

**Program Notes**  
**for the North Shore Choral Society's performance of**  
**Handel's *Israel in Egypt***  
by Donald Draganski

*Israel in Egypt* tells the story of the plagues of Egypt and the Exodus as set down in the Book of Exodus and in Psalms 77, 105, and 106. The oratorio is in two parts, "Exodus" and "Moses' Song." The latter, and longer part of the work, was written first and occupied Handel from the 1st to the 11th of October, 1739. The first part, "Exodus," was then written between the 15th and 28th of the same month – an extraordinary example of Handel's facility at composing.

*Israel* is unique in Handel's output for two reasons. First, it is the only oratorio in which the chorus itself is the protagonist. A quick glance at the contents shows that fully three-fourths of the work consists of choral movements, with solo and duet arias playing a very minor role. Evidently the predominance of the chorus did not sit well with Handel's contemporaries, for, as the English musicologist Donald Francis Tovey points out:

It contained too many choruses and not enough arias for the public taste, and was, in fact, a work of a kind that had never been heard in London before. Subsequent performances were few, and at them a half-hearted attempt was made to lighten the work by inserting a few more arias adapted from Handel's operas, a procedure quite exceptional in his oratorios .... The borrowed opera arias did not help matters much, and performances of *Israel in Egypt* remained rare in Handel's lifetime, and did not become commoner until the public learned that choral music was greater than solo arias.

Tastes have changed, of course, and today's public not only accepts but clearly relishes works that are predominantly choral in nature. Having the chorus at center stage in *Israel in Egypt* is very apt indeed, for it is the children of Israel's story that is being told rather than that of any individual.

The second reason for *Israel's* distinctive place in Handel's catalog is, perhaps, a somewhat dubious one. It contains a higher proportion of borrowings from other composers' works than can be found in any of Handel's other major compositions. Apropos, here's Tovey again:

It is perhaps one of the most composite and heterogeneous works of art in the history of music, and the discovery of its patchwork construction has caused a real distress. However, one must bear in mind that in the eighteenth century an oratorio ... was only in the rarest instances a single composition, and was always an entertainment filling several hours. The author was neither anonymous, like a master-builder of a medieval cathedral, nor multiple, like the authors and composers of a modern revue. But, as the provider of some four hours' musical entertainment, he had the right to insert acknowledged favorite arias, to invite contributions from pupils, and in the course of time, to neglect the formula of acknowledgement.

The extraordinary thing about this work, however, is the astonishing musical cohesiveness of the music, in spite of its many borrowings. Tovey remarks that Handel was incapable of writing any passage of music (whether written at a tearing pace in the heat of inspiration or slowly and meticulously) without making it fluent. He never wrote (or borrowed) a page that halted, and every note and phrase is indelibly stamped with the force of his personality and dynamism.

*Israel in Egypt* has no overture, but begins abruptly with a narrative recitative introducing the story of the plagues. After the opening tenor recitative, there follows an eight-part chorus, "And the children of Israel," in Handel's noblest style, followed by an excellent "Handelian" fugue, "They loathed to drink." The alto aria, "Their land brought forth frogs," is a good example of musical humor, as the strings hop about in dotted rhythms.

The following double chorus, "He spake the word," is a notable example of Handel's borrowing, for two-thirds of the music was borrowed from an instrumental piece by the seventeenth-century Italian Alessandro Stradella. The next chorus, "He gave them hailstones," borrows heavily from the same piece.

Handel's greatest power and depth are manifest in the next chorus, "He sent a thick darkness." The movement becomes something like a choral recitative as the voices give up full harmony and grope their isolated ways through vastly remote keys. Daylight follows with drastic effect in "He smote all the first-born," which Handel enjoys as fiercely as the Psalmist.

The chorus, "Egypt was glad," is another example of borrowed material, a note-for-note transcription of an organ canzona by Kaspar Kerll (1627-93) which Handel adapts to the text. A recitative-like short chorus, "He rebuked the Red Sea," leads directly into the wonderfully inventive "He led them through the deep," which is followed by the triumphant chorus, "But the waters overwhelmed their enemies." Handel evidently expects the kettle drums to enjoy themselves in this chorus. The following slow choruses, "And Israel was that great work" and "And believed the Lord and his servant Moses," conclude Part One on a quiet note.

Part Two opens with the sunny chorus, "Moses and the children of Israel," which is followed by "I will sing unto the Lord," a movement consisting of two interlocking fugues. The next two movements are both borrowed from a *Magnificat* by the Milanese composer Dionigi Erba. A wholly original piece, "And I will exalt Him," follows.

Of the next ten movements, only two are original; the rest contain wholesale borrowings from Stradella and Erba. The chorus "And with the blast," one of Handel's most picturesque choruses, even has themes borrowed from Erba. The tenor aria, "The enemy said," is entirely original. It is one of Handel's most spirited and characteristic outbursts of jingoism and deserves to be enjoyed with the utmost zest by singers and listeners.

We now pass to perhaps one of the greatest of Handel's choruses, "The people shall hear," a movement which, as Tovey says, deserves to provoke nothing less than "the attention of every listener, whether he be an idolater, an iconoclast, or a sensible person."

The final group of choral outbursts and recitatives brings the work to a splendid close with the last chorus, "Sing ye to the Lord," a recapitulation of the same music which opened Part Two.

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