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Handel Week: From one extreme to the other



Cathryn Wilkinson

Music

A cursory reading of the biography of George Frederick Handel reveals a man of unflagging energy and inspiration who delved into nearly every known venue for his musical compositions. A pillar of 18th-century European music, Handel did it all, making music to match every occasion, heard from grand palaces to popular parks and imposing cathedrals to tucked-away courts.

Oak Park's firmly established Handel Week itself has offered a sampling of Handel's music to match nearly every occasion over its 10-year run. Under the direction of founder Dennis Northway, this year's festival opened Saturday in the calming environs of Grace Episcopal Church with the three extremely popular "Water Music" suites and the crowd-pleasing harp concerto.

From the extreme of Handel's most-often-heard output in large celebratory settings, the second program in this year's festival ventures into an unusual, little-known Handel setting. Organizers for "The Intimate Handel: Play and Sing in Dulcet Tone" on Friday, 7:30 p.m., will transform the standard audience seating into a casual gathering space with candle-lit tables, approximating more closely the setting Handel would have expected.

"The Intimate Handel" may not have been so intimate in Rome, where Handel was a regular composer and performer of musical entertainment in the court of the Marquis Ruspoli, or in London, where he worked in the service of King George. For these and similar venues among the elite, Handel composed nearly 80 short cantatas for soloists and instrumental accompaniment. Like a sit-com with a story and a condensed format, each very short cantata is a micro-opera, without all of the overdone distractions.

Virtually unknown today, hearing this music live is extremely rare; in fact, this week's concert may be a Chicago-area premiere, at least in recent record. Appearing as soprano soloist in her Handel Festival debut is mezzo soprano Amy Anderson de Jong, who, along with oboist Deb Stevenson, will provide the dulcet tones. De Jong already has an impressive career behind her, having appeared in New York City in solo roles at Lincoln Center and at Carnegie Hall. In addition to a number of North American premieres, she has performed locally at Symphony Center, in the Chicago Cultural Center's Dame Myra Hess series, and for broadcasts on WFMT.

After rarities for voice and two sonatas for oboe, the festival programming returns in its closing event, March 8, 3 p.m., to the overly familiar end of the spectrum, with a complete performance of Handel's oratorio, Messiah. Although some portions of Messiah are so ingrained in America as to serve as ring-tones on cellphones, even this old war-horse contains surprises in portions not so often performed. Handel, the master at dramatic storytelling, recounts the complete life of Christ in music, with details beyond the Christmas angels and Easter resurrection.

Soloists for the three-hour tour-de-force are popular returnees Kimberly McCord and Philip Kraus, and Gerald Frantzen and Veronica McHale, who debut this year in the tenor and mezzo-soprano roles. All four have significant credits in the opera world in Chicago and beyond, as well as local ties.

One other extreme should not go without mention, and that is the extent to which organizers go to take care of the

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Courtesy Charles Chauncey Wells
GOING WITH THE FLOW: The Winifred Hawn dance troupe ends the program at Grace Episcopal Church with a flourish with Suite II in D Major HWV 349 last weekend. This was the first time Handel Week has used dance along with its musical performances.

If you go

All performances take place at Grace Episcopal Church, 924 Lake, in Oak Park. For more information, call 708-383-2261 or visit handelweek.com.

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audience at Handel Week events. For those who want details and a passionate look into the stories behind this music, Northway provides insightful comments 45 minutes prior to each performance. A welcoming reception with the artists follows, creating an extremely festive atmosphere, basking in the glow of Handel's genius.



Handel died in 1759, making this year's festival a 250th anniversary commemoration. Beyond an even number on the calendar, the opportunity to hear live music by a master of so many genres is worth commemorating, as is the local dedication and talent that year after year make Oak Park an extremely popular venue for hearing Handel's music.

Tickets for the pair of remaining concerts are \$40; for closing concert only, \$30, with free admission for young people, age 8-18.

When she is not out enjoying live concerts of great music, Dr. Cathryn Wilkinson chairs the music department at Aurora University and presides over the mighty Casavant pipe organ at First United Church of Oak Park.

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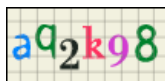
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