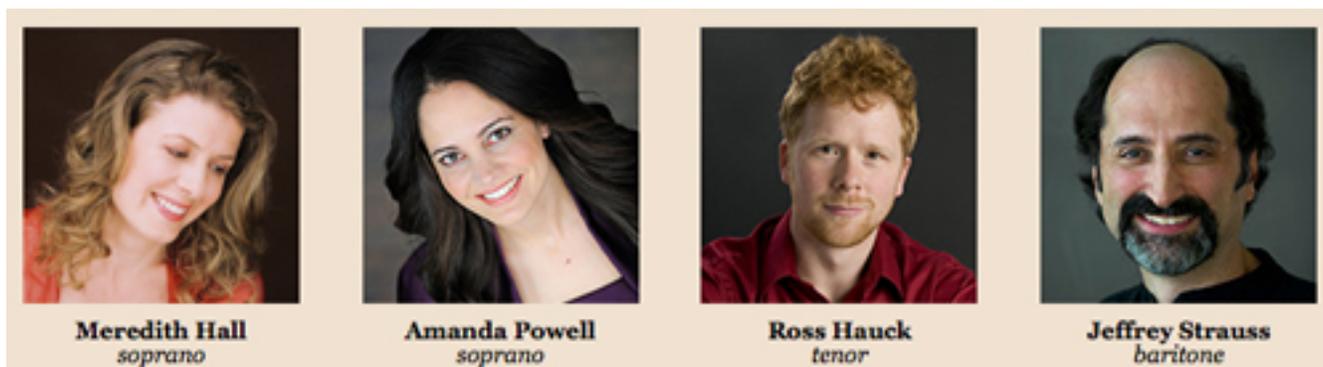


## Apollo's Fire: Handel's *Messiah* at First Baptist Church (December 13)

by Daniel Hathaway



When you're taking the risk of performing Handel's most celebrated oratorio from end to end, you need to field a quartet of soloists with alluring personalities, bring together a stellar chorus and orchestra, and be able to count on your own fine sense of pacing — otherwise this two-and-a-half hour work could become tedious soon after the "Hallelujah" chorus. Jeannette Sorrell and Apollo's Fire had all of these elements securely in place on Saturday night at First Baptist Church in Shaker Heights. Its version of *Messiah* — presented with a sense of theater, as Handel intended it to be — scintillated, charmed and inspired the large audience from Overture to "Amen."

The riveting tenor Ross Hauck conveyed the first prophetic words of Isaiah in "Comfort ye" and "Every valley shall be exalted," a recitative and aria that seemed written especially for his voice. Bass Jeffrey Strauss soon followed with "Thus saith the Lord" and "But who may abide," finding just the right vocal and bodily gestures to put across Haggai and Malachi's stern pronouncements — scary texts which have become somewhat dulled through familiarity.

Mezzo-soprano Amanda Powell's cheerful "Behold, a virgin shall conceive" and "O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion" turned the prophecy of doom into promise with the help of expressive hand gestures. Before long, soprano Meredith Hall's radiant appearance to the shepherds and her "Rejoice" aria turned the tide even further in the direction of divine fulfillment.

Part the First (up through “His yoke is easy”) breezed along in just under an hour. Though Sorrell kept the proceedings moving along throughout the oratorio, there were important moments of repose and reflection to come. Powell’s “He was despised” seemed to stop time altogether. Another oasis of calm was Hall’s lyrical “How beautiful are the feet,” a duet with violin soloist Johanna Novom, who returned to join Powell in “Thou art gone up on high”. Strauss’s “Why do the nations” was performed in its shorter version, but was no less of a commanding rage aria. Hauck, who earlier in Part the Second had plumbed the depths of despair during his five mini-arias, brought back a powerful note of revenge and recompense in his masterful “Thou shalt break them.”

Everyone who respects the tradition of standing for “Hallelujah” gave a well-deserved, if early, standing ovation to Apollo’s Singers, whose diction, blend, and clarity of line had been superb all evening, even at the liveliest of tempos and in the most complicated passage work. (And Part the Second included perhaps one of this writer’s favorite but usually omitted choruses, “The Lord gave the word.”)

Part the Third was distinguished by Hall’s luminous performances of “I know that my Redeemer liveth” and the oddly-placed “If God be for us,” expressively joined in both cases by concertmaster Olivier Brault. Trumpeter Josh Cohen and bass Jeffrey Strauss brought new sonorities to the work in “The trumpet shall sound” (playing from the pulpit, Cohen’s tone was burnished and his playing flawless). The whole oratorio came to a lavishly contrapuntal conclusion with Handel’s fugal intertwining of lines in the conclusion to “Worthy is the Lamb,” to which trumpets and timpani added their festive blare.

There are lots of interpretative decisions to be made in *Messiah*. Some were made in advance by Sorrell, some on the spot by the soloists. Some of those were surprising (the phrasing of the “Amen” fugue seemed fussy and over-sculpted) but most of them conspired to keep this performance fresh and full of spontaneous vitality. If many *Messiah* performances are as stately (and boring) as the progress of an ocean liner, this one skipped through the waves with the litheness of a sailboat, constantly changing its direction with shifts of the wind.

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