

Samson

George Frideric Handel



The German-born Handel (1685-1759) first visited London for a few weeks in 1710-11 to promote his Italian opera, *Rinaldo*. Two years later he was back and the promotion of Italian opera remained his chief pre-occupation for the next 30 years. He wrote forty such works in his lifetime, but by the 1730s fashions were changing and the call for Italian opera was in decline. Although Handel remained committed to the genre, he also composed a number of English language oratorios based on Biblical subjects. These proved popular and were relatively inexpensive to produce, so early in 1741 he abandoned Italian opera for good.

Nowadays, the best-known of Handel's oratorios is undoubtedly *Messiah*, which he famously wrote in 24 days, finishing on 14th September 1741. Yet within a few days, he was hard at work on his next oratorio, *Samson*, completing it by 29th October. Soon after this, Handel travelled to Dublin to present a series of concerts, including the première of *Messiah*.

Samson was originally conceived with only four main characters: Samson and his wife Delilah, his father Manoah and a Philistine giant named Harapha. However, while Handel was in Dublin, he was greatly impressed by the alto singer-actress Susannah Cibber¹ (right) and thought it would be good for her to have a role in *Samson*. So, upon returning to London, he set about revising the work, adding the part of Samson's friend, Micah, for alto voice. He also brightened-up the ending by adding the famous aria, *Let the bright seraphim* and the final triumphant chorus, *Let their celestial concerts*.



By the standards of the day, Handel employs a large orchestra and uses it to great effect.

¹ Susannah Cibber was the sister of Thomas Arne, the composer of *Rule Britannia*. She made a very bad marriage and was used scandalously by her husband, from whom she eventually ran away. She was renowned as an actress as well as a singer and ended her working life as David Garrick's leading lady at Drury Lane Theatre. She became the highest paid actress in London and is buried in Westminster Abbey.

As a result of the substantial revision, the sheer quantity of music written for *Samson* is unusually large, but a performance of it all at one time was never intended. Handel was a practical musician-impresario who made the best of the resources available to him on any given occasion and would select, adapt or remove items accordingly. To do this and still deliver a creditable performance, he needed enough material to provide options. To some extent, all his oratorios are like this, which is why they are rarely, if ever, heard in their entirety and never in a definitive form. The items selected for this evening's concert reflect Handel's own practice, together with choices 'sanctioned by long custom'.



The première of *Samson* took place at Covent Garden on 18th February 1743 and was a great success. It was performed seven times in its first season², the most first-season performances of any Handel oratorio. The work remained popular throughout the composer's lifetime and is still regarded as one of his finest dramatic creations. It is even staged as an opera from time to time.

The libretto, by Irish author and playwright, Newburgh Hamilton, is based on *Samson Agonistes* by John Milton, which takes as its starting point the Biblical story of Samson, found in Chapter 16 of the Book of Judges. The story covered in the libretto deals the end of Samson's life, so a brief review of events up to that point may help to set the scene.

Samson is a Judge of Israel³ well known for his superhuman strength, as witnessed by exploits which include slaying a lion with his bare hands and defeating the Philistines in battle using the jawbone of an ass. He marries Delilah, a Philistine woman, who goads him into revealing that his strength derives from allowing his hair to grow. While he is asleep, Delilah gets a servant to cut off Samson's hair and betrays him to her people. In his weakened state, he is easily captured, imprisoned and blinded, and set to work grinding grain at a mill in Gaza.

The libretto picks up the story towards the end of Samson's captivity, moving away from the Biblical account in favour of Milton's dramatic scenario.

²The London Season was when British aristocratic landowners and other gentry (typically 300-400 families) came to London for several months a year to engage in social and cultural events.

³ Judges served as leaders in Israel in the period before the establishment of hereditary kingship.

Part 1

It is the festival day of the Philistine god, Dagon, when Samson, blind and in chains, is allowed out of prison to receive visitors. The priests of Dagon praise their god while Samson bewails his fate. His friend Micah and father Manoah are shocked by how low the once invincible hero has fallen. Samson insists it is his own fault for giving away the secret of his strength, but predicts that Dagon will not have victory over the God of Israel. Samson longs for death, but is comforted by the Israelites saying he will ultimately triumph over death and time.

Part 2

Micah and the Israelites call upon God to have pity on Samson. Delilah arrives, saying she is sorry for her actions and pleads with Samson to go home with her, but he refuses and there is a scene of mutual recrimination. The Philistine giant, Harapha, comes to insult Samson, who challenges him to a duel. Harapha refuses because of Samson's blindness and is mocked as a coward. Micah proposes to measure the power of Dagon against the God of the Israelites, to see who is supreme. Harapha calls upon Dagon and the Israelites appeal to Jehovah, as both sides offer praise.

Part 3

Harapha comes to take Samson to the feast of the Philistines, but at first he refuses to go, not wanting to be present at the worship of Dagon. His friends are worried for his safety and call upon God to help. Samson thinks of a plan and goes to the feast after all, but warns the Israelites to stay away. Manoah



tells the Israelites of his hope that Samson may be set free. In the distance, the Philistine priests are heard celebrating Dagon's triumph, while Micah and Manoah can only express their sadness at Samson's plight. Suddenly, there is a loud noise and sounds of panic. An Israelite Messenger arrives with news that Samson has pulled down the temple, killing himself and the Philistines. Micah and the Israelites mourn Samson's death, and a funeral march is heard. Manoah celebrates Samson's heroic life and death, and the Israelites joyfully praise God.