

Heroic Handel

Handel's *Messiah*

The Oriana Chorale and Sinfonia conducted by David Mackay, St Christopher's Cathedral, Saturday, December 18.

Reviewer: **Jennifer Gall**

For many, Christmas is not Christmas without a live performance of Handel's *Messiah*. As the oratorio unfolds, memories of past performances create a pleasant layer of familiarity and a source of comparison with the new version. The length of the work ensures that both musicians and audience experience a real journey and the challenge for the musical director is to find a way to encourage the listeners to find new insights into the musical narrative throughout the experience.

David Mackay seized the opportunity and used bold tempo variations to present a version of *Messiah* that was electrified with emotional tension from beginning to end. Richard Black's tenor solos – such rich, complex vocal shades! – were complemented beautifully by the Choir's disciplined dynamics and precise articulation in the important opening chorus *And the Glory of the Lord*. Jeremy Tatchell's performance from his first entry was thrilling. His delivery had the scary authority of one of God's right-hand archangels. The lively pace of *Thus Sayeth the Lord* and the two subsequent airs highlighted his vocal skill. At this speed, the shaking foundations described in the words became realistically frightening.

David Yardley matched the intensity of his fellow soloists with his performance. His version of *But Who May Abide* was sung with the feisty energy of a messenger who is going to make mankind sit up and listen carefully to the steely message

enfolded in the clear purity of his vocal delivery. A real highlight was the choir's performance of *For Unto Us a Child is Born*. The exclamatory "Wonderful", "Counsellor", were conducted with great care to use dynamic emphasis to best effect creating a gentler mood for the Soprano's entry.

Soprano Josie Ryan built the dramatic tension skilfully with her approach to the linked solos, reaching a glorious high note on "peace" in *Rejoice Greatly*.

The Sinfonia shone throughout, bringing a lightness and spring to their playing with no loss of definition, particularly in the demanding continuo parts. At the beginning of the final *Amen* chorus, violinists Barbara Gilby and Rowan Harvey Martin introduced their parts in an exquisite, slow canon. At this speed, the harmonic layers of the choral parts rolled out like great ocean waves crossing each other and ascending into the cathedral. The effect was ravishing, the ear hanging on each note in anticipation of the next chord progression.

It has been a year of memorable music for the Oriana Chorale, and their performance of the *Messiah* suggests that further new, inspiring musical interpretations will be heard under Mackay's baton in the year to come.