

Handel Shows Relish for the Plagues - The Boston Musical Intelligencer

by [Susan Miron](#)

Locusts on the prowl in Medieval bible

Cantata Singers gave a riveting, heartfelt performance of Handel's *Israel in Egypt* on Sunday in Jordan Hall. This nearly three-hour oratorio is unquestionably close to the heart of Music Director David Hoose, whose explains that "Somewhere in this world someone has been oppressed, threatened, or held in bondage... *Israel in Egypt* continues to speak fluently and powerfully to such inhumanity." Although it has long been customary to perform only Parts 2 and 3, "Exodus" and Moses's Song." Hoose believes the oratorio is incomplete without the long-neglected Part I, "The Lamentation of the Israelites for the Death of Joseph." He recently told the *Intelligencer* that "We usually hear only two-thirds of this oratorio, the entire first part lobbed off and thwarting the music's dramatic journey. By restoring the first part, a lamentation of the Israelites, Handel's vivid depiction of the plagues that follows—sometimes terrifying, sometimes downright hilarious—finally makes sense." No other work of Handel underwent 20 years of such radical revisions.

While Handel's oratorio was new to me, I have studied its subject matter for decades, and was fascinated to hear Handel's and his librettist Charles Jennen's interpretation of Biblical texts I knew so well in Hebrew, usually in the context of cantillation during services. Just recently we had read the stories of Joseph and of the Exodus from Egypt in synagogue—I knew the ten plagues by heart from years of reading the Passover Haggadah at seders. Handel set them with dazzling special effects and superb tone painting! "The locusts came without number" was so vivid we felt the need to swat. Altogether, the composer had much to say about these ageless tales.

I always enjoy David Hoose's program notes, particularly his section here on "great composers stealing music" (words supposedly spoken by Igor Stravinsky).

Though he was a composer with one of the most fertile imaginations, he often solved his musical and dramatic challenges with an expedience that today would result in lawsuits. *Israel in Egypt* is probably the high (or low) point of Handel's thievery: many movements in Parts II and III are based on kernels of other composer's ideas or on other's entire compositions. The music of Alessandro Stradella and Dionigi Erbaf, in particular, proved wellsprings for Handel, and some form of their music appears frequently throughout. Somehow, Handel always found a way to give the stolen music his unmistakable voice.

Or as Christopher Hogwood told, "Thanks to diligent use of existing material, he finished 'Exodus' within

2 weeks.”

Cantata Singers' glorious players reveled in largest orchestra Handel ever used—two each of flutes (used in one act only), oboes, bassoons, trumpets, timpani, 3 trombones, harpsichord, and organ. All deserve kudos, but hard-working oboists Jennifer Slowik and Barbara LaFitte and the two bassists, Nancy Kidd and Bebo Shiu, were particularly call-out worthy. The twelve excellent soloists were all drawn from the Cantata Singers, which remain one the most distinguished choral ensembles in this city overflowing with same. Through the performance they captured the vast variety of moods from devastation to jubilation, captivity to rejoicing.

Part I began life in 1737 as funeral music for Queen Caroline, a friend and patron of Handel for whom he had written a Coronation anthem. Two decades later, Handel thought about reworking the anthem as part of *Saul*, but sensed that it would be better used as to open Part I 'The Lamentations of the Israelites for the Death of Joseph' of this oratorio. Shorn from its funereal origins, the new anthem told of Joseph, the beloved child of Jacob and Rachel, whose brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt. Christopher Hogwood wrote in his 1984 Handel biography, that *Israel in Egypt* proved a flop. Inevitably in a society with strong puritanical elements, there was much debate over the propriety of singing scriptural words in the theatre, a controversy which continued for much of Handel's career.”

There's no getting around it: Part I, still sounds funereal and gloomy, even in a performance this good. The famous line, “How is the mighty fall'n” from Second Samuel (also Psalm 34) is repeated twice, and the second was the first part's highlight. Tenor Steven Williams, part of a vocal quartet, was excellent in “Who shall receive a glorious kingdom, and a beautiful crown from the Lord's hand?” Part I has no real solos; instead it has vocal quartets and chorus alternating and at one point singing together. The enslaved people of Israel are the protagonist, which helps explains the lack of solos (and perhaps lack of popularity when it first was heard).

Part II describes the wretched captivity of the Israelites. Handel wrote this in a mere two weeks, as Hogwood puts it, with “diligent use of existing material,” or as Hoose puts it, “borrowing from the best.” Beginning at Exodus 1:8, The tenor Jason Sobol compellingly sang the lines that give me a chill each time I hear them, “Now there arose a king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph.” Alto Kimberly Leeds next gave us a slow and majestic cry to the God of Israel over their bondage in which she was emotionally double by the violins. Moses turns up next in another recitative done beautifully by Jason Sobol. Suddenly, the chorus announces (Exodus 7:18) that the waters have turned into blood and immediately, the chorus sings frantically about the plagues, highlighted by the arrival of both locusts and two trombones. The chorus evoked hailstones in a very staccato fashion, and showed passionate while smiting the first-borns. Gripping from beginning to end.

Darkness follows, at least for the Egyptians, as the chorus tells of the fear falling upon them. This was quite different from the awe that Israel expressed toward the lord. After so much drama in the text and in the music, the end offers needed relief.

Of Part III, “Moses’ Song,” the most famous of the many solos is “The Lord is a man of war,” intoned with great drama by basses Mark Andrew Cleveland and Ron Williams. Tenor Eric Christopher Perry’s very fast “The Enemy Said…” flew by with tremendous bravura.

The triumphant choral “The Lord shall reign for ever and ever” brought me back to December’s *Messiah*. Triumphant soprano Majie Zeller reminded us with the double chorus in “Sing ye the Lord,” how “The Lord has triumphed gloriously.”

The same can be said for David Hoose and the Cantata Singers.

Susan Miron is a book critic, essayist, and harpist. Her last two CDs featured her transcriptions of keyboard music of Domenico Scarlatti.

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