



...always well tuned and with plenty of rhythmic vitality

Wells Cathedral was full last Saturday night for a performance of Handel's *Messiah* given by Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society with Music for Awhile orchestra [leader Maggie Faultless] and soloists: Mhairi Lawson [Soprano], Stephen Harvey [Countertenor], Nick Pritchard [Tenor] and Benjamin Bevan [Bass]. The conductor was Stuart Beer who had stepped in to replace the society's regular conductor at short notice.

Written in the space of just over three weeks in 1741 Handel's *Messiah* has become an essential prelude for many people to Christmas. This was an uplifting performance which captured the drama and spirit of Handel's setting of words drawn from the King James version of the Bible.

Nick Pritchard set the scene with his eloquent and clear toned singing in *Every valley shall be exalted*. Later in Part 2 he would bring out the drama in the Recit *He that dwelleth in Heaven* and the Aria *Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron*. He particularly caught the mood of the Recit *All they that see him shall laugh him to scorn*.

Mhairi Lawson produced some beautiful tone and well placed top notes. Her aria *I know that my redeemer liveth* at the start of Part 3 was touchingly sung with purity of tone reflecting the certainty at the heart of the aria. In Part 2 her Recits leading to the chorus *Glory to God* conveyed the excitement and wonder of the Christmas message.

Benjamin Bevan the Bass soloist has some of the most dramatic music. His strong and sonorous voice captured the spirit of the early Recits *Thus saith the Lord* and *For behold darkness shall cover the earth*. Later we experienced the full dramatic potential of *Why do the nations so furiously rage together*.

Stephen Harvey was the excellent Countertenor. Whilst the part is sometimes sung by a Contralto Stephen's clear Countertenor was a perfect complement to the other soloists. Notable was the pathos that came across in the Aria *He was despised*. Drama came in the earlier Part 1 Arias *But who may abide* and *O thou that tellest* and also in the taxing *Thou art gone up on high* in Part 2. The virtuoso demands here were scaled with ease and with some fine top notes.

For a large body of singers the singing of the chorus was always well tuned and with plenty of rhythmic vitality when called for. Excellent controlled runs were a hallmark of the singing from the early chorus *And he shall purify* through *For unto us a child is born* and *His yoke is easy*. There was pleasing lightness, almost a touch of humour, in *All we like sheep* and the *Hallelujah* chorus with its trumpets and drums brought the audience to its feet in the now traditional manner. In contrast there was warm tone in the quieter passages in Part 3 for *Since by man came death* and *For as in Adam all die*. The whole performance was rounded off with strong sustained singing in *Worthy is the Lamb* and the final *Amen* chorus.

Music for Awhile orchestra on period instruments played with a great sense of style and ably underpinned the performance contributing to the lightness of the performance. Particularly noteworthy was the solo violin playing of the Leader Maggie Faultless in the Soprano aria *If god be for us*.

Stuart Beer, the conductor, is to be congratulated on producing a fine and exciting performance of this great work.

David Nichols