

A finely responsive Handel, though not a full one

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Elora Festival 2008

Solomon by George Frideric Handel

Elora Festival Singers

and Orchestra

Karina Gauvin, soprano, conductor Noel Edison,

In Elora, Ont., on Friday night

A gorgeous performance of George Frideric Handel's singular oratorio *Solomon* - albeit a seriously bowdlerized one - opened the 29th annual Elora Festival Friday night before a cheering audience.

Noel Edison led his superb Elora Festival Singers and Orchestra and five soloists, all but one of whom were bright jewels in this particular Solomon's crown.

Edison's choristers have risen in strength in the 28 years since he founded them. By now, they rival Ivars Taurins's Tafelmusik Chamber Choir for top spot among the several outstanding Canadian choirs. On Friday, they were in stunning form. From the rapt *May No Rash Intruder Disturb Their Soft Hours* to the glorious final chorus, *Praise the Lord with Harp and Tongue*, the singers were intelligible, immaculately in tune and responsive to the beauties and dramas of Handel's choral writing. As for their articulation in coloratura passages, it could serve many soloists as an object lesson.

In the arduous title role of Solomon, the young English countertenor Robin Blaze was disarming. It is not easy to imagine the virile King Solomon, with his reputed 700 wives and 300 concubines, being adequately portrayed by a countertenor, but Blaze was

astonishingly good. His musical authority, clarity and simplicity in enunciation, and his voice's unaffected lyrical grasp of every challenge, made him completely effective.

Our great Canadian soprano Karina Gauvin had three major roles to fill: Solomon's Queen, the visiting Queen of Sheba, and the first of the two women who argue before Solomon their claims as the true mother of the same infant.

To each role, Gauvin brought the beauty of her singing, the mastery of her technique, and human sympathy and emotional depth. As Solomon's Queen, she was duly enamoured of her monarch-husband. Her Queen of Sheba was at once grandly and subtly appreciative of Solomon's works and dominions. Her First Woman was heartbreaking in her pleas for the custody and life of her child.

The performance's serious bowdlerization occurred in two of Gauvin's roles. For reasons inexplicable, or in any case unexplained, Solomon's Queen's touching second aria, *With Thee, th'Unsheltered Moor I'd Tread*, was omitted, as was the Queen of Sheba's delicious first aria, *Every Sight These Eyes Behold*. Was this economy of music created to allow talk time for the parade of officials at intermission? But when Karina Gauvin is on the platform, I am selfish enough to want to hear every note she is entitled to sing.

As Zadok the Priest, U.S.-born tenor Lawrence Wiliford outdid himself in the longest role outside Solomon's own. Wiliford improves with every hearing. His fundamentally light tenor is so well supported by his breathing and his coloratura is so finely attuned to the music's long phrases that he makes an ideal baroque singer.

Canadian mezzo-soprano Jennifer Enns Modolo also continues to grow as an artist. Her performance in the ungrateful role of the Second Woman was firm and fierce; her singing secure and polished.

The only disappointment among the soloists was Canadian baritone James Westman. Possessed with a sumptuous dark baritone which he seemed not to have in focus for his single aria as the Levite, Westman further blotted his copybook by going off the rails rhythmically, and ending the aria with an ungainly ornament apparently designed to give him a final very loud and pointless top note. It was all too bad, as Westman comes with a sterling reputation which he will now have to regain.

Fortunately for the occasion, his contribution came early and was soon over. The disciplined artistry of the other soloists and the wonderful work of the choir and orchestra under Edison (with particular compliments to the obbligato oboe in Gauvin's last aria) conspired to give us a vivid and memorable experience of this Handelian masterwork.