



Israel in Egypt on a smaller scale: Solomon's Knot draws together all the threads of Handel's Baroque oratorio

29/12/2025 by Christopher Sallon

🇬🇧 United Kingdom **Handel, *Israel in Egypt*, HWV54 (1739):** Singers and instrumentalists of Solomon's Knot. Wigmore Hall, London, 22.12.2025. (CSa)



Solomon's Knot © Gerard Collett

Singers:
Zoë Brookshaw (soprano)
Rebecca Lee (soprano)
Kate Symonds-Joy (alto)
William Shelton (alto)

Thomas Herford (tenor)
David de Winter (tenor)
Jonathan Sells (bass, artistic director)
Alex Ashworth (bass)

Solomon's Knot – Wigmore Hall's Baroque Ensemble in Residence – describes itself as 'an international, flexible collective of unconduted instrumentalists and singers.' Unlike most musical groups which operate a traditional 'top-down' structure in which a single artistic director determines programming and identity, inspirational ideas can come from any member. Whoever suggested what proved to be a joyously authentic performance of Handel's oratorio *Israel in Egypt* at London's Wigmore Hall deserves credit for a refreshingly unseasonal and strikingly topical experience.

Unseasonal because in *Israel in Egypt* Handel and his devout and theologically driven librettist Charles Jennens, recount, for the most part in vivid choruses, the Old Testament story of the Passover which commemorates the liberation of the children of Israel by Moses from slavery under Pharoah. It coincides with Easter, which in turn draws symbolically on many aspects of the Jewish Festival. Strikingly topical, not because Handel intended a modern political message, but because issues of oppression, collective suffering, statehood and the right to self-determination which are central to this biblical tale, still resonate today in the tragic conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Breaking with the mighty 'Huddersfield/Handel' tradition of large-scale, thickly textured performances by huge orchestras and vast choruses, Solomon's Knot fielded a paired down choir of 8 singer/soloists and 17 musicians performing intuitively from memory on period strings, historical woods and brass, kettle drums, organ and harpsichord. The orchestral soundworld is transparent, intimate and expressive, and Handel would almost certainly have recognised it as his own. By stripping away the heavy musical varnish of centuries, this innovative ensemble revealed the fine grain and brilliant colours of Handel's picture painting and elevated the narrative into a compelling drama.

There is much to be said for casting soloists from the chorus itself. The result is not merely cohesion but a rare uniformity of excellence, with individual voices flowering naturally from the collective sound. By dint of crisp articulation, finely calibrated balance and supple dynamic shading, Solomon's Knot wove a seamless musical tapestry in which soloists, choir, and instrumental writing were inseparable, and where excellence was not just concentrated in the few but evenly distributed across the whole.

Premiered in 1739 and originally written in three parts, *Israel in Egypt* was later revised to form the two-part version we heard. Despite reduced orchestral forces, the opening *Prelude* unfolded majestically, ushering in Part Two: *The Exodus*. It began with a compellingly sung introduction to the story from first tenor Thomas Herford: 'Now there arose a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph' and chronicled the sighs and cries of the Israelites. Next, second tenor David de Winter, in fine voice, spelt out the nature of God's retaliation against the Egyptian taskmasters. 'He turned their waters into blood' ...and 'sent all manner of flies, lice ...and locusts'. Alto William Shelton's vocally agile 'Their land brought forth frogs' was followed by a clutch of deeply unsettling and masterfully depicted chorus-led plagues which included 'all manner of flies and lice', 'hailstones for rain', a 'thick darkness over the land', and ultimately the smiting 'of the first-born of Egypt'. Undeterred, Pharoah's army vainly pursued the fleeing Israelites to the shores of the 'rebuked and dried up' Red Sea, only to be 'overwhelmed' when the parting waters flooded back. A well-chosen moment for the 20-minute interval.

Part Three: *Moses' Song* which occupied the second half of the concert, opened with the lovely chorus 'I will sing unto the Lord', recycled by Handel from one of his earlier Chandos anthems, after which came a sweetly harmonious duet 'The Lord is my strength' between bell-bright sopranos Zoe Brookshaw and Rebecca Lea. Basses Jonathan Sells and Alex Ashworth excelled in a rugged but skilfully balanced 'The Lord is a man of war' while David de Winter continued the story as the children of Israel reached dry land. More too from alto William Shelton in a sublimely beautiful account of 'Thou shalt bring them in' and from Rebecca Lea whose wonderfully accomplished account of 'Sing ye to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously' brought one of Handel's greatest oratorios and a gloriously triumphant performance to a fitting close.

Chris Sallon

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