

Spring Choral Concert

George Frideric Handel (1685 – 1759)

Judas Maccabaeus HWV 63 (1746)

Judah, along with his father Mattathias, a Jewish priest, and his brothers John, Jonathan, Simon and Eleazar, led a revolt in Judea that established a period of independence for what is now Israel. Preceding this revolt of the “Maccabees,” Jews were under the rule of the Hellenic Seleucid Empire during which Judaic religious practice was suppressed. In 167 BCE, this Empire, under King Antiochus IV Epiphanes, attacked Jerusalem and murdered tens of thousands of Jews. Antiochus named Menelaus High Priest, and Hellenic culture was thrust upon all Jews. Jewish customs, rites, and the very core of monotheism were outlawed; worship of Zeus and the Greek deities was now a requirement. While there were always those who resisted, many Jews sought assimilation as Hellenists. However, it was written that Mattathias slew the Seleucid official who had demanded of him a sacrifice to Zeus. Mattathias, declaring “Let everyone who has zeal for the Torah and stands by the Covenant follow me,” also killed a Jew who had stepped forward to obey the command in the elder’s stead. This affront to the Greeks incited a rebellion by Mattathias and his sons who quickly escaped to the forest and became guerrilla warriors. Gaining the appellation of “Maccabee,” (“hammer”) Judah and his followers fought savagely, mounting victory after victory. By 164 BCE, Jerusalem had been restored to the Jews, and the consecration of the Temple in December of that year is now celebrated as Chanukah. However, this initial victory was only the first in a series of chronic battles between the Seleucids and Jews which led to four more years of bloodshed until the death of Judah in 160 BCE. From 140 BCE to 116 BCE, Judea, under the Hasmonean Dynasty, was a truly independent Jewish State. After 63 BCE, however, the Roman Empire and internal Jewish factionalism eroded this independence. Finally, in 37 BCE, Herod, named King of the Jews, ruled the state as a protectorate of Rome.

How and why would George Frideric Handel find Judah Maccabee of interest for an English eighteenth-century oratorio? The answer might disappoint modern audiences looking for an overt gesture of social and religious outreach by Anglican England to Jewry and Jewish independence. The libretto by Thomas Morell was actually intended as a tribute to Prince William, Duke of Cumberland and son of George II. William’s resounding defeat of the Jacobite uprising at the Battle of Culloden in 1746 was the specific event that inspired Morell’s political allegory. While England’s troops were spread thin on the continent during the War of the Austrian Succession, Charles Edward Stuart (“Bonnie Prince Charlie”) attempted to restore the Scottish House of Stuart, which had been lost first during the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, and then, finally, to the ascension of the House of Hanover, with George I. Prince William defeated the Scottish Jacobite forces who had solicited aid from France for a coup against the crown. The War of the Austrian Succession, in which the English and French were enemies, had aroused a strong patriotic sentiment in England who saw the Jacobites with their French allies as a clear and present danger to English independence.

George Frideric Handel had been court musician to George I in Hanover, prior to the monarch’s ascension to the English throne in 1714 after Queen Anne’s death. From 1714, Handel enjoyed great favoritism with the Hanoverian English monarchs. During the period of war (1740-1748), Handel provided music in support of the monarchy. In 1743 he had been commissioned to write a patriotic work extolling the victory of George II against the French at Dettingen – the Dettingen Te Deum. The oratorio Judas Maccabaeus was similarly conceived in a martial context. Making parallels to Judean history – Prince William as the heroic Judah, and a leader’s fierce struggle against foreign influence – Morell provided the necessary historical undercurrent for Judas Maccabaeus, the best known and loved of Handel’s oratorios after Messiah.

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Soloists:

Katharine Dain, Soprano.

Mary Gerbi, Mezzo Soprano.

Daniel Molkentin, Tenor.

Charles Wesley Evans, Baritone.

Israelitish Woman

Israelitish Man and Israelitish Priest

Judas Maccabaeus.

Simon