

AMSTERDAM
BAROQUE
ORCHESTRA
& CHOIR



TON KOOPMAN



HÄNDEL'S HEROINES

Esther

Deborah

Athalia

2024 & 2025



TON KOOPMAN 80!

Ton Koopman will reach the age of 80 in October 2024. To add luster to this joyous anniversary, the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra & Choir present three festive oratorios by Georg Friedrich Händel: *Esther*, *Deborah* and *Athalia*. Being rarely performed, these early oratorios are a treasure box of energetic and vibrant music. Wonderful repertoire to celebrate Ton Koopman's mastery and youthful spirit!

For decades, Ton Koopman has been one of the most celebrated baroque specialists. As one of the last living pioneers of the Early Music movement today, Koopman keeps alive a performing tradition based on a wealth of knowledge of the historical performance practice. He combines his extensive academic knowledge with a great sense of beauty, technical excellence and, most importantly, unbridled pleasure in music making.

HÄNDEL'S EARLY ENGLISH ORATORIOS

Georg Friedrich Händel 'invented' the English Oratorio with *Esther* in 1732, combining a biblical subject with spectacular operatic elements: drama, moving arias and impressive choral movements. The London audiences of the 1730's immediately loved this novelty, so Händel went on to compose *Deborah* and *Athalia* in the following season. Skillfully combining elements from Italian opera and the English anthem, such as virtuosic airs, rich instrumentation, and magnificent choral writing, Händel thus developed an entirely unique genre that generates great success and appreciation to this day.

'In these early stages of the English Oratorio, Händel is passionately experimenting. That is what makes his three early works in this genre so fresh and unconventional. This is a repertoire that sizzles with new ideas!' – Ton Koopman

BAROQUE OPERA STARS

For the original performances of these first oratorios, Händel chose his singers among his opera stars. Ton Koopman follows the example of the composer and has invited young and widely acclaimed singers from the (Baroque-) opera world for this anniversary project. The lead role in *Esther* will be sung by soprano **Julia Lezhneva** (*'The Voice of Angelic Beauty'* – The New York Times). In *Deborah* the role of the Prophetess will be sung by soprano **Lucy Crowe** (*'... brings down the house with a soprano artistry beyond compare'* –

'Ton Koopman radiates an indestructible joy of playing. Whether he is behind the organ, playing harpsichord or conducting his own choir and orchestra, 75-year-old Ton Koopman still has a fiery passion for sound' – NRC, October 2019

The Independent) and the fierce commander Barak will be interpreted by countertenor **Jakub Józef Orliński** (*'Orlinski is the real countertenor deal, one of the best I've heard on the operatic - or any other - stage'* – Opera). The magnificent role of the wicked queen Athalia will be performed by soprano **Anna Prohaska** (*'She is more than just a singer. She is a comedian and tragedian, diva and rampant, and wherever she appears, there is always a great opera'* – Tagesspiegel Berlin).

ORCHESTRA & CHOIR IN FULL SPLENDOUR

Händel's oratorios ask for a rich and colorful orchestra and an exquisite choir. The Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra & Choir are known and loved for the expressiveness and precision of their first-class instrumentalists and singers. Led by concertmaster Catherine Manson and choirmaster Peter de Groot, Amsterdam Baroque forms a close-knit ensemble of internationally renowned baroque specialists. The combination of playfulness and technical excellence leads to the exceptionally high quality with which Amsterdam Baroque, together with Ton Koopman, has been at the top of the classical music world for decades. Simultaneously with the maestro's 80th birthday, Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra celebrates its 45th anniversary. All the more reason for a great musical celebration!



Georg Friedrich Händel

(1685-1759)

SOLOISTS

ESTHER

**JULIA
LEZHNEVA**

AHASVERUS / MORDECAI

**MAARTEN
ENGELTJES**

HAMAN

**ANDREAS
WOLF**

Esther (1732)

Esther marks the beginning of the English oratorio. During the 1720's, Georg Friedrich Händel had established himself as a successful composer and producer of Italian operas in London. *Giulio Cesare* and *Rodelinda* are fine examples of this period. However, when the London public's taste for Italian opera started to wane in the 1730's, Händel invented something new for his audience. He combined an English libretto with a biblical subject and added a dose of operatic drama. He took the courtly entertainment *Esther*, that he had composed in 1720, and extended it to a full oratorio in 1732.

The libretto is based on the play *Esther* by Jean Racine. It tells the story of the Jewish orphan Esther, who becomes Queen of Persia and manages to save her people from brute massacre by the villain Haman. Händel masterfully depicts the various atmospheres and characters in his score. The arias and choruses make the love, despair, revenge, rage, hope and triumph of the gripping story palpable for the audience. *Esther* also has an unusually colorful orchestral score, including an aria with obbligato harp, and horns that invoke echoes of the famous *Water Music*.



PERFORMANCE PERIOD **12-26 OCTOBER 2024**





Georg Friedrich Händel

(1685-1759)

SOLOISTS

DEBORAH
LUCY
CROWE

BARAK
JAKUB
JÓZEF
ORLIŃSKI

SISERA
SOPHIA
PATSI

ABINOAM
WOLF
MATTHIAS
FRIEDRICH

Deborah (1733)

Following the success of *Esther*, Händel composed *Deborah* in early 1733. *Deborah* was created, like *Messiah*, in one month only. The first public performance took place in the King's Theatre in London in March 1733. *Deborah* is a substantial and spectacular sacred drama, employing an eight-part chorus and rich instrumentation. It has massive choruses and grandiose orchestral effects. A witness to the first performances noted "It is very magnificent, near a hundred performers, among whom about twenty-five singers."

The libretto by Samuel Humphries tells the story of prophetess Deborah who leads her people to freedom after years of oppression by the Canaanites. Deborah foretells the death of Canaanite leader Sisera by the hands of a woman, which indeed happens as she predicts. In *Deborah* Händel has reused several successful pieces that he had composed before. The choir, or rather the choirs, in *Deborah* are as much part of the drama as the soloists are.



PERFORMANCE PERIOD 17–31 MAY 2025



Georg Friedrich Händel

(1685-1759)

SOLOISTS

ATHALIA
**ANNA
PROHASKA**

JOSABETH
**DEBORAH
CACHET**

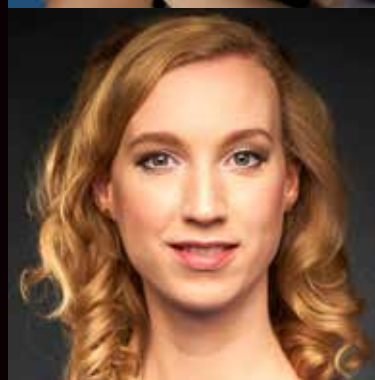
JOAD
**TIM
MEAD**

ABNER
**ANDREAS
WOLF**

Athalia (1733)

Händel holds on to the idea of female title roles with his third oratorio *Athalia*, although Athalia's murderous, heathen queen moves abruptly away from the idea of female virtue. The libretto by Samuel Humphreys is based on the play *Athalie* by Jean Racine, once again with a subject from the Old Testament. Queen Athalia has rejected Jehovah and turns to the worship of Baal. Moreover, to secure her position as queen, she has had all royal princes of Israel put to death even though they are her own grandsons. One prince is kept hidden and eventually brings on her downfall.

In *Athalia*, Händel is even more creative and innovative than before, and impresses with his vivid musical characterizations. The whole work has a fast-flowing narrative that is dramatic to the core. *Athalia* is a fresh and moving oratorio, full of musical surprises and a grippingly suspenseful plot.



PERFORMANCE PERIOD **11–25 OCTOBER 2025**



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AN AMSTERDAM BAROQUE ORCHESTRA & CHOIR PRODUCTION

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