

Handel's *Alexander's Feast* a marvellous musical meal in Tafelmusik's hands

Alexander's Feast is a musical showcase like few others. It gets more than its full due from a stage full of Tafelmusik Orchestra, Chamber Choir and guests under the baton of Ivars Taurins at Koerner Hall this week.

At its first-ever performance at the hands of Toronto's globally loved Tafelmusik on Thursday night, the music positively glowed. The invited soloists were as good as anyone could ever hope for, and the choir and augmented orchestra were at their very best.



Tafelmusik and singers perform *Alexander's Feast* by Handel on Thursday, Feb. 22 at Koerner Hall. (John Terauds photo)

The text for *Alexander's Feast* showcases every human emotion, and this masterful interpretation of a masterpiece of a score did justice to all of them.

George Frideric Handel, before his eternal fame as the composer of the oratorio *Messiah*, was a composer of Italian operas. Londoners grew tired of hearing the same-old overwrought singing and contrived plots season after season, and were looking for something new.

Handel, one of the savviest composers and impresarios of the early 18th century, spiced things up a bit in February 1737, by presenting a setting of John Dryden's 1697 poetic ode, *Alexander's Feast or The Power of Musick*. True to the title, Handel threw in everything he could think of, including (now-famous) concertos for harp and organ.

There are dramatic recitatives, soaring and highly ornamented arias, rousing choruses and a head-spinning variety of different orchestrations at work in this two-hour-plus oratorio.

After all is sung and done, the original poem telling of a banquet thrown by Alexander the Great in a recently captured Persian city is merely a pretext to display something that embraces the ears as well as the heart. It is Handel's ability to depict emotion in music — from celebration to despair and back again — that makes this oratorio something to experience.

It helps that musical forces are more than up to the task. Special kudos go to the soloists: American soprano Amanda Forsythe, whose articulation and ornamentation are the stuff goosebumps are made of; British tenor Thomas Hobbs, a paragon of Baroque-style narration; and British-Canadian baritone Alexander Dobson, who knows how to imbue every note with drama.

The instrumental soloists are just as impressive, from the Tafelmusik members given the spotlight to Calgary-based organist Neil Cockburn (who stepped in at the last minute for Tafelmusik's Charlotte Nediger) and Toronto harpist Julia Seager-Scott, who showcased her difficult-to-play triple-strung harp with virtuosic grace.

The collected forces so fully embodied the final lines of the closing chorus —

“And may this evening ever prove, sacred to harmony and love” — that all we could do was applaud wildly in agreement when it was done. Performances continue to Sunday afternoon.

Classical music writer John Terauds is supported by the Rubin Institute for Music Criticism, San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation.