

# Pressestimmen zum Konzert des Gemischten Chores Zürich vom 20. November 2016

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## “A woeful song in misery extreme”: Handel’s *Jephtha* in Zurich

Von [Sarah Batschelet](#), 21 November 2016

George Frideric Handel’s great oratorio *Jephtha* tells the biblical story of the exiled son of Gilead, leader of the Israelites, who vows to God that if he should win in battle against the Ammonites, he will sacrifice the first person to greet him upon his return. Tragically, it is his own beloved daughter Iphis who first runs out to welcome him, she who is about to celebrate her wedding day.

Such a sorry coincidence after a rash vow might seem sad enough, but there is another tragedy associated with this monumental work: the composer was close to blind when he completed it, and it was to be his last oratorio. In the Reverend Thomas Morrell’s libretto; Iphis’ life is saved by an angel, who decrees that the girl should not be killed, but live as a virgin in perpetuity. Given that she’s deeply in love with Hamor, that would seem a pretty dreadful fate, too, but apart from an air of regret that cites “dark forces”, she actually takes the news as a trooper. Essentially, that plot detail is in keeping with the *Leitfaden* of the work, “it must be so.” Grin and bear it, I guess.

*Jephtha* premiered at Covent Garden in 1752, Handel himself conducting, and the work’s reception was enthusiastic from the start. In Zurich, conductor Joachim Krause added tremendous enthusiasm and upbeat energy in spritely gestures; his was an easy, if modest, conducting style. He made enough of the story with his body to seem a dancer, enough of the rhythm to double for a metronome.

The winds had a little trouble starting up, but came up to speed by the end of the overture, and its foot-tapping march tempo. In the principal role of Zebul, Jephtha’s brother-in-law, Martin Hässler took the first of the soloists’ vocal parts and sustained terrific presence throughout. His voice was mellow, his enunciation, distinct. Consonants at the end of words were given their just due, and he sang without having to refer to his score, which made the music more immediate. Of all the characters, I found him the most comfortable in his role, and his projection and plausible interaction with the audience, superb. He addressed us as an orator, as a man full of query, as a commentator on tragic events.

Being a native English speaker, James Elliott had a terrific advantage as Jephtha, and convincingly shared his character’s extraordinarily tough luck. Having made a poor decision, Jephtha is harder to like as a character; his trumpery and rash promise have a “rack of wild despair” that he brought on himself. As a listener, I keenly looked forward to his “Waft her, angels, through the skies” at a drowsy pace. I thought it might rock me into an acceptance of his fate; instead, this most touching of arias was sung at a tempo so fast as to lack pathos, and exploration of variations. At such a speed, it emerged as a homogenous pulp of notes, hardly differentiated from the rest of the narrative score.

[Lenneke Ruiten](#) sang a lovely Iphis, whose piety and loyalty – except in the Baroque context – are as tight-laced as to be almost incredulous. In Act I, her confession of love for Hamor

(countertenor Maarten Engeltjes) was somewhat compromised by a lack of any eye contact; even more unsettling was his parry: “more worth that fame or conquest, thou art mine” without even a sideways glance at his Iphis. It seemed almost a study in avoidance, even though Hamor is a major transporter of the narrative that “makes the trumpet sound”. That said, Storgé (Anja Schlosser) had a lovely mezzo voice, and harmonies between her and her daughter Iphis’ voices made the whole crazy business plausible. Valentina Marghinotti sang the modest role of the Angel, who reassures the cast that Iphis shall live. She sang from the ranks of the choir as if “one of them”, giving a peculiarly democratic impulse to the events overall.

Finally, however, highest accolades go to the superb lay choir. It had many passages to master, some of them with words sung at a racehorse’s clip, and for many, in a foreign language. But as the “Chorus of Israelites” at the end of Act I, their simple canon could have mollified a testy baby. In Act II, the flowering strains of Cherub and Seraphim “directing the storm” were as great a testimony to a weave in sound as a Baroque configuration can ever become. Further, with transitions clean and timely, they mastered a unified sound, and stood and sat as one calibrated body. In sum, while less than truly illuminated, the Zurich performance of this lesser-known Handel work was thoroughly enjoyable, and argued convincingly for exercising careful judgment before taking any rash decisions.

[https://bachtrack.com/de\\_DE/review-handel-jephtha-capriccio-baroque-tonhalle-zurich-november-2016](https://bachtrack.com/de_DE/review-handel-jephtha-capriccio-baroque-tonhalle-zurich-november-2016)