



An uplifting performance

Last Saturday evening a large audience defied the cold to attend a performance of J S Bach's Christmas Oratorio given in the cathedral by Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society under their conductor, Matthew Owens.

The work in fact comprises six sacred cantatas covering various aspects of the Nativity, which were originally performed on separate days between Christmas Day and Epiphany. To perform the whole would have made for a very long evening and therefore the conductor wisely selected Parts 1, 2, 3 and 6.

The orchestral introduction, with its blazing baroque trumpets, set the mood for the joyous entry of the choir, which performed throughout the evening with great commitment. One of the notable features of Bach's oratorios is the chorales, originally intended for the congregation to join in, and these were sung with appropriate warmth and fervour. The more vigorous choruses were tackled with great spirit, if not always with the precision which we have come to expect from this body.

As far as the four soloists were concerned, the lion's share was given to the excellent tenor, Richard Rowntree, who sang the role of the Evangelist. He delivered the many recitative passages with variety of expression and attention to the texts. He also had two arias the first of which he sang lyrically accompanied by a delightfully played flute obligato. His rendering of the second was one of the high points of the evening.

In his more florid passages the bass, Stephen Faulkes, proved well up to the task. However, he was rather less satisfactory when a more lyrical approach was called for, owing to rather too much vibrato.

The soprano, Patricia Rozario, was the most well known of the four soloists. She sang with great warmth and beauty of tone but was a little wanting in power in her lower register such that she was occasionally lost beneath the orchestra.

The female alto originally booked had to withdraw and her place was taken at short notice by a cathedral chorister, Simon Clulow. He acquitted himself very well although it felt a little odd to have a man sing words ascribed to the Virgin.

The accompaniment was provided by the Chameleon Baroque Arts Orchestra playing on period instruments. They performed throughout with verve and accuracy although there was the odd occasion where wind tuning was less than perfect – an inherent hazard with early instruments. The three trumpets were particularly outstanding and contributed greatly to the excitement of the evening.

The lighter sounds of a baroque orchestra, as compared with modern instruments, meant that, with such a large body of singers, there were occasional problems of balance.

Nevertheless, these did not detract from the overall impact of the performance for which all credit is due to Matthew Owens' skill and musicianship. As a result, we emerged into the cold night air with our spirits uplifted.

Brendan Sadler