



FIRST NIGHT

Solomon's Knot review — parting the Red Sea with stylish, unfestive Handel

The excellent ensemble provided a welcome break from Christmas fare with a performance of Israel in Egypt at the Wigmore Hall

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With concert halls flooded with Messiahs, it's a quirky bit of Christmas programming by Wigmore Hall to offer another Handel oratorio drawn directly from biblical texts, Israel in Egypt. Parting the waters were the excellent ensemble Solomon's Knot, providing a welcome break from festive fare.

Handel's oratorio followed hot on the heels of Saul, but it didn't enjoy the same level of success, largely because London audiences in 1739 weren't used to religious works so heavily reliant on the chorus, with very few arias. Indeed,

Élisabeth Duparc, Handel’s leading lady at the time, was not amused at her lack of solo opportunities, declaring she had been “humiliated”. Here, the eight singers of Solomon’s Knot comprised the chorus, stepping out for arias, duets and recitatives.

Israel in Egypt was originally composed in three parts, but Part 1, a lamentation on the death of Joseph, was swiftly dropped. A few performances reinstate it, but most open with Part 2, where we whip through the ten plagues of Egypt faster than you can say “Rameses the Great”. Part 3, based on The Song of the Sea (Exodus), is far less dramatic, the Israelites celebrating at length their miraculous escape from the vengeful Pharaoh’s pursuing army after the crossing of the Red Sea.

The Wigmore Hall stage heaved with musicians; even the usual pedestal vases were removed to clear space for the 18 instrumentalists — strings, pairs of oboes, bassoons and trumpets, three trombones, kettledrums, chamber organ and harpsichord — wrapped around a semicircle of singers.

Solomon’s Knot performs without a conductor, singing from memory. This provides a great level of engagement, and their crisp choral singing and animated facial expressions captured the drama of the ten plagues, aided by lively orchestral playing: bouncing spiccato for the hopping frogs, a mighty timpani hailstorm and the heavy brass smiting Egypt’s firstborn. Pharaoh’s army was drowned under a torrent of thrilling sound.

The celebratory recap of Part 3 doesn’t hit the same degree of musical inspiration, although Handel offers a series of duets, interesting vocal pairings including a lengthy one for two basses proclaiming “The Lord is a man of war”. Zoë

Brookshaw and Rebecca Lea were a well-matched pair of sopranos in their duet. The occasional solo was a little choppy in places, but much of the singing was extremely classy, a highlight being the tenor Thomas Herford's duet with the alto Kate Symonds-Joy, "Thou in thy mercy".

★★★★☆