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A capacity audience gave an enthusiastic reception to a performance of Handel's Messiah last Saturday night in Wells Cathedral. The performance was given by the Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society with Music for Awhile orchestra on period instruments and four excellent soloists: Ali Darragh, Soprano, Louise Mott, Mezzo Soprano, Alexander James Edwards, Tenor and Andrew Mahon, Bass. The conductor was Matthew Owens.

Over two and half hours the oratorio relates the coming of the Messiah as foretold in The Bible and the manner of the Messiah's birth, death and resurrection. Handel's setting of the words arranged by Charles Jennens more than matches the drama and majesty of the text.

From the opening tenor recitative a pleasing lightness of style was evident which pervaded the whole performance. The Tenor, Alexander James Edwards, sang with a clarity and flexibility admirably suited to Handel's demands. Highlights were his recitatives in Part Two and the dramatic aria "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron". There was touching poignancy in "Thy rebuke hath broken his heart". Louise Mott produced some beautifully poised singing especially in "He was despised and rejected" having shown considerable agility in the earlier "For he is like a refiner's fire" in Part one. Ali Darragh has that rare gift of a pure soprano voice without a hint of tremor with clear unforced top notes. This was evident in the Christmas sections of Part One and later in a beautifully judged aria "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion". Particularly affecting was her performance of "I know that my redeemer liveth" at the start of Part Three. Complementing the other three soloists was the excellent Bass Andrew Mahon. His majestic voice produced some thrilling moments from his opening recitative "Thus saith the Lord" to the full drama of "Why do the nations so furiously rage together" with a telling gravitas in "For behold, darkness shall cover the earth".

The chorus sang with great verve throughout coping admirably with the slick tempos set by Matthew Owens. Entries were firm and well judged and words generally clear. For a body the size of the chorus the fast runs demanded by Handel came across with pleasing precision. The Sopranos produced some thrilling sounds at the top of their range right from the opening "And the glory" and later in "For unto us a child is born". All voices produced a resounding "Hallelujah" chorus with the audience rising to its feet in time honoured tradition. The singing from the chorus was always light, agile and well tuned.

The performance was greatly enhanced by the admirable Music for Awhile orchestra playing on period instruments who played with a great sense of style led by Maggie Fautless. Matthew Owens, the conductor, produced a memorable performance of this great oratorio making a very fitting prelude to the festive season of Christmas.

David Nichols December 2016