Raymond Leppard conducts the Boston Symphony Orchestra in Handel's Acis and Galatea, Feb. 14 & 16 at 8, Feb. 15 at 2pm.

It can surely be argued that Handel was a precursor to Mozart. His music clearly lies in the Baroque: its outward appearance is that of the age of Bach. But if one penetrates a few layers deeper one can find expressions of emotion — of love, of hate, of loss — endowed with immense power through simplicity and sincerity. Handel, like Mozart, could use music as a psychological tool to reach the psyche within, rather than merely strike the body with-out. In Acis and Galatea his art appears in its full maturity; the current Boston Symphony Orchestra production under Raymond Leppard, though not without its flaws, is illuminating.

The story is simple: Acis and Galatea are in love. The monster Polyphemus lusts after Galatea, is turned down and vents his fury by crushing Acis under a rock. Galatea gains consolation by changing him into a fountain to flow forever from under the rock.

Galatea was sung by Margaret Marshall in a performance of increasing intensity. "As When the Dove" was beautifully done, the violins cooing as the dove of Galatea's poetic lyrics. In Act II we saw the role deepen, innocent yearning turning to contemplative rejection of a rival, turning to innocence — hit by the rawness of loss — and transcending bitterness with a purity of tone sure to bring redemption.

Acis, sung by Michael Myers, was a dis-appointment. Myers' voice lacked drama, and Acis came across as an unsympathetic wench who hardly deserved the fair Galatea. David Britton as Damon was better — "Would You Gain the Tender Creature" was sung expressively — but there were times when his voice showed a lack of power.

Willard White, singing Polyphemus, was far away the star of the evening. The chorus announces the death of Polyphemus: "See what ample strides he takes," they sing, and we hear the strides in the orchestra. The strings hint at darkness as the monster arrives.

In the first six words White laid bare Polyphemus' heart: "I rage!" he roared with his clear bass voice. "I hate!" he declared with enough momentary softness to cause sympathy, "I hate!" he despaired, anger and pain combining.

"Let me breathe sweet Galatea's beauty, and glorying in Acis' new role as a stream, murm'ring still thy gentle love." — Polyphemus

Throughout the performance individual instruments added flavor, playing on tutti textures. Recorder solos were quite virtuoso; a cello suggested an emphasis here, and a lingering glimpse of introspection there. Leppard's perceptive thunder on the harpsichord gave Polyphemus another dimension.

The Tanglewood Festival Chorus performed strongly under the direction of MIT Senior Lecturer John Oliver. "Happy Day!" sung in response to our entranced "I am," was sung expressively. Mendelssohn's score provides an orchestral performance of immense power and transcendent bitterness. The addeditta of oboe and cello suggested an emphasis here, an cello a lingering glimpse of introspection there. Leppard's perceptive thunder on the harpsichord gave Polyphemus another dimension.

"Through the plains still murm'ring still thy gentle love." — Polyphemus

Despite a few measures of blandness during Act I, Leppard's mastery of the score provided an orchestral performance of great sensitivity. Strings were full-blooded for Polyphemus, yet they also suggested gentle pathos for him. For Galatea they brought a soft non-comprehen-sing sense of loss but then a soothing uplift, the gentleness in the strings joining with the sweetness in the wind to create a sweet fragrance of renewal.

Raymond Leppard, Conductor, Boston Symphony Orchestra