

Handelian Feast

By Michael Zwiebach

Those of us in the Bay Area with travel budgets in the high two figures are particularly grateful to Nicholas McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque for their floating Handel festival. We don't have to make the scene at Göttingen or Halle, or even London, to hear vivid, world-class performances of that great composer. To this marvelous group I owe my introduction to *Susanna* and *Theodora* — and now, my first live performance of *Belshazzar*.

Like so many of its brethren, *Belshazzar* (1744) is a knockout, brilliant both dramatically and musically. Saturday's opening night performance at the First Congregational Church in Berkeley was taut and precise, and yet not done slavishly in "early music" style. The Philharmonia Chorale, directed by Bruce Lamott, contributed overpowering sonic splendor in the choruses, while the soloists were uniformly fine, especially the sublime Dominique Labelle.

No one who likes Handel should miss *Belshazzar*. Composed in the same summer as the famous, more often performed *Hercules*, the oratorio has only recently begun to get the exposure that its tremendous musical riches warrant. The past three years have seen a *Belshazzar* bonanza, with performances in Berlin, Boston, and London (where Robert King and the King's Consort did it with James Gilchrist, who also sang the title role here). The classic recording by Trevor Pinnock and the English Concert was rereleased by Deutsche Grammophon in 2004, and a new European recording appeared a year later.

It's about time. *Belshazzar* boasts one of the finest librettos (or wordbooks, to use the English parlance of the time) of all of Handel's oratorios, which is saying something. Charles Jennens, in his last collaboration with the composer, produced a dramatic work of operatic intensity. At the same time, he wove large historical themes into its fabric. By elaborating the story of the reckless king who desecrates Jewish holy vessels, precipitating his downfall, Jennens conveyed the sweep and theological import of the Hebrew prophetic books, quoting from Jeremiah and Isaiah, as well as Daniel, where the story derives.

Boldly Characterized Music

Handel didn't stint in setting this libretto, even though the result is one of his longest oratorios, at nearly three hours. Despite its length and musical breadth, the score is extremely well-balanced and paced. Few notes are wasted or excessive, and the characterizations are sharp and carefully distinguished one from another. The first act begins with an extraordinary accompanied recitative, a meditation on the fate of empires that must have struck many listeners on Saturday as timely. It moves through rollicking party music for the Babylonians and their king, which is interrupted by two striking choruses for the Jews.

The first of these, "Recall, O king, thy rash command!" begins both a cappella and pianissimo. The sobriety of this music makes the strongest possible contrast with the preceding music. With its chromatically inflected harmonies, it partly resembles a 17th-century Italian motet — until, that is, the orchestra swells in to support a powerful fortissimo on the words "great Jehovah, king of kings."

The act's closing chorus, "By slow degrees the wrath of God," begins with a slow crescendo, rendered with startling immediacy and power by the Philharmonia Chorale. It ends with one of those extraordinary Handel fugue themes that seems more devoted to word-painting than fugal process: "And every step he takes ... precipitates the thunder down."

Outstanding Soloists, High Drama

In his quest to emphasize historical themes, Jennens lighted on the character of the Babylonian queen mother Nitocris, who, as Anthony Hicks put it in his notes, became "the presiding genius of the oratorio." She voices the opening recitative and allies herself with Daniel and the Jews in an attempt to prevent the coming destruction. In this role, Labelle outdid herself, unfolding all the myriad colors in her voice, singing with full, opera-house vibrato and tone, and at other times singing plainly. She was alive to every nuance in the setting of the words, her elocution was exemplary, and she was emotionally honest, as well, acting the role in her voice. Her solo that opens the third act, "Alternate hopes and fears distract my mind," achieved almost tragic intensity.

As her youthfully irresponsible son, James Gilchrist tore into his part with gusto. His tremendous vigor and clarion sound sent shock waves through the auditorium at his first entrance. If anything, he overenunciated, though his energy and fire blended perfectly with his conductor's reading.

As Daniel, countertenor William Towers displayed a pure, well-focused tone, befitting a prophet, with only an occasional, slight vibrato. In his opening aria, "O sacred oracles of truth," he showed a feeling for long line, as well as a fine pianissimo.

Mezzo-soprano Cécile van de Sant sang the role of the Persian king, Cyrus. She was appropriately martial, which in Handel always means dealing with long melismatic runs. She dispatched these with ease and only slight aspirations. She effectively brought out the contrast with the Babylonian king, playing the wise ruler. In another brilliant dramatic stroke, Jennens added the character of Gobryas, which Xenophon mentioned in his history of the period. Played by the outstanding young bass Andrew Foster-Williams, the grief-stricken Gobryas has seen his child murdered by Belshazzar and has joined Cyrus to seek revenge. Foster-Williams made the most of this part, singing the character's main aria, "Oppress'd with never-ceasing grief," with noble simplicity and a round, burnished tone that belied his slight frame.

The orchestra was on its mettle, the extraordinary string section offering up its gorgeous, full tone and playing as one. Rhythms were sharp and transparent, and every phrase of the music was investigated and given life. McGegan loves to highlight the sometimes busy and jumpy Handelian accompaniments, but he also makes them so clear, and keeps the textures so balanced, that it all seems the most natural and inevitable way for the music to proceed. Call this performance of *Belshazzar* one for the ages.

(Michael Zwiebach holds a Ph.D. in music history from UC Berkeley.)