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Review: Seattle Symphony and guest soprano set Handel fest beautifully in motion

Seattle Symphony kicks off the American Handel Festival with a program including soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian and well-known Handelian conductor Nicholas McGegan, on March 11 and 12, 2011.

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CONCERT REVIEW |

The American Handel Festival, set to bring Seattleites a generous sampling of the master's music over the next two weeks, got off to an auspicious start on Friday evening. Isabel Bayrakdarian was a thrilling soloist, and the Seattle Symphony played under the leadership of one of the leading Handelians of our time, Nicholas McGegan, a conductor whose concerts are never less than exhilarating.

The best composer-centered festivals tend to be those that present the subject of their focus not in isolation, but set in context by work from other hands. This festival is no exception. Friday's brilliant and stylish performances of an F-major suite from Handel's "Water Music," excerpts from his opera "Giulio Cesare," and his G-major Concerto grosso, Op. 6 No. 1, were flanked by explorations of three of his German contemporaries.

The evening was headlined "Songs of Cleopatra." That Egyptian queen is famous not only for her political acumen but for her bewitching appearance, so it was appropriate that the singer representing her on the stage of Benaroya Hall is herself a striking beauty.

Isabel Bayrakdarian's good looks, however, are worthily matched by her voice and artistry. The voice itself is essentially a lyric soprano, but she wields it with more power than that designation would suggest. The arias she sang from Graun's "Cleopatra e Cesare" and Hasse's "Marc'Antonio e Cleopatra" called forth some fearless coloratura, free and flexible throughout the range, and clear in the separation between notes even at rapid tempos.

Perhaps more impressive still was her profound identification with the grief of the death scene from "Cleopatra," by Johann Mattheson, who once fought a duel with Handel but remained on terms of close friendship with him. The four sections of this intensely emotional excerpt ended the official program, but the ovation that greeted its performance was rewarded with an aria from the same work, and this little gem reinforced the impression that this neglected composer and his music must surely be candidates for rediscovery.

Through all this, McGegan was his usual exuberant self. He drew elegant and zestful playing from the orchestra's strings, with Emma McGrath, Elisa Barston, and Eric Gaenslen constituting an impeccable concertino group. Oboist Stefan Farkas, who had much to do, did it beautifully, and there were strong contributions from Michael Gamburg on the bassoon, Kimberly Russ on the harpsichord, and John Cerminaro with two of his horn-section colleagues.

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