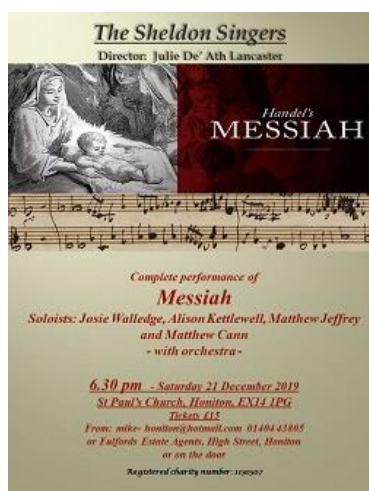


Messiah at St Paul's Honiton - 21st Dec 2019



There are many people for whom Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without hearing Handel's Messiah, and I am one of them. I was lucky enough to be amongst the large audience in St Paul's Honiton on 21st December for a performance by The Sheldon Singers, with four excellent soloists and a full orchestra. Unusually for an amateur choir, the decision (a brave one) had been taken to perform the work in its entirety. Singing Messiah with small forces is not easy – the choir (only 28 singers) and the compact orchestra are very exposed – but as it turned out, they were right not to be daunted. If your previous experience of Messiah has been limited to the large scale, Huddersfield Choral Society-type offering, then I recommend you seek out a performance such as we heard at

St Paul's, and which is in fact what Handel intended. Under the guidance of their Director, Julie De'Ath Lancaster, we were given an evening of musical delight. A particular feature was her skilful management of the sometimes awkward acoustic in St Paul's – a very comfortable balance was kept between the choir, the orchestra and the soloists. It's quite remarkable that all the soloists – Matthew Jeffrey (tenor), Matthew Cann (bass), Josie Walledge (soprano) and Alison Kettlewell (mezzo) - are from the south west. They all gave the impression that they were at ease with the music, and it is difficult to pick out highlights, but it can't be easy to be the man who follows the overture with "Comfort ye". Matthew Jeffrey handled it with great security, and maturity. Followed by his colleagues, it soon became obvious that we were in safe hands. Our soloists managed to make Handel's beautiful recitatives and arias sound as fresh to us as they must have sounded to the audience at the first performance. Alison Kettlewell's "He was despised and rejected" was very moving, leading seamlessly into "Surely He hath borne our griefs" from the choir. Josie Walledge's limpid voice soared to the ceiling in "I know that my Redeemer liveth", while Matthew Cann's bass held us spellbound during "Why do the nations so furiously rage together".

And then there was the choir. There was not a moment's need to "make allowances" for their not being professional singers. It would be really difficult to fault their work that evening – they were musicians to the nth degree. Their entrances and finishes were tight and controlled. Their diction was remarkable (but then the Sheldon Singers are known for clear articulation). The interplay between the different voices was very pleasing. And they responded perfectly to the conductor's interpretation, which included some very lovely expression and dynamics – I particularly enjoyed the relatively quiet start to the Hallelujah Chorus, which allowed for a gradually building to the final joyful phrases. But they kept the best until the end. The final chorus, "Worthy is the Lamb", and the Amen, were truly spine-tingling, and could have moved a heart of stone.

Everyone concerned with the concert – choir, soloists, the delightful and supportive orchestra, and the director – should feel very proud of a wonderful performance which did just what it should – left us satisfied and uplifted, and remembering what Christmas really is.

Val Moran