

# The Return of the Hero

**Samson, another high point of the Handel Festival, was performed in Kassel**

**By Verena Joos, Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine, May 12, 2008**

Kassel. In 1741, just after completing the Messiah, Georg Friedrich Handel took up John Milton's "Samson", which was based on a narration from the Book of Judges. He created a work of incomparable emotional power, which with its dramatic potential for entanglement had more in common with the world of opera than any other of Handel's oratorios.

Nicholas McGegan, under whose direction the work rang out at in the Festival Chamber of the City Hall, allowed his inspiration to lead him to a minimalistic scenic interpretation. It was a brilliant decision which took into account both the theatrical and the modulatory qualities of his soloists, as well as the interpretive sensitivity of the North German Radio Chorus and the seductively homogenous ensemble produced by the Festival Orchestra playing on historical instruments.

There he sits in the dungeon of the Philistines, the title hero (Thomas Cooley), whose superhuman power was broken by the betrayal of Dalila (Sophie Daneman). Walls are not necessary to paint the scene of imprisonment and disappointment. Cooley sang "Total Eclipse" in a melting tenor, a cavatina of despair which gets you under the skin.

He is lamented by his friend Micah (Franziska Gottwald, a pliant and impressive alto full of volume) and his father Manoah (William Berger, a wonderfully lyrical bass). One of the (many) highpoints is Dalila's appearance in the dungeon. Daneman, the majestic coloratura soprano and master of shading, performed the aria with an indescribably erotic timber and with the actions of gesture and mime, in an attempt to win back her lover. She was competently supported by the sopranos of the chorus.

To pay tribute to the Idol Dagon, the Philistines and their commander Harapha (Wolf Mathhias Friedrich, an impressively powerful bass, unfortunately the only role outrageously overplayed) organize a celebration into which the blinded Samson is led. Here the fallen hero regains his former strength through his belief in his God Jehovah.

The young tenor Michael Slattery turns the messenger's report of the destruction of the Idol's Temple into a highly dramatic miniature of the horrible scene, before the chorus, in high form, launches into an impressive closing apotheosis. Great rejoicing and standing ovations for a memorable event.