

Tafelmusik

HANDEL ALEXANDER'S FEAST

Directed by Ivars Taurins

February 22–25, 2018, Koerner Hall, TELUS Centre for Performance and Learning

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

Alexander's Feast, or The Power of Musick

Amanda Forsythe soprano

Thomas Hobbs tenor

Alexander Dobson baritone

Julia Seager-Scott harp soloist

Neil Cockburn organ soloist

There will be a 20-minute intermission between Parts One and Two

Program Notes

by Charlotte Nediger

Performances of odes on November 22, the feast day of the patron saint of music, St. Cecilia, were a regular feature of the concert season in London at the end of the seventeenth century. John Dryden's ode, *Alexander's Feast, or the Power of Musick*, was written for the occasion in 1697, set to music (now lost) by Jeremiah Clarke. From 1700 the tradition died out, but composers continued to write settings of St. Cecilia odes as concert works. Handel composed two such odes, the first being *Alexander's Feast* in 1736. (The second, *From Harmony, from heavenly Harmony*, followed three years later). The premiere of *Alexander's Feast* took place at Covent Garden on February 19, a few short weeks after Handel completed the score. Dryden's text was adapted by Handel's friend, the Irish playwright Newburgh Hamilton, who "took care not to take any unwarrantable liberties" with Dryden's original.

The audience at the premiere numbered 1,300, and it was so well received that an additional eight performances were given. Handel remounted it again the following season:

Last Night Mr. Dryden's Ode, call'd Alexander's Feast, was performed at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, to a splendid Audience, where his Royal Highness the Prince and Princess of Wales were present, and seem'd to be highly entertain'd, insomuch that his Royal Highness commanded Mr. Handel's Concerto on the Organ to be repeated.
[A London newspaper account, March 17, 1737]



The libretto describes a banquet held by Alexander the Great and his mistress Thaïs in the captured city of Persepolis. The musician Timotheus sings and plays his lyre, inciting various emotions in Alexander until he is roused to burn the city in revenge for his fallen soldiers. Cecilia arrives to turn the barbarity to a more uplifting end through her “loftier” music.

The aim of St. Cecilia odes is to celebrate music, and it is evident here in the range of orchestrations in the airs and choruses, and by the inclusion of two concertos — one for harp, representing Timotheus’

lyre, and one for organ, representing “the divine Cecilia.”

Engraved portrait of Handel by
Jacobus Hoebraken, with frame and
cartouche engraved by Gravelot,
1738, for the first edition of the score
of *Alexander's Feast*.

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