

Review: Spiritus Chamber Choir gifts audience with rarely sung Handel piece

[Kenneth DeLong, Calgary Herald](#) Updated: March 20, 2018

Alexander's Feast is a work more known about than frequently performed. Composed in 1736 just as Handel was turning away from composing Italian opera to works in English, it tends to sound "old" (like Henry Purcell) compared to the more modern style of the later English oratorios. To a considerable degree, this is, no doubt, because of the immensely arch text by John Dryden: the mock heroics of the Restoration style are a hard sell in the era of Reality TV.

It was thus an act of courage for Spiritus Chamber Choir to choose this particular work to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Timothy Shantz becoming director of the choir. But it was a gamble that paid off handsomely in artistic terms.

With the growth in vocal ability the choir has shown over the past decade, it was not surprising that it was fully capable of delivering Handel's choral writing in a clear, sprightly way; the runs nicely articulated and the text projected with character and excellent enunciation.

What gave it an extra boost was the performance of the newly founded, baroque-style orchestra Rosa Barocca Ensemble, complete with period oboes and trumpets, not to mention harpsichord, theorbo and baroque harp. Founded by Claude Lapalme less than two years ago, and led on this occasion by Shantz, the orchestra provided the choir and soloists with stylish, elegant support.



Spiritus Chamber Choir led by Timothy Shantz CALwp

The sense of the baroque sound was particularly apparent in the balance between the string and wind instruments, with the oboes (particularly excellent) assuming a prominent role. Both horns and trumpets occupy a significant place in the scoring of this work, the leaders of which — Heather Wooten and Richard Scholz respectively — were first class in their parts.

Special mention also needs to be made of Julia Seager-Scott, the harp player, who, as was the case in the original performance, performed a harp concerto in the middle of the work. This was everyone's favourite Handel harp concerto, the same one used by Alan Sangster for many years on his much-loved CBC programs devoted to the music of famous composers — including Handel.

Playing with a sure technique and with eloquence, the famous concerto again hit its mark with the audience, which spontaneously burst into applause.

Precise, discrete string playing rounded out the instrumental excellence of this performance.

The work includes four soloists, all of whom had voices remarkably apt for this kind of music. These included soprano Laura Hynes, whose clarity of tone and sense of character set the bar very high. She was joined by mezzo-soprano Sara Staples, who continues to impress with her beautiful sound

voice and eloquent legato. Too bad Handel didn't give her just one more aria to sing.

The lion's share of the narration is given to the tenor, on this occasion sung by Lawrence Wiliford. Even more than on other occasions, he was in his element here. His voice is perfect for this type of Handel, and in the beautiful Bella Concert Hall, he didn't need to push the sound. The result was eloquent Handelian singing at its finest.

There is only one famous solo item from this work, and it is the magnificent bass aria *Revenge, Revenge* Timotheus Cries. Roderick Bryce, heard before in the city as a soloist, was impressive here, his voice attractive, smooth, and well projected. Blessed with an easy top register, Bryce was able to deliver the aria with panache, the orchestra providing some excellent ghostly music in the remarkable middle section.

Shantz led the combined forces with his customary vigour and clarity of direction. Comfortable leading an orchestra, he is still the master of ensuring choral ensembles give the best of themselves in vocal and musical terms. The two final choruses, give the choir a chance to strut their stuff, and so they did, bringing to a conclusion a remarkably fine performance of this little-performed Handel choral work. Happy anniversary to Mr. Shantz!