

--	--	--

## **Program Note for *Esther***

### **By: Anne Piéjus**

The plot of *Esther* is derived from the Old Testament; the work is set in Babylon at the time of the exile of the Jewish people (in the fifth century, BCE). Aman, the cruel minister of King Ahasuerus, has obtained an edict condemning to death all Jews in the Babylonian empire, under the pretext that one member of this group, Mordecai, has refused to bow to royal power. The wise Mordecai comprehends the danger and warns his niece Esther. (Esther is the king's favorite and has hidden her Jewish identity from him.) Mordecai urges Esther to intercede with Ahasuerus to bestow mercy upon their people. Providence comes to the rescue: the king, tormented by a dream, remembers that Mordecai once saved him from an assassination plot. He orders Aman to lead Mordecai in triumph into the city. Aman obeys with reluctance, consoling himself by thinking of the torment he prepares for his enemy. However, Esther decides to enter the king's house, thwarting a prohibition against going near. She requests the favor of having Ahasuerus to dinner in Aman's presence. She throws herself at the king's feet, confesses that she is a Jew, begs for mercy, and reveals Aman's bloodthirsty plans. Touched and convinced, Ahasuerus revokes the edict and delivers Aman to the execution prepared for Mordecai.

The play by Jean Racine was created for the young ladies of the royal house of Saint-Louis. (This was an educational institution, funded by the king, that accommodated 250 girls from the nobility.) The pupils were trained in theater. In 1688, Madame de Maintenon, the second wife of Louis XIV and founder of the house, commissioned a "kind of moral poem" with music, written by Racine with the assistance of composer Jean-Baptiste Moreau. *Esther* encompassed all the elements that contributed to the success of court spectacles at the time: tragedy, music, elaborate stage settings, sumptuous "Persian-style" taffeta costumes, and jewelry borrowed from the queen herself. Indeed, the work represented the collaborative effort of the foremost court artists of the time: including Racine, Moreau, and the designer and decorator Jean Bérain. Trained at Angers' cathedral choir, Moreau had recently composed the court divertissement, *Les Bergers de Marly*. After *Esther*, he would go on to compose the music for Racine's *Athalie*, along with several other pieces for Saint-Cyr. It is highly likely that Racine collaborated with Moreau to facilitate the work's alternation between declamation and song, creating expansive musical scene structures. *Esther* contains an overture, prelude, and extensive sung scenes at the end of each act. Music is also included within the acts, in the form of lyric interludes featuring a three-voice female choir in dialogue with detached soloists. These interventions, in which the characters of the play do not participate, suspend the dramatic action, prolonging and amplifying the text's effects. Racine and Moreau, aiming to evoke the tradition of ancient choruses, prioritize contrasting emotions such as desolation ("Pleurons et gémissons"), supplication ("Dieu d'Israël"), confidence ("Il s'apaise il pardonne"), and joy ("Que le peuple est heureux"). During the premiere, several female singers from the courtly "Chambre du roi" mingled onstage with the student performers to form a choir of twenty-four girls. Professional female singers would take on the most demanding solo roles. The subtlety of

--	--	--

--	--	--

Moreau's style lies in the finesse of the composition, inspired by contemporary French airs: the melody is not overly virtuosic and emphasizes the sung words, while the distinctly French harmony, far from Italian effects, underscores the delicacy of these interludes composed for very young performers.

Handel likely did not know either Moreau's music or Racine's play, which had been adapted into English in 1715. A few years later, however, a group of poets including Alexander Pope and John Arbuthnot created a masque based on the subject, which in turn inspired the librettist and translator Samuel Humphreys, who wrote a libretto for Handel. The first version of Handel's *Esther* was composed and likely premiered in 1718 at Cannons, at the residence of the Earl of Carnarvon, a patron and sponsor of the composer who provided his singers and private orchestra for the performance. The work was presumably presented on stage.

Fourteen years later, in 1732, at the height of his career, Handel had *Esther* performed again. In the meantime, he had composed *Athalia* (first performed in 1733 at Oxford), also adapted from Racine by Humphreys, who had modified the French tragedy to make it a Jacobite work, centered on the elimination of Catholicism. In 1732, a piracy incident prompted Handel to rework *Esther* extensively. The libretto and score underwent profound modifications, and the oratorio (HWV 50b) was performed at the King's Theatre in Haymarket. Handel had Italian opera singers and an orchestra at his disposal, explaining the substantial size of the revised work. *Esther* inaugurates the form of Handel's oratorios to come. In contrast to Racine's play, the oratorio (a dramatic concert work performed without staging, sets, or costumes) is entirely sung and divided into successive music pieces. The chorus, representing the Israelites, remains prominent in expressing fundamental emotions such as lamentation ("Shall we of servitude complain"), prayer (as in the concerted aria "Praise the lord" and in the chorus "Save us o Lord"), or rejoicing ("The Lord our enemy has slain"). Meanwhile, the named characters present ornamented and even virtuosic arias, vocal ensembles, and recitatives to advance the plot. Due to the expressive potential of the villainous character, Handel gives a central role to the disloyal minister Haman ("Pluck root and branch"). The vivid dramatic subject allows for a musical composition based on contrast and effect musical characterization of the protagonists. In fact, however, nine of the twenty-one numbers in *Esther* are borrowed from an earlier work by Handel, the *Brookes-Passion*, created in Hamburg. This kind of musical reuse was commonplace for the composer. Handel assigns arias originally written for the pious soul or the daughter of Zion to the character of Esther and adapts to the character of Haman arias originally composed for both Judas and Jesus. The result is a work that is powerfully expressive, despite the dramatic inconsistencies caused by these reuses (as demonstrated, for example, in Haman's final aria on the power of forgiveness). Thus, the English oratorio derived from a French tragedy sounds in places like a German passion, beautifully illustrating the vitality of musical exchanges and influences in eighteenth-century Europe.

-Anne Piéjus, Director of Research  
CNRS IReMus (Institute of Research in Musicology)

--	--	--