

## BMC 47-48 - Handel: *Alexander's Feast* and *Ode for Queen Anne's Birthday*

Handel's Oratorio "*Alexander's Feast*", or "*The Power of Musick*" is based on the poem by John Dryden, (1631-1700), Poet Laureate, dramatist, critic, and the leading literary figure of Restoration England. Born to a Puritan family in Aldwinkle, Northamptonshire, he was educated at Westminster School and Cambridge University. About 1657 he went to London as Clerk to Oliver Cromwell's Chamberlain, and his first important poem was written in memory of Cromwell. After the Restoration, however, Dryden became a Royalist and celebrated the return of King Charles II in two further poems. In 1662 he began to write plays and during the next twenty years he became the most prominent dramatist in England, being appointed Poet Laureate in 1668 and Royal Historiographer in 1670.

In 1683 a musical society was formed in London for performing annually on November 22nd, a composition in honour of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music. Dryden had already written a poem (*A Song for St. Cecilia's Day*) for the 1687 festival. *Alexander's Feast* was written for the festival in 1697, first set to music by Jeremiah Clarke, and later by Handel in 1736. In this Cecilian Ode, subtitled "*The Power of Musick*", Dryden attempts to demonstrate the effects of music upon the emotional harmony of man and also conceives of music as the harmonization of human passion with universal order.

The setting is a scene from classical antiquity: Alexander the Great, after his defeat of Darius and the Persians in 331 B.C., is celebrating the victory with a banquet, at which the famous flute-player, Timotheus, entertains the guests with music.

Like Orpheus reborn, Timotheus, singing and playing the flute and the lyre, is able to inspire and arouse in his listeners a range of intense emotions - sense of sublime divinity, bacchanalian joy, martial zeal, heartfelt pity, tender love, and even fiery revenge. "*The Princes applaud, with a furious joy; And the king seiz'd a flambeau with zeal to destroy;*"

Then Cecilia appears and by giving men the instrument of heavenly harmony – the organ – she extends the benefits of music beyond those influences which Timotheus exerted. "*At last, divine Cecilia came, Inventress of the vocal frame; The sweet enthusiast, from her sacred store, Enlarg'd the former narrow bounds, And added length to solemn sounds.*"

In conclusion the poet decides that Cecilia and Timotheus should divide the musical crown between them. "*Let old Timotheus yield the prize, Or both divide the Crown: He rais'd a mortal to the skies; She drew an angel down.*"

### PART ONE

**1: OVERTURE** - *Maestoso / Allegro ma non troppo / Andante*

#### **2: RECITATIVE (Tenor)**

'Twas at the royal feast, for Persia won by Philip's warlike son; Aloft in awful state the godlike 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.

#### **3: AIR AND CHORUS (Tenor, followed by Chorus and Soloists)**

Happy, happy, happy pair; None but the brave deserves the fair.

#### **4: 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.

#### **5: ACCOMPANIED RECITATIVE (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 belied the god; Sublime on radiant spires he rode, While 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.

#### **6: CHORUS**

The list'ning crowd admire the lofty sound: "A present Deity!" they shout around: "A present Deity!" the vaulted roofs rebound.

#### **7: AIR (Soprano)**

With ravish'd ears the monarch hears, Assumes the God, Affects the nod, And seems to shake the spheres.

#### **8: 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!

**9: 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 the pleasure after pain.

**10: 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.

**11: ACCOMP. RECITATIVE (Soprano)** - He chose a mournful Muse, Soft pity to infuse.

**12: AIR (Soprano)**

He sung Darius, great and good, By too severe a fate Fall'n, fall'n, fall'n, fall'n, 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, With not a friend to close his eyes.

**13: ACCOMPANIED RECITATIVE (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.

**14: CHORUS**

Behold Darius great and good, By too severe a fate Fall'n from his high estate, And welt'ring in his blood; On the bare earth expos'd he lies, With not a friend to close his eyes.

**15: 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.

**16: AIR (Soprano)**

Softly sweet in Lydian measures Soon he sooth'd the soul to pleasures.

**17: 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! (*Da Capo*) War, he sung is toil and trouble.....

**18: CHORUS** - The many rend the skies with loud applause: So love was crown'd, but Music won the cause!

**19: AIR (Soprano) and CHORUS**

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 wine and love 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** - *Tracks:*

**1: ACCOMPANIED RECITATIVE (Tenor) and CHORUS**

Now strike the golden Lyre again! A louder yet, and yet a louder strain! Break his bands of sleep asunder And rouze him, like a rattling peal of thunder.

**CHORUS** - Break his bands of sleep asunder, Rouze him, like a peal of thunder.

**RECITATIVE** - Hark, Hark the horrid sound Has rais'd up his head: As awak'd from the dead, And amaz'd, he stares around.

**2: AIR (Bass)**

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 in their eyes! Behold, a ghastly band, Each  
a torch in his hand! Those are Grecian ghosts, that in battle were slain, And unburied remain Inglorious on the plain:  
Revenge, revenge: (*Da Capo*)

**3: ACCOMPANIED RECITATIVE (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!

**4: AIR (Tenor)**

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

**5: AIR (Soprano) and CHORUS**

Thais led the way, To light him to his prey, And, like another Helen, she fir'd another Troy.

**CHORUS**

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

**6: ACCOMPANIED RECITATIVE (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.

**CHORUS**

At last divine Cecilia came, Inventress of the vocal frame; The sweet enthusiast, 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.

**7: RECITATIVE (Tenor and Bass) / 8: CHORUS and SOLOISTS**

Let old Timotheus yield the prize Or both divide the crown: He rais'd a mortal to the skies  
She drew an Angel down.

Completed on January 17, 1736 and produced at Covent Garden in London on February 19, *Alexander's Feast* became one  
of Handel's most admired works. It was produced once more in February, and three times in March. Later Handel  
repeatedly revived it whenever, with his audiences diminishing, he wanted a "sure-fire" attraction. Altogether it was given  
eighteen times between 1737 and 1743, and eight times in the following decade. It was published in full in Handel's lifetime;  
a notable distinction accorded to only one other of his choral works, *Acis and Galatea*.

*Alexander's Feast* was a product of Handel's mature years, mature both in the musical sense and in the sense that he was by  
then well established in London both as a composer and an impresario. On the other hand, the *Ode for the Birthday of  
Queen Anne* goes back to 1713, when Handel was not even "officially" settled in England.

Born in Germany in 1685, in 1703 at the age of 18, Handel traveled to Hamburg, where he took a job as a violinist at the  
Hamburg Opera and gave private lessons to support himself. Whilst in Hamburg, Handel made the acquaintance of Prince  
Ferdinando de' Medici, who invited him to visit Italy where he spent more than three years, in Florence, Rome, Naples and  
Venice. Here Handel made a number of useful contacts including Prince Ernst August of Hanover, whose brother, the  
Elector George Louis was to become King George I of England. When Handel left Italy early in 1710 it was for Hanover,  
where he was appointed Capellmeister to the Elector, who immediately packed him off on a twelve months' leave of  
absence to England.

During this first London visit, lasting eight months, Handel was favorably received at Queen Anne's Court. Returning only  
briefly to Hanover in 1711, he was back in London by 1712 when he was invited to produce an *English Court Ode* for  
Queen Anne's Birthday. The Queen normally took little interest in her composers, being (according to the Duke of  
Manchester) "*too busy or too careless to listen to her own band, and had no thought of hearing and paying new players however  
great their genius or vast their skill*". It is surprising, therefore, that she granted Handel a pension of £200 a year for life. On  
the other hand, it was Anne who presided over England's dramatic defeat of France, in which John Churchill, Duke of  
Marlborough, put an end to the expansionist ambitions of King Louis XIV. This Ode is therefore one of great joy and  
celebration, which Handel captures in his music just as confidently as in *Alexander's Feast* though in a noticeably more  
youthful style.

But the Queen's health deteriorated, and by September 1714 Britain had a new monarch. Thus it was that George Louis, Elector of Hanover and already naturalized by Act of Parliament in 1705, became King George I of England, and Handel, later himself also naturalized, would become one of England's most celebrated composers.

## Ode for the Birthday of Queen Anne 1713

### 9: *Largo - Countertenor*

Eternal source of light divine!  
With double warmth thy beams display,  
And with distinguish'd glory shine  
To add a lustre to this day.

### *Allegro - Countertenor and Chorus*

The day that gave great Anna birth,  
Who fix'd a lasting peace on Earth.

### 10: *Andante - Soprano*

Let all the winged race with joy  
Their wonted homage sweetly pay  
Whilst tow'ring in the azure sky  
They celebrate this happy day.

### *Chorus*

The day that gave great Anna birth,  
Who fix'd a lasting peace on Earth.

### 11: *Andante - Countertenor*

Let flocks and herds their fear forget,  
Lions and wolves refuse their prey,  
And all in friendly consort meet,  
Made glad by this propitious day.

### *Countertenor and Soprano, with Chorus*

The day that gave great Anna birth,  
Who fix'd a lasting peace on Earth.

### 12: *Countertenor and Bass*

Let rolling streams their gladness show,  
With gentle murmur whilst they play,  
And in their wild meanders flow  
Rejoicing in this blessed day.

### *Chorus*

The day that gave great Anna birth,  
Who fix'd a lasting peace on Earth.

### 13: *Andante - Sopranos*

Kind health descends on downy wings,  
Angels conduct her on the way;  
To our glorious Queen new life she brings,  
And swells our joys upon this day.

### *Soprano and Countertenor, with Chorus*

The day that gave great Anna birth,  
Who fix'd a lasting peace on Earth.

### 14: *Allegro - Bass*

Let envy then conceal her head

And blasted faction glide away.  
No more her hissing tongues we'll dread,  
Secure in this auspicious day.

**Chorus**

The day that gave great Anna birth,  
Who fix'd a lasting peace on Earth.

**15: Allegro - Countertenor and Double Chorus**

United nations shall combine,  
To distant climes the sound convey,  
That Anna's actions are divine,  
And this the most important day!  
The day that gave great Anna birth,  
Who fix'd a lasting peace on Earth.