

AUSTRALIA'S BAROQUE OPERA COMPANY PINCHGUT PRESENTS WORLD PREMIERE OF HANDEL'S STRIKING AND POLITICAL *ATHALIA*



Handel's Athalia to be performed for the first time in Australia

- *Maestro Erin Helyard describes the composer as "a poet of the human heart" and the richly dramatic opera as "a hotbed of intrigue and devious characters" -*

Sydney, Australia: Australia's only Baroque opera company, the acclaimed Pinchgut Opera, will present a striking new production of **Handel's Athalia** at City Recital Hall Sydney, with four performances from 21 until 26 June 2018. Directed by **Lindy Hume**, with design by **Melanie Liertz**, lighting by **Matthew Marshall**, and with Pinchgut Artistic Director **Erin Helyard** conducting from the harpsichord, this production reunites much of the phenomenal creative team from Pinchgut's 2016 lauded production of Handel's *Theodora*. Debuting for Pinchgut in *Athalia* are Australian-born soprano **Emma Pearson** in the title role, South African-born countertenor **Clint van der Linde** taking the role of Joad and thirteen-year-old **Freddy Shaw** as Joas. Other artists include Pinchgut favourites **Miriam Allan, Brenton Spiteri** and **David Greco**.

Handel's *Athalia* is based on the story of the Biblical Queen Athalia, daughter of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel who was determined to stamp out the Jewish line of kings descended from David. It was commissioned for performance at a college in Oxford in 1733 and was Handel's third oratorio in English, preceding *Saul* as his next work in the genre.

Athalia is an English-language oratorio composed by George Frideric Handel to a libretto by **Samuel Humphreys** based on the play *Athalie* by **Jean Racine**. It was completed on 7 June 1733, and first performed on 10 July 1733 at the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford.

Enormously popular at the time, *Athalia* was an audacious experiment in a completely new theatrical form: relatively few da capo arias for the soloists, allowing the chorus to take on a more profound role in the drama. From their inception, Handel's oratorios dealt with themes that had strong – and controversial – resonances with contemporary political life.

Director, Lindy Hume describes the opera: ***“As a director, Handel is my favourite composer. He presents a series of emotional, moral and ethical problems via complex characters and situations, and challenges audiences to reach into their own souls to find solutions. Athalia deals with powerful psychological themes set against a quasi-historical background of Phoenicia, during the religious persecution of the Israelites. At the spiritual heart of the work is an other-worldly boy whose innocence crushes the corrupt Athalia and restores hope to the Israelites - their moving story is perfect subject matter for Handel's extraordinary choral writing, and the virtuosic soprano Emma Pearson is the ideal singer/actor to play the complex and damaged Athalia.”***

The powerful plot tells of the high priest Joad attempting to overthrow the despotic regime of the murderous and ambitious Athalia. *Athalia* deals with powerful psychological themes and personal dilemmas: an unstable queen visited by nightmares of her murderous mother, a religious couple concealing a royal child and a general with divided political loyalties. A central part of the drama is the relationship between the two women – Queen Athalia and Josabeth, wife of Joad, who is raising the boy king Joas.

Erin Helyard, Artistic Director, Pinchgut Opera describes *Athalia* as a work of great originality and splendour: ***“Described as the “first great English oratorio”, Athalia is a striking work that combines the chorus and solo voice in new and novel ways, and in some respects it was an experiment in vocal colour that Handel was not to use again in his career in oratorio, preferring larger block structures over the interweaving of textures. Handel's brilliance at examining human nature is in full flight with Athalia. He presents characters rich in thought and feeling, combined with haunting alternation of chorus and voice to create heart-stopping moments when everything clears but for a few strings and a single voice. It's just magic. The inclusion of a boy soprano only heightens Handel's desire to pair and play off one another youthfulness and adulthood, apostates and believers, the virtuous and the hypocrites. This is a magnificent work with thrilling orchestral and choral effects; I can't wait to begin work on it with such a phenomenal cast.”***

Ends

MEDIA CONTACTS

For further information and to request digital assets and interviews please contact Julia Barnes, Julia@articulatepr.com.au 0402 678 589 or Kym Elphinstone, kym@articulatepr.com.au 0421 106 139.

NOTES TO EDITORS pronunciation: Athalia “Ath-a-lyre” (rhymes with *Josiah*)

ASSETS

Images: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/7itpssuksdplu/AADdYkonFTSgEchydQVcNlcaa?dl=0>

1986 recording of Dame Joan Sutherland performing *Athalia*:

<https://open.spotify.com/album/5XD2LKYSd7b9oQ5TdPIrPa?si=mOrKIFGGTCa8TuRbuAniTw>

PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

Handel *Athalia*

Sung in English

Thu 21 June 7pm | Sat 23 June 2pm | Sun 24 June 5pm | Tue 26 June 7pm |

City Recital Hall Sydney

**The performance will run for approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes including an interval.*

ARTISTS: click links for bios

[Emma Pearson](#) Athalia

[Miriam Allan](#) Josabeth

[Clint van der Linde](#) Joad

[Brenton Spiteri](#) Mathan

[David Greco](#) Abner

[Freddy Shaw](#) Joas

[Cantillation](#)

[Orchestra of the Antipodes](#)

CREATIVE TEAM

[Erin Helyard](#) Conductor and Harpsichord

[Lindy Hume](#) Director

[Melanie Liertz](#) Designer

[Matthew Marshall](#) Lighting Designer

ABOUT PINCHGUT

Pinchgut Opera rediscovers operatic masterpieces from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since its inception in 2002, Pinchgut has presented twenty rarely performed gems. The creative team is driven by both musical excellence and academic rigour, and fueled by a desire to unearth these rarely performed operas and to present them for audiences. While other Australian opera companies present the more familiar operas excellently; Pinchgut is about discovering a new operatic experience and have sustained outstanding critical success.

LIST OF PRODUCTIONS

Handel's *Semele*, (2002)

Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* (2003)

Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (2004)

Rameau's *Dardanus* (2005)

Mozart's *Idomeneo* (2006),

Vivaldi's *Juditha Triumphans* (2007)

Charpentier's *David et Jonathas* (2008)

Cavalli's *Ormindo* (2009)

Haydn's *L'anima del filosofo* (2010)

Vivaldi's *Griselda* (2011)

Rameau's *Castor & Pollux* (2012),

Cavalli's *Giasone* (2013),

Salieri's *The Chimney Sweep* (July 2014),

Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* (Dec 2014),

Vivaldi's *Bajazet* (Jul 2015)

Grétry's *L'Amant jaloux* (Dec 2015),

Haydn's *Armida* (June 2016)

Handel's *Theodora* (Dec 2016)

Rameau's *Anacréon* and *Pigmalion* and Vinci's *Erighetta e Don Chilone* (June 2017)



Media Release Tuesday 17 April, 2018

Monteverdi's *Coronation of Poppea* (Nov 2017)