

WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 22 December 2025
7.30pm

Solomon's Knot

Zoë Brookshaw soprano
Rebecca Lea soprano
Kate Symonds-Joy alto
William Shelton alto

Thomas Herford tenor
David de Winter tenor
Jonathan Sells bass, artistic director
Alex Ashworth bass

George Clifford leader, violin I
Gabi Jones violin I
Rachel Stroud violin II
Will McGahon violin II
Joanne Miller viola
Sarah McMahon cello
Jan Zahourek double bass

Daniel Lanthier oboe I
Robert de Bree oboe II
Inga Maria Klaucke bassoon I
Ester van der Veen bassoon II

Ben Fullbrook timpani

Fruzi Hara trumpet
Thom Hewitt trumpet
Emily White trombone
Claire McIntyre trombone
Adam Crighton trombone
James Johnstone
harpsichord, organ

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Israel in Egypt HWV54 (1739)

The interval will fall between parts II & III



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The première that took place in the King's Theatre on 4 April 1739 was a curious event, even by London's standards. Arriving to hear the second of Handel's two new oratorios of the season, its fashionable audience may not have been expecting visual spectacle on an operatic scale, but after the success of *Saul* three months earlier they were at least confident of an evening of exciting music and vocal fireworks. Instead, though, they were faced with a work so unexpected and strange they had no idea what to make of it. In the end, only a handful of people turned up to each of its paltry three performances and everyone – including the critics – left less with a sense of disappointment than utter bewilderment.

The problem with *Israel in Egypt* was, as far as Handel's audience was concerned, its relentless parade of enormous choruses unbroken by any of the solo numbers or famous singers they were used to. *Saul* had shown oratorio could put on just as much of a show as opera and, even though its audiences had not been as big as Handel had hoped, the fact he had borrowed the Tower of London's biggest kettledrums and employed a dazzling array of brass instruments meant the minds of those who had taken the plunge once were open to another. But Handel's subscription concerts were expensive, so when *Israel in Egypt* opened with none of the operatic solo numbers of *Saul*, the confusion about its overall appearance was compounded by the related feeling of having been shortchanged. This didn't only go for the audience: Handel's leading lady, Elisabeth Duparc (*La Francesina*), had only just arrived in London and found herself with so little to sing at the première that she declared herself to be 'humiliated.' Realising his mistake, Handel made some additions to the second performance on 11 April, including the secular 'O Liberty, thou choicest pleasure' that later appeared in *Judas Maccabeus*, but it was too little, too late for the 1738-9 season.

The public failure of this first run, though, was no more than a wobble for what is, in fact, a work of extraordinary originality. Just as *Saul* had used kettledrums and trombones to create with sound that which would have been visual in opera, *Israel in Egypt* was equally radical in unite the Israelites in a single, dominant, choral voice to suffer through the plagues of Egypt. In 'He sent a thick darkness over the land', 'He gave them hailstones for rain' and 'He smote all the first-born of Egypt' there was, and is, a sense of theatre and community emblematic of the founding force of the Three Choirs and Birmingham Triennial Festivals much later, which commissioned some of the most important choral works of the English canon, including *The Dream of Gerontius*. In 1739, though, it was simply the case that Handel had misjudged his audience. He sensibly acknowledged the need to give audiences more of what they wanted but knew nonetheless he

had made something innovative with *Israel in Egypt*, so despite making it a more viable commercial enterprise he was careful to make sure its unified choral voice remained absolutely at its centre.

The changes Handel made out of necessity after that first production were no less innovative and far-reaching than the work itself. Repurposing existing music was common practice among composers of this time, and Handel was no stranger to it either. But when he came to revise *Israel in Egypt*, instead of writing new material to insert at just the right points to thrill the audience, he indulged himself more than he had ever done before in the nuanced art of 'borrowing.' Some of what he added came from his own music, but other revisions came from elsewhere. Even though we might describe it in uncharitable terms today, Handel would have seen this as no more than 'creative adaptation', and almost wholly positive. Fundamentally, he wanted to salvage his work as quickly as possible before his audience moved onto something else, in circumstances where he was still recovering from his (likely) stress-related stroke of the previous year. Furthermore, the anti-Handel opera group, led by the Italophile Lady Margaret Cecil Brown, which had plagued him for years was publicly capitalising on his misstep with *Israel in Egypt* to enjoy considerable collateral success with its rival production at the Covent Garden Theatre. So, when Handel lifted 'Pleasure's a fine lady' directly from his own *Il Parnasso in festa*, he was simply recycling music he already knew audiences would like for a quick-but-elegant fix. He was more respectfully creative, though, when he used the work of others. In Part II, he draws extensively on the *Magnificat* of Dionigi Erba, a less well-known, gentleman composer who had died in 1730. In repurposing Erba's material from the New Testament *Magnificat* text, 'my spirit hath rejoiced in God my saviour', Handel meticulously places it under the Old Testament words 'the Lord is my strength and my song.' Similarly, 'for he that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is his name' reappears under 'the Lord is a man of War, Lord is his name.' So, where Handel may have been purely pragmatic in his self-borrowing, he was never less than philosophical when it came to the work of his fellow composers.

Israel in Egypt was a far greater success second time round. Perhaps it was just too uncompromising for 1730s London, whose magpie audiences still wanted sparkling fireworks and big-name productions. But it was this very subordination of starriness and individuality that planted the seeds of the communal narrative and choral revolution which, only a few decades later, changed England's relationship with music making forever.

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George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Israel in Egypt HWV54 (1739)

Biblical text

Prelude

Part II: The Exodus

Recitative (Tenor)

Now there arose a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph; and he set over Israel taskmasters to afflict them with burdens, and they made them serve with rigour.

Alto solo and Chorus

And the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and their cry came up unto God. They oppressed them with burthens, and made them serve with rigour; and their cry came up unto God.

Recitative (Tenor)

Then sent he Moses, his servant, and Aaron whom he had chosen; these shewed his signs among them, and wonders in the land of Ham. He turned their waters into blood.

Chorus

They loathed to drink of the river. He turned their waters into blood.

Air (Alto)

Their land brought forth frogs, yea, even in their kings' chambers. He gave their cattle over to the pestilence; blotches and blains broke forth on man and beast.

Chorus

He spake the word, and there came all manner of flies, and lice in all their quarters. He spake; and the locusts came without number, and devoured the fruits of their ground.

Chorus

He gave them hailstones for rain; fire mingled with the hail ran along upon the ground.

Chorus

He sent a thick darkness over all the land, even darkness which might be felt.

Chorus

He smote all the first-born of Egypt, the chief of all their strength.

Chorus

But as for his people, he led them forth like sheep: he brought them out with silver and gold; there was not one feeble person among their tribes.

Chorus

Egypt was glad when they departed, for the fear of them fell upon them.

Chorus

He rebuked the Red Sea, and it was dried up.

Chorus

He led them through the deep as through a wilderness.

Chorus

But the waters overwhelmed their enemies, there was not one of them left.

Chorus

And Israel saw that great work that the Lord did upon the Egyptians; and the people feared the Lord, And believed the Lord, and his servant Moses.

Interval

Part III: Moses' Song

Introitus (Chorus)

Moses and the children of Israel sung this song unto the Lord, and spake, saying:

Chorus

I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.

Duet (Soprano I & II)

The Lord is my strength and my song; he is become my salvation.

Chorus

He is my God, and I will prepare him an habitation: my father's God, And I will exalt him.

Duet (Bass I & II)

The Lord is a man of war: Lord is his name. Pharaoh's chariots and his host hath he cast into the sea; his chosen captains also are drowned in the Red Sea.

Chorus

The depths have covered them: they sank into the bottom as a stone.

Work continues overleaf. Please turn the page as quietly as possible.

Chorus

Thy right hand, O Lord, is become glorious in power; thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy.

Chorus

And in the greatness of thine excellency thou hast overthrown them that rose up against Thee.
Thou sentest forth thy wrath, which consumed them as stubble.

Chorus

And with the blast of thy nostrils the waters were gathered together, the floods stood upright as an heap, and the depths were congealed in the heart of the sea.

Air (Tenor)

The enemy said, I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my lust shall be satisfied upon them; I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.

Air (Soprano)

Thou didst blow with the wind, the sea covered them; they sank as lead in the mighty waters.

Chorus

Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders? Thou stretchest out thy right hand, The earth swallowed them.

Duet (Alto, Tenor)

Thou in thy mercy hast led forth thy people which thou hast redeemed; thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation.

Chorus

The people shall hear, and be afraid; sorrow shall take hold on them: all the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away: by the greatness of thy arm they shall be as still as a stone; till thy people pass over, O Lord, which thou hast purchased.

Air (Alto)

Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which thou hast made for thee to dwell in, in the Sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established.

Chorus

The Lord shall reign for ever and ever.

Recitative (Tenor)

For the horse of Pharaoh went in with his chariots and with his horsemen into the sea, and the Lord brought again the waters of the sea upon them; but the children of Israel went on dry land in the midst of the sea.

Chorus

The Lord shall reign for ever and ever.

Recitative (Tenor)

For the horse of Pharaoh went in with his chariots and with his horsemen into the sea, and the Lord brought again the waters of the sea upon them; but the children of Israel went on dry land in the midst of the sea.

And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them:

Solo Soprano & Chorus

Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. The Lord shall reign for ever and ever. I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.