



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
487 HUDSON ST. NYC 10014

The Choir of St. Luke in the Fields
David Shuler, *Director of Music*
with Baroque in the Fields Orchestra

Thursday, May 7, 2026 at 7:30 p.m.
Pre-Concert Lecture in Laughlin Hall by Dr. David Schulenberg at 6:30 p.m.

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)
ESTHER

(first reconstructable version, 1720, HWV 50a)

An Oratorio in Three Acts
Words by John Arbuthnot and Alexander Pope

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Esther *Melissa Fogarty*

Ahasuerus, King of Persia *David Root*

Haman *Phillip Cheah*

Mordecai *Chris Carter*

Israelite Woman *Amber Evans*

First Priest of the Israelites *Elizabeth Merrill*

Second Priest of the Israelites *Catherine Hedberg*

First Israelite *Christopher Preston Thompson*

Second Israelite *Chris Carter*

Habdonah *Christopher Preston Thompson*

Persian Officer *Chris Carter*

Chorus of Israelites
Chorus of Persian Soldiers

Please silence cell phones and other electronic devices.
There will be a short pause between Act II and Act III.
We ask that you withhold applause until the end of the Oratorio.

THE CHOIR OF ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS

Soprano

Amber Evans
Melissa Fogarty
Adrienne Lotto

Alto

Catherine Hedberg
Elizabeth Merrill

Tenor

Ryland Angel
Chris Carter
David Root
Christopher Preston Thompson

Bass

Will Berman
Phillip Cheah

“One of the city’s finest classical choirs.” (*Time Out NY*), the Choir of St. Luke in the Fields is the professional vocal ensemble in residence at the Episcopal Church of St. Luke in the Fields in New York City. As part of the liturgy at St. Luke’s Church, the Choir regularly performs masses and motets that date from the fifteenth century to the present. The Choir has presented numerous NYC premieres, both of new works (Arvo Pärt’s *Berliner Messe* and *Missa Sillabica* and Dan Locklair’s *Brief Mass*) and older works (the North American premiere of Georg Phillip Telemann’s St. Matthew Passion of 1746 and the New York premiere of C.P.E. Bach’s St. Matthew Passion of 1769). The Choir is known for its historically informed performances of early music. *The New York Times* said in 2011, “Both as an ensemble and as individual soloists, the members of the Choir of St. Luke in the Fields were consistently admirable.” *Early Music America* wrote that the Choir “maintains a full schedule of early music services ... as well as concert performances known for their adventuresome programming and intimate scale.”

BAROQUE IN THE FIELDS ORCHESTRA

Violin

Leah Gale Nelson, *concertmaster*
Sarah Jane Kenner
Mark Rike
Jude Ziliak

Violin/Viola

Rachel Evans
Ryan Cheng

Cello

Arnie Tanimoto

Double Bass

Nicholas Kleinman

Oboe

Gonzalo X. Ruiz

Bassoon

Clay Zeller-Townson
Aaron Goler

Trumpet

John Theissen

Horn

Alexandra Cook
Sara Cyrus

Harp

Parker Ramsay

Theorbo

Kevin Payne

Organ

Kevin Devine

ABOUT THE LECTURER

David Schulenberg is author of books on the music of J.S Bach and his sons Friedemann and Emanuel. His textbook and anthology *Music of the Baroque* is now in its third edition, and his new book *Historical Performance in Baroque Music* will be out later this month. A player of harpsichord, clavichord, and fortepiano, he has recorded chamber music by Quantz, Graun, C.P.E. Bach, and King Frederick the Great and has taught at Boston University, Columbia University, and Rutgers University. Selections from his writings, recordings, and music editions are online at schulenbergmusic.org.

ABOUT TONIGHT'S PERFORMANCE

Tonight's performance presents the earliest recoverable performing version of Handel's *Esther* (Cannons, 1720), using a new edition, edited by Clifford Bartlett, John Butt and Brian Clark, published by the Early Music Company Ltd. The edition responds to recent findings and hypotheses about the origins of the work. It differs from the scholarly edition in the Hallische Händel-Ausgabe (HHA; ed. Howard Serwer) in that the latter is based entirely on the evidence of the existing sources, while this performing edition reassesses the relationship between them based on inferences about the missing performing sources for the 1720 version.

Given that the three acts in *Esther* are shorter than in Handel's later oratorios, it is quite likely that, as the very first experiment in the English oratorio genre, *Esther* was designed as a shorter work to be performed in one go without substantial intervals between acts (thus making it about the same length as *Acis & Galatea*, if performed in its 1720 form without an interval).

The performing forces used this evening are similar in number to those employed by Handel at Cannons. The band consisted of three violins per part, viola and two bassoons, along with flute, two horns and a single trumpet. The vocal complement (ten singers, including the boys, being on the list of employees at Cannons), seems to allow for roughly two singers per part in the choruses, with nearly all singers taking a solo at some point, including the major roles.

SYNOPSIS

Esther, a Jewish orphan, lived with her relative Mordecai, an advisor to King Ahaseurus of Persia. Mordecai had discovered and prevented a conspiracy to assassinate the King. Ahaseurus, having rejected his previous wife, selected Esther as his spouse. The Prime Minister, Haman, became enraged when Mordecai refused to bow to him, Mordecai stating that he would bow only to his God. *Esther* opens as Haman decides to order the extermination of all Jews throughout the Persian empire as retaliation for Mordecai's insult to him. The Jews, meanwhile, are celebrating Esther's accession as Queen of Persia but their happiness turns to mourning when they hear the news that the slaughter of all Jews has been ordered. Esther asks Mordecai why he is displaying grief by being dressed in sackcloth and ashes and he tells her the King has followed his Prime Minister's advice to order the extermination of the Jews. He asks Esther to appeal to her husband to rescind the order, but she explains that it is forbidden upon pain of death to approach the King without being sent for. She decides to take this risk anyway and goes to see the King, who pardons her breach of protocol in approaching him without invitation and offers to grant any petition she asks. Esther only requests that the King and Haman will attend a banquet hosted by herself. At the dinner, Esther reminds the King that Mordecai had saved his life and reveals her Jewish origin. She tells the King that the order to exterminate the Jews is directed against Mordecai and herself. Haman had prepared a gallows on which to hang Mordecai, but the King orders Haman himself to be executed there. The Jews give thanks to God for their deliverance.

PROGRAM NOTES

Handel's *Esther* has long enjoyed the cachet for being the first English Oratorio, but its origins during Handel's short period composing for James Brydges (who became Duke of Chandos in 1719) are obscure and the exact identity of its earliest version uncertain. What has become increasingly clear is the fact that 'The Oratorium' (as it was initially called) went through two versions between 1718 and 1720. What survives of the earliest version (much of which was clearly discarded during the revision) corresponds almost exactly to the vocal and instrumental forces required for *Acis & Galatea* of the same year, while the revised score corresponds to the expansion in the group of musicians that Chandos employed at his sumptuous establishment of Cannons, in Edgware. The libretto, like that for *Acis*, seems to have originated in the close circle of poets associated with Handel and Brydges during these years. Alexander Pope may have been involved, as he probably was with *Acis*, but most scholars agree that the bulk of the libretto was the work of John Arbuthnot.

It is clear that *Esther* was a topical subject during Handel's Cannons years since Thomas Brereton had recently published his translation (1715) of Racine's celebrated three-act play of 1689. Several turns of phrase from this appear in Handel's libretto (e.g. 'O Banks of Jordan's stream ... when shall we behold your Charms again?', 'Both Root and Branch they seek to spoil our Race!'), but it seems likely that the author also consulted Racine's original, having adopted the French version of the name of the Persian King Ahasuerus, 'Assuerus'. However, as Brereton notes in the opening dedication for his translation, there were many who were of the 'Opinion that Religion and Polite Literature are incompatible'. In other words, these believed that religion should be kept apart from anything that could remotely be called 'entertainment'. The Puritan strain clearly persisted in English culture, to the extent that Brereton believed those 'who are over-run with Superstition, or Religious to Melancholy and Enthusiasm' outnumbered those who are 'decently' devout by twenty to one. Given that a dramatic presentation of a biblical story would doubtless have been publically unfeasible in 1718, it is not surprising that Handel's first attempt at a musical setting should take place within the context of a private establishment.

What was the point of producing sacred dramas set to music if there was likely to be so much opposition in the public domain? Brereton clearly belonged with those (a minority?) who believed that art, correctly used, actually enhances religion, 'Tragedy wou'd, next to Preaching, be of all Ways the most conducive to Morality'. Moreover, he suggests that such productions provide a useful antidote to 'atheism' and attract those who might otherwise despise religion, quoting from George Herbert's *Church Porch*, 'A verse may find Him who a Sermon flies, And turn Delight into a Sacrifice.' He also notes that the use of a Chorus, after the Greek manner will 'to such as are especially inclin'd to Musick ... have all the good Effects of the Modern Opera, without any of its Absurdities.' Handel, of course, would have had considerable experience of the Italian genre of Oratorio, having written two examples of his own in Rome. But it is likely that the topicality of sacred drama in England provided him with an excellent opportunity to develop the genre in new directions, capitalizing on his already considerable operatic experience. What the English context in particular afforded was the ready-made establishment of the chorus in the various cathedrals, collegiate and private institutions, with the concomitant genre of the anthem. The chorus could have a greater emphasis than had been possible in the Italianate works, providing its own moral outlook on the drama and almost becoming a character in its own right. Here Handel could also draw on his native German choral tradition, adapting a large number of

movements directly from his recently composed *Brockes Passion* (English audiences would fortunately not have been aware that the evil Haman's last aria, lamenting his fate, was originally sung by Jesus). In all, the challenge was to integrate what was essentially actual church music into a music drama that benefitted directly from operatic practice.

The libretto for Handel's *Esther* presents some of the most striking elements of the Esther story (which constitutes the book of Esther, and which is also the subject of a Greek version in the Apocrypha). However, it is very sketchy in places and it may well be that the revisions between 1718 and 1720 resulted in some unevenness of detail. The main characters are Ahasuerus, the Persian King (sometimes identified with Xerxes); Haman, his evil henchman; Mordecai, leader of the Jewish community in Persia and guardian of his orphaned cousin, Esther. Esther has recently been chosen as queen following an extensive search for an attractive young woman to replace the disobedient Queen Vashti. The libretto opens with three contrasting scenes: first, the order from the king's chief minister, Haman, to massacre all the Jews (here it would be useful to know, from the full story, that the Jewish leader, Mordecai, had previously refused to bow before him), and the eagerness of his soldiers 'to execute the blow'; secondly, the Jews, unaware of the decree, celebrating their seeming felicity now that Esther has become queen; thirdly, the sudden change of mood in the Jewish community when the news of their forthcoming massacre arrives.

The central section of the story (Act 2 in Racine/Brereton and probably in Handel's 1720 version) begins with Mordecai informing Esther herself of the news and imploring her to go and intercede with the king. But anyone who enters the king's presence unbidden is to be put to death, regardless of status. Here Handel's librettist, following Racine, uses more of the Greek version of Esther, which describes her deadly fear and fainting when she finally approaches the king. However, the king extends his scepter to his queen, thus allowing her access without harm, and he expresses his deepest love towards her. Their relationship resumed, Esther invites Ahasuerus, together with Haman, to a feast. The final act concerns the arrival of the king and his offering Esther anything she desires. At this point it would be helpful to know that the king was not yet aware of Esther's Jewish identity, but in Handel's version it seems to be assumed, and the king seems ill-informed about Haman's evil decree. In reminding Ahasuerus that Mordecai earlier brought to light a plot to assassinate him, Esther convinces him of Haman's guilt. The latter is condemned to death and the Jewish community celebrates its freedom.

As is rather the case with *Acis & Galatea*, the events in this story are somewhat spare and the few changes of state occur very quickly. The opening act has something of the stasis of the first half of *Acis*, in which there are basically three tableaux in succession, Haman's evil decree, the joy of the Jews at their supposed freedom, and their lamentation at the forthcoming massacre. Here the music (most of it from the 1718 stage of the composition) comes closest to resembling the charmed world of *Acis*, with Haman's 'Pluck root and branch from out the land' almost recalling the comic evil of Polyphemus. One of the most attractive scenes of all concerns the Jewish celebration of freedom, very much recalling the pastoral felicity of *Acis*: the charming pizzicato aria 'Tune your harps'. This sense of a state of new-found peace – rather than a sequence of events – is enhanced by the repetition of the chorus 'Shall we of servitude complain'. A similar technique marks the complete change of state for the third scene, with the chorus of lamentation 'Ye sons of Israel, mourn' repeated on either side of the centerpiece, the

priest's aria, 'O Jordan, Jordan, sacred tide'. Here the interlocking violin lines allude both to the ripples of the river and the sadness of the community's mood.

The central act shows a strong turn towards the solemn but highly intimate mood of the German Passion tradition (the majority of the movements here having their origins in Handel's *Brockes* setting). Here the highly charged encounters between Esther and Mordecai, and then between Esther and Ahasuerus, can benefit from the type of recitative that Handel had developed in his operatic career. The borrowed music, almost miraculously, delineates the three characters, Mordecai's solemn piety in 'Dread not, righteous Queen' and Esther's frailty in 'Tears assist me' and in her duet with Ahasuerus (originally designed for Jesus and his mother). But it is the king himself who receives the greatest depth of character: a desperately concerned lover in the duet 'Who calls my parting soul from death?' and then – in perhaps the emotional high spot of the entire oratorio – he sings his greatest expression of love in 'O beautiful Queen'. As John Roberts has recently shown, this is an aria on which Handel expended the greatest compositional effort, adapting the melodic material from three different sources. This is also marked by the addition of two bassoons, which provide a glowing sonorous support for the tenor register. 'How can I stay, when love invites?' follows almost immediately, now showing the inescapable joy of Ahasuerus's love.

The final act introduces a pair of horns in the opening scene and a trumpet in the final chorus. Suddenly we seem to be in the world of *Israel in Egypt* or *Saul*, with their vast choral landscapes. The chorus 'He comes to end our woes' is perhaps the liveliest music in the work, marking the Jews' anticipation of God's intervention to end the tyranny of Haman. The final chorus, perhaps Handel's longest, is a vast rondo interspersed with duets of praise, first between the priest and trumpet, then between Esther and Mordecai, and finally between two basses announcing the felling of cedars of Lebanon to build the new temple. These two choral blocks enclose the final stage of the drama, musically expressed through Haman's recitative and aria of sorrow and supplication, and Esther's aria of rage at his impertinence. In all, we almost hear the genre of English Oratorio emerge in the course of the 1720 *Esther* itself. It begins like a sort of 'pastoral entertainment' along the lines of *Acis & Galatea*, it becomes more operatic and adopts some of the pious intensity of the German Passion, and emerges as a choral oratorio on the largest scale. But this development is somehow central to the success of the music, giving the entire work – containing so many symmetries or complementary blocks – a succinct trajectory that is unique in Handel's output. If the chorus ultimately emerges as the largest character, it is also there from the start, providing a dimension that is indispensable to the success of the drama. If Handel remained nervous of unleashing this extraordinary genre on the London stage, it was Bernard Gates, music director of the Chapel Royal, who took the plunge and organized a staged production of what was essentially the 1720 *Esther*, for a private audience in central London in 1732. In the wake of this success, and the likelihood of a pirate performance of the work, Handel correctly gauged that a revised, unstaged, version of *Esther* would become the beginning of a new venture in public music making.

LIBRETTO

ACT ONE

1. Overture

Scene 1

2. Recitative

Habdonah

'Tis greater far to spare than to destroy.

Haman

I'll hear no more; it is decreed,
All the Jewish race shall bleed.
Hear and obey, what Haman's voice commands.
Hath not the lord of all the east
Giv'n all his power into my hands?
Hear ye, all ye nations far and wide,
Which own our monarch's sway,
Hear and obey.

3. Air

Haman

Pluck root and branch from out the land:
Shall I the God of Israel fear?
Let Jewish blood dye ev'ry hand,
Nor age, nor sex I spare.
Raze, raze their temples to the ground,
And let their place no more be found.

4. Recitative

Persian Officer

Our souls with ardour glow
To execute the blow.

5. Chorus of Persian Soldiers

Shall we the God of Israel fear?
Nor age, nor sex we'll spare.
Pluck root and branch from out the land:
Nor age, nor sex we'll spare.

(Please turn the page quietly.)

Scene 2

6. Recitative

First Israelite

Now persecution shall lay by her iron rod;
Esther is queen, and Esther serves the living God.

7. Air

First Israelite

Tune your harps to cheerful strains,
Moulder idols into dust!
Great Jehovah lives and reigns,
We in great Jehovah trust.
Tune your harps. . . *da capo*

8a. Chorus of Israelites

Shall we of servitude complain,
The heavy yoke and galling chain?

9. Recitative

Israelite woman

O God, who from the suckling's mouth
Ordainest early praise:
Of such as worship thee in truth,
Accept the humble lays.

10. Air

Israelite Woman

Praise the Lord with cheerful noise,
'Wake my glory, 'wake my lyre!
Praise the Lord each mortal voice,
Praise the Lord, ye heav'nly choir!
Zion now her head shall raise:
Tune your harps to songs of praise.
Praise the Lord. . . *da capo*

8b. Chorus of Israelites

Shall we of servitude complain,
The heavy yoke and galling chain?

Scene 3

11. Recitative

First Priest of the Israelites

How have our sins provok'd the Lord!
Wild persecution has unsheath'd the sword.

Haman hath sent forth his decree:
The sons of Israel all
Shall in one ruin fall.

12. Accompagnato

First Priest of the Israelites

Methinks I hear the mother's groans,
While babes are dashed against the stones!
I hear the infant's shriller screams,
Stabb'd at the mother's breast!
Blood stains the murderer's vest,
And through the city flows in streams.

13a. Chorus of Israelites

Ye sons of Israel mourn,
Ye never to your country shall return!

14. Air

Second Priest of the Israelites

O Jordan, Jordan, sacred tide,
Shall we no more behold thee glide
The fertile vales along?
As in our great fathers' days,
Shall not thy hills resound with praise
And learn our holy song?
O Jordan. . . *da capo*

13b. Chorus of Israelites

Ye sons of Israel mourn,
Ye never to your country shall return!

ACT TWO

Scene 1

15. Recitative

Esther

Why sits that sorrow on thy brow?
Why is thy rev'rend head
With mournful ashes spread?
Why is the humble sackcloth worn?
Speak, Mordecai, my kinsman, friend,
Speak, and let Esther know,
Why all this solemn woe?

(Please turn the page quietly.)

Mordecai

One fate involves us all!
Haman's decree,
To strike at me,
Hath said that ev'ry Jew shall fall.
Go, stand before the king with weeping eye.

Esther

Who goes unsummon'd, by the laws shall die.

16. Air

Mordecai

Dread not, righteous queen, the danger;
Love will pacify his anger;
Fear is due to God alone.
Follow great Jehovah's calling,
For thy kindred's safety falling;
Death is better than a throne.
Dread not. . . *da capo*

17. Recitative

Esther

I go before the king to stand.
Stretch forth, O king, thy scepter'd hand!

18. Air

Esther

Tears assist me, pity moving,
Justice cruel fraud reproving.
Hear, O God, thy servant's prayer!
Is it blood that must atone,
Take, oh take my life alone,
And thy chosen people spare.

19. Chorus of Israelites

Save us, O Lord,
And blunt the wrathful sword!

Scene 2

20. Recitative

Ahasuerus

Who dares intrude into our presence without our leave?
It is decreed,
He dies for this audacious deed.
Ah! Esther there!
The law condemns, but love will spare.

Esther

My spirits sink, alas I faint.

Ahasuerus

Ye powers, what paleness spreads her beauteous face!

Esther, awake, thou fairest of thy race.

Esther, awake and live, 'tis my command!

Behold the golden sceptre in my hand,

Sure sign of grace. The bloody stern decree

Was never meant, my queen, to strike at thee.

21. Duet

Esther

Who calls my parting soul from death?

Ahasuerus

Awake, my soul, my life, my breath!

Esther

Hear my suit, or else I die.

Ahasuerus

Ask, my queen, can I deny?

22. Air

Ahasuerus

O beauteous queen, unclose those eyes!

My fairest shall not bleed;

Hear love's soft voice that bids thee rise

And bids thy suit succeed.

Ask, and 'tis granted from this hour,

Who shares our heart shall share our pow'r.

O beauteous queen. . . *da capo*

23. Recitative

Esther

If I find favour in thy sight,

May the great monarch of the east

Honour my feast,

And deign to be his servant's guest.

The king and Haman I invite.

(Please turn the page quietly.)

24. Air*Ahasuerus*

How can I stay when love invites?
I come, my queen, to chaste delights.
With joy, with pleasure, I obey,
To thee I give the day.
How can I stay. . . *da capo*

Scene 3**25. Recitative***First Israelite*

With inward joy his visage glows,
He to the queen's apartment goes.

Second Israelite

Beauty has his fury charm'd,
And all his wrath disarm'd.

26. Chorus of Israelites

Virtue, truth and innocence
Shall ever be her true defence.
She is Heav'n's peculiar care,
Propitious Heav'n will hear her pray'r.

BRIEF PAUSE

ACT THREE**Scene 1****27. Accompagnato***First Priest of the Israelites*

Jehovah crown'd with glory bright,
Surrounded with eternal light,
Whose ministers are flames of fire:
Arise, and execute thine ire!

28. Chorus of Israelites

He comes, He comes to end our woes,
And pour His vengeance on our foes.
Earth trembles, lofty mountains nod!
Jacob, arise to meet thy God!
He comes, He comes to end our woes,
And pour His vengeance on our foes.

Scene 2

29. Recitative

Ahasuerus

Now, O queen, thy suit declare.
Ask half my empire, and 'tis thine.

Esther

O gracious king, my people spare,
For in their lives, you strike at mine.
Reverse the dire decree!
The blow is aimed at Mordecai and me.
And is the fate of Mordecai decreed,
Who, when the ruffian's sword
Sought to destroy my royal Lord,
Brought forth to light the desperate deed?

Ahasuerus

Yes, yes, I own,
To him alone
I owe my life and throne.
Say then, my queen, who dares pursue
The life to which reward is due?

Esther

'Tis Haman's hate
That signed his fate.

Ahasuerus

I swear by yon great globe of light
Which rules the day,
That Haman's sight
Shall never more behold the golden ray.

30. Air

Haman

Turn not, O queen, thy face away.
Behold me prostrate on the ground!
Oh speak, his growing fury stay,
Let mercy in thy sight be found.

(Please turn the page quietly.)

31. Air

Esther

Flatt'ring tongue, no more I hear thee!
Vain are all thy cruel wiles!
Bloody wretch, no more I fear thee,
Vain thy frowns and vain thy smiles.
Tyrant, when of power possess'd,
Now thou tremblest, when distress'd.
Flatt'ring tongue. . . *da capo*

32. Recitative

Ahasuerus

Guards, seize the traitor, bear him hence!
Death shall reward the dire offence.
To Mordecai be honour paid:
The royal garment bring,
My diadem shall grace his head,
Let him in triumph through the streets be led,
Who saved the king.

33. Air

Haman

How art thou fall'n from thy height!
Tremble, ambition, at the sight!
In power let mercy sway,
When adverse fortune is thy lot,
Lest thou by mercy be forgot,
And perish in that day.
How art thou fall'n. . . *da capo*

Scene 3

34. Chorus of Israelites

The Lord our enemy has slain,
Ye sons of Jacob, sing a cheerful strain!
Sing songs of praise, bow down the knee.
The worship of our God is free!
The Lord our enemy has slain,
Ye sons of Jacob, sing a cheerful strain!
For ever blessed be thy holy name,
Let Heav'n and earth his praise proclaim.

Second Priest of the Israelites

Let Israel songs of joy repeat,
Sound all the tongues Jehovah's praise.
He plucks the mighty from his seat,
And cuts off half his days.

Chorus

For ever blessed be thy holy name,
Let Heav'n and earth his praise proclaim.

Esther, Mordecai

The Lord his people shall restore,
And we in Salem shall adore.

Chorus

For ever blessed be thy holy name,
Let Heav'n and earth his praise proclaim.

Bass I, II

Mount Lebanon his firs resigns,
Descend, ye Cedars, haste ye Pines
To build the temple of the Lord,
For God his people has restor'd.

Chorus

For ever blessed be thy holy name,
Let Heav'n and earth his praise proclaim.

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