



Review: Bach Collegium reveals the thrills of Handel's 'Theodora'

By [Valerie Scher](#)



Soprano Mireille Asselin in "Theodora." (Photo by Bjorn Bjerede)

Machine guns, a SWAT team, a TV press conference and execution by lethal injection were all part of Handel's 1749 oratorio "Theodora" when the ever-provocative Peter Sellars staged the 1996 English production that's now available on DVD.

Fascinating? Certainly.

But you don't need boldly imaginative staging to appreciate the neglected masterwork.

Bach Collegium San Diego proved that on Saturday at downtown's Balboa Theatre in what is believed to have been "Theodora's" first local performance. It will be repeated at 7 p.m. today (Sunday) at Santa Monica's First Presbyterian Church. (Tickets/information: www.bachcollegiumsd.org)

Unlike Sellars' production, the San Diego version didn't have costumes or sets, just acoustical panels and background lighting in angled hues of yellow, pink and purple.

Marvelously conducted by Richard Egarr, who doubled as harpsichordist, Saturday's presentation featured a passionately proficient group of musicians who emphasized the baroque style without ever seeming stuffy or academic.

With Bach Collegium associate director Pierre Joubert as the excellent concertmaster, the orchestra reveled in Handel's score, delivering everything from crisply-articulated trills to emphatic dotted rhythms with reliable finesse. The chorus achieved a cohesive blend, nowhere more magnificently than in the intricate passages of "He saw the lovely youth," one of Handel's personal favorites. And most of the vocal soloists conveyed both the dramatic and musical essence of their characters.

The epic undertaking was almost four hours long, including two intermissions. I confess to getting a little antsy during the lengthy opening act. After that I adjusted to the Handelian time zone, where the only thing that really mattered was the often glorious music and the musicians who were performing it.

As someone who had never before attended a live performance of “Theodora,” I felt an exhilarating sense of discovery and an appreciation for Bach Collegium’s ability to make music from the past such a vibrant part of the present.

Concert-goers even received information cards from the music website InstantEncore, which allowed them to get free downloads of the performance. How’s that for giving a 21st-century spin to an 18th-century masterwork?

Smartly, the Collegium’s program booklet supplied the text to the three-act oratorio. That made it easier to follow the tragic yet uplifting story of the Christian martyr and the Roman officer who loved her.



"Theodora" at San Diego's Balboa Theatre. (Photo by Bjorn Bjerede)

Soprano Mireille Asselin, a graduate student at Yale, seemed born for the title role. Her voice had a pleasing purity and she radiated so much charm that her Theodora was genuinely Theodor-able.

The gifted countertenor Darryl Taylor portrayed Didymus, the Roman officer who was smitten with Theodora. His voice was almost as pretty as hers. And they made a vocally attractive pair, as in the astonishingly lovely duet, “Thither let our hearts aspire,” where notes entwined as sumptuously as flowering vines.

Bass John Polhamus, a native San Diegan, brought expressive fervor to the role of Valens, the Roman villain. Mezzo-soprano Jennifer Lane conveyed the sympathetic nature of Theodora’s friend, Irene, and fearlessly tackled tricky coloratura flourishes. Also largely undaunted by the score’s demands was tenor Derek Chester, as Didymus’ pal Septimius, and tenor Krishan Oberoi sang ably as the Messenger.

As the final offering in the Collegium’s sixth season, “Theodora” is an unmistakable achievement, a rite of passage for the organization as well as for San Diego’s cultural community.

And it’s one more reason to look forward to the Collegium’s next season.

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