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Gramophone – March 2002

Handel: Deborah, HWV 51

Elisabeth Scholl, Natacha Ducret *sops*
Ewa Wolak *mez*, Lawrence Zazzo *counterten*
Knut Schoch *ten*, Jelle Draijer *bass*
Junge Kantorei; Frankfurt Baroque Orchestra / Joachim Carlos Martini
Naxos (3) (3) 8 554785/7 (162 minutes; DDD)
Recorded live at Kloster Eberbach, Germany
on May 23, 1999
Notes, text and translation included

A vigorously sung live account of a Handel rarity delivered with persuasive conviction

Comparative version:
King (2/94) (HYPE) CDA66841/2

„*Deborah* is a failure,“ says Winton Dean, providing a dramatic opening to his chapter on the work in his classic study of *Handel’s dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (2nd ed; OUP: 1990). If it is, it’s a glorious one. Certainly *Deborah* may lack the strength of structure and subtlety of characterisation that you find in some of the later works – given in 1753, it was Handel’s first attempt at a dramatic oratorio for the London public – but it was nevertheless popular in his own day: he himself performed *Deborah* more often than any other besides *Samson*, *Judas Maccabaeus* and *Esther*. Clearly Handel did not share Dean’s view. *Deborah* has drawn criticism too on the grounds that it is something of a *pasticcio*, with more than half its music culled froth earlier works (the *Chandos* and *Coronation* anthems, the *Brockes Passion*, *Il trionfo del tempo* and others), though why Handelians should subscribe

to so Wagnerian an aesthetic as to be influenced by this I don't know.

Handel revised the work, often quite substantially, for the revivals, and there are some doubts surrounding what he actually performed first time round. So conductors and editors have felt free to adapt it somewhat and to choose the numbers they preferred. That is what Robert King did for his recording, and Joachim Carlos Martini does the same here, making several choices that echo those of King (whom he acknowledges), including the overture used in the 1744 revival), and taking account too of other recent research on the text. I'm not entirely convinced that he did wisely to include 'La re-jouissance' from the Fireworks Music, still 15 years ahead, or a piece that Handel was later to compose, after Telemann, for Belshazzar. But these are trivial issues, Handel's own radical procedures can be taken to justify almost anything.

The performance as a whole has a vitality that I find very persuasive. Martini brings plenty of enthusiasm to the music and clearly his players and singers share it. Sometimes he allows vigour to get too close to roughness: the accompaniments to Sisera's second air in Part 2 and Jael's near the end of that part are perhaps overdrawn. But I do like the lively rhythms in the choruses and the forthright singing. Handel initially performed the work, according to contemporary reports, with over 100 musicians (which some of the audience found uncomfortably noisy). There seem to be quite a lot here.

The choral numbers form the backbone of the Work; some call for an eight-part choir (including the climactic antiphonal chorus for the Israelites in competition with the Canaanites), several for five- or six-part. They are full of rousing things and are sturdily done – listen for example to the very first, of the one that begins Part 2. The ensemble may not always be im-

maculate but in the rather reverberant acoustic of the Eberbach monastery there isn't quite the ideal clarity.

Among the soloists, Elisabeth Scholl provides a big, ringing voice in Deborah's music, with good articulation and a pure line; and the elaboration in her second air is florid but musically done, 'Cease, O Judah', one of the numbers Handel added later, is a shade less secure, but there is a real sense of the visionary prophet in her last air. Jael is sung by Natacha Ducret with a pleasing clarity and fineness of line, for example in 'No more disconsolate'. The role of Barak, originally written for a castrato, is sung in a very even countertenor by Lawrence Zazzo, clear and well defined, the kind of voice that even those allergic to countertenors will not dislike (his 'Impious mortal', a noble piece, is especially fine). Ewa Wolak provides a strong line and a precise contralto in the unfortunate Sisera's music and Jelle Draijer a warmly paternal bass as Abinoam; the Canaanite Herald is sung very adequately by Knut Schoch, who is perhaps the least sure among the cast as regards English pronunciation and articulation.

This is then a persuasive version of Deborah, by performers, who clearly believe in the piece and feel no need to be apologetic about it. By comparison King's, if more refined and more precise in some of its detail, is relatively lacking in energy and perhaps, conviction. But both invite a more positive reassessment of an unfamiliar work.

Stanley Sadie

Radar Magazine / Classical reviews (United Kingdom), 2002

GF Handel, Deborah

3 CDs, Naxos

Barockorchester Frankfurt
Junge Kantorei
Joachim Carlos Martini
with Elisabeth Scholl, Natacha Ducret, Lawrence Zazzo, Ewa Wolak, Knut Schoch, Jelle Draijer

This is the second of Handel's oratorios. It was first aired in 1733 with a hundred performers of which twenty five were singers. This was a difficult time for Handel as the Prince of Wales had recently started a rival opera company which had lured away some of his top singers.

Deborah wasn't to prove his salvation but he did do well with later oratorios such as Athalia. This isn't one that music scholars have favoured as Handel's habit of borrowing from himself led to this one being called a 'pastichio' (pastiche!).

For the rest of us, this has all Handel's usual mixture of grace and grandeur and this performance over three CDs is a very nice one. We've all heard versions of Handel where it sounded as if the musicians were somewhat tired and disinterested but this one is not like that at all.

As an aside, Handel's house, at 25 Brook Street close to Bond Street, in London is now open to visitors after a refurbishment.