



Handel's Israel in Egypt: Review

Concert review / Toronto Mendelssohn Choir blows the roof off of Koerner Hall

Gordon Bowness / Toronto / Wednesday, October 28, 2009

What a revelation to hear a GF Handel oratorio — not the Messiah — in its entirety. You rediscover what a genius composer Handel was.

Nearly everyone can sing a few bars of the “Hallelujah Chorus” from the Messiah. The work has been drained of much beauty and power because it’s too familiar and too often cut up in snippets. But hearing another of Handel’s great oratorios like *Israel in Egypt* with the 150-member Toronto Mendelssohn Choir and 29-piece Festival Orchestra was an unalloyed joy. And hearing it live in a great looking and sounding venue like the sumptuous new Koerner Hall in Toronto was overwhelming.

The Oct 24 concert kicked off the Mendelssohn Choir’s 116th season and marked the first full choral work to be mounted in the Royal Conservatory of Music’s Koerner Hall which opened Sep 25.

Handel’s oratorios have rightfully been called word paintings for their evocative imagery and the clarity of musical expression. It’s like a graphic novel beamed right into your head.

Telling the story of Exodus, each of the 27 sections contains a brief bit of text, a line or two from the Bible, that is repeated, broken up, bent back on itself and repeated again, each new configuration accompanied by an ever-changing musical setting. Each section has a beginning middle and end. Your emotional understanding of the words growing immeasurably as the section quickly progresses.

Much of it is call-and-response with the chorus and orchestra (or sections within) trading phrases back-and-forth. In one section the basses and the altos boom out, “He spake the word;” the sopranos answer with, “And there came all manner of flies,” with “flies” sounding all silvery and sinewy. The two sections are repeated and refracted. Then the sopranos add, “And lice in all their quarters.” Eew. It’s creepy.

This was the jolliest-sounding apocalypse I had ever heard. End-of-days text like “waters into blood,” “pestilence, blotches and blains,” “locusts without number” and “hailstones for rain” were accompanied by the jauntiest music for most of part one. But the Lord’s awe-inspiring power and stately majesty eventually took hold and other dark colours were introduced. In the section, “He smote all the first-born of Egypt,” the strings bow like they are stabbing the children themselves, the chorus repeatedly spitting out the word “spate.” Terrifying.

The beginning of part two left me cross-eyed under the onslaught of those immense, glorious chords that Handel knew resonated so powerfully with choral-loving Brits. Much of the hall is sided with a dark grey stone the surface of which has been treated to look like velvet. Handel bludgeoned me with that velvet stone. With such a huge choir, this was more aural power than Handel’s contemporaries would have been used to. And period instruments and smaller choruses are much more common nowadays too. I prefer the velvet bludgeoning.

It’s fascinating how Handel used soloists: one section had two basses face off against each other, another had two sopranos — like a contest. And there were two clear winners: The commanding bass-baritone Thomas Goerz and the angelic-toned soprano Suzy Leblanc. I don’t know what a crystal flute sounds like — a gorgeous 18th-century example is on display in the nifty vitrines on the way in to the hall — but I bet it sounds like Leblanc. Another stand out was counter-tenor David Trudgeon, a bright and powerful voice gaily singing about frogs in the king’s chamber. Not fairing so well was tenor James McLennan (filling in for Michael Colvin). He did a serviceable job during the recitatives but lacked the vocal firepower required for the Egyptian call to arms. “My lust shall be satisfied” — not.

This choral showpiece sounded stunning from the second balcony — the cheap seats. The acoustics were rich and lively. You could differentiate individual voices in the choir so there was no room for sloppy singing or balance problems. But under conductor Noel Edison this great choir gave a great performance with beautiful tone and control.

Why were there empty seats? You have to hear this choir in this hall. Next up: Benjamin Britten’s *Ceremony of Carols* a series of songs written on the ship bringing Britten and his lover Peter Pears back from their Canadian and US sojourn in 1942. Sadly, it’s not at Koerner Hall.

For season and ticket info go to Tmchoir.org or call (416) 598-0422.