

SNAPE MALTINGS CONCERT HALL: SATURDAY 29 NOVEMBER 2014
HANDEL: 'ALEXANDER'S FEAST'

Aldeburgh Music Club Choir
Suffolk Baroque Players
Conductor: Edmond Fivet
Lucy Hall (Soprano)
Christopher Bowen(Tenor)
Adrian Powter (Bass)

Alexander's Feast has been, after its initial great success, one of the less performed of Handel's oratorios. I must confess myself that before this performance I had never heard it in the concert hall and was unfamiliar with it. I now find it difficult to understand why as, on the evidence of this performance, it is one of his finest, full of superb, exciting choruses and solo arias and of strange and unexpected harmonic twists and orchestration.

This was one of the first of the oratorios that Handel wrote following the reduction in popularity of his Italian operas. With audiences for these falling off, he turned to the dramatic oratorio form, producing works which could be performed in concert halls and did not need expensive staging. The final culmination of these was of course, *Messiah*, the greatest and most popular of them all. *Alexander's Feast* is a setting of Dryden's Ode of the same name, probably best remembered for the oft-quoted line 'none but the brave deserve the fair', adapted into a libretto by Newburgh Hamilton. As the conductor, Edmond Fivet, has pointed out in his excellent programme note, the setting proved shorter than was desirable for public performance and was usually padded out by other works on the 25 occasions on which Handel himself conducted it.. On this occasion it was preceded by the resounding and immensely popular coronation anthem *Zadok the Priest* with the further insertion between the two parts and following an interval of Handel's popular organ concerto in B flat deftly played by Claire Williams (who also provided the harpsichord continuo in the oratorio) on a sweet-toned baroque organ.

The choral sections of the oratorio are by no means easy to perform, and the Aldeburgh Music Club Choir acquitted itself splendidly, both in the oratorio and in the anthem negotiating the tricky runs and unexpected intervals with dexterity, strength and warm, full tone. All three soloists were excellent, the soprano Lucy Hall sweet and clear, the tenor Christopher Bowen with fuller voice than is normally expected of a high tenor capable of ascending into the stratosphere but on this occasion restricted to a relatively modest range which he negotiated with skill and dramatic force when needed, the bass Adrian Powter strong and sonorous.

The Suffolk Baroque Players are an excellent group, their contribution on period instruments completing the success of the whole concert, their sound full but always supportive of the chorus and soloists.. If I single out the two trumpeters and two horn players it is because their valveless instruments are probably the most difficult to play without accident; but on this occasion they negotiated their short but by no means easy parts well-nigh faultlessly. The conductor, Edmond Fivet, steered the whole ensemble with his usual quiet skill and energy. I look forward eagerly to the AMC's next concert at the Maltings on 21 March next year which will include two of my very favourite choral works, Haydn's *Nelson Mass* and Faure's *Requiem*.

John Sims

(03.12.2014)