

MUSIC REVIEW

Octavo Singers impress crowd with performance of Handel oratorio

BY GERALDINE FREEDMAN

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SCHENECTADY — The Octavo Singers are sounding better than ever if their Sunday afternoon performance of Handel's "Judas Maccabeus" at the First Reformed Church is proof. Curtis Funk, their artistic director, did an impressive job whipping the almost 100 singers into shape for the group's first-time effort with this oratorio.

Written by Handel five years after his "Messiah" in 1746 in another record-setting 32 days, the almost-three-hour work rivals the more popular oratorio. He wrote it in similar style with the chorus alternating with the four soloists to tell the story of Judas, a Jewish priest circa 166 B.C., who led successful revolts against the Syrians to regain Jerusalem. Thomas Morell supplied the lively libretto, which was sung in English.

For this concert, the soloists, who were all in very good voice and sang with excellent diction, were soprano

Kelly Hutchinson, mezzo-soprano Heidi Skok, tenor Kyle Erdos-Knapp and bass Mark Schnaible, along with a 16-piece orchestra.

Funk conducted with precision and energy, kept tempos on the brisk side, allowed the soloists room to emote and maintained necessary pacing. The orchestra was solid and supportive and balances were never an issue.

The chorus sounded mellow and well-balanced with only an occasional straining in the sopranos. Although all their sections sounded good, they were exemplary in the "Chorus of the Israelites." It was a wowzer.

Handel went the extra mile and often described the text instrumentally, so there were many luscious minor harmonies and much chromaticism, and he spread out his lines spatially for more vitality and vigor. His use of cascading lines, especially when words were repeated, such as the word "never" in section 52, was marvelous; and in the unusual

move of using only a cello and organ or harpsichord under the voice rather than an entire section created a charm and transparency that was a color in itself.

As Judas, Erdos-Knapp sang with an impetuosity and boldness that was appropriate for the warrior. He did an admirable job in the difficult part, particularly since he'd had the score only for 72 hours. His high notes didn't ring, but the finished phrases and edged tone were convincing. He piled on the juice for his "Sound an alarm!" of section 45 impressively.

Hutchinson projected her big but lightly unforced and agile voice easily over the material, and Skok's darker-hued tones shaped her phrases. Schnaible's voice was like a clarion. He delivered his lines with dramatic intensity and feeling, sometimes caressing the words and other times disclaiming.

The huge crowd seemed rapt and applauded with enthusiasm.