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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Israel in Egypt: From Slavery to Freedom

Imago Dei Festival, 08.04.2025 [ENA]

Few concerts manage to blend historical depth, musical virtuosity, and a deeply humanistic message as seamlessly as *Befreiung zum Frieden – Israel in Egypt: From Slavery to Freedom* in frames of the Imago Dei festival. This ambitious reimaging of Handel's *Israel in Egypt*—interwoven with Jewish, Muslim, and Baroque Christian musical traditions—was nothing short of a triumph.

Under the visionary direction of Werner Ehrhardt and enriched by the profound artistry of Yair Dalal and his ensemble Al Ol, this concert was not just a performance; it was a dialogue, a journey, and a moving testament to the power of music as a bridge between cultures. At its core, *Befreiung zum Frieden* explores fundamental human questions: What does it mean to be free? How do we coexist while preserving our individual identities? The original narrative of *Israel in Egypt*, though drawn from biblical texts, transcends historical specifics to address the universal struggles for liberation and peace.

In this concert, these themes gained even greater depth as Handel's 18th-century oratorio was placed in conversation with the rich musical traditions of Judaism and Islam.

By incorporating Middle Eastern melodies, Sufi chants, and even Raga elements, the performance transformed into a living dialogue between three world religions. Rather than presenting these traditions separately, the concert allowed them to flow into one another organically, creating a sonic landscape where differences were not erased but celebrated.

Werner Ehrhardt, a master of historically informed performance, led the orchestra with impeccable precision and expressive depth. His approach to Handel's *Israel in Egypt* was both scholarly and deeply emotive, capturing the grandeur of the Baroque idiom while allowing space for spontaneity and interaction with the newly integrated musical elements.

The choral passages—always a highlight in *Israel in Egypt*—were delivered with breathtaking clarity and intensity. The singers navigated Handel's intricate counterpoint with agility, their voices soaring in moments of jubilation and descending into haunting whispers in passages of despair.

The orchestral playing was equally refined, with crisp articulation and a warm, resonant timbre that enhanced the dramatic storytelling. If Handel's score provided the structural foundation of the evening, it

**Redaktioneller Programmdienst:
European News Agency**

Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
Telefax: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.661
Email: contact@european-news-agency.com
Internet: european-news-agency.com

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was Yair Dalal and his ensemble Al Ol that infused the performance with a profound sense of cross-cultural connection. Dalal, a celebrated Iraqi-Jewish musician, is renowned for his ability to bridge Eastern and Western traditions, and here, his contributions were revelatory.

His mastery of the oud brought an earthy, deeply expressive quality to the performance, contrasting beautifully with the bright, structured clarity of the Baroque instrumentation.

The modal inflections of Middle Eastern music wove seamlessly into Handel's harmonies, lending an added dimension of color and expressivity. The interplay between the orchestra and the ensemble felt entirely organic, never forced—proof of the deep respect and mutual understanding between the musicians. One of the most striking aspects of the evening was how naturally the musical traditions intertwined. The call-and-response structures of Sufi chant echoed the choral grandeur of Handel's score, while the ornamented phrasing of the oud and violin seemed to illuminate Handel's already rich harmonic textures.

The transition from one tradition to another was never abrupt; rather, the concert unfolded like a gradual synthesis, mirroring the idea of unity emerging from diversity.

Even the text itself took on new meaning in this context. The biblical passages recounting plagues and liberation—so often depicted in stark, almost violent musical terms—were softened and recontextualized by the insertion of Middle Eastern musical commentaries. It was as if the music itself was offering a counterpoint, reminding us that narratives of struggle are always intertwined with the longing for peace.

By the time the concert reached its closing moments, the transformation was complete. What began as a juxtaposition of traditions had evolved into something greater—a singular musical and spiritual experience that transcended borders and historical divides. The final choral passages, enriched by the warm timbres of the oud and the lyrical expressivity of the Middle Eastern strings, felt less like an ending and more like an opening—an invitation to continue the conversation.

As the final notes faded, the audience sat in a moment of reverent silence before erupting into applause. The performance was not only a technical and artistic triumph but also a reminder of music's unique ability to foster understanding and connection.

In an era marked by division, *Befreiung zum Frieden* stands as a testament to the enduring power of music to unite and inspire. Werner Ehrhardt, Yair Dalal, and the extraordinary musicians of both ensembles have crafted a concert that is as intellectually compelling as it is emotionally stirring.

For lovers of Baroque music, this was a revelatory new perspective on Handel. For those drawn to the rich

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traditions of Jewish and Middle Eastern music, it was an affirmation of their enduring beauty and relevance. And for all in attendance, it was a reminder that music, at its best, does not belong to any one culture or tradition—it is a shared language, one that can build bridges where words often fail.

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
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