

Philharmonia plays up grandeur of Handel's 'Belshazzar'

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

Wednesday, April 18, 2007

Even among the lofty company of Handel's other oratorios, "Belshazzar" is a stunner. Grandiose, intellectually ambitious and packed with music of astonishing beauty and variety, this is one of the pinnacles of Baroque music drama, and Saturday's performance by Nicholas McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra brought it out in all its greatness.

In his last collaboration with librettist Charles Jennens of "Messiah" fame, Handel took on the story of the Babylonian tyrant whose triumphal dinner party was disrupted by the original "handwriting on the wall." But even though the Book of Daniel is the source for this story, "Belshazzar" is probably the least religious of the composer's biblical oratorios.

That's because Jennens' remarkable libretto draws on the historical works of Herodotus and Xenophon, and the widened focus produces not merely a theological pageant but a dramatically compelling meditation on the rise and fall of empires.

Daniel, in fact, is a fairly minor character in these proceedings, as the title suggests; the real struggle is between Belshazzar and Cyrus, the Persian king who has come to do him in. Cyrus has the God of Israel in his corner, naturally -- he could hardly prevail otherwise -- but in this oratorio piety tends to take second place to political science.

The tone is set in the extraordinary opening recitative. Here Belshazzar's mother, Nitocris, ponders the inevitable growth and decline of empires like her son's -- and does it in the imagery of child-rearing.

The rest of the work is a similarly far-reaching exploration of power, arrogance, faith and good government. And whereas most of Handel's oratorios depict a clash of two nations -- the Israelites and whoever happens to be oppressing them at the moment -- "Belshazzar" involves three, each of them vividly characterized in Handel's score.

There are the sybaritic Babylonians, with their ornate orchestrations and lusty, swaying rhythms just one step removed from tavern songs. There are the Persians, marching with virile heroism into battle; and finally, there are the downtrodden Jewish exiles, whose muted choruses, lit from within, speak of both persecution and an inside line to the divine.

Handel plays these forces and their leaders against one another with the skill of a master dramatist. The scene of the writing hand is rendered in all its eerie splendor with some sparse, hair-raising string writing, and Handel goes all out in the stirring battle scenes. Act 1 ends with a magnificent showdown between Belshazzar -- the original proponent of "You're either with us or against us" -- and his increasingly apprehensive mother.

Performing in Berkeley's First Congregational Church, McGegan led a rendition of almost frightening intensity and impact. The orchestra played with gusto in the more extravagant passages, then rendered Handel's more intimate writing crisply and tenderly.

And the singing was never less than first-rate, with top honors going to soprano Dominique Labelle as Nitocris. Labelle has been a regular and welcome visitor here over the years, but I can't recall when she last sang with such a glorious combination of dramatic fervor, tonal luxuriance and pinpoint accuracy.

Tenor James Gilchrist gave a vivid, strong-boned performance in the title role, and mezzo-soprano Cécile van de Sant was a noble, quietly heroic Cyrus. As Daniel, countertenor William Towers struggled a bit in the lower register, but most of his singing was crystalline and sweetly piercing. The singers of Bruce Lamott's Philharmonia Chorale moved dexterously among their three assignments.

Bass-baritone Andrew Foster-Williams made a wondrous showing in the smaller role of Gobryas, an Assyrian noble with his own score to settle against Belshazzar, and tenor Mark Mueller and baritone Jeffrey Fields stepped ably out of the chorus to convey the news of Belshazzar's ultimate defeat.

Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra: 7:30 p.m. Friday. Herbst Theatre, 401 Van Ness Ave. Also 7:30 p.m. Saturday. First United Methodist Church, 625 Hamilton Ave., Palo Alto. Tickets: \$29-\$67. Call (415) 252-1288 or go to www.philharmonia.org.

E-mail Joshua Kosman at jkosman@sfchronicle.com.