

CHORAL SOCIETY CONCERT FOR ST CECILIA'S DAY

Handel's Alexander's Feast 19th November 2016

A capacity audience filled the Minster for the Choral Society's presentation of Alexander's Feast, Handel's 1736 oratorio based on Dryden's Ode to St Cecilia, the patron saint of music. Supported by professional musicians - three outstanding soloists and a first-class chamber orchestra, Axminster Choral Society gave a thrilling performance of the two-part version, under the direction of their inimitable conductor Judy Martin. The work itself had undergone many revisions during Handel's lifetime, with additions made to both libretto and score. The format is conventional: recitatives to tell the story interspersed with arias and choruses for contemplation or emphasis. Dryden's original poem was rather short for a full concert work which gave Handel the opportunity to include ornamental orchestral interludes. The concerto in the middle of the first part with virtuoso performances from harpsichord and organ was an outstanding example.

The oratorio opens with a three-movement overture, each one highlighting the various instruments, notably the walking bass of bassoons in the third section. The tenor solo set the scene of the feast with a clear and confident opening recitative leading to general rejoicing in the first chorus. The choir was equally confident, sure of their exits and entrances, all eyes on the conductor and a joy to watch. This pattern of narratives sung by soloists interspersed with choruses led us through the celebratory feast, rejoicing in the feats of Alexander and the blessings of Bacchus, until the minstrel reminded the great ruler of the tragic death of Darius at which point the mood changed.

The soprano's aria mourning this event, expressively sung and beautifully accompanied by strings and organ, marked a turning point in the story.

This lyrical aria was followed by the chorus *Behold Darius*, in which the attention to detail and concentration of the choir was impressive. In part two, after a rousing chorus with flamboyant trumpet and timpani, it was the bass soloist who stepped into the dramatic spotlight: located in the Minster's pulpit, he held the audience in rapt attention with his aria *Revenge, revenge*, describing the vengeance of the Furies and the Grecian ghosts. As the work reached its climax, Alexander was reminded of the power of music and the closing section was dedicated to the patron saint in whose honour this oratorio had been written. It was especially pleasing to note that the three soloists joined in as the choir sang their final Grand Chorus in praise of Cecilia. All three gave superb performances: soprano Harriet Mountford, tenor Michael Graham and bass Julian Rippon. The orchestra too deserve great praise, with special mention of Peter Lea-Cox on harpsichord, and on the organ Peter Parshall who is also Music Director of the Choral Society. Steered through this demanding work by their charismatic conductor Judy Martin, members of the choir gave the audience a memorable evening of high quality music. At the back of the church was gold banner with a message to the choir: 'Look Up and Smile'. They did, and what a pleasure it was for us to see and hear them.

Sydie Bones