

Judas Maccabaeus

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By JOSEPH DALTON
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PITTSFIELD, MASS. – The Berkshire Bach Singers concluded their season with a concert Sunday night at the Colonial Theatre that was offered as a gift of consolation and healing for the community. In welcoming remarks, executive director Paula Hatch explained that the particular program was chosen after the defacing of a local Jewish temple in December, as well as the January shooting in Arizona and general unrest in the Middle East. Pittsfield Mayor James Ruberto spoke of the transforming power of the arts and the value of tolerance.

The one work on the program was Handel's oratorio "Judas Maccabaeus." It loosely tells of a long struggle and triumph over religious persecution and was written to honor a military victory by the composer's royal patron.

Handel waits quite a while to fully join the battle. In selection number 32 — out of 49 separate recitatives, arias and choruses — he finally deploys his trademark trumpets and tympani. Tenor Daniel Molkenntin sings, "Sound the alarm!" The chorus responds, "We hear the pleasing dreadful call." Soon enough victory is obtained and chorus, brass, and organ unite over a hollow drum beat for the pastoral "Chorus of Youths" and "Chorus of Virgins."

Despite the piece's historic connections to combat, it had many passages that were surprisingly reflective and lush, even sensuous. Early in the evening soprano Katharine Dain and mezzo Mary Gerbi had a beautiful duet about "ever smiling liberty... with whom eternal pleasures reign."

Another Handel trademark is the elongation of a single syllable over many notes, often running up or down a scale. The soloists deployed these especially well, and often with little chance for warm-up. Especially memorable was baritone Charles Wesley Evans in "The Lord worketh wonders."

Conductor Frank Nemhauser led the performance that featured a chorus of 30 volunteer singers and orchestra of 21 players. The chorus would have benefited from another legion or two for the heftier selections but it did fine work in many of the more hushed passages. Also, some of its sound probably got lost in the space above the Colonial's curtained stage. All the forces came together in fine form near the end for the piece's most famous chorus "Sing unto God, and high affections raise."

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union. He blogs at: <http://www.HudsonSounds.org>.