

## Feasting on the power of music (An example of music's power to persuade)

MUSIC REVIEW by Jeffrey Johnson

In 1736 Handel wrote music about the power of music itself, a work titled "Alexander's Feast; or The Power of Musick, An Ode to St Cecilia." This piece was performed recently by [The Greenwich Choral Society](#), conducted by their music director [Paul F. Mueller](#) at [Christ Church Greenwich](#).

The work unfolds like a mixtape. The bard Timotheus played five songs to Alexander the Great and his wife, Thais. Each of the songs moved Alexander and caused him to understand things around him differently. The first song made him feel like a god himself, the second was a drinking song, the third made him actually shed tears for his foe Darius, whom he defeated on the battlefield. The fourth was a love song that drew him closer to his wife, but the fifth filled him with such strong thoughts for vengeance against his foes that he burned down the conquered city itself.

So the Handel work celebrates but also cautions against the power of music to persuade.

Unlike an operatic setting of the story, there is no part for Alexander or Thais, so we as audience gauge their reactions from the music itself, and Handel set these reactions in vibrant and often surprising harmonies and modulations.

Mueller helped tell the story in the placement of the soloists. The overture closed with an andante during which the tenor soloist [Kirk Dougherty](#) and soprano soloist [Tharanga Goonetilleke](#) processed down the center aisle of the church and took seats in front of the conducting podium. In this sense the "happy pair" to whom the music was addressed were not only Alexander and Thais, but the soloists who embodied music itself in the telling of the story.

Dougherty sang with strong narrative sensibilities and communicated a sense of delight in the flowing melismas that appear within his part like spring flowers. Goonetilleke's strength is the overwhelming power and clarity of her voice.

The continuo part shifted from harpsichord to harp when the fingers of Timotheus "touched" the lyre. It was a clever way to underscore a transformational moment in the narrative and it introduced harpist [Rita Costanzi](#), who played the harp concerto in Bb major Op. 4 no 6. This concerto is one of three by Handel that were included in the original version of this work but later omitted. Costanzi played with fluidity and compelling musicianship.

Baritone Thomas Woodman entered from the doorway stage left with a deep flourish and bow. He captured the attitude of the royal hunting music with which the second song opens. He was an audience favorite as he sang of drinking as the "soldier's pleasure." Woodman also caught the dance energy of this music and made the physicality of the music itself audible.

After intermission, Mueller reminded the audience that the concert was dedicated to the memory of longtime GCS member and supporter SallieWilliams. He drew our attention to a line from near the end of the work "She drew an angel down."

The line refers to an action of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of music, who drew angelic music down to the Earth. Mueller asked us to think of Williams and her long service to the GCS during this line.

"Alexander's Feast" is an infrequently performed work and that made it especially pleasurable to hear it performed with the care and attention to detail invested into the process by the Greenwich Choral Society.