

From Klassik Heute (www.klassik-heute.de)

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In his dramatic conception of the *Sacred Oratorio*, Handel gave responsibilities to the choir within the dramatic framework of these works, which correspond to those of Greek tragedy: at a certain distance from the emotions of the main characters of the work, it often represents an element of commentary, which takes on the function of intermediary between the dramatic action and the audience, and in so doing enables for the public a deeper understanding of the action itself. Naturally, in the oratorios as in the operas that had preceded them, the virtuoso arias were one important point of reference, through which the vocal stars could demonstrate their full talent to an enthusiastic public. Presumably because it was not artistic arias but rather great choruses that dominated the work, the oratorio *Israel in Egypt* was a failure with the public on its first performance on 4th April 1739; in the 19th century however, precisely because of the dominance of the chorus, it became a favourite with the public and a firm part of the repertoire at major choral festivals, at which huge choirs celebrated this musical form which had in the meantime become highly popular.

The popularity of choral singing has remained strong up to the present, as shown not least by the massive numbers taking part in choral events under the direction of Gotthilf Fischer. Compilations of Handel choruses have for a long time, on record and CD, represented a safe source of income. This same motivation undoubtedly led to the production of this CD, for which the famous London Bach Choir joined up with the English Concert. Conducted by the Musical Director of the Bach Choir, David Hill, a veritable feast of favourite Handel choruses resounds, effectively rounded off by the *Hallelujah* chorus from *Messiah*.

There is no doubting the high standard of the performers. That is why the musical performance here reaches a notably livelier level than in comparable compilations which have accumulated over the decades and which show a standard of interpretative understanding that now belongs to the past. The concept of such a compilation of choruses detached from their dramatic context remains, however, questionable and should belong to the past, just like the 1950s tradition of performing music of Handel's time. No-one would hit upon the idea of recording the most beautiful adagios of Ludwig van Beethoven on the Hammerklavier – yet that is exactly what has been done here, with a high class orchestra, to historically informed performance practice.

Marks (out of ten)

Artistic quality 8

Sound quality 9

Overall impression 6

Translation by John Dunston