

HARROGATE CHORAL SOCIETY AND HANDEL Ripon Cathedral 3 December 2006

The evening before Advent Sunday was an appropriate one on which to enjoy hearing Harrogate Choral Society singing Handel's Messiah, a work which remains ever popular with audiences. This was again borne out by the large number present in the Cathedral on Saturday night and as so often before when I find myself in the audience, I wished I was up singing along with the altos. The energy and enthusiasm engendered under the baton of Musical Director Andrew Padmore meant that this performance was no exception and I did join in, as did some others, with 'The Hallelujah Chorus'.

Overall, the pace sometimes chosen was quicker than one often hears, but the result was generally to perceive the words in a new light. Andrew Padmore demonstrated that he intended to get exactly what he wanted by determinedly setting the speed for 'And the glory of the Lord' until the choir was really feeling the 'one-in-a-bar', and then he relaxed. Later, in 'He shall feed His flock', the orchestra was initially quicker than the beat Andrew was setting and he was painstakingly deliberate in his conducting until they too had settled. It was this belief in knowing he could achieve what he wanted which helped to make this such a successful performance. However, at a lively tempo, there was some unease in 'And He shall purify' at times, but this chorus, with all its semiquavers is not the easiest to sing at the best of times. 'Let us break their bonds asunder' also had a sticky patch, but otherwise the choir was alert and expectant, generally producing a magnificent sound, with many members manifestly enjoying themselves.

It was good to welcome Adam Green as the bass soloist, as he was a one-time Ripon chorister and was thus familiar with

the challenges imposed by the Cathedral setting. He sang with great control, raging suitably in 'Why do the nations?' and triumphantly in 'The trumpet shall sound'. The trumpet in this case was competent and clear, though did not always vary the dynamic much and was occasionally rather dominant for the solo voice to ring through.

Something one rarely sees is the duettists in 'O death, where is thy sting?' looking at each other, but tenor Matthew Minter and counter-tenor Daniel Wellings acknowledged each other periodically, such as the players in a string quartet will do, which resulted in a close co-ordination between the two. Both sang throughout with conviction, and especially memorable was Daniel Wellings' rendering of 'He was despised' which was particularly poignant. Matthew Minter also demonstrated some effortless singing in the top register, especially in the ornamentation at the end of 'Every valley shall be exalted' .

Maria Bovino's first solo was rather sharp and this occurred later also. Perhaps her voice sometimes lacked the clarity of tone required most especially when singing oratorio in a demanding setting.

Accompanying the choir was the Amici Ensemble, a group of local musicians who have accompanied Yorkshire Choirs as well as performing chamber music. Some occasional lack of synchronisation with the voices was apparent, but there was generally some very deft playing.

Overall, this pre-Christmas concert was both memorable and greatly enjoyable, once again vindicating Handel's immortal vision of the Messiah.

Cynthia Wood