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For many, the Christmas season doesn't begin until they've heard Handel's Messiah, and on 7 December Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society well and truly kickstarted this year's celebration. Each year after its major November concert the Society has a mere three weeks to prepare one of the greatest of all choral works, this year for the first time conducted by the newly-appointed Director of Music in the Cathedral, Jeremy Cole. Mr Cole's new and invigorating approach kept choir, soloists and orchestra on their toes from beginning to end, and the capacity audience was enthralled.

As always for the Wells Messiah the orchestra was Music for Awhile, playing authentic period instruments at the lower baroque pitch of A=415 instead of 440, with minimal vibrato in the stringed instruments, and the orchestra's spare, almost ascetic tone in the opening Sinfonia announced the prevailing style of the performance.

It was good to welcome back three of the four excellent soloists from Elijah in March, Elizabeth Atherton (soprano), who also sang in November's concert, Peter Auty (tenor) and Ben McAteer (bass), together with the countertenor Tim Morgan, and each proved aware of the baroque phrasing and articulation of the orchestra whilst filling the Cathedral with glorious sound.

Mr Auty's recitatives and arias were sung with heartfelt eloquence; after the opening Sinfonia the tenor's opening recitative Comfort Ye and aria Ev'ry Valley always create a wonderful sense of anticipation, and Mr Auty did not disappoint.

The bass's role in Messiah is often prophetic and requires real stature in its soloist, and Mr McAteer delivered with the same imperiousness which characterised his Elijah. One looks forward to The Trumpet Shall Sound in every Messiah, and Mr McAteer's, together with the pristine baroque trumpet of Paul Bosworth, was distinctly worth waiting for.

Tim Morgan, as a Royal College of Music post-graduate student the least experienced of the soloists, nevertheless proved a revelation. His countertenor matched the orchestra beautifully and his sensitivity and poise were most moving, even when pressed by a slightly faster tempo than usual in O Thou That Tellest Good Tidings to Zion.

Elizabeth Atherton is always a welcome soloist, her versatility a delight. Her solos were vibrant and serene as required, and her duet If God be For Us with the leader of the orchestra, Jean Paterson, superbly judged.

Over the past fifty years or so performances of Messiah have been transformed; large-scale, romanticised renditions have been replaced by crisper, less indulgent ones, and Jeremy Cole's vital approach, in partnership with Music for Awhile, was refreshing and involving. Over the past three weeks he had plainly sought to revitalise each of the choruses, resulting sometimes in tempi which seemed a trifle too fast to allow clear articulation of the rapid vocal lines in such a resonant acoustic, and in Hallelujah the various sections of the choir came a little adrift from each other and the orchestra for a moment or two; however, very often when the choir was in full flight the sound was positively thrilling, such as in Glory to God.

The occasion was again enhanced by Neill Bonham's encyclopaedic programme notes, and the evening rewarded with a well-deserved standing ovation. We shall now look forward to Mozart's sublime Requiem in March.

And if Peter Auty's name sounds somehow familiar, it is because in 1982 as a St Paul's Cathedral chorister he, not Aled Jones, sang Walking in the Air on the soundtrack of The Snowman, initially uncredited.

HDJ