

Tafelmusik

Handel *Israel in Egypt*

PROGRAMME NOTES

Handel began work on the composition that was to become *Israel in Egypt* on October 1, 1738, a mere five days after completing the massive oratorio *Saul*. The manner of composition was unusual: Handel composed the last part first, calling it “Moses’ Song.” The text is drawn from Exodus XV and celebrates the deliverance of the chosen people from the wrath of Pharaoh. Ten days later he started work on “Act ye 2nd,” the story of the plagues and the Exodus. This too was completed in short order, facilitated by extensive borrowings from works by A. Stradella, F. Urio and D. Erba collected during Handel’s Italian journeys. For the first part of the new oratorio Handel turned to an earlier work of his own: the anthem “The Ways of Zion do mourn,” written a year earlier for the funeral of Queen Caroline. He used the work unaltered, save for a few minor alterations to the text. He therefore did not need to write a new score, with the result that the autograph for *Israel in Egypt* includes only the two new parts. This resulted in much confusion: as early as 1756 the work was revived by Handel’s assistant John Christopher Smith with only the final two parts intact, a tradition that has remained to this day. In restoring the original Part I we hope to restore the character and balance intended by Handel in conceiving this massive choral epic.

It was probably the Funeral Anthem that inspired the entire oratorio. It is an unusual work, made up entirely of choruses. An endless variety of musical forms compensates somewhat for the lack of variety usually achieved by alternating recitatives, arias and choruses. The result is an extended anthem in the grand style, and one of Handel’s most noble and solemn works. Homage to Queen Caroline’s German origin is offered in borrowing from works by J. Handl and J.P. Krieger, and in the use of Lutheran chorale melodies.

Handel first tried re-using this anthem in *Saul*, but rejected the idea. In conceiving the remainder of *Israel in Egypt*, he retained the choral emphasis of the Funeral Anthem, admitting but a few solos, duets and recitatives. The solemn quality of the opening anthem is contrasted with the more dramatic and picturesque depictions of the plagues of frogs, flies, lice and hailstones of Part II, and balanced by the elevated tones of rejoicing in Part III.

Handel’s two choral epics, *Israel in Egypt* and *Messiah*, stand apart from his other oratorios: neither has a plot in the ordinary sense, both rely largely on collective expression of the text, and both are settings of text taken exclusively from the Bible. The latter aroused great controversy when the works were first presented and neither was successful, although *Messiah* was eventually accepted as a charity fundraiser in Handel’s lifetime. It is interesting that these are the two most popular Handel oratorios today, a position they have held for some 150 years, when amateur choral societies in Britain embraced them. The very qualities that caused 18th-century audiences to question their merit have endeared them to later audiences, as summed up in true Victorian style by Handel’s 19th-century biographer Richard A. Streatfield:

The subject is colossal, and its treatment no less so. The possibilities of choral music as a means of expression are practically exhausted in Israel. Nothing like it had been heard before its day, nor has been attempted since. Israel remains one of the most astonishing tours de force in the history of music. As a combination of massive grandeur of style and picturesque force, it stands alone. It is like a vast series of frescoes painted by a giant on the walls of some primeval temple. The colours may have faded, but the sublime conception and the grand strength of line survive to astonish later and more degenerate ages.