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Israel in Egypt George Frideric Handel By: Michael C. Lister

Israel in Egypt occupies a singular place in the history of Handel's oratorios. While unique in concept and composition, this work has several characteristics in common with Handel's most well known oratorio, *Messiah*, composed three years later. While there is no known librettist attributed to the oratorio, it is interesting to note that Handel had collaborated with librettist Charles Jennens on *Saul* just prior to beginning work on *Israel in Egypt* and would return to Jennens to shape the text for his next oratorio, *Messiah*. It is possible that Jennens influenced Handel's choice to deviate from the dramatic libretto to a scripture-based libretto that makes no use of a conventional cast of soloists who portray key characters in a series of dramatic events, but rather allows the drama to unfold in a narrative form. The themes of *Israel in Egypt* continued to resonate in *Messiah* as well, with the people of God seeking (and receiving) physical deliverance in the former and spiritual deliverance in the latter.

Unlike any other of Handel's compositions, *Israel in Egypt* relies on choruses rather than solo arias to describe events and conditions surrounding the exodus of the children of Israel from the land of the Pharaohs. *Israel in Egypt* features the chorus more than any other of Handel's oratorios, and uniquely employs a significant number of double choruses throughout the work. The expanded role of the chorus, the virtual absence of solo arias, and the unconventional libretto has led scholars to believe that Handel originally envisioned *Israel in Egypt* to be a series of anthems, similar to his Coronation Anthems, an idea encouraged by the composer's choice to rework music from his *Funeral Anthem for Queen Caroline* from 1737. The music and texts from the funeral anthem were transformed into "Lamentation of the Israelites on the Death of Joseph," which originally constituted the first section of *Israel in Egypt*. The second and third sections of the oratorio, "Exodus" and "Moses' Song", include musical and stylistic links that tie them to the *Funeral Anthem*, thus creating a musical unity throughout the work on an impressive scale.

Israel in Egypt was first performed April 14, 1739 at the King's Theatre in London. Because of its unique and unconventional characteristics, the work was poorly received by the London audience, who as opera enthusiasts had come to expect dramatic arias delivered by virtuoso soloists and dramatic first-person storylines. Listeners who were religious



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conservatives may also have taken issue with a libretto taken entirely from scripture. In performances that followed, Handel removed the entire first part and added several arias from other oratorios and operas to utilize the soloists more fully. When even these changes proved unsuccessful, Handel did not attempt another performance during his lifetime.

With such a dismal reception, *Israel in Egypt* could have become a musical footnote in Handel's compositional output rather than one of his most beloved works. Thanks to a revival performance that took place in London in 1784 during a centenary celebration for the "Commemoration of Handel" (which was, in actuality, one year premature, Handel having been born in 1685) *Israel in Egypt* was for the first time enthusiastically received by all attendees, including composer Franz Joseph Haydn, who is said to have burst into tears at the conclusion and remarked of Handel, "He is the Master of us all!" From that time, *Israel in Egypt* became one of the most regularly performed works of the 19th century and is now recognized as one of the great oratorios of all time.

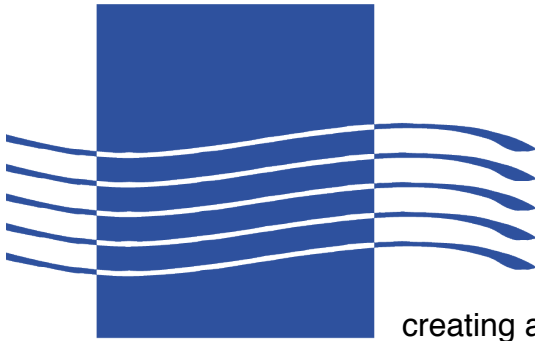
Since its revival, *Israel in Egypt* has been performed without its original first part, "Lamentation of the Israelites on the Death of Joseph." The original second part, "Exodus," has become the first, employing texts from Exodus and Psalms to depict the story of the Israelites' deliverance and departure from Egypt. In his description of the plagues Handel shows his whimsical side as well as his mastery of musical imagery. In the aria describing the plague of frogs, the instrumental parts imitate leaping movements, and the plague of flies and lice is brilliantly captured in the rapid figuration of the violins. Equally powerful in its imagery is the plague of hailstones, where the orchestra begins slowly and becomes more animated to depict the storm. The parting of the Red Sea is also given dramatic treatment, and Handel's use of double chorus in powerfully resounding chords is particularly effective. The second and final part, entitled "Moses' Song," is a setting of Exodus 15. Also known as the Canticle of Miriam and the Song at the Sea, it is essentially a continuous song of praise detailing the Lord's deliverance, beginning with the dramatic chorus "I will sing unto the Lord," a joyful fugue which celebrates the Israelites' delivery from the Egyptian armies at the Red Sea. In the second part, Handel makes more use of the soloists, individually and in duet. Many of the movements are shorter and are quite interrelated,

2 of 3

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lending credence to the idea that this music might have been conceived as a series of anthems. “The second part concludes with a return to the music from “I will sing unto the Lord,” thus creating a powerful sense of unity to the oratorio.

Handel was well known for his borrowings of musical themes, ideas, and sometimes entire sections or movements from his earlier works as well as from other composers. The sources from which Handel drew are numerous, from Lutheran chorale tunes to chamber and choral works he encountered during his years in Italy to his own works, most notably his *Dixit Dominus* and *Chandos Anthems*. However, it must be mentioned that the mere inclusion of themes or motifs from pre-existing works is far less interesting than the manner in which the composer has transformed them, weaving them into a tapestry of sound that represents the creative genius of the composer.

With its use of scripture as libretto, increased use of chorus and double chorus, and diminished role of soloists, *Israel in Egypt* stands alone in scope and style among all of Handel’s oratorios. Recent years have seen new score editions, recordings, and performances of *Israel in Egypt* with the original first part restored, although the work is still more regularly performed without the “Lamentation.” Perhaps after the first performance Handel felt that the serious tone of the reworked *Funeral Anthem* was not a suitable fit for the two brilliant, purpose-built movements with which it was coupled. Whatever the case, “Exodus” and “Moses’ Song” are well matched in thematic and stylistic character and have beyond Handel’s original conception to a powerful telling of the Israelites deliverance from their captors, together making any performance of *Israel in Egypt* an exciting and powerful musical experience.