

The Choral Society and Handel's Greatest

In Orpheus' view, Handel's greatest oratorio is not – despite its many qualities and its huge contribution to the social fabric of this country – the essentially non-dramatic *Messiah*, but the roughly contemporary *Samson* (premiered 1743). Handel was nothing if not a dramatic composer and *Samson* is one of the outstanding examples of this. Even the many choruses, or a lot of them, differentiate strongly between the pleasure-loving Philistines ('Great Dagon') and the more "spiritual" Israelites (most of all maybe in 'Hear Jacob's God', pinched by Handel from Carissimi's *Jephtha* – he knew a good tune even if he did not write it himself!). Samson himself moves from the deep despair of 'Total Eclipse' to the serenity of his curtain call, 'Thus When the Sun'. The transformation is brought about not so much by the support of his father and friends but by his conflicts with dallier and with Harappa, a braggart perhaps but with a rather engaging belief in his own ability. It is only surprising that Doncaster has not heard the work since 1945 under the baton of the great William Appleby.

That shameful 66 year neglect was put to rights on Saturday evening 12 March at Priory by the Doncaster Choral Society, under the inspiring direction of Simon Lindley. The Society, seemingly expanded in numbers for this occasion, responded excitingly to Handel's demands, varied ones as I have indicated above, but it wisely saved enough for the final chorus 'Let Their Celestial Concerts', appealing and inspiring in its direct, spine-tingling simplicity. The performance as a whole has got to be one of the Society's highest points in all the 47 years I have been reporting on its activities. Orchestral and instrumental support of high quality came from the organist David Houlder, harpsichordist Alan Horsey and the stylish National Festival Orchestra (leader, Sally Robinson). The orchestra has several particular opportunities to shine, including the extended overture, the haunting 'Dead March' (imported from Handel's earlier oratorio *Saul*) and the coruscating trumpet obbligato to 'Let the Bright Seraphim' matching the vocal brilliance of soprano Debra Morley who had earlier been called on to portray the coquettish self-satisfaction of Delila; well-judged characterisation though not the only one; I must mention Adam Magee's authoritative reading of the title role in all its fascinating aspects. I look forward to hearing him in a future Society presentation. I also remember bass Quentin Brown's exuberant Harappa, three dimensional and not unsympathetic (but isn't it the mark of a great dramatist, which Handel was, to make his audience feel sympathy even for the baddies?) Maroah, Samson's ever-optimistic, yet in a way fatalistic, father was nicely depicted by Philip Wilcox (also bass) while the experienced alto Kathryn Woodruff has plenty to do as Samson's friend Micah especially in her (?his) beautiful, quite extended set-piece with chorus 'Return O God of Hosts'. Soprano Helen Strange (Philistine Woman) and tenor Philip Steel (Messenger) both stepped forward from the ranks of the choir to give highly creditable accounts of their smaller but not insignificant roles.

So there it is. Ever since this vivid performance I have been unable to get it out of my head (not that I wanted to!). The audience was bigger than expected, considering the unfamiliarity of *Samson* to Doncaster audiences. Congratulations to conductor, choir, orchestra and soloists, but above all to George Frideric Handel, arguably the equal of Mozart, Weber, Verdi and Wagner as a musical dramatist. May we now have *Saul*, please? And not only so we can hear again that 'Dead March' – which queen Victoria disliked so much – despite, or maybe because of, its great popularity during her reign – that she gave explicit orders that it was **not** to be heard at her

funeral!

Orpheus