Theodora
An Oratorio for Soli, Chorus and Orchestra

by George Frideric Handel

featuring
Jennifer Driscoll-Holmes  Carolyn Maia
Emily Lunde          Howard Fankhauser
and Brian Box

Orchestra Seattle
Seattle Chamber Singers
George Shangrow, conductor

Sunday, June 7, 1998 ♦ 7:00 PM
University Christian Church

Acknowledgments

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Guest Artists

Brian Box

Brian Box is a native of Washington and received his Master of Music degree in vocal performance from Washington University in St. Louis. Mr. Box has frequently appeared with OS/SC as a soloist in Recital and Oratorio performances. Among his credits are performances of Brahms’ Four Last Songs with the Western University chorus and orchestra under the direction of Domini Argento’s opera Passacaglia from Morocco at the University of British Columbia. He is a regular performer with Northwest Opera in Schools, Etc. (NORSE), and Seattle Opera’s education programs and made his Seattle Opera debuts as the orphan in Daughter of the Regiment; this past summer he appeared in their production of Der Rosenkavalier. Mr. Box’s recent appearances with Northwest Opera include Haydn’s The Seasons and Handel’s Israel in Egypt, Messiah, Hercules and Brockes Passion.

Jennifer Driscoll-Holmes

Born in England, Jennifer Driscoll-Holmes now resides in British Columbia where she is an active soloist and teacher. A graduate of the University of British Columbia, she is heard frequently in Canada and Washington, and has particular acclaim for performances of major oratorio and orchestral repertoire, including works of Handel, Haydn, Bach and Mozart. She has appeared as featured soloist with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Peter McColpin (including a gala evening of Viennese operetta) and with numerous Pacific Northwest groups, including the Vancouver Bach Choir, Seattle Choral Company and Orchestra Seattle. In December of 1996, she sang Handel’s Judas Macabaeus with OS/SC and is featured as a soloist (along with mezzo-soprano Carolyn Maia) on a CD recording of Pergolesi’s Stabat Mater and Baroque vocal duets.

Howard Fankhauser

Howard Fankhauser is a frequent soloist with community and professional choirs and orchestras throughout the Northwest, including the Northwest Chamber Orchestra, the Seattle Youth Symphony, Cascade Choral and Choir of the Sound. Recent performances have included Mozart canatas with the Northwest Chamber Orchestra, Handel’s Messiah at St. Mark’s Cathedral, Orpheus in Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice, guest artist in St. James Cathedral’s New Year’s Eve all-Bach concert, and tenor soloist in Mozart’s Requiem. In July of 1996, Mr. Fankhauser was featured in the Living Composers Recital at the (National Association of Teachers of Singing national convention. He made his debut with Orchestra Seattle and the Seattle Civic Chorale in an April, 1996 performance of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion and appeared this season in Handel’s Hercules.

Emily Lunde

One of our region’s premier mezzo-sopranos, Emily Lunde is a performer whose repertoire runs the gamut from early and classical music to contemporary works. A native Seattle, she has sung extensively with many of the area’s finest choral and opera ensembles including the Seattle Symphony and Chorale, Orchestra Seattle and Seattle Chamber Singers, Seattle Choral Company, Choir of the Sound, the Everett Symphony and the Walla Walla Symphony. Ms. Lunde also performs regularly with the Pacific Northwest Ballet in their productions of Nutcracker and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. In 1997, she gave a Brahms recital in Seattle and performed for the Seattle Opera as part of their Young Artists Outreach Program, previewing selections from Tosca. This season Ms. Lunde has sung Messiah in Walla Walla and Colorado Springs, Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis at UPS, as well as Handel’s Saul and Hercules with OS/SC. Upcoming performances include the Durufle Recital with the Pacific Northwest Chamber Chorus.

Carolyn Maia

A native of London, England, Carolyn Maia attended the Guildhall School of Music and Drama on a vocal scholarship, where she continued her operatic training in Vienna on a scholarship from the Arts Council of Great Britain. While in Britain, she performed frequently with both the BBC and radio television, with both the BBC Symphony and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. She also sang on most of the major opera companies in Britain and Ireland as well as in opera houses and festivals in Stockholm, Brussels, Copenhagen, Berlin, and San Francisco. In 1974, Ms. Maia moved to the Pacific Northwest. Since then she has sung numerous roles with the opera companies of Seattle, Portland, San Diego and Los Angeles. She has also been featured with the symphony orchestras of Seattle, Oregon and Victoria, BC. With Orchestra Seattle, she has recorded a CD of Pergolesi’s Stabat Mater (together with North by Northwest and Babylon) and sung the alto solos in Handel’s Judas Maccabaeus. Next season, she will be joined by her Dye Voci partner Barbara Coffin and soprano Felicia Dobbs in a hilarious show celebrating three women “of a certain age” entitled Times Three.

Part the First

Overture

Reculaition – Velena

'Tis Dickenson’s day today, Pradom throughout the bounds of Atlantic, a feast, and solemn sacrifice to Jove; whose divinity in action, such a sight, shall fill our wrath in chasement or death. And this, Septimius, take you in charge.

Air – Velena

Go, my faithful soldier, go; Let the fragrant incense rise To the great god’s wondrous eyes.

Chorus

Who rules the world below.

Reculaition – Didmus

Viocechante, dare a grand ear to your request. Let not thy sentence doom, to racks and flames whose doubtful mind will not permit the less: to gods they know not, or, in wanton mood, to celebrate the day with Roman blood.

Reculaition – Didmus

Art thou Roman, and yet darst defend a sensual woman to the gods and Rome? Didmus Many there are in Antich that disdain an idol offering, yet are friends to Caesar. Velena.

Are there not Caesar’s friends who own not Caesar’s gods? I’ll hear no more.

Rakies, gladiy, sword, and fire, Shall speak my valiant wish. Against the abominable, Not praying to the high, shall shew the firm decrees.

Chorus – Heathens

For that saw Blood and doom the gods, Of rebel to the gods and Rome. While swifter than the trumpet’s sound, Their actions are heard around.

Reculaition – Didmus

Mort de cruel deities: Surly thy noble soul, Septimius, amongst dreadful task of peroration. Ought we not to leave the free-born mind of a man still ever free? Since vix is the attempt to force belief with the severest instrument of death.

Air – Didmus

The captured soul defies the sword, Secure of virtuous claim. And trusting Heaven’s unerring word, Enjoying the circling flame. No engine can it pierce To storm the truth-supported mind.

Reculaition – Septimius

I know the matter; but ask not the faith; Enjoy it as you will, my Didmus. Though not a Christian, I yet own well in offices of divine acts, for which But Antich’s President must be obeyed; such is the Roman majesty, while we can only pity those we dare not spare.

Air – Septimius

Depart, ye gods, heavenly guest, Depart and fill each human breast With sympathizing woe. Then liberty and peace of mind May sweetly harmonize mankind And bless the world below.

Part the Second

Reculaition – Velena

Though hard, my friends, yet whoresome are the truths taught in affliction’s school, whenceso the pure soul finds refined and soars above the world.

Air – Theodos

Food, flattering world, adieu! Truly, I know a true adoption. Emulous pleasures, feeding pleasures, Need of arm, or charm more. Failing hope, delighting Nobler joys we now pursue.

Reculaition – Velena

On high example of all goodness, how easy seems afflicton’s heavy load, while thus insulted and contemptuously, as bates with Heaven conversing, we lock down the chains of pomp of proud prosperity.

Chorus – Christians

Come, mighty mighty, mighty Lord, With love our souls inspire; While grace and truth flow from Thy Word, And feed the holy fire.

Reculaition – Messenger

Fly, my brethren, brethren rage pursues us swift, armed with the terrors of insulting devil. Velena.

Are they who should we fly, or fly from whom? The Lord is still the same, today, yesternight, and His protection here, and everywhere. Though gathering round our dead’s head, the storm now thickens, and looks big with fate: still shall Thy servants wait on Thee, oh Lord, and in Thy saving mercy put their trust.

Air – Iren

As we lay steepp the mom, Adorning divines the shades of night, So from virtuous tom! well-born, Raise up our house of endless light. Thou art the life, the light, the way.

Chorus – Christians

All poor! in Heaven’s earth, or above earth, behold to thee alone, Thou everlasting One, Most high, all-powerful, all-peace, storm and death.

Reculaition – Septimius

Oh foolish people, why thus blind to feign, for the President’s decree, and with the President’s decree to celebrate the day sacred to Caesar and pious loving? Velena.

Air – Septimius

Dread the fruits of Christian lying, And this abominable, Helen, And fide and liberty, Chains and dungeons we are going, And the storm of death, pursues us, to woe, to woe, to woe.

Chorus – Didmus

To the President’s decree. To the President’s decree. To the President’s decree.

Air – Didmus

The dead have no more joy. Didmus I am the President, who art to be obeyed. Deity, or the President’s decree.

Reculaition – Septimius

Death is not yet thy doom, but worse than death to such a vicious mind: Lady, these guards are ordered to convey you to Venus’ temple, to witness the portable death-rates.

Air – Septimius

Oh worse than death indeed! Me lead you, guards, me lead you, to the rack, or to the furnace; I’ll thank your gracious mercy.

Reculaition – Theodos

Angels, ever bright and fair, Take, oh take me to your care! Speed to your outposts my flight Clear my robes of evil dirt.

Reculaition – Didmus

Unhappy, wasted crowd! Why should you stand there so amazed? Say, where is my love, my life, my Theodos? Iren.

Alas! she’s gone, too late too late can’t to save the noblest, best of women. A soldier led her trembling hence to the place where Venus keeps her court.

Air – Theodos

Kind Heaven, if Venus be Thy care; When you can save me, or Art inspire me to free the captive fair! On fence the devil will to fly, With this princess to live, or this Christian to die.

Reculaition – Iren

Irene, you mighty power by greater still when virtue prompts the steady mind, to prove its native strength in deeds of highest honor.

Chorus - Didmus

Goe, gurnas, plous you! And his right hand will rear. Reward thy virtuous love, Thy constancy and toth With Theodora’s charms, Free from those alas! alarms; Or with thee is the bliss in glory, peace and rest.

Part the First

Reculaition – Velena

Ye gods, of solemn pomp renew the grateful sacrifice to Jove! And while your songs ascend the vaunted skies, pour on the smoking altar the bloody wine, in honor of the animating deities, fair Flora, and the Cyprian Queen.

Chorus – Didmus

Queen of Summer, Queen of Love. Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh! The king of crowding Jove! Great is he, and happy reign To great Caesar, king of men! Velena.

Air – Iren

With his own name, And make his glory Of this fame. The last story.

Reculaition – Velena

Return, Septimius, to the stubborn maid, and learn her final resolution. If, in the sun with prone career has reached the western seas, if she on offering the great gift, she shall be free; if, not the meaning of yours, lead her bound to Venus’ temple.

Chorus – Didmus

Venus, laughing from the skies, With this maiden, the king of Castor. While now without measure, We revel in Pleasure, Revolve sweet love suppliant.

Symphony

Reculaition – Theodos

Oh how mightily sweet how sweetly do they rays to health and Phebe but here, steal! They steal the agitated thought of shame, and pierce my soul with sorrow yet unknown.
How to Listen to an Oratorio
You Have Never Heard Before

For many music lovers, listening to Handel's Messiah is like spending an evening by the fire with an old friend. Enjoyment is easy and relaxed. The charms of the friends are well known and trusted and you happily anticipate the pleasures you have experienced before.

But listening to an oratorio you have never heard before is like going to a party where you don't know anyone. At first you do all right. You arrive at the place and there are things to see (someone hands you a program), and there are introductions to be made. You say hello to the musicians (applause), the orchestra shakes your hand (overture), you meet a soloist or two (what a wonderful dress the soprano is wearing!). Then the full chorus comes in (Wow! There are a lot of them!) Then...

Then you don't really know what to do. You feel a little awkward. You could go stand by the refreshment table and look at the program while you eat carrot sticks or celery sticks (you glance through the program. How long is this going to be?!) But if you are lucky, you might find yourself unexpectedly, but happily involved in an interesting and engaging conversation with someone you've never met before. The party turns out to be worthwhile, and you don't want to go home.

It is possible to have a good conversation with an Oratorio you've never met before. You can get caught up in it, engaged by the drama, and carried away by the music. How? One of the best ways is to talk about the story. A Handel oratorio such as Theodora is an embarrassment of rich comic opera. It is a theatrical, a poetic, a musical, aesthetic, a spiritual, a subjective, a preoccupation with life's (and the afterlife's) profundities, an attractive poise that is almost detached, and a faith in a Christian destiny. Nobility, loyalty, sacrifice, and eternal martyrdom are shown as facets of a courage very different from the military pompom and heroism present in some of the composer's earlier oratorios. Christanity and paganism are presented as opposed and attractive, and after a balanced struggle, Christianity is declared morally preferable. The work's construction is controlled to the minutest detail; tempo and tonality are assigned carefully to the individual numbers, as are melodic intensity and dramatic pace. Handel borrowed quite a bit of music, from the chamber duets of Clari, from Muffat's Componimenti (an entire movement is used in the overture), from Bononcini's Griselda, and from his own works, but the materials are nearly always transformed so that they outshine the originals.

The oratorio is scored for soloists (soprano, mezzo-soprano, alto (countertenor), tenor, and bass), chorus, and an orchestra of strings, flute (featured in the opening scene), oboes, bassoon, horns and trumpets (for the Roman scenes), timpani, and harpsichord. Handel's cast of soloists included, as Didimus, the Lombard castrato, Gavosto Gualdagni, one of the most spectacular vocal artists of his day. About him, Charles Burney wrote that "his attitudes and gestures were so full of grace and propriety, that they would have been excellent studies for an actor," and the power of his untrained voice to "his artful manner of diminishing the tones of his voice like the dying notes of an Aeolian harp." The oratorio was first performed at Covent Garden Theatre, on Friday, March 16, 1739; it was repeated on the 21st and on the 23rd. It was a dismal failure. Regarding the oratorio's second performance, a Mrs. Montagu wrote to her sister: "The Wednesday night the Oratorio was very empty, though it was the most favourite performance of Handel's." On the same night, the composer is reported to have asked Morell, his librettist, "Will you be there next Friday night? and I will play it to you."

Charles Burney wrote about Handel as follows in 1785 (original spelling retained):

"...Theodora was so very unfortunately abandoned, that he was glad if any professors, who did not perform, would accept of tickets or orders for admission into the house. This description of the character is perfectly in my living, having applied to Handel, after the disgrace of Theodora, for an order to hear the Messiah, he cried out, "Oh your servant, Mienber, you are tamale tainty! you would not co to Teodora 8 der was coon enough to tance dere, when dat was perform.""

Sometimes, however, I have heard him, pleasantly, as philosophically, console his friends, when, previous to the curtain being drawn up, they have lamented that the house was so empty, by saying "Neve moin: di mioic vici solis ci.""

The few who truly appreciated what Handel was attempting to do embraced the oratorio. The Earl of Shaftesbury told his cousin, James Harris: "I can't conclude a letter and forget Theodora, I have heard it three times and will venture to pronounce it, as finished, beautiful and labour'd a composition as ever Handel made. To my knowledge, this took him a great while in composing. The Town don't like it at all, but Mr Kellows and the musicians think as do I."

Handel's friend, Mrs. Delany, wrote to her sister, Ann: "Don't you remember our snug enjoyment of Theodora?" Ann declared: "Surely Theodora will have justice at last if it is to be again performed, but the generality of the world have ears and hear not."

Why was Theodora such a failure? Many factors apparently contributed to its box-office defeat. The Jews indeed stayed away, and current earthquake scares in England seem to have caused many Londoners to leave the city for safer territory. The story of Theodora was possibly objectionable to Protestant audiences because, of all Handel's "religious" English vocal works, it is the only one not based on a biblical source. It is also the only one without a little paganism in a way more obviously related than any of Handel's other works to the specifically Roman Catholic world in which the oratorio as a musical form had developed. Handel's audience was composed more of the city's wealthy, who were interested in sacred music for persecuted saints, and instead wanted to hear the heroic tales of the warriors, prophets, and kings of the Old Testament with whom they more readily identified. The oratorio's refusal to deprive the pagan Romans of their decline, its tragic end, and its interwoven all worked against it. But it may have been the work's insistence on the ultimate triumph of Christian values in an unchristian society that embarrassed its hearers and assured its demise. Theodora's portrayal of tragic lovers who experience, but who have risen above, all human passions and desires - whose hearts burn with intense love of their lover but who direct their ardor heavenward - was perhaps remains incomprehensible to an oratorio audience. Will the beauty of the musical expression conquer your heart?
ACT I
Handel's Theodora tells the story of a woman caught in a situation in which she must choose whether to remain faithful to her convictions and her love or compromise them and save herself from violence. Though set in the context of a big historical event (the Third Century persecution of Christians under Emperor Diocletian), it is not an epic drama like Israel in Egypt but an intimate portrayal of human beings struggling with issues of love, fear, conviction and compromise, hope and despair. These themes reflect Handel's own humanism—the concern of human beings freed from dogmatic intolerance and unjust oppression. These were the qualities Beethoven so admired in Handel. The whole oratorio has been described by its dedicatee as "an appeal for a social morality germane to Handel" own time; it is that for tolerance and freedom of thought...So Didimus tells Septimus,

"Ought we not to leave
The free-born mind of man still ever free?
Since vain is the attempt to force belief
With the severest instruments of death."

The oratorio begins by setting the stage for conflict. First we meet Valens, the ruler of the city of Antioch. In an opening recitative and arietta he announces that it is the Birthday of the Emperor, and sends his servant to begin the celebration and sacred rites in honor of the Emperor. He then speaks of a dangerous threat. Anyone who will not participate in worship of the Emperor "shall feel our wrath in chastisement or death." The chorus of Romans, struck by the ruler's threat, sings the opening prayer asking that the Emperor be blessed. It is stately and festive, and gives a hint of the impalpable Roman insistence on "order" and "law."

But Didimus, a Roman soldier who is secretly a Christian, is disturbed by the threat. He approaches Valens and requests that the Governor not persecute those who for reason of conscience will not worship the Roman gods. He is a plea for religious tolerance, but Valens is an obdurate Roman. The persecution of the Christians is the Emperor's decree and Valens holds the position, "They are not Caesar's friends who do not Caesar's god!" Any one departing from the party line is a traitor who must be punished! Valens sings arietta, "Racconta, racconta..." full of stubborn anger. The Chorus confirms the Roman position in a chorus, "For ever thus stands the doom..." which Handel sets as a Siciliano, bringing in a feeling of pathos.

A dialogue ensues between Didimus and Septimus, his superior officer. Didimus pleads for his acquittal, asserting that threats of violence cannot prevail against convictions of the truth. "No engines can the tyrant find to storm the discussion in gathering places built especially for this purpose called Oratories, or prayer-halls. A popular aspect of oratory gatherings was the singing of hymns. These were developed into narrative motets that dramatized

The Story of Theodora

The second half of Act I introduces us to the Christians. Handel makes the conflict between Roman authority and Christian conscience clear by the contrast between music of power and fear and the music of love and truth. The Christians' music is more legato, it does not use any of the banal gestures found in the Romans' music, and while the Christians' musical accents are almost funny in their awkwardness, the Christians' music is full of elegant line and sweet suspension.

We meet Theodora as she is teaching and encouraging her friends. She appears to be the leader of the community of Christians, and thus is the most in danger because of Valens' decree. She counsels them not to be afraid in the face of violent threats—afflictions teach the soul to discern what is of lasting value. In her aria, "Fond, flattering world, Adieu!" she communicates her conviction that truth offers the greatest possible delight and joy. She says that she understands that holding fast to her convictions will put her in mortal conflict with the powers that be. She either has to give up her beliefs or sell herself to the world, and she chooses her decision: She will hold fast, and sing her farewell in advance of her fate.

Irene, another member of the Christian community, praises Theodora for her inspiring instructions, and the Chorus, now representing the Christian congregation, pray the final prayer asking that the Emperor be blessed. It is stately and festive, and gives a hint of the impalpable Roman insistence on "order" and "law."

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Program Notes

by Loreletto Knowles

"[Sir T. Hankey] is a fool; the Jews will not come to it (as to judas [Maccabaeus]) because it is a [Christian] story; and the lads will not come because it is a [Christian] story." So George Frideric Handel excluded according to Thomas Morell, the author of Theodora's libretto. Morell had just told the composer that Hankey had said that if Theodora was written, "it would "engage for the Boxes." This work, with Messias, Handel's only English oratorio based on a Christian text, was his penultimate—and favorite—oratorio (...) "Mr Handell himself valued [Theodora] less than any Performance of the kind," according to Morell. It was also, despite marvelous musical merit, the least successful of all Handel's oratorios. Its failure must have caused the aging composer considerable pain, hidden though it might have been behind a veil of humor. Apart from a solitary revival in 1755, this oratorio, a work of unquestionable sublimity, received only four performances in Handel's lifetime, and is seldom performed today. Why?

Handel was 64 years old (quite aged by the standards of his day) when he wrote Theodora's music during the summer of 1749. It appears that he was quite vigorous and in fine spirits, and the work was written in less than five weeks, between June 28 and July 31. Theodora's libretto is by Thomas Morell, DD, Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries, and the author of Judas Maccabaeus and of Jephtha, Handel's last oratorio. It is based partly on an unnamed French tragedy, and mostly on an "unchaste and gory" historical novel, The Martyrdom of Theodora and Didymus (1667) by Robert Boyle, the famous chemist, who wrote "his sentimentless little novel as a neurotic reaction to his disturbed private life." In an article in The English Bible, Keating writes that Morell was "invariably hampered by [Boyle's] novelle[s]' more rambling excursions into moralizing, and at a result, the libretto was, according to Handel biographers, not his best. His is an illness of his time, and Morell ever prepared. Setting this text to music must have quite a fascinating exercise for Handel: coffee-cups, penciled cuts, and sealing-wax marks provide evidence of his struggles to produce a work of convincing artistic unity, and to convey the enduring human values which underlie martyrdom and suffering in a great cause.

The historical Theodora, better known as St. Dorothy, lived in Antioch in 306 CE, a victim of the persecution of the Christians under Emperor Diocletian. The oratorio opens with a scene of greeting honoring the emperor; the emperor issues a decree, declaring his reign, and the emperor on his birthday, and Valens, the Roman prefect of Antioch, threatens all who refuse to offer sacrifice to the emperor with death. Didimus, a young Roman officer who has secretly converted to Christianity, is finally developed into narrative motets that dramatized

Theodora's trial, where she is accused of "blasphemy" and "sedition," and she is condemned to death. Didimus, who has been present at the trial, reveals his Christian faith. The emperor, in a moment of remorse, orders Theodora to be saved. The scene is climactic, but Handel, with typical restraint, creates a sense of tenderness and pathos, rather than drama and excitement. The final chorus, "In the dark night," is one of Handel's most beautiful choral pieces, and the opening of the final act, "The day of the Lord," is a moving cantata for all hands. The finale, a beautiful choral piece, "I know not therefore what" (or "The day of the Lord"), is one of Handel's finest choral works, and is a fitting conclusion to this magnificent oratorio.
In a mood of hope that life and love will be preserved the two lovers sing a parting duet, praying for the blessings of life and safety, and affirming their hope that if their plans fail, they still have the hope of heaven. "I hope again to meet on earth, But sure shall meet in heaven!"

At their parting, we are returned to the Oratorio, where the Christian are still keeping their prayer vigil. They do not know that the rescue has been accomplished, but they are putting their trust in God who can "raise the dead to life and joy." In the tradition of the Italian oratorio gatherings they sing a mini-oratorio, a musical representation of a Bible story they sing to one another is found in Luke 7:11. "Soon afterward Jesus went to a town named Nain; his disciples and a large crowd went with him. Just as he arrived at the gate of the town, a dead man was being carried out, wrapped in burial clothes. Jesus saw him, and said to his disciples, 'Why do you bring him to life if he is dead?'

Then he walked over and touched the coffin, and the men carrying it stopped. Jesus said, 'Young man! Get up, I tell you!' The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother."

In the style of the early 17th century "spiritual madrigals" from which the grand oratorios evolved, Handel dramatizes this story in "The Resurrection of the King" which captures the scene of the funeral procession. Jesus sees the grief and is filled with pity. His words, "Rise again, stiffenc" are set as a dramatic command, immediately followed by the music rising in a strong upward scale. Then the mother bends to embrace her child, "Joy, the mother bawled, and bore away the prize."

And the music paints both the picture of her bending embrace, and through a canon that builds to a joyful height of intensity, the profound human joy that life has been rescued from the clutches of death.

Handel considered this chorus to occur at the high point of hope in the oratorio, and it is itself a reconstruction of the beginnings of the oratorio as an art form, to be the greatest oratorio chorus he ever composed. It is, simultaneously, a grand, an affirmation of the power of love to overcome death, and a celebration of art integrated with life.

ACT III

Act III of Theodora is the denouement of the Oratorio. Only one question remains: what is the dramatic action forward. Will Didimus succeed in escaping so that the lovers can enjoy the pleasurable life together? The act opens in the Oratory. Irene is singing a hymn of praise expressively, a grand air. The hope of a nation may have had special poignancy to the citizens of London who attended the première performance of Theodora. The audience was aware that this was an earthquake in London and people were terrified to leave their homes. Ironically, we may find the words poignant for us as well.

"Strong in hope we sing and pray, Though convulsive rocks the ground...."

Rebecca Parker
October 1989

Biblical stories. The most famous early collection of songs for singing in the oratorio was published as a "Soprano, mezzo, tenor, and basses to the year of Madrigals," by the beginning of the 16th Century when Handel lived for a few years in Italy, the "prayer hall" music had become fully fledged musical drama (though without costumes, scenic or lighting effects). The scholar singing in character is a character in the Biblical story or from the lives of the Saints, using recitatives and arias, with the chorus taking prominent scenes or commenting on the events. Oratorios, as the oratorio music was called by then, were so popular they were sung both in oratorios and as a form of popular entertainment in churches and in the streets. It is the nobility. While in Italy Handel wrote his first Oratorio, and his later works in England draw upon this Italian tradition.

Handel appears to be imagining the Christians in an oratorio. They are doing just what the 17th Century Italians did—offering one another spiritual instruction and performing music. What we have here is like the ever-popular "Shakespeare in the Park," only this is an "oratorio with the oratorio." Roman guards arrive to arrest Theodora, and threaten her with sexual violence (forced prostitution). We can imagine the guards laying hands on her, while she says she would rather die than face sexual violence. She asks the angels to take her instead, in her famed aria, "Angels, ever bright and fair."

Didimus arrives just after Theodora is taken away. We discover that in the days of the dinner party, he had praised her, in his anguished recitative, "Where is my love, My life, my Theodora?" He sings an aria praying for courage or clarity or some reassurance as he sings his praises of her love, and the Chorus of Christians sends him forth to rescue Theodora, with their prayer that he be rewarded either with Theodora's, or heavenly rest. Repeated throughout the opera these lines recur as cues for the Christians, either for earthly enjoyment of their love for one another, and joy in life; or for heaven's recompense—eternal bliss. Handel does not present "world-denying" Christians, longing for the glories of martyrdom. These Christians love life, affirm earthly joys. Death is not a sure thing for a certain position in heaven in 1676; they are not so interested in the face of death, but they do not want to die, except when despair overtakes them. The first Act closes with this hymn of shining confidence and hope.

ACT II

The tensions that propel the rest of the drama have been drawn. Will Theodora stand up under torture, or will she recant? Will Didimus succeed in finding a way to rescue her? Will the Emperor forgive and spare her? Will Didimus be hanged or will he stand by his loyalty to the Emperor or will the emperor be softened by mercy? Will Septimus continue his feeble efforts to avoid the military action?

Act II is brilliantly constructed, and the Handel scholar Winton Dean argues, "claims to rank as the finest single act in any of the oratorios." Repeating the Structures of Act One, it opens in the Roman court, with the Roman chorus; and ends in the Christian oratory, with the Christian chorus. In between these two chorus scenes are four intimate scenes, which take us deeply into the characters' feelings and motivations.

The Opening of the Roman festival proceeding gayly. The Chorus "Queen of Summer" is a rollicking dance. Valens takes time out from the celebration to coldly announce that if Theodora hasn't recanted by sundown, "she and her companions shall triumph over her boasted chastity." The Roman chorus takes lustful delight in this threat of sexual violence, and sings "Venetian women from the skies, will applaud..." in music that laughs itself.

In an abrupt scene change we leave the laughing Romans to their festivities and are taken to the prison where Theodora is in despair. The orchestral Sinfonia sets the scene of misery and loneliness. Theodora, alone, is overcome with fear and despair. She wants to die. A repeat of the Sinfonia gives us the feeling that the prison walls are closing around her. She struggles to regain her faith and hope, and her mood lifts as she affirms her trust that she must die, she will rise like "the savior down to the saints and angels in the courts above."

We leave Theodora in this more excited mood, and are let in on a conversation between Didimus and Septimus. Didimus has decided on a plan to rescue Theodora, but he needs the help of his friend, Septimus. Septimus responds with theQty, that "it is not in our power to determine" his character. Though a Roman, he does not believe that his Gods sanction the violence Valens' proposes, "Yet never will I dishonor the gods in the least that is in my power to do."

He resolves to take decisive action to assist Didimus, and will instruct the guards to take him to the cell. Now comes the most beautifully crafted section of the Oratorio. Septimus takes a brief look at the Sinfonia, where the Christians are keeping vigil. Irene, who earlier announced in her saras in God's sake, the dawn of day, now says that she feels that the dead hour of sunset is arriving, when Theodora must face her torture. They pray for her protection and safety.

We see this prayer is answered as we return to the prison cell. Didimus finds Theodora peacefully asleep, he sings a lullaby love song to her. She wakes, startled. He announces that he is there to rescue her, and that they must leave quickly, that she can escape with him. But Didimus, either crazed or comprehending the big picture better than Didimus, asks him another kind of question. She asks him to kill her. Her reason for this request becomes clear in the following recitative, "Ah! What is liberty or life to me, that Didimus should purchase them? " She is not willing to have her liberation from prison cost him his life. The only way out she sees is her death, and she'd rather it be by the hand of one she loves, than by those who oppose her. But Didimus assures her that there is still some hope that they both can escape death, and she consents to his plan, and changes clothes with him.
In a mood of hope that life and love will be preserved the two lovers sing a parting duet, praying for the blessings of life and safety, and affirming their hope that if their plans fail, they still have hope in heaven. “I hope again to meet on earth, But sure shall meet in heaven!”

At their parting, we are returned to the Oratorio, where the Christians are still keeping their prayer vigil. They do not know that the rescue has been accomplished, but they are putting their trust in God who “can raise the dead to life and joy.” In the tradition of the Italian oratory gatherings they sing a mini-oratorio, a musical adaptation of a Biblical story they sing to one another is found in Luke 7:11.

“Soon afterward Jesus went to a town named Nain; his disciples and a large crowd went with him. Just as he arrived at the gate of the town, a widow came forward to him weeping and wailing with great mourning. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, ‘Take courage, young woman, your faith has made you well.’ When he said this, the woman’s daughter got up and walked. This news spread throughout the whole region.”

Theodora arrives, dressed in Didimius’ clothes. The chorus rejoices to discover she is free, and prays that Didimus, also, will be blessed with “liberty and life.” But a report comes in that Valens is not going to release Didimus. He is enraged, and now is seeking Theodora to kill her.

Theodora resolves immediately that she must go rescue Didimus. She is unwilling to have him die for her, and with her courage and convictions, and strengthened by her passionate love, she refuses Irene’s counsel that she should think of her safety. She goes to liberate Didimus from the prison, and we have the rescue of a Christian. 

In the Roman Court, Didimus is on trial before Valens. Valens sends him off to be tortured just as Theodora arrives and pleads that he let Didimus go and inflict his “justice” on her instead. She is even more brazen about her forthright disbelief, swearing to Valens that he was a liar, praising virtue, and hoping that the virtuous be saved. Valens, enraged, answers the prayer with his words of condemnation, “The powers below, No pity know, For the breed of the Serpent is most base.”

Didimus and Theodora then both entreat Valens to only kill one of them, pleading that their beloved be spared. The chorus sings, marveling how strange this outcome of the conflict—that the two lovers are pleased to be killed, so their beloved can be spared. Valens’ anger is only intensified by these pleas, and he pronounces that both shall die.

In the end, the plot turns on Valens, alone. He holds fast to his belief of a new law, that he has no belief in Didimius, in the anguished recitative, “Where is my love, My life, my Theodora?” He sings an aria praying for courage and clarity to overcome the praises before him of love, and the Chorus of Christians sends him forth to rescue Theodora, with their prayer that he be rewarded either with Didimius’ or, heavenly rest. Repeated throughout, these love songs illustrate the love of the Christians, either for earthly enjoyment of their love for one another, and joy in life; or for heaven’s recompense—eternal bliss. Handel does not present “world-denying” Christians, longing for the glories of martyrdom. These Christians love life, affirm earthly joy in the present, and seek equal measure. Faith in heaven gives them courage in the face of death, but they do not want death except when despair overcomes them. The first Act closes with this hymn of shining confidence and hope.

ACT II

Act II of Theodora is the denouement of the Oratorio. Only one question remains: what will be the dramatic action forward. Will Didimus succeed in escaping so that the lovers can enjoy the pleasures of life together? The act opens in the Oratory. Irene is singing a hymn of praise expressively, a grand. The air of triumph may have had special poignancy to the citizens of London who attended the premiere performance of Theodora. The audience was aware of the rumour of an earthquake in London and people were terrified to leave their homes. Ironically, we may find the words poignantly for us as well.

“Strong in hope we sing and pray, Though convulsive rocks the ground…”

Rebecca Parker
October 1969

Biblical stories. The most famous early collection of songs for singing in the oratory was published as a "Spectacle of Madrigals." By the beginning of the 16th Century when Handel lived for a few years in Italy, the "prayer hail" music had become full-blown magnificent oratorio drama (though without costumes, scenic effects, and actors). It isolated singing away certain characters in the Biblical story or story from the lives of the Saints, using recitatives and arias, with the chorus taking a large part of the scoring or commenting on the events. Oratorios, as the oratorio music was called by then, were so popular they were sung both in oratorios and as a form of entertainment in public places and a symbol of the nobility. While in Italy Handel wrote his first oratorio, and his later works in England draw upon this Italian tradition.

Handel appears to be imagining the Christians in an oratorio. They are doing just what the 17th Century Italians did—offering one another spiritual instruction and performing music. What we have here is like the ever-popular "Romeo and Juliet" of Shakespeare; only this is an "oratorio with the oratorio".

Roman guards arrive to arrest Theodora, and threaten her with sexual violence (forced prostitution). We can imagine the guards laying hands on her, while she says she would rather die than face sexual violence. She asks the angels to take her instead, in her famous aria, "Angels, ever bright and fair."

Didimus arrives just after Theodora is taken away. We discover that he has not done so, and what he has done with Theodora, in his anguished recitative, "Where is my love, My life, my Theodora?" He sings an aria praying for courage and clarity to overcome the praises before him of love, and the Chorus of Christians sends him forth to rescue Theodora, with their prayer that he be rewarded either with Didimus’ or, heavenly rest. Repeated throughout, these love songs illustrate the love of the Christians, either for earthly enjoyment of their love for one another, and joy in life; or for heaven’s recompense—eternal bliss. Handel does not present “world-denying” Christians, longing for the glories of martyrdom. These Christians love life, affirm earthly joy in the present, and seek equal measure. Faith in heaven gives them courage in the face of death, but they do not want death except when despair overcomes them. The first Act closes with this hymn of shining confidence and hope.

ACT III

The tensions that propel the rest of the drama have been drawn. Will Theodora stand up under torture, or will she recant? Will Didimus succeed in finding a way to rescue her? What will happen to the Oratorio, and to obedience to the Emperor or will his heart be softened by mercy? Will Septimius continue his feeble efforts to avoid the consequences of the action?

Act II is brilliantly structured, and splendid. The High Choral Scholar Winton Dean argues, "claims to rank as the finest single act in any of the oratorios." Repeating the Structures of Act One, it opens in the Roman court, with the Roman chorus; and ends in the Christian oratory; with the Christian chorus. In between these two chorus scenes are four intimate scenes, which take us deeply into the characters’ feelings and thoughts in the tension. The opening scene is the Roman festival proceeding gaily. The Choral "Queen of Summer" is a rollicking dance. Valens takes time out from the celebration to coldly announce that if Theodora hasn’t recanted by sundown, "the Roman law shall triumph over your boasted chastity." The Roman chorus takes lustful delight in this threat of sexual violence, and sings "Venus is a slave from the skies, will applaud..." in music that laughs itself.

In an abrupt scene change we leave the laughing Romans to their festivities and are taken to the prison where Theodora is in despair. The orchestral Sinofina sets the scene of misery and loneliness. Theodora, alone, is overcome with fear and despair. She wants to die. A repeat of the Sinofina gives us the feeling that the prison walls are closing around her. She struggles to regain her faith and hope, and her mood lifts as she affirms her trust that she must die, she will rise like "the sleeper down to the saints and angels in the courts above."

We leave Theodora in this more excised mood, and are let in on a conversation between Didimus and Septimius. Didimus has decided on a plan to rescue Theodora, but he needs the help of his friend, Septimius. Septimius responds to his pleas, promising to help, but on his own terms. Though a Roman, he does not believe that his Gods sanction the violence Valens’ proposes, "Yet not without bloodshed...it is like the way of a nation to its fairest resemblance below." He resolves to take decisive action to assist Didimus, and will instruct the guards to take him to her.

Now comes the most beautifully crafted section of the Oratorio, and the act is taken briefly back to the Oratory, where the Christians are keeping vigil. Irene, who earlier announced in her serene aria that God’s power, like the dawn after the darkness of night, will eventually arrive, especially that the dreaded hour of sunset is arriving, when Theodora must face her torture. They pray for her protection and peace.

We see this prayer is answered as we return to the prison cell. Didimus finds Theodora peacefully asleep, he sings a lullaby love song to her. She wakes, startled. He announces that he is there to rescue her, and that they can escape and be together and that she can escape and be together, but that she can escape and be together, but that she can escape and be together, but that she can escape and be together. But Theodora, either crazed or comprehending the big picture better than Didimus, asks him for another kind of rescue. She asks to be killed. She is not willing to have her liberation from prison cost him his life. The only way out she sees is her death, and she’d rather it be by the hand of one she loves, than by those who oppose her. But she says she has her father that there hope that they both can escape death, and she consents to his plan, and changes clothes with him.
The Story of Theodora

ACT I

Handel's Theodora tells the story of a woman caught in a situation in which she must choose whether to remain faithful to her convictions and love or compromise them and save herself from violence. Though set in the context of a big historical event (the Third Persecution of Christians under Diocletian, Emperor Diocletian) it is not an epic drama like Israel in Egypt but an intimate portrayal of human beings struggling with issues of love, hate, fear, conviction and compromise, hope and despair. These themes reflect Handel's own humanism—the concern of human beings freed from dogmatic intolerance and unjust oppression. These were the qualities Beethoven so admired in Handel. The whole oratorio has been described as "the comment on a social morality germane to Handel" own time; it is that for tolerance and freedom of thought...So didimius tells Septimius,

"Ought we not to leave the free-born mind of man still ever free? Since vain is the attempt to force belief With the severest instruments of death."

The oratorio begins by setting the stage for conflict. First is a long stream of Valens, the emperor of the city of Antioch. In an opening recitative and aria he announces that it is the Birthday of the Emperor, and sends his invitations to all the court. The opening recitative and aria sings the opening prayer asking that the Emperor be blessed. It is stately and festive, and gives a hint of the implacable Roman皇威. The recit is filled with the opening title song, "Oh, the emperor's grace, and sing the glory of the emperor."

But Didimius, a Roman soldier who is secretly a Christian, is disturbed by the threat. He approaches Valens and requests that the Governor not persecute those who for reason of conscience will not worship the Roman gods. He is a plea for religious tolerance, but Valens is an obedient Roman. The persecution of the Christians is the Emperor's decree and Valens holds the position. "They are not Caesar's friends who don't own Caesar's gods!" Any one departing from the party line is a traitor who must be punished! Valens sings and aria, "Rack them, gibbets, hang them!," full of stuborn anger. The Choros confirms the Roman position in a chorus, "For ever thus stands the doom..." which Handel sets as a Siciliano, bringing in a feeling of pathos.

A dialogue ensues between Didimius and Septimius, his superior officer. They debate the Emperor's decree, asserting that threats of violence cannot prevail against convictions of the truth. "No enemies can the tyrant find to storm the throne of God in the B section of the arie, while the strings play music that storms against the vocal line. In Septimius' response, we see a Roman who is not comfortable with the authoritarian threat of his governor. Caught between the claims of his own conscience and his sense of duty, he sings an aria that expresses his awareness that only mercy from the governor will prevent a tragic end. His prayer is incidental kingly, with the opening chorus and closes the first scene of the story. In contrast to the prayer of the opening chorus, "Bless the Emperor," Septimius hopes for the advent of mercy in "each human breast."

The second half of Act I introduces us to the Christians. Handel makes the conflict between Roman authority and Christian conscience clear by the contrast between music of peace and joy as well as music of fear and despair. The Christians' music is more legato, it doesn't use any of the banal gestures found in the Romans' music, and with the Christians' musical accents are almost funny in their awkwardness, the Christians' music is full of elegant line and smooth suspension.

We meet Theodora as she is teaching and encouraging her friends. She appears to be the leader of the community of Christians, and thus is the most in danger because of Valens' decree. She counsels them to be not afraid in the face of violent threats—affliction teaches the soul to discern what is of lasting value. In her aria, "Fond, flattering world, Adieu!," she communicates her conviction that truth offers the greatest possible delight and she says that she understands that holding fast to her convictions will put her in mortal conflict with the powers that be. She either has to give up her beliefs or stay true to the world, and she makes her decision: She will hold fast, and sing her farewell in advance of her fate.

Irene, another member of the Christian community, praises Theodora for her inspiring instructions, and the Chorus, now representing the Christian congregation, prays to be filled with love, grace and truth. Their prayer is interrupted by the arrival of a messenger from the Roman Inquisition, who questions their beliefs.

But inspired by Theodora's leadership, Irene sings one of the most beautiful arias of the oratorio, "As with rose's steps on grasses...", in which she advances, whose rose's steps drive back the shades of the night. The Chorus says Amen to Irene's aria by singing a hymn of praise. The prayer meeting is disrupted by the arrival of an emissary from Handel. He tells the Christians that they must pray. Septimius, the Roman governor, states that Theodora was "inevitably hampered by [Boyle's] novel's more rambling excursions into moralizing," and at a result, the libretto was, according to Handel biographies, "revised, rewritten, and to a large extent remembered to be more popular."

Handel was 64 years old (quite aged by the standards of his day) when he set Theodora's music during the summer of 1749. It appears that he was quite vigorous and in fine spirits, and the work was written in less than five weeks, between June 28 and July 31. Theodora's libretto is by Thomas Morell, DD, Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries, and the author of Judas Maccabaeus and of Jephtha, Handel's last oratorio. It is based partially on an unnamed French tragedy, and mostly on an "amorous and gory" historical novel, The Martyrdom of Theodora and Didimus (1667) by Robert Boyle, the famous chemist, who wrote "his sentiment of the novel as a narrative to his disturbed private life," according to Daniel Keenan. Keenan states that "Theodora" was "inevitably hampered by [Boyle's] novel's more rambling excursions into moralizing," and at result, the libretto was, according to Handel biographies, "revised, rewritten, and to a large extent remembered to be more popular."

Theodora enters the cell with the "visor of her helmet closed," which causes Theodora to fear that the end has come, but Didimius shows himself and proposes to exchange clothes with Theodora so that she can escape. Theodora prefers death by his "hand of sword" to escape at Didimius' expense, but she finally agrees to his plan. The act ends with the chorus retelling the story of the young woman's life. It is clear that Theodora's story is an allegory for Jesus' power to raise the dead youth offers comfort (about this chorus, which Handel considered his finest, Morell wrote: "and when I once asked him, whether he did not think of him the Messiah?" as his Master Piece." No, says he, 'I think the Chorus at the end 2 part in Theodora far beyond it. He saw the lovely youth etc.')

Act III begins with the Christians at prayer. They rejoice over Theodora's unexpected return, but a messenger soon arrives with the sorrowful news that Didimius must die, and Theodora as well, when she is discovered. Joyfully, she accepts her fate, and, despite the protests of Irene, she goes to attempt to save Didimius. Theodora interned in prison, where she tactfully persuades the Emperor to offer her. Valens finally decrees that "If both are guilty, 'tis but equity that both should suffer." The loves go nobly to their deaths, leaving the chorus to pray an in a piece that has been compared to the sublime lullaby that concludes the St. John Passion.
How to Listen to an Oratorio
You Have Never Heard Before

For many music lovers, listening to Handel's Messiah is like spending an evening by the fire with an old friend. Enjoyment is easy and relaxed. The charm of the farmers is well known and trusted and you happily anticipate the pleasures you have experienced before. But listening to an oratorio you have never heard before is like going to a party where you don't know anyone. At first you do all right. You arrive at the place and there are things to see (someone hands you a program), and there are introductions to be made. You say hello to the musicians (applause), the orchestra shakes your hand (overture), you meet a soloist or two (what a wonderful dress the soprano is wearing!). Then the full chorus comes in! Wow! There are a lot of them! Then...

Then you don't really know what to do. You feel a little awkward. You could go stand by the refreshment table and look for the cheese, or eat carrot sticks or celery sticks (you glance through the program. How long is this going to be?!) But if you are lucky, you might find yourself unexpectedly, but happily involved in an interesting and engaging conversation with someone you've never met before. The party turns out to be worthwhile, and you don't want to go home.

It is possible to have a good conversation with an Oratorio you've never met before. You can get caught up in it, engaged by the drama, and carried away by the music. How? One of the best ways is to focus on the story. A Handel oratorio such as Messiah invites you to enter into the joys and sorrows of the human beings whose tale is told, to contemplate the connections between the people in the story and your own life experience, and to consider the insights into life the story seeks to convey.

A Handel oratorio is something like radio theater. You don't get to see any of what is going on. Instead, you hear everything. You hear the scenery. For example, part of Act II of Messiah takes place in a dungeon. The orchestra plays a Sinfonia that sets the scene. You can feel the darkness and loneliness of the place creeping over you, until you are in that dungeon yourself. Just before the dungeon scene, the music takes you to a Bacchanal—you can see the faces bright with delight, the garlands of flowers, the dancing, the tables laden with food. The dark dungeon is really miserable in contrast.

In Handel's oratorios you also hear, rather than see, the action. At one point in Theodora, Theodora realizes Didimus is in danger, her concern is intense, and she makes a fast, decisive decision to rescue him. You can hear her taking off at a run, and you feel her mix of determination, fear, righteous outrage, and passionate hope. You run with her to the rescue! When the lover's embrace you feel the music wrap tenderly around you. When the oppressive, controlling governor bars his orders that no insubordination will be tolerated, you feel him looming over you.

It is interesting to speculate on why Handel wrote oratorios when he had the opportunity to write and produce operas. His first oratorio, Esther, was presented in London because the Bishop of London objected to Handel's plans to produce a staged version of the Biblical story. The Bishop considered the opera house an immoral place, and as Handel scholar Writhe Wells says, "The Bishop's anxiety was such that he obtained a copy of Handel's manuscript of the opera and burned it."

But Handel did not abandon it. The opera was performed in its original form, and was a great success. The Bishop was happy, and the opera was a hit.

Theodora is a remarkable departure for a man of Handel's age, as analyst Paul Henry Lang points out. It displays an unusual spiritual, a preoccupation with life's (and the afterlife's) profundities, an attractive poise that is almost detachment, and a faith in a Christian destiny. Nobility, loyalty, sacrifice, and eternal martyrdom are shown as facets of a courage very different from the military pompousness and heroism present in some of the composer's earlier oratorios. Christianity and paganism are treated as evolved and attractive, and after a balanced struggle, Christianity is declared morally preferable. The work's construction is controlled to the minutest detail; tempo and tonality are assigned carefully to the individual numbers, as are melodic intensity and dramatic pace. Handel borrowed quite a bit of music, from the chamber duets of Clari, from Muffat's Compromissi (an entire movement is used in the overture), from Bononcini's Griselda, and from his own works, but the materials are nearly always transformed so that they outlive the originals.

The oratorio is scored for soloists (soprano, mezzo-soprano, alto, countertenor, tenor, and bass), choir, and an orchestra of strings, flute (featured in the passionate scene), oboes, bassoon, horns and trumpets (for the Roman scenes), timpani, and harpsichord. Handel's cast of soloists included, as Didimus, the Lombard castrato, Gaetano Guadagni, one of the most spectacular vocal artists of his day. About him, Charles Burney wrote that "his attitudes and gesture were so full of grace and propriety, that they would have been excellent studies for an actress." Handel has given the power of his unique style to "his artful manner of diminishing the tones of his voice like the dying notes of an Aeolian harp." The oratorio was first performed at Covent Garden Theatre, on Friday, March 16, 1739; it was repeated on the 21st and on the 23rd. It was a dismal failure. Regarding the oratorio's second performance, a Mrs. Montague wrote to her sister: "The Wednesday night the Oratorio was very empty, though it was the most favourite performance of Handel's." On the same night, the composer is reported to have asked Morell, his librettist, "Will you be there next Friday night? and I will play it to you."

Charles Burney wrote about Handel as follows in 1785 (original spelling retained):

"...Theodora was so very unfortunately abandoned, that he was glad if any professors, who did not perform, would accept of tickets or orders for execution. Two years after that description, now living, having applied to Handel, after the disgrace of Theodora, for an order to hear the Messiah, he cried out, "Oh your servant, Mien- heren! you are tamable tainty! you would not co to Theodora 8 der was cood enough to tance dere, when dat was perform.""

Sometimes, however, I have heard him, pleasantly, as philosophically, console his friends, when, previous to the curtain being drawn up, they have lamented that the house was so empty, by saying "Neve moind; di mocious vil sen." The few who truly appreciated what Handel was attempting to do embraced the oratorio. The Earl of Shaftesbury told his cousin, James Harris: "I can't conclude a letter and forget Theodora, I have heard it three times and will venture to pronounce it, as finished, beautiful and labour'd a composition as ever Handel made. To my knowledge, this took him up a great while in composing. The Town don't like it at all, but Mr Kellows says, "The Muscians think as I do."

Handel's friend, Mrs. Delany, wrote to her sister, Ann: "Don't you remember our snug enjoyment of Theodora?" Ann declared: "Surely Theodora will have justice at last if it is to be again performed, but the generality of the world have ears and hear not."

Why was Theodora such a failure? Many factors apparently contributed to its box-office defeat. The Jews indeed stayed away, and current earthquake scares in England seem to have caused many Londoners to leave the city for safer territory. The story of Theodora was possibly objectionable to Protestant audiences because, of all Handel's "religious" English vocal works, it is the only one not based on a biblical source. It is also the only one written with the Lombard castrato in a way more obviously related than any of Handel's other works to the specifically Roman Catholic world in which the oratorio as a musical form had developed. Handel's audience was composed of the well-to-do, the little people for persecuted saints, and instead wanted to hear the heroic tales of the warriors, prophets, and kings of the Old Testament with whom they more readily identified. The oratorio's refusal to deprive the pagan Romans of their due, its tragic end, and its introversion all worked against it. But it may have been the work's insistence on the ultimate triumph of Christian values in an unchristian society that embarrased its hearers and assured its demise. Theodora's portrayal of tragic lovers who experience, but who have risen above, all human passions and desires - whose hearts burn with intense fervor for love, but who direct their ardor heavenward - was and perhaps remains incomprehensible to an oratorio audience. Will the beauty of the musical expression conquer your heart?
Guest Artists

Brian Box

Brian Box is a native of Washington and received his Master of Music degree in vocal performance from the Western University of Technology in Cincinnati, Ohio. Mr. Box has frequently appeared with OS/SCS as a soloist in concerts and oratorios. Among his credentials are performances of Brahms’ Four Last Songs with the Western University of Technology in Cincinnati, Ohio. He also performed with the renowned Dominic Argento’s opera Postcard from Morocco at the University of British Columbia. He is a regular performer with Northwest Opera in Schools, Etc. (NOSSE), and Seattle Opera’s youth programs and has made the Seattle Opera debut as the Cornwall in The Daughter of the Regiment; this past summer he appeared in their production of Der Rosenkavalier. Mr. Box’s recent appearances with the Seattle Opera Chamber Singers include Haydn’s The Seasons and Handel’s Israel in Egypt, Messiah, Hercules and Brookes Passion.

Jennifer Driscoll-Holmes

Born in England, Jennifer Driscoll-Holmes now resides in British Columbia where she is an active soloist and teacher. A graduate of the University of British Columbia, she is heard frequently in Canada and Washington, and has particularly acclaim for performances of major oratorio and orchestral repertoire, including music of Handel, Haydn, Bach and Mozart. She has appeared as featured soloist with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Peter McCoopin (including a gala evening of Viennese opera) and with numerous Pacific Northwest groups, including the Vancouver Bach Choir, Seattle Choral Company and Orchestre des États-Unis. In December of 1996, she sang Handel’s Judas Maccabæus with OS/SCS and is featured as a soloist (along with mezzo-soprano Carolyn Maia) on a CD recording of Pergolesi’s Stabat Mater and Baroque vocal duets.

Howard Fankhauser

Howard Fankhauser is a frequent soloist with community and professional choirs and orchestras throughout the Northwest, including the Northwest Chamber Orchestra, the Seattle Youth Symphony, Cascade Choral, and Choir of the Sound. Recent performances have included Mozart cantatas with the Northwest Chamber Orchestra, Handel’s Messiah at St. Mark’s Cathedral, Orpheus in Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice, guest artist in St. James Cathedral’s New Year’s Eve all-Bach concert, and tenor soloist in Mozart’s Requiem. In July of 1996, Mr. Fankhauser was featured in the Living Composers Recital at the (National Association of Teachers of Singing national convention. He made his debut with Orchestra Seattle and the Seattle Opera Chorus in an April, 1996 performance of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion and appeared this season in Handel’s Hercules.

Emily Lunde

One of our region’s premier mezzo-sopranos, Emily Lunde is a performer whose repertoire runs the gamut from early and classical music to contemporary works. A Seattle native, she has sung extensively with many of the area’s finest choral ensembles and orchestras, including the Seattle Symphony and Chorale, Orchestra Seattle and Seattle Chamber Singers, Seattle Choral Company, Choir of the Sound, the Everett Symphony and the Walla Walla Symphony. Ms. Lunde also performs regularly with the Pacific Northwest Ballet in their productions of Nutcracker and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. In 1997, she gave a Brahms recital in Seattle and performed for the Seattle Opera as part of their Young Artists Outreach Program, previewing selections from Le Trovatore. This season Ms. Lunde has sung Messiah in Walla Walla and Colorado Springs. Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis at UPS, as well as Handel’s Saul and Hercules with OS/SCS. Upcoming performances include the Durufle Recital with the Pacific Northwest Chamber Chorus.

Carolyn Maia

A native of London, England, Carolyn Maia attended the Guildhall School of Music and Drama on a vocal scholarship, and later continued her musical training in Vienna on a scholarship from the Arts Council of Great Britain. While in Britain, she performed frequently with the BBC on both radio and television, with both the BBC Symphony and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. She also sang with most of the major opera companies in Britain and Ireland as well as in opera houses and festivals in Salzburg, Brussels, Copenhagen and San Francisco. In 1974, Ms. Maia moved to the Pacific Northwest. Since then she has sung numerous roles with the opera companies of Seattle, Portland, San Diego and Chicago. She has also been featured with the symphony orchestras of Seattle, Oregon and Victoria, BC. While in Seattle, she has recorded a CD of Pergolesi’s Stabat Mater (together with members of the continuo ensemble) and sung the alto solos in Handel’s Judas Maccabæus. Next season, she will be joined by her Dvor Voci partner Barbara Coffin and soprano Felicia Dobbs in a hilarious show celebrating three women “of a certain age” entitled Times Three.

Part the First

Overture

Reculata - Velena

Under the direction of Mr. Fankhauser, Priscilla throughout the bounds of Antioch, a feast, and solemn sacrifice to Jove; whose dishes he ordains none, shall feel the wrath in chaste disputation. And this, Septimius, take you in charge.

Air - Velena

Go, my faithful soldier, go!
Let the fragrant incense rise
To the great ruler of the skies.

Chorus

And draw a blessing down,
On the day of our great joy.

Who rules the world below.

Reculata - Didimus

Vineyard, dance, and gaud, a gracious ear to my request.

Let not thy sentence do, to racks and flames whose doubtful minds will not permit the law to gods they know not, in, or, in wanton mood, to celebrate the day with Roman Venus.

Venus

Art thou Roman, and yet darst defend a seek to befalse to the gods and Rome? Didimus

Many there are in Antioch who disdain an idol offering,
Yet are friends to Caesar.

It cannot be; they are not Caesar’s friends who own not Caesar’s gods: I’ll hear no more.

Air - Veluna

Racks, giblets, sword, and fire,
Shall speak my válshard against the abominable
Nor granting that time by prayer, shall shelve the firm decree.

Chorus - Heathers

For Rome’s sake, stand not the doom,
Of rebels to the gods and Rome.
While sweater than the trump of the summer, Their names are heard around.

Reculata - Didimus

Moot cruel decree; sum thy noble soul, Septimius, and bide thou true.

We do not to leave the free-born mind of a man still ever free.
Sure is the firm is to approach belief with the severest instrument of death.

Air - Didimus

The raptur’d soul despiseth the sword,
Secure of virtuous claim.

And trusting Heaven’s ungirded word,
Enjoys the clicking flame.
No engine can bar us in the storm to the truth supported mind.

Reculata - Septimius

I know the manner, and ask not the faith: Enjoy it as you will, my Didimus. Though not a Christian, I yet own the value of such declarations for acts of mercy.

But Antioch’s President must be obeyed; such is the Roman discipline, while we can only pity those we dare not spare.

Air - Septimius

Demur not, let the heavens, heavenly guest,
Descend and fill each human breath With sympathizing woes.

Then liberty and peace of mind May sweetly harmonize mankind
And bless the world below.

Reculata - Theodora

Though hard, my friends, yet whosoone are the truths taught in affiction’s school, wherein the pure soul is refined and soars above the world.

Air - Theodora

Fond, flattering world, adieu! May my thanks not fail you in my amazement.

Feel ing, hope delighting
Nober joys we now pursue.

Reculata - Octave

Oht bright example of all goodness, how easy seems affiction’s heavy load, while thus we rest and contemn, the brows thus, as weas weARS with Heaven conversing, we lock down, let not the rage of the pomp of proud prosperity.

Chorus - Christians

Come, mighty, mighty, mighty Lord,
With love our souls inspire;
White grace and truth from Thy Word, and feed the holy fire.

Reculata - Messenapers

Fly, fly, my brethren, heare rage pursues us earth, armed with the terror of insulting death.

Venus

Ah! Whither should we fly, or fly from whom? The Lord is the same, today, yesterday, and His protection here, and everywhere. Though gathering round our dear heads, the storm now thickens, and looks big with fate: still shall Thy servants wait on Thee, oh Lord, and in Thy saving mercy put their trust.

Air - Irene

As with rosy steps the mom, Adorning dines the shades of night,
So from virtuous to well-born, Raise our songs of our house of ending light. Thou art the life, the light, the way.

Chorus - Christians

All poor’s in Heaven’s air, or earth beneath Belongs to thee alone. Thou everlastiing One, Many, or less part, in part, storm and death.

Reculata - Septimius

Oh foolish people, why thus blind to feel, for this the President’s decree, and acr with nates to celebrate the day sacred to Caesar and his invading joy?

Air - Septimius

Dread the fruits of Christian life, And this abominable
The fate of life and liberty,
Chains and dungeons we are wo, And the storm of death, pursuing the souls to the bottom.

Reculata - Didimus

Know, these pleasures of the irreproachable

Chorus - Theodora

Deceived mortal, let not rebellion to Jehovah, if He is death correct. All who are, or are not, in thee, shall be free; if not, the means of your lead to their bound to Venus’ temple.

Chorus - Venus

Laughing from the skies, With smiles of joy From a smile, With smiles of joy From a smile, With smiles of joy From a smile, With smiles of joy From a smile.

Reculata - Theodora

Oh worse than death indeed! Lead me, ye guards, to the rack, or to the flames; I’ll thank thy gracious mercy.

Symphony

Reculata - Theodora

Oh thou bright sun how sweet thy rays to health and liberty but here, Alas! They swell the agonising thought of shame, and pierce my soul with sorrow yet unknown.
Air—Theodore
With darkness deep, as is my woe
Hid me, ye shades of night.
Your thicket well around me throw,
Concealed from human sight.
Or come, thou death, thy victim save,
Kindly embosomed in the grave.

Symphony—Recitative—Theodore
But why art thou displeased, my soul? Hast heaven invited thee in sweet repastify strains, to join the ever-singing, ever-loving choir of saints and angels in the courts above.

Air—Theodore
Oh! that on wings could rise,
Swiftly sailing, though the skies,
As alights the silver dove.
That I might rest.
For ever bliss,
With harmony and love.

Recitative—Didimus
Long have I known thy friendly social soul.
Septimus,
Often experienced in the calm and perilous scenes of war when side by side we fought, and bowed the dangers of the field, dependent on each other's arm.
With freedom then I will disclose my mind:--I am a Christian and she, who by Heaven's influence grade,
With pure religious sentiments inspired my soul, with virtuous love inflamed my heart even she, who shame to all humanity! is now condemned to wear
Septimus:
No more! The shame reflects too much upon thy friend, the mean though duteous instrument of power, knowing her virtues not only of love.

Air—Septimus
Though the honors that Florus and Venus receive From the Romans, the Christian refuse to give;
Yet nor Venus nor Florus delight in the wise, That disfigures their faintest resemblance below.

Recitative—Didimus
O save her, or, give me power to save By free admission to the imprisoned maid.
Septimus:
My guards not less esteemed of their servile office, will second your intent and pleasure.

Didimus
I will reward them with a bounteous heart, and you, my friend, with all that heaven can give to the sincerity of prayer.

Air—Didimus
Deeds of kindness to display, Play suing, musing woes,
Who the call can disobey?
But the opportunity Of virtuous beauty in distress,
Each praise and heaven repay.

Recitative—Innie
The clouds begin to veil the hemisphere and heavily bring on the light: the last perhaps to us.
Oh that it were the last to Theordora, ere she fall a prey to the unexamined shame and cruelty.

Air—Innie
Defend her, Heaven, let angels spread Their watchful tent on her bed! Keep her from rude assaults secure, Still ever calm and ever pure.

Recitative—Didimus
Or lulled with grief or rapt her soul to heaven, In innocence of thought, entreated she lies.

Part the Third
Air—Innie
Lord, to Thee, each night and day,
Strong in hope we sing and pray,
Though convulsive rocks the ground, And Thy thunders roll around.
Still to Thee we sing and pray.

Recitative—Innie
But see, the good, the virtuous Didimus, he comes to join with us in prayer for Theordora.

Air—Theodore
When sin in anguish and despair,
To Theordora I cried, Heaven heard my prayer, And tased a tender Father's care.
The generous youth employ The generous youth obeyed and came, All right in his divinest flame, To save a wretched virgin's fame, And turn his grief to joy.

Chorus
Blent be the hand, and blast be the power, That in this dark and dangerous hour Saved from those cruel trials.
Lord, fear the still kind intent, And Thy gracious instrument With liberty and life.

Recitative—Messenger
Undaunted in the court stands Didimus, virtuously proud of rescued innocence.
But vain to save the generous hero: his fate is even, even from Romans van: and high in rage the protesters would, should he remain, To Theordora.

Air—Innie
Oh, Theordora! whence this sudden change from grief's pale looks to looks of reddening joy.

Theodore
On the scene, Heaven is kind, and Valens, too, is kind to give me power and grace to turn my gratitude while safe my honor.
Stay me not, dear friend,

Didimus
Thee to heaven, glorious son of worth, To be and safely given.
Both
I hope again to meet in earth,
Sure shall meet in heaven.

Recitative—Innie
'Tis night, but night's sweet blessing is denied to grieve the ours. Be prayer our refuge, prayer to Him who raised and can still the dead to life and joy.

Chorus—Christians
He saw the lovely youth, death's early prey, Was too early snatched away; He heard his mother's funeral cries: Rise, he said; the youth begins to rise.

Air—Innie
This morning of joy come crowding on, While some few feet away
Like nets before the rising sun, That gives a glorious day.

Soloists
Theodore
Jennifer Driscoll-Holmes
Septimus
Howard Fankhauser
Valens
Brian Box
Didimus
Carolyn Maia
Irene
Emily Lunde

Orchestra Seattle
Harpischord
Robert Keckley
Violin
Dajana Akrapovic-Hobson
Sax Harring
Deborah Kirkland
Concertmaster
Pam Kummert
Avron Malatsky
Gregor Nitescu
Leif-Ivar Pedersen
Principle second
Viola
Beatrice Dolf
Sandra Humphrey
Principal
Katherine McWilliams
Stephanie Read
Cello
Julie Reed
Principle
Matthew Wyant

Seattle Chamber Singers
Soprano
Jennifer Adams
Barbara Anderson
Sue Cobb
Crissa Cugini
Kyla DeReemer
Susann Dier
Dana Durasoff
Cinda Greene
Kiki Hood
Lorelee Knowles
Ill Kraakman
Nancy Lewis
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Douglas Durassof
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Theodora
An Oratorio for Soli, Chorus and Orchestra

by George Frideric Handel

featuring
Jennifer Driscoll-Holmes Carolyn Maia
Emily Lunde Howard Fankhauser
and Brian Box

Orchestra Seattle
Seattle Chamber Singers
George Shangrow, conductor

Sunday, June 7, 1998 • 7:00 PM
University Christian Church

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