

St Albans Choral Society, Saturday 21 April 2018

The Cathedral and Abbey Church of St Alban

Handel's Messiah

Review by James Francis Brown

Messiah is one of the few great works in the choral tradition that remains a cultural household name – at least within the bounds of what used to be known as Christendom. Its fame is, in part, pinned to the Hallelujah Chorus; King George II found it so splendid that he initiated an obligatory 'stand up' from the audience, until he was seen to be, again, seated. That tradition is on the wane, if Saturday's performance was anything to go by, but there's no question that *Messiah* has maintained its reputation as a challenge, a respected summit in the repertoire of every choral society.

From the start, Orchestra Nova, conducted by George Vass, produced a vivid and historically informed sound, which banished the often ponderous approach taken by many, of late, in favour of a more dynamic and theatrical sense of pace. Vass also made telling choices in his four soloists whose widely contrasting temperaments served to heighten the drama.

Tenor Christopher Bowen opened the proceedings with clarity, polished decoration and a lyrical warmth in sustained notes, his confidence growing throughout the performance. Alexander Ashworth's powerful baritone made a tremendously vigorous impression, Vass allowing him free interpretative reign. One of the most captivating moments was his thunderously uplifting partnership with Heidi Bennett's trumpet in 'The Trumpet Shall Sound' - the latter on splendid form in a wonderful acoustic to match.

Countertenor William Purefoy provided a questioning contrast with an undemonstrative but shapely tone. Sometimes tempi bordered on the wayward but never to the point of destabilising the forward movement.

Whenever I hear soprano Helen-Jane Howells, I'm struck by the impression of wisdom and simplicity that she achieves by intelligently articulating the nature of the text, with seemingly effortless accuracy in the many florid runs and ornaments and, perhaps above all, with a scintillating and never forced upper register. She maintained energy until the end, a highlight being the thrilling decorations to final aria on the words 'God, who makes intercession for us'.

Clear diction in the words may be vital for comprehending the narrative but it also injects a huge amount of vitality, colour and character into a performance. All these qualities were communicated by the choir to an outstanding degree and, while we

may all lament the dearth of tenors in most choirs these days, the lack was more than made up for with confidence, stamina and close attention to intonation throughout the choir.

The choir also responded keenly to Vass's intelligent and probing sense of drama. So often, the succession of choruses, recitatives and arias are treated as static elements but in this performance they were delivered as highly charged episodes within the oratorio. In particular, the three choruses in part two - 'Surely he hath borne' through to 'All we like sheep' - seemed to create an almost operatic sense of theatre; I've never heard a less sheepish 'All we like sheep'!

St Albans Choral Society ought to be proud to have held their own with such excellent soloists and instrumentalists in a packed Cathedral. "The trumpet shall sound...and we shall be changed" - well, on this occasion, the audience certainly was - for the better.