

A fine and exciting performance of this great work.

Wells Cathedral was packed last Saturday night for a performance of Handel's Messiah given by the Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society under their conductor Matthew Owens with Music for Awhile orchestra (leader Maggie Faultless) and soloists: Eloise Routledge (Soprano), Simon Clulow (Countertenor), Daniel Norman (Tenor) and Michael Bundy (Bass). The Countertenor and Bass had stepped in to replace the billed singers because of illness.

Written in the space of just over three weeks in 1741 Handel's Messiah has rightly taken its place as one of the great choral masterpieces and with the first part telling the Christmas story has become an essential prelude for many people to their Christmas celebrations. This was by any standards a splendid and uplifting performance - a performance very much in the baroque tradition with the orchestra playing on period instruments. Throughout there was a sense of lightness and pace which pointed up the drama of the unfolding narrative.

Daniel Norman set the scene with his eloquent and clear toned singing in *Every valley shall be exalted*. Later he was to show his dramatic credentials in Part 2 in the Recit *He that dwelleth in Heaven* and the following Aria *Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron*. He also caught the mood of the mocking Recit *All they that see him* which was followed by the equally mocking chorus *He trusted in God* sung with verve and touch of sarcasm by the choir.

Eloise Routledge produced some beautiful tone and brilliantly placed top notes throughout. Her Aria *I know that my redeemer liveth* at the start of Part 3 was touchingly sung reflecting the certainty at the heart of the aria. In Part 2 her Recits leading to the great Chorus *Glory to God* had a real sense of the excitement and wonder at the Christmas message.

Michael Bundy as the Bass soloist has some of the most dramatic music. His strong, keenly edged, Bass voice captured the spirit in the early Recits *Thus saith the Lord* and *For behold darkness shall cover the earth*. We experienced the full dramatic potential of *Why do the nations so furiously rage together* - a real test for the Bass voice here admirably sung with intensity and a touch of fire.

Simon Clulow was the excellent Countertenor. Whilst the part is sometimes sung by a Contralto Simon's clear edged Countertenor was a perfect complement to the other soloists and the baroque style of this performance. Notable was the pathos that came across in the Aria *He was despised*. Drama shone through 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 with plenty of power and some fine top notes.

The chorus gave a thrilling account of themselves. For a large body of singers the singing was always well tuned with plenty of rhythmic vitality when called for. Excellent controlled runs were the order of the day from the early chorus *And he shall purify* through *For unto us a child is born* and *His yoke is easy* to *Let us break their bonds*. The high point *Hallelujah* chorus would certainly have brought George 1st to his feet as it did the audience on Saturday night. The effect here was quite electric. 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*.

Music for Awhile playing on period instruments played with élan and a great sense of style. Their playing ably underpinned the performance and contributed hugely to the lightness of this "period" performance.

Matthew Owens as conductor produced a fine and exciting performance of this great work characterised by lightness, pace and dramatic intensity. A very fitting prelude to Christmas.

David Nichols