

George Frideric Handel - Esther (2007)



Disc: 1 1. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 1. Overture. Andante - Larghetto - Allegro
2. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 1. Breathe soft ye gales 3. Esther, oratorio,
HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 1. Watchful Angels 4. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 1. O
King of kings, celestial Lord! 5. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 1. Alleluia 6.
Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 1. With transport, lovely queen 7. Esther, oratorio,
HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 1. So much beauty sweetly blooming 8. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b:
Act 1. Scene 1. Again shall Salem, to the skies 9. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 1.
My heart is inditing 10. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 1. Kings' daughters 11.
Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 1. Upon the right hand 12. Esther, oratorio, HWV
50b: Act 1. Scene 1. Kings shall be thy nursing fathers 13. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1.
Scene 2. Let me with freedom thy petition know 14. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene
2. Endless fame 15. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 3. 'Tis greater far to spare 16.
Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 3. Pluck root and branch 17. Esther, oratorio, HWV
50b: Act 1. Scene 3. Our souls with ardour glow 18. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene
3. Shall we the God of Israel fear? 19. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 4. Jerusalem
no more shall mourn 20. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 4. Tune your harps to
cheerful strains 21. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 4. Shall we of servitude complain
22. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 4. Praise the Lord with cheerful noise 23.
Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 5. How have our sins provok'd the Lord! 24. Esther,
oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 5. Ye sons of Israel, mourn 25. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b:
Act 1. Scene 5. O Jordan, Jordan, sacred tide! 26. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 1. Scene 5.
Ye sons of Israel, mourn Disc: 2 1. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 1.
Tyrants may awhile presume 2. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 2. Why sits that
sorrow on thy brow? 3. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 2. Dread not, righteous
queen 4. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 2. O heaven, protect her 5. Esther,
oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 2. Blessings descend on downy wings 6. Esther, oratorio,
HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 2. I go, the pow'r of grief to prove 7. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2.
Scene 2. Tears assist me, pity moving 8. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 2. Save us,
O Lord! 9. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 3. Who dares intrude into our presence
10. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 3. Who calls my parting soul from death? 11.
Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 3. O beauteous queen, unclothe those eyes 12.
Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 3. If I find favour in thy sight 13. Esther, oratorio,
HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 4. With inward joy his visage glows 14. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b:
Act 2. Scene 4. Heav'n has lent her ev'ry charm 15. Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene

4. *The king will listen to the royal fair* 16. *Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 2. Scene 4. Blessed are all they that fear the Lord* 17. *Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 3. Scene 1. Jehovah crown'd with glory bright* 18. *Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 3. Scene 1. He comes! He comes to end our woes* 19. *Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 3. Scene 2. Now O my queen, thy suit declare* 20. *Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 3. Scene 2. Turn not, O queen, thy face away* 21. *Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 3. Scene 2. Flatt'ring tongue, no more I hear thee* 22. *Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 3. Scene 2. Through the nation he shall be* 23. *Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 3. Scene 2. All applauding crowds, around* 24. *Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 3. Scene 2. How art thou fall'n from thy height!* 25. *Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 3. Scene 2. I'll proclaim the wond'rous story* 26. *Esther, oratorio, HWV 50b: Act 3. Scene 3. The Lord our enemy has slain, Allelujah!*

Joshua (soprano)	Ahasuerus:	James Bowman (countertenor)	Mordecai:	Susan Bickley (mezzo-soprano)
Haman:	Christopher Purves (bass)	Israelite Woman:	Rebecca Outram (soprano)	First Israelite:
Andrew Kennedy (tenor)	Second Israelite:	Cecilia Osmond (soprano)	Harbonah:	Angus Smith (tenor)
London Handel Orchestra & Choir	Laurence Cummings - conductor			

This is a particularly welcome and important world-premiere recording. Handel composed *Esther* in about 1718-20 for James Brydges, the Earl of Carnarvon (and later Duke of Chandos), using a libretto that was anonymously adapted from Thomas Brereton's English translation of a play by Racine. This slender work, containing only six scenes, lays a strong claim to being the first English oratorio, but Handel seems not to have considered performing it for a public audience until 1732, when the entrepreneurial composer thoroughly revised the score to fit his company of Italian opera singers (including Senesino, Strada and Montagnana, who all sang in English), and enlisted the aid of the writer Samuel Humphreys to expand the drama with additional scenes. This is the historic version of *Esther* that launched Handel's oratorio career in London, but it has remained inexplicably neglected in modern times.

Laurence Cummings is one of our finest and most natural Handelian conductors. The Israelite Woman's sensuous opening number 'Breathe soft, ye gales' (featuring recorders, oboes, bassoons, harp, theorbo, five-part strings and organ) is neatly judged by the impressive London Handel Orchestra. The superb choir is enthusiastic and masterful, and the two inserted Coronation Anthems *My heart is inditing* and *Zadok the Priest* (the latter given a parody text) are both performed magnificently. James Bowman sounds a little fragile in the most extensive coloratura passages written for Senesino in 'Endless fame', and the part of Mordecai seems uncomfortably low for Susan Bickley (which is not helped by the dragging speed of 'Dread not, righteous Queen, the danger'), but in general the soloists form a consistently solid team. Christopher Purves is marvellous as the scheming and bullying evil minister Haman, and is equally good at singing the pitiful and lyrical 'Turn not, O Queen, thy face away' when the villain fears his deserved doom. The all-round excellence of this live concert performance from

Handel's parish church, St George's, Hanover Square, makes it an essential treat for Handelians. ---prestoclassical.co.uk

Esther was the first of Handel's English oratorios, and developed out of a revision of an earlier work. It was composed while Handel was under the influence of the literary circle of Lord Burlington. The literati at Cannons were very interested in classical poetics, but also in typically English dramatic forms such as the Purcell semi-opera and the Stuart masque. Esther was originally called a masque, but had a biblical story. It contains dance, spectacle and visual treats for the eye which historically were very valued by the English, showing its indebtedness to English theatrical idioms. Esther was based on a libretto by the French playwright Racine, which was set to music by Jean-Baptiste Moreau(1656-1733). Both Esther and Athalia were intended for Madame de Maintenon, and meant to be morally edifying for the girls in her charge. They were written late in Racine's life, and do not emphasize such traditionally popular elements as love stories, or adventure. Rather they emphasize the moral dilemmas of their heroines, and the heroic strength of their personalities. In Esther we find the first emergence of the Handelian dramatic chorus, which was to inform his later oratorio creations. Esther was very successful at its premier, and Handel revived it throughout his life as a favorite of the London public whenever his seasons needed boosting.

Although quite popular initially, Handel would not have explored his new form had not another rival tried to pirate the work for profit. This occurred in April of 1732. Handel had no copyright, so he quickly revised the work for his star cast of Italian singers, and began a new production of it in March. His rivals were silenced, and Handel discovered a new idiom that was popular with the English public. Because of the new strictures against staging biblical stories, the new Esther was left unstaged, and was turned into Handel's first English oratorio. ---Rita Laurance, allmusic.com

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