



Jephtha Handel

An Oratorio

Jephtha is an oratorio: a story from the Old Testament, set to music and sung in English. The great heyday of oratorio was the between 1732 and 1752, when Handel wrote over 20 of them. People used to go to oratorios in Lent, partly because they felt they should do something religious during that period, and partly because the theatres were closed anyway. As oratorios were in many ways a substitute for opera they tended to have an operatic cast: a hero-king, some young lovers and a couple of basses to play priests, generals or Philistines. However, as oratorio wasn't staged, the composer could afford to pay a large chorus and big choral numbers became a feature of the genre.

The Story

Obviously an oratorio needed a good story and oratorio librettists seized on the exciting lives of Jewish heroes and kings recorded in the biblical books of *Samuel*, *Judges* and *Kings*. *Jephtha* himself comes from the book of *Judges* ('Champions' would be a better translation) and is an odd choice for the hero of an oratorio, as we shall see...

A Canny Bargain

Jephtha lived round about 1070 BC. He was the leader of a band of brigands and called in by some hard-pressed Jews to give them a hand against marauding tribes of Ammonites. *Jephtha* was more or less Jewish. He worshipped the Jewish God (or thought he did) and had some Jewish ancestry, but he'd spent his life as an outlaw and knew little of the people or beliefs he'd been asked to save. He immediately struck a bargain: "If I save Israel," he said, "I demand to be accepted by you, have some land of my own and become your leader." The Jews agreed, and *Jephtha* began to strategise his campaign against the Ammonites.

A Rash Vow

He immediately realised he needed God on his side and decided that he'd better offer Him something spectacular. He decided on a human sacrifice. "The first person to greet me after my victory", he said, "will be given to God." In point of fact God had made it perfectly clear, centuries before, that He abhorred human sacrifice. The founder of the Jewish people, Abraham, had been stopped by God Himself from sacrificing his son Isaac – but it seems *Jephtha* had never heard of Abraham. Be that as it may, *Jephtha* won his battle, came home triumphant, and was horrified to find that the person leading the crowd that rushed out to greet him, was his only daughter.

A Heroine

Amazingly his daughter greeted the news of her father's vow quite calmly. She asked him for two months respite to retire to the mountains and grieve with some companions. Then she came back and, as the Bible says, 'he did to her what he'd vowed'. (*Judges* was written down centuries later and the Jewish writer couldn't bring himself to spell out exactly what happened.) Obviously Jephtha cut her throat and sacrificed her on an altar as a burnt offering.

A Problem

It's a grim story, and an odd one for an oratorio. It's difficult to imagine an English tenor, in eighteenth century lace, wig and knee breeches getting up and pretending to be this bloodthirsty ruffian, or a chorus of Londoners singing approving 'Hallelujahs' as the priest approached with his knife. But eighteenth century librettists had ways of coping with these things and Handel's librettist, Thomas Morell, was no exception. Like the other writers of his century Morell assumed that the kings and heroes of the Bible were versions of modern men of action and so he made Jephtha an English general. Then he realised that Jephtha was, however mistakenly, a religious man, so he made him anxious and pious – somebody who wants to do the right thing and agonises when it goes wrong. Lastly he realised that God could not possibly have wanted Jephtha to sacrifice his child and so he sent in an angel at the last moment to offer an alternative.

Handel's last work

In other words, Morell *civilised* the story and handed it over to Handel – at which point the oratorio changed again. Handel was ill. He was a large energetic man and he made a rotten invalid but, at this point in his life, he seemed to know his composing days were running out. He got Morell's libretto in January 1751 and, though he normally composed in the long clear days of summer, he started work at once. All through February he hammered away at the score. On February 13th he wrote at the end of Act II, "unable to continue owing to the weakness of my left eye". (We can see from the score how bad his sight was, the bar lines straggle and many of the notes don't have stems.) He pushed on, stopped again as his left eye failed completely and finished the piece on his birthday, August 30th. It had been a long haul (most of Handel's works took him about a month to write) and when he got to the last hard won bar Handel wrote his age, in Latin, at the bottom: "aetatis 66". He conducted the first, very successful performance in February but, by the Autumn, Handel had become completely blind. People used to listen to Jephtha breaking down in "Deeper and deeper still" or to the chorus that ends Act II "How dark, O Lord, are Thy decrees!" and look sympathetically at the blind composer, sitting in the orchestra pit beside his silent harpsichord. Some of his anguish had obviously found its way into Jephtha's music: he never wrote a full length work again.

Happy Ending

However it would be wrong to think of *Jephtha* as a tortured work. Jephtha is forgiven at the end of the show, and much of the music describes the cheerful optimism of the young lovers, Iphis and Hamor. Handel himself bucked up

and began to give virtuoso organ concerts: even his rather gruff sense of humour returned. One evening he sat next to William Savage to listen to a performance of *Jephtha*. "This movement, Sir," twittered Savage, "reminds me of some of Purcell's old music." "Oh go to the devil" growled Handel, "if Purcell had lived, he would have composed better music than this!"

The Characters

The oratorio naturally centres round **Jephtha** (tenor) and his daughter **Iphis** (soprano). However, to give the show a little more variety, Morell added **Storge**, Jephtha's wife (contralto) who foresees doom almost from her first note, and a lover for Iphis, **Hamor** (counter tenor). **Zebul** (bass) leads the chorus of Israelites, and an **Angel** (soprano) completes the cast.

The ENO Show

Jephtha is normally performed as a concert. The soloists sit on chairs at the front of the stage; the chorus and orchestra sit behind; and the only action is a singer standing up to sing an aria, and sitting down again once it's over. However opera singers can't help acting, even on the concert platform, and as *Jephtha* always comes across as a drama, ENO has decided to stage it properly.

Act I – The Bargain

The oratorio starts with Zebul talking to his fellow Israelites and advising that they call in Jephtha to help them repel the Ammonites. We gather that the Jews have treated Jephtha badly (in the Bible we are told he was chucked out for being illegitimate) but they hope he'll forgive them. Jephtha enters, swiftly sets out the conditions – he's to remain the Jewish leader in war and peace – and sings a serene aria, "Virtue my soul shall still embrace." His wife, Storge, loyally supports him, but clearly wishes the battle was over.

Young Love

A young Jewish soldier, Hamor, comes downstage to talk to Iphis. They are obviously deeply in love but, whereas Hamor just wants to sing arias, Iphis feels he should be thinking about more important matters – specifically the coming battle with the Ammonites.

The Vow

Meanwhile Jephtha is struggling as he prays; he feels impelled to make an extravagant promise to God, and duly vows to offer Him the first thing that he sees on his return home. Even as he says it Jephtha has misgivings, but he stifles these feelings with a firm, "'Tis said!"

Doubts

Night falls and Storge enters, driven from her bed by ghastly dreams. Her distress wakes Iphis who comforts her mother with a cheerful aria, "The smiling dawn of happy days, presents a prospect clear." And indeed the sun does rise as Zebul enters to say the Ammonites refuse to talk terms and are defiant. Jephtha immediately rallies his troops and he and the chorus rush off to battle.

Act II – Victory

Hamor enters with the news of an Israelite victory; he tells us that scarcely had the Israelite trumpet sounded when thousands of armed Cherubim (very large angels) appeared in the skies, the Jews rushed forward and the Ammonites fled. (This is not actually what happens in the Bible, but Morell never lets minor details like that stop him.) The chorus sing the praise of the Cherubim and Hamor looks forward to seeing Iphis again. She enters, delighted at the news, and gathers her maidens round her to dance out and greet her father on his return. Knowing what we do, the happiness of her song – with wonderful pizzicato string and flute accompaniment – is heart breaking. There is a slight lull in the action as the soldiers gather, the generals congratulate each other, and a gentle symphony heralds the approach of the maidens.

Disaster

Jephtha freezes as he hears his daughter sing his praises and he lets another chorus of praise pass by unheeded before he erupts, "Horror! Confusion! Fly, begone, and leave me to the rack of wild despair!" Iphis naturally retreats and Jephtha is left to explain his behaviour to the others. Storge's response is immediate, "Kill somebody else..." while Hamor is heroic, "Kill me instead." Zebul joins the debate and the four sing a quartet: Storge, Hamor and Zebul pointing out that God cannot possibly wish him to fulfil his vow, while Jephtha remains adamant, "I'll hear no more, her doom is fix'd as fate."

An Heroic Offer

Iphis returns. She has heard what has happened and offers herself as a willing sacrifice. The offer heaps yet more guilt on her father's head and he is left to tumble through an astonishing variety of emotions (underlined by an equally astonishing number of key changes) in his agonised recitative, "Deeper and deeper still..." He breaks down at the end and the chorus close the act with the sombre chorus, "How dark, O Lord, are Thy decrees!" Faced with the twists and turns of human fortune they can offer Jephtha no consolation except the empty phrase, "Whatever is, is right!"

Act III – The Sacrifice

Jephtha and the Jewish priests enter. Jephtha is on the verge of collapse and the priests are horrified at the task he wants them to perform. Iphis alone remains serene as Jephtha sings a desolate aria "Waft her, angels, through the skies". The priests (rather more sensibly) pray to God for guidance and their prayer is answered as an Angel appears.

The Solution

The Angel stops the sacrifice and tells Jephtha that God has accepted his vow. His child *shall* be dedicated to Him, not as a sacrifice, but as a virgin – living singly in His service. The priests are greatly relieved; Jephtha sinks to his knees in gratitude; Storge embraces her daughter; and, though Hamor feels rather wistful about the wife he has just lost, everybody unites to praise the Lord in a final 'Hallelujah'.

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