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Handel lives on



The Hindu

Ode to Handel: At the MMA concert. Photo: K. Pichumani

The MMA choir and the Madras Chamber Orchestra brought alive the music of George Frideric Handel

“The Lord is a man of war” in George Frideric Handel’s ‘Israel in Egypt’ and the conductor, the choir and the chamber orchestra rose to the occasion. Those who witnessed the performance of the oratorio by The Madras Musical Association in concert with The Madras Chamber Orchestra headed by Jerry Fernandez experienced an innovative version of what many have called Handel’s greatest choral epic. Composed in English in three parts, the oratorio draws on biblical passages from the Exodus and the Psalms to relate the story of the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt, the Passover and their long walk to freedom.

Religious music works on the principle that God wants the best. Augustine Paul, the conductor, did his best to oblige. The evening began with an orchestral prelude Largo from Handel’s ‘Xerxes’ with a gentle yet memorable rendition of a man’s love song for a tree by the first and second violins.

This was followed by ‘Israel in Egypt’ whose music revelled in its operatic tone and sense of theatre. The choir sang passages that described the plagues of Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea and the Israelites’ triumphant escape. The music of Handel was never lost in the complexities of this story and the solos and duets performed by John Abraham, Sangeeta Santosham, Cleona Abraham, Billy John, Bennet Victor, Ebenezer Arunkumar, Ravi Santosham and Dia Paul provided a purity of texture and expression that fitted the oratorio’s spirit well.

Evocative performance

The orchestra was equally evocative. In the plague choruses, frogs and flies croaked and buzzed in the strings, hailstones fell in rattling staccatos and double bass strokes and the “thick darkness over the land” crept along in eerie modulations in Edwin Roy’s harpsichord. The music lent all the pictorial imagery of Handel’s orchestration without overdrive, especially the solemn stillness during the parting of the waters and the drowning of the Pharaoh’s horsemen. The conductor elicited a pleasing and accented chorus in some of the picturesque passages.

Stirring souls

The concert’s final piece was Handel’s and everyone’s beloved ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ from ‘Messiah’. When the English King George II first heard this majestic chorus, he was so moved by it that he stood up, a tradition audiences follow to this day. So when the audience rose en masse at the beginning of the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’, as it has for more than two centuries, who did it honour? At the Chinmaya Heritage Centre it was for the choir whose voices rolled away the stone from the tomb, the orchestra that provided the drama, the conductor who with every inflection of his baton took the music with him and Handel himself who continues to stir our souls across the centuries.