

Israel in Egypt-Handel- Program Notes

Notes Courtesy James Fancher of the Naperville Chorus

George Frideric Handel was born in 1685, at Halle, in the central part of what recently was East Germany. He was almost exactly contemporaneous with Johann Sebastian Bach, born at Eisenach, Thuringia, about 120 miles southwest. Both men were deposited into a fragmented, economically depressed and depopulated region: With the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire in 1648, Europe dissolved into hundreds of princely states, divided between the Empire's Catholicism and Martin Luther's Protestant initiative. Incredibly, music flourished in this tumultuous environment.

Unlike Bach, who was born into a musical family, Handel became a musician against his parents' wishes. At 17, he became a church organist, and at 18, he went to Hamburg to play violin and harpsichord in the opera house. Opera fascinated him from the beginning, and within three years Hamburg was presenting his operas. The Italians were preeminent in opera, so he soon found the way to Italy, where he spent three years churning out additional operas, and at least one oratorio. In 1710 he returned to Germany, but almost immediately left for England to produce an opera; he returned to Germany briefly but went back to England, where he lived until his death in 1759, save for brief visits to the Continent.

Like Bach, Handel was one of the pillars of the Late Baroque musical period. The Baroque musical style emerged about 1600, with composers such as Gabrielli and Monteverdi, and ended, practically, at Handel's death. His output was prodigious: Over 40 operas, two dozen oratorios, hundreds of anthems, cantatas, solos and songs; a hundred or more pieces of chamber and orchestral music, including the familiar Water Music and Royal Fireworks music; and several books of keyboard works. He never married, and was an eccentric figure-- one account has him, an old man, wandering along London streets, jabbering loudly to himself in a curious mixture of German and English. But his legacy, in particular to the English oratorio, remains.

Handel's oratorio *Israel in Egypt* was written in 1738, three years before the better known *Messiah*. The ecclesiastical authorities would not allow stage productions of Biblical works, or any stage productions during Lent; the concert-style oratorio presentation solved both problems.

The story of *Israel in Egypt* is familiar Judeo-Christian history: The Hebrew tribes of Israel entered Egypt voluntarily, probably about 1600 B.C., at the invitation of Joseph, the kidnapped son of Jacob, then a high official in the Pharaonic administration. Under Egyptian rule, the Israelites initially prospered, and their numbers multiplied, over three centuries, to perhaps 600,000, as much as 40% of the Egyptian populace. With a change in ethnic succession of the Pharaohs, however, Hebrews were disenfranchised and enslaved. Moses, Hebrew by birth, the adopted son of a Pharaonic queen (possibly Hatshepsut, queen to Thutmose II) as a young man was a loyal Egyptian subject and may

have been a military leader. He fled Egypt-- possibly at Hatshepsut's death, when her half-brother and arch-enemy, Thutmose III, assumed the throne-- and spent 40 years in the wilderness. He returned, reluctantly, aged 80, to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt, and confronted Pharaoh.

Attempts at negotiation caused a backlash, and Moses initiated a series of ten plagues, targeting particularly sacred aspects of the Egyptian culture. The Nile itself, the sacred river, was first: Its waters turned to blood and became unpalatable. Then came frogs, lice, flies, locusts, cattle pestilence, boils, hail, a 'great darkness', and, the crushing blow, the death of Egypt's first-born sons. Pharaoh's magicians tried to demonstrate that these plagues were tricks-- they succeeded in replicating the bloody river and invoking frogs-- but the continuing curses broke Pharaoh's will, and, in a moment of weakness, he approved the departure. (In fact, the Egyptians ceded "silver and gold" to the Hebrews to ensure their exit.) Pharaoh subsequently changed his mind and dispatched an army to overtake them, but Moses' charges escaped across the Red Sea on sand laid bare by a strong east wind; the army and its chariots, attempting to follow, bogged down in the sand and were wiped out when the waters returned. Modern explanations can be found for the plagues, and even for the sea crossing; however, the concurrence of these events, and Moses' foreknowledge of them, certainly rank as miracles, whatever the explanation.

Some authorities believe Handel intended to utilize a previously composed anthem as the first movement of his Biblical drama. As presented here, however, this oratorio consists of only the two parts that Handel composed in two weeks during October, 1738. The first tells the story of the oppression and the escape. Much of the story comes from the Biblical account in Exodus, but Handel (probably acting as his own librettist) interspersed references to the story from Psalms in lieu of relying totally on one book. The second part-- which Handel in fact wrote first-- consists of Exodus Chapter 15, v. 1-21, in order, known as the Song of Moses, rejoicing over the triumph. Only the final lines of that text, attributed in the scripture to Miriam the prophetess, sister of Aaron, appear to actually date from that early time; a later poet expanded on the same theme. Parts of verse 18, praising the Lord, recur in the last five pieces of the oratorio.

Like *Messiah*, *Israel in Egypt* is somewhat atypical of Handel oratorios. It contains relatively little solo material; also unusual is the extensive use of double choruses, with the themes alternately echoed and reinforced. The work nonetheless exhibits Handel's opera-honed dramatic sense, not only in choral climaxes but in orchestral textures which paint the scenery for the story. The hailstorm begins with a few small missiles, and rises to a roar as the chorus enters; the frogs hop through the king's chambers before being announced; and, as the chorus tells of the locusts without number, they can be heard buzzing furiously in the orchestra. And, in the second part of the oratorio, the exultant themes convey the essence of songs of victory of every age and culture.