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Freedom
GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL
Oratorio Arias
Oscar Verhaar countertenor
La Sfera Armoniosa
Mike Fentross conductor



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Elise van der Wel concertmaster

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL (1685-1759)

- [1] **All Danger disdaining** – Deborah (HWV 51) **4:23**
[2] **Return, O God of Hosts** – Samson (HWV 57) **9:17**
[3] **Fury, with red-sparkling Eyes** – Alexander Balus (HWV 65) **6:03**

Ouverture – Susanna (HWV 66)

- [4] [unmarked] **2:16**
[5] Staccato e non troppo allegro – Lentement **2:49**

[6] **In the Battle** – Deborah (HWV 51) **7:24**

O sacred Oracles of Truth – Belshazzar (HWV 61)

- [7] Air – O sacred Oracles of Truth **4:46**
[8] Recit. accompany'd – Rejoice, my Countrymen **1:22**
[9] Recit. accompany'd – Thus saith the Lord **2:36**

Symphony – Joseph and his Brethren (HWV 59)

- [10] I. Andante **1:19**
[11] II. Larghetto **1:41**
[12] III. Allegro **2:08**
[13] IV. Menuet, Larghetto e piano **1:26**

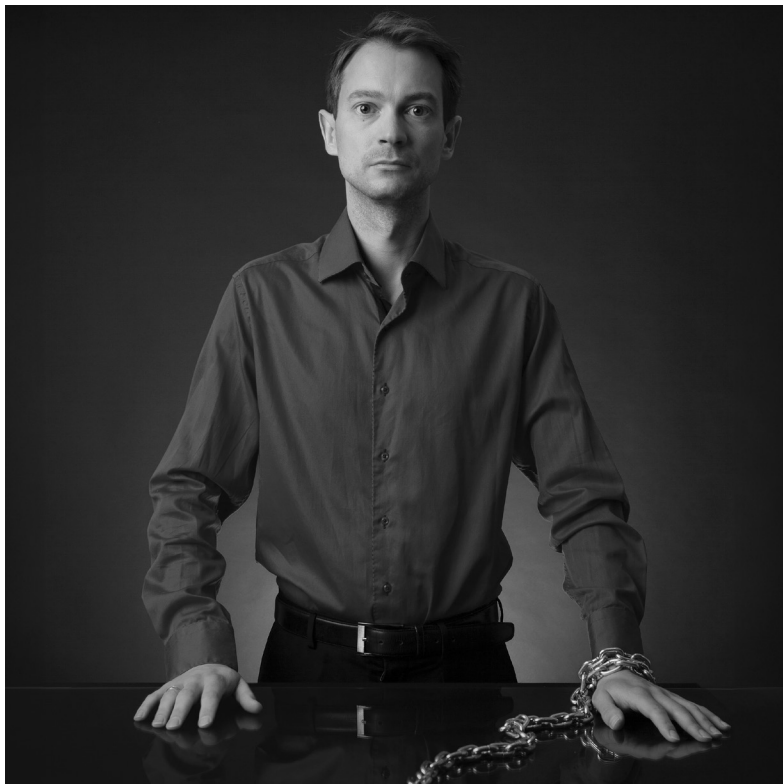
- [14] **Be firm, my Soul** – Joseph and his Brethren (HWV 59) **9:17**
[15] **O Lord, whose Mercies numberless** – Saul (HWV 53) **4:25**
[16] **Up the dreadful Steep ascending** – Jephtha (HWV 70) **4:18**

Total time 65:41

Monteverdi-organ:

The Monteverdi-organ is an 'organo di legno' built in 2020 by the Klop company, after the idea and initiative of Krijn Koetsveld. The organ was generously provided by the Dutch Musical Instruments Foundation (NMF).

For more information see: <https://www.muzeinstrumentenfonds.nl/instrument/10156/orgel?taal=nl>



The introduction of an album about freedom could, of course, deal with many topics. Covid-lockdowns, the war between Russia and Ukraine and suppression of women in Iran, to name a few, were prominently in the news during the course of this project and were influential in the thinking process. Needless to say, the current war between Israel and Hamas is especially relevant to the music of this album. However, the real elephant in the room is slavery.

This disc is filled with music that was written with the support of money earned through slavery. Look at the list of benefactors to Handel's Royal Academy and comparing it to the investors of the Royal African Company and the South Sea Company (the two major English slave trading organisations), 32% of Handel's sponsors were also investors in these companies. Some of them, such as members of the royal family and the Duke of Chandos, were leading figures.

Unsurprisingly, the influence of the elite on Handel's music business becomes apparent even in artistic choices. The libretto of **Deborah** was dedicated to Queen Caroline. **Alexander Balus** has a link to the Jacobite rising of 1745 and the opening prison scene of **Joseph and his Brethren** must have reminded the audience of the house arrest King George II endured long before his coronation. Mind you, Joseph was actually enslaved, the king merely confined to a palace.

Handel often received payments through banks associated with the slave-trading companies and eventually became a rich man. Hence, even though he was not actively involved in slave trading, he did benefit greatly from it.

And so do we, as we still enjoy playing and listening to his music. Is this only the case for Handel's art? Of course not. Slavery was a large economic motor at the time, so money made from slavery was everywhere. From music to paintings to the caritative institutions like the London Foundling Hospital. And how about today? Are the arts not sponsored by fossil fuel companies? Do you not have a bank account with a bank that was found guilty of fraud or money laundering? And who picked your strawberries?

This leads to the question how 'innocent' we are ourselves. You can't change the system on your own, but let it be a mirror for your actions. Perhaps Handel too saw a mirror in the systems of his time. At least he used his medium, music, to compose works about freedom that are very emotional and invite to (self) reflection. Handel's English oratorios are mostly based on biblical stories that deal with resistance, suppression, captivity and, finally, freedom reached with the help of a leader sent by God. So we find in his oeuvre impressive slave choruses and many arias about (the lack of) freedom, eight of which are presented on this album. Some scholars suggest that the British people felt they were surrounded by enemies. They projected their own (supposed) hazardous position on the stories told on the stage and it was not yet the time to reflect on whom they were suppressing themselves. But that is what we could do now.

Please take time to reflect and watch two round table discussions organised by the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic for some more context and opinions about how to deal with the influence of slave-

trading economics on (Handel's) music. These American institutions brought together people from various backgrounds to discuss the complex questions and emotions that come with this dark side of human behaviour. There is still a lot to learn.

The music

The aria *All Danger disdaining* is based on the aria *Gift und Gluth* from Handel's **Brockes Passion** (HWV 48). In **Deborah** it is placed in Part 1 and sung by Barak, the army leader of the Israelites in the battle against the Canaanites, who had been suppressing the Israelites for 20 years. Barak is a very eager man and in the end his "cause prevails" and the Israelites are set free. The aria was also performed in Italian, *Disprezzo al periglio*, as some Italian divas wouldn't sing in English.

Return, o God of Hosts is from **Samson**, one of the most successful oratorios during Handel's lifetime and also after his death. Its core was written in the same time as **Messiah** (HWV 51). The libretto had been based on *Samson Agonistes* by John Milton, who himself was blind and traumatised at the end of his life (Handel also lost his sight in the last years of his life). Samson longs for death in Part 1. In Part 2, his friend Micah and the Israelites implore divine assistance as Samson still wishes to die. The autograph shows that this aria was at first designed as a regular da capo aria, but the recapitulation was abandoned before the premiere for a third part that involved the choir. It was however still used in its original form at benefit concerts in Handel's days.

The story of **Alexander Balus** is taken from the First Book of Maccabees and was the fourth work in a series of military-themed oratorios, celebrating the victory of the royal family over the Jacobite uprisings. In Part 3, King Alexander is betrayed and *Fury, with red-sparkling eyes* is his reaction to the news. He will die shortly after, which is unusual for a leading character, but understandable in the light of the political context. The aria draws on the theme of *Vedo il Ciel* from **La Resurrezione** (HWV 47). The sudden change in atmosphere in the b-section is a feature Handel didn't use much. But it works very well here to accommodate the emotional change of state Alexander undergoes at this point. Likewise, the decision to start the return of the a-section from the singer's entrance, skipping the orchestral introduction, is really bringing back the first state of mind at once.

The *Overture of Susanna* was inspired by John Blow's ode **Begin the song** for Saint Cecilia's Day. Half of Handel's oratorio overtures are in three movements, often with a fugue in the middle, like in this case. The last movement is slow and foreshadows the lamenting opening chorus, sung by the Israelites in captivity. The story is not about them being liberated, but about clearing Susanna's name, after accusations of adultery.

Back to **Deborah**, where Barak once more shows his eagerness in the aria *In the Battle*. This aria is from Part 2, right before the battle starts. Barak obviously cannot wait to throw himself on the enemy. It is a rather curious, almost pastoral setting for such a grim text, especially with the organ solo. Apparently blood to Barak is the most delicious thing in the world. Several sources add a transverse

flute to the right hand of the organ, but why? The aria has clearly been designed as a mini organ concerto. Look at the last movement of **Organ Concerto no.1** (HWV 289), which is also an andante and even shows thematic resemblance. We know Handel experimented with different organs (and flute-stops) throughout the 1730's and 40's. **Deborah** was performed quite a number of times, perhaps the perfect stop wasn't always in working condition? Anyway, the Monteverdi-organ proved a great instrument to execute this part alone.

The libretto of **Belshazzar**, written by Charles Jennens, contains much more text than Handel wanted. He complained on several occasions that the text was "too long" and many passages, also in this scene, were never set to music at all. A special feature of **Belshazzar** are the many extended accompanied recitatives, such as the last section of this scene. Here, the Jewish prophet Daniel is reading the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, where he finds proof that the Jews will be liberated from Babylon by Cyrus, a Persian prince. The last section is quoted entirely from Isaiah 44 and 45. According to Winton Dean and other scholars, the use of the ground, a repeated melodic pattern, "symbolizes the certainty of divine support."

The opening *symphony* of **Joseph and his Brethren** starts with a slow movement, like most overtures, but its continuation with another slow movement is very unusual. The overture then leads into the typical fugue and the first Part, which shows Joseph in prison. He is innocent and tries to stay strong, *Be firm, my Soul*, but it rather looks like he is collapsing. The

stage direction reads “reclining in a melancholy posture”, and the piercing octaves in the orchestra and broken musical phrases spell little good. In the b-section, for which Handel remarkably composed a recitative, Joseph seems stronger, but then darkness returns. In the end, of course, Joseph is the hero, reuniting his family and leading Egypt to prosperity. This can probably be seen as a metaphor for King George II, the hero of England, or, in a more political reading, former ‘prime minister’ Robert Walpole.

Handel had gathered a number of special instruments for **Saul**, but the aria *O Lord, whose mercies numberless* was scored very modest. It is only strings, with slow progressions and no chords in the bass line: less is more... This aria and two others in the oratorio are strophic, a new feature in Handel’s English oratorios. *O Lord* was allocated to various roles (in different keys) in the process of developing this work. It ended up as David’s aria and is meant to soothe Saul’s “old disease.” Handel himself had known periods of ‘madness’, and enough anecdotes account for a choleric character even in ‘normal’ periods. Here, as perhaps in Handel’s private life, the prayer is in vain: Saul’s anger is only growing and he responds by throwing his javelin to David. *O Lord* is based on material from the opera **Imeneo** by Nicola Porpora (*Se potessero i sospir’ miei*), which Handel studied for his own **Imeneo** (HWV 41), composed at the same time as **Saul**.

In *Up the dreadful Steep ascending* from **Jephtha**, Hamor, a soldier, sings about collecting his “glorious Prize” after returning from the battlefield. This ‘prize’ is Jephtha’s daughter Iphis. They were already in love and now that

the Ammonites have been defeated, marriage awaits them. But what does Iphis think about being described as a glorious prize? Isn’t that a little heartless and is she allowed to possess him too? Well yes, in their final duet, they both sing about the other being ‘mine’ and Hamor now speaks of adoration, rather than his prize. In the aria Hamor is publicly drooling over her, but in the end he became a sensitive soldier, how miraculous!

Oscar Verhaar

For further reference:

David Hunter, “Handel and the Royal African Company”, <https://musicologynow.org/handel-and-the-royal-african-company/>.

New York Philharmonic, The Unanswered Questions: Handel and the Royal African Company, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7vZNgtBYjM>.

Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Panel Discussion: Responding to Handel’s investment in the transatlantic slave trade, <https://content.thespco.org/music/concert-library/feature/handel-panel-discussion>.



Oscar Verhaar countertenor

Oscar Verhaar started his musical life as a boy soprano and went on to study at the Royal Conservatory of the Hague where he earned a Master's degree in Early Music Singing. Whilst there he studied with Michael Chance, Jill Feldman, Lenie van den Heuvel, Peter Kooij and was fortunate to also take masterclasses with Ian Bostridge, Carlos Mena, Deborah York and Kees Boeke. After studying, Oscar went on to become laureate of the Fondation Royaumont and Young Bach Fellow of the Netherlands Bach Society. Oscar also holds Master's degree in Musicology from Utrecht University.

As a versatile early music singer, Oscar has been performing major works by composers such as Bach and Handel next to lesser-known music from the Middle Ages to the 18th century. His interest in performance practice also leads him to do much of the required musicological research for these works. Oscar's career so far has seen him appear in many early music festivals throughout Europe and he is also passionate about performing in opera.



Mike Fentross conductor

Conductor and lutenist Mike Fentross has largely earned his credits as an early music specialist. He is working all over Europe as a conductor, soloist and basso continuo player and he is professor of lute and basso continuo at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. In 2006 he founded the baroque orchestra La Sfera Armoniosa with which he performed extensively in the Netherlands and abroad.

Fentross conducted in many festivals and concert halls all over Europe. In 2006 he led the modern world premiere of Cavalli's opera *I'permestra*, discovered by himself in Venice, in a prestigious jubilee production from the Utrecht Early Music Festival. In 2008 he conducted a second unearthed Cavalli opera *La Rosinda* in a production from the Musikfestspiele Potsdam Sanssouci.

Mike Fentross forms a duo with jazz-musician Maarten Ornstein. For their adventurous musicianship and extraordinary collaborations they received in 2022 the Willem Breuker Price.

La Sfera Armoniosa

La Sfera Armoniosa was founded in 1992 by lutenist Mike Fentross and gambist Paulina van Laarhoven and focuses on performing music from the 16th, 17th and 18th century. In a short time, La Sfera Armoniosa developed to a top level ensemble performing on major European festivals and venues receiving raving reviews over many years for a wide variety of projects.

The ensemble consists of a core of top instrumentalists under artistic leadership of Mike Fentross. Besides well-known music by composers such as Monteverdi, Handel and Pergolesi, the ensemble also performs lesser-known music, distilled from old music prints and manuscripts after extensive research.

La Sfera Armoniosa is currently working on the series Dutch Masters, music by forgotten or little performed Dutch composers from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Elise van der Wel (concertmaster) studied at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague with Theodora Geraets and baroque violin with Kati Debretzeni and Walter Reiter. She took masterclasses with David Rabinovich, Lucia Swarts, Petra Mülleijans and Kristin von der Goltz. Elise is cofounder and member of Le Concert d'Apollon, an orchestra specialized in French baroque music, and also performed with many other early music ensembles.

Musicians

Violin I

Elise van der Wel (concertmaster), Ryuko Reid, Sakura Goto [1-6, 10-13], Emma Williams [1-6, 10-13], Sara de Vries [7-9, 14-16]

Violin II

Kano Imada (leader), Annabelle Ferdinand, Joseph Tan, Luca Alfonso Rizello [1-6, 10-13], Anna Jane Lester [7-9, 14-16]

Viola

Esther van der Eijck, Marta Jiménez

Cello

Octavie Dostaler-Lalonde, Evan Buttar

Double bass

Jesse Solway

Oboe

Katharina Verhaar, Eva Harmuthová

Bassoon

Wouter Verschuren, Yukiko Murakami [7-9, 14, 16]

Organ

Teun Braken

Harpsichord

Teun Braken, Siebe Henstra [7-9, 14, 16]



[1] All Danger disdainig

All Danger disdainig,
For Battle I glow:
Thy glory maintaining,
I'll rush on the Foe:
Tho' Death all around me,
Stalks dreadfully pale,
No Fear shall confound me,
My Cause shall prevail.

All danger...

[2] Return, O God of Hosts

Return, O God of Hosts! behold
Thy Servant in Distress,
His mighty Grievs redress,
Nor by the Heathen be it told.

Return...

[3] Fury, with red-sparkling Eyes

Fury, with red-sparkling Eyes,
Rise, in all thy Terrors rise;

All around Destruction deal.
That Revenge may give some Ease,
Or cold Death a kind Release
To the horrid Pains I feel.

Fury...

[6] In the Battle

In the Battle Fame pursuing,
We'll with Slaughter float the Plains:
And our Tyrants, low in Ruin,
Soon shall wear their Captives' Chains.

In the Battle...

[7] Air – O sacred Oracles of Truth

O sacred Oracles of Truth!
O living Spring of purest Joy!
By Day be ever in my Mouth,
And all my nightly Thoughts employ.
Who'er withhold Attention due
Neglect themselves, despising you.

[8] Recit. accompany'd – Rejoice, my Countrymen

Rejoice, my Countrymen: The Time draws near,
The long expected Time herein foretold.
Seek now the Lord your God with all your Heart,
And you shall surely find him. He shall turn
Your long Captivity: he shall gather you
From all the Nations whither you are driven,
And to your native Land in Peace restore you.
For long ago,
Whole Ages ere this Cyrus yet was born
Or thought of, Great Jehovah, by his Prophet,
In Words of Comfort to his captive People
Foretold, and call'd by Name the wondrous Man.

[9] Recit. accompany'd – Thus saith the Lord

Thus saith the Lord to Cyrus his Anointed,
Whose right Hand I have holden, to subdue
Nations before him: I will go before thee,
To loose the Strong-knit Loins of mighty Kings,
Make straight the crooked Places, break in Pieces
The Gates of solid Brass, and cut in sunder
The Bars of Iron. For my Servants' sake,
Isr'el my Chosen, though thou hast not known me,
I have surnam'd thee: I have girded thee:
That from the rising to the setting Sun

The Nations may confess, I am the Lord,
There is none else, there is no God besides me.
Thou shalt perform my Pleasure, to Jerusalem
Saying, Thou shalt be built; and to the Temple,
Thy raz'd Foundation shall again be laid.

[14] Be firm, my Soul

Air

Be firm, my Soul, nor faint beneath
Affliction's galling Chains;
When crown'd with conscious Virtue's Wreath,
The shackled Captive reigns.

Recit. accompany'd

But wherefore thus? Whence Heav'n these bitter Bonds?
Are these the just Rewards of stubborn Virtue?
Is this contagious Cell the due Abode
Of too much Innocence? – Down, down, proud Heart,
Nor blindly question the Behest of Heaven!
These Chastisements are just – for some wise End
Are all the partial Ills allotted Man.

Be firm...

[15] O Lord, whose Mercies numberless

O Lord, whose Mercies numberless
O'er all thy Works prevail,
Tho' daily Man thy Law transgress,
Thy Patience cannot fail:
If yet his Sin be not too great,
The busy Fiend controul,
Yet longer for Repentance wait,
And heal his wounded Soul.

[16] Up the dreadful Steep ascending

Up the dreadful Steep ascending,
While for Love and Fame contending,
Sought I thee, my glorious Prize.
And now happy in the Blessing,
Thee, my sweetest Joy, possessing,
Other Honours I despise.

Up the dreadful...

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Den Haag



MUZIEK
INSTRUMENTEN
FONDS



voor
de
kunst

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