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The online classical music magazine from composer Robert Hugill
Classical music news, reviews, interviews & features

Tuesday, 23 December 2025

Carrying the narrative strongly & directly: Solomon's Knot in Handel's *Israel in Egypt* at Wigmore Hall

Labels: [concert review](#), [Handel](#), [Wigmore Hall](#)

Solomon's Knot

Handel: *Israel in Egypt*; Solomon's Knot; Wigmore Hall
Reviewed 22 December 2025

Daringly performing Handel's great choral oratorio with just eight singers, Solomon's Knot bring out the work's narrative quality in a performance the was something of a tour de force

Handelian oratorio was a lot less settled in form than we like to think with the advantage of hindsight. Handel followed *Saul*, a large-scale dramatic work, with a work that minimised solo contributions and concentrated on the chorus. We

now see *Israel in Egypt* as a Handelian oratorio par excellence, beloved of choirs and choral societies, but Handel's contemporaries were not so sure. The reactions to the premiere of *Israel in Egypt* in 1739 may well have had as much to do with anti-Handel feeling as the work itself, but certainly Handel's initial conception involving an adaptation of the *Funeral Anthem for Queen Caroline* never survived beyond the first couple of performances. Handel himself tried various solutions, but the version of the work that has come down to us is in two parts (confusingly usually called Parts Two and Three).

In later works such as *Belshazzar*, Handel would go to great pains to characterise the chorus but in *Israel in Egypt* we find him using the chorus of Israelites as almost the only character, narrating the story directly to us. It was this aspect of the oratorio that came over most strongly in *Solomon's Knot*'s daring presentation of Handel's *Israel in Egypt* at Wigmore Hall on Monday 22 December 2025.

Handel would probably have expected rather more singers, but here we had just eight, plus an orchestra based around seven strings. The work does not use Handel's most extravagant orchestra, but *Israel in Egypt* does need two oboes, two bassoons, two trumpets, three trombones and timpani. The challenges of performing the work with eight singers are commensurately greater in terms of balance than say Bach's *Mass in B minor*.

Thus, this was a performance of losses and gains. What undoubtedly compelled was the sheer narrative element. Handel's choral writing was turned into a powerful narration as the eight singers, all performing from memory, spoke directly to us. The various plagues in Part Two: The Exodus were all brilliantly captured, the singing full of vivid contrasts. The balance between singers and instrumentalists meant that at times the vocal ensemble felt part of the greater instrumental ensemble so that Handel's lively orchestration told. In large-scale choral performances, these are details that can often be obscured. In Part Three: Moses' Song, the sheer directness of the singers' performance counted for a lot. We felt as if the story was being conveyed to it.

But, I have to admit that in some choruses, notably in Part Three, I did miss the choral weight that bigger forces bring. For many of the larger choruses, Handel doubles some of the vocal lines with the trombones and in others oboes too get in on the act. There were moments in these choruses when what the singers were doing seemed incidental to the overall sound. In many choral performances of Handel, I moan that the chorus is too dominant, so I admit that it seems perverse of me to worry about the opposite here.

The solos in *Israel in Egypt* almost seem incidental and certainly having them sung by choir members, as here, makes great sense. David de Winter opened things with a vivid narrative recitative, then Kate Symonds-Joy was sober and controlled in her solo opening the first chorus. Thomas Herford continued the recitative, and William Shelton delivered his 'frog' aria with wonderful relish.

In Part Two, Zoe Brookshaw and Rebecca Lea were beautifully balanced and remarkably intimate in 'The Lord is my strength', whilst Jonathan Sells & Alex Ashworth made 'The Lord is a man of war' into something rather vivid. David de Winter returned with more strong story-telling in 'The enemy said', Zoe Brookshaw was in fine form for 'Though didst blow', whilst Kate Symonds-Joy and Thomas Herford found a lovely balance in 'Thou in thy mercy'. William Shelton combined lyrical beauty with serious demeanour in 'Though shalt bring them in'.

The singers' achievements should not be minimised and the sheer *tour de force* of performing the work like this from memory very much carried away the evening. Putting on *Israel in Egypt* at all with such small forces took daring, and carrying the narrative so strongly and directly was a fine achievement.

Solomon's Knot

Zoe Brookshaw & Rebecca Lea sopranos, Kate Symonds-Joy & William Shelton altos, Thomas Herford & David de Winter tenors, Jonathan Sells & Alex Ashworth basses

George Clifford, Gabi Jones, James Toll, Will McGahon violins, Joanne Miller, viola, Sarah McMahon cello, Jan Zahourek bass, David Lanthier & Robert de Bree oboes, Inga Maria Klaucke & Ester van der Veen bassoons, Fruzi Hara & Thorn Hewitt trumpets, Emily White, Claire McIntyre, & Adam Crighton trombones, Ben Fullbrook timpani, James Johnstone harpsichord & organ

As we wish everyone a Happy New Year, it is a time to look back at 2025 and celebrate

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Planet Hugill is written by
Robert Hugill
(photo Robert Piwko)

See Robert's [Link Tree](#) for more about him and *Planet Hugill* and how to get into [contact](#) with us.

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Your blog has depth and intrigue. A hypnotic mix for someone who knows little about music. Thank you for an open ticket to wonderland.

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