

By Al Gentile

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Cantata Singers to perform Handel piece "Israel in Egypt" in Lexington

The 104-members of the Cantata Singers are bringing a several centuries old piece to stage again on Friday in Lexington.

Music Director David Hoose describes the piece, "Israel in Egypt," as timeless.

"People have come to love this piece immensely," Hoose said. "It's an extraordinary dramatic and colorful of the story of a people."

"Israel in Egypt" is a biblical oratorio – an orchestral piece of music created for chorus, instruments and soloists – written by George Frideric Handel, who is famous for his oratorio "Messiah."

The story has a universality that helped the piece persevere throughout the centuries through the theme of a people trying to escape bondage, Hoose said.

"It's one of the miracles of really thoughtful music," Hoose said. "It's a piece composed over 250 years ago, yet it speaks to the same issues that are with us today."

The piece, written in the 1730s, follows the stories of Exodus from the Old Testament of the Bible, in which the Israelites escape from the oppressive rule of the pharaoh. Ultimately, Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt, but not before casting several plagues to convince the pharaoh to let the enslaved people leave.

"Israel in Egypt" is not a historical artifact, Hoose said, but a "living document," that breathes in front of an audience.

"History may repeat itself, but the human condition is unchanging," he continued. "Music really is about the human condition."

The piece's historical circumstance, Hoose said, cannot be ignored. Though Handel spent the better part of his musical career in London, he was born in Austria. The piece was written in the late-1730s, when King George II and his wife, Caroline, were both Austrian-born were leading Great Britain. For a people living under the rule of a foreign people there was resonance with the story of the Israelites, Hoose said.

"There was a way in which many English people felt they were being held down by the relationship with Austria," Hoose said.

Ahead of its time

The musical composition of this piece tries to make the listener feel the action with a physicality that mimics cinema. In part two of the piece, when locusts are summoned to wreak havoc on Egyptian agriculture, the music takes on a textural form with quick prickling notes meant to simulate a swarm, Hoose said.

"[The story] inspires him to a level of creativity and specific invention that I think he hadn't imagined before," Hoose said. "My sense is in the 1700s, the interaction between the physical and the spiritual and the political in this work on this scale is unprecedented."

Hoose said this quality of the piece shows Handel had an ingenuity far ahead of others of his time.

"It seems to me that Handel, with much more limited musical means, was able to do things at the same time," Hoose said. "To amuse and enlighten, to entertain and to probe. To depict the earthly reality of what the stories say happened, and to at the same time relate it all to the emotional and the spiritual connection the Israelites felt toward the Lord."

Crafting music

Hoose who serves as conductor said he and his musicians bring something to a piece.

"It's very clear that a conductor has a palpable effect on what people hear," Hoose said. "You can take the same orchestra with the same piece of music and put two conductors in front of them and they'll sound quite different."

"Every conductor has a different kinetic sense of the music, different priorities," he continued. "The conductor ends up imparting his or herself into the music."

The world of orchestral musicians is, said Hoose, dominated by a number of factors. For singers, the moment of puberty and the changing of voices are determine one's place within a chorus.

"In general, singers come into serious music-making later in life because their bodies need to mature," Hoose said.



Elaine Bresnick, an alto with the Cantata Singers rehearses the piece "Israel in Egypt," which was written by George Frideric Handel, who is famous for his oratorio "Messiah." Wicked Local Staff Photo/Caitlyn Kelleher

For instrumentalists, years of dedication and strict practice regimens help create a qualified orchestral musician.

“Professional musicians aren’t just talented people; there is professional training that begins for many of them when they’re in grade school.”

In orchestral music, especially with “Israel in Egypt” there is an interesting connection between the orchestral structure and the story.

“The story at large is told by the chorus, representing the Israelites,” Hoose said. “In ‘Israel in Egypt,’ the chorus is the action.”

With so many musicians working in concert together, the theme of “Israel in Egypt” becomes, according to Hoose, that much more appropriate.

“There cannot be something better than a community of musicians performing a piece about a people,” Hoose said.

If you go

WHEN: 8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 29

WHERE: Cary Memorial Building, 1605 Massachusetts Ave.

ALSO: Ellen Harris, a professor of music at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), will give a pre-concert talk, free to all ticketholders at 7 p.m.

TICKETS: \$25 - \$69

INFO & TICKETS: 617-868-5885 and cantatasingers.org/

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