

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 27 May 2024
7.30pm

Solomon's Knot

George Clifford leader	Jan Zahourek double bass	Kate Goldsmith horn II
Maxim Del Mar violin I	Eva Caballero flute	Fruzszi Hara trumpet
Gabi Jones violin II	Daniel Lanthier oboe	Aileen Henry harp
Will McGahon violin II	Inga Maria Klaucke bassoon I	Josep Maria Martí Duran theorbo
Joanne Miller viola	Sally Holman bassoon II	James Johnstone harpsichord, organ
Gavin Kibble cello	Kathryn Zevenbergen horn I	

Clare Lloyd-Griffiths soprano (as Israelite boy)
Zoë Brookshaw soprano (as Esther)
James Hall alto (as Priest of the Israelites)
Kate Symonds-Joy alto (as Priest of the Israelites)
David de Winter tenor (as Habdonah, Officer, 2nd Israelite)
Joseph Doody tenor (as Mordecai)
Thomas Herford tenor (as 1st Israelite)
Xavier Hetherington tenor (as Ahasuerus)
Alex Ashworth bass (as Haman)
Jonathan Sells artistic director, bass

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Esther HWV50a (c.1718)

Act I • Act II

Interval

Act III



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Esther, written in c.1718, was surely never intended to achieve the fame it subsequently garnered, as the 'first' Handelian oratorio. Instead, *Esther* was a rather liminal work, marking the point in Handel's career where his allegiances shifted from wealthy private patrons to the public theatre, and from a variety of chamber works to the grandeur of the opera house. It also indicated a connection between Handel's Italian experience, where the oratorio was a well-known and venerable genre; his and his audiences' knowledge of French 17th Century theatre (the gold standard across Europe); and his willingness to engage with English theatrical interests, which at this time encompassed stories of distressed womanhood.

While we cannot be certain of the date of the oratorio's first performance or its cast, we know that it was written for the private musical entertainment of the Duke of Chandos at his country seat at Cannons. The Duke's fabulous wealth, acquired through exploiting a combination of British public office and colonial ventures, allowed him to gather the best writers and artists in his service. *Esther*, based on Jean Racine's 1689 schoolgirl play of the same name, via Thomas Brereton's *Esther; or Faith Triumphant* of 1715, was no doubt designed for musical setting because both those works included significant sections 'after the Manner of the antient Greek Chorus's ... [with] diverse Psalms or Hymns'. Although there was no clear English precedent for such a work in the sacred tradition, which explains why it was subsequently described as 'an Oratoria', there were some secular precedents: one contemporaneous manuscript calls it *Haman and Mordecai: A Masque*.

Whether conceived as masque or oratorio, *Esther's* anonymous librettist (or librettists) did not measure up to the standards of Racine in either plot or poetic construction, but nonetheless fashioned an emotionally varied drama. The piece is broadly devised in six scenes. It opens *in medias res*, with Haman refusing pleas for mercy and declaring that 'all the Jewish race shall bleed' (it later transpires that this is because of their refusal to obey Haman); a chorus of Persian soldiers affirms 'nor age nor sex we'll spare'. The second scene visits the Israelites in the middle of their rejoicing that one of their number, Esther, has recently been made queen. This then turns to general rejoicing in their faith, in spite of 'the heavy yoke and galling chain' of servitude. Their song changes to mourning in the third scene, when a 'Priest' arrives to announce Haman's decision. Esther's arrival in the fourth scene prompts another exposition of their danger from her kinsman, Mordecai, and the decision that she should visit her husband, King Ahasuerus, to ask for mercy, despite the danger of appearing unsummoned before the king (the punishment for which is usually death). Scene five, between Ahasuerus and Esther, makes much of that danger: Esther appears, is briefly threatened, and then immediately reprieved, but nonetheless faints, which prompts much tenderness from the King. When she revives, she invites him and Haman to a feast, and the

scene ends with an Israelite chorus of praise for Esther's 'virtue, truth and innocence', and thence for Jeohvah's anticipated vengeance on Haman. In the final scene, Esther tells Ahasuerus that 'Haman's hate' has led to the decree of death which is aimed primarily 'at Mordecai and me'. Ahasuerus decrees Haman's execution; Esther spurns Haman's pleas for mercy and he is led off, to be replaced (it is implied) by Mordecai as Ahasuerus's favoured servant. The Israelites conclude with extended choruses of rejoicing in God's vengeance and the restoration of his chosen people.

Handel perhaps suggests that he viewed *Esther* as a generically distinctive project from opera by borrowing 11 of the oratorio's 22 numbers from the *Brockes Passion* (though without any interest in parallel dramatic situations). The characters are certainly rather thinly sketched, with Haman the most musically interesting – though none of his arias have a *da capo*, perhaps suggesting the limitations of the first singer of the role. Indeed, the availability of musicians is likely to have affected the structure of the drama and distribution of music for both singers and orchestra. It is notable that, unlike in Italian opera, the major (and most minor) male roles are taken by tenors (Ahasuerus, Mordecai), or basses (Haman). This distribution reflects not only personnel available at Cannons, but also the nature of English theatre music up until this point. Esther herself may have been sung by a boy, rather than a woman.

Had Cannons been the only place of performance, in 1718 and again in 1720, *Esther* would have figured as a brief entry in Handel's career. In 1732, however, the Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal, Bernard Gates, who had obtained a score, decided to stage several productions at the Philharmonic Society's meeting at a tavern, with his boys acting in many of the roles. The first being in honour of Handel's birthday (23 February), the composer was present. After these three staged but essentially private performances – for male club members only – a pirated public performance was offered at York Buildings on 20 April. This stirred Handel himself into action, and on 19 April he announced his own public performance for 2 May, 'now revised by him, with several Additions, and to be performed by a great Number of the best Voices and Instruments'. The advertised additions included music from the coronation anthems of 1727 – also previously unheard by the general public, so a significant draw. However, there was 'no Action on the Stage', due to the intervention of the Bishop of London, concerned about the morality of the venture as a whole and the involvement of choristers. In any case, Handel must already have rewritten the roles to suit his operatic soloists, including the castrato Senesino as Ahasuerus, and Maria Strada as Esther. Thus, by a series of accidents, was a new genre born.

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George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Esther HWV50a (c.1718 rev. 1732-5)

attr. Alexander Pope and John Arbuthnot, after
Jean Racine

Act I

Overture

Scene I

Recitative

Habdonah

'Tis greater far to spare, than to destroy.

Haman

I'll hear no more; it is decreed,
All the Jewish race shall bleed.
Hear and obey, what Haman's voice commands.
Hath not the Lord of all the East
Giv'n all his pow'r into my hands?
Hear, all ye nations far and wide,
Which own our monarch's sway,
Hear and obey.

Air

Haman

Pluck root and branch from out the land:
Shall I the God of Israel fear?
Let Jewish blood dye ev'ry hand,
Nor age, nor sex I spare.
Raze, raze their temples to the ground,
And let their place no more be found.

Recitative

Officer

Our souls with ardour glow
To execute the blow.

Chorus

Shall we the God of Israel fear?
Nor age, nor sex we'll spare.
Pluck root and branch from out the land:
Nor age, nor sex we'll spare.

Scene II

Recitative

First Israelite

Now persecution shall lay by her iron rod;
Esther is queen, and Esther serves the living God.

Air

First Israelite

Tune your harps to cheerful strains,
Moulder idols into dust!
Great Jehovah lives and reigns,
We in great Jehovah trust.

Chorus

Shall we of servitude complain,
The heavy yoke and galling chain?

Recitative

Israelite Boy

O God, who from the suckling's mouth
Ordainest early praise:
Of such as worship thee in truth,
Accept the humble lays.

Air

Israelite Boy

Praise the Lord with cheerful noise,
'Wake my glory, 'wake my lyre!
Praise the Lord each mortal voice,
Praise the Lord, ye heav'nly choir!
Zion now her head shall raise,
Tune your harps to songs of praise!

Chorus

Shall we of servitude complain,
The heavy yoke and galling chain?

Scene III

Recitative

Priest of the Israelites

How have our sins provok'd the Lord!
Wild persecution has unsheath'd the sword.
Haman hath sent forth his decree:
The sons of Israel all
Shall in one ruin fall.
Methinks I hear the mother's groans,
While babes are dashed against the stones!
I hear the infant's shriller screams,
Stabb'd at the mother's breast!
Blood stains the mur'drer's vest,
And through the city flows in streams.

Chorus

Ye sons of Israel mourn,
Ye never to your country shall return!

Air

Priest of the Israelites

O Jordan, Jordan, sacred tide,
Shall we no more behold thee glide
The fertile vales along?
As in our great fathers' days,
Shall not thy hills resound with praise,
And learn our holy song?

Chorus

Ye sons of Israel mourn,
Ye never to your country shall return!

Please do not turn the page until the song and its
accompaniment have ended.

Act II

Scene I

Recitative

Esther

Why sits that sorrow on thy brow?
Why is thy rev'rend head
With mournful ashes spread?
Why is the humble sackcloth worn?
Speak, Mordecai, my kinsman, friend,
Speak, and let Esther know,
Why all this solemn woe?

Mordecai

One fate involves us all!
Haman's decree,
To strike at me,
Hath said that ev'ry Jew shall fall.
Go, stand before the King with weeping eye.

Esther

Who goes unsummon'd, by the laws shall die.

Air

Mordecai

Dread not, righteous Queen, the danger;
Love will pacify his anger;
Fear is due to God alone.
Follow great Jehovah's calling,
For thy kindred's safety falling,
Death is better than a throne.

Recitative

Esther

I go before the King to stand.
Stretch forth, O King, thy scepter'd hand!

Air

Esther

Tears assist me, pity moving,
Justice cruel, fraud reproving.
Hear, O God, thy servant's prayer!
Is it blood that must atone?
Take, O take my life alone,
And thy chosen people spare.

Chorus

Save us, O Lord,
And blunt the wrathful sword!

Scene II

Recitative

Ahasuerus

Who dares intrude into our presence without our
leave?
It is decreed, he dies for this audacious deed.
Hah! Esther there!
The law condemns, but love will spare.

Esther

My spirits sink, alas I faint.

Ahasuerus

Ye powers, what paleness spreads her beauteous
face!
Esther, awake, thou fairest of thy race;
Esther, awake, and live, 'tis my command.
Behold the golden sceptre in my hand,
Sure sign of grace. The bloody stern decree
Was never meant, my Queen, to strike at thee.

Duet

Esther

Who calls my parting soul from death?

Ahasuerus

Awake, my soul, my life, my breath!

Esther

Hear my suit, or else I die

Ahasuerus

Ask, my Queen, can I deny?

Air

Ahasuerus

O beauteous Queen, unclosethose eyes!
My fairest shall not bleed,
No, my fairest shall not bleed.
Hear love's soft voice that bids thee rise,
And bids thy suit succeed.
Ask, and 'tis granted from this hour,
Who shares our heart shall share our pow'r.

Recitative

Esther

If I find favour in thy sight,
May the great monarch of the East
Honour my feast,
And deign to be his servant's guest.
The King, and Haman I invite.

Air

Ahasuerus

How can I stay, when love invites?
I come, my Queen, to chaste delights.
With joy, with pleasure I obey,
To thee I give the day.

Scene III

Recitative

First Israelite

With inward joy his visage glows,
He to the Queen's apartment goes.

Second Israelite

Beauty has his fury charm'd,
And all his wrath disarm'd.

Chorus
Virtue, truth, and innocence
Shall ever be her sure defence.
She is heav'n's peculiar care,
Propitious heav'n will hear her pray'r.

Interval

Act III

Scene I

Air
Priest of the Israelites
Jehovah crown'd with glory bright,
Surrounded with eternal light,
Whose ministers are flames of fire:
Arise, and execute thine ire!

Chorus
He comes, He comes to end our woes,
And pour his vengeance on our foes.
Earth trembles, lofty mountains nod!
Jacob, arise to meet thy God!

Scene II

Recitative
Ahasuerus
Now, O Queen, thy suit declare;
Ask half my empire, and 'tis thine.

Esther
O gracious King, my people spare,
For in their lives, you strike at mine.
Reverse the dire decree,
The blow is aimed at Mordecai and me.

And is the fate of Mordecai decreed,
Who, when the ruffian's sword
Sought to destroy my royal Lord,
Brought forth to light the desp'rate deed.

Ahasuerus
Yes, yes, I own:
To him alone,
I owe my life and throne.
Say then, my Queen, who dares pursue
The life to which reward is due?

Esther
'Tis Haman's hate
That signed his fate.

Ahasuerus
I swear by yon great globe of light
Which rules the day,

That Haman's sight
Shall never more behold the golden ray.

Accompagnato
Haman
Turn not, O Queen, thy face away,
Behold me prostrate on the ground!
O speak, his growing fury stay,
Let mercy in thy sight be found!

Air
Esther
Flatt'ring tongue, no more I hear thee!
Vain are all thy cruel wiles!
Bloody wretch, no more I fear thee,
Vain thy frowns and vain thy smiles!
Tyrant, when of pow'r possess'd,
Now thou tremblest, when distress'd.

Recitative
Ahasuerus
Guards, seize the traitor, bear him hence!
Death shall reward the dire offence.

To Mordecai be honour paid:
The royal garment bring,
My diadem shall grace his head,
Let him in triumph through the streets be led,
Who sav'd the King.

Air
Haman
How art thou fall'n from thy height!
Tremble, ambition, at the sight!
In power let mercy sway.
When adverse fortune is thy lot,
Lest thou by mercy be forgot,
And perish in that day.

Scene III

Chorus
The Lord our enemy has slain,
Ye sons of Jacob, sing a cheerful strain!

Sing songs of praise, bow down the knee,
The worship of our God is free!

The Lord our enemy has slain,
Ye sons of Jacob, sing a cheerful strain!
For ever blessed be thy holy name,
Let heav'n and earth his praise proclaim.

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

Priest of the Israelites

Let Israel songs of joy repeat,
Sound all the tongues Jehovah's praise.
He plucks the mighty from his seat,
And cuts off half his days.

Chorus

For ever blessed be thy holy name
Let heav'n and earth his praise proclaim.

Esther and Mordecai

The Lord his people shall restore,
And we in Salem shall adore.

Chorus

For ever blessed be thy holy name,
Let heav'n and earth his praise proclaim.

Bass I and II

Mount Lebanon his firs resigns,
Descend, ye Cedars, haste ye Pines,
To build the temple of the Lord,
For God his people has restor'd.

Chorus

For ever blessed be thy holy name,
Let heav'n and earth his praise proclaim.