

Cantata Singers revel in vivid Handel oratorio - The Boston Globe



By Matthew Guerrieri Globe Correspondent February 01, 2016

Film and television have produced examples more graphic, more sensational, but disaster flicks still don't come classier than the Book of Exodus. That's always been the draw of George Frideric Handel's "Israel in Egypt," its pageant of biblical plagues re-created with circa-1739 state-of-the-art musical effects. On Sunday, the Cantata Singers and conductor David Hoose reveled in those set-pieces, but also sought deeper dramatic context, as if revealing a popcorn thriller as a prestige drama.

The mission involved a bit of restoration: Hoose reinstated the oratorio's original first part — an elegy for the biblical Joseph, setting the stage with stately, deliberate gloom — which Handel took out after a middlingly successful premiere. The music originated as a funeral anthem for Britain's Queen Caroline; maybe that's why it feels detached from the main narrative. The performance was lovely, polished, affecting, the chorus singing with both easygoing precision and a palpable, human warmth and presence. It made a strong case. But one could also hear, perhaps, why Handel decided to cut it.

Because the rest might well be by another composer — which, in a way, it is: the Handel of the royal court becoming the Handel of the opera house. The second part coursed at full tilt, chorus and orchestra

unleashed; once the destruction began (sparked by alto Jennifer Webb, with marvelous pertinence, describing a plague of frogs like an especially juicy bit of gossip), the music was off and running, flies flitting through the strings, fiery hailstones sizzling through the chorus, lurid darkness covering the land. By the time God was smiting Egypt's first-born (with the disturbingly eager insistence of a stadium chant), the opening elegance felt far away.

The third part, like the first, sustains a single emotion — jubilation — but Handel's theatrical intuition varies the dramatic rhythm, with quick-change tempi and a sudden clutch of solo numbers. (Sunday's solos were divided among 11 choristers; particular highlights were Ron Williams and Mark-Andrew Cleveland's "The Lord is a man of war," recapping the Egyptian army's demise with tag-team swagger, and Kimberly Leeds's "Thou shalt bring them in," the serene calm before the final storm of praise.)

"Israel in Egypt" harbors serious themes — displacement and identity, exile and return — though, even in a complete version, they are rendered diffuse by the sheer spectacle. Still, Sunday's performance, thoughtful and grand, dramatized at least one other homecoming: that of Handel, returning from court manners to the theater, where his extroverted exuberance could roam free.

Cantata Singers and Ensemble

At Jordan Hall, Sunday