Alexander's Feast

– George Frideric Handel



Sunday, November 22 | 4 pm
Christ Church Chorale & Orchestra



PROGRAM

Alexander's Feast, HWV 75 — *George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)*

The Christ Church Chorale and Orchestra

Sara Surzyn, *soprano*
Amy Mizikow, *alto*
Nick Edwin, *tenor*
Jake Surzyn, *bass*

Scott Hanoian, *conductor*

There will be a 15 minute intermission between Parts One and Two.

TEXT

PART ONE
Overture

Recitative (Tenor)
'Twas at the royal feast, for Persia won
By Philip's warlike son:
Aloft in awful state
The god-like hero sate
On his imperial throne:
His valiant peers were plac'd around;
Their brows with roses and with myrtles bound.
So should desert in arms be crown'd.
The lovely Thais by his side
Sate like a blooming Eastern bride,
In flow'r of youth, and beauty's pride.

Air (tenor) and Chorus
Happy, happy, happy pair!
None but the brave,
None but the brave,
None but the brave deserves the fair.

Recitative (Tenor)
Timotheus plac'd on high,
Amid the tuneful quire,
With flying fingers touch'd the lyre.
The trembling notes ascend the sky,
And heav'nly joys inspire.

Accompagnato (Soprano)
The song began from Jove,
Who left his blissful seats above;
(Such is the pow'r of mighty love)
A dragon's fiery form bely'd the God;
Sublime, on radiant spires he rode,
When he to fair Olympia press'd,
And while he sought her snowy breast:
Then, round her slender waist he curl'd,
And stamp'd an image of himself, a sov'reign of the world.

Chorus
The list'ning crowd admire the lofty sound,
"A present deity!" they shout around;
"A present deity!" the vaulted roofs rebound.

Air (Soprano)
With ravish'd ears
The monarch hears,
Assumes the God,
Affects to nod,
And seems to shake the spheres.

Recitative (Tenor)
The praise of Bacchus, then, the sweet musician sung;
Of Bacchus, ever fair, and ever young:
The jolly God in triumph comes;
Sound the trumpets, beat the drums:
Flush'd with a purple grace,
He shows his honest face;
Now give the hautboys breath; he comes, he comes!

Air (Bass) and Chorus
Bacchus, ever fair and young,
Drinking joys did first ordain;
Bacchus' blessings are a treasure,
Drinking is the soldier's pleasure:
Rich the treasure,
Sweet the pleasure,
Sweet is pleasure after pain.

Bacchus' blessings are a treasure,
Drinking is the soldier's pleasure:
Rich the treasure,
Sweet the pleasure,
Sweet is pleasure after pain.

Recitative (Tenor)
Sooth'd with the sound, the king grew vain;
Fought all his battles o'er again;

And thrice he routed all his foes, and thrice he slew the slain!
The master saw the madness rise,
His glowing cheeks, his ardent eyes;
And while he Heav'n and earth defy'd,
Chang'd his hand, and check'd his pride.

Accompagnato (Soprano)
He chose a mournful muse,
Soft pity to infuse.

Air (Soprano)
He sung Darius great and good,
By too severe a fate,
Fall'n from his high estate,
And welt'ring in his blood:
Deserted at his utmost need,
By those his former bounty fed,
On the bare earth expos'd he lies,
Without a friend to close his eyes.

Accompagnato (Soprano)
With downcast looks the joyless victor sate,
Revolving in his alter'd soul,
The various turns of chance below,
And, now and then, a sigh he stole,
And tears began to flow.

Chorus
Behold Darius, great and good,
Fall'n, fall'n, fall'n, fall'n, welt'ring in his blood;
On the bare earth expos'd he lies,
Without a friend to close his eyes.

Recitative (Tenor)
The mighty master smil'd to see
That love was in the next degree;
'Twas but a kindred sound to move,
For pity melts the mind to love:

Arioso (Soprano)
Softly sweet, in Lydian measures,
Soon he sooth'd his soul to pleasures.

Air (Tenor)
War, he sung, is toil and trouble,
Honour but an empty bubble,
Never ending, still beginning,
Fighting still, and still destroying;
If the world be worth thy winning,
Think, oh think it worth enjoying,
Lovely Thais sits beside thee,
Take the good the Gods provide thee.

Chorus
The many rend the skies, with loud applause;
So love was crown'd, but music won the cause.

Air (Soprano)
The Prince, unable to conceal his pain,
Gaz'd on the fair,
Who caus'd his care;
And sigh'd and look'd, sigh'd and look'd,
Sigh'd and look'd, and sigh'd again:
At length with love and wine at once oppress'd,
The vanquish'd victor sunk upon her breast.

Chorus
The many rend the skies, with loud applause;
So love was crown'd, but music won the cause.

PART TWO

Accompagnato (Tenor) and Chorus
Now strike the golden lyre again,
A louder yet — and yet a louder strain!
Break his bands of sleep asunder,
And rouse him, like a rattling peal of thunder.
Hark, hark! — the horrid sound
Has rais'd up his head,
As awak'd from the dead,
And amaz'd, he stares around.

Break his bands of sleep asunder,
And rouse him, like a rattling peal of thunder.

Air (Bass, Alto)
Revenge, revenge, Timotheus cries,
See the furies arise,
See the snakes that they rear,
How they hiss in their hair,
And the sparkles that flash from their eyes!
Behold a ghastly band,
Each a torch in his hand!
Those are Grecian ghosts, that in battle were slain,
And unbury'd, remain
Inglorious on the plain.

Accompagnato (Tenor)
Give the vengeance due
To the valiant crew:
Behold how they toss their torches on high,
How they point to the Persian abodes,
And glitt'ring temples of their hostile gods!

Air (Tenor)
The princes applaud with a furious joy;
And the king seiz'd a flambeau, with zeal to destroy.

Air (Soprano) and Chorus
Thais led the way,
To light him to his prey;
And like another Helen, fir'd another Troy.
The princes applaud with a furious joy;
And the king seiz'd a flambeau, with zeal to destroy.

The princes applaud with a furious joy;
And the king seiz'd a flambeau, with zeal to destroy.

Accompagnato (Tenor) and Chorus
Thus long ago,
Ere heaving bellows learn'd to blow,
While organs yet were mute,
Timotheus to his breathing flute,
And sounding lyre,
Could swell the soul to rage, or kindle soft desire.

At last divine Cecilia came,
Inventress of the vocal frame;
The sweet enthusiasts from her sacred store,
Enlarg'd the former narrow bounds,
And added length to solemn sounds,
With Nature's mother-wit, and arts unknown before.

Recitative (Tenor, Bass)
Let old Timotheus yield the prize,
Or both divide the crown;
He rais'd a mortal to the skies,
She drew an angel down.

Soli and Chorus
Let old Timotheus yield the prize,
Or both divide the crown;
He rais'd a mortal to the skies,
She drew an angel down.

PROGRAM NOTES

George Frideric Handel was a very cosmopolitan musician. He was born in Saxony in 1685, studied opera in Italy in 1706, and eventually moved to England in 1712. Having visited London previously, when his foremost patron from Saxony, the Elector of Hanover, rose to the English throne as George I in 1713, Handel gladly returned to London. There he composed over 40 operas – full of high drama, happy melodies, and musical drama – but by the late 1720's, the English love for Italian opera was in decline. Rather than submit to poverty and obscurity like other composers from competing British opera companies, Handel created a new genre which cemented his fame: the oratorio.

In the new oratorio genre, Handel's initial intention may not have been to create a new way to dramatically convey sacred stories through song, but he found much success. Despite not having the costumes and staging normally seen in opera, through his music he was able to convey human emotion through music. This was a standard of the Baroque period – for musicians to perfectly blend music and text, transcending from earthly things to the ideal harmonies of the heavenly spheres. This harkened back to Ancient Greece, exemplified in the story of Orpheus's music melting the heart of Hades to reclaim his wife from death. There was also a movement in English society in the 18th Century away from the secular, sensationalized passions of the opera and more toward those of religious inspiration.

Lauded English composer Henry Purcell had begun a tradition in 1683 to honor St. Cecelia, the patron saint of music and musicians, on her feast day of November 22. Her story soon became a source for both composers and poets to celebrate music and its power to inspire different sympathies from its audiences. Handel drew text from a the 1697 ode by poet John Dryden, extravagantly titled "*Alexander's Feast or The Power of Musick, wrote in Honor of St. Cecelia,"* as the perfect story to show his own compositional prowess and to also endear him to English audiences. This ode demonstrated the Greek and Baroque schools of thought, how the power of music conquered all (even the greatest man of antiquity, Alexander the Great), and how these ideals were connected to the 18th Century's modern interpretations of feelings and emotions.

In the ode, Alexander the Great is enjoying a victory banquet outside of Persepolis – his army having just vanquished the Persian King Darius III. Present at the feast is Thais, a lovely Athenian courtesan, and the minstrel, Timotheus, to entertain Alexander, Thais, and his army and entourage. Although there are only three characters in the ode (Alexander, Thais, and Timotheus), none are portrayed dramatically by Handel. Instead, the four soloists tell the story of the feast through recitative and aria, and the chorus responds with refrains or commentary on the action. Handel's integration of the chorus into the story was a central element of his transition from opera to oratorio.

Over the course of the feast, Timotheus, with his lyre, enchants the audience with stories. Led primarily by the tenor and soprano soloists interspersed with choir emphasizing the drama, the movements arouse the listeners with a range of feelings: an awed sense of Alexander's sublime heroism; raucous, bacchanalian joy brought on by wine; martial zeal and ardor; heartfelt pity for the vanquished Darius; and even fiery revenge. The first part ends with Alexander being wooed to sleep during the performance as the chorus continues their praises of music and love.

The second part begins with the Timotheus calling for Alexander to wake with a dramatic tenor solo and chorus. With the bass soloist invoking the furies of revenge and the alto describing the Grecian ghosts from battles, the audience remains engaged by Timotheus' music and stories. Alexander wakes by passionate cries to behold the ghosts' light and the furious joy of battle. Thais then takes up the flambeau to lead the soldiers to the warfront again, readied like Homer's Helen to "fire another Troy." It's at this point, after these many facets of human emotion have been roused, that the lyre of Timotheus is silenced, with the flutes appearing for the first time in Handel's piece, and St. Cecelia appears. Armed with the organ – the divine instrument which produces celestial harmonies – Cecelia brings to the soldiers and king a musical inspiration is far superior, and she leads the people to beauty, experiencing "arts unknown before." With a final fugal chorus Handel demonstrates the full "vocal frame" of Cecelia's heavenly music brought to earth.

Alexander's Feast was first produced at Covent Garden in February 1736, and became one of Handel's most admired pieces, often reproduced for assured success whenever Handel felt his audience was lagging. It was performed 25 times in Handel's lifetime, but its fame went beyond London, and even legendary impresario Baron von Sweiten asked Mozart to re-orchestrate and perform it for Viennese patrons.

Though a smaller work, and not as well-known as his later massive choral oratorios, like *Messiah* and *Israel in Egypt,* Handel's *Alexander's Feast* is a quintessential and identifiable Handel piece. Many elements throughout the work will be recognizable to listeners, even including motives and elements that Handel will quote and reuse in his later pieces, such as the chorus "The Listening Sounds" which is very reminiscent to his declamatory "Zadok the Priest" chorus, to the dotted French overture rhythms utilized similarly in *Messiah*. Many of his favored stylistic choices can be heard, like the dramatic homophonic or fugal choral moments, interesting instrumental choices and contrasting textures, virtuosic da capo arias brimming with emotion and drama. Each element heard in *Alexander's Feast* showcases how Handel's vivacious style and compositional confidence was beautifully consistent from this early oratorio and continued to blossom through his large pantheon of compositions still to come.

Meredith Hanoian

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Sunday, November 29

Advent Procession at 4 pm

with the Christ Church Choir

Each year we begin our personal preparations for the Navity of our Lord with the quiet reflection afforded us at the annual Advent Procession.

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Anne Busch
Joy Crawford
Joanne Fisher
Heather Hakim
Laila Hakim
Meredith Hanoian
Michelle Metes
Linda Mosley
Vickie Rice-Parker
Maggie Sicilia
Giles Simmer
Kay Stefanski
Michelle Zmyslowski

Alto
Jennifer Appleberry
Lynn Anslow
Christine Brown
Judith Burkhardt
Sue Chaklos
Liz Goodearl
Isabelle Granger
Paula Labadie
Ruth Louwsma
Britani Martinez
Ann McReynolds
Amy Mizikow
Marissa Richardson
Loretta Ryder
Marilyn Sicklesteel
Mary Steiner
Susan Van Dellen

Tenor
Darin DeWeese
Nicholas Edwin
David Martin
Teddy Sweeney
Brian White
Eric Williams
Larry Wolf

Bass
Glen Battjes
Kurt Battjes
David Clark
James Fitzgerald
Nate Gorman
Melek Kayser
David Krolikowski
Dennis LeRoy
B'Nathaniel Orlu
Dennis Parker
Jake Surzyn
Brendan Walsh

ORCHESTRA

Violin I
Marla Smith*
Connie Markwick
Bonnie Sweda

Violin II
Sander Kostallari
Melody Wootton
Alan MacNair

Viola
John Madison
James Greer

Cello
Debra Lonergan
Judith Vander Weg

Bass
Jon Luebke

Flute
Scott Graddy
Shelly Rouse-Freitag

Oboe
Ann Lemke
Judi Jones

Bassoon
Scott Armstrong
Jonathan Boyd

Horn
Emily Price-Dietz
Melanie Hellick

Trumpet
Mike McGowan
Clark Irwin

Timpani
Kristen Tait

Harpsichord
Joseph Daniel

Organ
Clayton Farmer

**concertmaster*

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Christmas Concert – An Irish Christmas

Messiah Part I (1742)
George Frideric Handel



December 13, 2026 | 4 pm
Christ Church Chorale & Orchestra
Tickets $25

Free pre-concert lecture at 3 pm



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