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MUSIC REVIEW

## Exploring Different Sides of One of Handel's Styles

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

Professional training workshops have been part of the programming fabric at [Carnegie Hall](#) since 1990, when they were introduced as part of the hall's centennial celebration. The subjects of these concentrated coaching sessions change: chamber music, piano concertos, art song interpretation and conducting have been prominent in recent years. But Carnegie's choral workshops have long held a special place in this constellation: the very first of the professional training workshops were those the great choral conductor [Robert Shaw](#) directed with his distinctive blend of experience, wisdom and inspiration.

The Dutch conductor Ton Koopman spent last week presiding over a choral workshop quite different from those Shaw used to lead. Shaw's conception of choral sound was large and lush, and the repertory was often (though not always) Romantic, with choirs of 200 singers, many of them choral conductors who attended the sessions to learn how Shaw did it.

Mr. Koopman's workshop, by contrast, was more narrowly focused. His subject was [Handel](#) choral and vocal music, specifically the "Ode for St. Cecilia's Day" and the "Dettingen" Te Deum. His choir, billed as the Ton Koopman Young Artists Choir, comprised only 30 singers, and in the valedictory concert on Sunday evening, devoted to both Handel scores, about half the singers were also soloists.

It should be noted as well that although Mr. Koopman, as the international drawing card, had top billing and conducted the closing concert, the conductor Andrew Megill was also credited in the program book with overseeing the choral preparation.

Both the ode and the Te Deum are celebratory works, yet they touch on entirely different sides of Handel's style. The ode, set to a Dryden text, honors the patron saint of music and musicians but is a secular work at heart. Its movements describe the passions aroused by the characteristic sounds of different instruments: passions that Handel paints as much in his text setting as in his choices of instrumental color. The Te Deum, by contrast, is a prayer of thanksgiving offered for a military victory in 1743 and is bright and assertive, with brass and timpani fanfares always close at hand.

Mr. Koopman, an original if sometimes idiosyncratic Baroque specialist, led his choir and the [Orchestra of St. Luke's](#) in a supple account of the ode and an electrifying performance of the Te Deum. Both performances reveled in current notions of Baroque phrasing, with double-dotted rhythms, zesty filigree and the sense that Handel's theatrical pulse should be felt in almost all his music, whether composed for theater or church.

The musicians of the St. Luke's orchestra played modern instruments but in a persuasively Baroque style, partly because several of these musicians play in period-instrument bands and perhaps partly as a result of their years working with the antiquarian conductor [Roger Norrington](#).

But the real focus was the choir, which sang with remarkable unity and focus, most telling in carefully terraced, finely detailed phrasing. It is remarkable what a week of intensive rehearsal can yield with a makeshift ensemble.

The soloists from within the choir were mostly of modest voice, but several — among them, Pablo Bustos, a tenor; Maria Bernius and Ellen Giacone, sopranos; and Jason Steigerwalt, a baritone — sang with ear-catching beauty and power.

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