

## Choral Society takes on Mendelssohn and wins

It was a brave decision on the part of the Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society to mount a performance of one of the greatest works in the entire choral repertoire — brave only since Mendelssohn, and this work in particular, has suffered some disfavour in recent years.

The large audience that packed into the Cathedral and the rapturous applause at the end was proof enough of the work's enduring quality and a fine performance.

The chorus were on exceptionally fine form and the frequent divisi writing into eight parts did nothing to lessen the impact or conviction of their singing.

Attention to detail by chorus master and conductor Matthew Owens resulted in near faultless clarity of diction.

The society was well-served by the Sarum Orchestra who responded to Owens' direction with commitment and flexibility — particularly in the dramatic accompanied recitatives — on the whole, the playing was a model of restraint when so often the orchestra could have overwhelmed the choir.

Of special note must be the cello soloist (unacknowledged in the programme) for her exquisite solo in It Is Enough - a highlight which restored my faith in the orchestra somewhat after the trombonist's unfortunate earlier blunder in the Baal chorus.

The home-grown soloists acquitted themselves with distinction: treble Jacob Coton managed his brief but exacting role admirably as the Youth, and with fellow choristers Nicola Kingston and Leonie Maxwell produced a truly magical off-stage performance of the Angels: Lift Thine Eyes.

The main soloists included a very fine Elijah in baritone Quentin Hayes — his deeply resonant voice being clearly focused and convincing throughout, while Christopher Watson's light and lyrical tenor voice was a perfect foil for Hayes.

The two lady soloists, however, had a less than successful evening: Christine Cairns (contralto), who replaced Arlene Rolph at short notice, sang consistently under the note; her wide vibrato did little for a vocal line that required greater definition.

Angharad Gruffydd Jones (soprano) also suffered poor intonation at times, and she made heavy weather of what should have been some sublime moments; Hear Ye, Israel, for example, requires effortless top notes to be convincing, but hers were laboured and often the note took too long to settle to the correct dynamic.

This is a difficult work to bring off successfully — the dramatic sequences flow easily enough but there are passages, particularly towards the end, where many performances simply run out of steam.

So full marks to Owens who seemed to have the right feel for the structure of the piece, exploiting the drama for all its worth and maintaining interest to the end.

Overall, this was a fine performance and the lasting memory is that of the total commitment of the chorus — they were the heroes of the night who surely “endured to the end” in spectacular style.

**Martin Freke**