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[Handel with care: Music of the Baroque's "Acis" opener celebrates long legacy](http://chicagoclassicalreview.com/2009/10/handel-with-care-music-of-the-baroque-acis-opener-celebrates-long-legacy/) (<http://chicagoclassicalreview.com/2009/10/handel-with-care-music-of-the-baroque-acis-opener-celebrates-long-legacy/>)

By Dennis Polkow

Sat Oct 17, 2009 at 12:41 pm



Back in the days when the Lyric Opera's idea of performing Handel opera was to have fading opera stars wobble through overblown stagings of his oratorios with a large chorus and orchestra, Music of the Baroque was the only group in town, apart from holiday and "do-it-yourself" performances of *Messiah*, that presented Handel operas and oratorios with some sense of Handel's forces and

intentions. Thus, how fitting that Music of the Baroque opened its season Friday night at the Harris Theater celebrating the 250th anniversary of Handel's death with a single Handel work, his "pastoral entertainment," *Acis and Galatea*.

A setting of the Greek myth, the work was composed as a private single-act diversion for the aristocrat whose home Handel was staying in when he first came to London. So many of its sections became pirated for public use that Handel ended up putting together an expanded two-act public version as well. There are English, Italian and even a later German version orchestrated by Mozart; the Music of the Baroque version was not any one specific account, but rather a cut-and-paste version that made use of the best of the English and Italian versions but maintaining the original John Gay English text.

The original plan—still listed in the pre-printed program—was to have music director Jane Glover conduct from the harpsichord, but this format was wisely abandoned in favor of having David Schrader play harpsichord as well as organ.

Glover had her hands full maintaining the brisk tempi that she established from the outset. Her Handel is spirited, swinging and, like her Mozart, slightly ahead of the beat, which was sometimes a challenge for singers to keep up with. The recitative sections had plenty of continuo timbral variety as Glover made use of organ alternating with harpsichord, along with therebo, artfully rendered by Charles Weaver.



Soprano Elizabeth Futral. Photo by Christian Steiner

The luxurious casting of soprano Elizabeth Futral as Galatea, making her Music of the Baroque debut, added a celebratory sense of occasion to the proceedings. Futral sounded a bit chesty and unfocused in Part I but compensated magnificently in Part II with an exquisite rendering of the work's soprano and chorus lament-filled finale, the odd effect of which had her more effectively mourn than woo her lover.

Tenor Thomas Cooley, also making his MOB debut, was no less impressive as Acis, and in fact had the best diction, most even runs and thrilling trills of the evening, bringing a contagious and youthful exuberance to the role of the fated lover willing to sacrifice everything for his love. Tenor Benjamin Butterfield had some rhythmic trouble initially as Damon but recovered nicely, his air *Consider, fond shepherd* a particular highlight of the evening, punctuated by Robert Morgan's flowing oboe lines. Possessing an imposing instrument, bass Christophèren Nomura as the villain of the piece Polyphemus, sacrificed clarity for projection, swallowed his consonants and plowed through Handel's delicate runs with wide vibrato.

The chorus was prepared for these concerts by Julia Davids, the first of five guest choral directors who will work with the group throughout the season. Davids' choral sound was balanced and there was wonderful dynamic contrast throughout the performance, but diction was often muddy and ensemble was a touch flabby, especially in the opening chorus.

Handel's *Acis & Galatea* will be repeated 7:30 p.m. Sunday at First United Methodist Church, 516 Church St., Evanston. www.baroque.org (<http://www.baroque.org/>); 312-551-1414.

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