

■ *Nantwich Choral Society* ■

HANDEL

JUDAS MACCABAEUS



SATURDAY 19th NOVEMBER 1994

**The Parish Church of St. Mary, Nantwich
at 7.30pm.**

NANTWICH CHORAL SOCIETY

NANTWICH SINFONIA
(Leader: Tony Cucchiara)

Catrin Ley (*soprano*) – *Israelitish Woman*

Pamela Clarke (*mezzo-soprano*) – *Israelitish Man*

Marjorie Seddon (*contralto*) – *Israelitish Man,
Messenger, Priest*

Paul Phoenix (*tenor*) – *Judas Maccabaeus*

Philip Ravenscroft (*bass*) – *Simon, Messenger, Eupolemus*

Conducted by
Stephen Buckman

JUDAS MACCABAEUS

Despite its biblical subject (from the first book of Maccabees) the object of **Judas Maccabaeus** was not primarily religious but political. On 16th April 1746, the English Army, led by the Duke of Cumberland, had finally put a stop to Bonnie Prince Charlie's Jacobite rebels at the Battle of Culloden, thereby ensuring the continued reign of George II and the Hanover dynasty. In London especially, the anxiety of the last nine months was over and the victorious Duke was the hero of the hour. The libretto of Handel's commemorative oratorio, by the Reverend Thomas Morell, was 'design'd as a compliment to the Duke of Cumberland upon his returning victorious from Scotland' and when **Judas Maccabaeus** was first performed almost a year later, in April 1747, patriotic feeling was still running high, guaranteeing Handel sell-out audiences – and a handsome profit.

The story of the threatened Israelites saved from heathen oppression by the valiant Judas Maccabaeus provided Morell with many parallels in contemporary events. These would have been easily recognised by the audience and must have added an extra dimension to their enjoyment of the oratorio. Not only would they have seen their gallant Duke in the 'conqu'ring hero', Judas, but also themselves in the children of Israel, the 'chosen nation', faithful to the true religion (the Church of England); whilst their Catholic enemies, the Jacobites, are represented by the heathen hordes, led by Gorgias (a.k.a. Bonnie Prince Charlie). Other parallels abound, and those who want to will be able to work them out for themselves.

Handel responded to the subject and the circumstances with music that includes a high proportion of grand military and ceremonial set-pieces (rousing calls to arms, songs of victory and thanksgiving); but there are also some great tragic choruses and tender arias, providing a whole range of emotional affects which those patriotic first audiences must have revelled in. There can be no doubt that the work's enormous patriotic appeal contributed to its continuing popularity with later generations (even when those other of Handel's oratorios were all but forgotten), standing with **Israel in Egypt** and **Messiah** in a mighty triumvirate of choral society war-horses. Nowadays, with so much other repertoire available, **Judas Maccabaeus** is heard much less often, making tonight's performance a welcome opportunity to hear some of Handel's most stirring music.

In the following synopsis, the acts have been broken up into smaller sections, each ending with a chorus, as these make easily identifiable reference points. The resultant grouping's are therefore not in any dramatic sense structural, but merely convenient.

OVERTURE

ACT I

CHORUS; RECITATIVE & DUET; CHORUS

The opening chorus depicts the 'Israelites, Men and Women, lamenting the death of Mattathias, the father of Judas Maccabaeus' and the loss of their freedom. They are encouraged to display their grief by the Israelitish Man and the Israelitish Woman, who act as leaders of the Chorus rather than as dramatic characters. They remind us that even the great Temple of Solomon now lies 'in smoky ruins' and the People respond with a moving chorus of lamentation for Sion.

RECITATIVE; AIR; CHORUS

Simon, one of Mattathias' sons, suggests that they have all mourned enough and that if they turn now to prayer, God will still help his chosen nation. This sentiment is amplified by the Israelitish Woman in her air 'Pious Orgies' (surely a quaint spelling of 'auguries?'), and in the next chorus the People, now more confident, pray again for a leader 'if not to conquer, born to save'.

RECITATIVE & AIR; CHORUS

Simon announces that God has answered their prayer in his brother Judas, and his call to arms 'in defence of your nation, religion, and Laws' brings an eager response from the chorus.

RECITATIVE & AIR; RECITATIVE, AIR, AIR; RECITATIVE & AIR; DUET; CHORUS

Judas accepts the leadership with a dramatic aria in which he hopes for the glory 'that triumphs in sweet liberty restor'd'. The sequence of recitatives and airs which follows is essentially an interlude, celebrating the joys which liberty brings and ending in a shortened repeat of the second air 'Come, ever-smiling liberty', now sung as a duet. Only after this do the People respond to Judas' earlier aria and resolve to cast off 'the galling load of hostile chains'.

RECITATIVE; CHORUS; RECITATIVE & AIR; RECITATIVE; CHORUS

Judas inspires his troops by recalling his father's dying words: 'Resolve, my sons, on liberty, or death!' The soldiers interrupt this fiery speech with a chorus expressing their reckless desire for battle, giving Judas cause to remind them that their aim is to win peace and not 'unbounded pow'r'. The First Act ends with the People ready for battle, 'Resolv'd on conquest, or a glorious fall'.

INTERVAL

ACT II

CHORUS; RECITATIVE & AIR; RECITATIVE & AIR; DUET & CHORUS

During the interval, the Israelites have fought back armies from Samaria and Syria and they recall their righteous victory in the magnificent chorus 'Fall'n is the foe'. The Israelitish Man proudly describes their successes, brought about by Judas' 'all-conquering sword', while the Israelitish Woman sings of her triumphs with passionate ardour. In 'Hail, Judea happy land!' the Man and the Woman lead the chorus in a movement of joyful celebration.

RECITATIVE & AIR; RECITATIVE; AIR & CHORUS

Judas reminds the Israelites that it was not he who brought them victory, but God, and comments on the vanity of man. The arrival of a Messenger with news of another enemy advance – this time from Egypt, under Gorgias – sends the People back into fearful despair, taking up the Israelitish Woman's song of woe.

RECITATIVE & AIR; RECITATIVE, AIR & CHORUS

Simon offers some comfort by pointing out that God does not want to destroy his people, but to test them. Judas again calls the Israelites to arms, and as if to underline the significance of the battle to come, trumpets and drums at last make their first electrifying appearance in the oratorio – their martial fanfares continuing through to the following chorus.

RECITATIVE & AIR; RECITATIVE, DUET & CHORUS

The pious Simon again calls for calm and urges that the Temple be cleansed and restored to God before they go into battle again. The Israelitish Man and Woman deplore the heathen rites which have desecrated the Temple and then are joined by the People in solemnly affirming their rejection of these idols and their obedience to the God of Israel.

ACT III

AIR; RECITATIVE & AIR; RECITATIVE; CHORUS; MARCH; CHORUS

The final act begins with one of those simple but exquisite airs of which Handel was such a master, sung by a Priest celebrating the Festival of Lights. In the recitative which follows, the Israelitish Man (after a quick character change from the soloist) and Woman hope that God has heard their prayers and that peace will now return to Judah. The Woman's happy anticipation fills her air 'So shall the lute and harp awake'. A Messenger arrives from Capharsalama, where the Israelites have again been victorious, and then a second Messenger announces the return of Judas, who brings on his spear the head and hand of the defeated Gorgias. His triumphal entry into Jerusalem is led by a 'Chorus of Youths' singing 'See, the conqu'ring hero comes!', accompanied by two horns (fresh from the battle field). Behind them comes a more delicately scored 'Chorus of Virgins' singing the second verse, followed by a rousing repeat of the first verse, now for full chorus and orchestra (including military drum). The instrumental March which rounds off the procession was originally in Act II, but when the previous chorus was added to **Judas Maccabaeus** in 1750 (after its huge success in **Joshua**), Handel moved the March to its present position. The monumental chorus 'Sing unto God' is an example of Handel's best 'state occasion' music, with all the splendour usually associated with his Coronation Anthems.

RECITATIVE & AIR; RECITATIVE; CHORUS

Judas asks for a pause in the thanksgiving while those who fell in battle are buried (including one poor man who 'triumph'd in a glorious death' – underneath the elephant he had just stabbed!). A solo trumpet features in the air Judas sings, but, unusually, the music is thoughtful and in a minor key. Eupolemus, the Jewish ambassador to Rome, returns with the Senate's promise of protection in case of future threats on Israel, and the People offer solemn thanks to God.

RECITATIVE & DUET; AIR & CHORUS

The Israelitish Woman invites all the women to show their gratitude for the peace which Judas' valour has won, and one of them joins her in a lilting duet 'Oh lovely peace'. The words of Simon's air, in which he calls on the people of Judah to join in their praise with the hosts of heaven, are repeated in the final glorious chorus, whose assertive self-confidence must have matched exactly the mood of those proud and happy Hanoverians.

Colin Bromelow