

A Christmas Messiah but one for all Seasons

One may argue as to whether *Messiah* is Handel's best oratorio in a musical sense, but as it has been firmly embedded in the fabric of British social and cultural life for upwards of two and a half centuries it is beyond doubt his best known and best loved. Performances are eagerly sought out and it was perhaps no surprise that Doncaster Choral Society's (now biennial) performance under Simon Lindley at Priory on 10 December was sold out before the doors opened to the public.

The performance was indeed worthy of this public interest. Choral singing had an infectious freshness, vigour and excitement, the freshness perhaps emanating from the fact that it came just a fortnight after the Society's previous outing featuring Karl Jenkins' *The Armed Man* (and that was a near sell out, so these are heady times for the DCS). Much of the freshness is owed to Dr. Lindley, Handel expert and enthusiast extraordinary, whose control and commitment were apparent in every bar of this familiar masterpiece. He is always anxious to find ways of spreading the joys and discipline of choral singing as widely as possible and on this occasion about fifteen students from Hayfield School, whose future examination commitments include an in-depth study of *Messiah*'s opening chorus ("And the Glory") were invited to sing that chorus with the Society.

The performance was completed, without any cuts, which two generations ago were the norm. The printed programme suggested that the air "Thou Art Gone Up on High" was not to figure but that was a printer's glitch and we duly enjoyed that number in its alto version. This brings me to a consideration of the four soloists and they were more than worthy of the occasion.

James Gower (bass), with a musical pedigree of Cambridge and sundry English opera companies, sang his first two airs with notable sensitivity, although "Why Do the Nations?" seemed to lack the ultimate in ferocity. Ben Thapa (tenor), who also has had considerable operatic experience, sought, with success, to draw as much drama as possible from a work which is, unlike much Handel, essentially non-dramatic in form: exciting singing. The other soloists' experience is in concert rather than opera; this mixture indeed reflected Handel's own experience. The alto music was sung by David Allsopp, once of King's College Cambridge and Westminster Cathedral and a countertenor (it was common enough in *Messiah* performances of Handel's day, if not, famously, in the premiere to have alto parts sung by men). The delicacy of his singing in "He Was Despised" was outstanding (though the middle section, "He Gave His Back to the Smiters", often omitted, which it should never be, supplied contrasting and appropriate violence. Throughout Mr. Allsopp's diction had memorable clarity, as had that of soprano Sarah Potter. Interestingly she performed one of Handel's 12/8 versions of "Rejoice Greatly", rarely heard in *Messiah* but whose rapid yet smooth, movement conveys so well an atmosphere of rejoicing. Her ringing notes on "shout" in that and "risen" in "I Know that My Redeemer Liveth" were unforgettable. All four soloists decorated their vocal lines with taste and judgement.

Instrumental support was as usual furnished stylishly by the National Festival Orchestra, just 18 players in all. Of these I pick out Andrew Cook (trumpet) for his obligato, matching Mr. Gower's fine reading, complete with middle section, of the "The Trumpet Shall Sound", and leader Sally Robinson. She provided what were in effect melting violin obligate to many of the solo airs. The organist was the ever-reliable David Houlder; Dr. Lindley directed much of the evening from the harpsichord, as Handel would have done and which is now common enough practice in today's performances. A top notch *Messiah*, then, worthy of the standing ovation accorded it at the end.