

# SAMSON Handel

## ACT ONE

### 1. Overture

#### Scene 1

*Before the Prison in Gaza. Samson, blind and in chains.*

*Chorus of the Priests of Dagon, celebrating his festival.*

#### 2. Recitative

*Samson*

This day, a solemn feast to Dagon held,  
relieves me from my task of servile toil;  
Unwillingly their superstition yields  
this rest, to breathe heav'n's air, fresh blowing, pure and sweet.

#### 3. Chorus of Philistines

Awake the trumpet's lofty sound!  
The joyful sacred festival comes round,  
When Dagon king of all the earth is crown'd.

#### 4. Air

*Philistine Woman*

Ye men of Gaza, hither bring the merry pipe and pleasing string,  
The solemn hymn, and cheerful song;  
be Dagon prais'd by ev'ry tongue!

#### 5. Chorus of Philistines

Awake the trumpet's lofty sound!  
The joyful sacred festival comes round,  
When Dagon king of all the earth is crown'd.

## Scene 2

*Enter Micah and Israelites, observing Samson.*

#### 9. Recitative

*Samson*

Why by an angel was my birth foretold,  
As in a fiery column ascending  
From off the altar, in my parents' sight?  
As of a person separate to God?  
If I must die, betray'd and captiv'd thus,  
The scorn and gaze of foes? Oh, cruel thought!  
My griefs find no redress! They inward prey,  
Like gangren'd wounds, immedicable grown.

#### 13. Recitative

*Micah*

Matchless in might! once Israel's glory, now her grief!  
Welcome, thy friends well known, to visit thee!

*Samson*

Welcome, my friends! Experience teaches now,  
How counterfeit the coin of friendship is,  
That's only in the superscription shown.  
In the warm sunshine of our prosp'rous days,  
Friends swarm; but in the winter of adversity,  
Draw in their heads; though sought, not to be found.

*Micah*

Which shall we first bewail,  
Thy bondage, or lost sight?

*Samson*

O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!  
O, worse than beggary, old age, or chains!  
My very soul in real darkness dwells!

#### **14. Air**

*Samson*

Total eclipse! No sun, no moon!  
All dark amidst the blaze of noon!  
Oh, glorious light! No cheering ray  
To glad my eyes with welcome day!  
Why thus depriv'd Thy prime decree?  
Sun, moon, and stars are dark to me!

#### **15. Chorus of Israelites**

O first created beam! And thou great word!  
"Let there be light!" — And light was over all,  
One heav'nly blaze shone round this earthly ball.  
To thy dark servant, life, by light afford!

### **Scene 3**

*Enter Manoah.*

#### **17. Recitative**

*Manoah*

Brethren and men of Dan, say, where is my son,  
Samson, fond Israel's boast? Inform my age!

*Micah*

As signal now in low dejected state,  
As in the height of pow'r. — See, where he lies!

#### **20. Accompagnato**

*Manoah*

The good we wish for, often proves our bane.  
I pray'd for children, and I gain'd a son,  
And such a son, as all men hail'd me happy.  
But who'd be now a father in my stead?  
The blessing drew a scorpion's tail behind;  
This plant (select and sacred for awhile,  
The miracle of all!) was in one hour  
Ensnar'd, assaulted, overcome, led bound,  
His foes' derision, captive, poor, and blind!

#### **21. Air**

*Manoah*

Thy glorious deeds inspir'd my tongue,  
Whilst airs of joy from thence did flow.  
To sorrows now I tune my song,  
And set my harp to notes of woe.

#### **22. Recitative**

*Samson*

Justly these evils have befall'n thy son;  
Sole author I, sole cause.

#### **22. Accompagnato**

*Samson*

My griefs for this

Forbid mine eyes to close, or thoughts to rest.  
But now the strife shall end: me overthrown,  
Dagon presumes to enter lists with God,  
Who, thus provok'd, will not convive, but rouse  
His fury soon, and his great name assert;  
Dagon shall stoop, ere long be quite despoil'd  
Of all those boasted trophies won on me.

#### **24. Air**

*Samson*

Why does the God of Israel sleep?  
Arise with dreadful sound,  
And clouds encompass'd round!  
Then shall the heathen hear thy thunder deep.  
The tempest of thy wrath now raise,  
In whirlwinds them pursue,  
Full fraught with vengeance due,  
Till shame and trouble all thy foes shall seize!

#### **26. Chorus of Israelites**

Then shall they know, that He whose name  
Jehovah is alone,  
O'er all the earth but One,  
Was ever the Most High, and still the same.

#### **27. Recitative**

*Manoah*

For thee, my dearest son, must thou meanwhile  
Lie, thus neglected, in this loathsome plight?

*Samson*

It should be so,  
Why should I live?  
Soon shall these orbs to double darkness yield.

#### **28. Accompagnato**

*Samson*

My genial spirits droop, my hopes are fled;  
Nature in me seems weary of herself;  
My race of glory run, and race of shame:  
Death, invocated oft, shall end my pains,  
And lay me gently down with them that rest.

#### **31. Chorus of Israelites**

Then round about the starry throne  
Of Him who ever rules alone,  
Your heav'nly-guided soul shall climb:  
Of all this earthly grossness quit,  
With glory crown'd, for ever sit,  
And triumph over death, and thee, O Time!

## **ACT TWO**

### *Scene 1*

*Samson, Manoah, Micah, and Israelites.*

#### **34. Recitative**

*Samson*

My evils hopeless are! One pray'r remains,  
A speedy death, to close my miseries.

*Micah*

Relieve Thy champion, image of Thy strength,  
And turn his labours to a peaceful end!

### **35. Air and Chorus**

*Micah*

Return, O God of hosts! Behold thy servant in distress,  
His mighty griefs redress, nor by the heathen be it told.

### **36. To dust his glory they would tread**

*Israelites*

To dust his glory they would tread,  
and number him amongst the dead.

## **Scene 2**

*Samson, Micah. Enter Dalila, attended by her Virgins.*

### **37. Recitative**

*Micah*

But who is this, that so bedeck'd and gay,  
Comes this way sailing like a stately ship? – Tis Dalila, thy wife.

*Samson*

My wife, my traitress? Let her not come near me!

*Dalila*

With doubtful feet, and wav'ring resolution,  
I come, O Samson, dreading thy displeasure;  
But conjugal affection led me on,  
Prevailing over fear and tim'rous doubt,  
Glad if in aught my help or love could serve,  
To expiate my rash, unthought misdeed.

### **38. Air**

*Philistine Woman / Dalila*

With plaintive notes and am'rous moan, thus coos the turtle left alone.

### **43. Air and duet**

*Dalila*

My faith and truth, O Samson, prove,  
But hear me, hear the voice of love!  
With love no mortal can be cloy'd,  
All happiness is love enjoy'd.

*Philistine Woman*

Her faith and truth, O Samson, prove,  
But hear her, hear the voice of love!

### **44. Chorus of Virgins**

Her faith and truth, O Samson, prove  
But hear her, hear the voice of love!

### **50. Recitative**

*Samson*

Ne'er think of that! I know thy warbling charms,  
Thy trains, thy wiles, and fair enchanted cup.  
Their force is null'd; where once I have been caught,  
I shun the snare. These chains, this prison-house,  
I count the house of liberty to thine.

### **51. Duet**

*Dalila*

Traitor to love! I'll sue no more  
For pardon scorn'd, your threats give o'er!

*Samson*

Traitress to love! I'll hear no more  
The charmer's voice, your arts give o'er!  
*Exeunt Dalila and Virgins.*

### Scene 3

#### 54. Recitative

*Samson*

Favour'd of heaven is he, who finds one true.  
How rarely found! — His way to peace is smooth.

### Scene 4

#### 56. Recitative

*Micah*

No words of peace, no voice enchanting fear,  
A rougher tongue expect. Here's Harapha,  
I know him by this stride and haughty look.  
*Enter Harapha and Philistines.*

*Harapha*

I come not, Samson, to condole thy chance;  
I am of Gath, men call me Harapha;  
Thou know'st me now. Of thy prodigious might  
Much have I heard, incredible to me!  
In this displeas'd, that never in the field  
We met, to try each other's deeds of strength.  
I'd see if thy appearance answers loud report.

*Samson*

The way to know were not to see, but taste.

*Harapha*

Ha! Dost thou then already single me?  
I thought that labour and thy chains had tam'd thee.  
Had fortune brought me to that field of death,  
Where thou wrought'st wonder with an ass's jaw,  
I'd left thy carcass where the ass lay thrown.

*Samson*

Boast not of what thou would'st have done, but do.

*Harapha*

The honour certain to have won from thee  
I lose, prevented by thy eyes put out;  
To combat with a blind man, I disdain.

#### 57. Air

*Harapha*

Honour and arms scorn such a foe,  
Though I could end thee at a blow; poor victory, to conquer thee,  
Or glory in thy overthrow!  
Vanquish a slave that is half slain: so mean a triumph I disdain.  
Honour and arms. . . *da capo*

#### 60. Recitative

*Samson*

Cam'st thou for this, vain boaster? Yet take heed!  
My heels are fetter'd, but my hands are free.  
Thou bulk of spirit void! I once again,  
Blind and in chains, provoke thee to the fight!

*Harapha*

O Dagon! Can I hear this insolence  
To me unus'd, not rend'ring instant death?

**61. Duet**

*Samson*

Go, baffled coward, go,  
Lest vengeance lay thee low,  
In safety fly my wrath with speed!

*Harapha*

Presume not on thy God,  
Who under foot has trod  
Thy strength and thee, at greatest need.

**62. Recitative**

*Micah*

Here lies the proof: — if Dagon be thy God,  
With high devotion invoke his aid,  
His glory is concern'd. Let him dissolve  
Those magic spells that gave our hero strength;  
Then know whose God is God, Dagon, of mortal make,  
Or that Great One whom Abra'm's sons adore.

**63. Chorus of Israelites**

Hear, Jacob's God, Jehovah, hear! O, save us, prostrate at thy throne!  
Israel depends on thee alone, save us, and show that thou art near!

**64. Recitative**

*Harapha*

Dagon, arise, attend thy sacred feast!  
Thy honour calls, this day admits no rest.

**67. Chorus of Israelites and Philistines**

Fix'd in his everlasting seat,  
Jehovah / Great Dagon rules the world in state.  
His thunder roars, Heav'n shakes, and earth's aghast,  
The stars with deep amaze,  
Remain in steadfast gaze.  
Jehovah / Great Dagon is of Gods the first and last.

## INTERVAL

## ACT THREE

### Scene 1

*Samson, Micah, Harapha and Chorus of Israelites.*

**68. Recitative**

*Micah*

More trouble is behind, for Harapha  
Comes on amain, speed in his steps and look.

*Samson*

I fear him not, nor all his giant brood.

*Enter Harapha.*

*Harapha*

Samson, to thee our lords thus bid me say:

This day to Dagon we do sacrifice with triumph, pomp, and games; we know, thy strength surpasses human race; come

then, and show  
some public proof to grace this solemn feast.

*Samson*

I am an Hebrew, and our law forbids  
My presence at their vain religious rites.

*Harapha*

This answer will offend; regard thyself.

*Samson*

Myself, my conscience and internal peace!  
Am I so broke with servitude, to yield  
To such absurd commands, to be their fool,  
And play before their God? — I will not come.

*Harapha*

My message, giv'n with speed, brooks no delay.

### **69. Air**

*Harapha*

Presuming slave, to move their wrath!  
For mercy sue, or vengeance due dooms in one fatal word thy death!  
Consider, ere it be too late, toward th'unerring shaft of fate.

### **70. Recitative**

*Micah*

Consider, Samson, matters now are strain'd  
Up to the height, whether to hold, or break.  
He's gone, whose malice may inflame the lords.

*Samson*

Shall I abuse this consecrated gift  
Of strength, again returning with my hair,  
By vaunting it in honour to their god  
And prostituting holy things to idols?

*Micah*

How thou wilt here come off surmounts my reach;  
'Tis Heav'n alone can save, both us and thee.

### **71. Chorus of Israelites**

With thunder arm'd, great God, arise!  
Help, Lord, or Israel's champion dies!  
To thy protection this thy servant take,  
And save, oh, save us for thy servant's sake!  
With thunder arm'd. . . *da capo*

### **72. Recitative**

*Samson*

Be of good courage, I begin to feel  
Some secret impulse, which do bid me go.

*Micah*

In time thou hast resolv'd, again he comes.

*Enter Harapha.*

*Harapha*

Samson, this second message send our lords:  
Haste thee at once; or we shall engines find  
To move thee, though thou wert a solid rock.

*Samson*

Vain were their art if tried, I yield to go,

*Micah*

So may'st thou act as serves His glory best.

*Samson*

Let but that spirit (which first rush'd on me  
In the camp of Dan) inspire me at my need:  
Then shall I make Jehova's glory known  
Their idle Gods shall from His presence fly  
Scattered like sheep before the God of Hosts.

### **73. Air**

*Samson*

Thus when the sun like wat'ry bed  
All curtain'd with a cloudy red,  
Pillows his chin upon an ancient wave;  
The wand'ring shadows ghastly pale,  
All troop to their infemal jail  
Each fetter'd ghost slips to his sev'ral grave.

#### **74. Accompagnato**

*Micah*

With might endu'd above the sons of men,  
Swift as the lightning's glance His errand execute,  
And spread His name amongst the heathen round.

#### **75. Air and Chorus**

*Micah*

The Holy One of Israel be thy guide,  
The Angel of thy birth stand by thy side!  
To fame immortal go,  
Heav'n bids thee strike the blow:  
The Holy One of Israel is thy guide.

#### **76. Chorus**

*Israelites*

To fame immortal go, heav'n bids thee strike the blow.  
The Holy One of Israel is thy guide.

## **Scene 2**

*Micah, Manoah, and Chorus of Israelites.*

#### **77. Recitative**

*Micah*

Old Manoah, with youthful steps, makes haste  
To find his son, or bring us some glad news.

*Manoah*

I come, my brethren, not to seek my son,  
Who at the feast does play before the lords;  
But give you part with me, what hopes I have  
To work his liberty.

#### **78. Air**

*Philistine, at a distance*

Great Dagon has subdu'd our foe  
And brought their boasted hero low:  
Sound out his pow'r in notes divine  
Praise him with mirth, high cheer and wine.

#### **79. Chorus of Philistines, at a distance**

Great Dagon has subdu'd our foe.  
And brought their boasted hero low:  
Sound out his pow'r in notes divine  
Praise him with mirth, high cheer and wine.

#### **80. Recitative**

*Manoah*

What noise of joy was that? It tore the sky.

*Micah*

They shout and sing, to see their dreaded foe  
Now captive, blind, delighting with his strength.

*Manoah*

Could my inheritance but ransom him,

Without my patrimony, having him  
The richest of my tribe.

*Micah*

Sons care to nurse  
Their parents in old age; but you, — your son!

### **81. Air**

*Manoah*

How willing my paternal love  
The weight to share  
Of filial care,  
And part of sorrow's burden prove!  
Though wand'ring in the shades of night,  
Whilst I have eyes he wants no light.

### **82. Recitative**

*Micah*

Your hopes of his deliv'ry seem not vain,  
In which all Israel's friends participate.

*Manoah*

I know your friendly minds, and —

### **83. Sinfonia**

*A symphony of horror and confusion.*

### **84. Recitative**

Heav'n! What noise!  
Horribly loud, unlike the former shout.

### **85. Chorus of Philistines, at a distance**

Hear us, our God! Oh, hear our cry!  
Death, ruin, fall'n, no help is nigh,  
Oh mercy, Heav'n, we sink, we die!

## **Scene 3**

*Enter a Messenger.*

### **86. Recitative**

*Messenger*

Where shall I run, or which way fly the thoughts  
Of this most horrid sight? O countrymen,  
You're in this sad event too much concern'd!

*Micah*

The accident was loud, we long to know from whence.

*Messenger*

Let me recover breath; it will burst forth.

*Manoah*

Suspense in news is torture, speak them out!

*Messenger*

Then take the worst in brief — Samson is dead.

*Manoah*

The worst indeed!

*Messenger*

Unwounded of his enemies he fell,  
At once he did destroy, and was destroy'd;  
The edifice, where all were met to see,  
Upon their heads, and on his own he pull'd!

*Manoah*

O, lastly overstrong against thyself!  
A dreadful way thou took'st to thy revenge:  
Glorious, yet dearly bought!

**87. Air [and Chorus]**

*Micah*

Ye sons of Israel, now lament, your spear is broke, your bow's unbent.  
Your glory's fled, amongst the dead great Samson lies,  
For ever, ever, clos'd his eyes!

**88. Chorus**

*Israelites*

Weep, Israel, weep a louder strain;  
Samson, your strength, your hero, is slain!

**91. Symphony:**

**Dead March** [in *Saul*]

**94. Recitative**

*Manoah*

Come, come! No time for lamentation now,  
No cause for grief; Samson like Samson fell,  
Both life and death heroic. To his foes  
Ruin is left; to him eternal fame.

**95. Air**

*Israelite Woman*

Let the bright seraphim in burning row,  
Their loud, uplifted angel trumpets blow.  
Let the cherubic host, in tuneful choirs,  
Touch their immortal harps with golden wires.

**96. Chorus of Israelites**

Let their celestial concerts all unite,  
Ever to sound his praise in endless morn of light.

Handel's oratorios were devised in the main for use during the "penitential" seasons of Advent and Lent when staged performances in London of works such as operas were forbidden by the Lord Chamberlain of the day. The oratorios provided the chance to keep the composer's musicians and, especially, his solo singers, gainfully employed during a period when – though contracted to Handel – they would otherwise have been provided with few, if any, opportunities for appearances in public.

In chronological order, the composition of *Samson* was Handel's project that followed immediately upon the completion of *Messiah* in the late summer and early autumn of 1741. Scholars tell us that work on *Samson* began on 29 September and was completed exactly one calendar month later. However, it was not until February of 1743 that the work was first performed.

*Samson* was to prove to be far the most popular of all Handel's oratorios during his life-time and it has retained an honoured position in the choral repertoire ever since. It's hard for us to imagine it today, but *Messiah* took much longer to establish itself in public favour in Handel's day. The stimulus to produce *Samson* may well have come from its composer's appearance as harpsichordist at a dramatic reading of Milton's epic poem *Samson Agonistes* in London during 1739; this event was hosted by Lord Shaftesbury, who described Handel's "harmony" [meaning his improvisations at the keyboard] as

perfectly adapted to the sublimity of the poem

Handel's librettist for *Samson* – perhaps textual compiler might be a more accurate description – was Newburgh Hamilton, whose adaptations from Milton and whose management of the work's dramatic potential in according chorus involvement to Philistines and Israelites by turn, for example, lend the work much of its dramatic impact. Not least among Hamilton's verbal contributions are the texts of the fine recitatives throughout, narratives that gave Handel immense opportunity to sustain an ambience through the score that so suited the composer's innate sense of drama and at the same time providing an uplifting response to so many of Milton's magical verbiage – itself drawn loosely from the biblical narrative of Judges, Chapter 16. The great Handel authority, Professor Winton Dean, asserts that the work

burns with a high moral fervour re-inforced by the mature potency of a great poet

The setting of the oratorio is that of a square in the ancient city of Gaza. Dalila has betrayed the secret of Samson's great strength to the Philistines. He eponymous hero has been blinded. Commentators have not been slow to point out the pathos of the composer's dealing with the subject of blindness when his own sight was already beginning to fail. The First Act includes a fine aria sung by Samson's father, Manoah beginning with the words *Thy glorious inspired my tongue*.

Dalila enters the drama in person in Act Two intent upon gaining back Samson's love and affection. In this, she fails. The Philistine's giant, Harapha, teases Samson over his physical impotence and in a strong aria, *Honour and arms*, disdains to fight with one who has been blinded and is a captive.

Disputation abounds in the Third Act; between the Philistines and Israelites, of course, and between Harapha and Samson. Eventually, Samson agrees to go to the feast with the giant, but a vivid orchestral *sinfonia*, pivotally placed in the score, and a frantic chorus, *Hear us, our God*, beseeches in vain the aid of the Almighty to save the company. The Temple is destroyed and everyone in it, Samson included; his body is borne solemnly to the accompaniment of the famous *Dead March*. The work closes with the fabulous soprano aria *Let the bright Seraphim* with obbligato trumpet and the final chorus *Let their celestial concerts all unite*.

With *Messiah* and *Samson*, the composer's commitment to the English Oratorio tradition (a tradition that he invented more or less single-handed) was complete.

Programme Notes by Simon Lindley