

Tafelmusik

Baroque Orchestra and Chamber Choir

Handel *Hercules*

PROGRAMME NOTES

The early 1730's marked a turning point in Handel's career. His success in composing and presenting Italian operas in the London theatres was waning, as the British public started to tire of the foreign entertainment. A solution to his problems came about almost by accident. In honour of Handel's 47th birthday in February, 1732, a friend directed a reworking of Handel's English masque *Esther*, written in 1718 at Cannons, at the Crown and Anchor Tavern. Handel's harpsichord pupil, Princess Ann, was impressed with the work and demanded that Handel present it as "*The Sacred Story of Esther: An Oratorio in English*" at the King's Theatre. He did so with great success, and although he continued to compose and remount Italian operas over the coming years, English oratorio gradually began to dominate his career, both as a composer and as an impresario.

Defined as the extended musical setting of a text on a sacred subject that included dramatic, narrative and contemplative elements, oratorios were performed without scenery, costumes or action. In form, they owed much to opera, their genesis in 17th-century Italy being as a replacement for opera during the Lenten season, when the performance of operas was forbidden by papal decree. The English oratorio was Handel's own creation: he explained, "I have endeavour'd to shew that the English Language, which is so expressive of the sublimest Sentiments, is the best adapted of any to the full and solemn Kind of Musick." He forged a synthesis of elements of English masque and anthem, French drama, and Italian *opera seria*. He increasingly replaced the Italian stars of the opera stage with homegrown British singers. He presented his oratorios in theatres, but true to the form, eschewed scenery, costumes or staging. Like the Italians before him, he produced most of his oratorios during the Lenten season – the theatres were otherwise empty, so there was little competition for audiences. A remarkable dramatist, Handel managed to create works for the oratorio stage that were as compelling and entertaining as those he created for the opera stage.

By the mid-1740's Handel was ready to expand his oratorio season, and thought to do so by pairing oratorios on sacred texts with secular English dramas: *Joseph* was paired with *Semele* in 1744, and *Belshazzar* with *Hercules* in 1745. *Semele* and *Hercules* defy classification – the characters are more fully developed than those in the sacred works, and the plots are arguably more theatrical. Most notably, the subject matter is decidedly profane. Although presented as part of his oratorio season, Handel did not label either as an oratorio: he called the first "*The Story of Semele*," and called *Hercules* "a Musical Drama" – and divided both into "acts" rather than "parts." The libretto of *Semele* had been written by William Congreve some 40 years previously for an English opera (probably never composed), so is replete with detailed stage directions, and in recent years, opera companies have used these as a justification for adopting the work as part of the standard opera repertoire. Under Handel's direction, however, both *Semele* and *Hercules* were both presented "in the manner of an oratorio," without staging, costumes or sets.

The libretto of *Hercules* was newly written by Thomas Broughton, a clergyman well versed in Classical literature. The story is drawn from two sources: Sophocles' tragedy *The Trachinians*, and the ninth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The central theme of Dejanira's jealousy is drawn largely from the latter. Although many believe

Hercules to be one of Handel's finest dramatic works, it played to small audiences when first produced. The librettist of several of Handel's oratorios, Charles Jennens, blamed this largely on Handel's extension of his season beyond Lent, as he therefore had to compete with "all the madness of Town Diversions." (In fact, Handel reverted to predominantly Lenten performances of his oratorios in subsequent seasons.) Jennens added that "his Opera [*Hercules*], for want of the top Italian voices, Action, Dresses, Scenes and Dances, which us'd to draw company, had scarce half a house the first night" – possibly implying that Handel should have considered presenting *Hercules* as a staged opera. In fact, doing so would be challenging – much of the dramatic action takes place "off-stage," including the climax of Hercules' destruction, which is recounted in the third person. The libretto contains only basic stage directions (entrances and exits, the settings of scenes), of a sort included in the printed wordbooks of most of Handel's oratorios so that the audience could better understand the narrative. Unlike that of its sister work, *Semele*, the libretto of *Hercules* was conceived from the outset with the oratorio stage in mind, not the opera stage, so although intensely dramatic, it has not enjoyed *Semele*'s popularity with opera companies. Ironically, because of its operatic nature, *Hercules* has also not enjoyed the popularity of some of the more epic Handel oratorios.

We have opted to embrace the "neither fish nor fowl" nature of *Hercules* by presenting it on the concert stage, but incorporating some elements from the opera theatre. The former allows the focus to remain on Handel's music as the primary source of characterization, as was true of the oratorios, and the latter allows the plot to unfold visually, heightening the operatic qualities of the inherent drama. One is left wondering whether, if Handel had been given a second lifetime, he might have ventured further with his exploration of English "musical drama" to develop a true English opera, something that was left to Benjamin Britten some 200 years later.