



A stylish and dramatic performance...

Handel's Oratorio "Messiah" was presented to a packed audience in Wells Cathedral on Saturday last performed by the Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society. The performance was supported by Music for Awhile Orchestra – a specialist period instrument band - with Harpsichord and Chamber Organ continuo and soloists: Lesley Jane Rogers [soprano], Matthew Minter [Tenor] and Andrew Kidd [Bass]. The soloist booked to sing the Alto part was unfortunately indisposed and replaced by Countertenor Simon Clulow at short notice.

This was a performance which captured the drama of Handel's vision with stylish singing from all concerned, with Matthew Owens setting good speeds and obtaining clear diction from the chorus. The opening Sinfonia and Tenor recitative had a lightness of style which set the tone. Throughout, the Tenor, Matthew Minter, demonstrated a clarity and flexibility of voice admirably suited to Handel's demands and where appropriate produced some very stylish vocal decoration – an expected feature of solo singing in Handel's day. Particular highlights were his recitatives in Part Two and a suitably dramatic Aria "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron". Lesley Jane Rogers, the Soprano soloist, demonstrated a purity of tone and clear top notes in the Aria "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion"- the latter calling for considerable vocal agility and achieved to thrilling effect. It was a nice touch for her to sing the Recitatives heralding the birth of Jesus from the Pulpit. Andrew Kidd was the sonorous Bass. His opening recitative "Thus saith the Lord" set the tone for some memorable singing. He conveyed the dramatic intent in "For behold, darkness shall cover the earth" and in the Aria "Why do the nations so furiously rage together". The Alto solos demand a whole range of emotions from the soloist. Simon Clulow rose to the demands. There was pathos a plenty in "He was despised" contrasted with virtuoso singing in "Thou art gone up on high".

Handel wrote some dramatic and demanding music for the chorus to sing. From the opening chorus "And the glory" the choir displayed confident singing with well controlled runs and clear diction. The Christmas story was heralded with a beautifully paced "For unto us a child is born" and "Glory to God in the highest". Lent came across in Part Two with "Surely he hath borne our griefs" and ended with a vibrant "Hallelujah" chorus which brought the audience to its feet. In Part Three the four short choruses from "Since by man came death" were well tuned and well contrasted. The final "Amen" chorus rounded off the Oratorio with style and unflagging verve. For such a large number of voices the singing was always light and spirited.

Music for Awhile played with a great sense of style led by the excellent String section. Also noteworthy were the Trumpets on their period style instruments. They helped to create a real sense of occasion and shone in the "Hallelujah" chorus. Matthew Owens, the conductor, produced a stylish and dramatic performance with a well trained chorus, excellent soloists and fine band of players.

David Nichols, December 2014