Handel
Samson
Jon Vickers

mpLIVE

George Frideric Handel 1685–1759

Samson

Text adapted by Newburgh Hamilton from Milton's Samson Agonistes *and other poems · Performing edition by Raymond Leppard*

Samson	**Jon Vickers**
Dalila	**Joan Carlyle**
Micah	**Lauris Elms**
Israelite woman	**Joan Sutherland**
Harapha	**David Kelly**
Manoah	**Joseph Rouleau**

The Royal Opera Chorus

The Orchestra of The Royal Opera House

Raymond Leppard

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CD 1		76’54
1	Symphony	4’10
Act 1		
2	Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound!	2’17
3	Ye men of Gaza, hither bring	3’41
4	Awake the trumpet’s lofty sound	2’23
5	Total eclipse! No sun, no moon	4’32
6	O first created beam	4’57
7	The good we wish for, often prove our banes	4’52
8	Why does the God of Israel	3’45
9	My genial spirits droop, my hopes are flat	1’36
10	Then long eternity shall greet your bliss	4’52
11	Then round about the starry throne	4’39
Act 2		
12	Return, oh God of hosts!	4’12
13	To dust his glory they would tread	7’10
14	With plaintive notes and am’rous moan	5’08
15	Your charms to ruin led the way	4’11

16	My faith and truth, oh Samson	4’42
17	Traitor to love! I’ll sue no more	4’14
18	Honour and arms scorn such a foe	5’24

CD 2 58’56

1	Recitative:	1’13
2	Go, baffled coward, go	3’11
3	Hear Jacob’s God, Jehovah, hear!	4’29
4	Fix in his everlasting seat	2’52

Act 3

5	More trouble is behind	1’53
6	Presuming slave, to move their wrath	3’43
7	With thunder arm’d great God, arise	5’07
8	Thus when the sun from wat’ry bed	3’55
9	With might endued above the sons of men	3’42
10	How willing my paternal love	4’02
11	Hear us, oh God, oh hear our cry	1’53
12	Ye sons of Israel, now lament	2’38

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13	Weep, Israel, weep a louder strain	1’43
14	A dead march (from *Saul*)	3’44
15	Glorious hero, may thy grave	5’01
16	Let the bright seraphim in burning row	6’31
17	Let their celestial concerts all unite	3’06

From the Harewood Collection

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‘Nobody would be bored’: Samson at Covent Garden

John Steane

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Handel died in 1759, and 200 years later England commemorated its favourite adopted composer with a thoroughness that could almost be called Germanic. The Royal Opera played its part, though possibly in doing so invited the tart rejoinder ‘And not before time!’: for nothing of Handel had been produced within the lifetime of the present building. Perhaps the authorities were aware of ground to be made up, and in fact their contribution appeared rather before time in the October of 1958. *Samson* was given first at the Leeds Triennial Festival and came to Covent Garden the following month. A more curious feature was that, with some 44 operas to choose from, the work selected was an oratorio.

Samson is of course a dramatic oratorio and at least as suitable for stage production as Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, which is one of its textual sources. Critical opinion, notably that of Winton Dean, had for some years been insisting that not only were the operas themselves highly dramatic but that the oratorios had a strong dramatic element too. Even so, it was widely felt that *Samson* was a somewhat perverse choice and in the event the complaint was raised promptly and consistently that this was essentially a production of ‘oratorio in fancy dress’.

Certainly care for the visual part of the production had not been neglected. Oliver Messel’s sets remain vivid in the mind 50 years later. Classical columns and arches receded into the distance, and raised areas either side of the stage housed the chorus. The set lent itself well to imaginative lighting, and many will remember the lovely effect of dawn over Gaza after the fall of the Temple, with Samson’s body borne on stage to the music of the Dead March from *Saul*. Costumes suggested Handel’s own times rather than the Bible’s, Delilah’s being described by Messel as a ‘heavily jewelled, wasp-waisted Restoration gown’. Advance publicity made much

of the element of spectacle. The *Daily Express* assured its readers (and this was ironical in view of its critic's subsequent reactions) that the 200-year-old piece would be 'turned into a lavish musical, glowing with colour and splendour': nobody, they added, would be bored. In fact Herbert Graf's direction met with a good deal of criticism. The chorus remained static in its tiered seats, like the ladies and gentlemen of any choral society, and the principal singers were described as 'holding on to poses and facial expressions until they hurt'. Where there was movement it was overdone, as in the staging of the double chorus of Israelites and Philistines calling upon their respective gods, which was described as 'high-spirited to the point of pantomime'.

It is hard to resist the suspicion that the critical battle-lines had been drawn up before the curtain rose in Leeds, let alone London. In general, the more thoughtful and responsible kind had begun with a great wish to see the Covent Garden experiment succeed. For us today Handel's operas are so much part of the course that we may not appreciate how novel a stage production was in those not-so-distant days. It would not be true to say that such enterprises were unknown, or that *Samson* itself had not been staged before. But previously it had been left to amateur or semi-amateur groups, mainly in the universities. This venture at the great national opera house was nevertheless overdue, and the weight of opinion welcoming it in kind can be gauged by the growth over the next 50 years of what almost amounts to a Handel opera industry.

Some hostile reviews were published under flagrantly philistine headlines: 'Knees-bend can't put a kick in this fossil', proclaimed the *Express*, conveniently forgetting their predictions of lavish spectacle and no boredom. This prefaced a rain of cold water from their critic Noel Goodwin: 'Once a week until Christmas Covent Garden is turning itself into an old curiosity shop.' The 'knees-bend' referred to the stylised movements of the dancers which in the critic's view were a particularly

absurd contribution to an overdressed pageant. Others found points to criticize amid a more pervasive sense of gratitude for beauties that were visual as well as musical. Thus Andrew Porter in the *Financial Times* wrote of the scene on stage as being 'like great biblical canvasses of Tiepolo brought to life'. In *The Manchester Guardian* Philip Hope-Wallace spoke of 'a world of magical perspectives, noble, deeply touching, extraordinarily satisfying': in spite of which he could not refrain from adding 'Is the total effect [of the staging] slightly that of a large pink meringue'.

Hope-Wallace is probably one of the few critics of his day who are fondly remembered in ours. He was a naughty man and enjoyed finding (for example) pink meringues in biblical canvasses. He also liked a larage canvas and usually showed awareness of the present in relation to the past. Thus when he turned his attention to the singers he began, as many did on this occasion, at the end. Joan Sutherland, her *Lucia di Lammermoor* still a year off, was then a workaday member of the company, and her emergence to sing 'Let the bright Seraphim' made a glittering finale. Hope-Wallace spoke of her as a 'glorious soprano' whose performance nevertheless 'lacked that absolute assurance it would and must have had from such Handelians as Albani in a bonnet and bustle at the Crystal Palace.' He could not have found much encouragement for such assurance from Albani's two dismal Handel recordings, but no doubt she was there for the bonnet and bustle – and possibly so that the new soprano should not get ideas above her station. This was indeed a huge personal triumph for her and a harbinger of the *annus mirabilis* ahead, with *Lucia* at Covent Garden and the no less admirable *Rodelinda* with the Handel Opera Society at Sadler's Wells. John Warrack in the *Daily Telegraph* wrote of her 'pure, radiant Handelian singing, with a run up to a thrilling top D'. Desmond Shawe-Taylor, in his first week as Ernest Newman's successor at the *Sunday Times*, concluded: 'it was magnificent, but it came a little too late'.

The famous solo, with its trumpet *obbligato*, comes after Samson has brought down the Temple, and the chance to say that Sutherland brought the house down too was not neglected. Several in the audience evidently felt that it brought a touch of brilliance where that was badly needed. Such comments, especially as we now listen to the recording, rebound rather uncomfortably on the critics themselves. And we cannot be altogether sorry for them when for the rest of the evening they had been present at one of the great performances by a man who was certainly among the great operatic artists of his century.

Unlike Sutherland, Jon Vickers had already gained the status of an international celebrity. Before the premier at Leeds, the *Yorkshire Evening Post* carried an article with details of his current schedule (he was just back from Bayreuth and straight after the last performance of *Samson* would fly to Chicago for a Beethoven Ninth and on to Dallas for *Medea* with Callas). The debut at Covent Garden which had launched his career at the top was only a year in the past, but he was now firmly established and would hold his position for decades to come. His religious convictions were soon to be notorious among journalists, but the local reporters cannot have known what hit them when they received what they called 'a dressing-room dissertation' at the end of which Vickers disarmingly remarked 'I sound like a preacher, don't I?'

The intense commitment of his Samson was everywhere acknowledged; less unanimous was the verdict on his singing. A severe critic at the time was William Glock who wrote for the *New Statesman*: 'He has still to achieve a more noble style before he becomes a singer of the highest class.' Hope-Wallace gave a carefully considered assessment: 'Although there was some roughness in his Handelian style, it would be a poor-spirited critic who did not record a large balance of gratitude.' John Warrack thought Samson his best part to date and Andrew Porter was blessedly specific: 'His utterance of the phrase 'No sun, no

moon' sent a thrill throughout the theatre.' For those who heard him throughout his career and who naturally tend to remember him in his later performances, it is wonderful to hear the freshness and yet the intense solidity of his voice in these early years. And if any listener to the present recording who was not familiar with the effect of that voice in a large house may be inclined to criticise the quiet singing as 'unsupported' or even falsetto, he can be assured that Vickers' softest notes would rise to the back of the gallery at Covent Garden and sound as though they came from just a few rows ahead.

Other soloists were welcomed with some qualifications. Joan Carlyle was reckoned an improvement on Elisabeth Lindermeier, who sang Delilah at Leeds, but I remember thinking her no more than frigidly efficient. Laura Elms, in her first season, was considered (by John Warrack) 'touching', Joseph Rouleau 'sonorous' and David Kelly 'sturdy'. The work of the orchestra under its 31-year-old conductor from Cambridge was praised (by the severe Glock) as 'worthy', and Raymond Leppard himself had not yet incurred the full displeasure of the purists. But the true hero, if that can be spoken of collectively, was the chorus. For its master, Douglas Robinson, the production must have brought particular satisfaction. Perhaps to this should be added a word for those who made the difficult editorial decisions: Lord Harewood, who was much involved, said that the guiding principle had been to produce a version that would be effectively dramatic. And Covent Garden's administrators deserve some credit too. They risked the cries of 'fossil' and 'oratorio in fancy dress'. They made amends for many years of neglect, and they brought honour both to the house and to Handel.

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Roger Beardsley

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