



**Jephtha by Welsh National Opera**

**Reviewed by Denis Joe October 2012**

**Cast includes**

**Jephtha: Robert Murray**

**Zebul: Alan Ewing**

**Storge: Diana Montague**

**Iphis: Fflur Wyn**

**Hamor: Robin Blaze (ex 7 Nov); Andrew Radley (7 Nov)**

**Angel: Claire Ormshaw**

Katie Mitchell's operatic staging (this Revival Director: Robin Tebbutt) of *Jephtha* was first produced in 2003, was first revived in 2006 and WNO have thankfully felt it worthy of restaging.

The story is, on the face of it, quite straight forward. Having been asked by the Israelites to lead the forces against the Ammonites, Jephtha makes a vow to God, that if he is victorious then he

will sacrifice the first person who comes to greet him after the battle. Tragically that person is his daughter Iphis. The libretto, by Revd. Thomas Morrell (largely derived from the Old Testament story as interpreted by the Scottish poet George Buchanan) provides us with an extra character, Iphis' fiancée Hamor and gives the ending a rather strange twist, in that an angel allows Iphis to live if she devotes her virginal life to God. If the original biblical story seemed morally questionable, Morrell's revision gave the story an even greater complexity.

The overture is unmistakably Handel, borrowed from the incidental music he had composed for Tobias Smollett's tragedy, *Alceste*: a majestic procession which moves to a greater urgency. It captures well the action that we are to encounter as if both tempos represented a sort of pondering about what needs to be done whilst there is a clamour demanding that action needs to be taken. The high string section and woodwind sections carry most of the argument until the overture ends on a Minuet, that is almost waltz-like, and the curtain is raised.



Director Katie Mitchell has transposed the story of *Jephtha* to, what appears to be, late 1940s Europe, and has set the action in a bombed hotel. The piece opens with a recitative ( *It must be so . . .* )

which is sung by Jephtha's half-brother, Zebul. For 18 years the Israelites have been subjugated by the Ammonites and have turned to worshipping false idols. They now see their

only chance of victory is to call in Jephtha, who he and his brothers had thrown out of Israel for being the bastard son of their father (

*True. we have slighted, scorn'd, expell'd him hence,/As of a stranger born; but well I know him;/His gen'rous soul disdains a mean revenge./When his distressful country calls his aid./And, perhaps, heav'n may favour our request/If with repentant hearts we sue for mercy*

)

.

Jephtha is summoned from exile with his wife, Storgé and his daughter Iphis. He agrees to lead the Israelite army on condition that he is allowed to continue as leader of his country following his victory. Saying farewell to his wife and daughter precipitates one of the most beautiful moments from any Handel work I can think of. Storgé's recitative, *'Twill be a painful separation,* Jephtha and aria *In gentle*

*murmurs will I mourn*

provide the most heart-rending moments in this exceptional work. The mezzo-soprano, Diana Montague, gave such great depth to these moments, that there were gasps throughout the house when she had finished. Whilst I have seen and heard many great moments in Handel's works, there was nothing, that I recall, to match this.

Hamor, who is betrothed to Iphis will follow Jephtha into battle. Caught between the glory of battle and his love for Iphis, Hamor (sung wonderfully by the countertenor Robin Blaze) tries to engage her in the glory this will bring (*Happy this embassy, my charming Iphis*) but Iphis (majestically sung by the soprano Fflur Wyn) is not convinced (

*Ill suits the voice of love when glory calls*

).

Worried about the outcome of the battle and unable to make a treaty with the Ammonites, Jephtha, privately bargains with God (*If, Lord, sustain'd by thy almighty pow'r,/Ammon I drive, and his insulting hands,/From these our long,-uncultivated lands,/And safe return a glorious conquer;/What, or whoe'er shall first salute mine eyes,/Shall be forever thine, or fall a sacrifice*

).

At the beginning of Part 2 Hamor rushes to tell, Iphis of her father's triumph (*Glad tidings of great joy to thee, dear Iphis,/and to the house of Israel, I bring*

.) The celebrations begin for the welcome of the hero, but tragedy strikes Jephtha as the first person to greet him is his daughter. Jephtha falls into despair as he realises the folly of his promise to God (

*Open thy marble jaws, O tomb!/And hide me, earth, in thy dark womb:/Ere I the name of father stain,/And deepest woe from conquest gain*

.) and we are left in no doubt that it is the personal anguish that has overawed the father.

Jephtha tells everyone about the vow he made to God. All about his attempt to dissuade him from carrying out his promise, but he cannot. And it is here that the morality of the Oratorio becomes clear and it is centred on the character of Iphis as she convinces her father that she will allow herself to be sacrificed for God and for Country. The whole community is stricken by Jephtha's determination to carry out his vow and part two ends with one of Handel's greatest chorus pieces, ironically, it is believed, his blindness stopped him from further work on *How dark,*

O

*Lord, are thy decrees /All hid from mortal sight!.*

Though he was well enough to begin part 3, ten days later.

In Part 3, the whole community prepares for the sacrifice of Iphis and plead with God for guidance (*Doubtful fear, and reverent awe,/Strike us, Lord, while here we bow;/Check'd by thy all-sacred law,/Yet commanded by the vow./In this distress, Lord, hear our pray'r,/And thy determin'd will declare* ). Just as Iphis is being taken for sacrifice an angel appears and stops the proceedings. The angel decrees that Iphis will be spared but she must devote the rest of her life to chastity in the service of God.



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