

Handel's 'Messiah', St Paul's Church, Saturday, 22 December 2012

Messiah is often done at Christmas, but not always in its entirety. Sheldon Singers, under the stylish direction of Julie De'Ath Lancaster, gave us the complete work at their recent concert, and what a treat it was. Smallish forces in chorus and orchestra created an authentic baroque sound, just as – the programme note pointed out – Handel would have expected to hear.

From the start, with well-judged tempi and dynamics in the opening Sinfony, it was clear that this was not a large-scale free-for-all but a chamber performance of charm and poise. The chorus, who are the backbone of this piece, after all, produced some lovely sound, nimble in the 'runny bits' although occasionally lacking in attack. The men especially were inclined to lose volume in the faster passages. However, the dramatic choruses in part 2 were handled confidently, and the Hallelujah chorus was magnificent.

Tenor soloist Dean Ward, in his debut Messiah, was firm and confident, filling the church with wonderful sound in "Ev'ry valley"; he wisely resisted the temptation to add decorations, letting the music speak for itself. David McKee, the bass soloist, has a nice baroque sound, and a sense of the drama of the piece. Alto Christiana Eastwood has a very impressive range, shown to good effect in appropriate vocal embellishments. The soprano soloist only appears half way through part 1, but Katherine Walker made the most of her late entrance with angelic singing. Her bright tone and flexible line were just right for the Angel of the Lord music, and she was particularly engaging later on in "I know that my Redeemer liveth".

The orchestra in Messiah has various roles - support, accompaniment and leading, by turns. The players, and especially Andrew Carter as continuo, fulfilled all of these admirably, taking centre stage or subsiding to a discreet support as required. Julie De'Ath Lancaster is to be congratulated on master-minding a very satisfying performance.

Sue Goodman

24/12/12