

## Israel in Egypt

## George Friderick Handel (1685-1759)

Handel had become *kapellmeister* to George, Elector of Hanover in 1710, but before accepting the post he stipulated that he should be allowed 12 months' leave of absence to visit London. George, who already knew he was heir to the English throne and therefore that Handel was, in effect, merely in another part of his realm, agreed. Handel was received at court by Queen Anne and at the Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket put on *Rinaldo*, his first opera composed specifically for London. He returned to Hanover in June 1711, but in 1712 he requested further leave to visit London, to which George agreed on the condition that he "engaged to return within a reasonable time". He had not done so when Queen Anne died without heir in 1714 and George was offered the English throne. The famous story is that George was displeased at Handel's long absence and that Handel won the monarch round by composing music which was played, without the King's prior knowledge, on a second barge while George was on an excursion on the Thames in the royal barge. Supposedly, George was so entranced by what became known as the *Water Music* that he was reconciled with Handel. In fact, it is highly likely that the two men were never estranged; certainly Handel's *Te Deum* was performed in both September and October 1714 in George's presence and Handel continued to be paid his full salary.

For the next quarter of a century, Handel's musical life revolved around producing Italian operas for London. Italian opera was the centre of musical and social life in London, and between 1714 and 1739 Handel wrote almost 40 of them. However, in the mid 1730s the public began to tire of what Dr. Johnson famously defined as this "exotic and irrational entertainment". Handel obstinately clung to opera, despite its failure to attract the public, but he was forced to try various other musical forms, and drifted into the composition of oratorios, though at first with little more success than with opera. Handel can really be credited with the invention of the English oratorio, as it was without precedent in this country and his oratorios bore little relation to continental examples of the genre.

Between 1<sup>st</sup> October and 1<sup>st</sup> November 1738, Handel composed *Israel in Egypt*. This extremely short time is partly explained by the wholesale "borrowings" that Handel made from other composers' music. He plundered the works of the largely-forgotten Alessandro Stradella and the utterly-forgotten Kaspar Kerll and Dionigi Erba in a way that may now seem shocking, but was common in the 18th century. The borrowings range from the use of some thematic material from Erba in the chorus "And with the blast" to a note-for-note transcription of an organ canzona by Kerll for "Egypt was glad". It must also be said in Handel's defence that the use he made of the "borrowings" is always a vast improvement on their original form. *Israel in Egypt* is unusual in that it is one of only two of Handel's 29 oratorios whose text is taken directly from the Bible (the other being *Messiah*). Its librettist is not known, but it has been conjectured that it may well be Charles Jennens, who compiled the libretto for *Messiah* three years later. *Israel in Egypt* is also most unusual in that it contains no named characters and three-quarters of its music is for chorus. This may well be one of the main reasons why its first performance on the 4<sup>th</sup> April 1739 was such a flop that the second performance was drastically "shortened and Intermix'd with Songs", though with little greater success.

In its original form, *Israel in Egypt* consisted of three large sections rather than the two which we will perform tonight. Originally, the first section of the work at the first performance in April 1739, was Handel's "Funeral Anthem for Queen Caroline," composed in December 1737. By judicious alteration of the text, Handel transformed this multi-movement anthem lasting almost 45 minutes into a "Lamentation of the Israelites for the Death of Joseph". For example, in the first movement, "The Ways of

Zion do Mourn" became "The Sons of Israel do Mourn". Similar alterations followed where necessary. The second and third sections of *Israel in Egypt* are entitled "Exodus" and "Moses' Song". After the financially disastrous original two performances, Handel cut the first section in the hope that this would aid the work's acceptance, though without success during his lifetime. Evidence of this rather unceremonious hacking off of the first part is the highly unusual way in which the oratorio begins, with a recitative rather than an overture or large scale chorus (an idea which Mendelssohn adopted for *Elijah*). The popularity of tonight's work only began in the 1780s, when it was performed at Westminster Abbey, but the huge rise in the popularity of choral societies meant that by the middle of the 19th century it had become one of Handel's most popular works.

Part One, *Exodus*. The texts of this part are taken from Psalms 78, 105 and 106, and from passages from the Book of Exodus. The story of the Jewish bondage and the plagues sent by God to encourage the Egyptians to let the Israelites go inspired some of Handel's most memorable word painting; the settings of the words are positively onomatopoeic at times. The sequence of six choruses at the end of this part describes the escape from Egypt, and concludes with a statement of renewed faith "And (they) believed the Lord and his servant Moses."

Part Two, *Moses' Song*, is, in effect, a gigantic song of praise and triumph rather than a continuation of the narrative. In it, the Israelites reflect with wonder, jubilation, gratitude (and not a little *schadenfreude*) upon the events of the Exodus.

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