

Georg Friedrich Haendel

(1714 - 1787)

Jephtha (*Jephté*)



Oratorio en 3 actes

Livret de *Thomas Morell*

Première représentation : le 26 février 1752 au Royal Theatre,
Covent Garden, Londres

Personnages :

Jephtha, (ténor)

Storgè, son épouse (mezzo-soprano)

Iphis, fille de Jephtha (soprano)

Hamor, prétendant de Iphis (contre ténor)

Zebul, conseiller de Jephtha (baryton-basse)

L'Ange, (soprano)

Synopsis

Acte I

Sur le conseil de Zebul, Jephtha (Jephté, en français), né d'une fille de joie, est rappelé in extremis de l'exil pour sauver son peuple de l'agression des Ammonites. Jephtha accepte le commandement des armées contre la garantie de préserver sa fonction en temps de paix. Les Israélites y consentent. Jephtha prend congé de son épouse Storgè qui s'inquiète de ce que l'avenir leur réserve. Hamor offre son amour à Iphis, la fille de Jephtha ; elle l'accepte volontiers. Mais le combat approche, et ils doivent se préparer. Aussi excité qu'angoissé par la perspective de la bataille, Jephtha propose à Jéhovah un marché : s'il remporte la victoire, il lui sacrifiera le premier qui viendra l'accueillir après le combat. Les Israélites prient pour une heureuse issue de la guerre, alors que Storgè est hantée par des visions d'horreur. Iphis la console. Dès lors que le roi des Ammonites a rejeté toute tractation, la parole est à Jéhovah.

Acte II

Hamor apporte à Iphis la bonne nouvelle : le ciel a déversé des légions de chérubins armés, permettant aux Israélites de terrasser l'ennemi. Iphis prépare un accueil triomphal à son père, tandis que Jephtha et les Israélites célèbrent la victoire. On vient saluer le héros, Iphis avance en tête du cortège. Jephtha, bouleversé, avoue son fatal serment : Iphis doit être sacrifiée. Storgè, horrifiée, refuse de se soumettre, alors que Hamor propose sa propre vie en échange de celle d'Iphis. Storgè, Hamor et Zebul supplient Jephtha d'épargner sa fille. Mais Iphis est déjà au courant du verdict, et s'y soumet sans murmurer. Une douleur immense déchire le cœur de Jephtha.

Acte III

Jephtha prie pour le salut de l'âme d'Iphis. Cette dernière prend congé de la vie. Les prières de tout le peuple l'accompagnent. Avant le coup fatal, un Ange fait son apparition, porteur d'une bonne nouvelle : Iphis vivra, mais pure et vierge, à jamais vouée à Dieu. Jephtha bénit le nom du Seigneur.



Charles Le Brun - *Jephté sur le point de sacrifier sa fille*



Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini - *Le retour de Jephté (détail)*

Part the First.

No. 1. OVERTURE.

No. 2. RECIT. Zebul.

IT must be so; or these vile Ammonites
(Our lordly tyrants now these eighteen years)
Will crush the race of Israel.
Since heav'n vouchsafes not, with immediate choice,
To point us out a leader, as before,
Ourselves must choose. And who so fit a man
As Gilead's son. our brother. valiant Jephtha? -
True. we have slighted, scorn'd, expell'd him hence,
As of a stranger born; hut 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.

No. 3. AIR.

Pour forth no more unheeded pray'rs
To idols deaf and vain:
No more with vile unhallow'd airs,
The sacred rites profane.

No. 4. CHORUS.

No more to Ammon's god and king,
Fierce Moloch, shall our cymbals ring,
In dismal dance about the furnace blue,
Chemosh no more
Will we adore,
With timbrell'd anthems, to Jehovah due.

No. 5. RECIT. Zebul.

But Jephtha comes. Kind heav'n, assist our plea!
O Jephtha, with an eye of pity look
On thy repentant brethren in distress.
Forgetful of thy wrongs, redress thy sire,
Thy friends, thy country, in extreme despair.

Jephtha.

I will: so please it heav'n; and these the terms
If I command in war, the like command
(Should heav'n vouchsafe us a victorious peace)
Shall still be mine.

Zebul.

Agreed. Be witness, heaven.

No. 6. AIR.* Jephtha.

Virtue my soul shall still embrace,
Goodness shall make me great,
Who builds upon this steady base
Dreads no event of fate.

No. 7 RECIT. Storge.

'Twill be a painful separation, Jephtha,
To see thee harness'd for the bloody field.
But ah! how trivial are a wife's concerns,
When a whole nation bleeds, and grovelling lies,
Panting for liberty and life

No. 8 AIR.

In gentle murmurs will I mourn,
As mourns the mate-forsaken dove;
And sighing wish thy dear return
To liberty and lasting love.

No. 9. RECIT.* Hamor.

Happy this embassy, my charming Iphis,
Which once more gives thee to my longing eyes
As Cynthia breaking from th' involving clouds
On the benighted traveler, the sight of thee, my love
Drives darkness and despair.
Again I live; in thy sweet smiles I live;
As in thy father's ever watchful care
Our wretched nation feels new life, new joy,
O haste and make my happiness complete

No 10 AIR.*

Dull delay in piercing, anguish
Bids thy faithful lover languish,
While he pants for bliss in vain.
Oh! with gentle smiles relieve me;
Let no more false hopes deceive me,
Nor vain fears inflict a pain.

No. 11. RECIT. Iphis.

Ill suits the voice of love when glory calls,
And bids thee follow Jephtha to the field.
Act there the hero, and let rival deeds
Proclaim thee worthy to be called his son;
And Hamor shall not want his due reward

No. 12. AIR.*

Take the heart you fondly gave,
Lodg'd in your breast with mine;
Thus with double ardour brave,
Sure conquest shall be thine.

No. 13. RECIT.* Hamor.

I go: my soul, inspir'd by thy command,
Thirsts for the battle. I'm already crown'd
With the victorious wreath; and thou, fair prize
More worth than fame or conquest, thou art mine

No. 14. DUET.*

These labours past, how happy we I
How glorious will they prove!
When gathering fruit from conquest's tree
We deck the feast of love!

No. 15. RECIT. Jephtha.

What mean these doubtful fancies of the brain?
Visions of joy rise in my raptur'd soul,
There play awhile, and set in darksome night.
Strange ardour fires Illy breast; my arms seem strung
With tenfold vigour, and my crested helm
To reach the skies, be humble still, my soul.
It is the spirit of God; in whose great name
I offer up my vow.

No. 16 RECIT. ACCOMPANIED

If, Lord, sustain'd by thy almighty pow'r,
Ammon I drive, and his insulting hands,
From these our long, un-cultivated lands,
And safe return a glorious conquer;
What, or whoe'er shall first salute mine eyes,
Shall be forever thine, or fall a sacrifice

No. 17. RECIT.

'Tis said. Enter Israelites, &c.,
Attend, ye chiefs, and with one voice,
Invoke the holy name of Israel's God.

No. 18. CHORUS.

O God, behold our sore distress;
 Omnipotence, to plague, or bless!
 But turn thy wrath, and bless once more
 Thy servants, who thy name adore.

No. 19. RECIT. Storge.

Some dire event hangs o'er our heads,
 Some woeful song we have to sing
 In misery extreme. O, never, never
 Was my foreboding mind distress'd before
 With such incessant pangs.

No. 20. AIR.

Scenes of horror, scenes of woe,
 Rising from the shades below,
 Add new terror to the night.
 While in the never-ceasing pain,
 That attends the servile chain,
 Joyless flow the hours of light.

No. 21. RECIT. Iphis.

Say, my dear mother, whence these piercing cries
 That force me, like a frightened bird, to fly,
 My place of rest?

Storge

For thee I fear, my child
 Such ghastly dreams last night surpris'd my soul

Iphis.

Heed not these black illusions of the night,
 The mocking of unquiet slumbers. heed them not
 My father, touch'd with a diviner fire,
 Already seems to triumph in success,
 Nor doubt I but Jehovah hears our pray'rs.

No. 22 AIR.

The smiling dawn of happy days
 Presents a prospect clear;
 And pleasing hope's all bright'ning rays
 Dispel each gloomy fear;
 While every charm that peace displays
 Makes spring-time all the year.

No. 23. RECIT. Zebul.

Such, Jephtha, was the haughty king's reply
 No terms but ruin, slavery, and death.

Jephtha.

Sound then the last alarm: and to the field
 Ye sons of Israel with intrepid hearts;
 Dependant on the light of Israel's God!

No. 24 CHORUS.

When his loud voice ill thunder spoke,
 With conscious fear the billows broke,
 Observant of his dread command.
 In vain they roll their foaming, tide;
 Confin'd by the Almighty! pow'r.
 That gave them strength to roar
 They now contract their boist'rous pride,
 And lash with idle rage the laughing strand

Part the Second.**No. 25. RECIT. Hamor.**

Glad tidings of great joy to thee, dear Iphis,
 and to the house of Israel, I bring.
 Thus then in brief: both armies in array
 Of battle rang'd, our general stept forth,
 And offer'd haughty Ammon terms of peace*
 Most just and righteous; these with scorn refus'd,
 He bade the trumpet sound: but scarce a sword
 Was ting'd in hostile blood, ere all around
 The thund'ring heavens open'd, and pour'd forth
 Thousands of armed cherubim. When straight
 Our general cried: "This is thy signal, Lord;
 I follow thee, and thy bright heavenly host."
 Then rushing on proud Ammon, all aghast.
 He made a bloody slaughter, and pursued
 The Hying foe, till night bade sheath the sword,
 And taste the joys of victory and peace.

No. 26. CHORUS.

Cherub and Seraphim, unbodied forms,
 The messengers of fate,
 His dread command await;
 Of swifter flight, and subtler flame,
 Than lightning's winged flame,
 They ride on whirlwinds, directing the storms.

No. 27. AIR.* Hamor.

Up the dreadful steep ascending,
 While for fame and love contending,
 Sought I thee, my glorious prize.
 And now, happy in the blessing,
 Thee, my sweetest joy, possessing,
 Other honours I despise.

No. 28. RECIT. Iphis.

'Tis well. Haste, ye maidens, and in richest robes,
 Adorn me, like a stately bride, to meet
 My father in triumphant pomp.
 And while around the dancing banners play,

No. 29. AIR.

Tune the soft melodious lute,
 Pleasant harp, and warbling flute,
 To sounds of rapt'rous joy,
 Such as on our solemn days,
 Singing great Jehovah's praise,
 The holy choir employ.

No. 30. RECIT. Zebul.

Again heav'n smiles on his repentant people;
 And victory spreads wide her silver wings,
 To soothe our sorrows with a peaceful calm.

No. 31. AIR.

Freedom now once more possessing,
 Peace shall spread with ev'ry blessing
 Triumphant joy around;
 Sion now no more complaining
 Shall, in blissful plenty reigning,
 Thy glorious praise resound.

No. 32. RECIT. Jephtha.

Zebul, thy deeds were valiant, nor less thine
 My Hamor; but the glory is the Lord's

No. 33. AIR.

His mighty arm, with sudden blow,
 Dispers'd and quell'd the haughty foe;
 They fell before him, as when through the sky
 He bids the sweeping winds in vengeance fly

No. 34. CHORUS.

In glory high, in might serene,
 He sees, moves all, unmov'd, unseen.
 His mighty arm, with sudden blow,
 Dispers'd and quell'd the haughty foe.

No. 35. SYMPHONY. ***No. 36. RECIT. Iphis.**

Hail, glorious conqueror! much lov'd father, hail!
 Behold thy daughter, and her virgin train,
 Come to salute thee with all duteous love.

No. 37. AIR.

Welcome as the cheerful light,
 Driving darkest shades of night
 Welcome as the spring that rains
 Sweets and plenty o'er the plains
 Not cheerful day,
 Nor springs so gay,
 Such mighty blessings brings,
 As peace on her triumphant wings.

No. 38. SEMI-CHORUS of Virgins.

Welcome thou whose deeds conspire
 To provoke the warbling lyre.
 Welcome thou, whom God ordain'd
 Guardian angel of our land!
 Thou wert born. his glorious name
 And great wonders to proclaim.

No. 39. RECIT. Jephtha.

Horror! confusion! harsh this music grates
 Upon my tasteless ears. Begone, my child;
 Thou hast undone thy father. Fly, begone,
 And leave me to the rack of wild despair!

No. 40. AIR.

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.

No. 41. RECIT. Zebul.

Why is my brother thus afflicted? say,
 Why didst thou spurn thy daughter's gratulations,
 And fling her from thee with unkind disdain?

Jephtha

O Zebul, Hamor, and my dearest wife;
 Behold A wretched man;
 Thrown from the summit of presumptions joy,
 Down to the lowest depth of misery
 Know, then! I vow'd the first I saw should fall
 A victim to the living God. My daughter.
 Alas! it was my daughter! and she dies.

No. 42. RECIT. ACCOMPANIED. Storge.

First perish thou! and perish all the world!
 Hath heav'n then bless'd us with this only pledge
 Of all our love, this one dear child, for thee
 To be her murderer? No, cruel man;

AIR.

Let other creatures die,
 Or heav'n. earth, seas, and sky,
 In one confusion lie,
 Ere in a daughter's blood,
 So fair, so chaste, so good,
 A father's hand's embrued.

No. 43. RECIT. Hamor.

If such thy cruel purpose: lo! your friend
 Offers himself a willing sacrifice,
 To save the innocent and beauteous maid.

No. 44. AIR.

On me let blind mistaken zeal
 Her utmost rage employ;
 'Twill be a mercy there to kill
 Where life can taste no joy.

No. 45. QUARTETTO.

Zeb. O spare thy daughter.
 Sto. Spare my child,
 Ham. My love.
 Jep. Recorded stands my vow in heav'n above.
 Sto. Recall the impious vow, ere 'tis too late:
 Ham. * And think not heav'n delights
 Zeb. * In Moloch's horrid rites.
 Jep. I'll hear no more; her doom is fix'd as fate

No. 46. RECIT. Iphis.

Such news flies swiftly; I've heard the mournful cause
 Of all your sorrows. Of my father's vow,
 Heav'n spoke its approbation by success .
 Jephtha hath triumph'd. Israel is free!

No. 47. RECIT. ACCOMPANIED.

For joys so vast, too little is the price
 Of one poor life but oh I accept it, heav'n
 A grateful victim, and thy blessings still
 Pour on my country, friends, and dearest father

No. 48. AIR.

Happy they: this vital breath
 With content I shall resign;
 And not murmur, or repine,
 Sinking in the arms of death.

No. 49. RECIT. ACCOMPANIED. Jephtha

Deeper, and deeper still, thy goodness, child,
 Pierceth a father's bleeding heart, and checks
 The cruel sentence on my falt'ring tongue
 Oh! let me whisper it to the raging winds,
 Or howling deserts; for the ears of men
 It is too shocking. Yet have I not vow'd?
 And can I think the great Jehovah sleeps,
 Like Chemosh, and such fabled deities?
 Ah! no; heav'n heard my thoughts, and wrote them down
 It must be so. 'Tis this that racks my brain,
 And pours into my breast a thousand pangs,
 That lash me into madness. Horrid thought!
 My only daughter! so dear a child,
 Doom'd by a father! Yes the vow is past,
 And Gilead hath triumphed o'er his foes.
 Therefore, tomorrow's dawn I can no more.

No. 50. CHORUS.

How dark, O Lord, are thy decrees I
 All hid from mortal sight!
 All our joys to sorrow turning,
 And our triumphs into mourning,
 As the night succeeds the day.
 No certain bliss,
 No solid peace,
 We mortals know,
 On earth below-
 Yet on this maxim still obey.
 Whatever is, is right.

Part the Third.**No. 51. RECIT. ACCOMPANIED Jephtha.**

Hide thou thy hated beams, O sun, in clouds
 And darkness, deep as is a father's woe.

No. 52. RECIT.

A father, offering up his only child
 In vow'd return for victory and peace,

No. 53. AIR.

Waft her, angels, through the skies,
 Far above yon azure plain;
 Glorious there, like you, to rise,
 There, like you, for ever reign.

No. 54. RECIT. ACCOMPANIED Iphis.

Ye sacred priests, whose hands ne'er yet were stain'd
 With human blood, why are ye thus afraid
 To execute my father's will? the call
 Of heav'n with humble resignation I obey

No. 55. AIR.

Farewell, ye limpid springs and floods
 Ye flow'ry meads and mazy woods;
 Farewell, thou busy world, where reign
 Short hours of joy, and years of pain
 Brighter scenes I seek above,
 In the realms of peace and love.

No. 56. CHORUS of Priests

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.

No. 57. SINFONIA.***No. 58. RECIT. Angel.**

Rise, Jephtha. and, ye reverend priests, withhold
 The slaught'rous hand. No vow can disannul
 The law of God, Nor such was its intent
 When rightly scann'd; and yet shall be fulfill'd
 Thy daughter, Jephtha, thou must dedicate
 To god, in pure and virgin-state for ever;
 As not an object meet for sacrifice,
 Else had she fall'n an holocaust to God.
 The holy spirit, that dictated thy vow,
 Bade thus explain it, and approves your faith.

No. 59. AIR.

Happy, Iphis, shalt thou live;
 While to thee the virgin choir
 Tune their harps of golden wire,
 And their yearly tribute give.
 Happy, Iphis, all thy days
 (Pure, angelic, virgin state)
 Shalt thou live; and ages late
 Crown thee with immortal praise.

No. 60. RECIT. Jephtha.

For ever blessed be thy holy name
 Lord God of Israel!

No. 61. CHORUS.

Theme sublime of endless praise,
 Just and righteous are thy ways;
 And thy mercies still endure,
 Ever faithful ever sure

No. 62. RECIT. Zebul.

Let me congratulate this happy turn,
 My honour'd brother, judge of Israel;
 Thy faith, thy courage, constancy, and truth,
 Nations shall sing; and in their just applause,
 All join to celebrate thy daughter's name.

No. 63. AIR.

Land her, all ye virgin train,
 In glad songs of choicest strain;
 Ye blest angels all around,
 Laud her in melodious sound .
 Virtues, that to you belong,
 Love, and truth, demand the song.

No. 64. RECIT. Storge.

O let me fold thee in a mother's arms,
 And with submissive joy, my child, receive
 Thy designation to life of heav'n.

No. 65. AIR.*

Sweet as sight to the blind,
 Or freedom to the slave,
 Such joy in thee I find,
 Safe from the grave.
 Still I'm of thee possess'd,
 Such is kind Heaven's decree
 That hath thy parents bless'd
 In blessing thee.

No. 66. RECIT. Hamor.

With transport, Iphis, I behold thy safety,
 But must for ever mourn so dear a loss:
 Dear, tho' great Jephtha were to honour me
 Still with the name of son.

No. 67. AIR.*

'Tis heaven's all-ruling power
 That checks the rising sigh;
 Yet let me still adore,
 And think an angel by,
 While thus each charm and beauteous line,
 With more than human lustre shine

No. 68. RECIT. Iphis.

My faithful Hamor, may that Providence.
 Which gently claims, or forces our submission
 Direct thee to some happier choice.

No. 69. AIR.

Freely I to heav'n resign,
All that is in Hamor mine
Joys triumphant crown thy days,
And thy name eternal praise.
Great the bliss assigned to me,
Greater still attend on thee.

No. 70. QUINTETTO.

Iphis.
All that is in Hamor mine,
Freely I to heav'n resign.

Hamor.
All that is in Iphis mine,
Freely I to heav'n resign.

Iphis.
Duteous to the will supreme.
Still my Hamor I'll esteem.

Hamor.
Duteous t-I Almighty pow'r,
Still my Iphis I'll adore.

Stooge Jephtha Zebul.
Joys triumphant crown thy days,
And thy name eternal praise.

No. 71. CHORUS.

Ye house of Gilead. with one voice,
In blessings manifold rejoice:
 Freed from war's destructive sword,
Peace her plenty round shall spread,
While in virtue's path ye tread.
 So blest are they who fear the Lord
 Hallelujah. Amen