

Programme Notes

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759): *Samson*

Handel composed *Samson* immediately after *Messiah* in 1741 but it was not performed until 1743 when it proved an instant success and has never fallen entirely out of favour since then.

The libretto by Newburgh Hamilton is based on Milton's, *Samson Agonistes* rather than the Biblical narrative in Judges chapter 16. As Milton was blind he could emphasise with the blindness of Samson, as indeed could Handel whose sight was also beginning to fail. It is a highly operatic work, from a famous operatic composer. The chorus's role is similar to the Greek chorus in that it sets the scene, offers moral comments, describes the action in thrilling detail and thus gives a backdrop to the various soloists whose characters are vividly portrayed through Handel's dramatic writing.

The entire oratorio takes place in Gaza where Samson, betrayed to the Philistines by his wife, Delilah, is blinded and imprisoned but allowed into the open air to be humiliated at the Philistines' feast in honour of their god Dagon. Samson laments his fate but his father, Minoah, consoles him and speaks of negotiations for his ransom. His Israelite friends pray for his release and for, 'Triumph over death and thee, O Time.'

In Act 2, Dalila makes an appearance in a scene of attempted re-seduction and reconciliation. After Samson's response in a duet of mutual loathing, *Traitor to love! I'll sue no more*, they finally part. This is followed by one of the most misogynist choruses in the choral repertoire, *To man God's universal law, gave power to keep the wife in awe*. The Philistine giant Harapha now appears, taunting and challenging Samson, but disdaining to fight a man both blind and enslaved.

Act 3 begins with a contest between the Philistines and Israelites. Harapha urges Samson to demonstrate his strength but Samson's indignant refusal is followed by the Israelite chorus's plea to God to arise *With thunder arm'd*. Samson apparently changes his mind and, urging his friends to remain behind, departs for the feast with Harapha. Distant revels announce the Philistine celebration. Suddenly, a terrible noise and confusion proclaim a tremendous disaster. A messenger arrives to report that Samson has pulled down the temple at the cost of sacrificing his own life. After the lament, *Weep, Israel, weep*, Samson's body is borne to the square to a Dead March.

This is where Handel originally intended to end his oratorio, on a note of tragedy. But he added the brilliant soprano aria, *Let the Bright Seraphim*, which leads straight into the final chorus, *Let their celestial concerts all unite*. Samson's great deed has brought redemption to God's people and the work ends triumphantly with a great hymn of praise as the angels praise God in heaven, *in endless morn of light*.

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