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## Review: Falling through the rabbit hole, happily, with Philharmonia Baroque

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Mercury News

Posted: 04/26/2009 03:04:08 PM PDT

Updated: 04/27/2009 02:52:48 PM PDT

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All those poor composers. They work so hard, creating, creating, creating. But what do most of us remember about their prolific lives?

Not much. Take Handel. Mention his name to most people, and they will respond with one word: "Messiah." That's it.

Conductor Nicholas McGegan and his Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra aren't satisfied with the situation — never have been. Saturday in Palo Alto, wrapping up their 28th season's subscription series, they treated the audience — and that's what it was, a giant treat — to a performance of Handel's "Athalia," a dramatic oratorio that's rarely performed. And that's a crime.

Because "Athalia," Handel's third English oratorio, completed in 1733, is stuffed with tunes that ride on wings of rhythm through bandwidths of emotion, especially as performed by this remarkable orchestra, along with the Philharmonia Chorale and five top-draw soloists. The several hundred people attending the performance at First United Methodist Church were lucky; it was like falling, enchanted, through the proverbial rabbit hole.

"Athalia" is essentially an opera, though un-staged, telling the biblical story of its namesake, the wicked queen of Judah. A Baal worshiper, she tries to wipe out the legitimate male heirs to the Hebrew throne. But one boy escapes, Joas,

protected by his aunt Josabeth and mentored by the high priest Joad. In the end, Athalia falls and Joas ascends as rightful king.

Portions of the story are gruesome, but Handel seems incapable of writing anything that isn't pungent, sweetly joyful and exquisitely beautiful. Even Athalia's trembling, wrathful declarations are exquisite. Soprano Dominique Labelle sang the role with a mighty radiance that transfused each syllable.

Soprano Marnie Breckenridge, as Josabeth, bloomed through Handel's over-the-top ornamentations. Well, all the singers bloomed through Handel's over-the-top flourishes: Countertenor Robin Blaze spilled through his Act I lamentations, wondrously, with liquid ease.

Soprano Céline Ricci, as the boy, Joas, sang with downy depths. Then there was bass-baritone Roderick Williams, with his golden oak of a voice, as Abner, the Jewish captain, and soothing tenor Thomas Cooley as the Baal priest Mathan.

Not to mention the chorale, directed by Bruce Lamott, with its marvelous mingling and balance of voices. Or the orchestra: crisp, rich strings, brisk and always springing ahead; heart-melting flutes; valveless horn soloists who never flub a note.

And McGegan at the helm, of course. Handel, the man upstairs, is giving thanks.

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