

# ORATORIO again

RTHK Radio 4  
10:00 – 11:00

Programme 5  
Sunday 4 January 2009

**MUSIC:** Handel: Solomon 93 R 02 disc 1 #1

**KANE: V.O. at c. 0:15**

This is Handel, the overture to one of his *many biblical* oratorios, “Solomon”. And welcome to another ‘Oratorio’ *presentation* by me, Ciaran Kane. “Solomon” came some *years* after ‘Messiah’, is very different, and didn’t have anything *like* ‘Messiah’s success. Handel wrote it in about six weeks in the early summer of 1748, and it had its first performance on the 17<sup>th</sup> March the following year: there were only two other performances at the time, and another two lack-lustre ones some ten years later, a few weeks after Handel died. It’s not known who wrote the *words*, but the text is based on the biblical 2<sup>nd</sup> Book of Chronicles and the 1<sup>st</sup> Book of Kings, with some hints of material from Josephus’ “Antiquities of the Jews”. “Solomon” is in three Acts. The first is about the completion and dedication of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem, and his happy marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter. The second provides the only real *dramatic* element in the work --- it’s about Solomon’s famous *judgement* in the case between two women claiming to be the mother of the same child. The overture to Act Three is a well-known orchestral piece on its own, titled ‘The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba’. It’s about a diplomatic visit, entertainment, and admiration for the wisdom of Solomon and the splendour of his court. In fact, the two outer movements are quite static, more like tableaux. Handel seems to’ve seen Solomon’s court as a kind of ideal society, and the oratorio is in a sense his *tribute* to the golden age of England under his patron, King George II. It pictures a nation at peace, smiling countryside, justice tempered by mercy, the admiration of other nations. “Solomon” has a number of unique or unusual features: the title role is sung by a mezzo-soprano and *five* of the seven solo singers are women. It contains (according to *one* critic) the greatest *choruses* that Handel ever wrote, and *seven* of them are in eight-parts. A number of arias are lyrical or

elegiac, and all of *Solomon's* have imagery from nature. But, "Solomon" is a *long* work, so I'm having to *cut* it *drastically*, to give just a taste of what it's like. **[ music fade-out here: c. 2:40 ]** It begins with a chorus of priests and a Levite praising the Lord; and then *this* chorus of priests singing "With pious heart and holy tongue"

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e                      disc 1 # 4    4:40**

**KANE:**                      Zadok the priest addresses Solomon, telling him the Temple consecration is complete, and the Lord of hosts is come.

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e                      disc 1 # 6    play to 0:32**

**KANE:**                      Zadok continues with an aria, "Sacred raptures cheer my breast", a chorus of Israelites sing "Throughout the land Jehovah's praise record", and Solomon himself praises the Lord in a humble pastoral aria.

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e                      disc 1 # 8 fade out at key-change    c.2:53**

**KANE:**                      The next scene of Act One of 'Solomon' has the king introducing his Queen, Pharaoh's daughter. "Thou fair inhabitant of Nile, Rejoice thy lover with a smile". She has a delightful aria "Bless'd the day when first my eyes Saw the wisest of the wise". They sing together a bucolic lover's aria, and then she has this lovely Handelian air, "With thee th'unshelter'd moor I'd tread". The happy pair retire, and the chorus pray that no rash intruder may disturb their soft hours, calling on nightingales and soft zephyrs to prolong their slumbers.

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e                      disc 1 ## 13, 14    5:37**

**KANE:**                      A much more *robust* choral piece begins Act Two of Handel's "Solomon", and it's *also* here that the *full* orchestra is heard for the first time in the oratorio. It's in *this* Act that we hear the dramatic story of Solomon's judgement between two women appealing to him, both of them claiming to be the mother of the same child.

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e                      disc 1 # 15    5:09**

**KANE:**                      An attendant addresses the King, and the first woman states her case. In plaintive song she sings that words are weak to paint her fears: she calls on the King to be her friend for her cause is just, but she's interrupted by the outbursts of the second woman.

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e                      disc 2 ## 1, 2    7:26**

**KANE:**                      Solomon now asks to hear the *second* woman's case, then gives his judgement --- to divide the child. And the second woman praises his

prudent and wise decision. But the *first* woman now pleads for the king to *reverse* his judgement and *spare* her child: ‘Can I see my infant gor’d’ ? And Solomon reveals his wisdom in discerning the secret dictates of the human heart.

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e                      disc 2 ## 4, 5    5:42**

**KANE:**             ‘From the east unto the west, who so wise as Solomon’ ? So sings the chorus of Israelites. And another strong Handel chorus concludes Act 2 of the oratorio, “Swell, swell the full chorus to Solomon’s praise”

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e                      disc 2 # 9    2:43**

**KANE:**             Act 3 begins with the arrival of the Queen of Sheba. She’s greeted by Solomon, and the king puts on a concert in her honour. Four successive choruses, *with* the king, portraying different emotions and passions, first a gentle air, and then a *martial* one.

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e                      disc 2 # 11, 13    3:11**

**KANE:**             The Queen of Sheba praises Solomon’s divine harmony, and then offers the tribute of her realm, gold, gems, balsam; and declaring that the *Temple* most attracted her eye. In her *farewell* to Solomon she prays that peace may ever dwell in Salem, and sings a lovely aria, “Will the sun forget to streak Eastern skies with amber ray?” Solomon then bids her farewell, in this duet “Adieu, fair queen”

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e                      disc 2 # 19    3:01**

**KANE:**             Just before the end of Handel’s “Solomon”, there is an imposing double-chorus of praise to the Lord, which quotes part of the old Lutheran hymn “Ein’ Feste Burg” (‘A Mighty Fortress is our God’). It makes a much better *conclusion* to the work than Handel’s *actual* closing chorus, according to John Eliot Gardner, the editor and conductor of this *recording*. We hear the Monteverdi Choir, with the English Baroque Soloists. Carolyn Watkinson, mezzo-soprano, sang the part of Solomon, Nancy Argenta, soprano, Solomon’s queen, Barbara Hendricks, soprano, the Queen of Sheba, Joan Rodgers, soprano, the first woman litigant, Della Jones, mezzo, the second woman, and Stephen Varcoe, bass, a levite.

**MUSIC: a s a b o v e                      disc 2 # 20    4:34**

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**Words total:     976                      Music timing:     45:43**