



## Handel's Messiah – Wells Cathedral

Handel's Oratorio "Messiah" has become one of the essential preludes to Christmas and it was to a packed audience in Wells Cathedral that the Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society presented this performance on Saturday last. It was a performance very much in the spirit of the Baroque period with Music for Awhile Orchestra – a specialist period instrument band - and Harpsichord and Chamber Organ continuo supporting the solos. In addition to the Chorus the work calls for four soloists: Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass. The Counter tenor booked to sing the Alto part was unfortunately indisposed and replaced by Contralto Wendy Dawn Thompson at short notice.

From the opening Sinfonia and Tenor recitative the lightness of style which was to be the hallmark of the performance was evident. Throughout, the Tenor, Anthony Gregory, demonstrated a clarity and flexibility of voice admirably suited to Handel's demands. Particular highlights were his recitatives in Part Two and a suitably dramatic Aria "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron". Wendy Dawn Thompson, whilst not having the timbre or power of a counter tenor, produced some beautifully poised singing especially in the poignant "He was despised and rejected" and later in the duet "O death, where is thy sting". The Soprano came into her own in the Christmas sections of Part One where Laurie Ashworth demonstrated a purity of tone and clear top notes in the recitative sections leading to the Aria "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion" - the latter calling for considerable vocal agility and achieved to thrilling effect. Benedict Nelson was the splendid Bass. His opening recitative "Thus saith the Lord" set the tone for some memorable singing with almost menace in "For behold, darkness shall cover the earth" and dramatic force in the <sup>Aria</sup> "Why do the nations so furiously rage together".

The choir were in excellent form. Handel wrote some dramatic and thrilling choruses for them to sing. From the opening chorus "And the glory" the choir displayed spirited singing with well controlled runs and clear diction. Christmas came alive with a beautifully paced "For unto us a child is born" and "Glory to God in the highest". The drama of lent came across in Part Two with "Surely he hath borne our griefs" and ended with a vibrant "Hallelujah" chorus which, by time honoured tradition, brought the audience to its feet. For such a large number of voices the singing was always light, agile and well tuned.

Throughout Music for Awhile played with style and verve. They helped to create a real sense of occasion. Matthew Owens, the conductor, produced a stylish and memorable performance with his well trained chorus, excellent soloists and fine band of players. A great start to Christmas.

**David Nichols.**