

# Irish Baroque Orchestra: Alexander's Feast

**Irish Baroque Orchestra**  
**Peter Whelan** director

**Hilary Cronin** soprano  
**Hugh Cutting** countertenor  
**Stuart Jackson** tenor

**George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759)

Alexander's Feast, HWV 75 (Dublin version, 1742)

libretto by Newburgh Hamilton (1691–1761) after John Dryden's ode 'Alexander's Feast, or the Power of Music' (1697)

Alexander's Feast: Part One

56'

INTERVAL

Organ Concerto, Op.4 No.3 in G minor, HWV 291 (1735)

i. Adagio ii. Allegro

Alexander's Feast: Part Two

Organ Concerto (continued)

iii. Adagio iv. Gavotte: Allegro

Alexander's Feast: Part Three (unique to Dublin version)

46'

## Part One:

### Overture

*Recitative (soprano):* 'Twas at the royal feast

*Aria & chorus (tenor & soprano):* Happy, happy pair

*Recitative (soprano):* Timotheus plac'd on high

*Recitative (soprano):* The song began from Jove

*Chorus:* The list'ning crowd

*Aria (soprano):* With ravish'd ears

*Recitative (tenor):* The praise of Bacchus

*Aria (tenor) & chorus:* Bacchus ever fair and young

*Recitative (tenor):* Sooth'd with the sound

*Recitative (alto):* He chose a mournful muse

*Aria (alto):* He sung Darius, great and good

*Recitative (alto):* With downcast looks

*Chorus:* Behold Darius, great and good

*Recitative (alto):* The mighty master smil'd

*Arioso (alto):* Softly sweet in Lydian measures

*Aria (tenor):* War, he sung, is toil and trouble

*Chorus:* The many rend the skies with loud applause

*Aria (soprano):* The prince, unable to conceal his pain

*Chorus (reprise):* The many rend the skies with loud applause

## INTERVAL

Organ Concerto Op.4 No.3 in G minor

i. *Adagio*

ii. *Allegro*

## Part Two:

*Recitative (tenor) & chorus:* Now strike the golden lyre again

*Aria (tenor & alto):* Revenge, Timotheus cries

*Recitative (alto):* Give vengeance the due

*Aria (tenor):* The princes applaud with a furious joy

*Aria and chorus (soprano):* Thaïs led the way

*Recitative (tenor):* Thus long ago

*Chorus:* At last divine Cecilia came

*Recitative (alto & tenor):* Let old Timotheus yield the prize

*Chorus:* Let old Timotheus yield the prize

Organ Concerto Op.4 No.3 in G minor (continued)

iii. *Adagio*

iv. *Allegro*

## Part Three: (Unique to Dublin version)

*Aria (alto):* Your voices tune

(Reconstructed aria from Royal College of Music source)

*Chorus:* Your voices tune

*Duet (soprano & alto):* Let's imitate her notes above

*Chorus:* Let's imitate her notes above

*Alexander's Feast* by George Frideric Handel was first performed on 19 February 1736 at the Covent Garden Theatre – a new venue opened three years previously by the impresario John Rich. Deprived of his previous berth at the King's Theatre, now occupied by the Nobility Opera, Handel enthusiastically accepted Rich's invitation to present opera at the new house, relishing the opportunity to go head to head with the rival company. The 1734–5 season was an artistic triumph, including premieres of two of Handel's greatest operas (*Alcina* and *Ariodante*) but financially mediocre, so the composer responded with alacrity to Newburgh Hamilton's suggestion that instead of presenting yet another new opera, he should offer audiences a setting of John Dryden's ode.

Dryden wrote *Alexander's Feast, or The Power of Music* – to give the poem its full title – in 1697 to fulfil one of the Musical Society of London's annual commissions for works to mark the festival of St Cecilia, patron saint of music. The ode describes the feast given by Alexander the Great at Persepolis, capital city of Persia, in celebration of his victory over the Persian king Darius in 331 BCE. After some adroit flattery of the king and his consort Thaïs, Alexander's bard Timotheus plays music of such power that he manipulates Alexander into destroying the Persian palace, in revenge for previous atrocities. Jeremiah Clarke had set Dryden's text to music in the year it was commissioned, but his score had gone missing, so Hamilton's suggestion that Handel make a new setting was astute.

Hamilton, who would later provide original texts for *Samson* (1743) and the *Occasional Oratorio* (1746), collaborated with Handel to turn Dryden's seven stanzas into a sequence of recitatives, arias and choruses that would demonstrate his powers to the full. Handel engaged one of his favourite sopranos, Ana Maria Strada, to interpret a series of exquisite arias, while tenor John Beard, a newcomer to Handel's company who would subsequently create leading roles in many of his oratorios, took on the bulk of the narration. A bass, Erard, was assigned two arias. The choruses are numerous, varied and effective, anticipating the emphasis Handel would place on choral singing in his later oratorios. The unusually large orchestra that Handel deploys for *Alexander's Feast*, meanwhile, is used with notable imagination: there are *obbligatos* for cello (adapted for violin in the 'Dublin version' we hear tonight) and trumpet; the texture is sometimes enriched by dividing violas and bassoons; and recorders, oboes, horns, trumpets and timpani are all used to telling effect.

In order to ensure that Covent Garden audiences received the full evening of entertainment to which they had become accustomed, Handel supplemented the new ode with an organ concerto, a *concerto grosso*, a harp concerto and an Italian cantata sung by Strada. Tonight's performance recaptures the spirit of Handel's enterprise by interpolating, between the parts of the ode, movements from an organ concerto that the composer performed in 1735 at the Covent Garden revival of *Esther*.



after **William Turner** (1775–1851): Alexander the Great and the Burning of Persepolis. Watercolour, 51 x 78cm

The premiere was a great success: in the short term, it generated repeat performances and welcome revenue; in the longer term, the positive reception surely encouraged Handel to consider making English-language oratorio, rather than the increasingly parlous business of Italian opera, the main focus of his work. His last new Italian opera, *Deidamia*, appeared in 1741, while *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt* – both premiered in 1739 at the King's Theatre, to which Handel returned after the Nobility Opera folded – inaugurated a magnificent series of new oratorios.

It is with the April 1742 premiere of the best-known of all those oratorios, *Messiah*, that Handel's visit to Dublin is indelibly associated, but his stay in Ireland is also notable for the first performances of a new and significantly altered version of *Alexander's Feast*. It was perhaps in part because he realised his career as an opera promoter in London was essentially over that he accepted the invitation from the Duke of Devonshire, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, to present a series of concerts in Dublin during the 1741–2 season. Handel greatly enjoyed Dublin society and the city responded by embracing his music with huge enthusiasm. An initial subscription series of six concerts at William Neale's new music hall in Fishamble Street quickly sold out, so Handel scheduled a second series, whose programmes included two performances of the Dryden ode, in February and March 1742.

Handel originally planned to employ male choral singers from St Patrick's Cathedral for these performances, but the increasingly obstreperous Dean, Jonathan Swift, forbade their involvement, issuing threats of dire punishment for any chorister who defied his ban. The ever-resourceful Handel turned elsewhere and adapted the soprano, tenor and bass solo parts from the original version to suit the different voice types of the best singers he was able to engage in Ireland.

For the Dublin performances, the soprano Christina Avolio and tenor Callaghan McCarty, a local theatre singer, were joined by the contralto Susannah Cibber, sister of the composer Thomas Arne and a talented singing actress. Unfortunately, Cibber had become notorious in London due to a lawsuit for adultery brought by her husband and the scandalous details of her liaison that emerged. She had travelled to Dublin to evade the attentions of the London press, and Handel's encouragement of her work there helped to rehabilitate her reputation: her performance of 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' in *Messiah* was interpreted by many as itself an act of redemption. For *Alexander's Feast*, Handel adapted several of the sections originally assigned to soprano, including the arias 'He sung Darius, great and good' and 'Softly sweet', to suit Cibber's small but highly expressive voice. The numbers performed by Cibber in the original Dublin performances are sung tonight by the countertenor Hugh Cutting.

The most significant change that Handel made to *Alexander's Feast* for the Dublin premiere was to reconfigure it into the three-part structure familiar from most of his operas and oratorios, adding a short third part written by Hamilton alone to the two adapted by Hamilton from Dryden that had been presented in London. Tonight's conductor, Peter Whelan, has worked with the eminent Handel scholar Donald Burrows to reconstruct the score for the 'Dublin version'. Their greatest challenge was to 'reverse engineer' (in Whelan's description) the lost solo line for 'Your voices tune', the alto aria that opens the third part, working from the extant libretto, a *basso continuo* (bass line) part found by Burrows in the Royal College of Music library, and the solo part of an unused soprano aria found in the Handel autograph. Their efforts promise both to shed light on neglected aspects of Handel's visit to Ireland and to renew interest in a score that – perhaps because it does not fall into the familiar categories of opera or oratorio – has not received the attention its brilliance warrants.