

MUSICA SACRA: 'Israel in Egypt' has relevance to refugees of today's world

Friday

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It's time we thought about refugees. You could have said the same thing thousands of years ago—just read the Bible. But those who have no option except to run from danger remain part of our world today. "This story is relevant to anyone who has no choice but to flee." So Mary Beekman, director of Music Sacra, says about Handel's "Israel in Egypt," which her ensemble brings in a special presentation this Saturday evening to the Gloucester Universalist Unitarian Meetinghouse.

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

If you go...

WHAT: Music Sacra sings "Israel in Egypt"

WHERE: Gloucester Meeting House (Universalist Unitarian Church), 10 Church St., Gloucester

WHEN: Saturday, March 18, 7:30 p.m.

TICKETS: \$25-\$60. Under 17 free. Visit www.gloucestermeetinghouse.org or call 617-349-3400.

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So Mary Beekman, director of Music Sacra, says about Handel's "Israel in Egypt," which her ensemble brings in a special presentation this Saturday evening to the Gloucester Universalist Unitarian Meetinghouse.

The Israelites didn't brave the Mediterranean in beat-up boats. They didn't cross multiple international borders, watched by hostile natives, to escape the bombs in Syria. They fled the Pharaoh, wandered in the desert for 40 years, and only found safety after the Red Sea was parted.

You don't have to be a believer to empathize with the story. But appreciation for the complex issue of allowing strangers to come to your homeland, seeking out safety when they have no other choice—that appreciation comes slowly to the surface, when your own comfort is secure.

"I think in general art exists because it always has relevance to the human condition," Beekman says. "We did 'Israel in Egypt' 13 years ago, and then it seemed like, 'Wow, this is the first recorded story of people having to flee their home.' But there are certain times when that resonance has particular importance."

Presenting Musica Sacra is a major undertaking for the Gloucester Meetinghouse Foundation. The ensemble's previous visit, when they sang Bach's B minor Mass two years ago, drew a sold-out house and an enthusiastic reception. "It's one thing to think that the performance went well yourself," Beekman says. "But another thing if the audience agrees, and were as excited as we were to present it."

For this performance, which repeats a presentation from March 11 at Musica Sacra's permanent home, First Church in Cambridge, Beekman conducts more than two dozen choristers and a Baroque orchestra, with soloists including Jonas Budris (tenor), Barbara Allen Hill and Janet Ross (sopranos), Ulysses Thomas and Ian Pomerantz (bass-baritones), and Caroline Olsen (alto).

Musica Sacra performs in a beautiful space in its regular home in Cambridge, but Beekman finds much to admire about the Gloucester Meetinghouse. "It's an acoustical gem," she says, "a very supportive sound. You feel like you're performing inside of a cello."

Perfect for this dramatic oratorio. "The story stands on its own," Beekman says. "When we did it 13 years ago, it was fabulous. Handel told the story in spades—the fire, the locusts—as if he said, 'Let's show off all the stuff I can do.' But for Anne (the group's executive director Anne Riesenfeld) and I there came this moment when we realized it had another resonance.

"When I think about my own comfortable life, it seems amazing that the Israelites were 40 years wandering in the wilderness," Beekman says. "The story doesn't really even begin to address that uncertainty.

"But then I think about people's lives now, and why they would get into a boat like that. I get the feeling that this art is even more relevant now."

Musica Sacra, Mary Beekman conducting, performs Handel's oratorio "Israel in Egypt" this Saturday evening at the Gloucester Universalist Unitarian Meetinghouse. For tickets and information visit www.gloucestermeetinghouse.org or call 617-349-3400.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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