

# A Hebrew tale

**Michael White** reports on how a rediscovered 18th-century oratorio is set to enjoy its British premiere in the language of the Old Testament

**W**hen Handel's Old Testament oratorio *Esther* had its first public performance in 1732, the soloists – largely Italian and including stars like the castrato Senesino – so mangled the English text that one commentator observed 'it might as well have been Hebrew'.

This proved a curiously prophetic observation. Some years later the libretto was indeed adapted into Hebrew, with someone else's music substituting for that of Handel. The result then disappeared into the void that can be music history, yet it has been reconstructed from assorted manuscripts found in unlikely places, and gets a long-delayed UK premiere this month – in Hebrew – when Andrew Griffiths conducts HGO, the north London company once known as Hampstead Garden Opera. Called *The Salvation of Israel by the Hands of Esther*, the score was composed in 1774 by one Cristiano Lidarti, an Austrian of Italian descent. As HGO's chairman David Conway says, 'It's not the kind of thing we would normally take on, except that I happen to have an academic interest in the historical access of Jews to Western art music, and this piece is a key example that was little-known until very recently – which is why it's never been done in Britain.'

*Esther* is, of course, a Jewish story, about a young girl plucked from humble origins to be the wife of the King of Persia at a time when Jews were being persecuted. Bravely, she reveals to



her husband that she herself is Jewish, persuading him to spare the lives of her people. And for centuries this narrative has been dramatised into stage-plays performed during the Judaic feast of Purim.

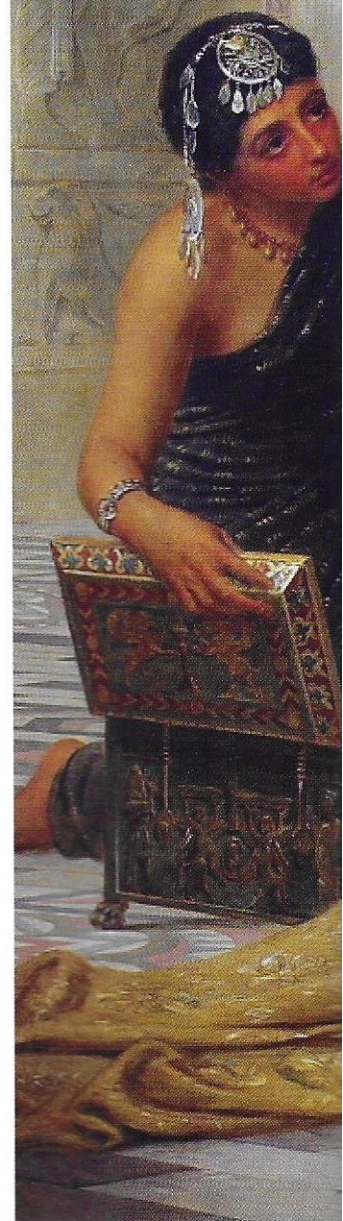
It's possible that Handel may have seen such a 'Purim-spiel' in Venice and remembered it when writing his original *Esther*. In any case, he knew that his Old Testament oratorios had

a following with the Jewish community of mid-18th-century London. And word about them spread to communities abroad – including a congregation of Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam, who took a keen interest.

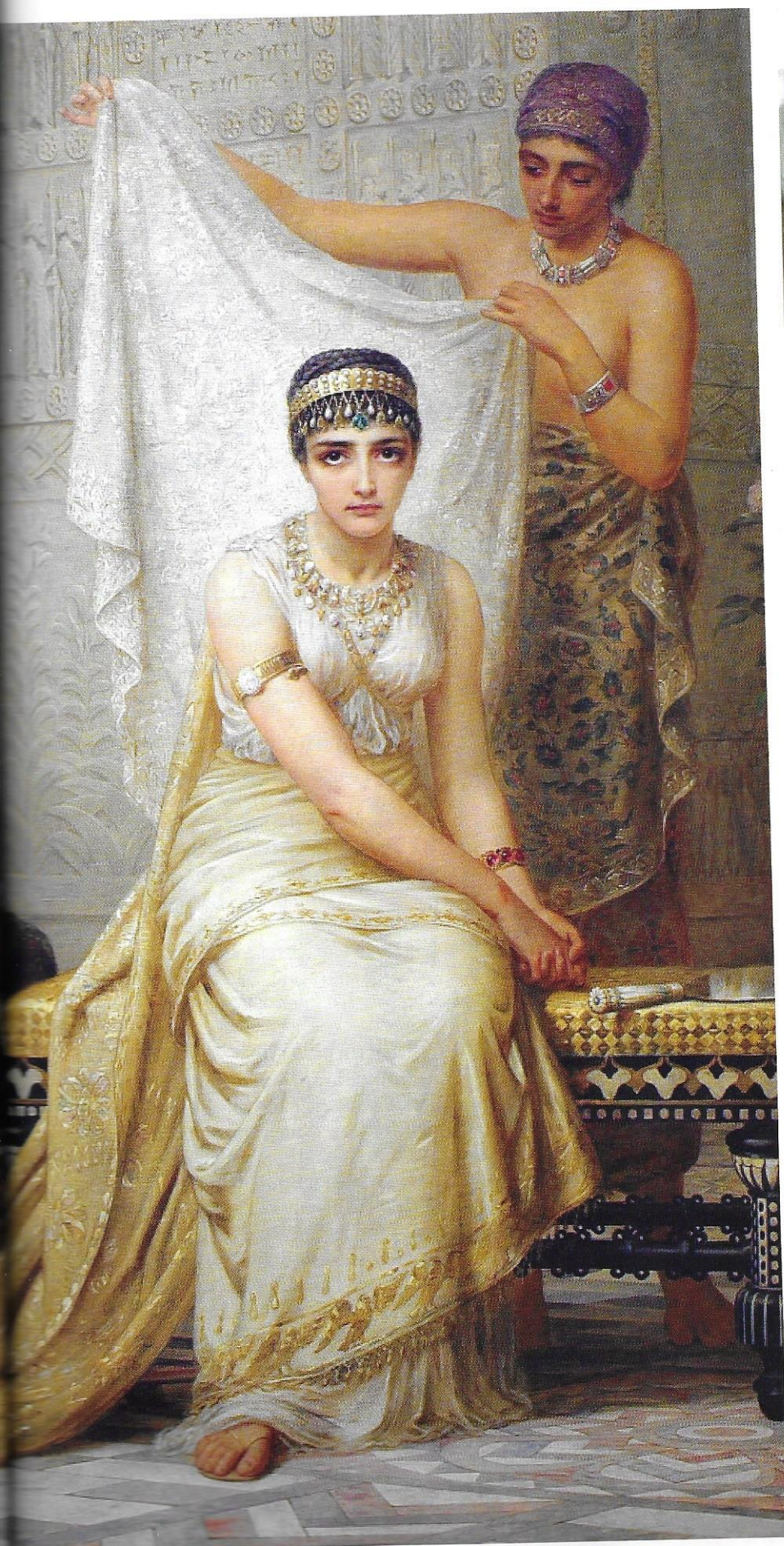
'Up to this point in time', says Conway, 'very few Jews involved themselves professionally in Western art music, because they didn't have the usual access routes through church or court. But things were starting to change. And these Amsterdam Sephardis were actively commissioning new art music that could relate to their own cultural traditions.'

Accordingly, they forged a relationship with Cristiano Lidarti, a Christian and an established church musician based in Pisa, who was open to offers. After writing several small-scale choral works for the Amsterdam congregation, he was provided with a Hebrew adaptation (almost word for word) of the text for Handel's *Esther* made by a local rabbi, and asked to set it to new music. What he produced was almost certainly the first Western oratorio ever composed to a Hebrew

A key episode of music history: Queen Esther, as depicted by Edwin Long; (left) the composer Cristiano Lidarti, who set the Hebrew text; (far right) conductor Andrew Griffiths







libretto. But it seems that it was never actually performed, and over time the words and music got separated – with copies of the text turning up in Israel while the music was thought lost until, in classic manner, a Cambridge University librarian spotted something of interest in a manuscripts sale: the missing score.

That was in the 1990s, and through recent years performances have taken place in Israel, France, America, but not in Britain – hence the opportunity that HGO, effectively a training company for young opera singers, has now seized. Its singers will be working on their

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Hebrew with a synagogue-trained cantor – which sounds challenging, though Conway says it's not unduly difficult 'because no one knows how 18th-century synagogue Hebrew was pronounced. So we're using current practice, which is relatively straightforward'.

So is Lidarti's score worth the effort? Conway gives a cautious yes. 'I don't claim it's great music that will sing forever in your heart. But it's charming, in the *galant* style of early classical, paying obvious debts to the likes of Jommelli (Lidarti's teacher) as well as Pergolesi and Haydn. And above all, it's a unique record of merging cultural traditions at a key moment in time.

'By the mid-19th-century it was almost a truism in Europe that Jews were inherently musical. But a century earlier they'd been thought not to be musical at all. So in this oratorio we have a landmark piece that heralds this change. It needs a hearing.'

*Lidarti's Esther is performed by HGO with the Londinium Choir on 13 March at the Free Church, Hampstead Garden Suburb*