

SAN FRANCISCO CLASSICAL VOICE

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Power Play

[Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra](#)

By [Michael Zwiebach](#)

Nicholas McGegan The Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra and their indefatigable music director, Nicholas McGegan, were in top form as they tore into [Handel](#)'s oratorio *Athalia* Saturday night. That means that a writer can only cast about for enough synonyms for the word *wonderful*. All night long, the air in Berkeley's First Congregational Church crackled with the energy from this performance.

Athalia (1733) is the third English oratorio by Handel, but the first one that he wrote entirely with public performance in mind. It's a boisterous score, filled with great melodies and stimulating ideas. The main plot — about Queen Athalia, who kills the heirs to Judah's throne, but misses one, to her cost — provides plenty of room for strong emotions from the characters, yet it's the chorus that truly comes into its own in this oratorio. They have a lot to do, what with praising God, throwing a harvest festival in Act 2, and impersonating the priests of both Sidon and Judah.

The Philharmonia Chorale, prepared by their director, Bruce Lamott, tackled the challenge with a will. You do begin to notice, toward the end, that there's little dynamic variation in what the chorus is asked to sing. One chorus member related, "Nic kept telling us, 'More butch.'" Taxing as their part is, the singing of the Chorale was always musical, with no distortion in the loud passages, and with clear, though not exaggerated, enunciation of consonants. The blend of voices was beautifully balanced.

The orchestra itself is just a marvel, with quite stable personnel from season to season. The players, being long familiar to each other (and to audiences), not only are stylistically perfect, they also seem to follow their music director's body language, making individual phrases stand out. They're technically amazing, and took some extremely fast tempos in stride, punching out taut rhythms at high speed without sacrificing detail.

The strings, as always, set the tone. Their sound is so full and rich, you'd think they were twice their number. In the overture, where the motives and figures are sharply articulated with rests, the orchestra had already caught fire, as if they (and Handel) couldn't wait to start characterizing the wicked queen.

Spotlit and solo parts abound in the score, so Stephen Schutz on flute in "Softest sounds no more can ease me," R.J. Kelley and Paul Avril on horn, and John Thiessen and Fred Holmgren

on trumpet got to show off their wares. Tanya Tomkins did brilliant work as continuo cellist, particularly in “Gentle airs, melodious strains,” where she used portamento unexpectedly, and to striking effect.

Full-Force Heroine

Dominique Labelle Among the soloists, soprano Dominique Labelle, as Athalia, had top billing. For those who have heard her frequently with this orchestra, the wonder is not that she keeps getting better, but that she displays such variety and range, and possesses such stage presence, that she’s able to do all kinds of roles. She played Athalia to the hilt, from the opening nightmare sequence to the famous rage aria, “My vengeance awakes me.”

One of my friends observed that the problem with *Athalia* is that there’s not enough of Athalia herself, and with Labelle singing the role that’s certainly true. Handel should have elaborated her final exit aria; as it is she simply has to slink offstage. Labelle has power to spare and she gave full-throated voice to her queen. Yet she also tossed off ornamentation and runs clearly, even delicately.

It’s no fault of Marnie Breckenridge that her character, Josabeth, the woman who saves the heir to the throne, is not as interesting as Athalia. She handled the lyrical music with her customary lovely tone, and her operatic vibrato stood out among her period-style colleagues. With that heavier vibrato comes a little smudginess in ornamentation, but in Breckenridge’s case, it was hardly noticeable. And she blended nicely; in fact, her finest moments were in duet.

Robin Blaze, now a major name in the countertenor ranks, showed exceptionally sensitive musicianship as the priest Joad (husband of Josabeth), animating his musical phrases with individuality and a pure, clear tone. In his hands, the prophecy “Jerusalem, thou shalt no more” became an electric mixture of lyric balm and declamatory force.

In supporting roles, baritone Roderick Williams, as the general Abner, constituted luxury casting. Thomas Cooley made a fine Mathan, and Céline Ricci, French accent and all, was a believable Joas, the young king.

It should be axiomatic among Bay Area music lovers, by now, that a mid-April evening *must* be reserved for the PBO and Handel. If you’ve managed to forget that so far this year, take a minute to rectify your error. It’s not often that this exciting score gets so fresh a performance.

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