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Handel - Samson - 1800

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v

The oratorio of *Samson* was a great favorite with the composer, who is said to have considered it so nearly equal to *The Messiah* that he could not determine which should take precedence of the other. Dr. Burney relates that Handel, in his latter years, after the calamity of blindness had befallen him, could never hear the air "Total Eclipse" without being moved to tears.

It may be considered appropriate and interesting to give here a chronological list of Handel's Oratorios as drawn up from the original manuscript scores in the possession of her Majesty Queen Victoria :

| | |
|--|---|
| No. 1. La Resurrezzione (The Resurrection). An Italian oratorio 1708. | No. 14. Belshazzar 1743. |
| No. 2. Acis and Galatea. | No. 15. Semele 1743. |
| No. 3. Esther 1720. | No. 16. Joseph 1743. |
| No. 4. Deborah 1733. | No. 17. Hercules 1744. |
| No. 5. Athalia 1733. [First performed at Oxford, 1733.] | No. 18. Occasional Oratorio. . . . 1745. |
| No. 6. Acis and Galatea (Serenata) . . 1735. | No. 19. Judas Maccabæus 1746. |
| No. 7. Alexander's Feast 1736. | No. 20. Joshua 1747. |
| No. 8. Ode for Cecilia's Day 1736. | No. 21. Alexander Balus 1747. |
| No. 9. Israel in Egypt 1738. | No. 22. Susanna 1748. |
| No. 10. L'Allegro ed il Pensieroso . . 1740. | No. 23. Solomon 1749. [Idem, 18 June. 1748.] |
| No. 11. Saul 1740. | No. 24. Theodora 1749. |
| No. 12. Messiah 1741. | No. 25. Jeptha 1751. |
| No. 13. Samson 1742. | No. 26. Time and Truth 1757. |

SAMSON.

PERSONS REPRESENTED.

SAMSON.
MICAH, *his friend.*
MANOAH, *his father.*

DALILA.
HARAPHA, *a giant of Gath.*
ISRAELITISH MESSENGER.

PRIESTS OF DAGON.
ISRAELITES, *friends of Samson.*
PHILISTINES.

ARGUMENT.

PART I.—Samson, blind and captive to the Philistines, being relieved from his toil by a Festival in honor of Dagon their god, comes forth into the open air.—The priests of Dagon sing in praise of their idol.—Samson, bemoaning his condition, is visited by his friends and his father, Manoah, who join in bewailing his degradation.—Samson, acknowledging the justice of his punishment, predicts that Dagon will not be allowed to triumph over the God of Israel.—Micah and his friends express a hope that Samson's prediction may be verified.—Samson, however, declares his hopes to be gone, his nature declining, and his life drawing to a close.—Upon which his friends recount to him the joy and peace that his spirit will realize in the eternal world.

PART II.—Micah and the Israelites call upon God to have pity on Samson.—Dalila then appears, and pretending penitence and submission, entreats him to go home with her. He refuses to listen to her entreaties; a scene of mutual recrimination ensues, and they separate. His friends assert the ordained subjection of the wife to the husband.—Harapha, a giant of Gath, then approaches, attracted by the fame of Samson's prodigious might, and boasts how he would have overcome him had he encountered him before his captivity.—Samson dares him to a trial now, which he refuses, and is taunted by Samson with cowardice.—Micah proposes, as a test of who is the supreme God, that Harapha should call upon Dagon to try his power over Samson.—The Israelites prostrate themselves before Jehovah and supplicate His delivering aid.—Harapha calls upon Dagon, and the worshippers of that idol appeal to him for protection and succor; after which the Israelites and Philistines jointly, but in opposition to each other, celebrate the majesty, power, and supremacy of their respective deities.

PART III.—Harapha is sent by the Philistine lords to bid Samson attend their festival to exhibit his strength before them, which at first he refuses to do.—His friends, perplexed for his safety, call upon God for help.—Samson, persuaded inwardly that this was from God, yields to go along with Harapha, who comes again with great threatenings to fetch him.—Samson departs, invoking the aid of that Spirit with which he had formerly been inspired.—His friends cheer him on and declare him to be fulfilling the call and under the guidance of Heaven. Manoah returns to tell his friends his hopes of obtaining Samson's release. The Priests of Dagon are heard to celebrate the praises of their idol for subduing their foe.—Micah and Manoah hear the shouts of joy, and the latter again manifests his paternal solicitude for Samson.—An appalling, loud, and confused noise is heard, succeeded by wallings and cries for help.—An Israelitish messenger arrives in breathless haste, and relates to the relations and friends of Samson the fearful news of his having pulled down the Philistine temple, and buried his enemies and himself in its ruins.—Micah and the Israelites lament his fall.—A Dead March is heard, and his body approaches on its way to the tomb; and Manoah and Micah and the Israelites perform the funeral rites.

PART THE FIRST.

OVERTURE.

SCENE.—*Before the Prison in Gaza.*

SAMSON, *blind and in chains.*

RECIT.—*Samson.*

This day a solemn feast to Dagon held
Relieves me from my task of servile toil;
Unwillingly their superstition yields
This rest, to breathe heav'n's air, fresh blowing,
pure, and sweet.

CHORUS.—*Priests, &c.*

Awake the trumpet's lofty sound;
The joyful sacred festival comes round
When Dagon, king of all the earth, is crown'd.

AIR.—*Philistine.*

Ye men of Gaza, hither bring
The merry pipe and pleasing string,
The solemn hymn and cheerful song;
Be Dagon prais'd by every tongue.

CHORUS.

Awake the trumpet's lofty sound;
The joyful sacred festival comes round
When Dagon, king of all the earth, is crown'd.

RECIT.*—*Samson.*

O loss of sight! of thee I most complain.
O worse than beggary, old age, or chains!
My very soul in real darkness dwells!

AIR.

Total eclipse! no sun, no moon;
 All dark amidst the blaze of noon!
 O glorious light! no cheering ray
 To glad my eyes with welcome day!
 Why thus deprived Thy prime decree?
 Sun, moon, and stars are dark to me.

CHORUS.—*Israelites.*

O first-created beam, and thou, great word,
 Let there be light! and light was over all;
 One heav'nly blaze shone round this earthly ball,
 To Thy dark servant, life, by light afford.

Enter MANOAH.*Micah.*

Here comes thy rev'rend sire, old Manoah,
 With careful steps and locks as white as down.

Samson.

Alas! another grief that name awakes.

Manoah.

Brethren and men of Dan, say where's my son
 Samson, fond Israel's boast? Inform my age.

Micah.

As signal now in low dejected state
 As in the height of pow'r: see where he lies!

AIR.—*Manoah.*

Thy glorious deeds inspir'd my tongue,
 Whilst airs of joy from thence did flow;
 To sorrows now I tune my song
 And set my harp to notes of woe.

AIR.—*Samson.*

Why does the God of Israel sleep?
 Arise with dreadful sound,
 And clouds encompass'd round,
 Then shall the heathen hear Thy thunder deep.
 The tempest of Thy wrath now raise,
 In whirlwinds them pursue,
 Full fraught with vengeance due,
 Till shame and trouble all thy foes shall seize.

CHORUS.—*Israelites.*

Then shall they know that He, whose name
 Jehovah, is alone
 O'er all the earth but one;
 Was ever the Most High and still the same.

Samson.

My genial spirits droop, my hopes are fled;
 Nature in me seems weary of herself;
 My race of glory run, and race of shame,
 Death, invocated oft, shall end my pains
 And lay me gently down with them that rest.

CHORUS.—*Israelites.*

Then round about the starry throne
 Of Him who ever rules alone,
 Your heavenly-guided soul shall climb;
 Of all this earthly grossness quit,
 With glory crown'd forever sit,
 And triumph over Death, and thee, O Time!

PART THE SECOND.

AIR.—*Micah.*

Return, O God of hosts! behold
 Thy servant in distress.

RECIT.—*Micah.*

But who is this, that so bedeck'd and gay,
 Comes this way sailing like a stately ship?
 'Tis Dalila, thy wife!

AIR.*—*Dalila.*

With plaintive notes and am'rous moan
 Thus coos the turtle left alone.

AIR.*—*Samson.*

Your charms to ruin led the way,
 My sense depraved,
 My strength enslaved:
 As I did love, you did betray.
 How great the curse, how hard my fate
 To pass life's sea with such a mate.

DUET.—*Dalila.*

Traitor to love, I'll sue no more
 For pardon scorn'd; your threats give o'er.

Samson.

Traitress to love, I'll hear no more
 The charmer's voice; your arts give o'er.

RECIT.—*Micah.*

No words of peace, no voice enchanting fear;
A rougher tongue expect. Here's Harapha,
I know him by his stride and haughty look.

*Enter HARAPHA.**Harapha.*

I come not, Samson, to condole thy chance;
I am of Gath, men call me Harapha:
Thou know'st me now; of thy prodigious might
Much have I heard, incredible to me!
Nor less displeas'd that never in the field
We met to try each other's deeds of strength:
I'd see if thy appearance answers loud report.

Samson.

The way to know were not to see, but taste.

Harapha.

Ha! dost thou, then, already single me?
I thought that labor and thy chains had tam'd thee.
Had fortune brought me to that field of death
Where thou wrought'st wonders with an ass's jaw,
I'd left thy carcass where the ass lay dead.

Samson.

Boast not of what thou wouldst have done, but do.

Harapha.

The honor certain to have won from thee
I lose, prevented by thy eyes put out;
To combat with a blind man I disdain.

AIR.—*Harapha.*

Honor and arms scorn such a foe,
Tho' I could end thee at a blow;
Poor victory to conquer thee,
Or glory in thy overthrow.

DUET.—*Samson.*

Go, baffled coward, go,
Lest vengeance lay the low;
In safety fly my wrath with speed.

Harapha.

Presume not on thy God,
Who under foot has trod
Thy strength and thee at greatest need.

RECIT.—*Micah.*

Here lies the proof: if Dagon be thy god,
With high devotion invoke his aid,
His glory is concern'd; let him dissolve
Those magic spells that gave our hero strength;
Then know whose god is God; Dagon of mortal
make,
Or that Great One whom Abr'am's sons adore.

CHORUS.—*Israelites and Philistines.*

Fix'd in His everlasting seat,
Jehovah } rules the world in state.
Great Dagon }
His thunder roars, heav'n shakes, and earth's
aghast.
The stars, with deep amaze,
Remain in steadfast gaze;
Jehovah } is of gods the first and last,
Great Dagon }

PART THE THIRD.

RECIT.—*Micah.*

Reflect, then, Samson, matters now are strain'd
Up to the height, whether to hold or break.
He's gone, whose malice may inflame the lords.

Samson.

Shall I abuse this consecrated gift
Of strength, again returning with my hair
By vaunting it in honor to their god,
And prostituting holy things to idols?

Micah.

How thou wilt here come off surmounts my reach;
'Tis heav'n alone can save both us and thee.

CHORUS—*Israelites.*

With thunder arm'd, great God, arise;
Help, Lord, or Israel's champion dies;
To Thy protection this Thy servant take,
And save, O save us, for Thy servant's sake.

AIR AND CHORUS.—*Micah and Israelites.*

The Holy One of Israel be thy guide,
The angel of thy birth stand by thy side:
To fame immortal go,
Heav'n bids thee strike the blow:
The Holy One of Israel is thy guide.

RECIT.—*Micah.*

Old Manoah, with youthful steps, makes haste
To find his son or bring us some glad news.

Enter MANOAH.*Manoah.*

I come, my brethren, not to seek my son,
Who at the feast does play before the lords;
But give you part with me, what hopes I have
To work his liberty.

CHORUS.

Great Dagon has subdued our foe,
And brought their boasted hero low:
Sound out his praise in notes divine,
Praise him with mirth, high cheer, and wine.

RECIT.—*Manoah.*

What noise of joy was that? it tore the sky.

Micah.

They shout and sing, to see their dreaded foe
Now captive, blind, delighting in his strength.

Manoah.

Could my inheritance but ransom him,
Without my patrimony, having him,
The richest of my tribe.

Micah.

Sons care to nurse
Their parents in old age; but you, your son.

AIR—*Manoah.*

How willing my paternal love
The weight to share
Of filial care,
And part of sorrow's burden prove!
Tho' wand'ring in the shades of night,
Whilst I have eyes, he wants no light.

RECIT.—*Micah.*

Your hopes of his deliv'ry seem not vain,
In which all Israel's friends participate.

Manoah.

I know your friendly minds, and—

(*A symphony of horror and confusion.*)

Heav'n! what noise!
Horribly loud, unlike the former shout.

CHORUS—*Philistines (at a little distance).*

Hear us, our God! Oh, hear our cry!
Death! ruin! fall'n! no help is nigh:
O mercy, heav'n! we sink, we die!

RECIT.—*Micah.*

Noise, call you this? An universal groan,
As if the world's inhabitation perish'd!
Blood, death, and ruin, at their utmost point.

Manoah.

Ruin, indeed! Oh! they have slain my son!

Micah.

Thy son is rather slaying them: that cry
From slaughter of one foe could not ascend.
But see, my friends,
One hither speeds, an Hebrew of our tribe.

*Enter an ISRAELITISH MESSENGER.**Messenger.*

Where shall I run, or which way fly the thoughts
Of this most horrid sight? O countrymen,
You're in this sad event too much concern'd.

Micah.

The accident was loud, we long to know from
whence.

Messenger.

Let me recover breath; it will burst forth.

Manoah.

Tell us the sum; the circumstance defer.

Messenger.

Gaza yet stands, but all her sons are fall'n.

Manoah.

Sad! not to us; but now relate by whom.

Messenger.

By Samson done.

Manoah.

The sorrow lessens still,
And nigh converts to joy.

Messenger.

Oh, Manoah,
In vain I would refrain: the evil tale
Too soon will rudely pierce thy aged ear.

Manoah.

Suspense in news is torture : speak it out.

Messenger.

Then take the worst in brief. Samson is dead !

Manoah.

The worst, indeed ! My hopes to free him hence
Are baffled all ! but Death (who sets all free)
Hath paid his ransom now.

Micah.

Yet ere we give the reins to grief, say first
How died he ? Death to life is crown or shame.

Messenger.

Unwounded of his enemies he fell,
At once he did destroy and was destroyed.
The edifice (where all were met to see)
Upon their heads and on his own he pulled.

Manoah.

O lastly over-strong against thyself !
A dreadful way thou took'st to thy revenge,
Glorious, yet dearly bought.

AIR—Micah.

Ye sons of Israel, now lament ;
Your spear is broke, your bow's unbent ;
Your glory's fled ;—
Amongst the dead
Great Samson lies :
For ever, ever ! closed his eyes.

CHORUS—Israelites.

Weep, Israel, weep a louder strain ;
Samson, your strength, your hero's slain.

*A DEAD MARCH.**RECIT.—Manoah.*

Come, come ! No time for lamentation now ;
No cause for grief ; Samson like Samson fell,
Both life and death heroic. To his foes
Ruin is left ; to him, eternal fame.

AIR.—Israelite.

Let the bright Seraphim in burning row,
Their loud uplifted Angel-trumpets blow ;
Let the Cherubic host, in tuneful choirs,
Touch their immortal harps with golden wires ;

CHORUS.—Israelites.

Let their celestial concerts all unite
Ever to sound his praise in endless blaze of light.

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