

George Frideric Handel (1685 - 1759): Israel in Egypt (1737-8)

By April 1736, the strain of giving programmes of opera, not many of which had been successful, had begun to tell on Handel and he suffered a severe stroke. Despite financial difficulties, he recovered sufficiently to travel to Aix-la-Chapelle for a month in September to improve his health further. He returned to London for the winter and presented a further series of opera at the King's Theatre in Haymarket, but with no better outcome than had earlier led to his collapse. It was clear by now that enthusiasm for Italian opera in London was declining and Handel decided the following spring to focus instead on the composition of oratorio, as another way of combining musical drama and solo vocal writing for his English audiences. He had already enjoyed some success with *Esther* (1732), *Deborah* (1733) and *Athalia* (1735), and would be able to draw once again on the resources he had acquired as a young man on his first visit to Italy.

Handel had spent the years 1706-10 there, a time that was decisive in the development of his career. It was then the home of opera, chamber cantata and the principal instrumental forms of concerto and sonata. His native Germany, by comparison, was relatively provincial and the experience of working with the major contemporary Italian composers and musicians enabled him to develop an early command of all the musical genres in which he chose subsequently to compose. This introduced him to the details of baroque style, and the influence of the expressionism of Carissimi, Stradella and Corelli was particularly important both in softening and elaborating Handel's vocal style and widening the range of his instrumental writing. It was whilst Handel was in Rome that Carissimi first developed baroque religious oratorio as a way of continuing performances of musical drama during Lent, thereby circumventing the Papal ban on secular opera which operated during that period. It was particularly on his work and that of Stradella that Handel drew for the composition of *Israel in Egypt*.

Soon after Handel's return to London in 1737 George II's consort, Queen Caroline died. He had composed anthems for their coronation in 1727, which included *Zadok the Priest* and *My Heart is Inditing*, both of which were reworked for inclusion in *Esther*, the latter to a new text 'Blessed are all they that fear the Lord'. The coronation pieces were so successful that Handel's oratorios of the early 1830's were advertised as 'Musick to be disposed after the manner of the Coronation Service'. He was the obvious choice to

compose an anthem for performance at the Queen's funeral in December 1737, a commission resulting in *The Ways of Zion do Mourn*. In recycled form, as *The Lamentations of the Israelites for the Death of Joseph*, this became the initial basis for *Israel in Egypt* and constituted Part I of the finished work. Handel often composed his oratorios in pairs and, despite having effectively begun *Israel in Egypt*, before proceeding further he moved on to the composition of *Saul* between July and October, 1738, the first work on which he collaborated with Charles Jennens, the librettist with whom he later worked so successfully on *Messiah*. The selection and arrangement of biblical passages for the libretto of *Israel in Egypt* remains unattributed but is widely thought to be the work of Jennens as well. Whilst revising *Saul* in October, Handel also began work on what was to be the third and final part of *Israel in Egypt*, entitled *Moses' Song*, which set text from Exodus xv, celebrating the deliverance of the chosen people of Israel from their Egyptian exile and the punitive wrath of Pharaoh. This was fully drafted by mid-October and was followed by an equally rapid drafting of the linking, second part of the work, Exodus. This set texts from Exodus and Psalms, which related the trials and plagues visited on the Israelites' Egyptian captors, and was completed by the end of the month. *Saul* was premiered at the King's Theatre in January, 1739 and was immediately successful. Like most of his oratorios, it provided an essentially operatic drama, enacted by soloists and chorus, of a sacred narrative in English, thereby providing a welcome replacement for traditional Italian operas no longer favoured by his audiences.

Israel in Egypt, however, premiered in the same theatre three months later on April 4, did not meet with comparable success, for several reasons. There was the issue over whether sacred scriptural texts set to music were appropriate for secular theatrical performance, which recurred throughout Handel's career. Its sombre, literally funereal opening failed to engage the audience from the outset and led the work as a whole later to be dubbed "too solemn for common ears". These difficulties were compounded by what was perceived as an overwhelming imbalance of choruses over arias. Although it was unpopular at first, the development of the role of the chorus was one of Handel's most significant stylistic innovations to the form of the oratorio. Whereas in opera it was subordinate to recitative and aria, he gave the chorus a more important function, both as dramatic agent engaged with the progress of the narrative in his oratorios – its role particularly in *Israel in Egypt* – and as commentator, reflecting on the import of events and their inevitable consequences, a strategy also used to especial effect in *Messiah*. For the second performance, of *Israel in Egypt*, Handel introduced a new organ concerto in F,

which later became known as *'The Cuckoo and the Nightingale'*, and several Italian arias, but still failed to redeem it with audiences, with only four performances. For annual revivals between 1756 and 1758 Handel removed the first part altogether, replacing it with a selection of pieces from other works but this, too, failed to attract and it was not performed again in his lifetime. For the next two centuries, apart from a performance conducted by Mendelssohn in Düsseldorf in 1833, who insisted as a mark of respect for Handel that it should be sung exactly as he had originally intended, it was performed, as it will be this evening, in an abbreviated version consisting of Parts II and III – now treated and renamed as Parts I and II - preceded by an introductory orchestral sinfonietta, which had been written originally to add to the funeral anthem for Queen Caroline. Yet, by the mid-nineteenth century it was second only to *Messiah* in frequency of performance among Handel's vocal works. In England it was sung regularly, at times by choirs of more than a thousand singers accompanied by orchestras of players numbered in hundreds. An idea of its success in Germany is given in the comments of Moritz Hauptman, cantor of the Thomas-Schule at Leipzig, after a rehearsal at the Thomaskirche in April, 1854: 'There's health and strength for you! What poverty-stricken stuff is our best modern music, by the side of it! How we strain for effect, and miss all the simplicity and repose, which one associated with every bar of this oratorio, even in its most vigorous movements!'

Following the overture, Part I opens, perhaps rather awkwardly and in a way that Handel would have been unlikely to allow, with a brief tenor recitative, 'Now there arose', to announce the concluding narrative of the Israelites' exile. This is followed by the first of the many eight part double choruses that sustain the work, 'And their cry came up unto God'. Led by the solo counter-tenor the chorus relate, in slow tempo, the rigour with which the Egyptians have made the children of Israel serve the severe burdens they have imposed on them. The musical structure displays in a wholly accessible way Handel's mastery of the baroque vocal art of diminution, adapted for chorus. Baroque singing was intended to produce a natural sound, though it was based on the quite unnaturally produced vocal agility of castrati operatic singers, a practice which diminution was designed to enable other singers to emulate. It involved the linking of two long notes through elaborated figures, moving dynamically from a soft voice into a gradual crescendo, then descending gently back into diminuendo. This relates music to text as a form of word painting essential to the persuasive rhetoric of baroque vocal style, designed both to further the narrative effects of the work and to express its emotional affects. In both aspects, the intention is to engage the sensibility of the audience, and is well displayed in

the dynamic undulations and complex variations on the line 'And their cry came up unto God...They oppress'd them with burdens and made them serve with rigour'. At this appropriately solemn tempo the listeners can both apprehend and appreciate the processes of vocal effort and release with which the chorus can express the meaning of the narrative they are given to communicate, preparing them for the much faster, expressive coloratura-like runs, all of them written-out diminutions, that he gives the chorus in later numbers

Handel uses the rhetorical practice of persistent repetition throughout this chorus, as in several others, as a prelude to musical elaboration and narrative development, possibly as a means of demonstrating to his audience how, in oratorio, the chorus can undertake the work of characterisation given in opera to individuals. The character, on whose plight the chorus focuses here, as throughout the first part, is that of the exiled nation of Israel itself. Similarly, in the opening and closing choruses of Part II, the use of repetition is turned on the defeat of the Egyptians, over whom, at last, 'the Lord...hath triumphed gloriously...the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea'. The second part is also organised structurally by Handel through use of another rhetorical technique, the rhetorized question. The chorus 'Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like Thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?' This divides the second part itself into two halves, the first of which concludes the account in Part I of the divine overthrow of the Egyptians, whilst the latter develops the song of praise and thanks from Moses and the children of Israel for their deliverance.

The 'burdens' of the first chorus are then relieved, as Moses and Aaron are sent to show God's answer to the Israelites' cries to Him. The first half of Part I details, in three further choruses and a single alto aria, the pollution, plagues, pestilence and other catastrophes with which He afflicts the Egyptians in retribution for the oppression of His chosen people. These are both accompanied and counterposed by extravagantly elaborated orchestral textures, such as the strings' strong suggestions of buzzing flies and crawling lice in 'He spake the word', the thunderous brass and percussion of 'He gave them hailstones for rain' and the violent vocal-orchestral staccato of 'He smote all the first-born of Egypt'. For all the sombre tone of much of Part I, appropriate to its themes of suffering and affliction, there is in these lively choruses, if not a sense exactly of fun, then surely of humour realised musically through the expressive interplay of voices and orchestra. The mood returns to seriousness, however, for the second half of the first part, with the chorus 'He

sent a thick darkness o'er all the land'. Low strings and woodwind here strain for unattainable harmonies as the vocal parts sink sonorously, almost into recitative, on 'even darkness, which might be felt'. The fierce, iterative staccato of 'He smote all the first-born of Egypt' follows, before the chorus gently startle listeners with a shift into the lilting andante of a delightful minuet – 'But as for His people'. From this soft entry, the chorus swings rhythmically to the graceful, dancing repetitions of 'He led them forth like sheep' into the sumptuousness of 'He brought them out with silver and gold' and onto the triumphant, concluding assertion that 'there was not one feeble person among their tribes'. Small wonder that, as the next chorus relates, 'Egypt was glad when they departed', before the grave staccato of 'He rebuked the Red Sea' commences the denouement of the divine intervention on behalf of the exiles. The tramping introduction of the basses to 'He led them through the deep' is followed by the excited, coloratura runs of 'as through a wilderness', marking the escape of the exiles before the tempo giusto of the next chorus, 'But the waters overwhelmed their enemies'. This is a reworking of 'The Lord is my light', one of Handel's *Chandos Anthems* (1717), used here to indicate the deluge which overtakes and destroys the pursuing Egyptians, as wave upon wave of repetitions insist that 'there was not one of them left'. Part I concludes with solemn awe, in C minor, as two final choruses report the fear of the Lord and belief in His servant, Moses, for 'that great work that the Lord did upon th'Egyptians'.

Part II, by contrast, is centred on C major and opens in a confident announcement by double chorus of Moses' song, before altos and tenors lead both choirs into 'I will sing unto the Lord', which erupts with triumphant joy in the elaborate runs for all parts on 'gloriously' and the galloping narrative repetitions of 'the horse and his rider'. There follows the first of the three duets which punctuate the choruses of the second part, 'The Lord is my strength', which continues the themes of praise and thanksgiving. Two double choruses, 'He is my God' 'And I will exalt Him', both endorse these themes, the first through a devout affirmation of faith, the second through elaborated, relaxed andante diminutions. In a brisker, but equally assured time sustained by strings and woodwind, we are reminded that 'The Lord is a man of war' who has drowned 'Pharoah's chariots and his host'. For all that the oppressors met a deserved fate, the next chorus, 'The depths have covered them' suggests that they are mourned nevertheless, not least by the deep sonority of the second basses' final plunge on 'they sank into the bottom as a stone'. Triumph and joy return with the next chorus, 'Thy right hand, O Lord', which is not only 'glorious' but has also 'dashed in pieces the enemy', reinforced further by the two choruses which follow, building from a

slow momentum in 'And in the greatness' before the misleadingly gentle female voices opening 'Thou sentest forth Thy wrath' are joined by tenors and basses to build up the fierce assertiveness of 'which consumed them as stubble'. The next chorus, 'And the blast' shows no restraint in explaining insistently how the annihilating floods visited on the Egyptians were divinely engendered, an account reinforced by the solo arias which follow. 'The enemy said', for tenor, repeats Pharaoh's specious boasts of a successful, destructive pursuit of the fleeing Israelites, only to be challenged by the soprano's return, in 'Thou didst blow', to the earlier reportage of 'And the blast'.

After the grave rhetoric of 'Who is like unto Thee', the triumphalist mood is concluded with 'The earth swallow'd them' to be replaced by more contemplative reflections on the deliverance. The last duet, 'Thou in Thy mercy', for alto and tenor soloists, locates the strength of divine mercy in redemption and guidance, providing an appropriate prelude to the transformational double chorus which ushers in the final passages of the work. Beginning slowly in a deep staccato rhythm, 'The people shall hear' conveys the fear and sorrow of the awed Canaanites, who 'shall melt away' as the music takes on a delicate, almost ethereal tone, before descending to firm assertiveness on 'They shall be as still as a stone'. The chorus then move through ascending repetitions of 'till Thy people pass over, O Lord', settling confidently into a final diminution on 'which Thou hast purchased'. Here, Handel captures with exquisite musicality the textual characterisation of both the severity of divine authority and the transcendent relief of those chosen for deliverance. The alto soloist begins the concluding numbers gratefully with 'Thou shalt bring them in', followed by a brief, joyous double chorus: 'The Lord shall reign'. This is reprised between two short recitatives by the tenor soloist, reminding of the fate of Pharaoh's soldiers, and how Aaron's sister, the prophetess Miriam, leads all the women in celebratory dance, before the double chorus sings to the Lord in a concluding, ecstatic reprise of the opening number.

Paul Filmer, February 2012