

Just who in heaven's name is Theodora?

Theodora was a Christian saint whose feast day, April 28th, is precisely when the Chorus will recount her martyrdom by performing *Theodora*, the oratorio that George Frideric Handel composed in 1749. So far, so good.

St. Theodora likely lived in Alexandria, Egypt, during the fourth century AD, although much later the French playwright, Pierre Corneille, as well as Handel's librettist would set their stories about her life in Antioch, a city in present-day Turkey. As a believer during the times of the Roman Emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians, Theodora had taken a vow of celibacy for Christ. When the local governor, Proculus, became aware of her vow, he cautioned that her penalty for such an action, which would further decrease the already withering Roman population, was to be taken to a brothel to be defiled. Since she came from a noble family, Theodora could have had her choice of husbands to avoid



punishment. Notwithstanding, she maintained her steadfast vocation until the end, stating "I believe...it is the will which God regards in every action; and that if my soul continue chaste and pure, it can receive no prejudice from outward violence."

Theodora's ultimate fate became intertwined with that of a Roman imperial guard who had secretly become a Christian. Some claim that their tragic love story reflects monotheism's great disapproval of the institution of "sacred prostitution", which had been prevalent in the ancient Middle East.

Joined by a baroque orchestra and renowned soloists (see page 3), we will present *Theodora* on Sunday, April 28th, 3 pm, in St. Mark's Lutheran Church, preceded by Music Director Ned Wetherald's pre-concert lecture at 2:45. As there is no additional fee for the lecture, do come to hear more about the plot, music, and staging of *Theodora*.

Tickets are available at Robert M. Sides Family Music Center, the Otto Book Store, and from Chorus members. Advance purchases include a \$2 discount off the box office prices of \$12 for general admission and \$10 for students and seniors. 🎵

Singers' Corner



Having been aware of our 2011 concert, *The World Beloved: A Bluegrass Mass*, Distinguished Concerts International/New York invited the Civic Chorus to submit an audition CD to participate in a Carnegie Hall performance of that very piece. Once

accepted, our singers could elect to participate, and three debuted there on February 18th. (Cost and time precluded others' going).

Imagine singing with 287 choristers from as far away as Ireland and

California! Imagine the work's composer and the librettist both being present to advise the esteemed Dr. Nancy Menk who conducted the ensemble, with Monroe Crossing as bluegrass band accompanists! Imagine a full house! 🎵

Ned's Notes...



"Among Handel's seventeen religious dramatic oratorios Theodora is unique. Nowadays it ranks as one of his greatest, most inward, most emotive compositions. But in 1750, at the age of 65, Handel had produced a work too radical and complex for the audiences of his time. In sharp contrast to his other dramatic oratorios, its story is not from the Bible, it is set in Christian times, and at the end there is no rejoicing: the hero and heroine are dead, and the community with which the audience identifies is in mortal danger. Although Theodora contains some of his most tender, most aspirational and most intense music, and although the first cast included his best singers, with the rising young star Guadagni as Didymus, for Handel it was a box-office disaster. But Theodora was admired by his musical friends and patrons, and in our own time it has gained its deserved place as a landmark of music theatre, both deeply challenging and utterly accessible."

This opening paragraph (in italics) of a pre-concert lecture last year by noted Handel scholar, Dr. Ruth Smith at the University of North Texas, does an excellent job of pointing out many of the unique (and to me, attractive) aspects of this wonderful work by Handel. Theodora's story was first told by St. Ambrose (fourth century) and was listed in *Acta Sanctorum* of the Catholic Church and John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. An unsuccessful play by Corneille (1646) retold the legend, as well as a 1687 novella by Robert Boyle. Boyle's "The Martyrdom of Theodora and Didymus" was included in a 1744 volume of his complete works and would have been known by Handel's audience.

I must admit that what initially drew me to *Theodora* were its differences—the intensity that persists throughout the work, the thought provoking plot, the somber ending. You will hear the intensity right from the beginning. No sooner does Valens (the president of Antioch) announce festivities to celebrate the birthday of Diocletian (the emperor of Rome)—which sounds like an upbeat beginning—than Didymus (a Roman soldier who has secretly converted to Christianity) takes us down a different road with his questioning of the decree. The intensity continues in the anguished arias and tense exchanges. The thought-provoking plot asks the listener to sympathize with a heroine who was a Catholic saint. We are asked to identify with the persecuted Christians, even though we are not dissenters from the state religion. The antagonists are not as objectionable as the Israelite's enemies in Handel's Old Testament oratorios. In fact, in several choruses and in the character of Septimius we catch glimpses of compassion that begin to endear the antago-

nists. The somber ending has waves of emotion with an air sung by Didymus, immediately followed by a duet with Theodora. After a brief recitative by Irene ("Ere this, their doom is past and they are gone to prove that love is stronger far than death"), the work closes with a slow benediction-like chorus in G minor.

Beyond its dramatic aspects, Handel's compositional maturity in this piece is stunning. He was 65 years old when he completed *Theodora* and had been writing oratorios for over 20 years and operas for many years before that. He knew how to use music to develop characters and plot. We have also been discovering these building blocks of Handel's musical form and look forward to bringing them to life for you.



"Ned's Notes" is provided for the enjoyment of our readers by Ned Wetherald. Currently in his sixteenth year as music director of the Williamsport Civic Chorus, Ned is minister of music at State College Presbyterian Church. He holds bachelor's and master's degrees in music and choral conducting from Shenandoah University.

"This performance is supported in part by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency."

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Theodora soloists

Dr. Jennifer Griffith Cowgill (soprano) is associate professor of voice at Marywood University in Scranton, having held a similar position at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. She has performed in recitals, operas, oratorios, and musicals including solo performances with the Atlanta Choral Guild and the Atlanta Ballet Orchestra. Dr. Cowgill received the doctor of music in vocal performance from Florida State University and the master of music from Peabody Conservatory. She earned her bachelor's degree in vocal performance from Oberlin Conservatory, studying with the internationally renowned voice pedagogue, Richard Miller. She and Dr. Todd Griffith, bass soloist, are siblings who grew up in Williamsport.

Amanda Silliker (mezzo soprano) returns as a soloist, having last performed with the WCC in "An Evening at Esterhazy". She studied vocal performance at Penn State and is an active local and international performer. She has been featured with the combined Penn State choirs and orchestra, the Williamsport Symphony Orchestra, and with the Williamsport Chamber Choir & Orchestra. Ms. Silliker teaches voice and piano in Bellefonte; she also directs "The Accidental Chorists", an experiential singing choir for women.

Timothy Oliver (tenor) hails from Ralston. With a music degree from Lycoming College, he has performed over 40 operatic roles and is sought after for repertoire in the *bel canto* style. Since leaving the Williamsport area, Mr. Oliver has appeared professionally with various ensembles in Philadelphia's Verizon Hall, Perelman Theater, Basilica of

Peter & Paul, and New York's Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. He is a member of the American Guild of Musical Artists, a board member for the Delaware Valley Opera Company, and he sings with the Vox Amadeus Ensemble. Mr. Oliver owns and operates the Cunningham Piano Company, a piano retailer and rebuilder in existence since 1891.

Dr. Todd Griffith (bass) appeared as a soloist in our April 2012 performance of *Mass in a Time of War* and *The Lord Nelson Mass*. He is chief technical officer for Discovery Machine, Inc., a software company he founded here. Dr. Griffith began his vocal career as a student section leader in Bucknell University's Rooke Chapel Choir and with the Bucknell Opera Company. While earning a PhD in computer science from Georgia Tech, he also studied voice with Elizabeth Colson. Dr. Griffith's area performances include solo parts with the Williamsport Symphony Orchestra and the Williamsport Chamber Choir & Orchestra.

Laurel Smail (soprano) most recently performed as a soloist in Penn State University's *Mosaic* concert in addition to working on several Penn State Opera Theatre productions. Miss Smail has competed at the regional National Association of Teachers of Singing for the last three years, where she won first place in the upper level collegiate women's category.

Nick Buckman (tenor) is seen regularly with the Community Theatre League and is a longtime member and soloist with the Chorus. He works for the Community Arts Center as a theater technician. 🎵



69th SEASON

Theodora

Handel's oratorio of a tragic love story, with orchestra and soloists

Sunday, April 28th, 2013

St. Mark's Lutheran Church
142 Market St., Williamsport

2:45 pm, pre-concert lecture

3 pm, concert

Looking ahead

In 2013-14, the Chorus begins its 70th continuous performance year. We open on **November 24th** with guest artist, Fiona Powell, in a program about Mother Goose that is geared to children of all ages. In April 2014, please stay tuned for our performance of a masterful, major work. We welcome you as singers, patrons, and audience members! 🎵

April 29, 2013: 20% of your Hoss's bill goes to the Chorus!



**WILLIAMSPORT
CIVIC CHORUS**

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2012-13 season



WILLIAMSPORT CIVIC CHORUS NEWSLETTER

“The Williamsport Civic Chorus is an open community of singers dedicated to making fine music accessible to all through education, participation, and inspiration.”



WCC singers Barbara and Ross Hemmendinger and Karen Gair at dress rehearsal, Carnegie Hall, NYC



February 18th DCINY performance of *The World Beloved: A Bluegrass Mass* at Carnegie Hall