

# Handel: Alexander's Feast

North Carolina Master Chorale  
Alfred E. Sturgis, Music Director

Carley DeFranco, Soprano  
Brian Thorsett, Tenor  
Jonathan Cooper, Bass  
Chamber Orchestra of the Triangle

Saturday, October 22 at 3pm  
Hayes Barton Baptist Church

## Program

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Alexander's Feast

G.F. Handel (1685-1759)

## Program Notes

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Handel was one of the Baroque period's most cosmopolitan composers. Born and trained in Saxony and Hanover, he spent three critical years in Italy where he flourished as a composer of the king of musical genres, opera. In 1710, upon his return to Hanover, he traveled to England on a musical "scouting" expedition under the patronage of the elector George Louis (heir to the English throne). During his eight-month visit, he composed *Rinaldo*, the first Italian opera composed specifically for London. The next year, his patron, now George I, brought Handel back to England for good.

Fortunately, Handel had immigrated to a land with a rich and varied theatrical tradition, regarded as all the more precious since all entertainment venues had been shut down during the reign of the Puritan Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell. With the Restoration of the monarchy, came the resurgence of musical entertainments: spoken drama with incidental music; masques, celebratory pastiches of music, dance and elaborate scenery based on fanciful allegories and mythological subjects; secular choral odes and religious anthems; and, of course, opera. The master of all these genres was the homegrown Henry Purcell (1659-1695), who drew on continental models to create a unique English Baroque style and had been the darling of the British

aristocracy. Although the two composers were of different generations, Purcell's influence on Handel was enormous, particularly his choral writing and his fluid incorporation of a chorus into dramatic works.

By the end of the 1720s the English love for Italian grand opera was in decline. The opera public tired of the exercises in vocal pyrotechnics, static, repetitious plots, improbable love stories and strutting castrati with their pretensions and astronomical fees. Although the competing opera companies of the German transplant Handel and the Italian transplant Nicola Porpora, continued to battle it out for the allegiance of the royal family and the nobility, both ended up broke. But Handel was a survivor, while Porpora returned to Italy to die in obscurity and poverty. Ever sensitive to public taste as well as the bottom line, Handel cast around for a new medium to regain his popularity. Whatever he came up with would have to compete successfully with the socializing, drinking, card playing and flirting that were as important a part of opera attendance as the music itself.

His solution was the dramatic oratorio, based on biblical and classical subjects meant for popular entertainment, not as religious fare. Handel's oratorios represented a new musical genre, borrowing dramatic action from opera, narrative

recitative from the Passion sung at Eastertide, contemplative religious content from cantatas and anthems – all sung in English. Originally the dramatic oratorio emerged as a workaround in response to the Bishop of London's banning of stage presentations during Lent in 1727.

Handel's first attempts, *Esther* and *Deborah*, met with little success, and he left off developing the genre for five years. *Alexander's Feast*, composed in 1736, was another experimental work, a musical setting of a narrative poem by one of England's greatest poets of the preceding century, John Dryden (1631-1700). The aim of Dryden's poem, a dedicatory ode to Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music and musicians, was to proclaim the power of music; Handel's setting was to illustrate that power and *Alexander* conquered London.

*Alexander's Feast* falls into a category all its own, neither opera, oratorio, ode nor masque, it partakes of all four genres. Although it is loosely narrative, it contains more *theme* than *plot* and is more accurately described with its alternate title. Of Dryden's ode, let's just say it's a "period piece," one of many such extravagancies that never attained the staying power of Handel's music. Although Dryden himself labeled certain verses of the ode "Chorus," there is no indication that the poem received more than spoken recitation. Handel's genius was to run with Dryden's conceit.

The title reads:

*Alexander's Feast Or The Power of Musick*  
*Wrote in Honour of St. Cecilia by Mr. Dryden*  
*Set to Musick by MR. HANDEL*

Like the *opera seria*, the meager—and anachronistic—plot harks back to reconstructed and romanticized ancient history. There are only three characters, none of whom is portrayed dramatically:

- Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) (during the Persian war);
- Thaïs, a courtesan and Alexander's "partner," credited by history as having urged him to burn the Persian capital, Persepolis;
- Timotheus, a musician whose art can manipulate the feelings of the king and his court.

Although the poem is a third-person narrative, Handel "gets inside the heads" of the characters through the dramatic nature of the music describing their actions. Unnamed soprano, tenor and bass soloists provide the narrative glue in simple recitatives. Handel parcels out to them nine airs, each one illustrating the mood, or affect, of the situation, but the soloists are not associated with any particular character. The chorus responds with refrains or commentary. Following Purcell's model and Dryden's labeling instructions, Handel integrated the chorus into the story, solidifying the most important element in the transition from opera to oratorio. He employed accompanied recitatives and varied the typical operatic *da capo* (ABA) aria structure to enhance musical interest and emotional affect. A large orchestra broken into smaller ensembles contributed to the musical imagery. After *Alexander's* success, Handel would go on to hone and perfect all these techniques in the dramatic oratorios, the jewels of his late career.

In Part I, the opening recitative sets the scene. Outside the walls of the city of Persepolis (the Persian capital) Alexander has slain King Darius in battle but without taking the city. Accompanied by his courtiers and the minstrel Timotheus, he takes a breather to celebrate with Thaïs. After the courtiers join in choral praise, Alexander recalls his military exploits, fancying himself one of the gods. Timotheus counters with a mournful air, reminding Alexander of Darius's greatness and virtue. He then questions whether the "toil and trouble" of war are worth the "empty bubble" of honor. At last, mollified by Timotheus's music – plus a bit too much wine and a sideways glance at Thaïs – the king succumbs to love.

By Part II, Timotheus has apparently changed his tune. He has conjured the Furies to incite Alexander to avenge his slain and unburied comrades by burning Persepolis. Thaïs seductively leads him on to revenge until St. Cecilia appears and, through *sacred* music, moderates the passions of the king and his court – although presumably not in time to rescue Persepolis. As the personification of the Classical world, however, Timotheus can only achieve so much. St. Cecilia's intervention, in effect,

“harmonizes” Classical paganism with the divine music of Christianity.

One of the most important characteristics of Baroque music was to convey emotion, or affect. Entire treatises on musical rhetoric were written specifying motives, ornaments, instrumentation and other musical devices that served as a kind of musical rhetoric on how to move listeners. Moreover, the idea that the perfect blend of poetry and music could produce a transcendent state that put humans in consonance with the harmony of the spheres dates back to the Ancient Greeks. The mythological standard bearer was Orpheus, whose music calmed wild beasts, made stones weep and melted the heart of the god Hades to release from the dead the poet/musician’s wife Eurydice. In another poem honoring St. Cecilia, Dryden expanded on this ancient philosophy.

Bach and Handel were firm believers, their works representing the epitome of this ideal. Bach in his sacred cantatas and Passions, and Handel in his

operas and oratorios, were sensitive to the matching of music to text, creating in sound feelings and pictorial images, although Bach was the more fastidious of the two. In *Alexander’s Feast*, The abrupt changes in mood are designed to illustrate the rhetoric of musical affect. There is the usual “directional” tone painting, using ascending and descending scales to signal apotheosis and St. Cecilia’s descend from heaven respectively. But there’s also the place where Handel runs into problems coordinating the total destruction of a great city, as led by a woman. Forced to choose, he has Thaïs mincing into Persepolis.

That the Christian martyr St. Cecilia lived and was martyred some 500 years after the pagan Alexander the Great seems not to have slowed down Dryden or Handel, and we should probably give it a pass as well.

Program notes by:  
Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn  
wordprosmusic.com

## Artist Biographies

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### **Carley DeFranco, Soprano**

Carley DeFranco, commended for her “stunningly exquisite, soaring soprano” and silvery smooth voice”, is an interpreter of oratorio, opera and song alike. She regularly performs with Emmanuel Music and Boston Opera Collaborative and has appeared here and abroad as a soloist with Emerald City Opera, the Sistema Side-by-Side Orchestra, the Bach Sinfonia, the BACH Orchestra in Yekaterinburg, Russia, the Vladimir Symphony Orchestra and the Madrigals of Glasgow, Scotland. Some of her recent performances include the role of Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro* with Greater Worcester Opera, Schubert’s *Mass in G* with the Polymnia Choral Society, and Mozart’s *Mass in C Minor* with the American University Symphony Orchestra and Chorus.

Carley especially enjoys performing new music alongside contemporary composers and has given premieres at the Kennedy Center (Millennium Stage Series), American University (Alumni Music Series), the Longy School of Music of Bard College (with Boston Opera Collaborative) and Glasgow University.

She is a second place winner of Celestial Opera Company’s Young Artist Competition and a semi-finalist in the American Prize Competition (Art Song/Oratorio). A native of Rush, NY, Carley holds a Master of Music degree in Vocal Performance from the Longy School of Music of Bard College.

### **Brian Thorsett, Tenor**

Hailed as “a strikingly gifted tenor, with a deeply moving, unblemished voice” ([sfmusicjournal.com](http://sfmusicjournal.com)), tenor Brian Thorsett excels in opera, oratorio and recital across the world. Since taking to the stage, Brian has been seen and heard in over 100 diverse operatic roles, ranging from Monteverdi to Britten, back to Rameau and ahead again to works composed specifically for his talents. Upcoming roles include Jupiter in *Semele*, the tenor in David Lang’s *Little Match Girl Passion* and the title character in the premiere of Josheff’s *The Dream Mechanic*. As a concert singer Brian fosters a stylistically diversified repertoire of over 250 works, which has taken him to concert halls across the US and Europe.

An avid recitalist, Brian is closely associated with expanding the vocal-chamber genre, and has been involved in premieres and commissions of Ian Venables, Scott Gendel, Michael Scherperel, Peter Josheff, David Conte, Shinji Eshima, Gordon Getty, Michel Bosc, and Noah Luna among many others. Upcoming projects include the premiere of David Conte's *Love Songs* and *Three Nash Settings*, Eric Choate's *...and fall*, and Scott Gendels' *Worship Songs*.

Brian has also been heard in recordings, commercials and movies as the voice for SoundIron's library *Voice of Rapture: Tenor*. He is a graduate of San Francisco Opera's Merola Program, Glimmerglass Opera's Young American Artist program, American Bach Soloists' Academy, the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme at Aldeburgh, England and spent two summers at the Music Academy of the West. Brian is currently Assistant Professor of Voice and Opera at Virginia Tech's School of Performing Arts and served on the faculties of UC Berkeley and Santa Clara University.

#### **Jonathan Cooper, Bass**

Baritone, Jonathan Cooper is a recent Master's graduate in voice from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM), where he studied with acclaimed baritone, William McGraw.

Appearances at CCM include baritone soloist in Bach's *St. John Passion*, baritone soloist in *Five Mystical Songs* by Ralph Vaughan Williams, and in "The Monteverdi Project" as both a vocal soloist and harpsichord continuist. An early music specialist, Jonathan performs regularly as bass soloist with Collegium Cincinnati, The Bach Ensemble of St. Thomas, Trinity Chamber Orchestra (Cleveland, OH) and Christ Church Cathedral Choir. His rendition of BWV 82 as part of the inaugural Cincinnati Bach Festival with CSO principal oboist, Dwight Parry, was acclaimed as demonstrating "a dark, caressing voice" with "just the right edge to it." Recent performances include *Der Tod (Death)* in Viktor Ullmann's *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* with Cincinnati Chamber Opera, bass soloists in Charpentier's *Le Reniement de St. Pierre*, Jesus in Arvo Pärt's *PASSIO*, Jesus in Schutz's *St. John Passion*, and soloist in Handel's *Messiah* with the Trinity Chamber Orchestra (Cleveland, OH). Upcoming soloist engagements include performances with the North Carolina Master Chorale, Bach Collegium Fort Wayne, and Apollo's Fire. As Music Associate at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Terrace Park, Ohio, Jonathan sings with the Parish Choir, accompanies services, and performs regularly as bass soloist on the monthly Bach Vespers series.