



## **Handel: A Classical Icon OR Handel's 250th Anniversary**

*Handel's Samson Oratorio in Context*

### **VOICE OVER**

Samson is one of Handel's greatest oratorios.

By accident it occupies a very curious moment in his history as a composer because it was written in the summer of 1741 directly after he'd finished writing Messiah.

The story is a biblical one from the book of Judges but, in fact, it was seen through, as it were, two lenses from that point onwards in that Handel's oratorio Libretto was based on the reworking of it in Milton's poem, *Samson Agonistes*, and then another person, Newburgh Hamilton, a person who lived quite near Handel in London, had to turn it into something that could be done in a musical setting, rearranging and rewriting the words for recitatives and arias, and for the musical movements

It was a little unusual in that he went to English singers almost as a matter of principle this was in circumstances where there was an Italian opera company in Handel's old theatre, the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, and someone who went to the first performance of *Samson* actually wrote to a friend, "Handel has set up an oratorio against the opera and succeeds. He has got all the women from the farces and the men who sing songs about roast beef between the acts of the plays, and put them into his oratorio". And this use of the English singers was something that was rather special to that season, but he wrote for them in just the same way as he would have written for his Italian opera singers except, of course, that in place of a high-voice castrato singer for the leading role *Samson* was played by the English tenor John Beard and, in fact, *Samson* set up in a rather grand way the type of biblical concert dramas performed in the theatre that would be the type of oratorio that Handel would develop for the rest of his life in London.