

**Dominique Labelle is wickedly good in 'Athalia'**

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

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Athalia, the wicked Judean queen in Handel's oratorio of the same name, has good reason to rage. Not only does she face the wrath of Jehovah when her scheme to usurp the throne and perpetuate the worship of Baal unravels, but she also hasn't been given nearly as much music to sing as a title character deserves.

Don't cry for Athalia, though. Fortunately for her - and for patrons of the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, which concludes its 2008-09 season with a fiery and sometimes brilliant performance of this early work - she's embodied by soprano Dominique Labelle, who on Saturday night in Berkeley's First Congregational Church made up for the unjust slimmness of her assignment with a performance of thrilling virtuosity and dramatic power.

Labelle has been Philharmonia's soprano of choice in these leading Handelian roles for many seasons now, but Saturday's performance revealed a new measure of intensity and flexibility in her approach. Athalia's soul is a whirlwind of fury and anxiety, and Labelle made that fierce power shine through without compromising precision or musical responsiveness.

The point was made in her opening recitative, but the real payoff came in the latter acts. One aria, "My vengeance awakes me," may well be one of the fastest arias Handel ever wrote, and Labelle tore through it with almost alarming ferocity; in Athalia's final aria, the defiant "To darkness eternal," she faced her end through torrents of impeccable coloratura.

Drawing on Racine's play, which in turn draws on the ever-juicy royal doings outlined in the Book of Kings, "Athalia" is an engaging but often odd creation. The formal plan, certainly, is ungainly - Josabeth, the wife of the high priest Joad, gets as much to sing as all the other characters combined, popping up like Zelig at every plot point for no very obvious reason, and the libretto, by Samuel Humphreys, is so elliptical that it's hardly worth trying to follow.

More interesting is the close integration of the chorus into the oratorio's texture, as Handel studs the score with aria-and-chorus combo plates. The Philharmonia Chorale, led by Bruce Lamott, sang superbly, making much of the more intimately scaled passages and blazing forth proudly in the trumpet-and-drums explosions that mark the triumphant revelation of the true Judean heir.

Music director Nicholas McGegan led a vivid, emotionally cogent performance, pacing the music smartly but patiently and drawing unusually fine playing from the orchestra. Cellist Tanya Tomkins contributed an especially eloquent solo during "Gentle airs, melodious strains," an ingratiating number by the apostate priest Mathan.

Soprano Marnie Breckenridge, as Josabeth, took on the lion's share of the performance, singing with bright tone and shapely phrasing but without always probing as deeply into the music as she might have. Each aria tended to begin rather tentatively, then grow into its full power as it progressed.

As Joad, countertenor Robin Blaze sounded under the weather during the first act but returned after intermission to give a crisp, eloquent performance. The two duets with Josabeth were beautifully intertwined.

Bass-baritone Roderick Williams, as the general Abner, sang with lustrous fluidity in the upper range and a bit weakly at the bottom. Soprano Céline Ricci was touching as Joas, the boy king, and Thomas Cooley's Mathan was the picture of unctuous insinuation.

**Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra:** "Athalia" repeats at 7:30 p.m. Friday at the Herbst Theatre and at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at the First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto. Tickets: \$30-\$75. (415) 392-4400, [www.philharmonia.org](http://www.philharmonia.org).

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E-mail Joshua Kosman at [jkosman@sfnchronicle.com](mailto:jkosman@sfnchronicle.com).

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