the end of each act, but in his oratorios, both sacred and secular, we have a plethora to delight in. He has been the inspiration for the likes of Haydn, Stainer and Elgar to compose great choruses for our phenomenal choral tradition. Of course, it is the *Hallelujah* chorus that has become a beacon of rejoicing from choirs the size of The Sixteen to thousands crammed into the Royal Albert Hall.

He is quite simply the master of chorus and on this compilation there is much rejoicing. Right from the outset, a chorus of Philistines revel in *Awake the trumpet's lofty sound* to celebrate Dagon's festival in *Samson*; the Israelites triumph in their victory over Goliath with great pageantry in *How excellent Thy name* from *Saul* and we can all feel the exuberance of *I will sing unto the Lord* from *Israel in Egypt*. There are, of course, two Handel oratorios where the choruses dominate – *Messiah* and *Israel in Egypt* – and we have given you a taster of pure majesty in the *Amen* chorus from *Messiah* as well as the dramatic ferocity of *He smote all the first-born of Egypt* from *Israel in Egypt*. Handel is all about drama; even though he forsook opera for oratorio, his innate sense of the theatrical did not leave him. Just listen to the poignancy of the opening of Act 2 from *Acis and Galatea* where the chorus pronounce the gloomy prospect of the lovers and the impending appearance of the monster Polyphemus; and the torment which the Israelites create in *O God, behold our sore distress* when Jephtha commands them to “invoke the holy name of Israel's God” – it's surely one of his greatest fugal choruses.

We have also included the longest chorus Handel ever wrote; in fact, in many ways, it is more of an extended verse anthem than a chorus. It is the closing sequence from his first version of *Esther* – *The Lord our enemy has slain* – only a great composer with immense skill and artistry like Handel can make well over 50 repetitions of the words “for ever” in each part sound exhilarating and thrilling.

Harry  
Christophers

<b>1</b>	<b>Awake the trumpet's lofty sound!</b> (Chorus of Philistines) (from <i>Samson</i> , HWV 57, Act One, Scene 1)	1.59
<b>2</b>	<b>Your voices tune</b> (from <i>Alexander's Feast</i> , HWV 75, Part 2 – Additional Chorus)	2.59
<b>3</b>	<b>Welcome, welcome, mighty King!</b> (Chorus of Israelites) (from <i>Saul</i> , HWV 53, Act One, Scene 3)	1.37
<b>4</b>	<b>Wretched lovers!</b> (from <i>Acis and Galatea</i> , HWV 49, Act Two)	4.11
<b>5</b>	<b>Ye sons of Israel mourn II</b> (from <i>Esther</i> , HWV 50a, Act One, Scene 3)	2.10
<b>6</b>	<b>Worthy is the Lamb</b> (from <i>Messiah</i> , HWV 56, Part 3)	3.34
<b>7</b>	<b>He gave them hailstones for rain</b> (from <i>Israel in Egypt</i> , HWV 54, Part 1)	2.13
<b>8</b>	<b>With thunder arm'd, great God, arise</b> (Chorus of Israelites) (from <i>Samson</i> , Act Three, Scene 1)	3.00
<b>9</b>	<b>O God, behold our sore distress</b> (Chorus of Israelites) (from <i>Jephtha</i> , HWV 70, Act One, Scene 4)	4.19
<b>10</b>	<b>He smote all the first-born of Egypt</b> (from <i>Israel in Egypt</i> , Part 1)	2.19
<b>11</b>	<b>How excellent Thy name</b> (Chorus of Israelites) (from <i>Saul</i> , Act One, Scene 1: <i>An Epinicion or Song of Triumph, for the victory over Goliath and the Philistines</i> )	2.48
<b>12</b>	<b>And He shall purify</b> (from <i>Messiah</i> , Part 1)	2.33
<b>13</b>	<b>Hear, Jacob's God, Jehova, hear!</b> (Chorus of Israelites) (from <i>Samson</i> , Act Two, Scene 4)	3.20

<b>14</b>	<b>Ye house of Gilead, with one voice</b> (Chorus of Israelites) (from <i>Jephtha</i> , Act Three, Scene 2)	3.44
<b>15</b>	<b>Hallelujah!</b> (from <i>Messiah</i> , Part 2)	3.53
<b>16</b>	<b>The Lord our enemy has slain</b> (from <i>Esther</i> , Act Three, Scene 2) Soli: Michael Chance (alto – <i>Priest of the Israelites</i> ) Lynda Russell (soprano – <i>Esther</i> ) Mark Padmore (tenor – <i>Mordecai</i> ) Robert Evans (bass 1), Simon Birchall (bass 2)	10.57
<b>17</b>	<b>I will sing unto the Lord</b> (from <i>Israel in Egypt</i> , Part 2)	2.42
<b>18</b>	<b>Then round about the starry throne</b> (Chorus of Israelites) (from <i>Samson</i> , Act One, Scene 3)	2.07
<b>19</b>	<b>The many rend the skies with loud applause (I)</b> (from <i>Alexander's Feast</i> , Part 1)	4.02
<b>20</b>	<b>Gird on thy sword, thou man of might</b> (Chorus of Israelites) (from <i>Saul</i> , Act Three, Scene 5: <i>Elegy on the death of Saul and Jonathan</i> )	5.21
<b>21</b>	<b>And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed</b> (from <i>Messiah</i> , Part 1)	3.06
<b>22</b>	<b>Let the bright Seraphim in burning row</b> (Chorus of Israelites) (from <i>Samson</i> , Act Three, Scene 3)	3.09
<b>23</b>	<b>He is my God</b> (from <i>Israel in Egypt</i> , Part 2)	0.58
<b>24</b>	<b>Amen</b> (from <i>Messiah</i> , Part 3)	3.41

Total Running Time: 80.48

George Frideric Handel moved to London at a time when British exceptionalism and the righteous force of the nation's Protestant faith were fast gaining strength. The rise of both trends emerged from the insecurity of the United Kingdom of Great Britain, established in 1707 by two acts of parliament, and genuine fears that the Catholic heir to the deposed king James II would return to claim the throne. The myth-makers worked hard to equate Britain with Israel, the second promised land favoured by God, staunch in her defiance of the papist threat. It was Handel's fortune to recognise British political symbolism and place it centre stage in so many of his oratorios. As the historian Linda Colley observes in her groundbreaking book *Britons*, the Saxon composer "flattered his new surroundings, and especially his patrons at court, by inserting into his music regular comparisons between events in British history and the endeavours of the prophets and heroes of the Old Testament".

Ancient Israel's leaders and generals served as proxies for prominent members of the Hanoverian establishment in Handel's

dramatic oratorios. "*Esther, Deborah, Athalia, Judas Maccabeus* (which was composed in honour of the Duke of Cumberland's victory over the Jacobites at Culloden [in 1745]) *Joshua, Susanna, Jephtha*, and self-evidently, *Israel in Egypt*," observes Colley, "all have as their theme the deliverance of Israel from danger by leaders inspired by God." Yet it was so often the chorus as crowd and collective commentator that reinforced messages of Britain's superior strength and moral purpose, expressed in great songs of triumph, praise and mourning. Those messages were conveyed in memorable fashion by Handel's music and, unlike his Italian operas, in the mother tongue of his adopted homeland.

Handel invented the English oratorio. The new genre began as a pragmatic response to changing popular tastes, signalled in 1728 by the financial failure of Handel's Royal Academy of Music, his formerly profitable venture to stage seasons of Italian opera in London. It was also informed by the immediate accessibility and corresponding box-office success of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. Handel, uncertain about oratorio's

financial returns and hybrid nature, hesitated at first to test it on the public. In 1732 Bernard Gates, music director of the Chapel Royal, staged a revised and expanded version of the composer's first English oratorio, *Esther*, for a private audience. Its success encouraged Handel to present the piece six times in concert a few months later as part of his season at the King's Theatre in the Haymarket. The appeal of both versions owed much to the chorus, which serves almost as an independent character while providing moral reflection on the persecution of Persia's Jews and the valiant Esther's part in averting their massacre.

*Esther* was followed in 1733 by *Deborah* and *Athalia*, the latter first performed at the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford to an uncomfortably packed house of almost 4,000 "ladies and gentlemen of the highest rank". Those early oratorios set the foundations for a remarkable series of mature works, beginning in 1738 with the compelling dramas of *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt*. The latter's monumental set-piece choruses owe a significant debt to the sonorous sacred anthems of Henry Purcell and other Chapel Royal composers, which

Handel studied and adapted to suit his own style. The first version of *Esther*, originally written in 1718, possibly for James Brydges, the future Duke of Chandos, closes with *The Lord our enemy has slain*, a magnificent early example of Handel's mastery of the English choral tradition and harbinger of choruses to come in *Saul, Israel in Egypt* and *Samson*. The piece, which celebrates the death of the tyrannical Haman, interweaves a recurring chorus with duets for the priest and trumpet, Esther and Mordechai and two basses, brought together to form a single dramatic scene.

The process of assimilating and owning existing musical styles was fundamental to Handel's development as a composer. Like so many talented young musicians before him, he made an extensive tour of Italy in 1709 and mastered the country's principal musical genres during his stay. Handel probably met the Elector of Hanover's brother during a visit to Venice and, in June 1710, was appointed Kapellmeister to the electoral court in Hanover. His new job offered generous periods of travel leave, which Handel readily accepted. He travelled to England in autumn 1710 and soon scored



a hit with *Rinaldo*, tickling the London public's recently acquired fascination for all-sung opera in Italian with an outstanding new contribution to the repertory.

Duty obliged Handel to return to Hanover, a setback after the experience of life in the vibrant British capital. Elector Georg Ludwig, the future George I, granted the composer a second leave of absence towards the end of 1712. He could visit England on condition that, as his first biographer put it, he "engaged to return within a reasonable time". Handel, no doubt encouraged by royal and aristocratic patrons, decided to remain in London and was dismissed from his Hanover job in June 1713. While Handel and his former employer were in fact reconciled before the latter ascended the British throne, legend has it that the new monarch was only moved to forgive the composer by the music he wrote for a royal water party in 1714. Handel's famous *Water Music*, however, was more likely written to accompany the king's stately barge journey from Whitehall to Chelsea and back in July 1717. Soon after his Thames outing, he began work for James Brydges and produced a series of choral and other

compositions for his extraordinarily rich patron's estate at Cannons Park, Edgware.

*Acis and Galatea*, Handel's first substantial dramatic work in English, was probably first staged or semi-staged at Cannons around April 1718. Based on Ovid's tale of two lovers tormented by the savage cyclops Polyphemus, *Acis and Galatea* began life as a pastoral masque. Handel later adapted the work for the London stage as a 'serenata' in English and Italian, first presented to popular acclaim during his 1731-32 season, and created an all-English version for performance alongside his new *Song for St Cecilia's Day* in 1739.

By the close of the 1730s, it was clear that the vogue for Italian opera had passed. London's middle-class audiences wanted a more dramatic, less stylised form of musical entertainment. Handel was ready to please the market, although it took him a decade to turn completely from opera to oratorio. His Lenten season in 1739 marked a shift away from opera in Italian to oratorio in English, although its modest success at the time would hardly have appeared decisive. It comprised the first runs of *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt*, revivals of *Alexander's Feast* and

*Il trionfo del Tempo*, and the pastiche *Jupiter in Argos* given in Italian.

With typical fluency and ease, Handel combined elements from genres as diverse as Italian *opera seria*, the cantatas and Latin psalm settings of his apprentice years in Italy, the Anglican verse anthem, German oratorio and the French cantata to forge English oratorios of striking variety and invention. As the Handel scholar Winton Dean memorably put it, these concert works were conceived not for the stage but for the "theatre of the imagination".

Charles Jennens, librettist of *Saul*, *Messiah* and perhaps *Israel in Egypt* among other works, recalled visiting Handel while he was drafting *Saul*. His account offers a vivid portrait of the composer's creative originality: "Mr Handel's head is more full of maggots than ever: I found yesterday in his room a very queer Instrument which he calls Carillon ... & says some call it a Tubalcain, I suppose because it is both in the make & tone like a set of Hammers striking upon Anvils. 'Tis play'd upon with Keys like a Harpsichord, & with this Cyclopean Instrument he designs to make poor Saul stark mad." The chorus *Welcome*,

*welcome, mighty King!*, complete with tinkling carillon, stokes Saul's murderous jealousy of the young shepherd David, seen by the Israelites as their saviour in combat against the giant Goliath and his Philistine compatriots. In addition to the drama of often raw human emotions, *Saul* projects political propaganda in favour of the legitimacy of replacing one king with another, just as William of Orange had replaced James II in the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1788.

Thanks to notes scribbled in manuscript scores or reports by early critics, we know the names of many of the soloists – some Italian stars, most dependable British singers – who took part in the first performances of Handel's oratorios. Much less was known about chorus members and their backgrounds until the publication of pioneering research by Donald Burrows into the composer's collaboration with the English Chapel Royal. Despite an official ban on the Chapel's boys appearing in theatrical productions, many of its adult Gentlemen and some of its child choristers joined Handel's chorus line. "There was," Burrows observes, "probably never any

question of Handel employing the complete Chapel Royal choir for his chorus; rather, the Chapel provided one of the main sources for competent professional singers in London.” The Chapel Royal choristers would have been proficient sight-readers and, as London residents, readily available to attend Handel’s rehearsals; other chorus members were drawn from the choirs of Oxford and Windsor and singers on the books of Handel’s opera company. “What does seem certain, however,” concludes Burrows, “is that the Chapel Royal singers, men and boys, were a significant resource when Handel needed a substantial chorus.”

This album’s anthology of choruses suggests that Handel took full advantage of the Chapel Royal resource, especially for performances of his oratorios of the 1740s and 1750s. *Messiah*, drafted between 22 August and 12 September 1741, was written at the invitation of the Lord Lieutenant of Dublin and first performed at Dublin’s Great Music Hall in Fishamble Street on 13 April 1742. Handel received special permission to engage the choirs of St Patrick’s and Christ Church Cathedrals, a combined force of 16 men and 16 boy

choristers. Chapel Royal choristers took part in subsequent performances of the work to raise funds for London’s Foundling Hospital. *Messiah* was followed in short order by *Samson*. Both works make high demands on their choristers, posing technical challenges and requiring close attention to words and their meaning.

*Jephtha*, Handel’s final oratorio, first performed during the 1752 season, probes human emotions more deeply than any of its predecessors to reveal the complex relationship between mankind, the natural word and their divine creator. *O God, behold our sore distress* gives voice to the hopes and fears of the Israelites. Their leader, Jephtha, has vowed to Jehovah that he will sacrifice the first living thing he sees on his return from fighting his people’s enemies. The chorus expresses a nation’s heartfelt plea for good fortune in battle; however, it also admits the possibility of tragedy to come. Jephtha’s subsequent joy in victory turns to despair when, greeted by his daughter and only child, he fulfils his vow to an apparently compassionless God.

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**Harry Christophers** stands among today’s great champions of choral music. In partnership with The Sixteen, the ensemble he founded over 40 years ago, he has set benchmark standards for the performance of everything from late medieval polyphony to important new works by contemporary composers. His international influence is supported by more than 150 recordings and has been enhanced by his work as Artistic Director of Boston’s Handel and Haydn Society and as guest conductor worldwide.

The Sixteen’s soundworld, rich in tonal variety and expressive nuance, reflects Christophers’ determination to create a vibrant choral instrument from the blend of adult professional singers. Under his leadership The Sixteen has established its annual Choral Pilgrimage to cathedrals, churches and other UK venues, created the *Sacred Music* series for BBC television, and developed an acclaimed period-instrument orchestra. Highlights of their recent work include an Artist Residency at Wigmore Hall, a large-scale tour of Monteverdi’s *Vespers of 1610*, and the world premiere of James MacMillan’s *Stabat mater*; their future projects, meanwhile, comprise a new series devoted to Purcell and an ongoing survey of Handel’s dramatic oratorios.

Harry has served as Artistic Director of the Handel and Haydn Society since 2008. He was also appointed as Principal Guest Conductor of the City of Granada Orchestra in 2008 and has worked as guest conductor with, among others, the London Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and the Deutsches Kammerphilharmonie. Christophers’ extensive commitment to opera has embraced productions for English National Opera and Lisbon Opera and work with the Granada, Buxton and Grange festivals.



Photograph: Marco Borggreve

He recently collaborated with BBC Radio 3 presenter Sara Mohr-Pietsch to produce a book published by Faber & Faber entitled *A New Heaven: Choral Conversations* in celebration of the group's 40th anniversary.

He was appointed a CBE in the Queen's 2012 Birthday Honours for his services to music. He is an Honorary Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, as well as the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, and has Honorary Doctorates in Music from the Universities of Leicester, Northumbria, Canterbury Christ Church and Kent.

## § The Sixteen

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## § The Sixteen

HARRY CHRISTOPHERS



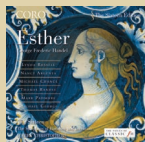
Tracks are taken from the following CORO recordings by The Sixteen:



**COR16008** Handel: **Samson**  
Recorded: St Jude's on the Hill, Hampstead Garden Suburb, London  
November 1996  
Tracks [1](#) [8](#) [13](#) [18](#) [22](#)



**COR16011** Handel: **Israel in Egypt**  
Recorded: St Jude's on the Hill, Hampstead Garden Suburb, London  
March 1993  
Tracks [7](#) [10](#) [17](#) [23](#)



**COR16019** Handel: **Esther**  
Recorded: St Jude's on the Hill, Hampstead Garden Suburb, London  
May 1995  
Tracks [5](#) [16](#)



**COR16028** Handel: **Alexander's Feast**  
Recorded: All Hallows Church, Gospel Oak, London  
1990  
Tracks [2](#) [19](#)



**COR16062** Handel: **Messiah**  
Recorded: St Paul's Church, Deptford, London  
November 2007  
Tracks [6](#) [12](#) [15](#) [21](#) [24](#)

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**COR16103** Handel: **Saul**  
Recorded: St Augustine's Church, Kilburn, London  
January 2012  
Tracks [3](#) [11](#) [20](#)



**COR16121** Handel: **Jephtha**  
Recorded: St Augustine's Church, Kilburn, London  
January 2014  
Tracks [9](#) [14](#)



**COR16169** Handel: **Acis and Galatea**  
Recorded: St Augustine's Church, Kilburn, London  
June 2018  
Track [4](#)

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