

# What's Playing? - Greenwich Choral Society's "Alexander's Feast"

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George Fredric Handel, who lived from 1685 to 1749, was a prolific Baroque composer, who, though born in Germany, spent the greater part of his career in England.

His most famous work is the oratorio "Messiah," but he wrote many other pieces -- oratorios, both sacred and secular; operas, (some of which are being revived); and instrumental pieces. The music of his period was stylized and formal.

The excellent Greenwich Choral Society presented one of his rarities, "Alexander's Feast," subtitled "The Power of Musick," last Saturday. The text, "An Ode in Honour of Saint Cecilia," was by the British poet John Dryden and the work had its premiere in Covent Garden in 1736. A lavish piece, it has properties of both opera and oratorio. Although unstaged.

Handel had a gift for infusing the formality of his music with emotion and drama. This piece was no exception. Basically a series of recitatives, arias and choruses, it describes the celebration of Alexander's conquest of Persia in 330 B.C. organized by the musician Timotheus. Three soloists tell the story, and the chorus comments. Two instrumental pieces for the chamber orchestra were added. The composer's Harp Concerto in B Flat Minor, with soloist Rita Costanzi, received a stunning performance, and close to the end, one beautiful and sensitive section of the Organ Concerto in G Minor, with organist James Wetzel.

Under conductor Paul Mueller, this group has developed a cohesive sound which by turns is both velvety and brilliant, depending on what the composer asks for. Their diction is excellent, and thanks to Mueller, they have ability to produce a wide spectrum of dynamic effects. They really were marvelous.

The solo singers were soprano Tharanga Goonetilleke, tenor Kirk Dougherty and Bass Thomas Woodman. Goonetilleke made her demanding role sound easy, displaying a warm, beautiful sound from the top of her range all the way down. She dramatized the text vocally with style and excellent taste. Dougherty's robust, well-controlled voice avoided the sometimes tight, over-restrained singing indulged in by some "Baroque" tenors, and was charming both in character and style.

Thomas Woodman provided some wonderful moments with his two arias. Always a satisfyingly solid bass, he was a delight to hear again. All three singers displayed fine musicianship and sensitivity to the composer's intent. In the last few sections, Dryden's lyrical text was especially affecting. In the final sections, Cecilia is invoked as the "inventress of the vocal frame," and on one of Handel's sublime showers of descending lines, the text is, "He raised a mortal to the skies, She drew an angel down."

This was the first time I had ever heard "Alexander's Feast" in its entirety, and I'd like to hear it again.

In a lovely tribute in the program, the concert was dedicated to the memory of [Sallie Walter Williams](#), a guiding light of the Greenwich Choral Society for many, many years.